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Revisiting Phule in a Transforming India: Caste, Culture, and Social Change

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Abstract:

India is currently undergoing significant transformation, influenced by globalization, technological advancement, evolving socio-cultural identities, and persistent struggles for equality. Within this dynamic context, the writings and reformist vision of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule gain renewed significance. This paper analyzes Phule's contributions to anti-caste discourse, cultural reform, women's emancipation, and educational restructuring in relation to contemporary India. By situating Phule's thought alongside current developments, including debates on social justice, affirmative action, digital empowerment, and cultural identity, this study demonstrates the continued influence of his radical humanitarianism on the nation's pursuit of inclusivity. Through textual analysis of *Gulamgiri* and other works, as well as engagement with contemporary scholarship, the paper contends that Phule's ideas offer a critical framework for interrogating caste discrimination, reimagining culture, and envisioning egalitarian social change.

Keywords: Mahatma Phule, caste, culture, social change, equality, education, identity, modern India.

Introduction

India's progress through the twenty-first century has been marked by profound transitions that continue to redefine its socio-cultural, political, and economic landscape. Rapid technological advancement, globalization, demographic mobility, and the expansion of digital infrastructure have transformed modes of interaction, communication, and social imagination. Concurrently, contemporary India faces intensified debates regarding identity, social justice, and constitutional rights. Issues such as caste inequality, gender justice, cultural belonging, and economic marginalization have become central to public discourse. In response to these developments, scholars increasingly recognize the importance of revisiting foundational thinkers whose ideas elucidate the origins of persistent inequalities and offer frameworks for a more inclusive future. Among these figures, Phule occupies a pivotal position.

Phule is recognized as a radical intellectual and social reformer who challenged entrenched structures of caste domination, patriarchy, and cultural hegemony in nineteenth-century colonial India. His principal works, particularly *Gulamgiri* (1873), offer a systematic critique of Brahminical supremacy and the ideological mechanisms sustaining caste hierarchy. Through reinterpretation of religious myths, exposure of structural exploitation, and advocacy for the rights of oppressed castes and women, Phule established the foundation for a counter-tradition of Dalit-Bahujan thought. His reformist vision was grounded in principles of social equality, rational inquiry, and universal human dignity—values that were revolutionary in his era and remain pertinent today. Phule's focus on education, especially for women and marginalized groups, reflected his conviction that knowledge serves as a transformative force capable of dismantling oppressive systems.



While Phule's activism and intellectual contributions originated within the socio-political context of colonial India, their significance extends well beyond the nineteenth century. Contemporary India continues to grapple with the enduring legacies of caste discrimination, economic exclusion, cultural marginalization, and gender-based oppression. Despite constitutional protections and governmental initiatives to promote equality, caste-related violence, educational disparities, and social exclusion persist across both rural and urban settings. The proliferation of digital media has generated new arenas for resistance, yet it has also replicated existing hierarchies in virtual environments. Within this landscape of continuity and change, Phule's ideas provide analytical tools for examining the adaptation of historical inequities to present-day conditions.

Re-examining Phule's thought is not solely an act of historical recovery; it is an intellectual imperative for interpreting the ongoing transitions within Indian society. His critique of caste offers a framework for analyzing the persistence of social inequality in contemporary institutions. His cultural interventions challenge prevailing narratives that continue to influence public perceptions of identity and belonging. His focus on education anticipates current debates regarding inclusivity, access, and the democratization of knowledge. Furthermore, his advocacy for women's liberation aligns with modern feminist theories that emphasize the intersections of caste, gender, and class. Consequently, Phule's work contextualizes India's ongoing struggles and provides a roadmap for building a more egalitarian and humane society.

This paper analyzes Phule's insights within the context of a transforming India. By examining his critique of caste hierarchy, his reimagining of culture, and his vision for social change, the study demonstrates the enduring relevance of Phule's thought to contemporary Indian society. As questions of identity, justice, and empowerment dominate national discourse, Phule's intellectual legacy warrants renewed attention and critical engagement. His ideas continue to

inspire movements for social equality and cultural assertion, establishing him as an essential figure for understanding both the complexities of India's past and the possibilities for its future.

Phule's Critique of Caste and Social Hierarchy

Phule's attack on caste was far ahead of his time. In *Gulamgiri*, he exposes the ideological construction of caste hierarchy by tracing its roots to myth-making and the socio-religious dominance of the Brahmin class. Phule argues that caste is not a divine creation but a historical tool of exploitation designed to maintain social privilege (Phule 12). His deconstruction of Brahminical narratives challenges the authority structures that justified inequality.

Phule interprets caste as a system that obstructs social mobility and prevents collective progress. His critique is grounded in moral humanism, where the dignity of all individuals is paramount. He asserts that social change is impossible unless caste hierarchy is dismantled through rational inquiry and education (O'Hanlon 58). This perspective aligns closely with contemporary debates over reservations, social justice, and equitable opportunities.

In modern India, despite constitutional safeguards, caste discrimination persists in various forms—digital spaces, workplaces, educational institutions, and political structures. The National Crime Records Bureau consistently reports caste-based violence, demonstrating that caste remains an unresolved challenge. Phule's insistence on questioning inherited social norms provides a robust framework for interpreting these realities.

Phule's Critique of Caste and Social

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's critique of the caste system stands as one of the earliest and most radical intellectual challenges to Brahminical social order in nineteenth-century India. At a time when caste hierarchy was accepted as a natural and divinely ordained structure, Phule emerged as



a pioneering voice who systematically questioned its ideological foundations. His landmark work, *Gulamgiri* (1873), is central to this critique. Through a combination of satire, historical reinterpretation, and moral reasoning, Phule exposes how caste was constructed through religious myths, ritual authority, and social narratives that legitimized the dominance of the Brahmin class. He argues that caste is not an inherent or sacred system but a socio-historical instrument designed to maintain privilege and subjugate the Shudras and Atishudras (Phule 12).

Phule's reinterpretation of Purānic mythology is particularly significant. By retelling stories such as the myth of Parashurama and the Aryan conquest, he reveals how these narratives were weaponized to portray the oppressed castes as inherently inferior and the Brahmins as natural leaders. According to Phule, such myths were not divine truths but ideological tools that helped institutionalize inequality. Rosalind O'Hanlon notes that Phule's reinterpretation of history was a "revolutionary gesture" because it challenged the epistemic authority of Brahminical texts and opened space for alternative identities rooted in dignity and rationality (O'Hanlon 58). In this way, Phule disrupted long-standing cultural narratives that justified caste supremacy.

Furthermore, Phule conceptualized caste not merely as a cultural practice but as a system of economic exploitation. He observed that the caste hierarchy ensured a constant supply of labor from the lower castes while simultaneously denying them access to property, education, and political power. According to Phule, this created a structure in which the oppressed masses were compelled to serve the upper castes, with no possibility of upward mobility. He described this as a form of "domestic slavery," a condition that robbed people of both material resources and human dignity. His economic reading of caste positions him as a precursor to later thinkers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who expanded the critique of caste through legal, sociological, and economic frameworks. Phule's philosophical foundation rests on moral humanism. He believed deeply in

the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals. For Phule, caste oppression was not simply a social injustice but a moral violation that corrupted the ethical fabric of society. He advocated for the democratization of knowledge through education, arguing that rational inquiry and scientific temper were essential for dismantling caste ideology. His insistence that the oppressed must cultivate self-respect and critical consciousness reflects his broader commitment to social transformation through enlightenment.

In the context of contemporary India, Phule's critique remains strikingly relevant. Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies, caste-based discrimination continues to manifest in various forms. Incidents of caste violence reported by the National Crime Records Bureau demonstrate the persistence of deep-rooted prejudice. These issues also extend into new terrains—such as digital spaces, workplaces, academic institutions, and political structures—illustrating how caste adapts to modern contexts. Studies on online caste abuse, discrimination in hiring, and barriers to higher education reveal that caste operates both overtly and subtly in contemporary society.

Phule's insistence on questioning inherited social norms offers a robust interpretive framework for analyzing these contemporary realities. His critique encourages individuals and institutions to challenge ideological assumptions, expose structural inequalities, and adopt a rational and humanistic approach to social relationships. Moreover, Phule's writings remind modern India that social reforms cannot be sustained merely through legal provisions; they require a transformation of cultural values, educational practices, and public consciousness. In essence, Phule's critique of caste and social hierarchy extends far beyond his historical moment. His work continues to serve as a foundational lens for understanding ongoing struggles for equality, justice, and social mobility in a transitioning India. By foregrounding the moral, cultural, and economic



dimensions of caste oppression, Phule provides both a critical vocabulary and a transformative vision for interrogating and dismantling entrenched inequalities in contemporary society.

Phule's Critique of Caste and Social Hierarchy

Phule's critique of caste stands as one of the most radical intellectual interventions in nineteenth-century India. Long before caste discrimination became a central subject of sociological and political analysis, Phule recognized that caste was neither a religious mandate nor a natural social order. In *Gulamgiri*, he exposes the caste system as an ideological construct developed through myth-making, particularly by the Brahminical elite, to justify and perpetuate social dominance (Phule 12). By reinterpreting origin myths such as the story of Parashurama and the creation of Shudras, Phule dismantles the sacred aura surrounding caste and reveals the political intentions behind these narratives. His method is both rationalist and satirical, aiming to empower the oppressed by exposing the manipulative nature of dominant cultural texts.

Phule argues that caste hierarchy is fundamentally a system of exploitation sustained through cultural conditioning, religious authority, and socio-economic dependency. For Phule, caste is not just a division of labor but a division of humanity itself—a structure that systematically denies dignity, education, and mobility to the majority. He identifies the Brahmin priesthood as central to this apparatus, accusing them of monopolizing scriptural knowledge and using it to maintain an unequal social order (O'Hanlon 42). His critique thus extends beyond ritual practices to include the ideological foundation of social inequality in India. Crucially, Phule's attack on caste is grounded in a form of moral humanism. He insists that no society can progress unless all individuals are treated with equal respect and granted equal opportunities. Phule asserts that rational inquiry and scientific temper are essential tools for dismantling inherited prejudice (O'Hanlon 58). This humanistic dimension distinguishes his social philosophy from mere

reformism; Phule does not seek minor improvements within the caste system but envisions its total abolition.

Phule also identifies caste as an obstacle to collective progress. The hierarchical nature of caste prevents communities from uniting and participating equally in economic and cultural life. He notes that societies that allow unrestricted education, occupational mobility, and intellectual freedom develop more rapidly. In contrast, caste-bound India remains fragmented and stagnant, unable to achieve genuine social transformation. His call for equality anticipates later movements for social justice, including those led by B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers.

Despite constitutional safeguards in the modern era, caste-based discrimination remains deeply entrenched. Contemporary India continues to witness caste violence, economic inequity, manual scavenging, and discriminatory practices in workplaces, academia, and political systems. Digital spaces—often assumed to be egalitarian—also reflect caste-based abuse and exclusion. Reports from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) demonstrate that crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have not declined significantly, showing that caste remains an unresolved and evolving challenge. Phule's insistence on questioning inherited norms provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding these realities. His critique helps decode how caste modernizes itself, adapting to new economic and technological contexts while retaining its hierarchical essence. For today's India—struggling to reconcile its democratic ideals with persistent caste inequalities—Phule's framework remains indispensable. His writings compel readers to confront the social injustices that hinder India's aspirations for equality, development, and modernity.



Phule's Critique of Caste and Social Hierarchy

Phule's attack on the caste system was not only radical for his era but continues to resonate as one of the most powerful critiques in Indian intellectual history. In *Gulamgiri*, Phule dismantles the belief that caste is a natural or divinely sanctioned order by exposing how Brahminical elites constructed religious myths to legitimize their dominance. He argues that caste hierarchy emerged through deliberate socio-religious manipulation, wherein Brahmin priests used ritual authority, textual interpretation, and spiritual coercion to impose superiority over non-Brahmin communities (Phule 12). By rereading Purānic stories through a rational lens, Phule reveals how myth-making functioned as a political tool rather than a spiritual truth.

For Phule, caste was not merely a social classification but a rigid structure designed to ensure the perpetual submission of Shudras and Atishudras. He believed that such hierarchical systems obstruct individual freedom, suppress critical thought, and prevent collective socio-economic progress. His critique is deeply rooted in moral humanism—an ethical framework that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals irrespective of birth (O'Hanlon 58). Phule contended that unless the caste system was questioned and dismantled, Indian society could not achieve true democracy, equality, or moral progress.

In contemporary India, Phule's observations remain profoundly relevant. Despite constitutional protections and legal prohibitions, caste discrimination continues to manifest in everyday life—within educational institutions, workplaces, housing markets, rural governance, and even digital environments. Reports by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicate persistent caste-based violence, illustrating that caste remains deeply embedded in social consciousness. Moreover, structural inequalities in employment, land ownership, and access to higher education reflect the continuation of historical marginalization. Phule's insistence on

interrogating inherited social norms and challenging oppressive cultural narratives provides a powerful analytical lens for interpreting these ongoing realities. His thought compels modern India to confront how caste operates not only through overt practices but also through subtle institutional arrangements and cultural attitudes.

Education as a Tool for Social Transformation

Education occupies a central and transformative place in Phule's philosophy. He regarded knowledge as the most potent instrument for dismantling caste hierarchy and breaking the ideological chains that kept oppressed communities in subordination. Together with Savitribai Phule—India's first trained woman teacher—he established pioneering schools for girls, Shudra children, and those excluded from caste-based learning spaces, thereby challenging age-old traditions that barred lower castes and women from formal education (Omvedt 32). Through these efforts, Phule envisioned education not merely as literacy but as enlightenment: a process through which individuals develop self-respect, critical consciousness, and the ability to question social injustice.

Phule's educational reforms were grounded in egalitarian principles. He believed that schools should cultivate rationality, scientific temper, and ethical responsibility, enabling individuals to rise above superstition, oppression, and ignorance. For him, education was synonymous with emancipation. It dismantles the ideological foundations of caste, fosters independent thinking, and encourages collective empowerment. Phule argued that without educational access, social reform movements would remain incomplete because the oppressed would continue to internalize their subjugation.

In contemporary India, the expansion of public universities, government initiatives such as the Right to Education Act (2009), digital learning platforms, and scholarship schemes for



marginalized communities reflect the ongoing influence of Phule's educational philosophy. However, the persistence of structural barriers—such as unequal access to digital technologies, high drop-out rates among Dalit and Adivasi students, underrepresentation in elite institutions, and disparities in English-language proficiency—reveals that democratization of education remains an unfinished project. The digital divide, especially in rural regions, underscores how technological advancements can reinforce inequality when equitable access is lacking. Phule's emphasis on scientific temper aligns with the principles of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which advocates inclusive, multidisciplinary, and skill-oriented education. His insistence on accessible education for all resonates with contemporary efforts to create equitable learning environments. By foregrounding education as an instrument of social transformation, Phule offers a timeless framework for evaluating India's progress and addressing gaps in its educational system.

Women's Liberation and Gender Equality

Phule's feminist vision was both radical and holistic, integrating women's liberation with the broader struggle against caste oppression. At a time when women, particularly from lower castes, were denied fundamental rights, Phule argued that social progress was impossible without gender equality. He advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of exploitative practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, and the denial of property rights. His writings highlight that patriarchy and caste were deeply intertwined systems of domination that mutually reinforced each other (Rao 91). For Phule, the liberation of women was essential for the moral and intellectual advancement of society. Savitribai Phule's pioneering work as an educator and activist further exemplified this feminist ethos. Together, the Phules challenged entrenched norms by creating spaces where women could learn, express themselves, and develop leadership capacities. Their work among widows, exploited labouring women, and socially

excluded communities reflected a commitment to intersectional justice long before the term became part of academic vocabulary.

In contemporary India, despite considerable progress in legal frameworks and women's rights, gender inequality persists across multiple spheres. Issues such as gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, unequal wages, limited political representation, and social constraints on mobility highlight the limitations of formal equality. For Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan women, these challenges are compounded by caste-based discrimination, making their struggles distinct and intersectional. Phule's feminist vision remains critically relevant in this context. His insistence on dignity, autonomy, and education for women continues to inspire Dalit feminist scholarship and grassroots activism. Organizations advocating for women's rights frequently draw on Phule's writings to address the layered forms of oppression experienced by marginalized women. By linking gender justice with the dismantling of caste hierarchy, Phule offers a comprehensive framework for understanding gender dynamics in a transitioning India.

Social Change and India's Democratic Transition

Phule's concept of social change extends beyond mere reform; it envisions a fundamental restructuring of society based on justice, rationality, and equality. He condemned all forms of exploitation—caste-based, economic, and cultural—and believed that true social transformation required challenging the ideological foundations of oppression. His critique of agrarian distress, indebtedness among peasants, and the misuse of religious authority anticipated many issues that continue to shape India's democratic landscape. Phule insisted that collective organization, rational deliberation, and public education were vital for empowering oppressed communities.

In many ways, India's democratic transition reflects aspects of Phule's vision. The Constitution, affirmative action policies, grassroots social movements, and the expansion of



electoral participation embody principles of equality and justice championed in Phule's writings. Reformers such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explicitly acknowledged Phule as an intellectual predecessor, drawing on his ideas to frame the concepts of constitutional morality and social justice. However, significant challenges remain. Socioeconomic inequality, caste violence, communal polarization, and the consolidation of cultural majoritarianism threaten the egalitarian ideals of Indian democracy. The gap between constitutional values and lived social realities continues to shape public debate. Revisiting Phule helps illuminate this tension by highlighting the historical roots of inequality and offering ethical guidelines for social reform.

Phule's thought emphasizes "Satyashodhan"—the pursuit of truth—as a moral imperative for governance and public life. His call for education, rational inquiry, and ethical leadership remains essential as India navigates its transition from tradition to modernity. By foregrounding human dignity, collective empowerment, and justice-oriented reform, Phule provides a blueprint for strengthening democratic values in contemporary India.

Conclusion

Revisiting Mahatma Phule in the context of a transforming India reveals the depth and durability of his philosophical and social contributions. His critique of caste, his cultural interventions, his emphasis on education, and his feminist vision continue to resonate with contemporary challenges. Phule offers not only a historical framework for understanding oppression but also a progressive blueprint for an inclusive future. As India moves through complex transitions—social, cultural, technological, and political—Phule's ideas remain crucial for interpreting the nation's evolving identity. His vision encourages a society founded on dignity, equality, and critical inquiry. In re-examining Phule today, India finds both a mirror to its ongoing struggles and a map toward meaningful social change.

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