

[Vol. LXIV, No. 1 (II)]

[2022]

पुराणम्
PURANA
(Half-yearly Bulletin)

[Vol. LXIV, No. 1 (II)]

[2022]

पुराणम्
PURANA

(Half-yearly Bulletin of the Purana-Department)

आत्मा पुराणं वेदानाम्



ALL-INDIA KASHIRAJ TRUST
FORT, RAMNAGAR, VARANASI (INDIA)

Journal on
PURANA (पुराणम्)
ISSN No.: 0555-7860

Vol. LXIV, No. 1 (II), 2022
(Special Issue)
January-June, 2022
Impact F. : 6.1

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Managing Editor & Publisher:
ALL-INDIA KASHIRAJ TRUST
FORT, RAMNAGAR, VARANASI (INDIA)

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SATYASHODHAK SAMAJ: A MOVEMENT THAT EMANCIPATED THE 'ENSLAVED'

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Abstract

The Satyashodhak Samaj was founded by Mahatma Phule with his associates in 1873 in Maharashtra. The term 'Satyashodhak Samaj' means 'the Truth-Seekers' Society'. This earliest Non-Brahmin Movement in modern India has contributed to such a great extent in every possible realm of the contemporary society, be it- social, political, educational, economic and cultural- that it should be considered as no less than the movement for renaissance in modern India. Yet, there is still less acknowledgement to this movement. The term 'Enslaved' in the title refers to the Oppressed i.e., women, peasants and 'untouchables' or as Phule would say 'Stri-Shudraatishudra'. Thus, this paper will try to understand the impact of Satyashodhak Samaj on these Oppressed-who were 'enslaved' with the evil customs, traditions, rituals, scriptures imposed on them by the Caste Hindus, especially the Brahmins and also how the 'true knowledge' from Satyashodhak Samaj enabled them to become liberated. Satyashodhak Samaj also drew inspiration from the other revolutions in the world, American Revolution, in particular and the 'Negros' who fought against the slavery. Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj dreamt this same emancipation for the 'Stri-Shudraatishudras' from the slavery of the Brahmins in modern India. This paper will try to highlight the work done by the 'Satyashodhaks', especially Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Fatima Sheikh and Mukta Salve.

Keywords: Satyashodhak Samaj, Stri-Shudraatishudras, Emancipation.

Introduction

Satyashodhak Samaj:

Established on 24th September, 1873 by Mahatma Jotirao Phule and his like-minded associates, Satyashodhak Samaj i.e., 'Truth-Seeking Society', was the earliest non-Brahmin movement of the Bahujan (masses) in India which championed the cause of *Shudra-Atishudra*, women, peasants and workers. The goal of the Samaj was to make the *Shudras* and the *Ati-Shudras* aware of their civil rights and free them from religious and emotional slavery imposed by Brahminical scriptures. Interestingly to become a member of the Samaj one had to swear loyalty to the British government as the members believed its modern ideas would liberate them from the Brahmanical slavery. Although being non-Brahmin movement, its membership was open to all castes including brahmins and even to people from other religions like Jewish and Muslims as well who were committed to anti-caste goals.

In 1911 the Satyashodhak Samaj published its resolutions comprising three guiding principles:
a) *All human beings are children of one God; hence, they are my brothers and sisters,*

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

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

After the demise of Jotiba in 1890 and his wife Savitribai in 1897, the movement continued by Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, Keshavrao Jedhe, Madhavrao Bagal, Dinkarrao Jawalkar, Kranitsinha Nana Patil, Mukundrao Patil and A. H. Salunkhe etc.

The Satyashodhaks:

1. Jotiba Phule:

Jotirao Phule, born on April 11, 1827 at Katgun village in Satara, was the pioneer anti-caste social reformer, writer and great Satyashodhak from Maharashtra. He was married to Savitribai Phule in 1840. During his secondary education in missionary school, he was greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's book viz. 'Rights of Man'. As he was 'Mali' (lower caste), he faced humiliation at the marriage procession of upper caste friend, in 1848, which ignited Jotiba's mind to end this discriminatory caste system.

Crusader of Education and Anti-Caste Social Reforms: In the '*Chaturvarna*' (four *Varnas* in Hindu) society where only upper caste men were allowed education, Jotiba with his wife Savitribai, opened the first school for girls and *Mahars* and *Mangs* (two Dalit castes in Maharashtra) in Bhide Wada, Pune in 1848. Being a staunch supporter of gender equality and women's rights, Jotiba first taught his wife Savitribai and made her the first female teacher. Jotiba dared to become 'that man behind his successful woman.' They even were forced out of their home as they both were working for education among the *Shudras* (lower castes) and *Ati-shudras* (untouchables). He also opened night school in 1855. His was the only representation to the Hunter Commission of 1882 with the concern of the education of lower castes and accused the British government for ignoring the education to the non-upper castes. He believed in the universal compulsory education. In the introduction to his book '*Shetkaryacha Asood*' he writes:

Without knowledge the mind was lost,

Without the mind virtue was lost,

Without virtue fortune was lost,

Without fortune wealth was lost,

Without wealth the Sudras sank;

Such was the havoc wreaked by wisdom's lack. ⁱⁱⁱ

He dedicated his life for the upliftment of the *Stri-Shudratishudras*. In 1868, he opened his own water tank for the untouchables. He firmly rejected the authority of the *Vedas* and Hindu scriptures and exhorted the masses to do the same. He asked this brilliant question: "*If there is only one God who created the whole mankind, why did he write the Vedas only in Sanskrit? What about those who do not understand this language?*" ^{iv} (Sayanekar, 2020)

Even Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was inspired by his anti-caste writings and made him his guide. **Writer:** Besides '*Shetkaryacha Asood*' (Cultivator's Whipcord) he also wrote *Gulamgiri* (Slavery); *Brahmanache Kasab* (Priestcraft Exposed), *Sarvajanik Satyadharma* (Universal Religion of Truth) and a drama '*Trutiya Ratna*'. Through his writings he exposed the truth about how cunning Brahmins were exploiting the ignorance of the masses. He revealed the nexus of the then 'bourgeoisie classes' in Maharashtra i.e., '*Bhatji* (Brahmans) –*Shetji* (moneylenders)' and blamed them for the pitiful condition of the masses. He also held the British government responsible for the poverty of farmers and workers.

Religion: In his '*Sarvajanik Satyadharma*' Phule hoped for 'Universal Religion of Truth' which will be based on liberty, equality, rationale, dignity, justice and fraternity. He attacked false beliefs and superstitions. Just like Brahmo Samaj, his Satyashodhak Samaj also believed in monotheism. Phule created a new term for God as 'Nirmik' i.e., Creator and believed that true worship is to serve the humankind.

Cultural Revolution: Phule had realised that the masses were not just the slaves of the religious scriptures but also of the cultural hegemony of *Brahmins*. Phule gave them the new hope by bringing up alternative culture of masses in the public. In his Satyashodhak Samaj, he used folk arts like *Povada* (Ballads), *Jalsas*, *Akhandas*, *Gondhal*, *Kirtan*, *Lavani*, *Tamasha* etc. to awaken the masses. It is Jotiba who first started celebrating Shiv Jayanti in 1870 as for him Shivaji Maharaj was 'the adornment to the tillers of the soil'.^v

Phule's Akhandas:

Phule counterpoised his *Akhandas* to the *Abhangas* of the Varkari saints from the Bhakti movement. While *Abhangas* still accept the authority of Hindu scriptures *Akhandas* reject to do so. Unlike sophisticated *Abhangas*, *Akhandas* are the compositions which are not written in Sanskritized Marathi.

In one of his *Akhandas* viz. 'A Peasant Woman' he details the daily routine of *Shudra* woman and counterpoised it to *Brahmin* woman's routine. He writes:

She (Shudra woman) takes a big basket full of cow-dung cakes on her head, while carrying her baby on her back.

To earn a living, a shudra mother roams the alleys and lanes hawking cow-dung cakes. She does not worship idols, unlike a Brahmin woman, who walks arrogantly flaunting her ornaments.

The wicked Aryans call her a kulambin. This is really shameful, says Joti.

A Brahmin woman neither applies fragrant scrub to a shudra woman nor bathes her. She does not comb her hair. She does not wipe off water from her body.

She does not need to wash sarees and blouses [of a shudra woman].

She does not clean up plates with leftovers of a shudra woman or tend shoes in [her] house.

She does not take care of shudra children or kiss them, says Joti.^{vi}

Thus, he argues that even though a *shudra* woman toils throughout the day she is still not respected in the society but rather is called '*kulambin*' (a contemptuous Marathi word for vulgar). On the other hand, a Brahmin woman, '*does not do any labour but just indulges in idle tricks*' and yet is

rich and respected in the society. This analysis of his is just parallel with the Dalit Feminists' critique of 'Brahmanical Patriarchy'.^{vii} (Chakravarti, 1993)

Women's Rights: He strongly opposed child marriages, Sati and vehemently supported the widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. In 1863, he established Infanticide Prohibition Home. In 1889, he even organized the barbers strike to prevent the evil practice of Keshavpan (tonsuring of widow's head) among Brahmins. He also worked for the prevention of Devdasi system (temple prostitution). He believed all these evil practices were rooted in brahmanical order.

Satyashodhak Marriage: Phule even started this practice of simple marriages without the priests as mediators in order to avoid waste of money, to oppose dowry and rituals. This marriage believed in the equality between man and woman. These marriages lessened the burden of loans on the poor families. Today even Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti is propagating Satyashodhak Marriages.^{viii}

On May 11, 1888 he was fondly felicitated and honoured by the public with the title 'Mahatma'. On November, 1890 he passed away.

2. Savitribai Phule:

With Jotiba, Savitribai too, has done immense work to uplift the oppressed which often is not remembered enough. She was the equal champion of anti-caste movement and gender equality as her companion Jotirao Phule. Born on January 3, 1831 at Naigaon, she was married at the age of 10 to Jotirao (who was 13-years old) in 1840. Though they could not stop their own child marriage, together they raised voice and went against many evil *Manuwadi* and Brahmanical customs and practices against women.

Feminist and Educator: With her husband, Savitribai established India's first girls' school and became the first female teacher in 1848. Besides girls, she also educated the *Shudras* and *Ati-shudras* boys who were barred from the education. She was very supportive to her husband even after they were evicted from their house by her father-in-law. The *Manuwadi* and orthodox Hindus could not tolerate a sight of this brave woman walking in a public place alone with the books to teach other girls. They pelted stones, mud and cow-dung on her. Some even verbally abused her. Savitribai bore all this patiently and stood against the forces of caste and patriarchy. Savitribai was not just a teacher but also a kind, generous and loving woman like a mother to her students. Students from the hostel run by the Phule couple remembered how she would offer poor students her own clothes and food with love.

Poet and Writer: Very few know that Savitribai was also modern Indian poet. Her poems collection '*Kavyaphule*' written in 1854 is one such example. This collection of poems and her other writings have been put together and made available to the people under the title '*Savitribai Phule-Samagra Vangmay*' (The Complete Works of Savitribai Phule) - thanks to the scholar Dr. M. G. Mali. In this, we can find and read her writings which include-Jotirao's Speeches, Edited by Savitribai Phule, 25 December 1856; Savitribai's Letters to Jotirao; Speeches of Matoshree Savitribai, 1892; Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar, 1892.

Her poems from 'Kavyaphule' cover wide range of subjects from nature, history, education to social issues. Her most appreciated poem on education is befitting even today. She writes:

Go, Get Education

Be self-reliant, be industrious

Work—gather wisdom and riches,

All gets lost without knowledge

We become animal without wisdom,

Sit idle no more, go, get education

End misery of the oppressed and forsaken,

You've got a golden chance to learn

So learn and break the chains of caste.

Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast.^{ix}

Savitribai, just like Jotiba, believed that English is the real language of emancipation as opposed to Sanskrit which rejected education to the *Stri-Shudratishudras*. She explains this through her poem:

Learn English

Make self-reliance your occupation,

Exert yourself to gather the wealth of knowledge,

Without knowledge animals remained dumb,

Don't rest! Strive to educate yourself.

The opportunity is here,

For the Shudras and Ati Shudras,

To learn English

To dispel all woes.

Throw away the authority

Of the Brahmin and his teachings,

Break the shackles of caste,

By learning English.^x

Her letters to Jotirao tells us how immensely they loved each other but also how even their love for each other was based on the shared concerns about the plight of the oppressed.^{xi}

Social Change and Service: Savitribai's relentless efforts and sacrifices have equal share in the social change that Jotiba brought.

They both were ardent supporters of widow remarriage. They even opened a 'home for the prevention of infanticide' in their own house to ensure the safe delivery of pregnant and exploited widows. Not just that but they opened an orphanage to take care of these 'abandoned' children as well. They had no child of their own but adopted a child of a Brahmin widow whom they named 'Yashwant', educated him and arranged an inter-caste marriage for him. These actions even today would seem bold.

Jotirao, paralysed due to heart attack in 1887, could manage to recover and write again, only on the strength of Savitribai's night and day nursing. Even when he passed away, it was Savitribai

who performed his death rites. This again was a slap in the face of the Brahmanical patriarchy where only a man is supposed to do this. After his demise, she led the Satyashodhak movement till her life. She chaired the Satyashodhak Conference at Saswad (Pune) in 1893. In 1897 Pune witnessed bubonic plague in which many died. Savitribai along with Yashwant set up a hospital to take care of the patients. Even this deadly disease could not separate her from her commitment to serve humankind. She would herself pick up sick people and bring them to the hospital for treatment. She knew that in a society where 'untouchability' was so common in normal times let alone this contagious epidemic, no one would 'touch' these 'untouchables', even to save them. In the same attempt to save one *mahar* son, she caught the plague and passed away on March 10, 1897.

Her work is so monumental and yet less celebrated. Today we celebrate September 5 as 'Teachers Day' in India on the occasion of the birth anniversary of our former vice-president and president, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. However, some sections of the society have been celebrating rather 'January 3' i.e., Savitribai Phule's birth anniversary as the 'National Teachers' Day'. This celebration rightfully honours this great liberator and educator we have ever got. Unfortunately, this realization is yet to spread among the mainstream.

3. Fatima Sheikh:

Looking at the insignificant attention to Savitribai Phule's service in our mainstream history, it is no wonder that her colleague, a Muslim woman, Fatima Sheikh, finds no mention in our history textbooks at all. Although her name is gaining recognition in recent years among activists and academicians, it is still yet to reach to the common people.

When the Phule couple was forced out of their own house by Jotiba's father, they were Fatima and her brother Usman Sheikh who had offered them their own house as a refuge and to open the 1st girls' school. Since then, both worked with Jotiba and Savitribai and their Satyashodhak Samaj. They both co-founded the Indigenous Library with the Phule couple in Pune in 1848 which became India's first girls' school. Since then, Fatima worked as a colleague of Savitribai and teacher in each and every school opened by Phule couple. Being a Muslim Bahujan woman she faced the same hate, taunts, cow-dung and stone attacks from the orthodox and upper caste Hindus. Just like Savitribai Phule, Fatima Sheikh too went from house-to-house to convince parents to enrol their daughters in school. Together these two lion-hearted women educated the Dalits and Muslims- both girls and boys.

In 1875, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan founded Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, known as Aligarh Muslim University today. However, Fatima Sheikh co-founded India's first girls' school and became first Muslim woman teacher in 1848 i.e., way before 1875. Yet she still has not found a place in popular history.^{xii}

In 2014, the government added Fatima Sheikh's achievements and efforts in Urdu textbooks.^{xiii} On 9th January, 2022, her 191st birth anniversary, Google honoured this fearless feminist, educator and first Muslim woman teacher of India, with the doodle. Nonetheless, she deserves more than this recognition in the mainstream.

4. Mukta Salve:

Mukta was one of the first 8 girl students enrolled in Phule's first school. She was a granddaughter of the revolutionary Lahuji Salve and belonged to *Matang* caste (then 'untouchable' caste in Maharashtra). Having received education from Savitribai, there is no doubt that she was raised with the thoughts and ideas of Satyashodhak Samaj. At the age of just 11-years old she wrote this essay about the poignant life that the *shudras* and *ati-shudras* lived in her times where she points out their oppression by the *Brahmins*. This essay was titled '*Mahar Mang chya Dukhishayi*' (About the grief of *Mahars* and *Mangs*) and is believed to be the first recorded female Dalit writing. It was first published in 1855 in '*Dnyanoday*', a Marathi periodical from Ahmednagar. Her sharp observations and understanding of society around her at such young age may surprise one.

Phule's critique of Brahmanical supremacy is reflected even in her essay as she writes: "*If the Vedas belong only to the Brahmins, then it is an open secret that we do not have the Book. We are without the Book—we are without any religion.... Let that religion, where only one person is privileged and the rest deprived, vanish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to boast of such a [discriminatory] religion.*"^{xiv}

While listing the brutalities against the *mahars* and *mangs*, she wrote about how the *brahmins* degraded her people as even lower than animals. She mentioned how under *Manuwadi* Bajirao Peshwa's rule, if any *mang* or *mahar* happened to pass in front of gymnasium, the Peshwas would cut off his head and play 'bat-ball' with their swords as bats and his head as ball.

She calls the British government as 'benevolent' and believes that it is a blessing that merciful God has bestowed upon her people. This is because under 'impartial' British government, as she writes- "*Harassment and torture of mahars and mangs, common during the rule of Peshwas in Pune, have stopped. Excessive and exploitative tax has stopped. The practice of untouchability has stopped in some places. Killing has stopped on the playground. Now, we can even visit the market place.*"^{xv}

She concludes with a message to her people- "*Only the medicine of knowledge will cure and heal you. It will take you away from wild beliefs and superstitions. You will become righteous and moral. It will stop your exploitation. People who treat you like animals, will not dare to treat like that anymore. So please work hard and study. Get educated and become good human beings.*"^{xvi}

With this she explains how education can give her people dignity. Such was the power of 'Satyashodhak education' that the 'downtrodden' masses could feel emancipated.

Unfortunately, like Fatima Sheikh, we do not have much information about Mukta Salve either, except this essay.

Conclusion:

The painstaking efforts of these and other Satyashodhaks, empowered the Bahujan to break from the shackles of slavery of Brahmanical order. Satyashodhak Samaj unveiled the 'truth' to the masses fooled in ignorance. In real sense, Satyashodhak Samaj proved 'knowledge is power.' Even

today the thoughts and ideas of Satyashodhak Samaj inspire the movements of Dalits, women, farmers, workers, students, minority religions and whoever fighting for justice.

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