



“Legacy of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule on Women's Empowerment”

Ruma Mukherjee

Research Scholar,

Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion,

Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan (W.B)-731235

ABSTRACT

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.”-B.R.Ambedkar.

Women constitute almost half of the population in the world but they are denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. Women gradually lost the right of education in India which they had in the Vedic period. Manu Smriti states- “न स्त्री स्वातंत्र्यं अर्हति”. Movements, both religious and social (like Buddhism, Jainism or Bhakti), tried to eradicate these in ancient and medieval India, but they continued to exist even in colonial India. However, in the British period there was revival of interest in women's education in India. During this period, various socio religious movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized on women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar took initiative to make education available to the women of India. This paper intends to give an awareness and insight into the problems faced by women over the years and their roles. The study will help us to imagine the thoughts and contribution of Mahatma Phule. Methodology of this paper is purely descriptive and required information are collected from different secondary sources like Epics, Vedas, Smritis and Puranas and other publications relating to women in the ancient age and Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata.

Mahatma Phule fought all his life for women and educating them, his aim was that all lives should be treated equally. Jyotirao saw that a thousand teachers or masters could not mould a child more than an educated mother. Thus, he reasoned that as long as the women – who made up half of the population – were deprived of education, India would not develop. In this small work I would like to focus on the philosophical aspect of his thought about women and will conclude with remarks on the contemporary relevance of Jyotiba Phule's contribution to construct a society with its inherent part, women.

KEYWORDS- Indian social system, status of women, women empowerment & Mahatma Phule's perspective, caste discrimination, social revolution.

INTRODUCTION: Women empowerment is central to achieving the target of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development. It is not only a national goal but also a global agenda under sustainable development goal no. 5 of the United Nations. During ancient times the form of society was matriarchal (mother as ruler and head of the family) and popularly it was said that, “यत्र तार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते, रमन्ते तत्र देवता” means God resides at places where women are worshiped. But soon the deterioration of the status of women started in the later Vedic period. Many orthodox principles were imposed upon them and women were treated as slaves, had no property rights and were expected to show their obedience to men, utmost respect and integrity. In Mahabharata quotes are made about ‘Draupadi VastraApaharana’ depicting disrespect to women. Gradually issues of inequality and discrimination on women emerged as a result of custom. The occupation in the society is divided on gender. Girl children were entrusted with the works of weaving, stitching, domestic works, and cropping. Even though the above statements are done under a specific context, the real understanding of the status of women is possible by reviewing the life of women in different periods.

Phule's own life was a reformist movement, a mission. Thus, Uma Chakravarty the feminist scholar stated him as a forerunner elaborating the theory of “Brahmanical Patriarchy”. [3]

STATUS OF WOMEN: The patriarchal nature of ancient Indian society led to very different expectations for the behaviour of women than that of men. Gender discrimination is sometimes naked, sometimes hidden, sometimes flexible, sometimes so nasty that it is frightening to think of it. In Ramayana we find that Rama tried hard to rescue Sita. He did all this to protect morality, to prevent exceptions and to remove the stigma on his proud lineage. Rama did not stop here. He cast a dirty look at Sita. There is doubt in her character, so Rama declared that Sita can be wherever she wants to go and be with whomever she wants to be.

तदस्य व्याहृतं भद्रे मयैतत्कृतबुद्धिना।

लक्षणे वाथ भारते कुरुबुद्धिं यथा सुखम्। [15]

Means "O gracious lady! Therefore, this has been spoken by me today, with a resolved mind. Set your mind on Lakshmana or Bharat, as per your ease."

Hearing this Sita was unable to bear all these words and entered into fire-

"अमृष्यमाना सा सीता विवेशज्वलनं सती" [1]

Just as dog-licked ghee cannot be used in yajna, Sita used by others will no longer be accepted as such. Remember, even Ravana himself did not commit such a

crime against Sita. The husband has no obligation to refute false accusations against the wife, but it is the wife's sole duty to refrain from slandering her husband. In Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas, it is said that- "*Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, naari - Ye sab tadankeadhikari*". [16]

The women in the Mahabharata have been treated as slaves, property, chattel and commodities used for the pleasure of men. The key characteristics of women are seen as submission, suppression, obedience and silence. Here we find (Sabha Parva) that Shakuni suggests Draupadi's staking after Nakula in the Dice game, when Yudhishthira starts to describe the beauty of draupadi-

तथा सयाच छील संपत्या याम इच्छेत पुरुषः सत्रियम्। [35]

आभाति पद्मवद वक्त्रंसस्वेदं मल्लिकेवच।

वेदीमध्या दीर्घकेशी ताम्राक्षी नातिरोमशा। [38] [13]

It is a clear sexual hint. When Yudhishthira accepts the stake and Shakuni slyly replies that-

अभ्यन्तरा च सर्वस्वे द्रोपदी भरतर्षभा (Draupadi is included in all the possessions), Yudhishthira could not respond to that sly suggestion. Once Yudhishthira loses himself, Draupadi should have been considered automatically lost. Draupadi in Mahabharata was '*नाथवती-अनाथवत्*'. But why would nobody Dharmik, Vikarna, Wise Bidura, Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarashtra not point out the redundancy at this phase? What sort of collective amnesia is this? [16]. Bhishma, who is dying in peace, says to Yudhishthira, there is nothing worse than a woman, a man should have no affection for a woman. Dharmaputra Yudhishthira condemns women and says that women are the root of all evil; Krishna says that when a woman is stigmatized, she becomes hybrid and ultimately loses.

The Vedic society, the most important duty of a wife is to bestow the matrimonial family with a son. One such example, at the ceremony to get male progeny, the woman has to eat a barley corn and two mustard seeds or beans placed on both sides of the barley corn and an image of the male genital organ so that she may give birth to a male child. The position of women, further experienced a decline with the prevalence of child marriage, sati, polygamy and the purdah system. Thousands of such arrows of hatred have been thrown at women in Dharmashastra and Puranas. Women and Shudra were treacherous and ungrateful. They had no right to chant Vedic Mantras. In the Vedic age, women were the cause of impurity, sinfulness and evil. It has been said in Maitrayani Samhita- Women are liars, unlucky and just like sura and gambling they are just addicts.

During the Mauryan period too, the status of women was in a deteriorated condition. Though the kings employed female bodyguards and spies. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas upon them, they were not permitted to go to any places without the permission of their husbands and were not allowed to make decisions on their own. Manu dictated that they would be dependent upon their fathers during the childhood stage, husbands in youth and on sons in old age-

पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने।

रक्षन्ति स्थाविरे पुत्राः नस्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति। [9.3] [4]. This is further supported by Narada Smriti, which says "*पक्षद्वयावसाने तु राजा भर्ता स्त्रियां मतः।*" If nobody is there to protect women on both sides, her father and in-laws, it is the duty of the King to take care

of women. In *Smriti Chandrika* also it is said -

रक्षेत्कन्यां पिता वित्रां पतिः पुत्रास्तुवाधके।

अभावे ज्ञातयस्तेषां नस्वातन्त्र्यं कचिस्त्रियाः [8.299]

In the *Manusmriti*, Manu refers to the woman as the field and the man as the seed of the field and he says-

वीजस्यचैव योन्याश्च वीजमुत्कृष्टमुच्यते।

सर्वभूतप्रसूतिर्हि वीजलक्षणलक्षिता। [9.35] [5]

The seed is the best of the two, the seed and the vagina. Because everywhere the child becomes symptomatic of the seed. Here it is also said that - Women are nothing but an inferior sexuality-

स्वभाव एष नारीणां नराणामीह दूषणम्।

अतोऽथान्नि प्रमाद्यन्ति प्रमदासु विपश्चितः। [2.213] [6]

It is the nature of women to pollute men in this world. That is why scholars never neglect women.

The scriptures also say that no man will live alone with his mother, sister or daughter, Because the senses are so restless that they attract even the wise person with lust.

मात्रा स्वस्रा दुहित्रा वान विविक्तासनो भवेत्।

वलवानिन्द्रियग्रामो विद्वांसमपि कर्षति।।2.215।। [7]

Nari Shudra and Vaishya are also placed in the same category in the Gita-

"मां हि पार्थ व्यापाश्रिता येऽपिस्युः पापयोनयः।

स्त्रियो वैश्वस्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति पराई गतिम्।।"(32) [8]

Indian society, like the number of classical societies, was patriarchal in nature. When the Vedic period came to an end, then women were deprived of social and religious rights. They were not allowed to participate in social, religious and cultural functions. Purana and sastradescribed –“अवला-दुर्वला” +“दुर्वलस्य-वलमराजा” +“वलानाम्-रोदनम्-वलम्”, “विनाश्रय नावर्तन्ति कविता वनिता लता”etc. The society treated women as the weaker sex, dependent on male and subordinate sex. In this age the suppression of women started on a larger scale due to influence of the religion, caste system, custom and they are victimised in all walks of their life. The family was regarded that the birth of girls would prove to be a major hindrance within the course of bringing about welfare of the family and community. Whereas, the male children were regarded as assets. Widows were neglected in a number of aspects and were not allowed to render a significant participation in social, cultural or religious functions. Ambedkar, in his article, “*The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women*” attacked Manusmriti for leaving bitter remarks on womanhood and legally sanctioning a benighted life of suppression. The status of women improved a little during the Buddhist period. He did not preach religion for any particular community or gender, in his view men and women were equal. According to the Mahaparinirvana Sutras of the Sutrapitaka, the Buddha told the monks that he would give knowledge to the old woman as a mother, the young woman as a sister and the girl as his own child. Because excluding women, men are useless. The contribution of the wealthy Vishakha to the propagation of Buddhism is still remembered in the history of Buddhism. Theri Patachara was well versed in religious education and provided religious education to many women. Buddha was the first to establish a women's organization or nuns' association for the realization of women's education, health and individual freedom.

MAHATMA PHULE'S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN: Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1826-1890 AD) is a respected name in the history of the social reform movement in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. Mahatma Phule was determined for the overall development of the lower-class people including Shudra and Ati-Sudra. Mahatma Phule was the first to launch a women's education campaign. Education should be given to live as a capable woman. Phule started his career as a teacher by educating his wife. Mahatma Phule was the first Indian citizen to advocate the idea that primary education should be compulsory and free. Mahatma Phule's feminist thought has evolved out of intuitive understanding, respect for the dignity of all human beings and belief in their equality. Mahatma Phule has seen the condition of women by linking them to the shackles of caste and varna. The Brahmin patriarchy deprived the woman of all rights and warmth for her sexual luxuries, making her completely powerless and dependent on the patriarchy. Mahatma opposed the Brahminical patriarchal monopoly which gives the woman the status of a mere slave in the dominion of man by creating the biggest obstacle in the male-female relationship. When they oppose the practice of Sati, they attack its foundation.

Mahatma Phule supported women not only at the level of thought but also arranged for Western education for them. He established institutes like the 'Pune Female Native Schools' and the Society for Promoting Education for Mahar. To teach in these made his wife literate. He presents the philosophy of liberation from social and mental slavery of the exploited and neglected people. Mahatma Phule, in his social thought, considered the cruellest aspects of the caste system and presented a new ideology for the abolition of the caste system. He was probably the first thinker who did direct work for women's emancipation, women's education, economic rights of women and their social existence and self-respect, security. Similarly, he was also strongly opposed to cutting the hair of widowed women. He was insistent on the remarriage of widows. Keeping in mind the needs of the society, he made widow ashrams and provided rights and alimony to the widowed women. Similarly, he also started children's homes for the orphan children of widows (1863), even got a home built for housing upper caste widows during (1854). He did many social works like schools for the untouchables, providing water by opening water cisterns of their homes. He stated, “Narnarisabhimehnati bane. Parivar ko pale. Anand le. Nit bachobachi ko padnebheje”. Mahatma Phule's book 'SampadaJajwalya' is a literal philosophy of revolutionary ideology. He was particularly influenced by the abhang of Sant Tukaram Maharaj. He says that the progress of an individual is only possible with education. “When a man gets educated, only the man learns. When a woman gets educated, the entire generation learns” [9]. Jyoti Rao says in the introduction to the book "ShetkaryachaAsud":

Without education wisdom was lost;

Without wisdom morals were lost;

Without morals development was lost;

Without development wealth was lost;

Without wealth the Shudras were ruined;

So much has happened through lack of education.[9]

Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule had done a lot in his life to reform society, to fight for establishing equality in society. Following his principles Dr. Ambedkar had compiled the constitution in which we have provision for free and compulsory education and universalization of education in the constitution.

SOCIAL REVOLUTION: Mahatma Phule (1827-1890) is hailed as the father of the social revolution in India but not many know that he is the original architect of India's gender revolution as well. The first gender-sensitive act of Jotirao was to encourage his young wife Savitri to read and write. Mahatma Phule started the first school for girls on 15 May 1848 at Bhide Wada, Poona. Savitribai was its headmistress. People often threw cow dung and stones at her when she went to school but still, she did not deviate from her duty. The school brought together girls of all castes under one roof. Jyotiba started the marriage ceremony without a Brahmin priest and it also got recognition from the Bombay High Court.

Dr. Ambedkar, the father and architect of Indian Constitution, was of the firm opinion that until and unless, we defy the Hindu Dharma-Shastras, nothing much can be changed. He wrote extensively on women's oppression and set up newspapers like '*Mook Nayak*' and '*Bahishkrit Bharat*' with sections that exclusively covered women-centric issues. The Constitution of India guarantees equal status to all citizens of India including women under article 14 and does not distinguish or discriminate between a man or a woman. Moreover, article 15 empowers the government to make special provisions for women. Dr. Ambedkar, while being a labour member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, arranged maternity leave for women for the first time. Ambedkar, through his various writings, showed how the Hindu Brahmin society and its various activities in different cultures forced the women of the society to accept different traditional practices. After being sworn in as law minister, he first enacted the Hindu Code Bill. The Bhakti movement also sought to restore the status of women and questioned the forms of dominance. Bhakti movements openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women in the Hindu community. Tracing the roots of Indian Feminism Bhakti challenged Brahmanical patriarchy through their songs, poems and ways of life. Kabir says-

Nari naraknaniye, sab santan ki khaan

Jaame harijan upjay, soyee ratan ki khaan [14]

He also says that-

Nari nindana karo, nari ratan ki khaan

Nari se narhotahai, DhruvPrahadsamaan.[14]

A number of the emancipation of women and the self-respect movement were the major issues Periyar E.V.R. fought for. Periyar also clarified that the role of women is most important in any movement as they are an equal part of the society, giving voice, diversity and breadth to the movement. Periyar insisted on abolishing the institution of marriage in India because for women marriage was a symbol of slavery.

He developed the concept of self-respect marriage in the year 1929. There were two basic principles of this marriage, first gender equality and second the right to make their decisions. He articulated all these thoughts in his talks, speeches and writings, which were compiled in the form of a booklet titled "*Why the Woman was Enslaved*". He persuaded his newly wedded 13-year-old wife, Nagammal, to discard the "thali" or mangalsutra. He stated that "*if the right to divorce is not granted, polygamy and polyandry should become norms. To bear in silence and patience the travails of an unhappy marriage is a slur on one's humanity, self-respect and an act of clear folly*" (Anaimuthu: 148). Periyar was in favour of giving women unlimited and unconditional freedom in the matter of sex and reproduction. Periyar was in favour of it decades ago and considered contraception as a tool to give freedom and rights to women. He used to address women in the context of children, saying that women should stop giving birth to children if it hinders their independence.

After Independence, the educational rights of women were promoted and they were made aware of the value of education. The number of working women has also steadily increased. The acceptance of gender equality in the constitution was the fulfilment of a dream of women's entitlement to an independent identity. A number of administrative bodies were set up for the creation of opportunities for women. Women were inducted into the government.

CONCLUSION: While dedicating one of his important books '*Shudra Kaun The?*' (Who were Shudras?) Ambedkar declared that Phule had made the lower castes aware of how they were slaves to the higher varnas. Among his three gurus – Buddha, Kabir and Phule – Ambedkar was the closest to Phule. The logic and tone and tenor of Phule are clearly reflected in Tarabai Shinde's historical essay '*Stri-Purush Tulana*' (Comparing men and women). Mahatma Phule had great respect for "Lokhitwadi." Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's '*Gulamgiri*' is considered one of the first tracts against the caste system.

Manusmriti declares, "*Women have no business with the text of the Vedas.*" The education of girls was entirely domestic. At this time there was a need in the society for some people who could improve the condition of women. Mahatma Phule's quest for providing women and girls with the right to education was supported by his wife Savitribai Phule. In 1873, Jyotiba Phule formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) to decontaminate the society from caste discrimination and liberate the oppressed lower-caste people from the stigmas inflicted by the Brahmins. India is increasingly doing better in the field of female education. The more we spread and imbibe the spirit of Jyotiba Phule's words, the chances are that we will do better as a nation.

REFERENCES:

1. Bandyopadhyay, Ashok. 2010. Ramayanam, Balakandam, Swadesh prakashan, 3rd (Ed) p.- 77
2. Bandyopadhyay, Indrajit. Yudhishtira Never Staked Draupadi and Pandavas in Dice Game, Article in Google Website.
<https://www.boloji.com/writers/46/indrajit>
3. Chakravarty, Uma. 1993. Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India, Gender, Class and State- Economic and Political Weekly.
4. Dutta, Chaitali. 2008. Manushita, Mahapatra Prakashan, Kolkata-73, 1st (Ed). p.- 369
5. Ibid, p.- 419
6. Ibid, p.- 322
7. Ibid, p.-322
8. Geeta, 9th Chapter, Rajvidya-Rajguhyayog, Google Website. <https://www.anupamasite.com/9gita.php>
9. Jain, Gunjan. Feb. 2017. Education- A Tool For Empowering Women in Indian Society, Article in ResearchGate.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323525006>,
EDUCATIONA_TOOL_FOR_EMPOWERING_WOMEN_IN_INDIAN_SOCIETY_ABSTRACT
10. Mukherjee, Radha Kumud. 1969. Ancient Indian Education (Brahmanical and Buddhist). Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 4th (Ed).
11. Narasu, P. Laxmi. 2015. The Essence of Buddhism, Gautam Book Centre, Delhi.
12. Phule, Jyotirao. 1883. Shetkaryaca Asud translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar, <http://www.ambedkar.org/gail/Phule.pdf>
13. Sharma, Ramswarup. 1928. Mahabharata Sabha parva, Sanatan Dharma press, Moradabad. P. - 313/314
14. Upadhyay, Shraddha. 2018. Seeking Femininity In Kabir's Poetry, Google Website. <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/07/11/seeking-femininity-kabir-poetry/>
15. Valmiki Ramayana - Yuddha Kanda, Google Website. http://www.valmikiramayan.net/yuddha/sarga115/yuddha_115_frame.htm
16. What -Tulsidas-Said-Once, Article in Google Website. <http://killeransh.blogspot.com/2010/03/what-tulsidas-said-once.html?m=1>