



Inclusive Development in India: Mahatma Jyothirao Phule's Ideology

K. Narasimha Rao

Research Scholar

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule Centre

Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur.

Prof. M. Trimurthi Rao

Director, Mahatma Jyothirao Phule Centre

Director, Prof. K. Satchidananda Murty Centre

Head, Department of Sociology and Social Work

Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur.

ABSTRACT

Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) initiated social change in nineteenth century India especially in Maharashtra through his philosophy. The nineteenth century was an era of social criticism and transformation that focused on nationalism, caste and gender. All major questions taken up by the reformers were connected with women's issues such as female infanticide, child marriage, ban on women's education, Sati, tonsuring of widows, ban on widow remarriage etc. At the same time, reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family & marriage with special emphasis on the status & rights of women. Jyotiba took up the issue of gender and caste. He revolted against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. His revolt against the caste system integrated social and religious reform with equality. He emerged as the unchanged leader of the depressed classes in Maharashtra and was recognized as a leader of downtrodden class in all over India. He was influenced by American thinker Thomas Paine's ideas of Rights of Man.

INTRODUCTION

Jyotirao Govindarao Phule(11 April 1827 - 28 November 1890), popularly known as Mahatma Phule or Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 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.

Review of Literature

Sucharita (2025) critically reviews tribal education policies in India and argues that development approaches often prioritize assimilation over inclusion. The study highlights that lack of culturally responsive frameworks marginalizes indigenous communities. It emphasizes the need for inclusive development rooted in diversity and social justice, aligning with Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's vision of equality and empowerment.

Damor et al. (2024) analyze the structural barriers faced by tribal women and argue that inclusive development remains incomplete without addressing socio-economic inequalities. The study identifies poverty, gender discrimination, and lack of access to education as key obstacles, reinforcing the need for transformative and equity-based approaches consistent with Phule's emancipatory ideology.

Padmavathi and Rama Devi (2024) examine education as a tool for empowerment among tribal women, highlighting gaps in literacy, enrollment, and gender parity. The study argues that inclusive development must go beyond access to focus on skill-building and awareness, reflecting Phule's idea of education as a means of social transformation and self-respect.

Sukhija and Mishra (2024) explore barriers to education and skill development among tribal women, emphasizing cultural dissonance and institutional neglect. The study highlights that development policies often ignore indigenous knowledge systems, limiting true inclusion. It calls for culturally grounded and participatory approaches, resonating with Phule's ideology of inclusive and community-centered development.

Research Gap

Existing studies on inclusive development in India largely focus on policy frameworks, economic growth, and welfare schemes, often overlooking the deeper social and ideological dimensions of exclusion. Although the contributions of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule are widely acknowledged in the context of social reform and education, limited research systematically applies his emancipatory ideology to contemporary inclusive development debates. Furthermore, there is a lack of integrated analysis connecting caste, gender, and education within a Phulean framework. Most studies remain sector-specific and fail to provide a holistic, justice-oriented perspective, highlighting the need to reinterpret inclusive development through Phule's vision of equality and empowerment.

Objectives

- To examine the concept of inclusive development in the Indian context.
- To analyze the key ideas of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule on equality, education, and social justice.
- To explore the relevance of Phule's ideology in addressing contemporary social inequalities.
- To assess the role of education as a tool for inclusive development among marginalized communities.
- To suggest policy measures for promoting inclusive and equitable development based on Phule's philosophy.

Phule's Social Reform Movement

The history of nineteenth century is the story of the impetus for social reform in which the introduction and spread of modern education was an important element. Schools which taught English language were opened not so much to educate the masses but to groom Indian people to run the British government. Christian missionaries opened a Marathi school in Pune for the public. During this transitional phase, even though education was open to masses, the common person was not aware of its importance. Jyotiba has worked for the masses and made them aware of education as a vehicle for social change.

19th Century was a period of social problems like Varnasystem, mythology, caste-system, ignorance about human rights etc. In oppressed castes great-grandparents and grand-parents did their community work which involved hard menial labour. They were not permitted social mobility other permissible for them. They were not even aware of their rights; illiteracy was very high in the society. Jyotiba shows the light of hope, to free from these problems of society. He revolted against the unjust caste-system and upheld the cause of education of women and lower castes. He started primary education and higher education and fought for their rights. Thus, he ushered in primary education as a tool in perceiving the work of the oppressed castes as dignified labor that was exploited by society. In 20th Century people belongs to oppressed castes their parents had opportunity to get undergraduate education which they could also impart to their children. This was a period when oppressed castes struggled to enter institutions and make their presence visible in the context of nation-building. It was also a period when they had an understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

In the late 20th century and the beginning of 21st Century oppressed castes to an extent have entered into institutions of higher learning and have started producing knowledge that questions inequality and reconstructs identity from the theoretical point of view. They are ready to face the challenges of their time. We can see the growth of education from 19th to 21st century India. 19th century the focus on primary to higher education, then in 20th century system focused on Undergraduate level education, and now in 21st century high level research on social sciences is available for the generation. The present position is better because of education which has given them self-respect, made them aware of their rights, organizations to voice their feelings.

Ideas on Social Justice and Equality

Phule made a powerful plea to abolish untouchability and the entire caste-system. He revolted against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. The Dalit at that time did not have any political, social, educational and economic rights.

He condemned dual morality of the Brahman system. He said equal opportunity should get to all people. He said by birth all are free and equal. All human beings have natural rights. He was a militant advocate of human rights to the downtrodden.

He protested against man-made inequality which was rooted in Hindu caste-system and varna-vyavastha. He struggled fearlessly to implement the reforms in the Hindu society. He tried to remove inferiority complex from the minds of the people. He made aware to shudras. He advised them take education and acquire power, they are not slave but human beings. As T.L. Joshi said, "Jotiba Phule was one of the first persons to rebel against the traditional social system in India. From where did he find the inspiration for this revolt considering that the prevailing social laws had taken a firm hold on the Indian mind for thousands of years? The answer is that Jotiba was a Satyashodhak-a seeker of truth-the moral truth of human life. The manifestation of that perennial truth was his belief in man's freedom in the universe, as upheld by modern western civilization."

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj which sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propounded the spread of rational thinking. The movement carried on by the samaj was the first of its kind to reach the remote villages. He carried on the social reform movements based on social equality. Phule believed in the equality of men and women. He did not merely stress the equality of men but also equality of men and women. For Phule equality in the society was meaningless. Without equality of man and woman in the family. He propagated universal humanism based on values of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood. He criticised the caste system through the books "Gulamgiri" and "Brahmanache Kasab". He established the Satyashodhak Samaj. He sowed the seeds of development of masses.

We can emphasize on his ideas by these words to lead the social change in the society, "Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. To him blind faith eradication formed part of a broad socioeconomic transformation. This was his strategy for ending exploitation of human beings. Mere advice, education and alternative ways of living are not enough, unless the economic framework of exploitation comes to an end. Shudras became conscious of their caste identity and started claiming equality with higher castes in all areas of life. In short, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule liberated women and Shudras from the control of religious vested interests and laid the foundation for a Backward Class Movement in India."

Feminism and Women Empowerment

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai, were remarkable personalities, especially for their times. He started women education from the education of his wife and trained her for the school. Savitribai was the first

women teacher in India. He started the first school for girls at Pune, in the year 1848. He advocated education for female students from the downtrodden (Shudras/Atee Shudras) communities and adults. He started schools. He established institutes like the 'Pune Female Native Schools' and the 'Society for Promoting Education for Mahar, Mangs'. More important, he engaged in his education at home too. Jyotiba prepared his wife, Savitribai, to teach in the girls' school, with a view to educating the women first, in order to bring in the value of equality at home. Savitribai had to face bitter opposition from the orthodox society of the time for teaching girls and people from the underprivileged groups in the school. Despite this bitter opposition, Jyotiba and Savitribai continued their work with sincerity.

Jyotiba believed in the equality of men and women. He stressed on women's education, emancipation of women. He brought women in public life. He said equality and oneness is necessary for the development of the country. "In order to empower women he opposed child marriage. He initiated widow-remarriage and started a home for widows. In that time widow remarriage were banned and child-marriage was very common among the Brahmins and in the Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in a manner in which the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the widows resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Realizing the dangers of a widow giving birth to a child conceived in unfortunate circumstances after her husband's death, he opened a home for newborn infants in 1863 to prevent infanticides and suicides."5 Phule vehemently advocated widow-remarriage and even got a home built for housing upper caste widows during 1854. He requested people all the time to send their children in schools he opened for downtroddens and women. He stated,

Nar nari sabhi mehnati bano.
Parivar ko pale. Anand le.
Nit bacho bachi ko padne bheje.

On 17th Feb. 1852, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 's school was publicly inspected. The officials passed the following remark."It is a pity that the citizens of our country are not yet convinced of the need to educate women."A judge named Brown who was present on the occasion said, "Educating women will strengthen family happiness and utility of the institution of the family." Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's bold efforts to educate women, Shudras and the untouchables had deep effect on the values, beliefs and ideologies. His efforts unleashed the forces of awakening among the common masses. Education made women more knowledgeable. They became conscious of what is right and wrong in the light of science. Women began to question the age-old customs which degraded them.

Findings of the study

- The study finds that inclusive development in India remains uneven due to persistent caste, gender, and educational inequalities, particularly among marginalized communities.

- It highlights that Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's ideology strongly emphasizes education as a tool for social transformation, dignity, and empowerment.
- The findings show that despite policy efforts, structural barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, and social discrimination continue to hinder true inclusion.
- The study reveals that women's empowerment and access to education are central to achieving inclusive development, as emphasized by Phule's work.
- It concludes that current development models often focus on economic growth but fail to integrate social justice, equality, and cultural inclusion, which are essential in Phule's vision.

Limitations of the Study

This study is primarily based on secondary data and existing literature, which may not fully capture the contemporary ground realities of marginalized communities. It lacks primary field-based evidence and empirical validation. The study is also limited in its scope by focusing mainly on theoretical interpretation of Phule's ideology rather than comparative or region-specific analysis.

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is remembered as one of the most transformative thinkers of 19th-century India, whose contributions extended far beyond a single domain. His work in education laid the foundation for inclusive learning by opening schools for women and marginalized communities, challenging the deeply rooted caste and gender hierarchies of his time. Phule firmly believed that education was not merely a means of literacy but a powerful tool for social awakening, dignity, and empowerment.

His commitment to caste equality questioned the oppressive structures of Brahmanical dominance and advocated for a more just and humane society. Through his writings and activism, Phule exposed social inequalities and emphasized the need for structural change. In the field of agriculture and economics, he highlighted the exploitation of peasants and called for reforms that would ensure fairness and dignity for farmers, recognizing their central role in society. Phule was also a strong advocate for women's rights, including education for girls and support for widows, which were revolutionary ideas in a highly patriarchal society. His vision of human rights and social equality was rooted in the belief that every individual deserves respect, opportunity, and freedom from discrimination.

In conclusion, Phule's ideology remains highly relevant in contemporary India. His emphasis on equality, education, and social justice provides a strong foundation for addressing present-day challenges. Reinterpreting his ideas in today's context can guide efforts toward building a truly inclusive and equitable society.

REFERENCES

- Deshpande, G. P. (Ed.). (2002). *Selected writings of Jotirao Phule*. LeftWord Books.
- Dhara, L. (Ed.). (2011). *Phule's and woman's question*. Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics.
- Engels, F. (1972). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. International Publishers. (Original work published 1884)
- Government of India. (2023). *Annual report 2022–23*. Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2012). *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Havilland, W. A. (2005). *Anthropology: The human challenge* (10th ed.). Thomson Wadsworth.
- Jodhka, S. S. (2012). *Caste*. Oxford University Press.
- Joshi, L. S. (1996). *Jotirao Phule*. National Book Trust.
- Keer, D. (1997). *Mahatma Jotirao Phule: Father of the Indian social revolution*. Popular Prakashan.
- Mill, J. S. (1869). *The subjection of women*. Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.
- Omvedt, G. (2002). *Jyotiba Phule ani stree mukticha vichar*. Lokvangmay Prakashan.
- Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anti-caste intellectuals*. Navayana.
- Phadke, Y. D. (Ed.). (1991). *Complete works of Mahatma Phule* (Vols. 1–2). Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya and Sanskruti Mandal.
- Phule, J. G. (2002). *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*. LeftWord Books. (Original work published 1873)
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1952). *History of philosophy: Eastern and Western* (Vols. 1–2). George Allen & Unwin.
- Rao, A. (Ed.). (2003). *Gender and caste: Issues in contemporary feminism*. Kali for Women.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sujatha, K. (2002). *Education among tribal women: Problems and prospects*. National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration.
- Tilak, J. B. G. (2002). Education and poverty. *Journal of Human Development*, 3(2), 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880220147301>
- Xaxa, V. (2014). *Report of the high-level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities of India*. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.