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CHAPTER TWO

MAHATMA JOTIBA PHULE:

THE FATHER OF NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT

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## CHAPTER II

### MAHATMA JOTIBA PHULE THE FATHER OF NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT

Jotirao Govindrao Phule ( Jotiba Phule ) ( 1827-1890 ) is known as the chief exponent or the chief artist of the non-Brahmin Movement. The history of social reform in Maharashtra starts from Bal Shastree Jambekar and it goes to Dr.Ambedkar. In the reform history of Maharashtra, the period of Jambekar (1818-1848) is known as 'Zuluk'. The period of Jotiba Phule (1848-1894) is known as 'Wara'. The period of Shri Shahu Maharaja (1894-1922) is known as 'Vadal' and lastly the period of Dr.Ambedkar (1922-1956) is known as 'Tufan'. These periods point to the continuity of the non-Brahmin movement.

Jotiba Phule was born in 1827, only to lose his mother. Right since his childhood he marked himself with certain talents which were notable. Jotiba Phule belonged to Kshatriya (Mali) caste. His father could not think of giving education to him, as education was not meant for children of backward classes. But his father was persuaded by his neighbours to send Jotiba to a missionary school. There is very little information available regarding his early school career, but he was fully equipped to play a historical role right since his childhood. Jotiba's mind was attuned to all modern influences.

It is no wonder that he was greatly distracted by the position that the down trodden poor masses occupied in Indian society. The apathy and indifference shown by the Brahmins to non-Brahmins caused Jotiba Phule distress and he demanded on their behalf a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity. The high esteem and respect in which Jotiba Phule held the poor is evident in all his writings. Jotiba Phule wanted some definite action to counter act the growing unrest, resulting from economic and social suffering of the masses and the alienation of the intellectuals.

Jotiba Phule was very much interested in understanding the true meaning of liberty, equality and fraternity. He had to go into the details to understand the real meaning of the caste system, and thereby he could understand Brahminism in the real sense. Poona was described as the hot-bed of Brahminism, private institutions were established in Poona, which were mainly devoted to the study of Vedas, Shastras and Science. When at school, Jotiba Phule was very much shocked by the treatment meted out by the Brahmins to the so called backward classes. On the other hand, he was much attracted by the sympathetic approach of the missionaries. " The missionaries started schools and colleges and used English as medium of instructions at school and college level. The teaching was so good that even Hindus who were opposed to missionary

activity and had no intention of becoming Christian sent their children"<sup>1</sup>. While the Brahmins kept the backward classes at a distance, missionaries welcomed them.

The position of the Shudras under British was worst when compared to their position under the Peshwa rule. Missionaries played an important role in the development of the social and political thought, especially in Maharashtra . The advent of the missionaries, following the establishment of the British rule in India, was no doubt for the spread of Christianity. It was since then the lower classes, for the first time, came to be treated with sympathy by the missionaries. Jotiba Phule himself was a great admirer of the missionaries. But the impact of the west a was uneven. " The majority living in the country side or in the princely states were untouched by it. The western influence was confined largely to the few cities which the British used as the centres of their rule, and it was especially felt by the small minority who had higher education"<sup>2</sup>. The position can be understood by the following chart of caste breakdown of students.

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1. Lamb, B. Pitney, The Nehrus of India, Macmillian Co., New York, 1967, p.31.
  2. Kavlekar K.K., Non-Brahmin Movement in Southern India (1873-1949), Shivaji University Publication, Shivaji University Press, 1979, pp.37-38.

Cates Breakdown of students in the colleges of Bombay and Poona in 1984.

Institution	Brahmins	Kahtriyas	Vanis
Saint Elephinstone College, Bombay.	59	10	38
Deccan College, Poona.	107	1	1
Free General Assembly's Institution, Poona.	34	1	6
Saint Xavier's College, Bombay.	15	1	6
Gujarat College, Ahmedabad.	3	-	1
Rajaram College, Kolhapur	23	-	-
Total	241	13	51

These influences touched Jotiba Phule to the very core. He felt that the condition of the untouchables was horrible. The untouchable could not walk on the streets in the morning or in the evening ( at the time of sunrise and sunset ) least his long shadow should pollute the house of a Brahmin. He had to carry an earthen pot hanging around his neck for his sputum. He had to tie a branch of leaves to the back of his hip so that his foot-prints might be erased.

The untouchables thus were treated as a species much lower than even a dog or a cat. The Brahmins as the custodians of religion and religious practices, were the natural targets for those who aimed at creating a new society by fighting these evils root and branch. The western impact was not confined to a particular field, and especially the social institution of caste came under attack as being incompatible. The earliest exponent of this school of thought was Jotiba Phule. He welcomed the Western secular education. He traced the causes for the backwardness of the Hindu society. The caste system had proved a great hinderance to individual progress. The very philosophy of caste hierarchy was detrimental to social advancement. Jotiba Phule was " extremely irritated with the Brahmins and the caste structure of the Hindus as propounded by them; he felt an attraction for Christian religion " <sup>3</sup>, and had also spoken highly of the " Mohammedans because of the principle of equality in their religion " <sup>4</sup>. He felt that the caste system was a steel frame, and the so called lower classes were denied education and social status.

Jotiba Phule, as he belonged to the lower class, believed that the Brahmin ascendancy in the social and religious



- 3. Sarvajanika Satyadharma Pustaka, Poona, 1891, p.353.
- 4. Phule Jotirao, Manav Mohammed, Akhandadi Kavyarachana, Part 11, p.489.

matters kept away the vast multitudes of the Indian masses. He wanted to eradicate the evil effects of Brahminism which perpetuated social inequality. He could find that the backward classes were deliberately kept as such in order to ensure the front ranks in all walks of life for the Brahmins. Centuries of subjugation had reduced the Indian masses almost to the position of dumb-driven cattle. He goaded them to revolt against the Hindu deities, the religious practices, the scriptures and the priests. In short, he raised the standard of revolt against the age old tradition which enslaved the masses. Western knowledge was an eye-opener to the existing evils in social conditions of the society. He realized that the social structure of India was tottering and hence was in need of maximum revolutionary changes. He felt that superstitions, false beliefs and baseless customs required complete overhauling. The Brahmins played different role when they saw that the lower castes were getting associated in the form of caste Sabhas. They tried to turn their attention away from the then existing Hindu religious practices". " There were some who sought to defend caste on the ground that the substitution of the western class system for the Indian caste system would not usher in an egalitarian society"<sup>5</sup>.

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5. Shankar Ghose, The Western Impact on Indian Politics (1885-1919), Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1967, p.9.

Jotiba Phule's rise had taken the Brahmins to their toes, and the Brahmins, to counteract the moves of Jotiba Phule and his attacks through his various writings, called upon their compatriots to play an unique role. For example during the 1890, Maharashtrian nationalists started an annual Shivaji festival in honour of the great seventeenth century warrior and founder of the Maratha Empire, who led a major revolt against the Mughal Empire and Muslim rule. The festival methods were used by B.G.Tilak (1856-1920) to spread the nationalist movement among the people. The festival appealed to persons who felt ill at ease at gatherings with more anglicised character. B.G.Tilak was most popular Indian nationalist, to advocate traditionalism. But when Brahminism was challenged by Jotiba Phule and his caste sabhas, even nationalists like B.G.Tilak and his thoughts were not free from Brahminical influences.

" Both those who agitated for reforms and those who collaborated with the British were drawn from groups which traditionally enjoyed high status"<sup>6</sup>. This cultural revival and the growth of political extremism which often went together, especially in Maharashtra, had its greatest impact during the nineteenth century and it was felt everywhere. The Brahmin reformers belonged to the white collared gentry and could address themselves to that class only because of the other classes had fully understood the Brahmins. They tried

6. John R. Maclane, The Political Awakening in India, Prentice, 1970, p.1.



to revise only those customs which were incompatible with the industrial city life. This was all due to the swinging of the pendulum of the other side because of the activities of the ' Satya Shodhak Samaj ', started by Jotiba Phule. Jotiba Phule is known as the father of the revolutionary social reform movement of Maharashtra. He influenced the society through his various important publications. His publications threw open the reality on the various aspects of Brahminism. Through his writing Jotiba Phule made an impact which threw a challenge to the position of the Brahmins in Poona, the centre of Brahminism. " Although Brahmin dominance was still unshaken, there were signs that its Poona leadership was not so solid as it had been"<sup>7</sup>. While Jotiba's activities were becoming stronger, and he was gaining <sup>in</sup> position of importance as a leader of the non-Brahmins, Brahmins created disagreements among its leaders over tactics.

The rise of Jotiba Phule and his attack on the Brahmins, was a great set-back to the Brahminical leadership in the Deccan. Brahmins were divided among themselves on the ways

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7. Anil Seal, The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in later 19th Century, Cambridge, 1968, p.242.

and means to face this new social thought that was rising against Brahminical influence. Without this movement of ' Satya Shodhak Samaj ' and a revolutionary leader like Jotiba Phule, history of Brahminism would have been quite different. The Brahmins, throughout southern India, were pressed in every way to change their process of politics and were compelled to take note of the movement of Jotiba Phule.

In this condition Jotiba Phule felt the need for an institution. " A revolutionary leader like Jotiba Phule required an institution, an authoritative credo and a platform for the propagation of his ideals"<sup>8</sup>. Accordingly Jotiba Phule convened on September 24, 1873, a meeting of all his admirers and disciples at Poona. About sixty men from many important centres of Maharashtra assembled. Jotiba named his organization " Satya Shodhak Samaj " ( Society for seeking Truth ). Its aim was to challenge Brahminical supremacy, the first of its kind ever organized with sole objective " To redeem the shudras and atishudras from the influence of Brahminical scriptures under the Brahmin priest who fleeced them, to teach them their human rights, liberate them from mental and religious

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8. Keer D., Mahatma Jotirao Phooley: Father of Our Social Revolution, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1964, p.125.

slavery"<sup>9</sup>. Jotiba Phule with a great depth in the studies of the origins of Hindum, came to the conclusion that Brahminism had always controlled and prevented education from reaching the lowest classes. All sufferings of non-Brahmins were due to the monopoly of Brahmins in education. " Belonging to the Phule Malis (Gardener's caste), Jotirao was well placed to voice a general protest against the Brahmins, because his own caste, while standing below the Maratha-Kunbis, could eat and drink with them, and it would also speak for the untouchables Maharas and Mangas"<sup>10</sup>.

Jotiba Phule's was a united platform, and he could command the ignorant masses, because for the first time these masses could find a leader who belonged to their community. Jotiba Phule could successfully unite various sub-castes (Jatis) under the banner of the ' Satya Shodhak Samaj '. Jotiba, real realised that the sole cause of all the difficulties of the masses was lack of education. With the founding of ' Satya Shodhak Samaj ' in September 24, 1873, Jotiba Phule turned his concentration to education for the most oppressed group, untouchable and womens. He organised non-Brahmins for the

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9. Kavlekar K.E. Non-Brahmin Movement in Southern India (1873-1949), Shivaji University Publication, Shivaji University Press, 1979, p.43.

10. Anil Seal, Op.cit.p.245.

fundamental attack on Brahmin Hinduism. He started various types of educational institutions. Home being the earliest school for every child, he thought of making learned the ignorant mother, who was the first teacher"<sup>50</sup>, "In 1848, Jotirao Phuley founded a school for Girls"<sup>11</sup>. This school was thrown open to all classes. But the practical difficulty he faced was the non-availability of female teachers. As a solution to this, he first taught his wife at home and appointed her as a teacher in the school. Jotiba Phule was a pioneer of the female education in India. He was the first to establish a school for girls, and to conduct it with much personal hardship. There were girls' schools run by the missionaries who were more interested in religious conversion. Jotiba Phule felt that the only effective way to fight the dominance of Brahmins, and break their monopoly, was to educate the masses by employing non-Brahmin teachers, who could understand the mind of the lower classes.

Jotiba Phule, no doubt, earned the sympathies of the British, " because the natural antagonism of Indian races was a considerable element of British strength so a disassociating spirit was kept alive, because if all India were to

11. Jotirao Phule, Samagra Grantha, Adhikari Prakashan, Poona, p.295.

unite against us (British) how long could they maintain themselves"<sup>12</sup>. Jotiba Phule's love of service was insatiable. He befriended the suppressed classes poverty wherever found, claimed his attention. It was his passion for social justice. He campaigned vigorously for social equality and abolition of caste. The British had always played and followed the policy of " Divide and rule " and naturally such movements were encouraged. The British might have carried this tactics of playing Brahmins against non-Brahmins.

Jotiba Phule did not hesitate to criticise the British policy of education. " When he met the Indian Education Commission appointed by the Government of India in 1882, he submitted to the Hunter Commission as follows: I think primary education of the masses should be compulsory upto certain age say at least twelve years"<sup>13</sup>.

On 19th October, 1882, Jotiba himself gave a detailed account of the schools he established, the period of his service as a teacher, and his experience in the field of education. Jotiba continued: " primary schools are almost all of Brahmins, a few trained and most of them are untrained.

12. Wood to Elgin.... (Wood Papers), Vol.7, Quoted by S.Gopal, British Policy in India (1858-1905), Cambridge, p.36.

13. Report of the Hunter Commission, 1883, Vol.II, p.141.

He called upon the Government to train these Brahmin teacher as far as possible and to select teachers of the cultivating classes who will be able to mix freely with them and understand their wants and wishes much better than Brahmin teachers"<sup>14</sup>.

Jotiba Phule's movement, 'Satya Shodhak Samaj ' had influenced British policy so much so that they had to revise their own policy to suit the conditions of the society in Southern India. Thus the impact of Jotiba Phule's ideas and action was deep and continuous on the society and the British Policy. The ' Satya Shodhak Samaj ' had influenced the British policy, and the movement was mainly one of social reform, having its own economic, social and political implications and having an ideology of its own. All these thoughts were given expression in the writings of Jotiba Phule.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF JOTIBA PHULE:

Economic thought of Jotiba Phule are laid down in a pamphlet entitled ' Isara' (Warning) published in 1885, in which he discussed the economic conditions of the Indian masses at length. He advocated that the Government should help the

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14. Keer D., Op.cit.pp.168-71.

people by developing irrigation facilities, because Indian agriculture was completely dependent upon the monsoon rains. Even in this regard, he blamed the Brahmins for not developing irrigation facilities when they were in power. His economic thoughts are few but they are meaningful which were attained to modern developments. His thought certainly influenced the Government. He appealed to the Government to construct small bunds for water to collect, which would be helpful for the people in needy times. What is worth considering here is his bent of mind towards the concept of a welfare state. His thoughts were less doctrinaire but more a reflection of the effects of the caste system and the then existing social condition.

#### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT:

In his book ' Setakaryancha Asuda ' he elaborated the social life under the Maratha rule, and shows how the Brahmin influence kept the people uneducated, and how later under the British rule the people were over-burdened with the revenue policy, which again was completely controlled by the Brahmins". Jotirao entreated Queen Victoria in his ballads to take pity on the poverty-stricken peasants, rescue them from the inhuman Brahmin tyranny and save her rule from corruption and malpractices. He suggested that teachers, magistrates and clerks should be appointed from other castes also so that the chain of these

tyrants might be broken"<sup>15</sup>. Jotirao Phule in April, 1877, announced an essay competition on a topic, " Imaginary Tour of India by Queen Victoria ". She comes to a certain village where Mahar and Mang kept down their bundles of baggot, met her and narrated to her their miserable conditions under Peshwa rule and their disabilities under the British rule. A few days later Jotirao himself wrote a booklet on this topic and published it under the caption ' Kaifiyat '.

Jotiba Phule was a man of both theory and action and because of the various techniques employed by him as the one mentioned above, his movement was a great success. He consolidated all the non-Brahmin castes in Maharashtra and even to this day the term Bahujan Samaj (Society of all castes except Brahmins ) is quite a popular one. Through the idea of Bahujan Samaj, he created a social revolution which was not limited to Maharashtra. His struggle was not limited to any caste among the non-Brahmins, but it was a protest by all the castes, against one single caste namely Brahmins.

Jotiba Phule's thoughts were wide ranging and were expressed in a number of ways i.e. in politics, public speaking

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15. Keer D., Mahatma Jotirao Phuley, Father of Our Social Revolution, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1964, p.99.



and in writing. There were two main causes to which he was devoted throughout his life time. They are:

- a) Social Reform which meant elimination of the caste system;
- b) Democratic Justice.

These causes led him into conflicts. He allowed himself to be a controversial figure concern for the poor, the down trodden and the weak was the key-note of his life. His personality, his thoughts and actions were, very much influenced by his birth in a lower caste. Jotiba Phule raised the level of his movement by his own contribution. Without education, political and economic power, the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' achieved a good deal of a social reform movement.

In fact, the real impetus to the non-Brahmin movement was not forthcoming until the formation of the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj'. He wanted revolutionary social reforms, because his very faith in Hinduisms was rudely shaken.

Jotiba Phule began to attack the various rituals ceremonies and the priests. He was against idol worship and superstitions and interested in reviving the real Indian culture. He wanted definite action to counteract the growing unrest, resulting from the economic sufferings of the masses and the alienation of the intellectuals. Jotirao Phule one

Year before his death in 1889, called upon the non-Brahmins to condemn congress as an engine of Brahminical dēpotism.. If the Aryans hold not one, but a hundred congresses. Jotirao Phule wrote no sensible Sudra or Ati-Sudra would become its member. I can confidently state that if Sudra do join, our beneficent rulers will be disgusted with them. " In 1890, Jotirao phule died, the only pioneer a solitary beackon light in the darkness of the age, for the guidance of the non-Brahmin reformers who had yet to come"<sup>16</sup>.

The movement was further carried by His Highness Shri Shahu Chhatrapati Maharaja of Kolhapur, who spread the movement far and wide in India.

The study of Jotiba Phule's efforts and ' Satya Shodhak Samaj ' reveals that the non-Brahmin movement was ushered in with the efforts of Jotiba Phule. Philip Sprant has aptly pointed out that Jotiba Phule is the original source. Similarly, Miss Gail Omvedt has also gone considerably deep into the understanding of Satya Shodhak Samaj movement in Western Maharashtra and Jotiba Phule's activities. When this fact is clearly established that he had influenced non-Brahmin risings,

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16. Anil Seal, The Emergence of Indian Nationalism, Cambridge, 1968, p.243.

it is not necessary and worthwhile to examine the non-Brahmin movement under the leadership of Shri Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur. A chronological study of the non-Brahmin movement becomes necessary as Shri Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur follows the policy of Jotiba Phule and gives continuity to the movement.