



Mahatma Govindrao Jotiba Phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj : A Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper elaborates on "Mahatma Govindrao Jotiba Phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj : A Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra in the Second half of the Nineteenth Century". The Satya Shodhak Samaj was founded by Mahatma Jotiba Govindrao Phule in 1873 for the uplift of lower castes. The Movement led by Mahatma Jotiba Phule was against the practice of untouchability and casteism. Mahatma Phule also fought for safeguarding the interests of the poor and landless peasants, discriminations prevailed in society based on socio-economic strata and based on gender. He gave much emphasis on opening educational institutes for girls and untouchable communities. Mahatma Phule also launched movement against widow practice. He awakened Shudras and non-Brahmins on a large scale. Mahatma Phule brought many revolutionary transformations among the depressed and backward classes, a sizable section of society. He brought social legislation like prohibition of practice of widowhood, Devdasi system, Prohibition of Practice of untouchability.

Introduction

In Maharashtra, the Brahmins had been the dominant caste till the arrival of the British and even after the establishment of the colonial administration formed the bulk of the new elite that had emerged due to English education. Leaders of the social reform movements were often high caste. (Mahadev Govind Ranade, Kashinath Trim-bak Telang, N.G. Chandravarkar, and Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar were Brahmins). In fact two movements for social reform can be identified in Maharashtra. The first was the Brahmin led movements like the National Social Conference and the Prarthana Samaj. The second was the non-Brahmin (at times even anti-Brahmin) movement of Jotiba Phule begun in the 1870s. The prominent concern of this movement was the social improvement of the middle and lower castes especially among the Marathas. The need and impetus for reform in Maharashtra came from the realization of stagnation in society. However the perceptions differed as to its cause. The social background and the context in which caste consciousness emerged in Maharashtra were very different from other parts of the country. Mahatma Phule is regarded as important figure of the social reform movement in Maharashtra. He believed in overthrowing the social system in which he has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. He became a pioneer of dalit liberation social transformation in his lifetime.

Brahmanical Social Reform Movements in Maharashtra

The Brahmin led movement for social reform in Bombay was careful to take into account resistance from the orthodox section. Social opprobrium and disapproval could often be personally costly to reformers. This was manifested in their need for social sanction and not mere legal sanction for reform. By supporting gradual social and religious reform they hoped to avoid a radical break with tradition. Mahadev Govind Ranade was the most prominent figure in this movement. He advocated against rebellion and revolt from society fearing that such radicalism would do more harm than good to the cause of social reform.

Other reformers however were critical of the evolutionary nature of reform proposed by Mahadev Govind Ranade.

Awaiting social sanction for the path of reform may make it more sure but the pace would be excruciatingly slow to confer immediate benefits. Social reform thus far had been restricted mainly to issues concerning the upper castes (like female education, widow remarriage etc.). Issues of caste and social advancement of lower castes rarely received attention. To leaders from lower castes like Mahatma Phule "the progress along lines of least resistance" as advocated by Mahadev Govind Ranade often implied no progress at all. The close link between the social and political movements in Bombay presidency also resulted in social reforms being sidelined in favour of political reforms.

Jotiba Govindrao Phule (1827-1890)

Mahatma Jotiba Govindrao Phule was born in 11 April, 1827 in mali caste in Katgun, Satara, Maharashtra. His mother died when he was nine months old. He got married at the age of twelve. This caste had a distinct position because the members lived by cultivating and selling fruits and flowers. This caste acted as medium of contact between rural areas and the growing centres of Western India. In the caste hierarchy the malis were shudras, the lowest. Mahatma Phule's father Govindrao had set up a green grocers shop to sell the produce of the land. Phule had to leave school after completing primary education and helped his father in family's farm just outside Pune (Poona). Phule's neighbours persuaded his father to allow Phule to attend the Scottish Mission High School in Pune. He completed in 1847. The school was Jotiba Phule's first encounter with new ideas of social reform and religious radicalism. The Scottish mission had a certain determination to admit the boys of lowest castes and this led to conflict with Brahmin students. This intermingling of castes as well as atmosphere of hostility left their on Phule. Mahatma Phule died on November 28, 1890.

The most important changes that were to take place in the nineteenth century, concerned education and learning. It was no doubt possible for small numbers of the lower castes to acquire some sort of education under Peshwa rule, contemporary Hindu attitudes to the education of the shudras made it unlikely that facilities would ever be made available for their teaching on any large scale. Most of the

lower castes, employed as cultivators or labours, were simply too poor to afford the luxury of education. Yet Hindu values did play a very important part in shaping opportunities for literacy and learning. Mahatma Phule and his wife Savitri Bai Phule were pioneers of women education in India. First girls school was opened in India by them in August 1848. He opened first native library for lower caste students. In 1854, he joined Scottish Mission School as a teacher. He opened a night school in his house in 1855 and his wife helped him in this task. In 1857, government allotted him a plot to set up a school. Phule opened an orphanage for destitute women which greatly helped the destitute women.

Foundation of Satya Shodhak Samaj By Mahatma Jotiba Phule

Mahatma Jotiba Phule was a thinker and social reformer in Maharashtra, founded Satya Shodhak samaj (Society of seekers of Truth) in 1873 for upliftment of shudras and untouchable castes against oppression and exploitation in prevailing caste hierarchical system, equal rights for landless peasants and poors in Maharashtra. Its membership was open to all. Mahatma Phule was its first President and treasurer. There were 316 members of the Satyashodhak Samaj 1876. in He was against the social practices of untouchability and casteism and condemned caste hierarchy and orthodox nature of religion. Phule was against child marriage and sati practice. Discriminations prevailed in society based on socio-economic strata in society and on gender basis. Phule refused to regard Vedas as sacrosanct and opposed idolatory. He opened many schools and colleges for girls and untouchables. He was a staunch supporter of widow remarriage. Mahatma Phule was nominated as member of Poona Municipality in 1876. Mahatma Phule tried to help in the severe famine which took place in Maharashtra in 1877. He raised his voice for poors and landless peasants. Condemning the prevalent religion Mahatma Jotiba Phule established Satya Shodhak Samaj with simple religious principles. Mahatma Phule was influenced by Thomas Paine's book 'Rights of Man'(1791). He developed a keen sense of justice. The Hindu religion with the caste system as one of its pillars, violated such rights and was thus indefensible. Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. Mahatma Phule was in favour of western education and demanded free and compulsory primary education up to the age of twelve. He advocated technical education for the lower castes. He also agitated for better living conditions of for the workers in the mills in Bombay.

Mahatma Phule's some of the notable published work

Tritiya Ratna (1855), Brahmananche Kasab (1869), Gulamgiri (1873), Shetkaryanch Asud (1883), Ishara (October,1885), Satsar Vol. 1 (June,1885), Satsar Vol. 2 (October,1885), Gramjoshya Sambhandi Jahir Kasab (1886), Satyashodhak Samajokt Mangalashatakasah Sarva Puja-vidhi (1887), Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Poostak (April,1889), Sarvajanic Satya Dharmapustak (1891).

Satya Shodhak Samaj - A Social Reform body

Disenchanted with the Brahmin leadership of the social reform movement many reformers disassociated themselves from existing reform bodies to start their own. Most prominent among them was Mahatma Jotiba Phule the social reformer who emerged from the lower castes. The accent on nationalism before reform, the gradual nature of the transformation advocated, the lack of concerted attempts

to the reform the caste system, were some of the reasons that increasingly alienated Mahatma Phule from the Brahmin-led social reform movements. A strong advocate of female emancipation and female education he founded a girls school in Poona. He actively supported the widow remarriage movement and opposed polygamy and child marriages.

Mahatma Jotiba Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj for the uplift of lower castes and prevent their exploitation by Brahmins and the upper castes. Rationality and the equality were the principles on which he based the Satya Shodhak Samaj. The former principle was used to overthrow tradition and deny the supremacy of the scriptures. The principle of equality was used to attack the caste system. The Satya Shodhak Samaj worked to undermine the cultural and religious sanction for priest hood by conducting rituals and ceremonies without Brahmins. In its attack on the caste system it drew from both Western rationalism as well as indigenous sources of social revolt like the Bhakti. What distinguished the Satya Shodhak Samaj was its non elitist mass nature. In propagating its ideology it made wide use of the vernacular. The backbone its came from the Maratha peasantry (Maratha Kunbis, Malis, Kolis etc.). It also gained some support from untouchables. The "commercial bourgeoisie" comprising of tradesmen, contractors etc. were another source of support.

The activities of the Satya Shodhak Samaj got a fillip when the Maharaja of Kolhapur extended his support to it. The Maharaja had realized that political power was also necessary for advancement of the backward classes. To this end he encouraged the education of the lower castes and introduced reservation for them in his administration. Following Mahatma Phule he aided in replacing religious ceremonies which previously were the prerogative of Brahmins by those performed by the lower castes themselves. Brahmins who were the main losers in the new dispensation were the most vocal in condemning the Kolhapur experiment.

Two criticisms directed against the movement which have persisted in the historiography of social reform were that it was anti-national and that it was rabidly anti-Brahmin. These two criticisms must be examined in the social and political context of the times.

The major difference of Mahatma Phule with the National movement in Bombay, dominated by Chitpawan Brahmins, was over the primacy of social reform over political reform. Increasingly he found that attempts to address the question of caste were sacrificed in the interests of the national unity. Mahatma Phule was not blind to the exploitative nature of colonial administration. And while he questioned the wisdom of opposing the British through a movement that would come under upper caste control and influence he was well aware that the elite dominated colonial administration was also a cause of exploitation. Mahatma Phule's dilemma about the Nationalist struggle was thus an acute one.

But for Mahatma Phule, the sources of lower caste exploitation were two. The colonial regime and the Brahmanical cultural system. He was well aware that political reforms in the absence of substantial social reforms would at best result in the substitution of one form of exploitation by another. Along with the neglect of caste based reforms when the intervention of the government became less welcome to the National movement, it was not surprising that Mahatma Phule turned towards the British for succor, though

he was well aware that the concessions he could extract were limited.

Mahatma Phule thought well of British rule and western influence as he hoped that they would help to liberate the Shudras and the lower castes. Indeed he once said "the creater has purposely sent the English people to liberate the disabled Shudras from the slavery of the crafty Aryas". He did not hesitate to accept British financial help and his open administration for the work of Christian Missionaries was such that his detractors claimed that he had converted to Christianity.

The Satya Shodhak Samaj as a lower caste body had a great role in breaking down the barriers among the Marathas and the creation of the Maratha identity. Its contribution to the emerging domination of the Marathas in the political scene and their upward mobility in social status was no small one. But as a non-Brahmin movement it failed to carry all sections of the lower castes with it. The political and social ascent of the Maratha caste was to some extent based on the exclusion of the out-castes and untouchable communities. The higher the status that the caste gained in the social and cultural ladder, the lesser was its inclination to undermine the system and further the prospectus for social revolution receded into the background. To a certain extent it was co-opted into the same cultural system that it set out to overthrow.

Conclusion

While the anti-Brahmin nature of Mahatma Phule's movement can not be easily denied there was nevertheless sufficient rationale for it. The anti-Brahmanism was part of developing consciousness among the lower castes for a social revolution. The rising in status of the most impure (untouchables and lower castes) could only take place when the status of the top most is devalued. Hence the anti-Brahmin nature of most lower caste movements. The Satya Shodhak Samaj movement of Mahatma Jotiba Phule was anti-Brahmin because the existing cultural system rested on the primacy and superiority of the Brahmins and any social revolution must aim at the overthrow of this superiority and dominating ideology of Brahmanism. He subscribed to the Aryan invasion theory to prove that the traditional cultural system that emerged was foreign in origin. It can be seen as an attack on the cultural system rather than an alternative historical explanation. Mahatma Phule was the son of an obscure lower caste family. He attacked on the religious authority of Brahmins. His initiatives set off a broad and very active movement of the lower castes which was to have a profound effect upon the growth of political organization in the Bombay Presidency and the shaping of the nationalist movement towards the end of the nineteenth century. He worked in the fields of Caste system, education particularly for women and lower castes, removal of untouchability and upliftment of widows.

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