CHAPTER – III
LIFE SKETCH OF MAHATMA JYOTIBHA PHULE

During the time Mahatama Phule started his life’s work, the British regime in India was at the zenith of its power. Indian especially in urban areas were under the sway of British education, administration and political philosophy originating from Britan. Those were the days of turmoil in which there was a conflict between those who believed in the superiority of the British and those who believed that the Indian traditions were supreme. At such a juncture there was a conflict between the rationalists and the orthodox. One of the eminent social revolutionaries of this period was Mahatama Jotirao Phule.

Jyotibha Phule was one of the foremost exponents of modern humanitarian thought in India, though there have been several others such as Raja Rammohun Ray in Bengal, Swami Dayanand in Gujarat etc. Tradition had made Indian society inert and devoid of dynamism of energy. These reformers went to the root of the problem and preached an ideology that would create a new and integrated social structure. As a result of modern education in the nineteenth century, the youth had begun to be acquainted with ideas that challenged traditional beliefs and constraints. Jotirao had the courage to be inspired by modern thought. He was one of the first Indians to forcefully introduce the values of freedom, equality and fraternity, as proclaimed by the French Revolution, into the Indian way of thinking. He introduced the notion of ‘slavery’ which was an integral part of the ancient social system, but had never found a foothold in India. One of the characteristics of the slave system was that the master enjoyed complete personal and physical authority over slave. One
does not find this feature in the ancient Indian social system. However, India had another social standing at birth the highest caste being the Brahmins and the lowest, the untouchables of the Mahars, Mangs, Chamars, D hers, etc. The Brahmins formed the priestly class, who imparted religious instruction with the help of religious texts known as Srutis, Smritis and Puranas. A Brahmin was considered the most holy person. The remaining castes came between the two extremes of pure and impure. According to Jotirao, the Brahmins arbitrarily took upon themselves the right to govern society, and the society accepted this right. Jotirao challenged this right with his concept of slavery and warned in his writings that the Indian mind could achieve all-round progress only if it freed itself from the shackles of this particular form of slavery. The biography of Jotirao is the biography of a great man of action.

Jyotibha Phule ancestral lineage can be traced back to Shetiba. The native village of his ancestors was Khanavali in the Purandar division of Pune district. Shetiba had three sons: Panoji, Govinda and Krishna. Their original family name was Gorhe but after they started a florist’s business they began to be known as Jyotibha Phule. In the latter days of the Peshwa rule, Jyotibha Phule ancestors supplied flowers and various articles made from flowers: flower mattresses, pillows and garments to the Peshwas. The letter gifted them with a garden and 35 acres of land. Prior to this Jotirao’s ancestors were greengrocers.

Jyotibha Phule father, Govinda of Govindrao married a girl called Chimana, daughter of one Zagde Patil from Dhanakwadi near Pune. They had two sons, one of whom, Joti, was born in 1827.
During Jyotibha Phule father`s time, the power and glory of the Peshwas had ebbed considerably. In the latter days of the Peshwas, the rulers had given up governing in a just manner. The Brahmins were the favoured cast. Merit was not considered while giving them high posts. For many crimes, the Brahmins were given milder punishment instead of the severe by law. They would manage to get their land tax reduced by half or even less. During the time of Bajirao II the Brahmins were especially showered with alms and given lavish feasts. In contrast, the farmers were miserable, caught as they were in the grip of money-lenders, who were mostly the Brahmins. The Brahmins reigned supreme owing to the blind acceptance of their cast superiority. So deep-rooted was this belief in the caste system that a Hindu felt polluted even if the shadow of an `untouchable` fell on him. It was believed that one could cleanse one`s sins by giving alms to a Brahmin or by drinking the water obtained by washing the feet of a priest. The latter custom still prevails in some regions of India.

The Brahmin community ensured that women remained uneducated and illiterate. In the last days of the Peshwas, even the religious beliefs had become debased. Worship of shakti had taken deep roots even among the officials of Bajirao were Brahmins and they practiced shakti madya (alcohol), mansa (meat), matsya (fish) maithuna (coitus), and mudra (consumption of roasted of puffed rice).

The Maratha kingdom established by Shivaji had expanded under the leadership of the first four Peshwas. But, after the death of Shahu, towards the end of Peshwa. reign, the Brahmins became all powerful. Shivaji`s governing policy, which laid emphasis on justice and merit, collapsed. Justice and
competence lost their place in the administration of the state. Lokahitavadi, who held a high place among the educated class which came into being during British rule, has drawn an excellent comparison between the rule of the Peshwas and the British in his book Shatapatre (One Hundred Letters).

Raja Rammohun Roy was among the earliest social reformers to have welcomed the new, modern educational system established by the British. Some British officials believed that only Sanskrit academies were required, in keeping with the Indian tradition. But Rammohun Ray told them. “You are not needed to teach us Sanskrit. We are quite capable of doing it on our own. But we need you to set up institutions that will give us modern education.” The products of this modern education system of the British were the social and religious reformers of the nineteenth century among whom Jyotibha Phule holds pride of place. In those days even the upper castes were not convinced of the worth of modern education. The shastris (learned Brahmins) ran private schools in which Sanskrit, grammar, law, Vedanta, astrology, elocution, the code of Hindu law, etc., were taught. The children of merchants and the rich studied reading and writing. In 1836, the British government opened schools in some villages of Pune district, where reading, writing and arithmetic came to be taught. Before British rule, education was not the responsibility of the government.

The history of nineteenth century India is the story of the impetus for social reform, in which the introduction and spread of modern education was an important element. Schools which taught English language were opened not so much to educate the massed but to groom Indian staff to run the British government. Christian missionaries opened a Marathi school in Pune for the
public. During this transitional phase, even though education was open to the masses, the common man was not aware of its importance. Not withstanding this, Govindrao got his son Jyotibha Phule admitted to a Marathi primary school at the age of seven. However, on the advice of his Brahmin clerk, Govindrao thereafter withdrew Jyotibha Phule out of the school and set him to work on his vegetable farm (Jyotibha Phule excelled in this work).

Jyotibha Phule mother, Chimanabai, had died when Jyotibha Phule was a child. His father, Govindrao felt the loss deeply, but instead of remarrying, appointed a nurse to look after Jyotibha Phule. She brought up Jyotibha Phule and his brother Rajaram with great love and care. By the time Jyotibha Phule finished primary school, he could read and write well, and had learnt accounting too. Lokahitavadi Gopalrao Deshmukh writes of this in Shatapatre in 1850:

If a Brahmin were to come across a clerk of the Maratha caste or of a caste other then his own, he would get livid. The Brahmin would say that kaliyug was here, that learning (which had been held sacred) was being polluted by being imparted to the lower castes. Thus we see that the Brahmins held the belief that the other castes should not be imparted education hence, the Brahmin clerk’s advice to Govindra to withdraw Jyotibha Phule from school.

As a result of acquiring a sound primary education, Jyotibha Phule became fond of reading. He would read in the flickering light of a same (a tall brass lamp) before going to bed or while at his farm. There were two scholars among his neighbors. One of them, Gaffar Baig Munshi, was a teacher of Persian language; the other, called Lizit, was a Christian missionary. They advised Govindrao that Joti needed to study further. So in 1841, Govindrao
admitted Jyotibha Phule to a school run by a Scottish mission. Jyotibha Phule was then fourteen years old. He had got married at thirteen to the eight-year old daughter of Zagde Patil from the village Dhanakwadi, near Pune. At the government school in Budhwar Wada, Jyotibha Phule made friends with Sadashiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin. He also had Muslim friends with whom he discussed the relative merits of Hinduism and Islam. In the Scottish Mission School Jyotibha Phule other friends were two Brahmin boys, Moro Vithal Valvekar and Sakharam Paranjape.

In this school, Jyotibha Phule became acquainted with the concepts of human rights and duty. His reading of the biographies of Shivaji and George Washington aroused feelings of heroism and patriotism in him. Another important book to influence Jyotibha Phule and Govande was the Rights of Man by Thomas Paine; this book had created quite a stir in Europe and America. Realising that in order to fulfil their goals and lead a purposeful life, physical fitness was essential, the two friends took to sports which included fencing and target practice. Their guru was an untouchable from the Mang caste and was called Lahujibuwa. Jyotibha Phule excelled in dandpatta (wielding of stick). People flocked to watch him at it. Joti had a well-built, well-shaped body.

Vasudeo Balwant Phadke, a well-known Marathi revolutionary, had his military training under Jyotibha Phule. English education thus opened a whole new world of learning for Jyotibha Phule and his friends. Valvekar says in his autobiography. “As students we lost faith in Hinduism and turned towards Christianity. Nevertheless, we did a comparative study of all religions and came to the conclusion that every religion has some aspects which can be believed in, if one has faith. Hence all religions have a few theories in common, which alone
should be followed. “With this thought the friends put off their plans to convert to Christianity. After all, religions say that God is one and should be worshipped. However, it cannot be denied that Joti and his friends were influenced by the emphasis laid by Christian missionaries on public service and spread of education."

Jyotibha Phule finished his ‘English’ education in 1847. Drawing inspiration from the American struggle for independence, he thought deeply on humanitarian values of equality and freedom. The thought of driving out the British from India occupied his mind continuously. In Jyotibha Phule student days there were a number of big and small revolts against the British, both in Maharashtra and outside; these included the agitations by Umaji Naik in 1826, the fishermen of Pune district in 1830, Bhau Khare, Chimanaji Jadhav and Nana Darbare in 1839 and 1846, Bapu Mangare and Radoji Mangare in 1848 all of which were suppressed by the British. The aim to overthrow the British and make the country free and strong, with the help of his friends, took deep roots in Joti’s mind early in his very prime. He even records in his book Gulamgiri (Slavery) that his thoughts regarding freedom were conditioned by Brahmin students and teachers. After the decline of the Peshwas, a section of the Brahmin community in Maharashtra began seriously thinking about ways and means for overthrowing the British.

Sir Richard Temple, wrote to senior representatives of the British government in India that the Chitpavans did not seem content with the facilities given to them and these included education, salary, promotion in governments. On completing his education, Jotirao joined his ancestral florist business. Around
this time, an incident occurred to change his desire to seek freedom from British rule. It so happened that Jyotibha Phule was invited to the wedding of a Brahmin friend. The bridegroom and his party were going in a procession to the bride’s place. There were no non-Brahmins in the procession as had become the practice in Hindu functions. When it was detected that a non-Brahmin had joined their procession, a haughty Brahmin snapped at Jyotibha Phule, “Hey, what are you doing here, joining our procession as an equal? Off with you” Jyotibha Phule was deeply humiliated. He returned home and told his father about the incident. His father advised him not to take the matter to heart and pointed out that each caste should keep to its own rank. The working of the Hindu social structure then became painfully clear to Jyotibha Phule at a young age. He realized that though all Hindus followed one religion, Hinduism had not succeeded in creating a spiritual life based on unity. On the contrary, it had given rise to inequality and discrimination; hence the need was for the doors of education to be opened to the non-Brahmins. He was simply thrilled at the prospect that introduction of modern education could help in bringing about an enormous social change.

Jyotibha Phule set himself to the task of seeking educational reforms. He was convinced that both the women and the Sudras from the Hindu community should avail themselves of modern education. At the time, even the Brahmins were opposed to educating their women. He decided to open a school for girls. For, if a women were educated, the home could became a school where the educated mother could teach her children. Meanwhile his friend, Sadashivrao Govande took him to Ahmednagar, the centre of education run by Christian missionaries. They visited the mission school of Madame Farrar, who too lamented that education of women had been sadly neglected in India. She felt
that each Indian male should take to educating his wife who could then help him in the spread of education. Accordingly, when Jyotibha Phule returned to Pune, he persuaded his wife to get educated. She did so and later started a school for girls belonging to the lower castes. The school began functioning in August 1848 at Bhide Wada in Budhwar Peth. Jyotibha Phule associates, Paranjape, Hate and Govande, gave him financial assistance to help run the school. This school was open to girls from the untouchable castes such as Mahars, Mangs and Chamars. This was the time when Pune in particular was the bastion of ultra-conservative Hindu leaders, who looked upon an institution which imparted education to Sudra and Ati-Sudra women as an offence against God, and against the Shastras, religion and society. According to these leaders, Hindu religion prohibited women and Sudras from learning when in reality, it is only the Vedas which are prohibited to the women and Sudras, and not education. However, learning had been denied to women by leaders of various castes. The Brahmins and the caste leaders feared that the social edifice of the caste structure would receive a severe jolt if women became educated. They felt that a women, if education, could go astray and destroy family happiness. Those were the days when women were not allowed to use footwear of umbrellas of speak to their husbands in the presence of others; a newly-married couple could not converse with each other in the presence of elders; a woman could nit sit down to a meal with her husband. Educating women was considered as bad as playing with fire, as it could lead women to cross the boundaries of family decorum and make elders lose their authority.

Jyotibha Phule father, Govindrao Phule, being a man of tradition, was deeply troubled by his sons` actions. However, Govindrao`s friends of the same
caste convinced him that Jotirao was right in taking action against. Age-old Hindu religious beliefs. Jyotibha Phule argued with his father but ro no avail. Govindrao in a fit of anger told his son to go his own way and ordered Jyotibha Phule and his wife to leave his house Jyotibha Phule wife, Savitribai stood by her husband in this period of trial. Thus Jyotibha Phule and his wife moved out. Meanwhile the school closed down temporarily due to lack of sufficient funds. When the finances improved somewhat, Jyotibha Phule reopened the school in the space donated by his friend Govande in old Ganjipeth. Soon, with the number of girls in the school increasing, Jyotibha Phule found a bigger place to run the school, which he took on rent from a Muslim. Major Candy provided books to the school. On 3 July 1851, Jyotibha Phule started a girls’ school in Anna Chiplunkar’s mansion at Budhwar Peth, where he taught for four hours daily without taking any salary. He set up an acting committee and handed over the management of the school to the committee, which comprised of Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar, Anna Sahastrabuddhe, Bapuraoji Mande, Vishnu Bhide, Krishnashastri Chiplunkar and Vishnushastri Pandit. Vishnushastri Pandit later became famous as the supporter of widow remarriage. The school first began with merely eight girls on the roll; soon their number rose to forty-eight. Since the financial position of the school was not very sound, Jyotibha Phule wife began teaching on an honorary basis; she also became its principal. Jyotibha Phule became an important figure in the promotion of women’s education. He opened a second school for girls in Rasta Peth on 17 September 1851 and a third in Vithal Peth on 15 March 1859. The curriculum comprised of reading, grammar, arithmetic, geography, history, map reading, etc. Major Candy, supervisor of the
school, said in a report; “I am happy to note the intelligence and progress of the girls.”

On 17th February 1852 Jyotibha Phule school was publicly inspected, following which there was a speech by Bhansaheb Mande. It is a pity that the citizens of our country are no yet convinced of the need to educate women, “he said. A judge named Brown was present on this occasion. In his speech he quoted Milton and said”, “Educating women will strengthen family happiness and utility of the institution of the family.”

A fourteen-year old girl from one of Jyotibha Phule schools for untouchables wrote an essay in which she, “The Brahmins say that other castes should not read the Vedas; this leaves us without a scripture. Thus, are we without religion? Oh God, please tell us, what is our religion? God, by Your Grace, you sent us the kindly British government. This has brought relief and welfare. Before the British came the Mahars and Mangs were beheaded when they committed an offence against the people of higher casted. Earlier we were not allowed to move about freely in the bazaar of Sultekadi; now we can.” Such was the freedom given to girls in schools run by Jyotibha Phule.³

Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar was the supervisor of the local government schools. On 16th October 1851, he inspected the first school set up by Jotirao in Budhwar Peth. He remarked that it went to the credit of those who ran the school which had made such remarkable progress in so short a time. Meanwhile, Jotirao set up a library for his students, since he felt that a library is an important means of imparting education. The number of students in Jotirao`s school grew ten times more than that in government schools. This amazing
transformation was due to the excellent conditions present and the conducive atmosphere for teaching. On 16
th November 1852 the government called a meeting of local leaders on Vishram Wada to felicitate Jotirao. One behalf of the government, Jyotibha Phule was honored with a shawl an honour hitherto conferrd only on Brahmins. Apart from Bapurao Mande, Pandit Moreshwarshastri, principal of Pune College, spoke at the function.

The movement to educate women began to spread to other regions of the country. A literary and scientific society for students was established in Bombay. The first four presidents of the society were Europeans. The society set up eight schools in Bombay on 1
st October 1849. These schools were open to children of all castes. British governors and judges visited the schools. Describing the condition prevalent then, Lokahitavadi said:

The Brahmins have monopolized learning through unfair means. They have decreed that other castes should not be educated. Today, the Brahmins have captured all the means of livelihood. The Brahmin pundits have threatened to leave their profession rather than teach the holy language Sanskrit to non-Brahmin students.

The newsletter Dnanodaya wrote; It is high time the Brahmins stopped entertaining such strange ideas. “Between 1820 and 1825, a Brahmin pandit from Pune, Gangadhar Phadke, used to make a living by teaching Sanskrit to Europeans in Bombay. The Pune Brahmins ostracized him. Neelkantshastri Bhat and five other pundits refused to teach Sanskrit to non-Brahmin students, for which they were transferred to the Oriental Research Institute on a lower salary. Pandit Dhondoshastri Dengcekar and Pandit Krishnashastri Rajwade
were severely persecuted by the Pune Brahmins for teaching Sanskrit to non-
Brahmin students.

Dadoba Pandhare, a contemporary of Jyotibha Phule, advocated the
philosophy of social equality. He had deep faith in the Bible. Dadoba established
the Manavdharma Sabha (humanitarian Society) in Suret, in 1844, with the help
of Gujarati teachers, and also the Paramhansa Sabha in 1848. Ram Balakrishna
Jayakar was the president of the latter society, and to him Jyotibha Phule later
dedicated his ballad on Shivaji. The Paramhansa Sabha movement has an
important place in the history of social reforms in Maharashtra. The members of
the Sabha were from the castes like Shenvi, Sonar, Prabhu Bhandare etc., Its
aim was to abolish the caste system, oppose child marriage, encourage widow
remarriage and bring about social reforms in Hindu religion. The Sabha had
branches in Pune, Nagar, Satara, Dharwad, Belgaum and Calcutta.

In Bombay there were two social reformers, Jambhekar and Nana
Shankarsheth, who were involved in the movement to reconvert those who had
converted to Christianity. Jyotibha Phule, however, kept away from the
movement to reform those who had `fallen' from caste. The religion of a person
did not in the least matter to him; he could be a Hindu, a Christian, a Muslim of a
Jew.

All his attention was concentrated on making a success of the movement
to educate the non-Brahmin masses. Hence great care was given to teaching
girls and boys in his school. Some of Jyotibha Phule associates were Brahmins
who courageously and selflessly supported the good work he was doing. The
directors of some schools tried to avoid admitting the children of untouchable.
According to law, this kind of discrimination was an offence, but implementation of the law was shoddy. The narrow-minded among the upper classes were apathetic to the problem. But Jyotibha Phule broke this barrier. He believed that if people from the lower classes were educated, they would be willing to struggle for the basic human rights.4

Although he was hard put to it to make both ends meet, he did not neglect the schoolwork. His wife faithfully supported him. In 1855, Jyotibha Phule brought to light the beliefs and rituals practiced in the name of God. Some educated Hindus too were fighting against superstitions in order to bring about new thinking. It was being realized that Jyotibha Phule actions and teachings not only challenged the superiority of the Brahmins but struck at the very root of Hindu religion. Some fanatics, disturbed at this, sent some assassins to get rid of Jyotibha Phule. But when the assassins set feet in Jyotibha Phule house, they entered into a dialogue with him. Jyotibha Phule asked them. “Why have you come to kill me? What wrong have I done to you?” The assassins replied. “We are going to be paid a thousand rupees each for the job. “Jyotibha replied, “Alright, then here in my neck. I know it is your poverty which in making you do this.” Jyotibha Phule magnanimity impressed the assassins. They fell at his feet in repentance and became his slaves for life. One of them, Dhandiram Kumbhar, studied well and became the pillar of the Satyashodhak Samaj.

On 10th May 1857, there was an uprising against the British government. The battle-field for this agitation was outside Maharashtra, but the leaders were Maharashtrians. The cause of this uprising was strange. In a mischievous move the bullets of the guns were smeared with the fat of cows (held sacred by
Hindus) and pigs (considered unholy by Muslims). The Indian soldiers revolted thinking that this was a plot by the British rulers to convert them to Christianity. This unorganized uprising was unsuccessful because of the superior discipline displayed by the British army. However, it was not an easy victory for the British.

Jyotibha Phule views on this incident were somewhat different; he was completely indifferent to it. He said he was happy that God was merciful enough to the Sudras to have crushed the revolt led by the Brahmin, Nana Phadnavis. He was aware that the British were there today and would be gone tomorrow; hence the need was for the Sudras to hurry and free themselves from the bondage of the Brahmins while the British were still around. He was certain that British rule would prove useful in introducing social reforms. In later years, another social reformer, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar said as much the same. The establishment of schools for women was the first step towards up-liftment of the deprived and downtrodden.

After founding educational institutions, Jyotibha Phule turned his attention to social reforms by striking at age-old social traditions. Earlier, Rammohun Roy had fought against the practice of sati in Bengal which was subsequently abolished in 1829. The issue of widow remarriage was extremely sensitive and Jotirao was deeply moved by the plight of Hindu widows. In 1864 he got a widower of the Shenvicaste remarried. He founded an anti-abortion centre where widows could deliver their babies and have them cared for. This was the first institution of its kind. It saved the widows from loneliness and from the killing of their infants.
Jyotibha Phule himself had no children. Although even his father-in-law advise him to remarry but Jyotibha Phule remained firm. He said, “If a woman cannot beget a child from her first husband, will she be justified in getting a second husband? This male practice of a second marriage because there is no issue from the first is an extremely cruel one. “On the death of his father, Jyotibha Phule performed the last rites, but not according to tradition. He fed orphans and invalids. On his father’s first death anniversary, he distributed food among the poor and books among students. His wife who was herself childless served the children in the anti-abortion centre with tender affection.

Had Jyotibha Phule opted for government service, he would have prospered but he chose public service as he considered it his moral duty towards society. He engaged in private business to support his family. When the government drew up a plan for the construction of the Khadakvasala dam, Jotirao along with his friend Sakharam Paranjape, acquired the contract for the supply of stone. In this line of business, Jyotibha Phule came into contact with workers and government officials, especially engineers. Concerned about the welfare of the workers, Jyotibha Phule fought for their rights. He impressed upon them the value of education for their children. He became a staunch critic of corrupt practices in such business enterprises. By and by, he undertook other jobs, like supplying lime for the construction of the Yerwada bridge. His spare time he devoted to reading, especially poetry and books on history written by Christian missionaries.

In 1865, Jyotibha Phule published a book which created a stir. Called Jatibhedaiveksar, it was written by his friend, Tukaram Tatya Podwal. In the preface to its second edition, the author says.
In the delineation of caste distinction Hindu scriptures, one finds a corrupt form of caste distinction which has shackled the minds of the Hindus. There is no task more important than liberating them from the isolation resulting from such caste distinctions.

The Brahmins according to the author acquired superiority merely on the strength of their birth, even when they did not have a trace of learning or knowledge of righteous behavior. Podwal says in his book that the Puranas, by promising happiness in the next world, subjected the masses to performing all kinds of services for the Brahmins. Caste distinctions were founded on the Brahminical notion that a Sudra can never be superior even if he is virtuous of has conquered his passions.

The whole world is under the control of the gods, the gods are under the control of mantras, the mantras are under the control of Brahmins and the Brahmins are my deity.\(^4\)

All the holy waters of the earth are contained in the sea and all the holy water in the sea is contained in the right foot of the Brahmin-such was the belief which formed the basis for the caste system. The first edition of this analytical book had earlier been published in August 1861 by Vasudeo Navarange, a progressive individual. He was a Shroff. In England, when his business failed he paid off all the money he owed to the merchants abroad and came to Bombay. Here, he participated enthusiastically in the activities of the Prarthana Samaj. In 1870 he married a widow.
In 1873, a Brahmin widow named Kashibai gave birth to a baby boy in the anti-abortion centre. The boy was named Yashwant. Jyotibha Phule's wife, Savitribai, brought up the boy like her own son. Reformers such as Lokahitavadi, Bhandarkar, Madan Shrikrishna, Mama Paramananda and Tukaram Podwal, specially commended this act.

Earlier in 1871, Madhavrao Ranade had become a follower of Jyotibha Phule. Impressed by Jyotibha Phule's success in running the home for babies, Ranade and friends opened a similar home in Pandharpur in 1875. Meanwhile, Jyotibha Phule began to think of giving momentum to the issue of widow remarriage. Vishnushastri Pandit, who was a member of the educational institution, gave a helping hand in the work. He wrote articles on the issue of widow remarriage and had them published in the Induprakash. On 28 January 1866, Vishnushastri opened an institution to promote widow remarriage. Soon there were many branches of the institution. Invitations to the wedding of Pandurang Vinayak Karmarkar and Venubai were sent out, signed by seven rishis including social reformers and supporters such as Gopal Hari Deshmukh, M.G.Ranade, Vishnu Parshuram, and Vishnushastri Pandit (known as the Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar of Maharashtra). The social reaction to the marriage of Karmarkar and Venubai created a division in Maharashtrian society and set in motion a furious debate.

Jyotibha Phule had set a personal example of his belief in the eradication of untouchability. Paying no heed to the orthodox dictates of Hindu society, Jotirao threw open the water tank near his house to untouchables, for whom the municipality had not made any arrangements for providing water. During
summer, they had to walk long distances to fetch water. Jyotibha Phule caste-
fellows threatened to ostracize him. It was rumored that he had converted to
Christianity, because only Christian missionaries did not believe in being polluted
by the untouchables. Jyotibha Phule showed exemplary courage in the face of
strong social pressure. He believed that right was on his side.

Jyotibha Phule was a poet too and wrote poetry well. He published a book
of povadas. A magazine, called Vividha Dnanavistar, published his poems,
although the intention was to highlight that Jyotibha Phule views were wrong.
According to Jyotibha Phule, the Brahmins were the real Aryans who came to
India from Iran and were responsible for the degradation of the original
inhabitants of this country (the Kshatriyas), whom they looked down upon as the
Sudras. He painted an authentic picture of the social conditions of the time. The
government earned tax government schools. In his povadas, Jyotibha Phule sent
a petition to Queen Victoria:

Please save the farmers from the Brahmins clutches.
Please appoint clerks and teachers from other castes.

Inspired by Jyotibha Phule message, young non-Brahmins took to
education and acquired government jobs. Jyotibha Phule spoke in his povadas
against the upper caste, especially the Brahmins. However, his exposition of
history did not appear to be convincing and in not available in print today. The
povadas that lotirao wrote on Shivaji was published in 1869. It runs into forty-five
pages. As composer of the povada, Jyotibha Phule describes himself as
kulwadibhooshan (a credit to yhe Kulwadis, i.e. the Kunbi caste). In the povada,
according to Jyotibha Phule, Shivaji `planted the flag of the Hindus ' with the
blessings of his mother and the help of his brave and loyal associates. He also mentions that Shivaji made Ramdas his guru, and `the beloved child of Jijabai became a messenger of death for the Mohammedans. I sing the ballad of Shivaji. The ornament of the Kunbis sings the ballad of the Bhosla of Chhatrapati Shivaji.

In his collection of poems called Brahmanache Kasab (The Clecerness of Brahmins), Jyotibha Phule says that the ignorant and gullible farmers perform religious rites according to the dictates of Brahmin priests and mendicants, blissfully unaware that the are being exploited. He ruthlessly attacked this kind of religious naiveté and custom, the details of which he gave in the poem.

When a farmer’s wife delivered a baby, the farmer had religious rites performed which according to the Brahmin priests prevented untimely death. For every reading of the scriptures, the Brahmin stood to gain money. It was in the hands of the Brahmin priests to make of break marriages among the common folks, for horoscopes had to be studied and unfavorable planets propitiated. On the occasion of a girl reaching puberty, the Brahmins apart from friends and acquaintances had to be fed a special meal. On the construction of a house, a house-warming ceremony had to be performed in which the Brahmins were fed and given alms. Carpenters and masons were also invited to the feast. On every possible occasion and religious and cultural function, a puja had to be performed by Brahmin priests for one to receive the good grace of God. When the common man fell ill, not only the physician but also the Brahmin profited. The Brahmin read scriptures such as Shivilamruta, Pandavpratap, Harivijay and Ramvijay at the bedside of the patient and made money. He would recite mantras and
perform various homas and abhisheks. In the event of a death, the religious rites would continue for over ten days; Brahmins were given alms, relative were fed and gifts such as shoes and umbrellas were given. In the performance of acts of charity, the Brahmin priests supervised the rituals. They were needed on the occasion of on eclipse, sanskranti and the shraddha ceremony.

Jyotibha Phule published this collection of poems himself. He requested the education department to buy copies of the book, but they would not prescribe such a book for general reading let alone for their schools. On 31st March 1867 the prarthana Samaj, which believed in introducing moderate forms of reforms, was founded in Bombay. It was a counterpart of the Brahmo Sanaj of Bengal. Learned men like Dr. Atmaram Larkhadkar, Waman Abaji, Modak, M.G. Ranade and R.CG. Bhandarkar were the of the prarthana Samaj. At first they held discussions on social reform but subsequently turned to religious contemplation. The members were monotheistic and admired the work of Jyotibha Phule; the latter however chose not to be a member of the Samaj.\(^5\)

On 2nd April 1870, the Sarvajanik Sabha (People`s Society) was founded. It was headed by Ganesh Vasudeo Joshi alias Sarvajanik KaKa (Universal Uncle) and Sadashiv Govande. The aim of the society was to publicise and place public grievances before the government. Jyotibha Phule friends, Moro Vithal Valvekar and Sakharam Yashwant Paranjape, were to present to the government, on behalf of the Sarvajanik Sabha, a memorandum of people`s grievances and problems. They also formed an organization of Indian newspapers to fight the ordinance, passed by Lord Lytton, against the freedom of the press and against the use of Indian goods instead of foreign.
Prior to the Sarvajanik Sabha, a political institution, known as the Deccan Association, had been founded in Pune in the first half of 1852. Progressive minded and educated people were involved in its activities, which aimed to put before the British the grievances of the people. The Poone Association was founded in Pune around 1867. Jyotibha Phule, however, had no faith in such institutions as he felt that they were merely concerned with the grievances of the upper castes. They did not bother to understand the grievances of the lower castes or represent their case to the government.

Jyotibha Phule Chief aim was to strike at the social structure. Towards this end he was determined to remove ignorance, illiteracy, prejudices and caste-based beliefs among the lower castes and free them from the mental slavery resulting from centuries of Brahmin dominance. In 1872 he wrote the book, Gulamgiri (Slavery). In the first part of the book he invoked parshuram, because the latter is considered to have lived for 432 million years, as stated by Brahmin scriptures. He published two manifestos under the title Brahamani Dharmcharya Aapadadyat (Behind the Screen of Brahminical Religion). In them he asserted the ideals, proclaimed by the French Revolution, for freedom, equality and fraternity. Inspired by Abraham Lincoln, the champion of human freedom, who had abolished slavery in America in 1863, Jyotibha Phule dedicated his book to the Black population of America.

He begins his book with the famous quote from Homer: `The day a man becomes a slave, he loses half his virtue'. The book is in the form of questions and answers. It has 16 chapters. In the first nine which relate the history of Brahminical dominance in India, Jyotibha Phule asserts with confidence that:
The Sudras are the life of this nation. In times of economic and political crises the government should rely on them rather than on the Brahmins. If care in taken to ensure that the Sudras are kept happy and contented, the government will have no cause for doubting their loyalty.⁶

Jyotibha Phule concluded by demanding that the masses should be educated.

We must remember that Jyotibha Phule was not a researcher of a philologist; he was a champion of social revolution, and his history of the Brahmins and the Aryans in purely imaginary.

In Gulamgiri, Jyotibha Phule explains his aim thus:

I wrote the present book to warn my Sudra brothers that the Brahmins are exploiting them.

After he finished writing the Gulamgiri Jyotibha Phule prepared himself to launch a mass movement. Even before the book was completed, he had expressed his views in public meetings and through pamphlets and booklets. To carry forward his crusade, Jyotibha Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, the first social reform movement in Maharashtra. He was the first president and treasurer of the Samaj. N.G. Kadlag was the secretary. The goal of the Samaj was to make the Sudras and the Ati-Sudras aware of their civil rights and free them from religious and emotional slavery imposed by Brahminical scriptures. To become a member of the Samaj one had to take an oath before the deity Khanderao by picking up a bel leaf and swaring loyalty to the British government.
In 1911 the Satyashodhak Samaj published its resolutions comprising three guiding principles:

a) All human being are children of one God; hence, they are my brothers and sisters.

b) Just as one does not need a mediator to meet one’s mother or to please one’s father, similarly one does not need a priest of a guru to pray to God. I do not feel the need for a mediator when I worship, pray or meditate. I shall exhort others to believe likewise.

c) I shall educate my sons and daughters. I make this resolution with God as my witness. May God give me the strength to live my life according to these principles.

Membership of the Samaj was open to all castes. Brahmins, Mahars, Mangs, and others were members of the Samaj. Wherever branches of the Samaj were opened, meetings were held every week. In Somwar Peth in Pune, meetings were held at the residence of Dr Govande, compulsory education, use of indigenous goods, conduction ceremonies without Brahmin priests, performing weddings at minimum cost, freeing people from the clutches of fortune-tellers, soothsayes, spirits (of Brahmins) and ghosts, etc. Emphasis was laid on fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.

Like the Prarthana Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, the Satyashodhak Samaj was also a monotheistic sect. All the three institutions believed that all human beings were children of one God and held assembly prayers and meetings every week. Rammohun Roy stressed on prayer while Jotirao
emphasized on the importance of truth. As we can see, Jyotibha Phule was not greatly interested in prayer or spiritual development.

After founding the Satyashodhak Samaj, Jyotibha Phule set out to put into practice the aims and goals of the Samaj. He invited applications for scholarships which he awarded to ten students; this was much acclaimed. The Samaj performed several marriages without availing the services of Brahmins. The bride and the groom were made to pledge loyalty to each other and the marriage party then blessed the couple. As can be imagined, a wedding without a Brahmin priest was at the time an-unheard-of event. One such wedding was that of Jyotibha Phule friend, Gyanoba Sasane, which created quite a stir.

Meanwhile, several like-minded persons joined Jyotibha Phule movement. Newspapers reported the event.

Krishnarao Pandurang Bhalekar, a florist by caste and a poet, editor and excellent orator, helped to spread the message of the Samaj in many villages. In Bombay Vyanku Balaji Kalewar and Jaya Karadi Lingu joined Bhalekar. A contractor named Narsu Saidu agreed to help the Samaj. Kalewar, who lived in Kamathipura, donated a factory worth Rs 1,200 to the Samaj. Many wealthy people from the lower castes joined the Samaj. One such influential man was polsani Rajanna Lingu from the Telugu florist community, called Kamath, in Bombay; another was Vyanku Ayyavaru who joined the Samaj, as did the wealthy Ramshet Bapushet Urwane from Pune. Marutrao Nawate, an associate of Dr Anna Nawate, was a strong supporter of the Samaj. Dr Vishram Ramji Ghobe, honorary physician of the Viceroy, at the time, was also a benefactor.
The first anniversary of the Satyashodhak Samaj was celebrated with great pomp and show. Narayan Tukaram Nagarkar was chosen as its secretary. Bhalekar and Urvane were nominated to the acting committee. Ramchandrarao Dhamnaskar, Santuji Ramji Lad (the man from the Dhangar community) and Narayan Meghaji Lokhande (leader of the labour movement) were others to make a mark in public life.

The work of the Satyashodhak Samaj drew the attention of many thinkers, inspiring them to act. But those with the courage to personally practice the reforms were very few in number. When Mahadeorao Ranade’s sister was widowed, he said “If I remarry my widowed sister, it will break my father’s heart. Besides, the Pune Brahmins will ostracize me”. To which Jyotibha Phule replied, “Then don’t parade as a reformist.” In October 1873, Ranade the aged thirty two, lost his wife and married a girl of twelve. The reformers of Maharashtra were embarrassed by his action. Jyotibha Phule expressed strong disapproval and wrote a scathing article on Ranade in Vividha Dnavisthar. Similarly, another social reformer, Lokahitavadi Gopalrao Deshmukh, too surrendered to the conservatives and performed penance for having committed the anti-religious act of sending his son to England, in defiance of the scriptural ban imposed on crossing the seas. So did many other reformers back down. Only a very few reformers were there who practiced what they preached.

In July 1875, Dayanand Sarswati, founder of the Arya Samaj, was invited to Pune by Mahadeorao Ranade. Dayanand had successfully toured north India and Bengal, winning over several institutions and people. It was, however, difficult for reformers to accept Dayanand’s theory that the Vedas contained all
the knowledge, without, of course, advocating the cast system. Dayanand gave several lectures in Pune and also visited Satara. He was ceremonially taken around in a procession in Pune, which the conservatives tried to disrupt. The reformers sought Jyotibha Phule help to conduct the procession, with was joined by many reformers as well as by non-Brahmins. Jyotibha Phule participated along with his followers, as did Ranade and other social reformers. The opponents to reforms took out a counter procession led by a donkey. A fight ensued; the police quelled it.

In 1875 the Satyashodhak Samaj celebrated its second anniversary. Dr Vishram Ramji Ghole became the new president and Ramshet Urvane, the treasurer. Ilayya Solomon, a Jew, was admitted as a member of the acting committee. Members of the Samaj met every Sunday evening every fortnight lectures on philosophy were organized. The same year, in November, the Prince of Wales visited Pune In a meeting of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Dhandiram Kumbhar and Krishanrao Bhalekar sang songs in praise of the Prince. Meanwhile in the Satyashodhak Samaj weddings were performed without a Brahmin priest. A lawyer named Raghavendra Rao opined that these weddings were legal.

The Samaj also conducted essay contests on topics such as whether there was may need for idol worship and caste system. Prizes were awarded. The activists of the Samaj made efforts to spread education in the villages. They opened a school in Hadapsar which became a major centre for the Samaj. Membership of the Samaj went up to three hundred.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


