



## Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Revisiting Idea of Progress

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The history of India from 18<sup>th</sup> century onward has been largely analysed as developments emerging out of interaction with British traders or colonial powers. It is a way of constructing history from colonial perspectives. This way of writing history not only unfolded in Indian subcontinent, but it is also evident in history of world civilisation during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The framework of writing history is largely structured in a way considering west as epicentre of progress, without defining what does progress mean. This paper questions this uniformity of history writing where issues of developments and progress are considered given and unquestionable. In this regard, this paper examines the writings of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, particularly, Gulamgiri and Kisan ka Koda.

First of all, how shall we situate historically India prior to arrival of British East India Company and colonisation? There can be many ways to analyse the evolution of state and society prior to arrival of British colonial state, but this paper largely focuses on the issues of knowledge production emerged in India during 19<sup>th</sup> century. The questions raised are whether forces of India are capable of questioning any epistemology imposed by colonial state, whether world view of India is capable to negotiate with the so called modernism of west in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, question arises about epicentre of new awakening rooted in forces of Indian subcontinent or rooted in the west.

At the outset, the replacement of Persian language by English with the arrival of British colonial state seems as if India was static with reference to language and communication. Contrary to this argument, the history of India in 18<sup>th</sup> century reflects history of vibrancy and emergence of diversity in various corners of society. Kolf<sup>1</sup> argues that the multiple identities of peasants, zamindars and combination and confrontation made the existence of state a very problematic idea, and state was always in need to control or engage the peasants and zamindars, and in way was also imbibing the political culture from below. It is clearly visible in the form of new political culture emerged in various parts of India and easily identified by language and ethos. Language is reflections of social formation and world view of society. The emergence of Punjabi language, Awadhi language, Telgu language etc., paved way for recognition of language as tool of political assertion. The politics of India in 18<sup>th</sup> century is not a politics of confrontation rather it is a politics of convergence. No doubt, the spaces witnessed continuous struggle and warfare, but it was a struggle for assertion of political power whether it was a case of Marathas, Rajputs, Jats, etc.

Within the given political formation, the spaces for articulation of identity and rights of people was a continuous process, it is visible in various reform movements visible since historic times. Having said that, how shall we situate the contribution of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule? The discourse of writings of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is regarding the role of education for critical consciousness. No doubt, the immediate and most

<sup>1</sup> Dirk H.A. Kolff, Peasants fighting for a Living in early Modern North India in Erik Jan Sanchar, ed., Fighting for a Living: A comparative Study of Military Labour, 1500-2000( Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013),P.244.

urgent issue of the writings is about rights of masses oppressed by birth based and gender based formation. At the same time, the world view of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is about how our consciousness is constructed through various processes and the urgency to identify the processes. Also, he raised very fundamental question about neutrality of knowledge. In Ghulamgiri, he situates the issue that the societies placed in conflict oriented frame if the multiple centres of knowledge are not allowed. Knowledge production from any centre is always relative and making it objective or universal requires that world view of one Knowledge is allowed to interact with world view of another knowledge. Mahatma Jyotiba is against the caste based discrimination because it denies space of communication. Rather, the cognition is shaped with particular reference point of identity restricting the space of collaboration among social forces. Once the limitation is placed on the process of cognition, the making of self and other is also structured on the frame of recognition based on the assumption who is identified as self, and who is identified as other. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule argues that the self-constructed on awareness is capable of convergence, and a self-constructed on the basis of ignorance is site of multiple contestation.

For Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, the multiple sites of contestation gets structured on the basis of pattern of settlements. The restricted mental landscapes of people gets transformed into a reality on the basis of pattern of settlements. If pattern of settlements are based on birth based, it will minimise the space of interaction. Infact, the people internalise the process of cognition on the basis of birth based or gender, it becomes a reality for the next generation. Hence, the process of identification becomes self-perpetuating and it gets reproduced automatically shaping other economic or political formations irrespective of their source of articulation. As a result, the new constructed reality gets absorbed by other formations and if the religious formations are monopolised by any identity, the possibility of getting legitimised the emerged reality as divine reality fare more.

Mahatma Phule argues that the elimination of multiple centres of knowledge production is key to create the abovementioned social formation. The complexity created by elimination of multiple centres of knowledge production is very problematic for a society aims to be convergence oriented. The elimination of multiple centres of knowledge leads to legitimisation of centres of self-contained isolated islands of identification. It is beginning of dehumanisation of the other. For every self, every other person is other. Accordingly, the space of society is dominated by one world views and it is always in contestation with the other world views, hence, it is making of a society always in conflict from within. In order to minimise or annihilate struggle from within, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule proposed that the 'jobs of the state should not be dominated by any segment and the space should be representative in nature.'<sup>2</sup> For Jyotiba Phule, one form of knowledge can be corrected by getting it cross checked by another form of knowledge, and the most relevant way to get the knowledge cross checked is to appoint people from diversity in institutions. It will ensure the policy making and implementing process is immune from domination and control of few. Mahatma Phule took the initiative and opened schools for Girls and Marginalised communities in 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

In this scenario, what is progress for Mahatma Jyotiba Phule? Is it linear as argued by western thought or it is empathy concerned for sense of belonging? For Jyotiba Phule, individualism not concerned with pain and agony of the other, creates a society dominated by conflict and violence. No doubt, the science may be used in such a society for best possible innovative structures in such as society, the use of science will be for perpetuation of structures historically arrived in such as society. Hence, Science, Innovation and so called development is problematic idea when one situate such ideas in the matrix of human society. Dr. Surendra and Dr. Lata says, Mahatma Jyotiba phule argued that the peasants are largely exploited by the priestly class, but he also raised concern about women from priestly class, refers Mahatma Phule saying , "Brahmin's orphans, widow woman are forced to witness exploitation of rape etc, and also forced to infanticide or kill pregnancy"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, Ghulamgiri( Delhi; Samyak Prakashan, 2018),P.79

<sup>3</sup> L.G.Meshram Vimalkirti, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rachnawali( Delhi; Radhakrishan Prakashan Pvt Ltd, 2015),P.272

<sup>4</sup> Surendra Kumar, Lata, Idea of India: Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar( Delhi: Swaraj Prakashan, 2017),P.19

Thus, it is crystal clear that the world views emerged in India prior to arrival to British colonial state provides elements forcing intellectuals to revisit the idea of progress imposed by colonial state. An idea exclusively shaped by materialism and individualism where life is considered as pleasure was left aside by the though process emerged in Indian subcontinent since time of Buddha. Now, this idea of progress has impact of societies depending on the historically arrived by the respective societies. Hence, Mahatma Phule re-establish a living being centric idea of progress where pain and agony of people may be annihilated.

