



## De-constructing the caste structure: Phule's anti- caste movement in Maharashtra

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### Abstract:

Jyotiba Phule, a trailblazing social reformer in 19th-century India, dedicated his life to dismantling the entrenched caste system through a multifaceted and relentless mission. This abstract delves into Phule's efforts, highlighting his groundbreaking contributions in education, social reform, and advocacy for marginalized communities. Phule's unwavering commitment is evident in his endeavours to challenge oppressive practices such as child marriage and female infanticide, as well as his strong support for widow remarriage. By establishing centres to prevent infanticide and providing homes for widows, Phule aimed to create a society that values the lives of those traditionally marginalized. Beyond specific issues, his vision of personhood encompassed fundamental rights like gender equality, sexual freedom, and access to education. Phule's lasting influence extended beyond his lifetime, inspiring subsequent leaders like Ambedkar and anti-caste activists. In essence, Jyotiba Phule emerges as a disruptor in the historical continuity of Brahminism, leaving an indelible mark on the anti-caste movement and serving as a guiding light for a more inclusive and egalitarian society. His life's work continues to be a transformative force, reminding us of the ongoing journey towards social justice and equality.

**Keywords:** phule, caste, segregation, equality, oppressed, social rights, empowering, tribals

### Introduction

India's intricate social tapestry is woven with the threads of the caste system, a complex network that dictates birth-based hierarchies, occupation, marriage, and social interactions. By navigating this intricate landscape, one gains a nuanced understanding of a complex network that dictates birth-based hierarchies, justifies social exclusion, exploitation, and social slavery based on pollution and purity. The delineating social boundaries underlines the structural inequality ingrained in the established socio-cultural and political order. While social scientist have provided theoretical frameworks to understand this system, the lived realities reveal a nuanced and diverse terrain shaped by historical traditions and regional nuances which prominent sociologist Ghurye exhibits in his six key features of the caste system, for a comprehensive understanding of the graded structure, that is engulfed in the segmental division, hierarchy, social taboos on social interaction, civil and religious distinctions, limitations on marriage, and constrained occupational choices. The social life is dominated by Civil and religious distinctions perpetuating through ritualistic disparities, imposing restrictions on public amenities, temple entry, and even regulating proximity to certain castes'



shadows. Each caste guards its unique customs, traditions, and rituals, adhering to an array of informal rules and regulations. The check post are through the caste councils or panchayats who play a crucial role in regulating caste segregation, addressing grievances, and enforcing prescribed norms. These councils, are invariably headed by elders, who possess the authority to excommunicate members who deviate from caste restrictions. These caste panchayats are distinct from panchayats, from they operate within the boundaries of their specific caste, exhibiting the convoluted social governance based on caste structures that exist parallel within our democratic republic.

This structural reproduction of caste which fortified graded inequality, exploitation and hegemonized Brahmanical supremacy was challenged in the fiercely for the first time by a social reform who was deeply influence by Thomas Paine's book 'Rights of Man,' named Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. Paine's 'Rights of Man' espoused the belief that every person has inherent rights that society and its institutions ought to uphold and defend, irrespective of their social background. Phule, greatly resonated and critique the pervasive injustices and discrimination that the Indian caste system upheld. Inspired by Paine's advocacy of justice and equality, Phule set out to analyse and demolish the caste system of social organisation. One of the most significant events in Jyotiba's life happened in 1848 when he faced humiliation from Brahmin family members of a friend during his involvement in a marriage ceremony. This compelled him to probe in to the demeaning and disgraceful cultural practise robbing the individual its dignity due to caste practices. Phule's critique of the caste system was complex. Caste is hereditary, he argued, but one's social standing and opportunities shouldn't be determined by birth. Drawing on Paine's focus on individual rights, Phule promoted fairness and universal access to education for people from all backgrounds, including caste. He believed that education was a potent instrument that could liberate the oppressed and end social injustice. The oral history of his movement traces the influence of socio-reformist movements such as Paramahansa Sabha, struggles of kolis and Ramoshis. This laid the formation of a revolutionary movement which challenged the Brahmanical supremacy and unsettled the established social order, not by protesting on specific practices but by interrogating the rooted cultural and ideological structures regulating social life, enforcing economic hardships and exploitation on the majoritarian by the minority. He was the pioneer in visiting caste through the economic lens relating the privileged caste to the privileged class, while examining mass poverty of the deprived sections. The urge of the toiling masses to live the life of dignity and the absences of a social agency or platform lead him to the foundation of Satya shodhak Samaj in 1873 the pioneering social reformist movement in history of Maharashtra. His quest for social transformation can be identified into two ways:

## **The Ideological Foundation**

This movement laid the ideological foundation for a new social order. The Satyashodak Samaj outlined its aims and objectives as follows:

1. The primary goal was to disseminate education among the Shudras, empowering them with awareness of their rights and liberating them from the influence of sacred texts crafted by Brahmins for their own sustenance.
2. Rooted in Phule's ideological framework, the Satyashodak Samaj sought to unite all Shudra and Ati-Shudra masses, positioning its ideology at the core of the non-Brahman movement.



3. In direct opposition to Brahmanical culture, the Satyashodhak ideology aspired to establish an ideal society based on several principles:

- a. Faith in One God (Creator)
- b. Rejection of any intermediary between God and Man.
- c. Denouncement of the Caste System and the fundamental four-fold varna division of society. Instead, placing faith in the notion that a person's supremacy is determined by their qualities, not their caste.
- d. Advocacy for equality, freedom, and brotherhood

The Samaj aimed to create awareness among the shudras and Ati-shudras regarding their civil rights, seeking to liberate them from the religious and emotional bondage enforced by Brahmanical scriptures. In 1911, the Satya Shodhak Samaj articulated its resolutions, encapsulated in three guiding principles:

(a) Recognizing all human beings as children of a singular God, thereby considering each other as brothers and sisters. (b) Emphasizing the absence of a need for intermediaries, akin to approaching one's parents, to connect with God. (c) Pledging to provide education to both sons and daughters.

It further encouraged certain actions prominently a) Defying the role of priests as intermediaries in the union between individuals and God, as well as in religious rituals and ceremonies. The Samaj advocated for straightforward and cost-effective marriages, opposed child marriages, and supported progressive initiatives such as widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. While the prevalence of such actions was initially limited, they marked the advent of a novel and innovative form of opposition.

b) Challenging the exploitation of peasant masses by 'Shetjis' (moneylenders) and 'Bhathis' (Brahman Priests). Phule, in his insightful work titled "Shetekaryancha Asud" (Cultivators' Whipcord), extensively illustrated how Shetjis and Bhatjis collaborated to exploit the vulnerable peasant masses.

### **Unearthing the historical legacy**

Phule laid stress on the non-brahminical ideologies through historical narratives of God Khandoba, King Bali and the formation of Swaraj by Shivaji Maharaj. By presenting them as a cultural symbol and as tools for social empowerment and the upliftment of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras, he tried to inculcate a sense of identity, pride and a quest for social change. Also, by connecting the present-day marginalized communities to a noble ancestry, he aimed to boost their confidence and diminish their sense of social backwardness. He aimed to create a common identity among the marginalized castes by emphasizing shared practices, beliefs, and symbols. This was to unite these communities under a common cultural heritage. Secondly, Phule contended that the present-day Shudras and Ati-Shudras (a term used to describe the most oppressed among the Shudras) were the displaced and deprived descendants of the Kshatriyas (warrior class). By tracing their ancestry to the Kshatriyas, Phule intended to inspire a sense of pride and elevate the social aspirations of the Shudras. The effort to introduce a new cultural orientation among non-Brahmin castes, he presented Baliraja as a revered figure among the



peasantry. Phule held that to initiate a democratic revolution in India, it was crucial to establish a cultural tradition with popular heroes from non-Brahmin backgrounds at its core. His reinterpretation of Bali, therefore, departed from traditional mythology and instead was grounded in his own Aryan vs. non-Aryan paradigm. By presenting Bali as a peasant king leading a non-Aryan combat, Phule aimed to inspire a democratic revolution and foster a sense of pride and identity among the non-Brahmin communities. In Phule's narrative, Bali was portrayed as a peasant king leading the non-Aryan resistance against Aryan aggression. This reinterpretation aimed to create a cultural narrative that challenged the prevailing power dynamics within Hindu society.

This theory, according to Gail Omvedt, posed an impromptu threat to the caste Hindus predominantly the brahmins who were now educated in English and situated themselves in the elite classes with the rise of British colonial rule. Though this elite group faced the dilemma of how to use their status to serve a foreign power while simultaneously aligning themselves with the British conquerors. They identified themselves on the basis of education and their place in the Hindu culture system. They sought to combine Eastern morality with Western science in order to revive Hindu tradition. However, their adherence to the "Aryan Theory of race" aligned them with the British conqueror and justified the caste hierarchy. On the economic front, the elite worked for capitalist development, but mainly against foreign exploitation, disregarding the exploitation of native capitalists or landlords. The elite's vision of modernization and capitalist development failed to acknowledge the interests of the majority of Indians, who were non-Aryan dark-skinned individuals often categorized as Shudras or peasants. The concerns of peasants, tribals, workers, and lower castes were not addressed by these liberal modern Hindu. Since these elite was closely linked to colonial rule and often perpetuated caste-based discrimination. Phule saw them as the primary obstacle to social justice and equality.

His divulging in the history of non-brahmans strengthens the social esteem of the lower class drove them towards an extensive societal change. His anti-caste outlook pointed at dismantling the classified structure that had marginalized, discriminated and dehumanised certain communities for centuries. This elite class, specifically the upper castes, embodied the entrenched power structure that Phule sought to challenge. The non brahman ideologies highlighted by Phule aimed at dismantling the dominance of the elite by challenging their cultural, social, and economic hegemony.

### **The formation of "Sarvajanik Satya Dharm"**

Phule was cognizant of the fact that that every society that undergoes revolutionary changes, essential needs moral and religious underpinning hence instead of absolutely rejecting the concept of dharma, he focused on establishing a more universalistic approach - "Sarvajanik Satya Dharma" - "True Religion of the Community." It aimed to articulate a fresh, theistic, and egalitarian religious framework. Essentially, Phule's religious alternative did not only reject established religious norms, but it also actively advocated for a theistic system that promoted equality and justice. The principles of democratic governance are deeply embedded in the ideology of "Sarvajanik Satya Dharma." This ideology serves as a manifesto for democracy by promoting inclusivity, rejecting hierarchies, empowering individuals, advocating for universal participation, and challenging authoritarianism. These foundational principles are essential for



the functioning of a democratic society. The underlying principle is that society's moral framework should be based on truth, rationality, and equality, rather than perpetuating divisions based on traditional caste-based notions of dharma. From this perspective, the world is seen as inherently good and sacred, contradicting the Vedantic idea of it being an illusion. This optimistic viewpoint arises from the belief that the world is a creation of God, who is portrayed as a loving father (or, in a more inclusive Indian expression, as ma-bap), valuing all individuals equally as his children. This fundamental concept serves as the basis for Satyashodhak teachings, justifying the principles of equality and stating that no intermediary or priest is required between individuals and God. The Sarvajanic Satyadharmas as stated by Tarkatirtha Lakshman Shastri Joshi and Chanchreek K.L., consists of thirty-three articles that outline the principles for establishing a global community founded on fundamental rights, as well as the necessary social and intellectual perspectives. The author's intention in writing this book is to guide individuals, both men and women, on the righteous path and promote harmonious living for the greater good of humanity. This entails acknowledging the divine presence, embracing the virtues of the holy kingdom of God, and reaping the rewards of such a virtuous existence.

In his book "Sarvajanic Satyadharmas Pustak," Jyotirao Phule raises a thought-provoking analysis of religious texts. He highlights the absence of a clear and unwavering truth in these texts, which are predominantly authored by men. Phule proclaims that religious works have undergone alterations throughout history, influenced by the requirements and conditions of different eras. Consequently, he contends that religions, as they exist today, do not offer equal advantages to all individuals. Instead, they inadvertently foster divisions and factions characterized by animosity and jealousy. Nirmik, which means God, is the new designation Jyotiba has employed for the creator of the universe. He held the belief that the existing terms used for God had originated from practices and rituals of prayer or worship, which only served to divide humanity. As a result, he rejected terms like Ishwar, Allah, and Brahma. According to Jyotiba, the genuine worship of God lay in serving mankind, defending human equality, and preserving freedom. This was the religion that Jyotirao advocated. In his view, religion is what sustains society, and thus he named his religion as the true religion for the people.

Jyotirao spearheaded campaigns aimed at eliminating the economic and social disadvantages that fostered blind faith among women, Shudra, and ati-Shudras. He subjected religious texts and religious practices to the scrutiny of rationalism. He described this faith as being outwardly religious but fundamentally driven by political motives. He refused to acknowledge the holiness of the Vedas and openly disagreed with the worship of idols. Additionally, he strongly criticized the Chatur Varna system for its oppression and marginalization of women. According to him, both genders should be treated equally and it is unjust to discriminate based on gender. He emphasized the importance of unity among all people and visualized a society marked by freedom, equality, and brotherhood, rejecting the hierarchical caste system promoted by the Chatur Varna system. Furthermore, he was aware of the risks associated with religious extremism and aggressive nationalism. He accused its followers of upholding religious teachings without subjecting them to rational analysis. According to him, the root cause of all calamities was the unquestioning belief that religious books were either created or inspired by God. Consequently, Phule sought to eradicate this blind faith as a priority. The established religious and priestly classes found this blind faith advantageous to their own interests, and thus, they vehemently defended it. He posed the question, "If there is only one God who created



all of mankind, why were the Vedas written exclusively in Sanskrit, despite God's concern for the welfare of all people? What about those who do not understand this language?" He concluded that it was untenable to claim that religious texts were divinely created. Instead, he believed that all religions and their religious texts were man-made, serving the selfish interests of the caste. In his perspective, every religious book was a product of its time, and the truths it contained had no permanent or universal validity. Furthermore, these texts could never be devoid of the biases and self-interests of their authors.

In the Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak, as mentioned in P.G, Patil book "Collected works of Mahatma Phule", Jyotirao astutely observes that religious texts, authored exclusively by men, lack a consistent truth throughout. These works have undergone alterations on specific occasions to meet the demands of their respective eras. Consequently, religions have not universally provided equal assistance to all individuals, but rather have fostered divisions and spawned sects characterized by animosity and resentment.

## **Women's liberty**

Jyotirao Phule's writings and ideas pertaining to women represented a groundbreaking perspective in 19th-century India, carrying significant importance in the domains of social reform and gender equality. Central to Phule's vision was a strong belief in empowering women through education. He confronted prevailing societal norms that limited women's access to knowledge, emphasizing education as the key to liberating women from deeply entrenched societal constraints. Phule acknowledged the crucial role that women could play in fostering social change and enlightenment. By critiquing patriarchal norms and practices, he shed light on the oppressive nature of traditional gender roles, laying the groundwork for future feminist movements in India. This commitment to gender equality was not merely theoretical; it found practical expression through his collaboration with Savitribai Phule. As the first female teacher in the first women's school they established in Pune, she embodied their shared dedication to education and social justice. Phule's advocacy extended to legal reforms, exemplified by his involvement in enacting the Satyashodhak Marriage Act, which permitted inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, granting women the agency to choose their life partners. Furthermore, he addressed the challenges faced by widows, actively campaigning against mistreatment and social exclusion. Phule's vision of social equality encompassed both genders, aiming to dismantle hierarchical and discriminatory practices and striving for a society where women could enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men. In essence, Jyotirao Phule's writings on women's issues were transformative, challenging established norms, advocating for women's education and empowerment, and laying the foundation for a more egalitarian and inclusive society in India. His enduring contributions to women's rights and social reform remain fundamental in the history of Indian social reform movements.

Phule's reflections on the origins of humanity and the absence of fraternal feelings between men and women shed light on the mistreatment of women in society. He posits that both men and women are creations of a divine entity, Nirmik, suggesting a shared origin. However, despite this common origin, Phule observes a distinct lack of brotherly sentiments in men towards women. He laments the unjust stigmatization of mothers, sisters, daughters, and daughters-in-law by men, characterizing this attitude as unnatural, untruthful, and cunning. Phule's language underscores the severity of the issue, portraying the mistreatment of women



as not only morally wrong but also deceitful and malicious. The comparison of women to "serfs" or "slaves captured as booty in a battle" vividly conveys the dehumanizing and oppressive nature of prevailing attitudes towards women. This metaphorical depiction highlights the deep-rooted inequality and disrespect that women faced in Phule's time. According to him, such sinful injustice creates an atmosphere of discontent, spreading pervasive sorrow. The mistreatment of women not only harms individuals but also contributes to a broader societal malaise. Phule describes the lack of empathy and respect between genders as resulting in a truthless and discontented environment. Thus, in essence, Phule's work serve as a critique of patriarchal norms and the mistreatment of women in society. His observations reflect a profound concern for social justice, urging a re-evaluation of attitudes towards women and advocating for a more equitable and compassionate society.

## **B) Building a masses movement - Satyashodak Samaj**

As noted by G. Bhadru, Individuals from all castes, sects, and religions were welcome to join Satyashodhak Samaj, as long as they embraced the Samaj's ideology and demonstrated their commitment through an oath. He felt that the goal could be attained through collective action and an organized movement. The Samaj's inclusive ideology attracted members from diverse castes and religions, including Brahmans and Muslims. According to Rosalind O. Hanlon, around 700 families from Kunbi, Mali, Potter, Carpenter, and other Shudra communities initiated a movement to assert their religious independence from the influence of Brahmans. These families rejected the traditional practice of relying on Brahmans to perform ceremonies and instead chose to provide food to their own caste members, which would have otherwise been given to the priest. During the first year of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Patil observed that a diverse group of 114 individuals actively participated in the organization, representing different castes, religions, and professions. This inclusivity was a significant achievement for the Samaj, as it aimed to challenge the oppressive caste system and promote social equality. Among the members, there were lawyers who used their legal expertise to fight for the rights of marginalized communities. Their presence was crucial in providing legal guidance and support to those who faced discrimination and injustice. Merchants, on the other hand, brought their business acumen and financial resources to the Samaj. Their contributions helped sustain the organization and fund various initiatives aimed at uplifting the oppressed and marginalized sections of society. Peasants and agricultural labourers, who formed a significant portion of the Samaj, brought their firsthand experiences of exploitation and oppression. Their presence ensured that the Samaj remained grounded in the struggles of the working class and focused on addressing their specific needs. The inclusion of Malis, a non-Brahman caste, was particularly noteworthy. Not only did they actively participate in the Samaj, but they also held influential positions and provided financial support.

This demonstrated the growing solidarity among non-Brahman castes and their determination to challenge the Brahmanical hegemony. The participation of Rajputs, traditionally considered a higher caste, indicated a shift in their mindset and a willingness to support the cause of social reform. Their involvement helped bridge the gap between different castes and fostered a sense of unity among the members. Untouchables, who were historically marginalized and subjected to extreme discrimination, found a platform within the Samaj to voice their grievances and demand justice. Their presence challenged the deeply ingrained social hierarchy and paved the way for their inclusion in the fight for social equality. The inclusion of Muslims within the



Samaj highlighted its commitment to religious harmony and secularism. It emphasized the need to transcend religious divisions and work towards a society where individuals of all faiths could coexist peacefully. Brahmans, despite being part of the privileged upper caste, also participated in the Samaj. Their involvement indicated a growing awareness among some members of their own community about the need for social reform and the dismantling of oppressive systems. Government officials joining the Samaj demonstrated the organization's efforts to engage with the state and push for policy changes that would benefit the marginalized. Their presence also provided a platform for dialogue and negotiation with the authorities. Additionally, the support of wealthy Marathi and Telugu Mali families involved in construction contracts.

During the timeframe spanning from 1873 to 1890, Patil observed a significant rise in the rural populace flocking to Pune and Bombay, engrossed and involved in the diverse undertakings of Samaj. The augmentation of Samaj's influence can be discerned by examining the number of its members, which amounted to 225, 232, and 316 in the consecutive years of 1874, 1875, and 1876 respectively. The period from 1882 onwards, social reformer Jyotirao Phule and his colleagues embarked on a mission to expand the influence of the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) beyond urban areas and into the rural regions surrounding the Pune, Ahmednagar, and Thana Collectorate, as well as even further afield. This deliberate and strategic move allowed Phule, known for his controversial viewpoints, to establish a direct and dependable connection with the Kunbi cultivator communities. By extending the reach of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Phule aimed to empower and emancipate the oppressed and marginalized sections of society, particularly the Kunbis, who were predominantly engaged in agricultural activities. The Kunbi community, which comprised the backbone of the agrarian economy, faced numerous social and economic challenges, including oppressive caste-based norms and exploitative practices.

To effectively reach out to the Kunbi cultivator communities, Phule and his colleagues organized meetings, rallies, and educational programs in rural areas, advocating for social equality, education, and the abolition of untouchability and caste discrimination. They sought to challenge deep-rooted orthodox beliefs and practices that perpetuated social inequality and obstructed progress. The efforts to spread the influence of the Satyashodhak Samaj in rural areas proved successful, as they resonated with the aspirations and grievances of the Kunbi cultivators. Phule's direct interaction with the Kunbi community allowed him to understand their struggles, gain their trust, and effectively communicate his ideas for social transformation. These activities of the Satyashodhak Samaj continued until 1890 when Phule faced significant opposition from conservative elements within society. Despite the cessation of the Satyashodhak Samaj's active operations in 1890, the movement had already left a lasting impact on the social consciousness of the region. Phule's ideas of social equality, education, and the empowerment of marginalized communities had taken root and continued to influence subsequent social reform movements in Maharashtra and beyond.

The leaders of the Satyashodhak Samaj played a vital role in expanding its influence in rural Maharashtra. They took the initiative to reorganize the movement and effectively spread its message in their respective districts. Through various means, these leaders mobilized the masses and garnered support for the cause. One of the prominent figures in this movement was





Chatrapathi Shahu Maharaj, who not only provided financial aid but also offered ideological motivation. His policies and programs significantly contributed to the growth and success of the Satyashodhak movement. Shahu actively supported the establishment of Samaj branches in the Kolhapur State, and his significant influence resulted in the identification of the Kolhapur Satyashodhak Samaj as the Shahu Satyashodhak Samaj. In the early stages, the activities of the Satyashodhak Samaj in Kolhapur mainly focused on organizing religious ceremonies independently of Brahman priests. It is worth noting that a considerable number of marriages, 200 in 1912, 266 in 1913, and 299 in 1914, were reported during this period. Furthermore, Chatrapathi Shahu Maharaj advocated for a policy that aimed to promote non-Brahmans in the state administration. As part of this policy, 50% of the posts were reserved for non-Brahmans. This action showcased Shahu Maharaj's commitment to social upliftment and equal representation for marginalized communities. Between 1897 and 1927, Shahu also made significant efforts by establishing twenty hostels for the Shudras and Ati Shudras, further emphasizing his dedication to improving the social conditions of these communities.

The Satya-Shodhakis were motivated by their compassion for the people, which led them to engage in social activism. They communicated with the masses using a language that resonated with them, and they conducted their propaganda in places where people gathered to collect corn. The preacher of the Satyashodhak Samaj dressed simply, wearing a blanket, turban, and dhoti, and carried a drum. He highlighted the burdens of debt, oppressive injunctions, and rituals that the peasants endured, emphasizing how the cunning and self-serving Brahmin priests exploited their meagre resources. The preacher encouraged the peasants to send their children to schools, where they could gain knowledge about the law, religion, and God. While other reformers focused on issues within the family, such as child marriage and women's education, many of these reforms primarily addressed the concerns of the upper castes and had little relevance to the lower castes. The problems of widows' disfigurement and remarriage were specific to the Brahman caste, as lower caste widows were allowed to remarry and were not subjected to disfigurement. Even the issue of women's education only had a remote connection to the lower castes, as per the Shastras, even individuals from lower castes, particularly the Shudras, were not permitted to pursue education.

The satyashodhaks played a crucial role in various sectors, including construction, agriculture, and the emerging mill industry, leaving a lasting impact. In order to amplify the voices of the oppressed class, they took the initiative to establish newspapers like *Deenbandhu* and *Shetkaryancha Kaivari*. One notable event took place in the Junnar region around 1885, where the Samaj organized a massive strike that lasted for a considerable duration. This strike brought together thousands of individuals from peasant and artisan castes who were united in their cause. Peasants demonstrated their dissent by refusing to work on the lands owned by Brahmin landlords, while also boycotting the services provided by Brahmin priests. Artisans similarly chose not to offer their services to Brahmins. This movement soon spread to other regions, such as the Konkan and Ghat areas, and in some places, it persisted for up to three years. According to Govind Bhau Patil's memoir, the impact of this movement was tangible. Brahmins were compelled to reduce their religious fees from 20 rupees to 8 aanas, while landlords were compelled to lower their land rental rates significantly.

In Mumbai, notable figures among the satyashodhaks like Swami Ramayya Ayyavaru, Jaya Karadi Lingu, and Narayan Meghaji Lokhande played prominent roles. They actively invited



Jyotirao Phule, and were responsible for organizing his speeches at various venues. In 1880, Lokhande spearheaded the establishment of the Bombay Mill Hands' Association, which became the first labour organization of its kind. With the support of his colleagues, he worked tirelessly to advocate for the rights of the mill workers, a majority of whom hailed from marginalized castes. Lokhande successfully mobilized support for the labourers and advocated for their demands. As a result, the workers were able to secure certain benefits such as weekly leave on Sundays, a half-hour lunch break, and timely payment disbursement. Dhananjay Keer, Phule's biographer, rightly points out that the early stages of the Indian labour movement were deeply influenced by the satyashodhak movement.

In the late 19th century, Pune and the entire Bombay Presidency experienced a severe drought that had a profound impact on the region. This dire situation prompted Jyotirao Phule, a prominent figure, to issue a compelling appeal on May 24, 1877, through the Marathi newspaper "Jnanaprakash." The primary aim of this appeal was to reach out to members of the "Satyashodhak Samaj" residing in Bombay, Pune, and nearby areas. The purpose was to inform them about a crucial decision made by the "Samaj" - the establishment of a food shelter called "Victoria Balashram" in the village of Dhanakavadi, near Pune. This decision was a direct response to the severe consequences of the drought, which resulted in crop failures in the Deccan plateau and ultimately triggered the devastating Great Famine from 1876 to 1878. The impact of this humanitarian crisis extended beyond the British-administered presidencies of Bombay and Madras, affecting princely states such as Mysore and Hyderabad as well. As the famine persisted, its devastating effects spread to other regions in northern India, including the Central Provinces, the North-Western Provinces, and Punjab. It is estimated that approximately four million individuals lost their lives during this catastrophic famine in India.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Jyotiba Phule's unwavering dedication to dismantling the deeply ingrained caste system in India serves as a testament to his tireless efforts. Through his multifaceted endeavours in education, social reform, and advocacy for marginalized communities, he fundamentally challenged the oppressive structures that had persisted for centuries. Phule's commitment to breaking down caste-based hierarchies was evident in his relentless work in the field of education, where he focused on empowering women, Shudras, and Ati-Shudras. Phule's actions spoke volumes as he actively opposed practices such as child marriage, female infanticide, and advocated for widow remarriage. His establishment of centres to prevent infanticide and homes for widows demonstrated a tangible commitment to creating a society that valued the lives of those who were traditionally marginalized. Beyond addressing specific issues, Phule's vision of personhood extended to the fundamental rights of individuals, encompassing gender equality, sexual freedom, education, and the pursuit of one's full potential as a human being.

Furthermore, Jyotiba Phule's influence extended far beyond his lifetime, shaping the cultural and educational landscape in ways that inspired subsequent leaders like Ambedkar and numerous anti-caste philosophers and activists. In essence, Phule became a disruptive force in the historical continuity of Brahminism, challenging and subverting the established social order. His legacy serves as a guiding light for those who aspire to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society, free from the constraints of caste-based discrimination. Jyotiba Phule's life's



work remains a transformative force that continues to resonate, reminding us of the ongoing journey towards social justice and equality. di H. Doctor. (1991). Low Caste Protest Movements in 19th and 20th Century Maharashtra: A Study of Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. *The Indian Journal of Social Science*, 4(2), 207-208.

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