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**PHULE'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY: A RADICAL REJECTION OF SLAVERY  
AND HIERARCHY**

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**Introduction:**

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1827. He belonged to 'mali' caste, considered as inferior by the Brahmins. His father and uncles served as florists and so the family came to be known as 'Phule'. He married Savitribai India's first educated lady.

He occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the Nineteenth century. He devoted his life for the liberation of untouchables from the exploitation of Brahmins. He revolted against the unjust caste system and developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. Not only caste system but also, he strongly opposed gender inequality. He sacrificed his life for the progress of untouchables, peasants and women. As a result, he was severely criticized by Brahmin Samaj and attacked by them. On other hand, for his noble work he earned the title of "Father of Indian Social Revolution". In 1953, the Government of India awarded Phule the Padma Vibhushan, recognizing him as one of the outstanding leaders of India's independence cause. In Maharashtra, his birthday is celebrated as Maharashtra Day.

Jyotirao Phule opened the first girls' school in 1848, called Mahilashram in Khetwadi, Pune. He also started a library and reading room near the school, so that students could read book, magazines and newspaper. He started his first newspaper, "Maravi" dealt with political and literary issues of the time. In this newspaper he wrote against Brahminism. He started teaching children from nearby poor families after converting a room into a classroom in his residence. He also opened the Satyashodhak Samaj to campaign against social discrimination based on caste and gender. Like the

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Prarthana Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, the Satyashodhak Samaj was also a monotheistic sect. All three institutions believed that all human beings were children of one God. Membership of the Samaj was open to all castes.

He said, “If we want to make our nation knowledgeable and strong, we should teach social equality and eradication of horrible customs like child marriage. My duty is to fight against Brahminism”. He had broken all the barriers of injustice and had united everyone regardless of their castes in one place by giving them a chance to think freely and independently without discrimination. Jyotirao Phule is considered a philosopher of social reform and a revolutionary thinker whose philosophy focused on equality, humanism and rationalism. He adapted traditional philosophy to address practical social issues like caste oppression and inequality, advocating for social justice through education and critical awareness. His work challenged traditional hierarchies by prioritizing social empowerment, critical thinking and the need for universal education for all, regardless of caste and gender.<sup>1</sup>

**Slavery:**

Slavery has a long history in India, with different forms existing throughout ancient, medieval, and colonial periods. In ancient India, slavery was a reality. Some texts like *Manusmriti*, etc established rules about who could enslave whom and all. The varna system is an old social classification emerging in Hindu scriptures. It divides society into four main groups.

(i) Brahmins- The priests and scholars who are meant to conduct religious rituals and preserve sacred knowledge.

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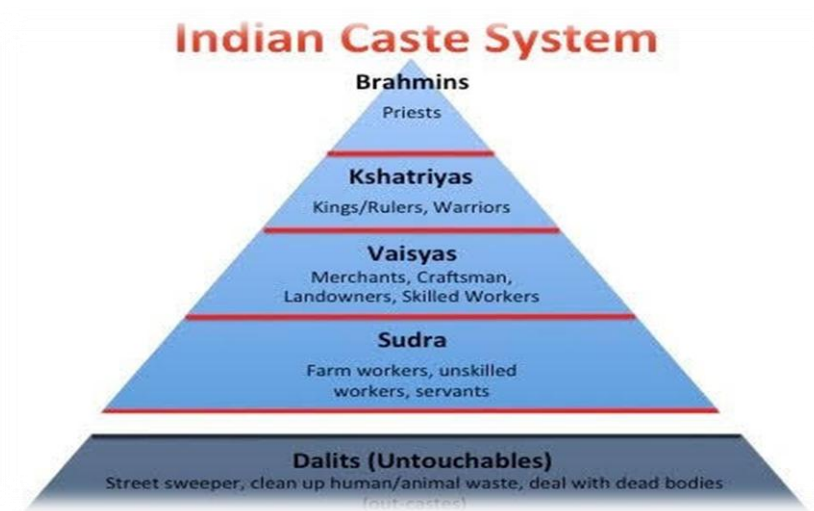
<sup>1</sup> Mathur, B. (2022, May-June). The Ideology Of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Its Influence On Society Today. *Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research Studies and Development* (Vol No. 01, Issue No.-01).

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- (ii) Kshatriya- The warriors and rulers meant for protection and governance.
- (iii) Vaishyas- Merchants and agriculturists for commerce and agriculture.
- (iv) Shudras- Labours and service provides for the other three varnas.

These classifications were supposed to clarify people in society according to their occupations and characters leading to social cohesion and effectiveness. Although the Shudras comprised most of the enslaved population, members of other varnas could also become slaves. Shudras were most likely to be enslaved due to their low social status and their expected role of servitude to the upper classes. Slaves were considered property, but masters were sometimes obligated to treat them ethically and could not kill them. Here slavery mainly discussed in the context of Brahmanical society. Over time, a more complex, localized system that developed, consisting of many groups defined by birth, occupation and regional factors, creating a very rigid, social hierarchy.



Dalits formerly known as “Untouchables” have been historically oppressed and excluded under the rigid Hindu caste system. They were denied access to education, temples, wells and social mobility and were often subjected to inhumane treatment and discrimination.

### **Jyotirao Phule on Slavery:**

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According to Jyotirao Phule the Shudras are slaves in their own land". He published *Gulamgiri* against the moral foundations of Brahmanical Hindu Society. This text was written in a period when British Colonialism and traditional Brahmanical structures coexisted. His attack on Brahminism-

- (i) Rejection of the myth of divine origin of caste- Phule attacked the Purusha Sukta myth from Rigveda, which claimed that different castes originated from different parts of the cosmic being Purusha- Brahmins from the head, Kshatriya from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet.
- (ii) Critique of spiritual authority- Phule strongly rejected the *Manusmriti* and other Hindu scriptures that sanctioned caste discrimination, untouchability and the subjugation of women.
- (iii) Opposition to Brahminical monopoly on knowledge and rituals- Phule condemned the Brahmins' monopoly over education, religious rituals and cultural norms, which excluded Shudras and women from the sphere of knowledge.
- (iv) Religion as a tool of domination- For Phule, religion was not a neutral or sacred force, but a deliberate instrument used by the Brahmin class to enslave the minds and bodies of the oppressed.

The Hindu Scriptures, especially in *Manusmriti*, supplied the ideological whip, sanctifying a social order in which the labour bodies and even thoughts of Shudras were treated as a Brahmin property. Jyotirao Phule challenged Brahmanical dominance and promoted education for Dalits and women. In rural Maharashtra, Brahmin landlords occupied the role of plantation masters, extracting surplus labour from lower caste cultivation through ritual authority and inherited privilege. According to Phule, this dominance was a form of mental and social colonization in which the

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oppressed were made to believe that their suffering was their destiny. He universalized the idea that liberty is a human birth right, not a concession of rulers. He always practised what he preached.<sup>2</sup>

Phule compared the condition of oppressed castes in India to the slavery seen in America, claiming that Indian slavery was more subtle and long-lasting because it was justified through religion and sacred texts. He exposed how Brahmins controlled knowledge, education and religious authority, using them to keep lower castes in ignorance and servitude. He also criticised the British Government, which he believed continued this unfair system by supporting Brahmanical elites instead of uplifting the truly oppressed. He argued that the British, though claiming to be civilised, allowed caste-based exploitation to continue under their rule.

Jyotirao Phule's philosophy aimed at creating an egalitarian society based on justice, education and human rights, what made him one of the earliest and most influential voices against social oppression in modern India. In his writings, Phule compared caste oppression in India to slavery, arguing that social hierarchy was a man-made system used to maintain power. He promoted Sarvajanic Satya Dharma, which upheld human dignity, freedom and ethical living beyond caste and ritual. His interpretation of the non-Vedic Gods of the non-Brahmins is highly significant from the Indian sociological point of view.

**Conclusion:**

Jyotirao Phule was a pioneering social reformer and thinker who strongly opposed caste oppression and social inequality in 19<sup>th</sup> century. The movement started by Jyotirao Phule reached new heights under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit scholar, lawyer and the chief architect of the Indian

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<sup>2</sup> Phule, J. G. (1991). *Slavery: In the Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism* (P. G. Patil, Trans.). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

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Constitution. But in the present scenario, Dalits continue to face pervasive social exclusion, significant economic inequality and systemic violence and discrimination, despite constitutional safeguards and legal protections. While there have been some improvements in political representation and education access, major disparities and ongoing human rights abuses highlight the persistence of caste issues in contemporary India. Dalits often live in segregated colonies on the outskirts of villages and face discrimination in access to public services, shops, and even crematoriums. They are routinely subjected to verbal abuse. Discrimination is prevalent in schools and universities. Incidents reported in 2024 include a Dalit minor being brutally beaten by a teacher for refusing to do a menial task and another young child forced to clean a school toilet. Suicides of Dalit students in prestigious institutions like IITs have raised concerns about institutional discrimination and majoritarianism on campuses.

It is absolutely possible to overcome contemporary Dalit problems by following Jyotirao Phule's philosophy. The focus should be on universal education, economic empowerment, fostering a rational and critical temper and demanding social and political equality through collective action. He believed that education was the key to liberation from oppression and superstition. The way Jyotirao Phule critiqued the religious scriptures and Brahmanical dominance that justified the caste system, in the same way we need to continue challenge and expose caste-based discrimination in all spheres of life, including social systems and market practices. Besides that, have to use modern media and community platforms to spread awareness similar to how Jyotirao Phule used this newspaper to articulate grievances and spread reformist messages.

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