



MAHATAMA JYOTIBHA PHULE'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Mahatama Jyotibha Phule's, Social injustice, inequality, casteism, exploitation of the farmers and the underprivileged strata of society, untouchability and the suppression of women were rampant. It is with these social problems that Mahatama Phule battled with the every ounce of energy he had.

In fact Phule devoted all his time and energies in organizing educational institutions for the poorer low classes. His upper caste progressive friends encouraged him in his mission, while he was discouraged by the Pune's reactionary Brahmins. As narrated earlier he became very much popular among educated class. Even the Europeans appreciated his efforts for dedication to be seen nowhere in Maharashtra and other places. This was a practical way of bringing social revolution among the lower classes. As we have seen Phule himself was a victim of Brahminical social order. In the words of Keer: "The public examination of the Mahar and Mang schools was held at Babaji Munagee's Coal Factory, opposite the Queen's Hostel near the City Hospital, on Tuesday, the 2nd February 1858, in the evening at half past four. A large number of European and Indian gentlemen assembled. C.M. Harrison, Judge of Poona, presided. Among the gentlemen assembled were Edwin Arnold, Principal of Poona College, Mrs. Arnold, Lt. C.J. Griffith, Inam Commissioner, The Rev. J. Mitchell, Bapu Raoji, Framji Nusserwanji, Annasaheb Chiploonkar, Noolkar and other officials.

As usual a report was read showing the progress made by Mahar and Mang children from September 1856 to January 1858 by the Jt. Secretary Waman Prabhakar. A few advanced scholars of one of the schools were very kindly permitted by the free Church Missions to attend their English institutions, but from causes which would be tedious to detail, the report said, most of the scholars had discontinued at that seminary. It was also related that in rainy and winter seasons attendance became very precarious as they had no clothes to protect themselves from rain and cold. Scholarships of higher value should be given, and these scholars should be formed into a normal class. An Industrial department should be attached to the schools to teach them useful trades and crafts, to enable them, on leaving school, to maintain themselves comfortably and independently.

“The Government have also sanctioned”, observed the Report, “the grant of liberal sum of Rs. 5,000 for the erection of a new school. They have also kindly made over the Society a site to build the school.” The war of 1857 had its effect on the European donars of the school. The Report says: “Several European and Native Gentlemen have of late withdrawn their monthly subscriptions and these have fallen so low that it will be the painful duty of the society to shut up at least one of the three schools under their direction”. It was the time when the Mahar and Mangs had become alive to the utility of education and were demanding better teachers, the society would have, the Report stated helplessly, to shut up one of the three schools, if benevolent persons did not come forward with a liberal hand and prevent the extreme step. Certainly it was a very unfortunate step.

C.M. Harrison, judge of Poona, made a very moving speech. Concluding his speech, he said: “The disinterested efforts of the founder of these schools and of the native gentlemen who are acting with him and who form the committee are, I consider, worthy of all praise. They have my entire sympathy and they shall have all the countenance and support it is in my power to afford them”. Really, this reference to Jotirao by the judge testifies to the fact mentioned by Jotirao in his statement submitted to the Hunter Commission: „I continued to work in them (schools) for nearly nine or ten years and that I and my wife worked together-for many years’.

It was a very sorry state of affairs and painful too, as Keer further writes : Jotirao finally withdrew himself from these societies when they were properly established, and when the cleavage between the committee and him widened. The Dnyanodaya was sorry that the natives of Poona were not helping the schools. It noted with regret that the Europeans had ceased helping the schools and added that it was a disgrace to the liberal and patriotic men of Poona that they were not helping the schools.

However, the Director of Public Instruction, held the view that a different kind of teaching was required for the low castes and as he wished to have one individual school in every district for the benefit of those who found book-learning above them and useless, he concluded in his Report on these schools: “My views on the subject have been confirmed by witnessing the signal failure of the Mahar and Mang schools, in Poona, from which Government aid was withdrawn a year ago”. It is painful to state that the school house could not be built as the money sanctioned by Government could not be secured, either on account of the downward trend and tone of the schools, or the dwindling interests of the committee. Sadashivrao Govande became the first General Secretary of the Sarvajanic Sabha in 1870, which mainly voiced the political grievances of Maharashtra.

Jyotibha's school met in a cottage on the site which Government had donated. Later, under Resolution No. 5421 of 24th September, 1874 the school was transferred on a special grant to the Local Fund Committee and in 1894 Government, under Education Department Resolution 1921 of November 13, 1894, ultimately made it over to the Poona Municipality. The other schools continued to work until

1869, when a mention was made in the report of the Director of Instruction of there year 1868-69 as follows: “Four Marath Firls’ schools at Poona which receive a grant from the Dakshina Fund are not prospering” (Keer, Dhanajay).

Money came in his way but Joti was a great success in his mission. He aroused public interest in the education of the Dalits.

Jotirao knew that besides illiteracy, there were many social evils in the society, which have crippled the whole social order. It was all due to ignorance, superstitions and traditional prejudicial thinking. In these days widow’s problem was there in the society. It was a great curse in the Hindu Social System. Due to early child marriage and many other social reasons those unfortunate women who lived as widows were not allowed to remarry. The dominating upper castes and the ruling chiefs even encouraged Sati tradition, against which foremost social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy raised his voice.

Jotirao’s mind now was attracted towards social problems. “As practical reformer, he virtually destroyed all religious dogmas that were against reason and opened the door to reforms. His aim was to reconstruct society on the basis of equality, liberty and reason”. In fact, enlightened by the sparks of Western education and thoughts, India had begun to march with the times and was throwing away her outworn cruel customs and obstinate traditions. Haunted and pressed by a personal grief caused by the death of his brother’s wife on the pyre of his brother, Ram Mohan Raoy had helped the Government abolish the practice of Sati. Government put an end to it in 1829. Yet, it seems, the cruel practice had not entirely disappeared until 1852. In the *Telegraph and Courier*, Bombay, news appeared in November 1852, that some English officers pulled, at Bhuj, an unfortunate woman off the pyre. She was quite willing to be saved; but the attendant Brahmins dragged her back, and on her second attempt to escape, they dashed out her brains.

Many more cruel superstitions in the society were yet crying for solution. Exposure of the sick on the banks of the Ganga had been regarded in Bengal as a religious duty and a high proof of the relatives affection for the dying man. The sick were not allowed to die in peace at home. It was the belief of many that if at the hour of death one thought about the Ganga one would attain the place in heaven. This pernicious custom was no less criminal than *Sati*, widow-burning, or infanticide of girls. The *Calcutta Review* published the horrifying accounts of these Ghat murders which involved crime and distress. The medieval custom of infanticide lingered in some lower sections of Hindu Society, but British rule put a stop to it.

Many superstitious women counted rice or wheat grains day and night till the full measure of one lakh of grains was complete, and then the whole thing was offered in worship to God. Wicks of various kinds numbering a lakh were offered to God. To offer grain or seeds devoutly to cows and eat the remnants which were excreted was a religious act. Brahmin priests would thrive on such superstitions of

the people, and a period of such austerities would always end in a costly feast to Brahmins! All these superstitions Jotirao was preparing himself to attack. Ultimately, the power of Maharshtrian Brahmins, with the loss of their political supremacy, came under a critical review. Under British rule their religious and social power began to diminish. In 1827 the Shankaracharya visited Pune and demanded as *dakshina* any amount he chose. Some represented this matter to the British Collector of Poona who ordered that the Shankaracharya should accept what people offered him willingly. During Peshwarule the Shankaracharya named any amount he pleased for his *dakshina*. Brahmins, too, were now made amenable to the law. They were now punished even at Kashi where for years together these tiny gods on earth tried to escape punishment before the law.

Certainly the new modes of transport, new roads, Western education, railways and transfers of officers to different towns and centres gave a rude shock to the rigidity of old Indian customs and prejudices, and smote hard the old system of joint family. It began to crumble. Educated men began to think of having educated girls as their partners. For completing their primary education, girls naturally required some time. So the question of the minimum age for marriage arose. And along with it the question of widow-remarriage, too, pressed for a solution.

The society suffered so many ills. Though liberated from self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband, the widow faced from her young age widow hood till her death, the cruel tonsure of her head and the unjust laws of inheritance. A sad life, dependable on the head of the family, was her lot ordained by Hindu traditions and customs and the *Shastras*. Down to the ninth century the custom of tonsuring the widow was not in vogue. Only nuns and monks tonsured their heads. Tonsuring gave the widow an ascetic appearance. She was expected to lead a celibate life. So it was necessary to destroy her beauty.

Keer narrates that remarriage of child widows was allowed upto the year 1000. Earlier, widows were allowed to keep their hair but not to oil it. It became general from the year 1200. Originally, the custom of tonsuring was confined to Brahmins, but gradually it spread to the upper classes as a whole, and was prevalent more in Northern India than in Southern India. Shri Vaishnavas vehemently opposed the custom in Southern India.

Unfortunately the presence of the widow was regarded as a symbol of inauspiciousness. Early in the morning the sight of the widow was shunned as an ill-omen. Nobody would willingly see her face in the morning. She could not walk about freely at home. Regarded as impure, she remained humiliated and ostracized in a corner. She was deprived of her ornaments and was forbidden to dress well or to attend the marriage ceremony even of her own children or the thread ceremony, or any other auspicious function. She would waste away in a dark nook. She became an eyesore even to her parents. They often said that had this unfortunate girls died instead of her husband, they would have given their son-in-law another of their daughters in marriage. While the reformers said that only the marriage locked should be taken

away from the widow after her husband's death. Other things such as bangles, hair, the vermilion mark, and the hair knot which she used in her virgin state, she should retain; she had a right to them.

Poet after poet then sang of the terrible fate of the widows who either perished in utter sorrow and misery in a corner or ended in debauchery with their hands full of crimson blood of the embryos, bringing disgrace upon the families from which their fathers, mothers and husbands sprang. The propaganda for widow remarriage was started in Maharashtra as early as 1840. By writing a booklet in Marathi on widow re-marriage, championed the cause in Poona. Remarriage of two Brahmin widows took place at Belgaum in 1842. These marriages escaped, however, unnoticed. The Lokahitavadi said that the prevailing condition of widows was unbearable, and searing aside the injunctions of Manu and Yajnavalkya, they should relieve widows from the tragic fate and miserable life. In the last week of October 1853 a meeting of the Hindu Community was held at the general assembly institution in Bombay "to consider the advisability of introducing the custom of remarriage of Hindu widows". Over five hundred persons assembled. Gangadhar Appa Shastri was to have presided over the meeting; but he was absent owing to a fear of persecution even though he had advocated the remarriage of widows in his writings. Bhawani Vishwanath occupied the chair in his place. Orthodox Shastris had mustered strong to oppose the reform; and so the meeting broke up after a heated debate.

To meet the situation the Widow Remarriage Act was passed by the Government of India on July 25, 1856. By this Act XV of 1856 any Hindu widow was free to marry if she liked, and her progeny would be looked upon by the law as entitled to succeed to her property as other Hindu Children could. England was preparing for the Divorce Act and the British Parliament passed it in 1857. In 1857 the Rev. Baba Padmanji wrote a novel entitled *Yamuna Paryatan*. This first Marathi novel put before the bar of world opinion the sorrows of the Hindu widow. The religious heads were cruel to the widows. For example in 1854 the Shanaracharya decided a case of a young widow, who had morally gone astray. On receiving some money as dakshina, he ordered her father to perform the holyrites by administering him water made pure by bathing his toe in it, and by five products of the cow. When however, the Brahmin asked for the purification of his daughter who was pregnant, the Shankaracharya ordered that the young widow should be kept in the hollow trunk of a tree and the trunk should be burnt all round then, if alive the widow should be tonsured and reclaimed to the society after a feast was given to one thousand Brahmins. Every religious or social rite or ritual prescribed as feast or the distribution of money to Brahmins!

The cruel practice of tonsuring widows long persisted, although it began to break down rapidly in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The story is told of a Brahmin's widowed sister who, in due course, died. As she had not undergone the rites of shaving her head, Brahmins refused to attend her funeral. Barbers would not shave the head of the dead body. So she was consigned to flames by her Shudra neighbours. At late as 1930s, a similar case of a Brahmin widow from Naisk was reported by

Anant Hari Gadre, a champion of social equality and annihilation of untouchability in Maharashtra, in his famous weekly, *Nirbhid*. Because the widow had not had her head tonsured during her widowhood, the Nasik Brahmins refused to carry her dead body to the crematorium. They got the head of the body pitilessly shaved, and then the corpse was carried away and burnt” ((Keer, Dhanajay).

As Keer writes further: “Although this problem of remarriage of widows was confined to Brahmins and some other high caste Hindus, Jotirao was moved by the miserable condition of the widows, and often by their immoral behavior. Sometimes they were involved in child murder. A man of flaming indignation against injustice, Jotirao actively supported the movement for widow remarriage. He wanted to liberate the woman from her age-old shackles. The Indian woman was now at the crossroads.

The remarriage of a Shenavi widow took place in Poona on March 8, 1860, with a Shenavi widower. The widow was about eighteen. The *Dnyanprakash* published the news of the widow marriage and stated that it was not necessary for it to express its opinion on it. It is said that Jotirao encouraged the marriage of a Shenavi widow in 1864, and it seems this must be the marriage often referred to. Great reforms are the result of a series of small pioneering efforts. Later, Vishnushastri Pandit, rightly called the Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar of Maharashtra, resigned his job in 1864 and devoted his life to the cause of widow remarriage. Moved by the tragedies and crimes which sometimes resulted from the misdeeds of widows, Jotirao, a wonderful combination of a dreamer and a man of action, who attached more importance to deeds than words, resolved to found an orphanage where widows would secretly come either for delivery or for keeping their babies. Consequently handbills advertising this bold announcement were pasted on the walls of houses in Poona. They read: “O you widows! Come and deliver here safely and secretly. Take your child or leave it here at your sweet will. The orphanage will do the looking after!” This news sent the Poona orthodox wild. They asked one another who its author could be. The reply often was: “Who else can it be No person except Jotiba. The perfidious villain” Orthodox Hindus became red in the face the moment they heard Jotirao’s name. It is a disgrace the way he is behaving”, they said indignantly. Great social changes do not occur accidentally. They are willed by men of action.

More is, this social institution was the first of its kind in India. It was conducted by a non-Brahmin boldly, humanely, benevolently, especially for Brahmin widows, to save them from disgrace, avert the killing of embryos and children, and to save the lives of the widows who often either committed suicide or were involved in criminal proceedings. Although meant for pregnant widows the orphanage was indirectly guided by one great motive. It saved orphans from going over to Christian missionaries. However, this time Jotirao formed no committee. He was conducting the orphanage without the help of Government or any Brahmin colleagues. His experience in conducting the girls schools and schools for the low castes under committees composed of Brahmins had burnt his fingers. So he scrupulously avoided placing the orphanage under a committee of Brahmin members. The men who could not save their sisters

and mothers from mental tortures and from tonsures were quite unfit, he said, to become members of that Institutions. Several widows delivered their children safely in this orphanage. Thus Jotirao became a savior of the unwilling sinners. The orphanage continued its noble work, and eminent men showed keen interest in it.

Just then Jotirao's father fell ill. Govindrao's other son Rajram lived with him. He looked after the property, and his household affairs were running smoothly. Yet he was grieved that Jotirao had no child. The old man advised him fervently to marry a second time, so that he might have children. He tried to impress the point through Jotirao's father-in-law. That family also agreed. But when they asked Jotirao to consider their suggestion and insisted that he should respond to it, Jotirao was perturbed. He said that if a pair had no child, it would be unkind to charge a woman with barrenness. It might be that the husband also was unproductive owing to his defects. In that case if the women went in for a second husband how would her husband take it? Would he not feel insulted and humiliated? According to him, it was a cruel practice for a man to marry a second time because he had no issue from his first wife.

Savtiribai his wife looked unflinchingly after the children in the orphanage as if she were their mother. She had no child; but with her kind and generous disposition she tenderly and lovingly cherished the infants. It was her practice to invite, from time to time, all neighbouring children to dinner. She was happiest and smiled her sweetest when she was left among children. So dearly she loved children. She would invite her female neighbours to help her to dress and feed the children. For several years she had worked in the girl's school conducted by her husband. One can imagine the significance of her work when one knows that until 1873 a woman's appointment to the post of teacher was noted in leading papers like the Native Opinion as a matter of respect and pride" (Gail Omvedt, 2006).

"Jotirao therefore appealed to Government to provide the Shudras with educational facilities, and to dispel their ignorance and prejudices. The Government should care for the education of the lower classes. It was its duty to do so because most of its revenue came from the labour of the *ryot*, from the sweat of his brow. It was anything but just and equitable to expend profusely a large portion of Government revenue on the education of the higher classes who, it was believed, would in time vend learning without money and without price. According to Jotirao, the theory of filtration was wrong and its philosophy utopian. The best way to advance the moral and intellectual welfare of the people was to spread instruction among the masses.

Demanding then the abolition of the virtual monopoly of the Brahmins in the administration, he advocated the recruitment of candidates from other classes. He suggested that candidates from the lower classes should be selected, trained and appointed to the posts of Kulkarnis, Patils and Teachers. He raised no objection to Brahmins getting posts in proportion to their population. He said it was agonizing to see that there was not a Mahar or Mang graduate. Brahmin teachers had brought disgrace upon the Education

Department by creating this situation.

How Jyotirao was justified in making his attack can be seen from the fact that until the year 1881-82 there was no student from the Ati-Shudras in either any of the high schools or colleges of the Bombay Presidency. He also demanded the establishment of village schools without Brahmin teachers because they either discouraged the lower class pupils or frightened them into quitting the schools.



Jyotirao urged the necessity of nominating men from the lower classes to Municipal bodies to look after the interests and amenities of the lower classes, such as adequate supply of water and light. It was his experience that because of absence of representatives of the lower classes on Municipal bodies, the poor classes were not provide even the minimum supply of water. When the Ati- Shudras and the poor classes of Pune started using cisterns in the localities of the Brahmins, they obtained a supply of water for their own cisterns. He felt that it was the bounden duty of the Municipality to provide proper lighting and an adequate water supply to the lower classes.

Jyotirao wrote that the practice of calling the roll for the criminal tribes who committed robberies was not improper; but he held the view that the same practice would have been not improper in case of pregnant Brahmin widows whose crimes were more sinful and harmful to society. Jotirao further observed that had the Brahmins been real patriots they would not have reduced the Shudras and Ati-Shudras to slavery and regarded even pure spring water at their hands as more impure than the urine of animals.

Conclusion:

Further, “The Shudras are”, Jotirao concluded with confidence, the life and sinews of the country, it is to them alone and not to the Brahmins, that the Government must ever look, to help them in their difficulties, financial as well as political.

If the hearts and minds of the Shudras are made happy and contented, the British Government need have no misgiving about their loyalty in the future. He cried vociferously for mass education and loudly denounced the theory of filtration, but in vain (Keer, Dhanajay).

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