CHAPTER – III

Jotirao Phule: Deconstructing Dichotomies

In last chapter we briefly discussed the basic concepts of Marx which evolve out of certain socio-economic-political and especially cultural context. From historical materialism to the concept of communism, one can notice a gradual but reconstructive development of Marx’s ideological and philosophical conceptualization. This conceptualization is, of course, deliberately and painstakingly reconstructed, by rejecting and negating the prevalent philosophical trend which advocated and upheld the system of domination and exploitation. Marx’s philosophic and ideological conceptualization was the outcome of a systematic training and intellectual discipline which he had gone through.

In the present chapter we will discuss Jotirao Phule’s major concepts that evolve through his creative writing. This chapter in no way intends to take up a comparative version of Marx and Phule, it is taken up in the following chapter, however, it needs to be mentioned here that Phule, like Marx, deconstructs the oppressive philosophic and ideological system and reconstructs a newer approach through conceptualization through an egalitarian, humanitarian philosophic system. The only difference is that Marx manifests through philosophic idiom whereas Phule gets evolved through literature, and his hypnotizing oratory which has stunning resemblance with his literary and even apparently nonliterary writing.
Joitrao Phule’s literary writing, it must be understood, does not intend to entertain people; rather it educates and enlightens them. In fact his writing is a radical critique of Hindu socio-cultural and religious foundation. This is one of the reasons why the critics and historians of Marathi literature neglected him for many years as G. P. Deshpande rightly points out:

Most historians of Marathi literature do not refer to Phule. This is strange and sad. Phule’s prose, his use of nineteenth – century colloquial speech, his system of argumentation, his ferocious polemics, his poetry (greatly influenced by the seventeenth – century Bhakti poet Tukaram), his assessment of various Bhakti poets which amounts to the beginning of Marathi socio-literary criticism, all these are aspects of his work which hardly, if ever, get discussed. (2002, 16)

The reasons behind the boycott on Phule by Marathi literary historians are deeply rooted in socio-cultural reality of India, because, Phule interrogated the religious basis and challenged it by providing an alternative cultural and religious system. Any person, who challenges the dominating system, is either neglected, boycotted or killed, is a painful reality in the world history. Therefore it is our prime concern, before discussing Phule’s concepts, to briefly focus on the socio-cultural and religious reality which has been dominating Indian milieu.

Indian socio-cultural reality has been characterized with four Varna and innumerable castes and sub-castes which have a hierarchical structure. In the colonial period caste based discrimination and exploitation had reached to an extreme stage when Jotirao Phule emerged on the socio-cultural horizon of Maharashtra, the western part of India. In fact he was the product of the
oppression and exploitation of his socio-cultural environment. Born into a Shudra family in Maharashtra during a decade of the collapse of Peshwa rule in 1818, Phule experienced the indignities and humiliations traditionally heaped on the lowered castes. The Peshwa rule had ended after the death of Maratha king Chattrapati Shahu and British started to rule the region. But still, brahmans considered themselves as the chosen caste. Brahman supremacy and superiority was considered as ‘divine’. Most of the administrative posts were reserved for brahmans in British government. The debauched and profligate last Peshwa, Bajirao II, was revered by the brahmans as an ‘incarnation of Krishna and Shiva’. (Keer, 2000, 4) Under Peshwa rule brahmans had become very strong and powerful and enjoyed every privilege.

During these days Chitpawan brahmans dominated the society at every level and controlled economic, administrative and cultural functions. All this had reached to such an extent that Peshwa rule had come to be known as the Brahmanyra raj. It seemed that the Peshwa rule intended to create, ideologically and materially, the Vedic-brahmanical kingdom whose main intention was to uphold the existing socio-cultural order. (Chakravarti 1998, 5)

Brahmans, during Peshwa rule, perpetrated the worst kind of atrocities on the lowered castes and caste system had become more rigid. The rules of purity-pollution which were designed by Manusmriti were stringently observed. People of the lowest strata of society, in Phule’s vocabulary Shudratishudras, such as
Mangs, Mahars, Chambhars, Bhangis etc. had to tie earthen pots to their waists while walking on roads. They had to sit down on noticing a brahman on the road, for their shadow was polluting. These untouchables were allowed to walk on roads only if they tied the branch of a tree to their wrist: the branch of tree served the purpose of sweeping the earth and erasing their vile footprints! Even the people of Mahar cast were not allowed to build their huts close to an upper caste village. (Mani, 2005, 255-56)

We have a detailed account of atrocities and exploitation perpetrated by brahmas in Shatpatre (one hundred letters) written by Gopal Hari Deshmukh alias Lokhitwadi in 1840s. These letters give a graphic of the social degradation and depravation of lowered castes under the last Peshwa rule. In spite of his brahman roots, he viewed the deplorable situation as the by-product of centuries-old ascriptive values and held the brahmans responsible for promoting all kinds of retrograde ideas in order to safeguard their hereditary supremacy. Lokhitwadi argued, the social effects of upholding ascriptive values have been disastrous as they stifled individual enterprise and merit. (O’Hanlon, 1985, 93). Dhananjay Keer has encapsulated Lokhitwadi’s final remark. He says: “The brahmans ruined the country.” (2000, 6)

This remark of Lokhitvaadi is enough to understand the behavior of the Brahmans in Phule’s time. The reasons behind such behavior of brahmans, are deeply rooted in the religious and mythological scriptures which declare the
supremacy of brahman and receive the sanction of the lowered castes to this supremacy. In order to maintain and perpetuate this supremacy, brahmanic religious scriptures design certain cultural agenda through which the sanction to supremacy is conveniently and comfortably achieved.

Colonial rule brought thoroughly a new system of government and there seemed some chances of change in socio-cultural scenario. But, as Braj Ranjan Mani argues:

British rule brought an altogether new system of government, but strengthened the entrenched brahmanical leadership within the society ….. the British rules cemented a conscious alliance with the native elites. The collaboration and collusion between the foreign and native elites, vital for the construction and survival of the colonial order, was advantageous to both. This was however, a complex process; it ruined many traditionally powerful elites, but usually patronized and empowered the information-providing Brahmans who acted as interlocutors of a sort between the colonizers and the colonized. (2005, 256)

In fact colonial conquest was impossible without the active support and participation of the local elites. Hence British colonizers sought support of brahman elites and maintained domination. Mani again puts:

The colonial rulers had to build a well-organized revenue collection system and a new administrative and legal structure to rule over the sub-continent. This mammoth task involved the creation of new job opportunities, for which knowledge of certain literacy skills was necessary. Thus, the Brahmans who traditionally enjoyed the privilege of learning were able, despite the eclipse of the Peshwai, to make a smooth transition of the colonial order and corner almost all employment opportunities. (256)
It means, in any reign, Brahmans enjoyed the dominant position. In colonial rule they established a kind of monopoly over jobs. Since the caste based rules have been governing the society, brahmans enjoyed social domination along with the administrative domination. Most important thing is, though British ruled the country politically, brahmans were the social and cultural rulers. Economic exploitation was implicit in caste-based society which was validated by religion.

Another major feature of this period was, Indian elites, in order to support orthodox policy, needed some new modernized ideology in order to retain traditional and hereditary domination over the masses. And this need was fulfilled by the recently emerged ‘Aryan race theory’ which was originated under the leadership of the German linguist Max Muller. This theory discovered the “Indo-European” basis of Sanskrit and European languages. This linguistic basis was very useful to assert the racial unity in which the early Aryan invaders represented the basic Indo-European stock. (Omvedt, 1976, 103)

In the light of ‘Aryan race theory’ caste system was redefined by Indian elites. Omvedt argues:

The “Aryan theory” was adopted enthusiastically by the British and by most of the Indian elite as a new model for understanding caste; up until the 1930s at least it seems to have functioned as a new “grammar” into which the old Verna system was translated.” (103)
It means *Verna* system was glorified and sublimated with the advocating obtained from Aryan race theory. This theory was a kind of sanction, given by the European Orientalists, to casteism and caste system. In this situation fundamental challenge before Jotirao Phule was to create an alternative ideological basis to counter cultural hegemony of brahmans. Phule investigated into the nature and sources of caste ideology and analyzed that brahman religious authority and monopoly over knowledge is the fundamental cause behind the cultural hegemony of brahmans over the masses. Since the toiling masses lived and worked under the socio-religious and cultural ritualistic norms laid down by the brahmans, they blindly followed them and succumbed to the evil interests of the brahmans. Hence, Phule radically attacked the very basis of brahmanic cultural hegemony through this action and literature. But attacking the cultural hegemony of brahmans was not the only concern of Phule, he in fact, intended to dismantle the whole brahmanic cultural system and to put in an alternative one.

In the whole struggle of Jotirao Phule, agitational as well as intellectual, we notice that there is a conceptual thread which is characterized with the egalitarian, rational and humanistic ideology. Actually, Phule never intended, consciously or unconsciously, to propound the philosophical or ideological concepts which are supposed to be essential in any philosophical or intellectual writing. He focused on cultural mutation in Indian society, therefore his literary production does not fit in the traditional literary matrix because he never wrote for the sake of writing.
Rather, his literary creation is an indispensable part of his socio-cultural movement which was a virtual war against hegemonic brahmanic culture. Literary production, he considered, as equally important as direct social movement. So, the concepts which emerge through Phule’s creative writing, though don’t suit to philosophical and literary discipline, have influenced and shaped many schools initiated by the marginal groups in India. In this chapter I will focus on some of the basic concepts which emerge through Phule’s writing which is epitome of his egalitarian and humanistic philosophy.

- **Crusade Against Slavery: A Conceptual March:**

  In almost all the works of Jotirao Phule we notice the concept of slavery at the centre of his cultural, historical, social, and mythological analysis. By slavery, he meant, physical as well as mental slavery of the lower castes i.e. *Shudratishudras* in his own terminology. Phule’s interpretation and critique of slavery is based on the traditional Hindu cultural history and mythology. (In fact he never uses the terms such as Hindu or Hinduism; instead he uses brahman or brahmanism). For Phule mythology is a historical record of Varna struggle that resulted into the slavery of *Shudratishudras*. Phule critiques and analyses the causes behind the slavery of lower castes in all of his works, but in his seminal dialogical satire *Slavery* he prominently writes on slavery – its genesis, and consequences in Indian context. This dialogical satire has, interestingly, two introductions - one in English and other in Marathi. At the outset of his English
introduction Phule quotes well known poet Homer as – ‘The day that reduces a man to slavery takes from him the half of his virtue.’ (2002, 26)

It denotes, Phule’s treatment of the concept of slavery is not only concerned with physical slavery but it is concerned with morality as well. He, in the very introduction, declares that brahmins are outsiders and not the aborigines of India. He puts-

Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmins were not the aborigines of India. At some remote period of antiquity, probably more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin Race decended upon the plains of Hindoo Kush, and other adjoining tracts. (27)

This opinion of Phule is based on the researchers like Dr. Pritchard, the ethnologist. While stating the reasons behind Aryan invasion on India, Phule puts that:

The extreme fertility of the soil in India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of its people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favoured land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western nations, no doubt, attracted the Aryans, who came to India, not as simple emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors. (27)

According to Phule, these foreign Aryans subjugated the aborigines of India and perpetrated all sorts of tyrannies on them. What sort of the people Anyans were? Phule says: “They appear to have been a race imbued with very high notions of self, extremely cunning, arrogant and bigoted.” (27)
The aborigines, according to Phule, waged many wars and resisted the Aryan invasion, but with dastardly attacks Aryans ultimately defeated the aborigines and relegated them as Shudra (insignificant), Maha ari (the great foe), Antyaja, Chandal etc. This mythological historical information presented by Phule is very necessary to understand his all the major arguments pertaining to the cultural subjugation/slavery of lower castes at the hands of upper caste elites in India. At the same time it will serve as a very crucial basis for socio-economic and cultural concepts that evolve through Phule’s writings. Customs and traditions play very crucial role in cultural construction in India society. This cultural construction has multipronged functions such as to regulate the way of life and at the same time to maintain socio-economic domination with hegemonic method. Phule maintains, these customs and traditions are created and continued to enslave the masses.

Phule believes that, Aryan leaders such as Brahma, Parshuram and others waged a long lasting war against the aborigines and eventually established their supremacy over the natives. He compares the slavery of Indian aborigines with the slavery of Native Americans. This indicates Phule’s pervasive and comprehensive understanding and deep concern with the concept of slavery. In a way, it seems, Phule wants to raise the issue of India slavery on a global platform. He says: “The cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indians on their
first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India on the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines.” (28)

This quotation provides a universal status to Phule’s perception of the concept of slavery. Phule, in fact, believed that the enslaved masses of India were, originally the ‘Kshetrapati’ or ‘Kshtriya’ who had been relegated to the lowest segments of society. They were declared as Mahar, Mang etc. Hence in order to decipher the true identity of slaves he investigates into the deep past of Indian masses. In the ballad Priestcarft Exposed, Phule writes:

Lawless men leagued together
They made Brahma their chief
They plundered and caused chaos

Beating the people and bringing them to their knees
Degrading them into slaves
see, these are the Shudras

The rest left over, a tiny number
Rose up and challenged Parashuram
They took care to remain united

Of their countrymen, their beloved brothers,
Many were slain
The Shudras no longer cared for unity

The Maha-ari attacked Parashuram
Many women became widows
Parashuram routed the maha-ari
In constant fighting he broke their spirit
He did not spare pregnant women
He killed the newborn children

The great enemies of the twice-born
Came to the end of their strength
Thrust down and defeated.

Those that were left were punished severely
Abused as Mangs and maha-aris, great enemies
See, these are the Kshatriyas of the olden days.”
(O’ Hanlon, 1985, 142-43)

Phule, in this poem, as we see, depicts the true history which has been, according to him, emphasizes entire distorted Hindu mythology. Of course, such distortions made by brahman of shudra-atishudra history, served the purpose of slavery. Phule’s conceptualization of slavery begins predominantly in his dialogic satire slavery in which he brings a very-very sharp satire of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. This sort of mythological analysis might have been the first and foremost in the whole history of Marathi literature. Rosalind O’Hanlon cites J. Dowson, “In the Hindu accounts, the first six incarnations of Vishnu are usually represented as: Mastsya, the fish; kurma, the tortoise; Varah, the boar; Narsinha, the man-lion; Vaman, the dwarf; and Parashuram, Rama with the axe. Phule wove these into his account of the invasion of the Aryans.” (143)
The Aryans, according to Phule, sailed in small boats to attack Indian subcontinent. Hence, the first leader of the Aryans was nicknamed as Matsya. This is the first incarnation of God Vishnu according to brahman scripture i.e. *Bhagwat Purana*. The next wave of Aryan attack was in a larger boat which was slow and resembled a tortoise. This was the second incarnation of Vishnu i.e. tortoise or turtle. The third incarnation was that of the boar, *Varah*. This Varah was followed as the leader of the Aryans by the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, *Narshinha*, the man-lion. According to Hindu mythology Vishnu assumed this incarnation to deliver the world from the tyranny of the Daitya i.e. demon King *Hiranyakasipu*, the brother of *Hiranyaksha*. It must be noted that Phule deconstructed this brahmanic mythology and tried to demythologize it. He says that all the aboriginal kings have been declared by Brahmans as *Daitya, Rakshas* i.e. demons in the scriptures.

According to the *Bhagwat Purana* Vishnu assumed the form of Vamana, the dwarf, in order to subdue the overmighty *Daitya King* Bali. *Vamana* asked Bali, famous for his generosity, for three steps of the Earth. Bali granted this, but Vishnu assumed the form of a giant and took three steps, over the Earth, the sky, and finally on Balis’s head, pushing down into the nether regions. (Deshpande, 2002, 54-55)
Jotirao Phule, deconstructing and demythologizing the myth, puts that King Bali was the greatest leader of the ancient Kshatriyas. He took steps to unite all the petty Kshatriya rulers of India in the effort to resist the Aryans. Vamana, the fifth incarnation of Vishnu, but in reality the new leader of the Aryans, advanced to the frontier of Bali’s Kingdom, and attacked his subjects of peaceful cultivators. After a great fight, Bali fell in battle, and his son Banasura was forced to flee. (2002, 59)

In this way Aryans, after defeating the native kings, perpetrated slavery. And in order to maintain this slavery and subjugation, brahmans created various spurious books. According to Phule these books were composed with the sole aim to legalize and legitimize the suppression and exploitation of Shudratishudras. These religious books, particularly Vedas, were considered as infallible, hence unquestionable. Phule raises many questions on the authenticity of the theories propounded in these books. For instance, Manusmriti, in Purush Sukta gives the origin of human being which Phule outrightly rejects and brings a great satire with it. In a way, he diagnoses and challenges the very basis of brahmanic hegemony. In this connection, the dialogue between Jotirao and Dhondiba in Slavery is interesting.

Dhondiba: The fact that benevolent government in Europe, like the French, English, come together to prohibit the slave system, demonstrates that they defied the Brahman law written in Manusmriti. The book says that Brahma created Brahmans from his mouth and shudras from his feet, only to serve the Brahmans.
Jotirao: You say that the English, French and other governments prohibited the slave system which means they defied the brahman law. But there are so many different people on this earth! Tell me, what does the Manusmriti say about their creation? Which limb of the Brahma were they created from?

Dhondiba: Regarding this, the brahmans, learned as well as illiterate, say that since people like the English are depraved vulgar sinners, the Manusmriti does not mention them. (47)

This is the beginning of Slavery. Phule seems to be very daring and courageous when he brings a satirical critique of brahman scriptures which had been considered impenetrable and unquestionable. Particularly, Manusmriti was taken as constitution, a code of conduct in Indian society. But Phule understood that the path leading to the cultural emancipation begins from the diagnosis of cultural enslavement. Hence he begins his journey with the investigation of the fundamental texts of brahmans which contain the agenda of slavery. No thinker or ideologue or literary person had done this before Phule, at least in modern history of India.

There are several satirical dialogues between Jotirao Phule and Dhondiba in Slavery, which are aimed to expose the hypocrisy and superficiality of brahman religious scriptures. In one of the pinching satirical dialogues Phule puts:

Jotirao: Now from this you can observe for yourself that since Brahma had genital organs at four places- mouth, arms, groins and legs (for the four vernas were born out of those four organs according to the Manusmriti) – each of them must have menstruated at least for four days each, and he must have sat aside in seclusion, as an untouchable person, for sixteen day in all, each month. If that was so, then who looked after his house during those sixteen days? Does Manusmriti say anything about this?
Dhondiba : No.
Jotirao : All right. Does Manu say anything about how the foetus grows right from its conception in the mouth over the next nine months?
Dhondiba : No. (49)

Such dialogues are not meant for laughter, but for introspection on the part of the ignorant and illiterate *Shudratishudras* for whom Phule was fighting and writing. In the end of first part of this dialogic satire, he comes to the rational conclusion. He says:

Jotirao: The true facts one arrives upon, after due consideration, are that the brahmans originally inhabited Iran which is located in the region beyond the sea. Several English historians have proved it in their own books that they used to be called Iranians or Aryans then ....... After some years, Brahman became their chief after Vaman. ....... He defeated several of the natives, our original ancestors, in the battles and turned them into slaves. He made several laws to permanently distinguish these slaves from his own people, ..... they composed and spread several strange myths about brahma. They wanted the slaves to believe that whatever had happened was divinely ordained. (49-50)

This, according to Phule is the physical slavery perpetuated by Aryan brahmans. This physical slavery was legitimized by the religious basis derived from the cunningly crafted mythological books. Phule, after analyzing and interpreting the causes of slavery, gives the panacea to emancipate from the slavery. According to him one has to deny the legitimacy of religious books created by brahmans.

I denounce all the main books of the *bhats*. Which decree us their slaves as well as any other books which claim so, and embrace that book (Which may have been written by a person
belonging to any other country or religion) which propounds that all human beings have a right to enjoy human rights in equal measure. (98)

The main books of the brahmans, according to Phule, are the substantial instrument of slavery. In one of his responses given to Dhondiba in Slavery, he asserts:

Jotirao: After Brahma’s death, the Brahmans divided Brahma’s writings into three divisions which they called the Vedas. Then several brahmarishis added to these texts, several stories and myths they knew and also their own concoctions tailored along the lines of these models. Thus they created, after sometime, a fourth text, that is, the fourth Veda ………. They compiled all their magical incantations, their silly tales together and composed several new books such as the smrutis, shartras, puranas, samhitas, etc, out of them. These they forced on the shudras and established their domination over them. They abandoned their traditional war mongering and created a great rigmarole of their religiosity. They did not want the shudras to ever realize how they had been tricked. So they strictly prohibited education of the shudras and made strict rules about this in their books like the Munusamhita. Keeping the shudras illiterate also enabled them to make whatever changes in their books they wanted to suit their interests. (72-73)

Phule not only protests against the outdated, artificial and unrealistic religion of brahmans but rejects the very basis of this religion i.e. the scriptures such as Vedas, Manusmriti, Puranas, Bhagwata etc. He compares these brahmanic texts with the tales of Aesop and declares later superior.

Dhondiba: I think you are quite right. Really, the Bhagwata contains such atrocious fictions! The tales of Aesop are a thousand times better! At least they do not contain anything. Which would corrupt the minds of young children. (73)
Jotirao Phule is aware that the tales of Aesop are not just meant for entertainment of the children. Rather, it has moral messages which are significant, and have everlasting impact in the cultural upbringing of children. Comparatively brahmanic texts such as Vedas, Manusmriti and Bhagwata are the spurious, exploitative and atrocious texts which also have an everlasting impact on people. These texts wipe out the true identity of Shudratishudras and throw them into perpetual slavery.

Phule’s concept of slavery is not restricted to the Shudras and atishudras, though it focuses more on the cultural agony of them. But if we read dedication note of his dialogic satire Slavery we can understand that Phule’s concern was universal. He rejects the very phenomena of human enslavement in any form existed in the world. When he dedicates his treatise Slavery to those good people of United States who fought for the emancipation of Negro slaves, he crosses the geographic boundaries of nations. And this is the token of a thinker of universal concern. He identifies the slavery of Shudratishudra people with Negro slaves in United States. Phules writes:

Dedicated –

to

the good people of the United States
as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom.

(25)
This dedication note of Slavery is highly suggestive of Phule’s humanitarian attitude. It not only shows the concern towards the Negro Slaves and the White Americans who took part in freedom movement of Negro Slaves, but Phule’s deep sensibility about the oppressed and enslaved humanity in the world. I think this is the most important characteristic of any literary writer of universal stature. Any great literary work should be devoted to the wellbeing of humanity, happiness of humanity. Phule’s literary works fulfill this requirement, hence his works are universal in stature.

- **The Concept of Anti-Ritualism:**

  Religious system, in order to maintain authority of the elites (priests) finds its expression in various rituals. Rituals have indispensable place in making and preserving culture. In fact, rituals carry and strengthen cultural agenda set or formulated by religion. Therefore, authority on rituals is authority on Culture, which means that rituals are the conductors of certain cultural practices which are initiated and controlled by the religion- finally controlled by the dominant brahmanic autocracy, so to say.

  Rosalind O’Hanlon says: “Phule was completely clear about the way in which this monopoly of ritual knowledge operated to maintain the religious authority of the priesthood.” (1985, 146) The reason behind this was that the most important Sanskrit texts had been the exclusive property of brahman priests. Jotirao Phule gives ample of examples of brahmanic rituals performed in the name of religion
resulting in economic exploitation of the Shudratishudras. Especially, Phule’s prose such as *Cultivators Whipcord* and poems like *Priestcraft Exposed* are fully stuffed with the instances of how Brahman priests deceive gullible Shudratishudra farmers in the name of religious rituals and extract money from them. In *Cultivators Whipcord* he says:

On every *Chaitra Varsha Pratipada* (New years day according to the Maharashtrian lunar calendar.) The brahmans read the predictions for the year at every farmer’s house and take dakshina from them. Similarly, on Ramnavami and Hanuman Jayanti, if the Brahmans can find a rich farmer in their lane, they get him to arrange a meal for brahmans and if they can find only a poor one, they alternately collect contributions from him and make sure of such a meal.

(Phule, 2002, 123)

Phule further says:

On the Shravani Poornima (full moon of the month of Shravan), without paying attention to the black thread in the mahar’s neck, they tie Gagabat-like sacred threads made of white thread on the bodies of pretentious Kunbis, and jump on the food and the dakshina. They tie rakhees on the wrists of all the farmers and take one paisa dakshina from them. (124)

In the month of Shravan, brahman priests loot vary much to the farmers because according to Phule this month is full of festivals and rituals and these occasions cannot be observed and celebrated without the brahman priests.

Again Phule puts in an emphatic way:

On *Vadya Pratipada* (The first day of the dark fortnight) Brahmans lure most rich farmers into observing ‘devotional week’, put Veenas round their necks and one by one, make them dance through the night and sing like parrots, while the Brahmans themselves sit in style, reclining on bolsters, and
everyday take money from the farmers for this or that. On the night of the Gokulashtami, they read the third book of *Harivijay*, and take *dakshina* for Yashoda’s delivery (the day of Loard Krishna’s birthday). In the morning, for the completion, it is they who eat ghee and chapatti first, and then, leaving the leftovers for the farmers and the drummers and others, go home. (125)

It indicates that brahmans have invented various occasions to extract money from the farmers. Phule has very minutely depicted the pretexts made by brahman priests to extract money in the name of religious rituals. In fact, near about every day in the year marks with certain ritual according to various scriptures. Phule, minutely but satirically discusses about every ritual such as – *Ganesh chaturthi, Anant Chaturdashi, Pitra Paksha, Kapila Shashthi, Amavasya, Vijaya Dashmi, Bali Pratipada, Various yattras, Vadya Dwadashi*, etc. On every occasion brahmans read a certain texts in order to praisa gods and mark the occasion and loot the money under the pretext of *dakshina*.

Brahmans, according to Phule, don’t satisfy by these rituals which run throughout the year; they also extract money on the occasional eclipses and turning of planets. Phule says:

Over and above the annual festivals and rituals…… the occasional eclipses of the moon and the sun, the turnings of the planets are occasions for the *bhat* brahmans to take all manner of donations and feasts, walking the lanes of the farmers’ houses turn by turn. Also, in order to make the weight of the Hindu dharma lie heavy on the farmers and so that they follow the brahmans unquestioningly, the *bhat* brahmans read and re-read hollow and ridiculous texts like the *Pandav-Pratap* (A narrative in verse about the Pandavas of Mahabharata.) in the rich farmer’s houses and take money, along with dhotis and headgear. (126)
Brahman priests, according to Phule, rob and deceive the Shudra farmers since their very birth until death under the pretext of religious rituals: He puts in the beginning of *Cultivators Whipcord*:

Now, the first type of letter-less farmer is so exploited by the brahman under the pretext of religion that it would be very hard to find a parallel example anywhere in the world. The ancient and cunning Arya brahman scripture-writers have so smoothly machinated to tie up the farmer in their selfish religion that from even before he is born, when his mother gets her menses and the *garbhadhaan* (to make conception) rituals are performed, till he dies, various things are looted from him. Not only that, but even after he dies, his son has to bear the weight of religion for the *Shraadha* and other rituals. For, the moment a farmer’s woman gets her menses, in the name of japa and anushthan, the brahmans loot their money, and in the process, under the pretext of brahman – bhojan collect their relatives and friends, create such a confusion of dakshina and ghee and chapatti that of the left-over food, not even, dal and chapatti is left to fill the poor farmer’s belly. (120)

Phule had studied all the seminal scripture of brahmans in which these rituals have been depicted. He found hypocrisy and artificiality in all the rituals. But one may ask the question that why, then, the Shudratishudras succumb to the hypocrisies and fraudulent religious scriptures. Again, the answer of this question lies in the same religious scriptures, as Phule says in *Cultivator’s Whipcord*:

Hearing this narrative, someone might enquire, how is it that the farmers continue to be ignorant and are looted till today? My reply to this is that in the ancient times, the moment Arya *bhat* brahmnas began to rule this country, they totally prohibited education for their subject Shudra farmers and thousands of years, they looted them as they willed. There is written material to this effect in their selfish texts like the *Manusamhita*. (128)
According to Phule denial of education to Shudratishudras is implicit in brahman scriptures like Manusmriti. Brahmanic rituals thus not only maintain the religious supremacy of the brahmans but economically exploit the masses also. In this connection noted Marathi writer and critic Professor Nagnath Kottapalle argues:

The main centre of Phule’s contemplation, writing and work were Shudra, atishudra and woman. Of course, while thinking of Shudratishudras he did not merely think of their exploitation by caste system but how they were economically impoverished due to caste structure too was deeply and empathetically contemplated by him. This is important. But what was more important was he coupled his thoughts with the action.” (2006, 524)

According to Phule, religion has been functioning as an instrument of economic exploitation which found its expression in various rituals. Kottapalle further argues that besides caste inequality between Shudratishudra, farmers, worker and bhat brahmans, Phule insists on economic exploitation as well. Hence, this struggle cannot be merely on social level but predominantly it is on economic level. Phule had very well realized this truth. Welfare of peasants is possible only by providing them with knowledge is the opinion of Phule. But bhat brahmans always wished peasants to be ignorant and illiterate. (530)

Phule has very beautifully and brilliantly pin-pointed the causes of Shudratishudra’s wretched condition, superstitious nature, irrational attitude and deplorable state in his celebrated short piece of poem which serves as the beginning of prologue of cultivator’s Whipcord. He says:
Without knowledge, intelligence was lost, without intelligence morality was lost and without morality was lost all dynamism! Without dynamism money was lost and without money the Shudra sank. All this misery was caused by the lack of knowledge. (Phule, 2002, 117)

Lack of knowledge, according to Phule is the main reason of sinking of shudratishudras. This critique made by Phule redirects our attention to his analysis of Brahmanic religious scriptures such as *Manusanhita* which rejects the right to education to the shudras and atishudras.

Thus Phule’s concept of anti-ritualism is simultaneously and inevitably relates to brahmanic religion, cultural practices and economic agenda implicit in it. It means all the above aspects of brahmanism function in the interest of one another. It is the salient feature of brahmanic religious system that all the religious ceremonies are performed by brahman priests only, which indicates and underlines brahman superiority. At the same time, these religious ceremonial performances scrupulously observe the social elements of purity and impurity organized and maintained by brahmanic religious structure.

The performance of any religious ceremony by a Brahman priest for a member of another caste expresses in a concrete form the relations of purity between them which make up the basis for Hindu religious hierarchy. It is the Brahman priest alone who, in his ritual purity, has the power to mediate between the human world and that of the high gods, and so who controls the entry of divine power into the world. (O’Hanlon, 1985, 189)
Phule knows the Brahmanic arrangement, in the religious scriptures, of Brahman as mediator between God and ordinary people. Anyone who wants to perform any ritual to please god, he/she requires brahman as mediator, without whom his/her prayer would not reach to god. This is, according to Phule, a self claimed inevitability of brahmans in order to impose religious domination. Hence in one of his poems he out rightly rejects brahman presence in ceremony. He writes:

*There is no need (necessity or propriety) of *Brahmins *(as priests) here (at the Shudra weddings), and should drive them (the Brahmin priests0 away(forthwith), says Joti.* (Patil, 1991, 67)

Rosalind O’Hanlon says:

Phule’s collection of ballads, *Priestcraft Exposed*, attempted to undermine existing belief in the necessity of a Brahman to carry out religious ritual. No such intermediary was necessary between man and God; and where Brahmans did attempt to interposes themselves, this was in serch only of money or power, and not of the spiritual well-being of Hindus themselves. (1985, 208)

Phule unveils the secrets behind Brahman supremacy by deconstructing the religious scriptures where, he maintains, the imaginary and fake stories are fabricated to support the brahmanic position. Hence, he radically attacks these religious scriptures that perpetuate brahman supremacy. But this attack is not based on emotional assumptions but it is highly rational. While deconstructing the brahmanic ritualistic position he says in the poem *Priestcraft Exposed*:
At the time of proposal the priest comes
Affecting great airs, he looks at the horoscope
He builds up his hopes of a great reward
He calculates the astrological houses and repeats the name of God.
Calculating the marriage, he spreads out his wares
With a Ganpati made of supari nuts
A heap of coconuts as a food offering to the Gods
And as custom demands, the payment of a great fee.

(O’Hanlon, 1985,209)

Phule while deconstructing the Brahman priest’s role in the wedding of a Shudra brings a satire and points towards the ultimate goal of the priest -extortion of money from Shudra.

Phule’s rational analysis of brahmanic rituals turns further into a poignant criticism when he says:

The uninvited guests pour in
Their hands spread out for money
The thread is rolled up, a prison for the bride and groom
Gifts of money is the real meaning behind their chants
They burn twigs and make the sacred fire
The mind has no shame and no satisfaction. (209)

Phule describes the illogical, unscientific and superstitious rituals which are performed by Brahman priest in the marriage of Shudra. Hence Phule suggests the scientific remedy, i.e. alternative way of marriage which is devoid of brahman priest. He says:

Do not give these things to others to do,
With religion as the reason, being ruined needlessly
The young and old friends of each
Should choose a jury of their own caste
Their age, years, qualities and love
Examine and see these thoroughly
Put a garland of prayers for God
This is an agreement of happiness. (209)
Phule maintains that brahmans are parasites who enjoy every pleasure of life at the cost of shudras’ labors. But shudras fail to understand that they are being duped and economically exploited in the name of religious rituals and ceremonies. The reason behind this is superstitious nature of shudras which is the consequence of psychological conditioning. Phule wants to sensitize the shudras pertaining to their economic exploitation under the pretext of religion. In *Priestcraft Exposed*, he depicts all the ceremonies and ritual occasions upon which the shudratisshudras are deceived and looted.

At Nagapanchami, on the eighth day of each lunar fortnight
A great weight of Brahman feasts
Rivers of butter on the cakes of wheat
He stretches himself out, he puts his feet up
The trade of the priest in the month of Bhadrapad
He grows sleek and fat
    At Vijayadashmi he makes them worship horses
    Choice tit-bits on the thirteenth day of the,
    Waning moon in Ashwin
    The worship of Lakshmi in the account books.
    At the wedding of the tulasi, at Makarsankrant;
I tell you of the fruits of the whole year
I take my wages in my hand
    The money is squandered; the Shudra is ruined
    The rites of the Holi remain
    Their shouts ring out loud
They dream it all up in their minds; they plan out the houses of the zodiac
A great profusion of religious gifts
The rogues are very clever. (209)

Phule depicts the contemporary socio-cultural scenario where brahman is the religious master and Shudratisshudra as religious slave and the cultural practices as means of exploitation. O’Hanlon pertinently comments on Phule’s concern in this regard.
Phule was overwhelmingly concerned with contemporary Hindu religion as a worldview and as the legitimation of a social structure which entangled the *Shudra* in a never-ending series of illusions. The destruction of these illusions formed the precondition for all other kinds of libration. In so far as Phule was concerned with economic exploitation, what engaged him most was that which took place in every kind of ritual. (213)

- **The Concept of Popular Culture:**

  Indian Hindu society has been divided into thousands of castes and sub-castes with their respective cultures and sub-cultures. Every caste enjoys the wealth of beliefs, practices and symbols though several of them have been emerged from brahman religious scriptures. The cultural traditions emerged from brahman scriptures naturally uphold the brahmanic world view and maintain brahmanic supremacy. Therefore, it becomes obligatory to interrogate these supremacist cultural practices in order to build an alternative ideology and culture. Phule wages his socio-economic and cultural war on two fronts – first interrogating and challenging the dominating narratives which upheld brahmanic supremacy, and second, establishing the parallel and alternative narratives which upheld the world view of shudratishudra. In short he reinterprets the popular culture. Rosalind O’Hanlon argues:

  Phule endowed his ideas about the ancient past with immediate significance by integrating into his account a wealth of practices, beliefs, and symbols from contemporary popular culture and religion. In this way, he hoped to make it possible for potential followers to ‘discover’ common identity for all lower castes. This identity existed in the midst of familiar institutions and traditions. Its true significance had always been concealed by the mystifications of Brahmanic religion. (152)
Since Indian masses have been divided into innumerable castes and subcastes, it has been a great task to accumulate them with a common identity which is very much required in the struggle against brahmanism. To mentally transform the masses, to make them conscious of their impoverished situation, to sensitize them about their glorious cultural past and prepare them for the cultural battle against brahmanic hegemonic culture, are the crucial tasks before Phule. Therefore he seeks for the common cultural identity of the masses and he finds this identity in the popular culture of the masses. Popular culture has been playing immensely important role in the life of Indian masses. Popular religious traditions, which the shudratishudras have been clinging to, are the cultural reflections of these shudratishudras. But the fact is, they differ from caste to caste. Means it has been a herculean task to bring all the castes on the equal platform with common interest. Each and every caste has its own casteist ego and pride which has been cultivated by the caste structure. Notwithstanding this, Phule tries to give a comprehensive common identity to all the shudratishudra castes so that a pervasive alternative movement can be launched.

Phule reinterprets the popular culture of the masses which had been either condemned or corrupted by the brahmanic hegemonic system. Brahmanic mythology, as we saw earlier, had tarnished the images of all the indigenous kings and gods according to Phule. So, in order to relocate these great figures in popular
culture he reinterprets the myths and glorifies the popular gods and kings.

O’Hanlon pertinently argues:

The figures which feature most prominently in Phule’s account are the god Khandoba, and the good Daitya King Bali of Hindu mythology. In Khandoba, Phule chose one of the central figures of popular religious culture in Maharashtra, the god who was the Kuldevata or guardian deity of the Maratha and Kunbi group of castes. (152)

But Khandoba was sanskritized as an incarnation of Shiva. Because it has been the tradition of the Brahmantic system to sanskritize the popular figures in shudratishudra culture. Jotirao Phule tries to desanskritize the great figures in popular culture. He says in his dialogic satire Slavery.

As Maharashtra was a huge region, it was divided into nine divisions (Khandas) by Bali. Each division was assigned to an officer called Khandoba. There used to be two assistants under him according to his status. They were called Mallukhan. The Khandoba of Jejuri was one such officer. He used to quell the rebellions of the various wrestlers in the courts of the neighbouring chieftains and bring them to their senses. That is why he was also called Mall Ari (The enemy of the wrestlers). Malhari, the name by which he is worshiped today is probably a corrupt form of this word. He was famous for his just warfare. (2002, 57)

Here Khandoba has been projected as one of the officers in the Kingdom of Bali who was, according to Phule, the greatest king before Aryan conquest. Same is the story of the god Mahsoba. Phule tells:

Bali had also appointed two officers for the task of collecting revenue and dispensing justice, called Mahasubha and Nau Khandacha Nyayi. They used to have several junior officers to assist them. The term Mahasubha seems to have changed to Mhasoba in course of time and that is how we use it today. His job was to assess the agricultural produce of the farmers and
charge revenue of grant concessions accordingly. Even today, each Maratha family installs a stone in the name of this Mahasubha in some corner of their farm, paints it vermilion, and does not start any work in the field: like weeding and reaping corn, without burning incense before it and worship it. (57-58)

Originally, as Phule puts it, Khandoba, Mhasoba and other gods were the officers in the kingdom of Bali but brahmanic texts misinterpreted them as gods and attached so many false superstitious stories to their character. Phule, in a way, deciphered the glorious past of the shudratishudra kings and the noble men. Because he knew that these were the ideal figures in the life of shudratishdra people.

Phule, with great ingenuity, traces many general practices and beliefs current in 19th century which formed the popular culture. The tradition of presenting a tali or dish of offerings to Khandoba originated under Bali’s rule. Phule says:

Whenever Bali had to assign some important task to one of his noblemen, he used to hold court and place some betel leaves in a tray along with a coconut and some turmeric. Then he used to announce that the betel leaves could be picked up only by that noble man who had the guts to complete that task. Then the nobleman who did have the grit would come forward and, chanting the war cry ‘Harhar Mahaveer’, (It is logical to assume that the English ‘Hurrah! Hurrah!’ is a corruption of Harhar. This cry inevitably accompanies the call to arms in the West. The standard expression was ‘Hurrah boys! Loose the saddle or win the horse!’) pick up the betel leaves with the coconut; then bowing, he would apply the turmeric on his forehead and raising the contents of the tray in his pallu. Then Bali would assign the task to that particular nobleman who would decamp his army and proceed to vanquish the enemy. That is why this ritual was probably called as ‘Picking up the tali’. (58)
This quotation is important to understand the process of popular culture formation. Though Phule is anti-ritualist he favours the rituals which speak the story of glorious past of shudratishudra. He puts that Bhairoba, Jotiba and Khandoba were the great noblemen in Bali’s Kingdom, and hence the shudratishudra people still remember them.

They chant ‘Harhar Mahadev’ and ‘Jotibacha chang bhala’, ‘Hail the rise of sadananda’ and ‘Hail Mallukhan the Proud.’ Since Baliraja considered sunday as the holy day of Lord Shiva, todays Marathas, that is the many, mahar, kunbi, mali and others do not consume any food or even a drop of water unless they have worshipped that family deity every Sunday; first they bathe the idol and then whatever food happens to be in the house serves as the holy offering. (59)

Worshiping family deities, observing certain days as holy and offering of food etc. are the indispensable elements of pastoral life. In fact cultural identity of the rural masses emerges and establishes on the basis of these ritual traditions; hence Phule insists on these popular cultural traditions in order to construct the counter cultural ideology and philosophy which, he thinks as necessary in the cultural battle against Brahmanism. O’Hanlon argues:

This brings us to the second part of Phule’s strategy: the provision of an ideological basis on which a potential popular following might be brought to reject the religious hierarchies of conventional Hindu society. He felt that these hierarchies derived their strength from their roots in the most important Hindu religious accounts of the origins of Indian society and its proper divisions, and in the prescriptions which this literature contained for the social life of the pious Hindu. In particular, he argued that the strongest hold of religious tradition on the people derived from the extensive integration of Hindu religious literature into the popular culture and oral
traditions of Maharashtra. Phules answer to this was to provide alternative accounts of the text, myths, and stories most common in popular Hinduism. He linked these with important symbols and structures from contemporary Maharashtrian society in order to convey the real community of culture and interest that united all lower castes against their historical and cultural adversaries: the Brahmans. (1985, 138)

Besides deriving certain myths that reflected the world view of the shudratishudras, Phule emphasized on two major kings in the history and mythology of masses who, he believed, have been very close to the psyche of masses. King Bali and Chattrapati Shivaji were those great kings who fought for the welfare of the masses but, according to Phule, were misinterpreted and projected as daitya (Bali) and gobrahman Pratipalak (Shivaji). Phule’s cultural struggle was, at the same time, based on reinterpretation of shudratishudra symbols and myths, along with rejection of the brahmanic symbols and myths. In this connection Braj Ranjan Mani argues: “Since Phule wanted to dismantle the whole structure of the exploitative system, he produced subversive tracts against Brahmanism and vehemently contested its philosophical and metaphysical formulations.” (Mani, 2005, 268)

According to Phule, king Bali was the greatest warrior in ancient India. In the Kingdom of Bali (Balistan), there prevailed the values of equality, brotherhood, freedom, and at the same time, there was no caste discrimination, and economic exploitation; in short, people were happy in Bali’s Kingdom. Phule believes, Bali’s system is ideal one, hence, must be remembered.
Therefore, at the heart of Phule’s writing we find the symbol of Bali and *Balistan*. Phule, in order to construct a counter argument to brahmanic mythological system, brings the symbol of Baliraja, the most virtuous king of the indigenous people of this land. Phule refers Baliraja many times in his poems and other prose pieces besides his dialogic satire *Slavery*. In fact Phule’s attempts of alternative and parallel symbols are necessary to construct a philosophical and ideological discourse emerging through popular culture. In one of his seminal poems he praises king Bali. Here is a translation of this poem by P. G. Patil:

He was an incomparably heroic King of our country.
He was an intrepid hero in war. So let us remember him (gratefully).

Many brave heroes like *Brairoba, Khandob, Jotiba and Mahasubha (Mhasoba)* have adorned (the history of) this land of King Bali.

King Bali, the original King of this land, was an embodiment of all virtues, and hence (his subjects) remember him gratefully on the occasion of Dassera and Diwali (even today). That is exactly why the Kshatriya ladies pray fervently (at these festivals), “Let all evil flee far from hence, and let Bali’s Kingdom come!”

The Aryan Brahmins came here from Iran, conquered and enslaved the Kshatriyas here, robbed them of all their gold as also of their ancestral wealth. *The garden* Joti puts a pointed question to the Bhats (Brahmins) – ‘Why did Waman condemn (and exile) King Bali to the nether world!’ (1991, 152)

According to Phule the symbol of Bali is a part and parcel of shudratishudra life. Therefore womenfolk, during the days of Diwali, remember King Bali and praise him – ‘ida pida talo aani Baliche Rajya Yeo!’ (Let all miseries go and let Bali’s Kingdom come) This proverb demonstrates the place of
Bali in shudratishudras worldview. But Phule again and again mentions how brahmans have stigmatized the character of Bali and projected him as Daitya, Rakshas and justified his murder by dwarf Waman. Not only Bali but all the legendary figures described in mythology have been grotesquely depicted in order to perpetuate cultural hegemony. So, for Phule, the process of demythologizing and deconstructing the myths is necessary by creating alternative symbols and myths. Of course these symbols are not newly created but already existed in Indian folk culture.

Jotirao Phule composed A Ballad about Chhatrapati Shivaji Raje Bhonsle and relocated the symbol of Shivaji which was hijacked and corrupted by brahman historians. Shivaji was declared as ‘Gau Brahman pratipalak’ (protector of cows and brahmans) by brahman historians, which, according to Phule, was misinterpretation of Shivaji. Brahmanic system, in order to perpetuate cultural hegemony, implements various philosophic, historic and mythological strategies. Corruption and misinterpretation of cultural symbols, and use to those symbols for own benefit and convenience, have been, according Phule, the methods and strategies of brahmans. So, relocating and reinterpreting history is most important for Phule. In A Ballad about Chhatrapati Shivaji Raj Bhonsle, Phule tries to reinterpret Shivaji. He focuses on the great qualities of Shivaji as:

Oh (Shivaji) Maharaj, speak with us, please! Why have you stopped (given up) speaking with us? You took as your companions the simple peasants (of Maharashtra). You made the (half) naked (folk) into soldiers. You braved the scorching
heat of Sun, and were not afraid of the (pouring) rains. You wandered high and low over the mountains (and through the caverns) and, thus, brought the Mohammedans to heel (subjugated them). (79)

He further writes:

He was so un-assuming that he never took liberties with others, and was guileless and innocent by temperament (at home). His conversation was sweet and pleasant. He was thoughtful and reasonable (by temperament), and, thus, would establish his supremacy (over others). He strove ceaselessly for the welfare of (his subjects), and kept many of his relatives in his employ (as retainers and faithful followers). Sometimes he used to be worth with those whom he had pampered (who were very dear to him). Having read historical records in English, I designate Chhatrapati Shivaji as a scion of the Kshatriya race, who has thoroughly exposed (made fun of, discomfited) the iniquities of the Brahma. Jotirao Phule has sung the praises of (eulogised) the son of a Shudra (Shivaji Maharaj) who was the authentic and chief overlord of the Peshwas. I chant (recite) the Ballad of Shivaji Maharaj, the darling son of Jijabai, who proved to be the scourge of the Mohammedans. (80)

Since Shivaji is the most popular figure in the masses, braham historians and literary persons have misinterpreted him as ‘protecor of cows and brahmans’, but Phule places Shivaji among Shudratishudra. Shivaji, according to Phule, is the King of peasants who fought for the welfare of shudras. Braj Ranjan Mani argues:

Phule wrote a ballad on Shivaji – Shivaji Pavada in 1868. In it he depicted Shivaji as shudra king and social rebel against caste tyranny whose descendents were robbed of their power by the treacherous Brahman Peshwas. As if anticipating the brahmanical, especially Tilak’s, resurrection of Shivaji in the 1890s as the orthodox anti-Muslim and savior of the brahmanic culture – gau-brahman pratipalak (protectors of cows and brahmans) – Phule placed Shivaji within the anti-brahmanical tradition of Maharashtrian history and culture…. He draw a parallel between Shivaji and King Bali as the brave and just leaders of their communities against the alien oppressors: (2005, 270)
Chhatrapati Shivaji has been interpreted by many literary persons since 17th century. But most of the writings on Shivaji project him as anti-Islamic and orthodox Hindu king. Phule’s *Pawada* (Ballad) on Shivaji was one of the earliest printed works in Marathi which insisted on the original identity of Shivaji as Shudra king.

Searching symbols from folklore and projecting them as cultural identity of the masses is the necessary function of any literature that emerges through social necessity and intends to bring a cultural revolution on the basis of which emancipation of masses is guaranteed. Phule’s literary writing, therefore, highlights the symbols from popular culture in order to formulate a deconstructive conceptual discourse. So the concept of popular culture which gets shaped in Phule’s writing is not a deliberate attempt to philosophize and systemize any concept but it is a part of cultural struggle. Hence we find lack of discipline in Phule’s conceptualization, because, for Phule, result is more important than the method.

Phule’s concept of popular culture is not restricted merely to the description and analysis of traditional brahmanic cultural symbols and religious practices, but his use of literary genres while articulating the deconstructive themes is also an essential part of popular culture. He deliberately chooses those literary forms which have been deeply rooted in folk soil and which have always been neglected or condemned by elite critics. Ballad, *Songi Bhajan, Bharud, Abhang*, have been
emerged out of oral literary tradition of rural India and popularized by the Shahirs (ballad singers) and saints. This tradition of orature is an indispensable tradition of rural life that has been enlightening, educating and entertaining the masses.

Brahmanic forces intelligently utilized this tradition in order to disseminate religious superstitions and perpetuate cultural hegemony. Phule is conscious of this; therefore he uses the same tradition in a constructive way and brings a brilliant deconstruction of hegemonizing culture. His whole dialogic writing is very close to Buddhist tradition of dialogics and Songi Bhajan. G.P. Deshpande argues:

Phule was very fond of the dialogue form. He wrote a play, of course, but also a lot of his other writing…. is in this form. The use of the dialogue form connected him with the western, specifically Greek tradition on the one hand, and though he may not have liked it, to the Upanishadic tradition on the other. One should add that the Bauddhas had a strong dialogic tradition as well. (2002, 17)

Phule’s use of colloquial dialect and choice of literary genres for creative writing are important aspects of his socio-cultural movement because he wants to awaken the oppressed masses, therefore, he believes that the Sanskritized language and literary forms are of no use, so, he uses Prakritized (antithetical to the sanskrititized) literary genres and themes to enlighten the masses. In Indian context, Prakrit tradition (literature, drama etc.) has been so crucial and playing a vital role in the life of masses. This tradition is not only different from the Sanskrit tradition (Brahmanic) but sharply antithetical also.
The Concept of Religion:

Jotirao Phule’s major concern undoubtedly is a radical analysis of hegemonic brahmanic system and accordingly he does that successfully and out of deep commitment. In all of his works we can see an uncompromising position of him while criticizing brahmanic religio-cultural system. But this is not the ultimate concern of Phule. Rather, he provided a very logical and scientific panacea by introducing an alternative religion such as Satyadham (True Religion) which is thoroughly antithetical to the brahmanic religious construct. Phule’s concept of religion evolves specifically in his last dialogic work – Sarvajanik Satya Dharm Pustak (The Book of the True Faith), hence we shall focus on this book to discuss the concept. The editor of Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule, G.P. Deshpande says: “Sarvajanik Satya Dharm Pustak is almost like Phule’s final testament. It is the summary statement of his theology and his view of what a rational and scientific system could be for India and the Hindus.” (225)

Phule believes that, in order to establish concept of true religion, the basic precondition is to uproot the existing corrupt and artificial religion of brahmans. For that, he rejects the infallibility of Vedas. The stories from Geeta, Ramayan, Mahabharat and Bhagvat are inferior to the stories in Aesaps fabels, according to him. Phule ridicules Ram, Krishna, Dnyaneshwar and Ramdas as discriminatory and hypocrites. It doesn’t mean that Phule is atheist. He believed in man equally as in Creator (God). But he rejected the existence and intervention of the mediator
between man and God. Because, he believed, the mediators i.e. brahmans have belittled man and God as well. In this situation, greatness of Mahatma Phule lies in his consideration of creator not beyond social, religious and economic equality and welfare. Therefore Phule’s cultural movement, though he believed in God, was not a religious movement, because man is more important than creator in his movement. (Kasbe, 2006, 167-68)

Phule insists on the material needs of man; and, the existence of creator, according to Phule, is for the welfare of man and a just society. Phule again and again attacks brahmanic concept of God and religion, and categorically rejects the concepts of Aatma (soul), Swarg (heaven) Narak (Hell), and other metaphysical concepts. Notwithstanding this he believes in creator (God), but this concept of God is not superstitious and based on injustice. He experiences God in man, not in idols or temples.

His concept of creator and religion may best be seen in one of his dialogues with Balwantrao Hari Sakvalkar in *The Book of the True Faith:*

*Balwant Hari Sakvalkar: Does it then mean that there is no religious book that in fact states the truth, the realization of which would make all living being happy?*

*Jotirao Govindrao Phule: All the religious and revelatory books that man has produced on our planet, one and all, do not contain a consistent universal truth. This is so because in every such book are to be seen passages interpolated into those texts by certain groups of individuals as the situation in their view warranted and as their dogmatism and mulishness dictated. Consequently those religions of faiths did not in the final analysis work towards the good of all. This in turn resulted in sects and sectarianism. Small wonder that these sects hated and turned against each other.*
Secondly the creator of this universe is also the creator of human beings. It would not be surprising if He, because He is merciful, would want all human beings to enjoy all human privileges and rights. In reality however, this does not happen and human beings suffer unbearable miseries of various kinds.

In sum, this solar system and naturally the planet earth which we inhabit are created by one Creator. Why is it then, that the human beings living in different states and nations hate each other? How and why are the foolish passions of religions and national hatreds generated? There are any number of rivers on our planet. All of them eventually meet the sea. How and why then can only one of those rivers be sacred? Does that sacred river ever hesitate to carry dog’s excreta to the sea? (Phule, 2002, 229)

This quotation adequately clarifies Phule’s views on traditional god and religion. His perception, that all the religious books do not contain the universal truth which should be consistent. It means, all the religious books are the products of certain socio-cultural context. Then, about the traditional concept of god Phule asks the fundamental question, that if this planet earth is created by one creator, then why the people of different nations hate each other. This, I think, is the rebel against even traditional monotheism.

Phule was a radical rationalist, and rationalism does not accept the concept of god. This apparently seems to be contradictory. Many scholars of Phule have pinpointed this so called contradiction in Phule’s thoughts. Prof. Yadavrao Vadaskar has a different view on this contradiction in Phule’s thoughts. He says:

Though Mahatma Phule belonged to non-brahman class which did not have tradition of knowledge’ and was not a bookish scholar, his ideological grip was so strong on his own perspectives. Ideological clarity and commitment to principles were his special characteristics. He was little educated and had not gone through Jungian theories, yet he believed that the ‘Concept of God’ is the product of human psyche. He had understood it not out of ‘intuition’ but ‘reason’. (Vadaskar: 2006, 227)
It means Phule’s concept of God does not belong to the stream of idealism and spiritualism. Rather, it is very close to the stream of materialism. On surface level Phule’s interpretation of God seems to be contradictory, but his ideological coherence and rational analysis don’t allow us to categorize him as believer in God. Actually, his God is based on ethical values. Therefore, his God does not claim for any heaven or hell, rebirth, and so called salvation. Then why does Phule believe in God if he does not believe in idealistic and spiritualistic construct? This question can be discussed in socio-cultural and religious context of Phule’s time because every period is restricted with its own limitations. Phule, himself, knew about these limitations, and hence he never attacks the very framework of the conception of God and religion, though the attacks brahmanic notion of God and religion. Prof. Vadaskar argues:

Working classes in Phule’s time were untouched from the scientific developments. They were deprived of economic, social, political and educational rights. Their minds were strongly obsessed with the notion of God. In this situation, had Phule given top priority to annihilate the notion of God from their mind, his entire movement would have turned into a fiasco. The notion of God was the psychological need of common people. But the nature of this belief was like a double edged weapon. Religious and political power elites had used it to impose slavery on people. Phule takes the fundamental nature of this notion into consideration. Phule accepts father image of God based on the commitment of equality. But he rejects the fatalism which was the outcome of the notion of God. He does not want man to be operated by God. (232-33)
Phule firmly believes that the concept of God has been cultivated by prevalent brahmanic system; hence the attack must be concentrated on the very system. Therefore elimination of the concept of God is not the prerequisite for Phule. But he knows how these concepts could be rationally and constructively propounded. Accordingly, he targets brahmanic God and religion and introduces truth as God and religion. Prof. Vadaskar further argues:

Though he did not condemn the idea of God as it was the psychological need of common working people, he never took the idealistic or spiritualistic position. The crux of his ideology is human-centered, materialistic, egalitarian and dynamic revolutionary. (234)

One of the indispensable features of traditional religion is belief in heaven and hell along with the belief in God. Rationally speaking, on the basis of these aspects the common masses have been psychologically paralyzed and made them vulnerable to injustice and exploitation. This exploitation is very much useful for the pleasure of upper caste elites. So, the concepts of heaven and hell are the cornerstones of the institution of brahmanic religion. The fear of hell and wish of heaven are the selfish constructs of brahmanic religion which are necessary to befool the masses and dominate them. It is interesting to see what Phule says about this brahmanic construct. Conversing with Manaji Baluji Magar in The Book of the True Faith Phule categorically puts his view on heaven and hell:

Manaji Baluji Magar : It is generally believed by the ignorant that there are heaven and paradise. The faithful and the virtuous reach paradise. They enjoy unlimited happiness in paradise. The sinful and the miscreants, however, go to hell
and undergo various kinds of suffering as determined as by their sins. What do you have to say on that?

Jotirao Govindrao Phule: In times immemorial when human beings had not yet heard of reform or betterment, some clever people thought of this construct called paradise more to frighten the common people in much the same manner as the peasants use a scarecrow to frighten or scare the birds and animals away from the crops. Later there were reforms of different kinds. But nobody really thought out the concept of paradise.

Manaji: Would you then say that there is no such thing as heaven of paradise?

Jotirao: Undoubtedly. All religious books talk of heaven and paradise. But can anyone think of a man who has actually seen heaven? Has it ever happened that a certain individual decided not to trust the word of the text unless experience were to endorse it and therefore went in search of paradise and came back to report on its existence? Can you ever find such an experimentalist individual in our midst? The fact is that this concept of Paradise has never been logically thought out. (Phule, 2002, 230)

Heaven and hell are considered to be the ultimate destination by most of the religions. In fact these concepts have been used, as Jotirao Phule argues, to frighten the people and behave according to the religious norms. A good man is supposed to achieve heaven and a bad man hell. Then the question emerges, on what grounds man can be declared as good or bad? And the answer of this question is categorically given in the brahmanic scriptures that states a person who follows the norms, and functions accordingly as accorded by birth based caste is a good man. It means a person belonging to shudratishudra caste has to do menial works and serve the upper castes as his religion. If he denies to do the same he will go to hell. At the same time a person belonging to the upper castes should enjoy the services of the lower castes and authoritatively exploit them as their religion.
Means, exploitation and subjugation of lower caste i.e. shudratishudras, finds its validity in religion. The concepts of heaven and hell are the constructs of elites, in all the religions as Phule says which are created to frighten and exploit the masses and benefit the caste elites.

Phule’s outright rejection of heaven and hell is very close to Buddha’s philosophy of materialism. Buddha’s philosophy rejects the concepts of heaven, hell, Atma (soul), ghost, fasting in the name of religion, sacrifice of animals etc. and concentrates on the worldly life and its betterment. Man and his welfare is the centre of Buddha’s philosophy.

In order to understand Phule’s position on the concept of God in his religion it will be important to see Prof. A.H. Salunkhe’s argument. He says:

This is true that Phule had deep faith in existence of God. But it does not mean that he adhered to the central principle in Hindu philosophy. Basically belief in God is certainly not a central principle in Hindu philosophy. For instance, Sankhya, Mimansak etc. Vedic philosophical schools have not accepted God’s existence. Further, Phule’s Nirmink (Creator) has little resemblance with those Hindu schools which believed in God’s existence. Both believe ‘God’ as creator. But in several other aspects there are differences of nature. Phule drastically changed and materialized the nature of prayer, Anushthan (religious ritual), chanting, etc. In traditional Hindu religion it is believed that God created Chaturvarnya (Four fold system) on account of social well being, and hence the existence of that discrimination system is the rein of God. Rather, to maintain this system was the God assigned duty of earlier kings. Phule destroyed that system and believed to have egalitarian system is God’s rein. It means, God’s rein in his religion is very material empire..... Phule rebelled against brahmanic religious scripture, not for superficial changes in Hindu philosophy by retaining central principle in it.” (2006, 79)
Phule believes in radical rationalism which he thinks is the ultimate methodology in the process of emancipation of masses. Through this methodology he rejects the Brahmanic religion and establishes the concept of egalitarian religion. In this connection Prof. J.M. Waghmare comments:

Equality and brotherhood were the predominant principles assumed by Phule in social reconstruction. In fact there were no boundries of nation-time, religion-sect, Varna-castes or language-dialects to Phule’s consideration of brotherhood. This brotherhood was unrestricted, and hence he put the idea of universal religion before people. He belived brotherhood to be man’s love for other man.” (2006, 206)

Nowadays some scholars interpret Phule as thoroughly anti-brahman which is certainly a misinterpretation. Phule radically attacked everything that supported and advocated brahmanic system, but when it comes to the question of social reconstruction he propounds a universal concept of love and brotherhood. He includes even Brahmans in his concept. Therefore, his Satyadharm was open for all, including Brahmans. This universalism can best be understood in the following dialogue between Phule and Govindrao that lays certain conditions for Brahmans.

Govindrao: Dear Tatyasaheb (What is done is done!) What was done by the Aryan Brahmins in the distant past cannot now be undone. What should they do now by way of atonement?

Jotirao: There is only one remedy for their sins. All the Aryan Bhats/Brahmins regard themselves shamelessly as the earth-gods. If they genuinely repent for this crime, and if they search for the (eternal) Truth and if they sincerely try to follow the path of the truth (if they genuinely worship the Truth and try to translate it into actions), then (and then) only will the shudras and Atishudras, and the Bhils (tribals) and the fishermen etc. will not take revenge upon them for their past and present crimes committed against them, but will certainly forgive them (Magnanimously). (Phule, 1991, 31-32)
Phule’s universal religion of truth is not discriminatory like that of Brahmins. As discussed above Satyadharm assures equal opportunity to all the people and believes in universal brotherhood and love. While contemplating on the issue of religion, Phule comes to the conclusion that brahmanic hegemonic system is the outcome of religious scriptures which need to be disbelieved by the shudratishudras. Moreover, brahmans, the creators of these scriptures, must discard them on their own accord and surrender to the truth. Phule believes that this is the only panacea for brahmans. Then the shudratishudras will pray for even brahmans before the benevolent creator.

Jotirao : When all the Aryan Bhats/Brahmins will discard (throw away) their spurious, wicked, bogus Scripture (religious books) and when they will begin to behave in a truthful manner. (When they will follow the path of Truth in their dealings with) towards all human beings (all men and women), then all the men and women in the wide world will bow down reverently before the benevolent creator of us all, and will pray unto Him fervently for the welfare and happiness of the said Aryan Bhats/Brahmins (Who were their earstwhile tormentors) undoubtedly (I have no doubt about it). (32)

Phule’s concept of religion constitutes not only the principles of humanity, brotherhood and universalism, but the principle of compassion also. This principle is antithetical to the principle of retaliation. Hence, brahmans also have space in his religion if they discard the exploitative religious scriptures and surrender to the Truth.
Jotirao Phule’s conceptualization of religion is not arbitrary and baseless. It does not come out of mere observation and experience of brahmanic domination. Many times in his writing Phule compares Hindu religious system with Islam and Christianity. In his perception, the monotheistic aspect of Islam and Christianity is crucial which treats all human beings on equal social footings. So, the value of equality, especially in Islam attracts him. In fact, we can see a deep influence of these two religions in his writing. But still, he finds inadequacies in the religious books of these religions, in fact in all religious books. He argues that there is no consistent and universal truth that will encompass the entire humanity, in these books. Besides Islam and Christianity, Phule seems to be strongly influence by the philosophy of Thomas Paine. Phule’s religious understanding is basically shaped by this philosophy. G. B. Sardar puts:

Paine rejected Bible and restored the authority of conscience. At the same time, he has combined reason with conscience. But, this reason must be scientific, he expected. He interpreted the incredible, unnatural and unjust stories in new and old testaments and shown how the supreme position of God is degraded due to these stories through his book *The age of Reason*. (2006, 77)

Paine believed, as G. B. Sardar puts:

God is one. He is just and considers all equally. Therefore, if there is to be any God given religious book, it should be one. This is not enough; this religious book should be available forever. It should be permissible for reading to all nationals, in all ages; it should be permissible to be interpreted. Fortunately we have such religious book before us. Since antiquity it is available to all. The nature created by God is that book. There is no room for artificiality in it. Nobody can deprive to any one from this. This nature is the exclusive holy book for true deists. (77-78)
Phule had already assimilated the Christian humanism, but his reading of Thomas Paine sharpened and concretized his religious perception. He noticed that the disciples of almost all religions proclaimed infallibility of their religious books. But Phule found many shortcomings in those books when he critically studied them. Had these books been created by God himself, he believed, those would have been immaculate, flawless and perpetual. It means no religious book has been created by God. In fact the idea of infallibility of religious books, which was propounded and strengthened by various religious institutions, brought numbness to the inquisitive minds of the people. Hence Phule, like Paine, maintained that God (Creator) can be experienced through conscience and nature. It seems in *Sarvajanik Satyadharm Pustak (The book of the True Faith)* that Phule hates communalism. Therefore, he doesn’t advocate any particular existing religious system. Paine’s concept of universal religion and Jotirao Phule’s concept of *Sarvajanik Satyadharm* (Universal Religion of Truth) have enormous philosophic resemblance. G. B. Sardar writes:

> Jotirao was influenced by Paine’s religious thoughts. He had equally explored the inherent principles of his political and social thoughts. Dignity of humanity, importunity of individual freedom and interdiction of slavery are the inherent principles of Paine’s whole philosophy. (80)

Very few writers and philosophers could go beyond the psychological conditioning perpetuated by the socio-cultural and religious traditions. Phule not only goes beyond this but brings a radically logical critique, which underlines his
philosophic stature above contemporary thinkers. The basic difference between other social reformers and Phule is that these reformers wished reformation of society within the framework of Hindu religion, which reinforced this religious system, and Phule wished the complete destruction of Hindu religious framework. “Phule had adopted the path,” as Janardhan Waghmare puts, “of cultural de-colonization.” (2006, 200)

Indeed, Phule’s *The Book of True Faith* is a seminal document of cultural decolonization which not only outrightly rejects the rites and rituals of Brahman priests but establishes alternative cultural practices as well. In fact cultural colonization is more dreadful and terrorizing than the political colonization. Political colonization is mainly concerned with the physical enslavement of the colonized ones and cultural colonization is predominantly a psychological phenomenon that perpetuates mental slavery of the people. Therefore, political de-colonization can be achieved and the slavery can be transformed into freedom. But cultural decolonization is not that much easy phenomenon. It requires a prolonged cultural struggle which aims at reassessment of existing culture and installation of alternative culture. Cultural colonization is always advocated and sanctioned by religious system, or, to be more precise, it is established and sustained by religion. Thus, the prerequisite to cultural decolonization is destruction of prevalent religion. Phule is very much conscious of this; hence he invents cultural weapons to destroy the brahmanic religion and initiates the process of cultural
decolonization. Phule’s establishment of True Religion is, therefore, not just a replacement for old religion, but an indispensable step towards cultural de-colonization.

In Indian context revolutionary philosophy is not possible without a comprehensive critique of Hindu religious system. Phule brings this critique and, at the same time, provides a blue print of ideal religion. This ideal religion is based on morality, equality, humanism and brotherhood. Truth is at the centre of his concept of religion. Phule, in the nineteenth chapter of his dialogic discourse, *The Book of the True Faith*, propounds thirty three principles which are the basic tenets of his religions philosophy. His concept of universal religion of truth evolves through a dialogue with Ganpatrao Daryaji Thorat.

Ganpatrao Daryaji Thorat: Who are the votaries or followers or the Truth?

Jotirao Govindrao Phule: (1) Our creator has created all human beings. All men and women are by birth independent, and are entitled to enjoy all due human rights. Those who accept this view are the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(2) Our creator has created the sun (Solar system) and the stars and planets of the galaxy in the vast void. He or she who does not venerate or worship any of these, or a freak star or any stone or metal icon as the true creator – should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.” (1991,33)

Phule in the very first principle categorically proclaims the freedom of all individuals. This freedom is by birth. And all individuals can enjoy due human rights. His deliberate insistence on human freedom and human rights is
noteworthy, because it challenges the birth based caste systemic enslavement of individuals who have been deprived of all human rights.

Brahmanic religion believes in the worship of stars, stones or metal icons, which is absolutely false in Phule’s views. Therefore he does not consider a person the follower of truth who worships stars, stones or metal icons.

These two tenets are important to understand Phule’s rational position on the issue of religion. According to him worship of stars, stones and metal icons is the results of superstition which makes man slave of religious masters i.e. priests.

According to Phule all human rights are given by The Creator, and not by any religious book, hence religion does not have any right to deprive any man of these human rights. He says:

Our creator has graciously bestowed all human rights on all men and women, without any distinction. No particular man or a group (gang) of men has any right to oppress any human being. Those who do not so oppress their fellow beings should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.” (33)

Phule believes that all men and women are equal in the eyes of Creator; they are equally bestowed with human rights without any discrimination. Further, there is no place for any sort of oppression in Phule’s universal religion. In fact, Phule’s religious philosophical position is totally antithetical to the Brahmanic religious philosophical practice which, he found, to be containing many contradictions. Because, in some places in brahmanic texts woman is mata (mother), Durga, Kali (goddess) but some where she is deprived of freedom – Na
Stri Swatantryam arhati (women should not be given freedom) (Mani, 2005, 16)

Phule out rightly rejects and condemns every sort of oppression which is an integral part of brahmanic religion.

So far as the choice of religion by an individual is concerned, he says –

(7) Our creator has bestowed full religious and political autonomy (freedom) on all human beings. So nobody is justified in troubling other person. Those who respect other persons’ rights scrupulously and do not trouble others in any way should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (1991, 33)

This principle has a distinct significance because no religion provides this sort of freedom of religious choice. In present post modern socio-cultural situation world is suffering from religious and political egoism. Various religious compartments are being formulated and the possibilities of interreligious dialogues are coming to an end. Religious dogmatism and extremism is so increasing that even the existence of other religion has become unbearable. This religious dogmatism is turning into fanaticism which produces terrorism. In this situation Phule’s notion of religion which categorically approves man’s freedom of religious choice is truly amazing and necessary.

In Phule’s religion freedom of expression is also respected. Man’s personal opinions and views are important for Phule. One can doubt whether freedom of expression is a religious principle. But it is true that the untouchables and other
lower castes were deprived of voices. They were voiceless people. Hence Phule specifically incorporates this principle in his religion. He says:

(9) Our creator has given all human beings full freedom to express, to write down and to publish (propagate) their personal opinions and views regarding the human rights (which he has so kindly bestowed upon them all). Those who take scrupulous care not to harm other human beings while excercising the above mentioned freedom in their personal lives should be designated as the votaries of the Truth. (34)

Pure materialism is one of the crucial features of Phule’s universal religion of truth. Traditional religion, under the pretext of heavenly pleasure and celestial bliss, rejects and condemns the worldly life. In fact this is scholarly strategy deployed for the benefit of brahman elites. Brahman enjoys every pleasure of worldly life at the expenses of other’s miseries and hard work. Phule, on the contrary, insists on the worldly life. He puts:

(12) In accordance with the dictates of our creator, all human beings have rights regarding matters of religion, or village administration or revenue administration – such as their freedom (to enjoy these rights), their property, their defence and their protection from being oppressed. Those who do not hamper these rights should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (34)

Phule’s Universal Religion of Truth is indeed a comprehensive statement on human welfare which, besides equality, freedom and fraternity, thinks of morality as an indispensable criterion for a truthful human being. He says:

(14) Those men or women who do not consume narcotics such as opium or heroin or who do not imbibe wine (as per the direction of the doctors) and who do not commit any acts of injustice (to others) or who do not give any quarter to those
who indulge in such habits, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(16) Those men or women who do not tell lies either for their own selfish ends or to harm the interests of others and who do not assist liars should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(17) Men or women who do not indulge in immoral acts or who do not treat with respect persons indulging in such acts should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(18) Men or women who do not commit theft of any kind, or who do not help such thieves should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (34-35)

Jotirao Phule, throughout his writing, deconstructs the contradictions in brahmanic philosophy on which basis he propounds crucial dichotomous philosophic principles. He writes

(21) There are (selfish and crooked) persons who brag loudly that the religious scriptures have been composed for the common weal of all the people in this world, but who keep them tightly under their own vicious grasp and refuse even to show them to other fellow-citizens. Men or women who do not trust such treacherous braggarts should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (35)

Phule has rejected and condemned the notion of birth based superiority or inferiority of person, which is the most crucial characteristic of brahmanic religion.

(22) Men or women who do not regard either themselves or their blood relations or their own kith and kin or their own friends and companions only as pre-eminent, sacrosanct or specially privileged hereditarily, and who do not regard other human beings as of mean lineage or as unholy – such persons should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (35)
Attack on caste based discrimination i.e. demand for equality is the centre of Phules’ entire philosophic writing. And the person who does not believe in such discrimination under the influence of brahmanic religious text is the follower of truth. He says:

(23) Men or women who, on the dubious authority of their spurious and wicked scriptures, do not stigmatize other human beings as hereditary slaves (helots, thralls) or who do not pay respect to those who stigmatise others- should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (35)

Phule’s true religion takes cognizance of farmers and artisans who have been either neglected or condemned by the brahmanic religious system. His religion is basically of the masses, welfare of the masses i.e. farmers, artisans, laborers, women and the untouchables. He writes:

(26) Men or women who honor farmers or other artisans who earn their livelihood honestly, the hard way, and who pay respect to those who diligently help the farmers and allied classes, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(27) Men or women who do not look down upon persons earning an honest livelihood by working as unskilled labourers under a cobbler (a chamar), but who, moreover, praise persons aiding such artisans, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (36)

Last two commandments in The book of the True Faith especially focus on the futility of manmade discrimination. Through these commandments Phule exhibits his deep and sincere feelings for humanism. He says:
(32) Men and women who do not discriminate against human beings created by our creator or who do not make any (artificial) distinctions in their dealings with them regarding their food habits or the mode of their apparel, but conduct themselves with pure hearts to them, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth.

(33) Men or women who do not discriminate against human beings, but who are ever ready to help, to the best of their ability, lepers, physically handicapped persons or orphans, or honour those helping such person should be designated as the votaries or followers of the Truth. (36-37)

Thus, through these 33 commandments Phule’s philosophy of religion evolves which underlines the necessity and inevitability of an alternative religious system that would be antithetical to existing Brahmanic system.

Phule believes that all over the world women have been discriminated treated as marginal, because the makers of all religions are men. In one of the dialogues in The Book of the True Faith he says:

Ganapatrao : Dear Tatyasaheb, you say that all the scriptures, (religious books) were written by holy men. I would like to know if any holy woman has written any scriptures.

Jotirao : If a holy woman had written any scripture then men would not have been able to ignore the due rights of women and they would also not have waxed so eloquent about their own rights. If women were learned enough, then men would never have been able to be so partial and deceitful.” (38)

It is very important to note that in 1890 Phule argue for the rights of women and even pinpoint the limitation of the existing religious scriptures. Perhaps, due to his feminist position, which has not yet been recognized by established feminist
schools, he could incorporate principles regarding prominent place for women’s rights. G.P. Deshpande’s observation, in this connection, is worth consideration:

Phule is the first shudra thinker – as he himself would have liked to be described – to have thought about the gender question. The reformers of the so-called Indian Renaissance were content to take a basically humanist view of the problem. Their approach was liberal, progressive, and historically necessary. But their upper caste biases were apparent in much of what they did or advocated. In this respect, again, Phule is more radical than his contemporaries. (2002, 15)

Phule’s understanding of subordination of woman is beyond caste and religion. Woman, that may be brahman or atishudra, belong to the last segment of Hindu social structure, Phule knows this fact and hence views all women, irrespective of caste, as victims of brahmanic religious system. G.P. Despande further argues:

Phule does not talk of patriarchy. Nor does he give us a theory of man – woman inequality. He relates some aspects of woman’s position to the Arya-bhat social order. Though he does not say so explicitly, he seems to imply that the end of the Arya-bhat domination would ensure man-woman equality. To that extent, subordination of women is part of the larger process of the subordination of the shudratishudras. He would therefore not quite have approved of the present-day tendency towards organizing women in separated caste-based movement. For him, a Brahman woman was as much shudratishudra as a dalit woman. In that sense, it was a remarkably modern and gendered view, which saw gender itself, not verna, as the basis for the oppression that women faced. (15)

Thus, Phule’s notion of religion finds its culmination in the freedom of individual, freedom from brahman domination, equality among the people, equality of the opportunity, and freedom of expression, freedom of selection of
religion, insistence on morality and so on. And, the basis of his notion of religion is pure materialism which is in sharp contrast with the existing religious idealism and spiritualism. Therefore Phule emerges as the first materialist thinker and writer in modern India who brings dichotomous structure of Indian cultural system, and brilliantly deconstructs it. Any intelligent reader can easily discern the parities and similarities in Marxian and Phuleisque means and methodologies of conceptualization marveling towards a cultural reconstruction; a newer culture absolutely free of dominance and discrimination.
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