

## EMINENT INDIAN EDUCATIONISTS

### Their Life and Thought

# 1

## Mahatma Jotiba Phule: An Educational Philosopher

Navjoti Marwaha\*

### Abstract

*Experiments of great thinkers and educationists can act as beacon light to guide our thoughts. One such thinker, teacher, educationist and social revolutionist we had in India is Mahatma Jotiba Phule. He lived and worked in Maharashtra. The purpose of this article is to look into his thoughts and ideas as an answer to the present challenges of education and inequality in India. His thoughts and ideas were revolutionary. His single aim was universalisation of primary education. Mahatma Jotiba Phule concentrated on need of primary education, the essential qualities of primary teacher and the curriculum of primary education. He gave importance to upliftment of lower castes and women education and took necessary steps for this at that time. His wife had got pride of being the first lady teacher.*

### INTRODUCTION

Among many thinkers and theorists, in the field of education, a very simple yet convincing, and impressive contribution is of Mahatma Jotiba Phule. For Mahatma Phule education was not just literacy. If we look at the phenomenon in totality it will be clear that for him education was for social change in real sense of the term. He was the forerunner of Dr B.R. Ambedkar as far as education of the downtrodden is concerned. That is why Dr Ambedkar has accepted him as 'Guru'. Mahatma

Phule used to think about the type of education which would be a powerful device for eradication of social evils. It was his firm conviction that if social reforms are to be effective and lasting, the individuals at all levels should be educated. Therefore, he laid emphasis on the conscious and deliberate efforts for proper education of the masses. Mahatma Phule was one of the prominent social reformers and as such social reforms was his main aim. For this purpose he took the spread of education as his mission. It was his firm

---

\* Assistant Professor in Education, Department of Education, S.V.S.D.P.G. College, Bhatoli, Distt. Una (H.P.)

contention that backwardness of the masses was mainly due to lack of education. Now-a-days importance of education is universally acknowledged and all out efforts are being made for universalisation of education all over the world particularly in developing and under-developed countries. But during Phule's time it was not so. Education for women and untouchables was not less than a daydream. In such phenomena he struggled a lot for the education of women and low castes even at the stake of his own life. No doubt, he was the pioneer of revolutionary thinking. He was rightly called as 'Father of Indian social Revolution' in the modern age.

### **Life Sketch**

Mahatma Jotiba Phule was born in 1827. His father Govindrao was a vegetable vendor in Pune. Originally Jotiba's family known as Gorhays came from Katgun, a village in the Satara district of Maharashtra. His grandfather Shetiba Gorhay settled down in Pune. Since Jotiba's father and two uncles served as florists under the last of the Peshwas, they came to be known as *Phules*. Jotiba's mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, Jotiba had to leave school and help his father by working on the family's farm. Jotiba's marriage was celebrated when he was not even thirteen.

Impressed by Jotiba's intelligence and his love of knowledge, two of his neighbours, one a Muslim teacher and

another a Christian gentleman, persuaded his father Govindrao to allow him to study in a secondary school. In 1841 Jotiba got admission in the Scottish Mission High School, Pune. It was in this school that he met Sada Shiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin, who remained a close friend throughout his life. Jotiba was greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's ideas and he read with great interest Paine's famous book *Rights of Man* (1791). Moro Vithal Valvekar and Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjape were two other Brahmin friends of Jotiba who, in later years, stood by him in all his activities. After completing secondary education in 1847, Jotiba decided not to accept a job under the government.

An incident in 1848 made him aware of the inequalities of the cast system and predominant position of the Brahmins in the social setup. He was invited to attend a wedding of one of his Brahmin friends. As the bridegroom was taken in procession, Jotiba accompanied him along with the relatives of his Brahmin friend. Knowing that Jotiba belonged to the Mali caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused him. Jotiba left the procession and returned home. With tears in his eyes, he narrated this experience to his father who tried to pacify him. After this incident he decided to defy the caste system and serve the *Shudras* and women who were deprived of all their

rights as human beings under the caste system.

Education of women and lower castes was his priority. Hence at home he began educating his wife Savitribai Phule and opened a girls' school in August 1848. The orthodox opponents of Jotiba were furious and they started a vicious campaign against him. He refused to be unnerved by their malicious propaganda. As no teacher dared to work in a school in which untouchables were admitted as students, Jotiba asked his wife to teach girls in his school. Stones and brickbats were thrown at her when she was on her way to school. The reactionaries threatened Jotiba's father with dire consequences if he did not dissociate from his son's activities. Yielding to the pressure, Jyotiba's father asked his son and daughter-in-law to leave his house as both of them refused to give up their noble endeavour.

Though the school had to be closed for some time due to lack of funds, Jotiba reopened it with the help of his Brahmin friends, Govande and Valvekar. On 3 July 1851, he founded a girls' school in which eight girls were admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Savitribai taught in this school also and had to suffer a lot because of the hostility of the orthodox people. Jotiba opened two more girls' schools during 1851-52. In a memorial addressed to the Education Commission (popularly known as Hunter Commission) in

1882, he described his activities in the field of education.

Jotiba was aware that primary education among the masses in the Bombay Presidency was very much neglected. He blamed the British government for spending profusely a large portion of revenue on the education of the higher classes. According to him, this policy resulted in the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices under the government by the Brahmins. Jotiba boldly attacked the stranglehold of the Brahmins, who prevented others from having access to all the avenues of knowledge and influence.

Widow remarriages were banned and child marriages were very common in the Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in a manner in which the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the delinquent widows resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Out of pity for the orphans, Jotiba Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu. Jotiba gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jotiba adopted him as his son and named him as Yashwant Phule. On 24 September 1873, Jotiba convened a meeting of his followers and admirers

and it was decided to form the Satya Shodhak Samaj (society of seekers of truth) with Jotiba as its first president and treasurer. The main objectives of organisation were to liberate the *shudras* and *atishudras* and to prevent their exploitation by the Brahmins. The membership was open to all. In 1876, there were 316 members of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. Jotiba refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct. He opposed idolatry and denounced the *Chaturvarnya*. In 1876, Jotiba was nominated as a member of the Pune Municipality. He tried to help the people in the famine-stricken areas of Maharashtra when a severe famine in 1877 forced people in rural areas to leave their villages. Throughout his life, Jotiba Phule fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle which he launched at a young age ended only when he died on 28 November 1890. It is very clear that he had very revolutionary ideas and he expressed his ideas through his books. He had written many books — *Tritya Ratna* (1855), *Brahmanache Kasab* (1869), *Gulamgiri* (1873), *Shetkaryancha Asud* (1883), *Satsar*, Vol.1 (1885), *Satsar*, Vol. 2 (1885), *Ishara* (1885), *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (published posthumously). So in all, he worked the whole life for achieving his motives, i.e. compulsory universal education, women education and uplifting of lower caste people.

### **Views of Mahatma Jotiba Phule about Primary Education and Primary Teacher**

Jotiba Phule has expressed his views about primary education and primary teacher in the statement forwarded to the Hunter Commission. According to his view, it was the pressing need of the hour to concentrate more on primary education than on higher education because it was the urgent need of the masses. “The British Government receives more amount by taxation from common masses but ‘in return’ the British Government does not extend facilities for spreading primary education to the common masses.”

Jotiba Phule insisted on the principal that the amount received from the common masses should be invested for them proportionately and education was to get priority in the government expenditure. The need of the public was to receive instructions for jobs and day-to-day activities. He was thinking of useful education to common masses. The concentration of the British Government was on higher education rather than on primary education. Though Jotiba Phule was not against higher education, he was of the firm opinion that the common masses were less connected to higher education. Their urgent need was useful primary education. Jotiba Phule was interested in the culturisation of the nation with Indian background and humanism through education. He wanted

educated persons of high vision and high intellect directed towards humanism in education. He was against the traditional view that the weapon of education should be used as an instrument for mass exploitation. Jotiba Phule had a beautiful foresight and interest in education policies. Therefore, in the statement presented to the Hunter Commission, he argued: "The present number of educated men is very small in relation to the country at large and we trust that the day may not be far distant when we shall have the present number multiplied a hundredfold— all taking themselves to useful and remunerative occupation not looking after service."

Through education Jotiba Phule was not interested in raising the temporary standard of living for a few persons. He was, in fact, thinking of the future of education for independent India, therefore to run after service as per the whims of the British rulers was not his vision about education. It was the temporary effect of education to get government jobs. He was expecting the permanent value of education to Indian society with freeness of mind and liberty of action.

Jotiba Phule concentrated on the need of primary education, the essential qualities of primary teacher and curriculum of primary education. Through his wide experience in the field of primary education, Jotiba Phule expressed his views with profound

foresight. Primary teacher plays a pivotal role in the education process. According to Jotiba Phule:

1. Primary teacher should be a trained person and sufficient salary should be paid to him/her.
2. In order to safeguard the interests of teachers and so called lower castes of the community, teachers from these castes should be provided opportunities for employment.
3. Efficient primary teachers should be paid more salary than the usual teachers.

### **Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Jotiba Phule**

Mahatma Jotiba Phule was fully conscious of the importance of education. He knew that education can only be the powerful instrument of social revolution. Education can only bring social equality and social justice in the society. The essence of the educational philosophy of Mahatma Phule was 'to be educated is a human right' and he emphasised on 'education for all'. He was the sponsor of the concept of universalisation of education. It meant to accept and extend facilities of education to all irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex and physical disability. Article 45 of Indian Constitution is the symbol of victory of the philosophy of equality of education propounded by Mahatma Phule. He also worked for women's education. Through his activities and undaunted efforts, Jotiba Phule tried

to build a foundation for women's education in particular and education for all and especially the non-established class of society. For achieving his aims, he opened a girls' school in 1848 at Budhwar Peth in the residential building of Tatyasaheb Bhide. He opened two more schools in 1851 of which one school was for girls of backward class. He wrote many books and through these books he expressed his revolutionary views and awakened the people about their rights. He had revolutionary ideas about different aspects of education which are briefly explained below:

1. Individuals being equal, it is necessary to provide facilities to more and more individuals and the monopoly in education should be stopped.
2. While educating individuals, religion, race, caste and sex should not be considered. Education should develop values for humanism.
3. The principle of universalisation of education should be followed and to some extent education should be made compulsory.
4. Women, who were neglected and those who were deprived of education since long, should be given top priority in educational facilities and thus social justice should be established.
5. Education should be based on equality because such education binds the society together. It does

not destroy the society, hence it is beneficial for the welfare of the country.

6. Mahatma Jotiba Phule expressed deep concern for primary education and the primary school teacher. He was of the view that the primary school teacher should be a trained person and sufficient salary should be paid to him/her.
7. He argued that curriculum should be utilitarian and practical so as to cover the needs of the society. Preliminary knowledge about agriculture and health should be included in the curriculum. He said that there should be demarcation between the curriculum of rural and urban areas.
8. Permanent values like freedom, equality and fraternity should be developed through education. Personal fraternity and kindness should also be developed.
9. Along with the advancement of knowledge, the values of devotion to nation, self respect, universal fraternity, etc. should be developed.
10. Professional ability and efficiency should be developed so that knowledge may be properly linked.
11. The downward filtration theory advocated by Lord Macaulay is not philosophically sound as it ignores the common masses and their progress.

12. Practical knowledge is superior to bookish knowledge hence basic knowledge of accounts, history, grammar, agriculture, ethics and health should be imparted in Modi (a special Marathi script).
13. Quantitative growth of primary education is important but it should not be at the cost of qualitative growth.
14. He was of the view that government should formulate the scheme of scholarships and rewards for the needy and deserving students.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude with, we can say that Jotiba Phule was the first Indian educationist whose pragmatic views on education were honoured by the British in India. He was a great critic of the system of

education laid down by Lord Macaulay. He was the most practical man with profound philosophical background. The Indian educationists of his period and after him were profoundly impressed by the richness and originality of his thoughts. But some contemporary leaders and reformers in education could not appreciate him in his times as they were in the grip of traditionalism. His educational ideas and principles especially in the field of women's education and universal free and compulsory primary education are most welcome in the modern Indian society as elsewhere. The history of women's education in India will just be incomplete without referring to the contribution of Mahatma Jotiba Phule. He is rightly called the Mahatma. For his subtle and substantial contributions he is regarded as Martin Luther of Maharashtra.