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## The Contribution of Jyotiba Phule in Women's Education

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**Abstract**— Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (11 April 1827 – 28 November 1890) was an Indian social activist, thinker, anti-caste social reformer and writer from Maharashtra. His work extended to many fields, including eradication of untouchability and the caste system and for his efforts in educating women and oppressed caste people. He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were pioneers of women's education in India. Phule started his first school for girls in 1848 in Pune at Tatyasaheb Bhide's residence or Bhidewada. He, along with his followers, formed the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) to attain equal rights for people from lower castes. People from all religions and castes could become a part of this association which worked for the upliftment of the oppressed classes. Phule is regarded as an important figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra. He was bestowed with honorific Mahātmā (Sanskrit: "great-souled", "venerable") title by Maharashtrian social activist Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar in 1888.

**Keywords:** Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, untouchability, caste, girls, school, upliftment, social reform, activist.

### Introduction

Jyotiba Phule was born in Pune in 1827 to a family that belonged to the Mali caste. The Malis traditionally worked as fruit and vegetable growers: in the four-fold varna system of caste hierarchy, they were placed within the Shudras. Phule was named after God Jyotiba. He was born on the day of Jyotiba's annual fair. Phule's family, previously named Gorhe, had its origins in the village of Katgun, near the town of Satara. Phule's great-grandfather, who had worked there as a chaughula, or low-ranking village official, moved to Khanwadi in Pune district. There, his only son, Shetiba, brought the family into poverty. The family, including three sons, moved to Poona seeking employment. The boys were taken under the wing of a florist who taught them the secrets of the trade. Their proficiency in growing and arranging became well known and they adopted the name Phule (flower-man) in place of Gorhe. Their fulfillment of commissions from the Peshwa, Baji Rao II,[1,2] for flower mattresses and other goods for the rituals and ceremonies of the royal court so impressed him that he granted them 35 acres (14 ha) of land on the basis of the inam system, whereby no tax would be payable upon it. The oldest brother machinated to take sole control of the property, leaving the younger two siblings, Jyotiba Phule's father, Govindrao, to continue farming and also flower-selling.

Govindrao married Chimnabai and had two sons, of whom Jyotiba was the youngest. Chimnabai died before he was aged one. The Mali community did not make room for much by education, and after attending primary school to learn the

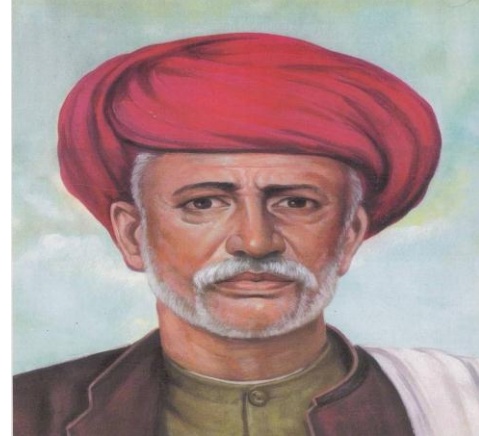
basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, Jyotiba was withdrawn from school.[3,4] He joined the menfolk of his family at work, both in the shop and the farm. However, a man from the same Mali caste as Phule recognised his intelligence and persuaded Phule's father to allow Phule to attend the local Scottish Mission High School. Phule completed his English schooling in 1847. As was customary, he was married young, at the age of 13, to a girl of his own community, chosen by his father. The turning point in his life was in 1848, when he attended the wedding of a Brahmin friend. Phule participated in the customary marriage procession, but was later rebuked and insulted by his friend's parents for doing that. They told him that he being from a Shudra caste should have had the sense to keep away from that ceremony. This incident profoundly affected Phule on the injustice of the caste system.

In 1848, aged 21, Phule visited a girls' school in Ahmednagar, run by Christian missionaries. It was also in 1848 that he read Thomas Paine's book Rights of Man and developed a keen sense of social justice. He realized that exploited castes and women were at a disadvantage in Indian society, and also that education of these sections was vital to their emancipation. To this end and in the same year, Phule first taught reading and writing to his wife, Savitribai, and then the couple started the first indigenously run school for girls in Pune. He also taught Sagunabai Kshirsagar (his maternal aunt's daughter) to write Marathi with Savitribai. The conservative upper caste society of Pune didn't approve

of his work. But many Indians and Europeans helped him generously. [5,6]Conservatives in Pune also forced his own family and community to ostracize them. During this period, their friend Usman Sheikh and his sister Fatima Sheikh provided them with shelter. They also helped to start the school on their premises. Later, the Phules started schools for children from the then untouchable castes such as Mahar and Mang. In 1852, there were three Phule schools in operation 273 girls were pursuing education in these school but by 1858 they had all closed. Eleanor Zelliot blames the closure on private European donations drying up due to the Indian Mutiny of 1857, withdrawal of government support, and Jyotiba resigning from the school management committee because of disagreement regarding the curriculum.[7,8]

Phule watched how untouchables were not permitted to pollute anyone with their shadows and that they had to attach a broom to their backs to wipe the path on which they had traveled. He saw young widows shaving their heads, refraining from any sort of joy in their life. He saw how untouchable women had been forced to dance naked. He made the decision to educate women by witnessing all these social evils that encouraged inequality. He began with his wife, every afternoon, Jyotiba sat with his wife Savitribai Phule and educated her when she went to the farms where he worked, to bring him his meal. He sent his wife to get trained at a school. The husband and wife set up India's first girls' school in Vishrambag Wada, Pune, in 1848.

He championed widow remarriage and started a home for dominant caste pregnant widows to give birth in a safe and secure place in 1863. His orphanage was established in an attempt to reduce the rate of infanticide. In 1863, Pune witnessed a horrific incident. A Brahmin widow named Kashibai got pregnant and her attempts at abortion didn't succeed. She killed the baby after giving it birth and threw it in a well, but her act came to light. She had to face punishment and was sentenced to jail. This incident greatly upset Phule and hence, along with his longtime friend Sadashiv Ballal Govande and Savitribai, he started an infanticide prevention centre. Pamphlets were stuck around Pune advertising the centre in the following words: "Widows, come here and deliver your baby safely and secretly. It is up to your discretion whether you want to keep the baby in the centre or take it with you.[9,10]



**Jyotiba Phule**

This orphanage will take care of the children” The Phule couple ran the infanticide prevention centre until the mid-1880s. Phule tried to eliminate the stigma of social untouchability surrounding the exploited castes by opening his house and the use of his water well to the members of the exploited castes. Phule appealed for reestablishment of the reign of mythical Mahabali (King Bali) which predated "Aryans' treacherous coup d'etat". He proposed his own version of Aryan invasion theory that the Aryan conquerors of India, whom the theory's proponents considered to be racially superior, were in fact barbaric suppressors of the indigenous people. He believed that they had instituted the caste system as a framework for subjugation and social division that ensured the pre-eminence of their Brahmin successors. He saw the subsequent Muslim conquests of the Indian subcontinent as more of the same sort of thing, being a repressive alien regime, but took heart in the arrival of the British, whom he considered to be relatively enlightened and not supportive of the varnashramadharma system instigated and then perpetuated by those previous invaders. In his book, *Gulamgiri*, he thanked Christian missionaries and the British colonists for making the exploited castes realise that they are worthy of all human rights. The book, whose title transliterates as slavery and which concerned women, caste and reform, was dedicated to the people in the US who were working to end slavery.[11,12]

Phule saw Vishnu's avatars as a symbol of oppression stemming from the Aryan conquests and took Mahabali (Bali Raja) as hero. His critique of the caste system began with an attack on the Vedas, the most fundamental texts of Hindus. He considered them to be a form of false consciousness. He is credited with introducing the Marathi word *dalit* (broken, crushed) as a descriptor for those people who were outside the traditional varna system. The terminology was later popularised in the 1970s by the Dalit Panthers. At an education commission hearing in 1882, Phule called for help in providing education for exploited castes. To implement it, he advocated making primary education compulsory in villages. He also asked for special incentives to get more

lower-caste people in high schools and colleges. On 24 September 1874, Phule formed Satyashodhak Samaj to focus on rights of depressed groups such as women, the Shudra, and the Dalit. Through this samaj, he opposed idolatry and denounced the caste system. Satyashodhak Samaj campaigned for the spread of rational thinking and rejected the need for priests.[13]

Phule established Satyashodhak Samaj with the ideals of human well-being, happiness, unity, equality, and easy religious principles and rituals. A Pune-based newspaper, *Deenbandhu*, provided the voice for the views of the Samaj. The membership of the samaj included Muslims, Brahmins and government officials. Phule's own Mali caste provided the leading members and financial supporters for the organization. Apart from his role as a social activist, Phule was a businessman too. In 1882 he styled himself as a merchant, cultivator and municipal contractor. He owned 60 acres (24 ha) of farmland at Manjri, near Pune. For period of time, he worked as a contractor for the government and supplied building materials required for the construction of a dam on the Mula-Mutha river near Pune in the 1870s. He also received contracts to provide labour for the construction of the Katraj Tunnel and the Yerawda Jail near Pune. One of Phule's businesses, established in 1863, was to supply metal-casting equipment. Phule was appointed commissioner (municipal council member) [14,15] to the then Poona municipality in 1876 and served in this unelected position until 1883. Phule was bestowed with the title of Mahatma on 11 May 1888 by another social reformer from Bombay, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandeekar.

### Discussion

'Jyotiba' Govindrao Phule was a prominent social reformer and thinker of the nineteenth century India. He led the movement against the prevailing caste-restrictions in India. He revolted against the domination of the Brahmins and struggled for the rights of peasants and other low-caste people. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was also a pioneer for women education in India and fought for education of girls throughout his life. He is believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children. Jyotiba Govindrao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1827. His father, Govindrao was a vegetable-vendor at Poona. Jyotiba's family belonged to 'mali' caste and their original title was 'Gorhay'. Malis were considered as an inferior caste by the Brahmins and were shunned socially. Jyotiba's father and uncles served as florists, so the family came to be known as 'Phule'. Jyotiba's mother passed away when he was just nine months old. Jyotiba was an intelligent boy but due to the poor financial condition at home, he had to stop his studies at an early age. He started helping his father by working on the family's farm. Recognising the talent of the child prodigy, a neighbour persuaded his father to send him to school. In 1841, Jyotiba got admission in the Scottish Mission's High School, Poona, [16,17] and

completed his education in 1847. There, he met Sadashiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin, who remained his close friend throughout his life. At the age of just thirteen years, Jyotiba was married to Savitribai.

In 1848, an incident sparked off Jyotiba's quest against the social injustice of caste discrimination and incited a social revolution in the Indian society. Jyotiba was invited to attend the wedding of one of his friends who belonged to an upper cast Brahmin family. But at the wedding the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused Jyotiba when they came to know about his origins. Jyotiba left the ceremony and made up his mind to challenge the prevailing caste-system and social restrictions. He made it his life's work to hammer away tirelessly at the helms of social majoritarian domination and aimed at emancipation of all human beings that were subjected to this social deprivation. After reading Thomas Paine's famous book 'The Rights of Man', Jyotiba was greatly influenced by his ideas. He believed that enlightenment of the women and lower caste people was the only solution to combat the social evils. Jyotiba's quest for providing women and girls with right to education was supported by his wife Savitribai Phule. One of the few literate women of the time, Savitribai was taught to read and write by her husband Jyotiba. [18,19]

In 1851, Jyotiba established a girls' school and asked his wife to teach the girls in the school. Later, he opened two more schools for the girls and an indigenous school for the lower castes, especially for the Mahars and Mangs. Jyotiba realised the pathetic conditions of widows and established an ashram for young widows and eventually became advocate of the idea of Widow Remarriage. Around his time, society was a patriarchal and the position of women was especially abysmal. Female infanticide was a common occurrence and so was child marriage, with children sometimes being married to men much older. These women often became widows before they even hit puberty and were left without any family support. Jyotiba was pained by their plight and established an orphanage in 1854 to shelter these unfortunate souls from perishing at the society's cruel hands. Jyotiba attacked the orthodox Brahmins and other upper castes and termed them as "hypocrites". He campaigned against the authoritarianism of the upper caste people and urged the "peasants" and "proletariat" to defy the restrictions imposed upon them. He opened his home to people from all castes and backgrounds. He was a believer in gender equality and he exemplified his beliefs by involving his wife in all his social reform activities. He believed that religious icons like Rama are implemented by the Brahmin as a means for subjugating the lower caste.[20]

The orthodox Brahmins of the society were furious at the activities of Jyotiba. They blamed him for vitiating the norms and regulations of the society. Many accused him of acting on behalf of the Christian Missionaries. But Jyotiba was firm and decided to continue the movement. Interestingly, Jyotiba

was supported by some Brahmin friends who extended their support to make the movement successful. In 1873, Jyotiba Phule formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth). He undertook a systematic deconstruction of existing beliefs and history, only to reconstruct an equality promoting version. Jyotiba vehemently condemned the Vedas, the ancient holy scriptures of the Hindus. He traced the history of Brahmanism through several other ancient texts and held the Brahmins responsible for framing the exploitative and inhuman laws in order to maintain their social superiority by suppressing the "shudras" and "atishudras" in the society. The purpose of the Satya Shodhak Samaj was to decontaminate the society from caste discrimination and liberate the oppressed lower-caste people from the stigmas inflicted by the Brahmins. Jyotiba Phule was the first person to coin the term 'Dalits' to apply to all people considered lower caste and untouchables by the Brahmins. Membership to the Samaj was open to all irrespective of caste and class. Some written records suggest that they even welcomed participation of Jews as members of the Samaj and by 1876 the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' boasted of 316 members. In 1868, Jyotiba decided to construct a common bathing tank outside his house to exhibit his embracing attitude towards all human beings and wished to dine with everyone, regardless of their caste. Jyotiba Phule devoted his entire life for the liberation of untouchables from the exploitation of Brahmins. Apart from being a social activist and reformer, he was also a businessman. He was also a cultivator and contractor for the Municipal Corporation. He served as Commissioner of the Poona Municipality between 1876 and 1883. Jyotiba suffered a stroke in 1888 and was rendered paralyzed. On 28 November, 1890, the great social reformer, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, passed away.[21]

### Results

Perhaps the biggest legacy of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is the thought behind his perpetual fight against social stigma that are enormously relevant still. In the nineteenth century, people were used to accepting these discriminatory practices as social norm that needed to be enforced without question but Jyotiba sought to change this discrimination based on caste, class and colour. He was the harbinger of unheard ideas for social reforms. He started awareness campaigns that ultimately inspired the likes of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, stalwarts who undertook major initiatives against caste discrimination later. A biography of Jyotiba was penned by Dhnananjay Keer in 1974 titled, 'Mahatma Jyotibha Phule: Father of Our Social Revolution'. The Mahatma Phule Museum in Pune was set-up in honour of the great reformer. The Government of Maharashtra introduced the Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jeevandayeeni Yojana [21] which is a cashless treatment scheme for poor. A number of statues of the Mahatma have been erected as well as several street names and educational institutes have been rechristened with his name – eg. Crawford Market in

Mumbai is rechristened as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Mandai and the Maharashtra Krishi Vidyapeeth at Rahuri, Maharashtra was renamed Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth. Jyotiba had penned a number of literary articles and books in his lifetime and most were based on his ideology of social reforms like the 'Shetkarayacha Aasud'. He also penned some stories like 'Tritiya Ratna', 'Brahmananche Kasab', 'Ishara'. He wrote dramas like 'Satsar' Ank 1 and 2, which were enacted under his directives to spread awareness against social injustice. He also wrote books for the Satyashodhak Samaj that dealt with history of Brahminism and outlined Puja protocols that the lower caste people were not allowed to learn.[19,20]

### Conclusions

Jyotiba Phule made a significant contribution to women's empowerment and girls' education. On November 28, 1890, Jyotiba Phule passed away. He put a lot of effort into emancipating women and ending caste and untouchability. The effort that Phule did to educate women and members of lower castes is what made him most famous.[22]

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