

**INTRODUCTION**

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (*Jyotirao Govindrao Phule*) (1827-90), who was born in a low-caste family of Pune, distinguished himself as a social reformer and social thinker. Reflecting on Hindu caste system, Phule realized that the members of higher castes had deliberately kept the members of the lowest caste illiterate, poor, ignorant and slaves of superstition with a view to carrying on their exploitation. He argued that apart from eradicating the blind faith in the sanctity of the caste system, thorough social-economic transformation was necessary for ending this widespread practice of exploitation. *Jyotiba Phule is credited with introducing the Marathi word Dalit (the broken, the crushed) to describe the down-trodden castes.* This word is now widely used in many Indian languages as well as English in this sense. He was bestowed with the title of *Mahatma* (the Great Soul) in 1888 by an eminent social reformer, and endorsed by the people of Bombay (now Mumbai).

Jyotiba Phule was born in a *Mali* (Gardener) family of Maharashtra which belonged to the *Shudra* caste. So he was directly exposed to the social injustice that was inherent in Hindu caste system. He was educated in a Scottish Mission School where he became well-versed in English as well as Marathi.

In 1848, Phule started a school for girls and children of the untouchable castes; his wife Savitribai greatly helped him in this venture. In 1851 he opened two more schools for girls. He campaigned for widow remarriage, and in 1863 he started a Home for upper caste widows as well as a Home for unwanted newborn infants in order to prevent female infanticide. In 1873 he founded *Satyashodhak Samaj* (Society for the Seekers of Truth), in collaboration with other dedicated social workers. This society opposed idolatry and denounced the rigidity of the caste system. It also campaigned for the spread of rational thinking, and rejected the need of priests. In fact, Phule incessantly worked for the uplift of all vulnerable sections of society, but the major part of his life and effort was devoted towards the emancipation of the untouchables.

Jyotiba Phule's most important published works include:

- Jaati Bhed Vivek Saar* (1865) (*An Inquiry into Caste Discrimination*);
  - Brahmanache Kasab* (1869) (where Phule has exposed the exploitation done by Brahman priests);
  - Gulamgiri* (1873) (where Phule has given a historical survey of the slavery to which lower castes were subjected);
  - Shetkarayancha Aasud* (Cultivator's Whipcord) (1881) (where Phule has analysed how peasants were being exploited in those days); and
  - Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (1891) (*A Book of True Religion for All*).
- Phule wrote mainly in Marathi in a simple style so that it could be understood

by the masses. As a result, his works did not receive wide attention of scholars.

Nationalism in India cannot develop as long as restrictions on intercaste dining and intercaste marriage continue to exist.

Mahatma Phule

Downtrodden sections are in urgent need of education in order to enrich them with wisdom, morality, progress and prosperity.

Mahatma Phule

Discrimination between human beings on grounds of caste, creed or gender is a sin.

Mahatma Phule

## FAITH IN EQUALITY

Phule was deeply impressed and enlightened by the revolutionary thought of Thomas Paine (1738-1809), British philosopher. Drawing inspiration from Paine's celebrated work, *Rights of Man* (1791), Phule argued that all men and women are free and equal by birth. When God has made them free and equal, no individual has the right to oppress another. They are not only entitled to equality before the law, but also to equality of opportunity to enter into civil service and municipal administration.

*Satyashodhak Samaj* sought to secure emancipation of the down-trodden castes, and liberate the *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras* (lowest and degraded castes) from the slavery of the higher castes. Phule repudiated those episodes of Hindu mythology and scriptures which justified the cruel and inhuman rule of higher castes over lower castes. Phule tried to expose the falsehood and selfish motives behind the Hindu mythology. He argued that the codes of conduct propagated by Brahmans were cunningly devised to serve their own interest. For centuries the masses were kept in chains. Phule went to the extent of claiming that the oppression and hardship faced by *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras* was greater than that faced by the slaves in America.

Phule held that whatever improvement was visible in the condition of the low castes, it was due to the efforts of the British rule. But it was not enough. Emancipation of the lower castes needed the expansion of mass education. Phule complained that the British government had neglected the need of mass education, and spent a huge amount for the expansion of higher education. He also criticized the British rule on the ground that its economic policy was unfavourable to the poor peasants in many respects. He suggested several measures for improvement of the agricultural sector.

Finally, Phule wanted to replace the exploitative Indian social order by a society founded on the principles of liberty and equality. He also sought to replace Hinduism by a new, universal religion. It would affirm faith in one God, and discard the idea of having any intermediary between God and his devotee. Phule denounced the sanctity of the sacred books of Hindus, like the *Smritis* and the *Vedas*. His *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* exhorted the individual to seek truth without the aid of any *Guru* or a sacred text. In Phule's scheme of universal religion, each member of a family would be free to accept any religion of his or her choice whether it was Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity, but everyone would have faith only in the rational elements of his or her religion.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, most brilliant leader of the depressed classes, was inspired by Mahatma Phule when he insisted on education of the masses to pave the way for emancipation of the 'untouchables'. But Ambedkar did not oppose the expansion of higher education; he argued that the benefit of higher education should not be confined to the higher castes, but the lower castes should also avail themselves of the opportunities of higher education for their own emancipation.