



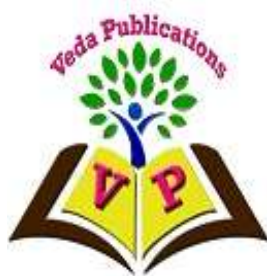
UNDERSTANDING THE EXIGENCY OF EDUCATING THE MASSES: THE INSPIRATIONAL IDEOLOGY OF JOTIBA PHULE

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ABSTRACT



The traditional Indian system had given monopoly of educational resources to Brahmins. Anyone who tried to break the hegemonic encroachments of educational resources was severely punished by the *Laws of Manu* or by the preaching of Vedic scriptures such as Rig-Veda. For a very long-time Indians born in disparate *Varnas* could not even think of transgressing the caste lines or stepping into the zones that were not made or meant for them, especially those who were born in lower segments of *Varnas*. Although a mild system of punishment is also listed in *Manusmriti* for a transgressive upper segmented *Varnas* such as Brahmins Kshatriya and Vaishyas. But in the case of Shudra and Chandala – the nomenclature used for lower *Varnas* as per *Manusmriti*, are accorded with severest punishment¹. The consecrated knowledge was accessible to the first three *Varnas* only. Breaking the mold of Hindu caste system was unthinkable till the time some social reformers from the lower *Varnas* challenged the hegemony, educated themselves, and understood the value of education for everyone. Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) was one such man. He has been largely known for his tirade against the Brahmanism and their concoction of rules and regulation for keeping the large number of underprivileged people disenfranchised from the education spheres. Phule also criticized British educational policies that did not keep any compulsory provision to implement rules that could ensure Shudra/Atishudra's educational opportunities. An aborigine theory of Shudra and Atishudra as the original inhabitants of India is developed by Jotiba Phule. Such possible novel identity of Shudra/Atishudra inculcated in them a sense of belongingness and spread out in other parts of North and South India. My paper attempts to map the trajectories of such beliefs in North India and also in the select Hindi Dalit autobiographical literature.

Keywords: *Dalit Literature, Traditional Literature, Jotiba Phule, Educational Policies, Untouchables.*

Citation:

APA Singh,P.(2018) Understanding the exigency of educating the masses: The inspirational ideology of Jotiba Phule. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 92-97.

MLA Singh,Poonam. "Understanding the exigency of educating the masses: The inspirational ideology of Jotiba Phule." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.92-97.

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INTRODUCTION

To strip off the curtains of ignorance from the eyes off Shudras and Atishudras, Jotiba Phule insisted on their gaining education. Phule challenged not only the Brahminic orthodoxy but also cut across gender positions. Both the visions were blasphemous in those times and attracted a lot of criticism from the Indian traditional system. Acting as a double-edged sword, Phule, did not spare Indian orthodox system, nor did he approve of British educational policies which were not emancipatory for the Shudras and Atishudras.

British educational policies from the Charter Act of 1813 to Hunter Commission in 1882, rest heavily upon the down-filtration theory. The British wanted to educate the upper class which by default meant upper castes and expected them to spread education amongst the masses. Jotiba Phule objected to it, as he understood that upper class or caste people could not empathize with the untouchables and the masses at large. Phule did not spare anyone for exploiting the masses or the lower caste/class people. Although, he has been charged of being sympathetic towards the Christian religion, perhaps for his defense of Pandita Ramabai's proselytization, this could be a propaganda to portray him as anti-Hindu. He did not remain lacked a classical to the inimical policies of the British authority on education and vehemently pointed out their privation of Indian masses. In his *Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission*, Jotiba Phule says:

Because of his ignorance Huntersahab is indulging in meaningless and idle loquaciousness (vachalpana);...[t]hey have educated many children of wealthy men and have been the means of advancing very materially the worldly prospects of some their pupils. But what contribution have these made to [the] great work of regenerating their fellowmen? How have they begun to act upon the masses? Have any of them formed classes at their own home or elsewhere, for the instruction of their less fortunate or less wise countrymen? Or have they kept their knowledge to themselves, as a personal gift, not to be soiled by contact with the ignorant

vulgar? Have they in any way shown themselves anxious to advance the general interests and repay the philanthropy with patriotism? Upon what ground is it asserted that the best way to advance the moral and intellectual welfare of the people is to raise the standard of instruction among the higher classes? (Deshpande, 104)

Phule's in-depth analysis for lack of opportunities for the Shudra and Atishudra people and women was an unusual insight in the whole scheme of things. He unearthed the intricacies of British policies that apparently seemed benevolent to the masses, but was a shallow method of providing education for all. He recognized the value of education and how it could change the lower caste people. In 1848, he started a school for untouchable's girls. In 1851 he started another school for girls from all castesⁱⁱ. It was a step towards enlightenment for the untouchable people and its impact was not only in Maharashtra but in other states as well. Phule also devised mechanism to retain students in the classroom. He pointed out at the daily problems of the lower class or caste students that the village students. He said, "the cultivating classes hold aloof, owing to extreme poverty, and also because they require their children to tend cattle and look after their fields" (106).ⁱⁱⁱ

While putting across the difficulties of the lower caste children before the education commission, Phule stated that the mindsets of the upper caste Brahmin teachers would not be empathetic towards the lower caste children. Their tyrannical behaviour might dissuade the pupils to coming to school. Phule helped to form association of education for untouchables. To retain students in the classroom, he demanded incentives for the students to be motivated to gain the benefit of education. On the other hand, he demanded that since caste prejudices cannot be lifted completely

"Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away from all Brahmin school-masters! The Shudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them alone, and not to the Brahmin, that Government must ever look to tide over their difficulty (105).^{iv}



Phule's take on education was in its time unique and revolutionary. Rosalind O'Hanlon admires Phule for his farsightedness of getting emancipation from the caste bondage by the means of education; O'Hanlon avows that Phule was reasonable in his approach as the "remedy for the plight of the lower castes lay in education, and in schemes of self-help and social reform. Yet their religious and social values, instilled by generations of Brahman preceptors, lay in direct oppositions to such schemes" (220).^v

Phule believed that education was the only force that can thaw the age-old conventions of ignorance amongst the lower castes. Education works in many ways, it can provide occupational skills and employment in administration, it can liberate the lower castes from the doctrines of Brahmanic Hinduism that upheld caste-based hierarchy, it can reform harmful social customs such as child marriage, reluctance to educate girl child, and heavy expenditure on weddings.

Education means emancipation from all the bad customs or the social evils which people accepts without questioning them, a rationale can only be inculcated if the people are educated (234).^{vi} "Phule also talked of knowledge and power long before Foucault did. Foucault's post-modernist analysis came at a time when Europe has literally seen 'end of history', whereas Phule's efforts were to change the world/society with the weapon of knowledge (Joshi, 1326)."^{vii} Many scholars have thus acknowledged Phule as one of the greatest critic and theorist that can be placed at par or perhaps above, the western theorists of modern times.

Gail Omvedt in her essay "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India" sums up the life of Jotirao Phule. He was a man of extraordinary courage and beliefs. His theory was that the Indian lower castes were the natives of India who were subjugated by the Aryans. In Greek tradition of dialogue, he indulged in dialogic form to deconstruct the mythological stories of the Hindu religious order. To provide education to those who had been denied it for centuries, he urged the British authorities to re-formulate their guidelines and focus on primary education than on the higher education.

Phule's criticism was not limited to Brahminism and their machinations to keep lower caste subjugated. He also disapproved of British who did not throw away Brahminic prominence in Indian social system. Omvedt says

[i]n fact, one of his major criticisms of the British was that in leading their pleasure-seeking life they acquiesced in Brahman dominance of the masses. In every department, education, irrigation, the judiciary, etc, the Brahmans were seen as monopolizing the benefits of rule (Omvedt, 1975).^{viii}

Jotirao Phule's Aryan theory of race sowed such seeds that sprouted not only in Maharashtra but elsewhere in India as well. Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala also got so affected by the same theory^{ix}. Many lower castes regained their self-confidence and found the possible reasons of their marginalization.

THE IDEOLOGY OF PHULE THAT AFFECTED NORTH INDIA/UTTAR PRADESH AND REFLECTED IN THE HINDI AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

Ambedkar is an ever-increasing phenomenon in Dalit literature or political consciousness of Dalits across spatial temporal spaces. Ambedkar has avowed to Phule's insight for understanding the degraded position of Shudras and Atishudras. Ambedkar one of the seminal text, *Who Were Shudras? Inscribed in the Memory of Jotiba Phule (1827-1890)* ^xHis extensive works is examined as the gearing force for Dalit identity and Dalit ideology. Dalit activists draw inspiration from Ambedkar which is supposedly a bigger name than Phule, because of his political activism that brought compulsory regulations in the form of reservation policies for the Shudras and Atishudra in the Indian constitution. However, the high regard for Ambedkar is a recent development. In Uttar Pradesh, it was the Mayawati-Kanshiram duo, who made Ambedkar a household name in Dalit houses to awaken the conscious of Dalits and aspiring them for political mileage. Before Mayawati and Kanshi Ram, in 1950s and 1960s, Ambedkar is not known as popularly as he is known to the Dalit people in the contemporary times. Hindi Dalit autobiographers, Tulsi Ram (b.1949-2015) and Sheoraj Singh Bechain (b.1960), Mohandas Naimishrey (b.1949) concede that



Ambedkar did not loom large in their memories. Although, they do remember some of the occasions that relate to Swami Achhutanand's and his activism in North India. In their growing up years in the far-flung villages of Uttar Pradesh, they reminiscence about Mahatma Gandhi and Dalit Congress leaders but not so much about Ambedkar. Influenced by Arya Samaj and its principles, the adolescent Sheoraj under the tutelage of Prempal Yadav recalls that he gave up his tradition of eating meat and became teetotaler. Field researcher, Badri Narayan states that such changes came largely from Dalit leaders such as Achhutanada, who had initially reposed their faith in Arya Samaj but had got disillusioned by it. Achhutanada tried to introspect the history of untouchables and believed they are the original inhabitants of the place. Badri Narayan writes:

Swami Achhutananda, who made an immense contribution to the welfare and education of Dalits, himself attained consciousness through the Arya Samaj, but left it when he understood the inner conflicts of the organization. While a section of Dalits were obtaining education and knowledge from the Arya Samaj, a few Muslim organization in UP also opened up their schools to Dalits students. These schools enabled many Dalits to acquire education and wisdom (76)^{xi} into the fold of education.

Badri Narayan also asserts that even before Dr. Ambedkar, the Adi-Hindu Movement of Swami Achhutanand had set up Adi-Hindu Hostels and Adi-Hindu Schools in UP to catalyze the movement to bring Dalits into the fold of education. As part of the movement, members started motivating the Dalits living in remote rural areas to set aside a handful of cereal everyday to save for their children's education. Swami Achhutanand also inspired the Dalits to send their demands to the British government through postcards and paintings. Through his writings, he inspired the Dalit community to develop a dissenting culture. Quite in tune with Jotiba Phule, Achhutanand also asserted that the Dalits are the original inhabitants of India. The theory of reclaiming the ownership of the Indian land was definitely an

assertion that unifies and builds a link between Jotiba Phule and Achhutananda.

Just as Dalits of Maharashtra were claiming to be the original habitants of India, Swami Achhutanand's theory of Dalit as the Adi-Hindu of India started getting prominence in North India Dalit politics. Leaders from Maharashtra and North India were responsible for waking the untouchables from their great slumber. Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu recalls one occasion when Ambedkar and Achhutanand met each other, in 1928; Simon commission came to enquire about the social status of Indian castes. When this commission visited Lucknow, the members of the Adi-Hindu Sabha established by Swami (Achhutanand) expressed their views which were so clear and logical that that commission was impressed. In a function of the Adi-Hindu Sabha at Lucknow, Babasaheb Ambedkar also came to attend. When he arrived, he was greeted with such slogans as *Victory to Rajarsi Dr Ambedkar*. Enthralled by the services of Swamiji in north India, Ambedkar called him *Vishwa Vijayee Sri 108 Swami Achhutanand* (Conqueror of the World Sri 108 Swami Achhutanand (Narayan, *Multiple Marginalities*, 109).^{xii}

Jigyasu venerates both the leaders immensely. In his words "Swami Achhutanand and Baba Saheb Ambedkar are the original Karl Marx and Lenin of India. Adi-Hindus are the proletariats of India and the Brahmins are the Indian bourgeoisie" (116).^{xiii} Researchers are trying to unearth the possible impact of Swami Achhutanand on Dalit identity in North India specifically in Uttar Pradesh. Because of the dearth of written material on Dalit activism in Uttar Pradesh during the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century, one cannot establish quite easily what made more impact on Dalit identity in that area. However, because of the remnants of principles of Arya Samaj, and Dalit leaders like Achhutanand who had come under the aegis of Arya Samaj, one may hypothesize that Achhutanand played a great role in those times.

A scrutiny of Hindi Dalit autobiographies shows that the impact of Ambedkar on the writers was not as great as their aspiration for education, which they grasp from their surroundings in absence of any quantifiable philosophy of Ambedkar. Though they did not exchange their views with each other,



but their activism was similar. Ambedkar figures out rather late in their lives. Tapan Basu asserts:

Dalit personal narrative in Hindi, which began to make itself more and more visible in North India during the last two decades of the twentieth century. These narratives are legatees of the Achhutanand tradition of anti-caste writing that took shape as early as the earliest decades of the twentieth century (46).^{xiv}

Theories such as Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka and Adi-Dravida in south India and Adi-Dharm in Punjab claimed that the untouchables were the original inhabitants of India. Founding the Adi-Hindu Sabha, Achutanada claimed the Bhakti tradition was a part of the Adi-Hindu tradition, he said "Bhakti was the original religion of the Adi-Hindus." He claimed that Shiva was the original godhead of the Adi-Hindus and the egalitarian religions Buddhism and Janinism on the same level as Sant dharm (qtd. in Bellwinkel-Schemp, 2178).^{xv}

In Uttar Pradesh, another figure who helped in unifying untouchables and setting up schools for them was Achrya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900-1971). He set up a school for the Depressed and Backward class children on the outskirts of Kanpur and modeled it after Gurukul Kangri.

Acchutanada published the first newspaper in the Hindi region in 1917 called *Achhut*. He launched another newspaper in 1928 which is called *Adi-Hindu Mahasabha*. The following were other newspapers for Dalit identity in Uttar Pradesh: *Samta* (1934) – a weekly newspaper by Munshi Hariprasad Tamta, *Privartan* – fortnightly newspaper by Ajudhyanath, *Sinhad* (1957) – by Dayand Vyas, *Zamin Ke Tare* (1962) – by Mishrilal Deepak (who also established Bhim Printing Press in 1966). *Samta Shakti* and *Bahujan Adhikar* (1972) – Mohan Das Namish Rai. Dalit issues became central to the identity politics of the untouchables and since the environment was conducive in other parts of the India also, like-minded people of lower caste could communicate with each other.^{xvi}

Therefore, the phenomena of Dalit identity and their struggle for education that were started by the Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra, became an agitating movement in other parts of the country. Phule laid a

foundation that supported the Dalit intellectuals to go back in times and locate the possible reasons of their marginalization. Ambedkar, Achhutanand and Periyar have been directly/indirectly inspired by Jotiba Phule's revelatory principles and at present reflected in the form of thousands of Dalit Magazines assisting in awakening the Dalit conscience.

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ⁱⁱG.P. Deshpande, p 3

ⁱⁱⁱIbid 106

^{iv}Ibid 105

^vRosalind O'Hanlon, Caste, Conflict, And Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth- Century Western India (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2002)220.

^{vi}Ibid 234

^{vii}Satyakam Joshi. "Jotirao Phule: An Incomplete Renaissance." *Economic and Political Review*. May 25 1991. 11 October 2017. P 1326

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^{ix}Adi Dharma in Punjab, Adi Dravid in South, Adi Hindu in Uttar Pradesh are some of the theories that gained currency in establishing Shudra and Atishudras as the original inhabitants of India.

^xB R Ambedkar. *Who Were Shudras? Inscribed in the Memory of Jotiba Phule (1827-90)*

<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/38A.%20Who%20were%20the%20Shudras%20Preface.htm#PRE>

^{xi}Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2011)76

^{xii}Badri Narayan, and A.R. Mishra. Ed and Trans. *Multiple Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writing*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2004. P 109

^{xiii}Ibid 116

^{xiv}Tapan Basu, "The Dalit Personal Narrative in Hindi: Reflections On a Long Literary Lineage" vol 40, Number 1, winter 2017, p 46 <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/666050> accessed on 2/8/2017

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