

CHAPTER - V :-

MAHATMA PHULEY ON THE CONDITIONS  
OF CULTIVATORS

- 1) Condition of the Peasants during British Rule.
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CHAPTER - V

MAHATMA PHULEY ON THE CONDITION OF CULTIVATORS.

Mahatma Phuley studied the nature, reasons and consequences of the poverty and ignorance of the cultivators who are the mainstay of society. He thought that peasants suffered from poverty, superstitions ignorance and indebtedness. According to him there were many reasons for this condition. The want of education was the basic cause which led these people to degradation, moral and economic, social and political. He made it clear that the peasants could not be blamed because they were the victims of the various social, and religious traditions and customs, dominated perpetuated and controlled by the Brahmins.

In 1883, Jotirao wrote a book namely "Cultivators Whipcord" which was written in the interest of Shudra community. Jotirao completed the book of July 1883 and submitted copies of it to the Governor of Bombay, the Maharaja of Baroda and the Governor General of India. The book opens with an introduction that is significant. He wrote in ringing tone,

For want of education intellect deteriorated,  
For want of intellect morality decayed,  
For want of morality progress stopped,  
For want of progress wealth vanished,  
For want of wealth the Shudra Perished,  
All these sorrows sprang from illiteracy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, lack of education was the main cause of sorrow.

Hence, he launched a scathing attack on British bureaucracy and Brahmins in his book, as he blamed both for illtreatment of Shudras. 'The whipcord' is a long argument in favour of peasants as Phuley discusses many aspects of exploitation. The book is divided in five chapters with two appendices and in these chapters Phuley covered most of the ground by dealing with the problem of peasants. In the first chapter he pointed out that due to bureaucratic exploitation a Shudra peasant was not in a position to send his son to schools. In the second chapter he made it clear that due to negligence of the British officers the peasants were plundered and looted by Brahmins. In the third chapter he had studied a historical background of peasants history in the light of conflict between Aryans and original inhabitants of the land and pointed out that at present, the cultivator was living most miserable life as he had been indebted. The British Government had imposed new taxes to give pensions and salaries to their officers and as a result of the heavy taxes, the peasants has become virtually bankrupt. In the fourth chapter he discussed present conditions of agriculture and in the fifth chapter he suggested various measures to improve the conditios of peasants. The whipcord is the most interesting document on the problems of Indian agriculture of 19th Century. India in the sense that we get an authentic radical peasant view point from Phuley.

1) CONDITIONS OF THE PEASANTS DURING BRITISH RULE :

During the British rule the condition of the peasants was

very bad. At that time Kunabis, Malis and Dhangars were living very miserable life because of wrong policies of the Government and cunning of Brahmins and money lenders. He pointed out that the Brahmin Priest exploited a Shudra farmer all the year round from cradle to cremation, from pregnancy to pilgrimage, and all this exploitation was done under the cloake of religion through its unending rites and rituals.<sup>2</sup> Due to this religious exploitation the farmers had no money to send their children to school.

But it was his complaint that the British officers were given to merry-making and they did not pay attention to the grievances, of the agriculturists. They relied upon the advice of the Brahmins who worked under them. Despite the fact that the farmers did not have sufficient food and cloths for their families.<sup>3</sup> India had ~~high~~ ~~ex~~ a most costly Government run by high slaried officers, and burdened with heavy pensions.

According to Phuley the causes of the utter poverty of the peasants were many. After the downfall of Maratha empire, the large Maratha armies were disbanded which left a large number of people unemployed. The failure of 1857 added more people to the rank; consequently there was growing unemployment and greator reliance on land. The fragmentation of land among the members of the family was second important cause as it went an unabeted rate, on fragmented land the farmers found it difficult to live and rear their bullocks. Due to this there was no room for sheeps and goats to graze.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the farmer had to follow land to fall back upon and due

to its the land lost its fertility. Due to fragmentation of land, it was either sold or rented to other farmers who owned bullocks, and ploughs. These poorlandless peasants obtained small jobs under the weavers, carpentars and blacksmiths for earning their livelihood. But these artisans could not compete with the British machine made goods such as cutlety, needles, locks, seuing machines, threads, keys, ironplates, differents kinds of carts and cloth brough to India without any custom duty<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the problem was made worse by Government as it acquired village grazing grounds through the forest department, while describing the conditions of upper strata of peasantry, he argued that Indian Princes were mostly illiterate and were guided or misguided by their Brahmin ministers. It was one of the reason of their downfall of moral and political. At that time some peasants were contractors, and Jahagirdars but they were illiterate, so they lost their estate through drinking and enjoyment.

The last cause of miserable condition of peasants was frequent occurances of famine, that destroyed everything the peasant collected with great difficulty. But despite existence of famine the Government continued to realise taxes from them.

## 2) EXPLOITATION OF THE PEASANTS BY MONEY-LENDERS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICERS

Mahatma Phuley gives a very vivid account of peasants exploitation during British rule. Phuley was of the view that during the British rule the exploitation by money lenders grew

very fast as there developed in a class of traders and money lenders. He pointed out that there was huge output of industrial goods and to supply raw material for these industries and to sell the same in market. There arose a class commission agents, traders and money lenders. These agents and money lenders took big commission from peasants for selling their products grain and raw material etc, peasants also had to borrow money from them to cater to their needs like seeds, religious rites, marriage ceremonies etc. Debt was a trap as for that debt the peasants and shudras had to give up their rights on their land and also had to pay great interests. Pauley described this process as follows, " the money lender used dishonest means to create confusion in the record and increased the amount of loan. He gave loan to the peasant on mortgagage of land and waited for an opportunity to establish his ownership right over the mortgagaged land by imposing interest rate<sup>6</sup>.

The money lenders could do this because at that time peasants were illiterate and superstitious. They had a great respect for religious considerations and social customs. They never went against the Brahmin money lenders. Again he said, "To give religious foast to his caste brothers the peasant mortgagaged his land and borrow money from money lender within a few days, the money lenders played a cruel trick and established his ownership right over the land<sup>7</sup>" Not only Brahmins and money lenders but the Government was also responsible for the exploitation of peasants. British and Brahmin officers used to levy, huge taxes upon land and their

goods, and they were imposing octroy,<sup>8</sup> and exporting the foodgrain, wool etc., out of this amount huge salaries are given to British Officers.<sup>9</sup> He demanded that Rani Sarkar was neglecting these factors. So he bemoaned that the Government was blind to the needs of peasants.

During the British rule the Government needed efficient bureaucracy and justice. The need was provided by the Brahmins, who had taken New English Education, and ~~were~~ were also customary to intellectual exercise. In this way the Brahmins were able to have an overhand in Governmental administration on all levels in all departments i.e. law, police, education<sup>10</sup> etc. All these Brahmins Officers exploited Indian peasant and shudras who also suffered great injustice at their hands. That is why Phuley indignantly called them "Pen-butcher" and "Village monster". In short, Brahmin Officers used the power for his brother only.

### 3) PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE :

Jotirao suggested some ways and means to improve the condition of peasants in Maharashtra. He argued that, 'To develop Shudra community education was essential, we can not criticize Manu's philosophy without English education.<sup>11</sup> So Government should introduce the compulsory education and it should not spend large amounts on higher education. For the development of Shudra community Government should spend more amount on primary education. He pleaded that the teachers

from shudra community should be recruited and trained. The special boarding schools should be opened for the peasant children. Government should make a law compelling the children of peasants to attend school upto certain age.<sup>12</sup> Number of primary schools should be increased.

He proposed a detailed program for agricultural development of the country. Some of his points are as follow :-

- 1) He requested the Government to develop good breed of cows and oxen so that good cows could be produced. He also requested the Government to impose a ban on cow slaughter.
- 2) Service of the policemen and army personnel should be commissioned to undertake to build dams across the vallies at important places.
- 3) In the hilly areas and valley water tanks and wells should be built upto maintain water level of tanks and rivers and for storing water. This would help in bringing under the irrigation a large chunk of land.
- 4) He asked the Government to undertake the soil conservation work by digging small bunds. So that fertility of land could be retained.
- 5) Government should sink new wells and encourage private agencies to undertake this work.
- 6) Peasants should be allowed to carry of the rich soil from river bed lakes and tanks free of charge.

- 7) Government should encourage good breed of sheeps, goats and cows and for that purpose import good breed from other developed countries.
- 8) Government should organize peasant fairs and gathering to train the peasants in the modern methods of agriculture. It should also give awards and titles to peasants.<sup>13</sup>
- 9) The peasants should be encouraged to learn the arts like carpentary and iron-work.
- 10) The salaries and wages of low class workers should be raised. The local cess must be utilized for the education of farmers children.
- 11) Due to high taxes Jotirao made an appeal to Government to fix a reasonable assesment on land.
- 12) Phuley suggested that the pupils coming from peasantry should provided with books, slates and cloths.
- 13) Phuley made an important suggestion that there should be Government directive to watch the conduct of the farmers. They should be men of right conduct. These shudra who lived immorally must be punished.
- 14) Jotiba suggested that there was the necessity of keeping a watch on the Marwaris and tradesman who sold goods and used false measures.
- 15) A law should be passed for prohibiting the cutting down of trees.

- 16) Farmers should be provided with guns to protect their farms as pigs and other wild animals did incalculable damage to their crops. He pleaded that loss of the farmer due to this could be made good through the salaries of the police officers.
- 17) He argued that Joganiyas, Muralis should be kept in separate places. This should be done to save young generation of farmers from their evil influence.
- 18) He asked the Government to open new agricultural schools to impart recent knowledge agriculture to peasants.

Phuley was of the view that this program would lead us to the establishment of democratic form of society. In this society, he visualised that the bureaucracy coming from peasant extraction would be helpful to the peasantry and due to spread of education, peasants could not be exploited by money lenders.<sup>14</sup>

While summing up our discussion, we can say that Phuley was a prophet in the sense that about a hundred year ago, he correctly understood the problems of peasants and suggested implementation of a agricultural development program which could change the face of the ~~of~~ land of rural India. The measures suggested by Phuley were not taken seriously by the British Government as it was interest in plundering the Indian people. After the independence only the Indian Government adopted measures to alleviate the problems of peasants.

It righted the wrong by introducing and implementing land tenancy act and by giving ownership rights to owners of the land who worked as tenants. It also started different co-operative societies, to give loans to peasants. After the establishment of Maharashtra State in 1960 most of the agricultural development program of Phuley was being implemented by the Government as it promised to change the face of rural area by bringing about agricultural development.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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