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Phule, Gandhi And Ambedkar On Dalit Emancipation And Education As A Panacea For Dalit Empowerment

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Abstract:

Caste has multiple implications in the socio-economic, cultural and political sphere in India. Though caste has its genesis in Portugal, yet it reached to India through the colonial rule. *Jati*, instead of caste, is the right word for defining social hierarchies among Indians, notwithstanding among Hindus. Now, caste becomes an Indian reality and affects India's social political and economic life in myriad ways. Is society responsible for the adoption of caste system in India and how caste system benefits certain sections of Indian society remains the centre of the analysis of this research article. What ways can be suggested for the empowerment of lower and lowest caste people who had been / have been subjected to caste-based discrimination? How the thoughts of greats like Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar remain relevant in terms of thinking of 'annihilation of caste', and how these great three invariably emphasize on the role of education in dalit empowerment, remains the epicenter of this research analysis.

Key Words: Caste, Dalit, Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Education.

Introduction:

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (popularly known as Ambedkar) was a thinker, crusader of caste-reforms and a great scholar. Ambedkar had an elaborate and deep understanding of socio-historical contours of caste system in India. Apart from his academic pursuit of caste, his own caste tag and the affiliated experiences also shaped his ideas that he echoed in his leadership during his anti-caste movements. Since childhood, unlike Phule and Gandhi, Ambedkar remained subjected to the caste-prejudices and practices. According to Ambedkar, Hinduism was once a missionary religion but it ceased to be so with the advent of caste system among the Hindus. Ambedkar analyzed that caste does not allow 'social mobility'. It is a closed loop. Therefore, a person discriminated on caste-lines cannot escape his or her caste to escape discrimination. Ambedkar finds that Hindu society is a collection of castes and each caste has been a close corporation. Ambedkar analyzed that the upper caste Hindus deliberately prevented the lower castes from rising to the cultural level of the upper castes. To Ambedkar, caste system breeds anti-social feeling, because of the division of the population into various castes. Ambedkar famously said that the caste has 'killed the public spirit' and made the collective 'public opinion' an impossibility. Anthony J. Parel points out the importance of Ambedkar in the larger design of India democracy: "B. R. Ambedkar is the great liberator of India's oppressed- the Dalits. Unlike Fanon, he sought to liberate them with the aid of law, the Constitution, and the state, not revolutionary violence and class struggle." (Parel 35).

Jyotiba Phule and Caste Question: In continuation of his efforts to form a society that would conduct itself on the Enlightenment values of Equality, Liberty and Justice, he founded the Satyasodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers). The objective of the Satyasodhak Samaj was to secure 'human dignity' and 'social justice' for the destitute-ridden untouchables and other low caste people. This was an unprecedented experiment in the long cherished 'nationalist' tradition of reforms in India. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar have been vocal of many such important areas where reforms were needed, but, this nationalist tradition did not 'mark' the need to reform the dalits that had long been exploited and marginalized, socio-culturally and historically. Therefore, Phule's social reform added a special chapter in the long-cherished history of reforms in India. Phule was convinced that before bringing change into the material conditions of dalits, it was important to do away with Brahminical ideology. To do that, Phule considered that access to knowledge is essential. Therefore, he believed that until the women and dalits do not get education, they would not be ready to free themselves from the clutches of persistent subjugation. (O'Hanlon 188-192).

The Satyasodhak Samaj had certain rules, total twenty-eight in number which were drawn up shortly after the inauguration of the society. The first rule would tell to its members to create the conditions for making the society aware about the 'terrible neglect' of the dalits and their alarming backwardness and also to make the dalits conscious about their rights. This highlights the enlightened vision of the society. Though the Satyasodhak

Samaj was for the social reforms and against the ill practices with which certain social groups can be identified, still its membership was not set 'casteist or religious'. This underlines the modern, secular and egalitarian of the Satyasodhak Samaj. Phule, in his writings, tried to reinterpret the old theories related to the Aryan invasion and Aryan colonization of the country. In opposition to Aryan theory, he conceptualized a reverse theory that claimed that Aryans 'clandestinely' and 'scrupulously' defeated the mainland 'Khastriyas' that were, later, marginalized to the status of the '*shudratishudra*'. Phule claimed that the Aryans were 'barbaric aliens' who 'conquered the indigenous powerful social groups of the time, shudras (Mahars and Mangs)'. (Figueira 147)

The Satyashodhak Samaj was only the first among many such organizations that was established for the emancipation and the welfare of the dalits. There was a difference in the treatment to the various dalit issues by different leaders and organizations. Still, it was having a kind of homogeneity being the part of Maharashtra's social order. There was a stark difference in the two classes in Maharashtra at that time. There were *shudratishudras* (dalits) who would work and would hardly be able to survive. On the other hand, the brahmins were respected and dominated the mainstream socio-political spectrum. The brahmins held the privilege of education whereas the shudratishudras (dalits) were kept ignorant. Therefore, the religious authority and the advantage of education for Brahmins pushed the dalits in a 'hopeless' backwardness. Here Phule found that the socio-political system was responsible for the perpetual backwardness and the plight of the dalits. Phule, while reflecting on the issue, found that until the dalits were allowed to get education, they would suffer endlessly. Hence, we see that Phule's larger discourse of dalit consciousness has not been limited to his rhetorical critique of brahminism, rather, parallel to it, he started taking concrete steps towards creating the opportunities of education of the dalits. Yet they all worked within the same broad set of assumptions about Maharashtra's history and the divisions in her present-day society. These assumptions were of a fundamental division within Maharashtrian society. On one side lay the vast majority of her population, who lived and labored on the land, who provided for the material support of all other groups, yet who lived in poverty and ignorance. On the other were the small groups of brahmins and other literate castes, who had added to their existing religious authority a virtual monopoly of English education and of clerical and professional employment in the British administration. The remedy for the plight of the lower castes lay in education, and in schemes of self-help and social reform. Yet their religious and social values, instilled by generations of brahman preceptors, lay in direct opposition to such schemes. (O'Hanlon 220). Gandhi and Ambedkar, both, also did not limit themselves to lead the political movements for removal of untouchability removal and the dalit emancipation, rather they also created institutions to help the dalits educationally and socially. Gandhi's *Harijan Sevak Sangh* and Ambedkar's *Bahiskrut Hitkarni Sabha* did the same for the dalits. Phule called for re-establishing the 'mythical age', the rein of the King Bali, a Kshatriya, which took place before the Aryan's 'coup d'etat'. (Figueira 148).

Gandhi's Quest for Social Reforms- Not Caste Reforms *per se*: In rationalising the argument against caste system, Gandhi took a metaphysical-religious approach. Gandhi insisted that as Hindus we all are all the children of same God. Therefore, how can there be any 'rank' or social gradation amongst us. He was found severely critical of those who would claim caste-based superiority in society. For him, we are all born as human being, following different faiths, but remain same at social level. Therefore, to Gandhi, social gradation of society is unscientific and inhuman. Gandhi was found troubled after seeing the plight of untouchables in various parts of Indian society. To bring a metaphysical tone to his call for social reform, he would call himself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver and a labour. That helped him to develop his counter-ideology of caste. Gandhi's commitment towards the removal of untouchability can be seen from the prominence it could receive in his writings and speeches. He started a journal by the title 'Harijan'.

Gandhi used to call himself a 'Harijan' (the son of the God) and believed that the God takes care of the weak and therefore the Harijans are the 'loved-ones' of the God. Though Ambedkar severely criticised Gandhi's use of Harijan as Ambedkar found that by using a name that has its origin in the same religion that persistently let the caste system discriminate against the untouchables, Gandhi rather exposed himself as the 'conscience-keeper of the upper caste Hindus' only. Gandhi believed that if the caste system persisted in post-independent India, the condition of the Harijans would be worse than during the time of the British. He feared that the power may create illusion of 'swaraj', but independent India would only realise true swaraj if its 'irrational and dehumanising' social practices also got eliminated from its social system. Therefore, Gandhi's untouchability removal movement involved the use of 'Harijan' and 'Young India' (newspapers) to propagate the awareness about these social ills and give a clarion call to the upper caste Hindus to welcome caste-based social reforms. Gandhi had a firm belief that Hinduism did not permit 'untouchability'. To qualify his view, Gandhi gives the example of major Indian texts, Bhagavad Gita and tells us that the Bhagavad Gita did not mention that a Brahmin is superior to an untouchable. Rather, to be a brahmin, one needs essentially 'not to believe' in untouchability, as believing in untouchability exemplifies 'inferiority' rather than 'superiority'. Interestingly, Gandhi was not in favour of the

removal of untouchability by an act of law. This is where Gandhi held an opposite opinion from Ambedkar. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar would believe in 'Constitutional-legal' framework to eradicate social ills. Gandhi believed that untouchability can only be removed once the upper caste Hindus start believing that it is 'criminal' to practice untouchability and it is a crime against God. Thus, Gandhi brings his 'metaphysical-religious' discourse in use to bring social reforms whereas Jyotiba Phule charts out counter-religious ideology in his social reform, whereas Gandhi sees the possibility of social reforms within the same religious paradigm, i.e., Hinduism. To Gandhi, to practice untouchability as a Hindu signifies the 'absence of the true understanding of the essence of Hinduism'.

Ambedkar's Call for Social Reforms and *Annihilation of Caste*: In 1927, at Mahad in Maharashtra, Ambedkar led a procession that included almost 10,000 persons to protest against the ills of caste system prevailing in the Hindu society. Socially, untouchables at that time were not supposed to use the same sources of water as the upper caste Hindus would use. Many untouchables of that time, under the leadership of Ambedkar, felt this practice irrational and inhuman. Therefore, Ambedkar, with almost 10,000 others, marched to the Chawadar Tank and exercised their civic rights to use the water and drink it. Subsequently, the text, *Manusmriti*, that Ambedkar believed had been the 'sanctity' behind the upper caste Hindus' belief to practice untouchability, was also burnt. The Mahad Satyagrah (1927) remains the *first* such collective opposition to the caste-bound irrationality within the Hindu society. It was the first of many similar actions which later took place. Mahad Satyagraha not only opposed the socio-cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hindus but also kindled a sense of belief among the untouchable castes about their civil rights and the importance of 'collective action' to fight against caste system. This attracted the fury of many orthodox upper caste Hindus.

Furthermore, commenting on Gandhi's approach to the removal of untouchability, Ambedkar said that Gandhi failed to recognise that our actions are the outcomes of our belief-system. The belief of caste system by Upper caste Hindus emanates from the shashtras (Hindu scriptures) and people would not change their behaviour until these shashtras were attacked and criticised as their social behaviour is guided by the dictums of these shashtras. (Rodrigues 290). Ambedkar says that the caste has 'a divine basis'. Therefore, prior to destroying caste at social level, the 'sacredness and divinity' of caste has to be broken. (Rodrigues 290).

Subsequent to the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar questioned the religious hegemony of upper caste Hindus in general and Brahmins (priestly class) in particular in selectively observing the right to pray in the temples. Till then, the right to enter into the temples was restricted for the untouchable castes, socially. In 1929, Ambedkar began temple-entry campaign for untouchable castes. It is noteworthy that much before Ambedkar, Gandhi called for the temple entry rights of the untouchable castes in Viakam. Gandhi was against the mentions of untouchability in the Hindu scriptures. He categorically criticised this aspect of shashtras or Hindu scriptures however, failed to admit Ambedkar's call for the total annihilation of all the cannons of Hinduism. Gandhi also failed to reconcile that the fact that the caste and untouchability are the natural institutions. In 1925, while talking to the pundits of the Viakam, he failed to be persuaded. Gandhi was conscious of the fact that if he fashioned his thoughts as a social reformer, perhaps he had to face the fury of the orthodox upper caste Hindus. Therefore, as we see in the Round Table conferences, he presented himself as the protector of the Hinduism. For Ambedkar, this move remained hypocritical on the part of Gandhi. (Kolge 167).

Almost fifteen thousand untouchables collectively tried to enter the Kalaram Temple of Nasik, Maharashtra. As expected, the untouchables were denied the entry and riots among the two rivalling communities broke out. Here it is noteworthy that Ambedkar used, initially, the Satyagraha method, as a socio-political tool to bring social reforms, in both the Mahad Satyagraha and in the Kalaram Temple Satyagraha. It is during the Kalaram Satyagraha protest, Ambedkar was found appreciating Gandhi and following the Gandhian method of protest. It is also noteworthy that the Temple Entry movement was partially led by both, Gandhi and Ambedkar. Ambedkar, later opined that Gandhi's separation of the social and the moral consequences of the caste system, in fact, led to legitimize the hereditary based, not merit based, system in India, and therefore, was 'degrading'. To Ambedkar, defending Varna leads to defending caste system in its modern avatar. Ambedkar could not appreciate Gandhi's caste critique in the backdrop of his support to the varna system. (Rathore: 125). Gandhi criticized the upper caste Hindus for this but felt that untouchables must not make it a 'fundamental issue'. Though for different reasons, Ambedkar also did not participate later in the Temple Entry movements as he felt that fighting for temple entry beyond a point would reflect the 'dependency' of dalits on Hindu religion. He wanted to holistically challenge the cannons of Hinduism. This got qualified when in 1935 Ambedkar announced that he was born as a Hindu but would not die as a Hindu. (Berg 53). Berg analyzes that there had been fundamental differences between the Gandhi's and Ambedkar's approaches to temple entry movement leadership. For Ambedkar it remained the issue of 'civil rights and access to public spaces', whereas for Gandhi, it remained a question of 'religious reform and national cohesion'. (Berg 78). For Gandhi, untouchability was not a result of the caste system but of a distinction between the 'high and the low' within the Hindu religion. Though

Gandhi was found persistently vocal against caste based hierarchical grading system within Hinduism, yet he was found supportive of 'Varna' as a natural social order. (Berg 79).

Phule, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Role of Education in Bringing Social Change

In 1882, Jyotiba Phule appeared before the Hunter Commission which was entrusted with the responsibility to investigate the prevailing conditions of education in India. Phule got the chance, due to his affiliation with the missionaries, his interactions with the government officials and, more importantly, due to his long-standing social reforms in the field of education for dalits and women. Before the Hunter Commission, Phule emphasised over the need of bringing 'state-supported' educational system. It is noteworthy here that the government till then was not directly regulating the education system. He insisted for the education for women and the lower and lowest castes. Like a modernist, he was against Sati system and was against the child marriage. He was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment values and therefore, throughout his life, he was found believing in the Western ideas of liberal democracy. He was a votary of the Western education and therefore, demanded before the Hunter Commission free and compulsory education- till the age of twelve years.

Along with the free and compulsory primary education, he was also an advocate of technical / vocational education. Phule considered that the vocational education would work as a significant window for the lowest / low castes to participate in the mainstream process of development and to minimise the impact of caste-ridden marginalities at socio-economic levels. He believed that better education and the idea of a good life are closely associated. Perhaps, he would have drawn this inference seeing the British. He was very vocal of the life conditions of the mill workers in Bombay as well as the abject life conditions of the farmers, mostly belonging to the lower / lowest castes. He found education, along with other 'structural changes' at social levels, as the panacea to correct such social mistakes. Like Gandhi and Ambedkar, Phule was perhaps the first among them to use the press for the cause of social reform. Though not subjected to the miseries of life, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule lived a life of sacrifices so that they could bring social change. In every aspect of life Phule was a social reformer. Gandhi's concept of 'Nai Taleem' (New Education) and his 'Constructive Programme' categorically talk about the human and rational characteristics of education. Gandhi also emphasized over the 'vocational education' in order to make individual and society self-reliant, economically.

Sharmila Rege (2010) critically evaluates Jyotiba Phule's thoughts on education as Phule emphasized over the relevance of education in guarding against the discrimination of dalits. Rege finds that Phule was the first Marathi author for the play on the intriguing relationship between education and social reform. His first play, titled, 'Trutiya Ratna' (Third Eye), written in 1955, was the first Marathi play to take up the issue. In this play, Phule tried to sensitize the oppressed minds to understand the complex relationship between 'power and knowledge'. In this play Phule discusses that it is the privilege of those who are in power to proliferate their ideological biases with the instrumentality of knowledge. The marginal communities deliberately had been 'sidelined' in the knowledge discourses. He accused Brahmins that they deliberately forged a knowledge system that sets them in the center of the things and hence, creates a narrative of their heroism. In the play *Trutiya Ratna* (The Third Eye), the narrative revolves around the corruption done by the Brahmins. Ironically, during the British times, it was easy to establish the Brahmin officials as corrupt ones, yet this could not 'dismantle' the hegemonic social status of Brahmins in the Twentieth century Maharashtra during the times of Phule. This exemplified the deep-rooted religious sanctity that the Brahmins enjoy that time. Brahmins as the priests and priests as the 'privileged' class was a common consciousness of Indian society and British, to a great extent, could also not escape from this social consciousness. Phule, later in his political discourses, also accused the British rule for legitimizing the 'Brahminism' through the induction of Brahmins in the administrative positions of the government. (O'Hanlon 206). It is also noteworthy that Phule used the terms like *shudraatishudra* to denote the lower castes community, not the words that had a regional appeal, like Maratha or Maharashtrian. (O'Hanlon 162).

Dalits were deliberately left from which narrative, to further the ideological interests of Brahmins. (Rege 91-94). Ambedkar, following the same line of thought, also gave a slogan of 'Educate, Agitate and Organise' to the dalits in a speech that he delivered in the Nagpur in an All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942. This slogan became the 'guiding principle' for the subsequent dalit discourses across India. Here, Ambedkar also emphasizes the role of education in ensuring the outcome of the protest against socio-economic and cultural inequality. Therefore, we see that Phule adopted the 'dialogical form' in his writings to establish better reasoning while emphasizing the role of education and hence, criticized the narrow outlook of education that limits itself to the receipt of university degrees. Phule and Ambedkar, both, thought alike in terms of the role and relevance of education in forging a robust social movement against caste ills within Indian society. Ambedkar also emphasized the need to cater education to the 'vulnerable' sections of society, including women and dalits, to establish social equality in the society.

Conclusion:

Phule and Gandhi were visionaries in terms of anticipating the methods of dalit empowerment and rule out the ill impact of the functioning of caste system in India. Both of them were not satisfied with the existing education system of their times and they put forth new ideas to establish totally new systems of education. While Phule put his ideas before the Hunter Commission, Gandhi suggested a new system for basic education, known by different names such as Nai Talim (new education), the Wardha system and the Gandhian system. Appreciating Jyotirao Phule's ideology, Gandhi paid rich tributes to his precursor of a great movement and said that Jyotiba was a real Mahatma. Gandhi and Ambedkar, like Phule, equally emphasized the importance of education in bringing social change.

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