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Phule's India Revisited:

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE CONTINUING SOCIAL DISPARITIES

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ABSTRACT

Jotirao Phule is best known for his reformative efforts towards women and Shudras. However, despite the significant gains made by the downtrodden sections of society, the struggle persists. As per the Government data, women, and Dalits are still lagging on several crucial parameters such as literacy rate, labor force participation rate, political representation, and crime rate against them. Through an analysis of these parameters, this paper aims to analyze the still-precarious situation of women and Shudras. Finally, the paper proposes a few reformative measures that could bring about positive change in the lives of these sections.

Keywords- Jotirao Phule, women, Dalits, reforms, disparity

INTRODUCTION

Jotirao Phule was born on 11 April 1827 in Kutgun Village of Maharashtra into a Mali family. The Malis were traditionally engaged in gardening and agriculture and were therefore considered low caste within the Brahmanical social order. Despite facing initial challenges, Phule managed to attain an education. In 1841, his father enrolled him in a school managed by Scottish missionaries. His exposure to English education highly influenced his thinking pattern, allowing him to rise above traditional teachings. He learned about the concepts of human rights and duty, which he believed applied to all humans. The stories of Shivaji and George Washington taught him lessons of patriotism and humanism. He was particularly influenced by "Rights of Man" by Thomas Paine, which deeply impacted his worldview.¹

The turning point of Phule's life was in 1848 when he experienced caste-based discrimination at the hands of his Brahmin friend's family after participating in a marriage procession.² This incident profoundly affected him, prompting him to question the prevailing social hierarchy. It ignited a passion for emancipation and a determination to break free from the oppressive structures of society. From that point onwards, Phule resolved to work for the emancipation of all those suffering discrimination and are placed at the lowest rungs of society.

¹ Tarkatirtha Lakshman Shastri Joshi, *Jyotirao Phule* (New Delhi: National Book Trust India, 1992), pp. 7-8.

² Shiladhar Yallappa Mugali and Priyadarshini Sharanappa Amadihal, "Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's Views on Upliftment of Women as Reflected in *Sarvajanic Satyadharm*," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 69 (2008), p. 693.

SOCIAL REFORMS AND ADVOCACY: DALITS AND WOMEN

Jotirao Phule was not only a champion of human rights but also a staunch advocate of equality for all, recognizing their inherent rights. He worked towards women's education and aimed to integrate women and girls into public life.³ For him, equality and oneness were necessary for the nation to develop.

In his vision, women were not merely equal to men but, in some aspects, superior. In *Sarvajanik Satyadharma*, he writes, "Both men and women are equally qualified to enjoy human rights in equal measure.... The patient woman carries their child without complaint. She does her duty and brings up the child. She teaches the little one to walk and to speak. Don't we have the proverb that one can repay all debts except the mother's debt? Undoubtedly, the woman is superior to man."⁴

Dr. Ambedkar was inspired by Phule's ideas on women's liberation. Like Phule, Dr Ambedkar also educated his wife, Ramabai, enabling her to lead his social reform campaigns and meetings. Following Phule's ideology, Dr. Ambedkar, in the Depressed Class Women Conference, 1942, said, "Let every girl who marries stand by her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave. I am sure if you follow this advice, you will bring honor and glory to yourselves."⁵

In his efforts to change the existing degraded society, Phule began by educating his wife, Savitribai Phule. For him, education was the backbone of any revolution. He asserted: "Education that does not help common people prepare for life's struggles, that does not instill strength of character, generosity, and the courage of a lion, is not true education. True education is that which enables a person to stand on their own feet."⁶ In 1848, Phule, along with his wife, established the first school for girls from lower castes, making Savitribai one of the first female teachers in Indian history.⁷ Their efforts expanded over time, and by 1851, several schools had been founded to educate Dalits and other marginalized communities. In 1854, they established a widow shelter home to protect them from exploitation. Taking a step forward, they also founded a shelter home for pregnant widows, allowing them to carry their pregnancies to term preventing female infanticide.⁸ With the support of Sadashiv Ballal Govande, his longtime friend; and his wife, Savitribai, Phule established an Infanticide Prevention Center in Pune. To raise awareness about the center, they distributed pamphlets, one of which read: "Widows, come here and safely and discreetly give birth to your child. You have the choice to either keep the baby with you or leave them in our care. If you choose not to keep the child, the orphanage will take full responsibility for their upbringing."⁹

To challenge the rigid caste system and advocate for the freedom of women, Phule strongly promoted inter-caste marriages. The elaborate rituals associated with weddings were another problem that made girls seen as financial burdens upon the family. To address this problem, Phule proposed a simplistic marriage ceremony that could be solemnized without an officiating priest.¹⁰

To counter the Brahminical hegemony in society, Phule emphasized non-Brahminical historical narratives like Chhatrapati Shivaji and King Bali. He sought to use these figures as symbols of social empowerment for the downtrodden and to connect them to a noble lineage. A feeling of belonging to such a noble lineage would then instill a sense of pride and confidence among the Shudras and Atishudras. By portraying Raja Bali as a peasant king who resisted Aryan dominance, Phule sought to inspire a revolution that would challenge the prevailing social hierarchy, democratize society, and instill a sense of respect and pride among marginalized communities.¹¹

³ Nirupama Paliwal, "Mahatma Jyotiba Phule: A Truth Seeker," *International Journal of Advanced Educational Research* 3, no. 2 (March 2018), p. 578.

⁴ Ratnesh Katulkar, "Fight Against Patriarchy: Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar's Views on Gender Equality," *Maharashtra Ahead* 6, no. 4 (April 2017), p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

⁶ Debashis Bera, "Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) and the Struggle for Dalit Rights," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 7, no. 2 (March–April 2025), p. 5.

⁷ Nirupama Paliwal, "Mahatma Jyotiba Phule: A Truth Seeker," *International Journal of Advanced Educational Research* 3, p. 577.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁹ Debashis Bera, "Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) and the Struggle for Dalit Rights," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 7, p. 5.

¹⁰ Ratnesh Katulkar, "Fight Against Patriarchy," *Maharashtra Ahead* 6, p. 9.

¹¹ Vaishali Wankhede, "De-constructing the Caste Structure: Phule's Anti-Caste Movement in Maharashtra," *International Journal for Recent Developments in Science and Technology* 1, no. 1 (January 2011), pp.67–68.

As his movement gained momentum, Phule came up with Satyashodhak Samaj (The Society of Truth Seekers) in 1873. This revolutionary organization aimed to eradicate caste-based oppression and promote social equality.¹² T.L. Joshi aptly highlights, “Jyotirao Phule was one of the first revolutionaries against India’s traditional social structure. Considering that conventional social laws had kept the Indian consciousness in chains for thousands of years, where did he draw the inspiration for this rebellion? The answer is that Jyotirao was a ‘Satyashodhak’—a seeker of truth—who realized the moral truths of human life. The manifestation of that eternal truth was reflected in his belief in human freedom, which was supported by modern Western civilization.”¹³

The Satyashodhak Samaj brought about a significant transformation in Indian society. Prominent figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar drew inspiration from its principles and worked towards the emancipation of Dalits. Phule’s efforts played a crucial role in legitimizing the rights of Dalits, further strengthening the idea of social equality. “Dinbandhu”, a Pune-based newspaper, served as the voice of Phule’s ideology. The society’s members came from various religions and castes like Brahmins, Muslims, and government officials.

In 1876, Phule was appointed commissioner of the Pune Municipality, a position he held until 1883. On May 11, 1888, Vitthalrao Krishnaji Vandekar, a prominent social reformer, honored him with the title of “Mahatma” in recognition of his contributions to social justice.¹⁴

FROM VISION TO REALITY?

A society where everyone enjoyed equal rights, was treated with respect, and lived with dignity and liberty- such was the vision of Phule. His remarkable efforts and revolutionary actions paved the way for many. Due to his efforts, women from lower castes and the downtrodden, especially Shudras and Atishudras, got the privilege of being educated- an opportunity previously denied to them. However, while Phule’s legacy significantly improved their social position, it did not entirely dismantle systematic inequalities. While the long legacy of Phule had brought these sections to a better position, there is still a long way to go.

WOMEN IN 21st CENTURY

Despite significant progress, women in the twenty-first century continue to face systematic inequalities compared to their male counterparts. Various surveys highlight their precarious situation, as they continue to struggle for equal representation, opportunities, and access to essential resources.

Education

Education forms the bedrock of an individual’s development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, recognizes literacy as a fundamental human right, making it a crucial gateway to formal learning.¹⁵ According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2020-2021), Mizoram has the highest literacy rate at 98% and Rajasthan lowest at 62.5%, for both men and women combined. The female literacy rate in rural areas stands at 67.4%.¹⁶ While literacy rates have shown steady improvement, the slow progress remains a concern. The literacy rate of women in rural areas can largely be summed up as about half of the women being illiterate, which not only restricts their development but also makes them dependent and unaware of their rights.

Beyond basic literacy, continuous enrollment in education is another challenge for girls in both rural and urban areas. The share of girls enrolled in primary-level education has remained stagnant at 48% since 2014-15.¹⁷ The constant decline and stagnation in the number of girls enrolled poses a question of equality in society.

¹² Parmod Kumar, “Mahatma Jyotiba Phule: His Role in Women Empowerment,” *International Educational Scientific Research Journal* 9, no. 3 (Special Issue, March 2023), p.108.

¹³ Debashis Bera, “Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) and the Struggle for Dalit Rights,” *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 7, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, *Status of Women in India* (October 2022), pp.17-18.

¹⁶ compared to 82.7% in urban areas.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

At the secondary level, gender disparities persist, with 18.6 million girls enrolled in 2020-21, while the number of boys stood at around 20.4 million. Since 2015-2016, the enrollment figures have seen a steep decline.¹⁸ A World Bank(2018) report notes that at the global level, nine out of 10 girls complete their primary education (till class 5). However, only three in four complete their lower secondary education (till class 10). In the specific context of India, a higher drop-out rate among girls in classes 8 and 9 is witnessed, around the time when a girl hits puberty.¹⁹

There is a direct link between the female drop-out rate and the lack of functional toilet facilities. Studies have put forward the difficulties faced by girls at school in the absence of a toilet facility. Learning becomes an almost impossible task as girls restrict their food and water intake because the school lacks a restroom facility.²⁰ Addressing this issue through accessible sanitation infrastructure is imperative to improving female education outcomes.

Higher Education and Employment Disparities

Women are often restricted by various factors ranging from lack of basic facilities to societal constraints that do not allow them to step out of their homes to pursue higher education. The All India Survey on Higher Education(AISHE 2020) highlights that female representation is lowest in Institutions of National Importance, Deemed University-Government, and State Private Universities.²¹ This lack of education opportunities further manifests in the gender gap at workplaces.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report(2022) by the World Economic Forum, India ranks 135th out of 146 countries in gender equality in workplaces.²² The Sustainable Development Goals India Index (2018) of the NITI Aayog outlines the national target for India to achieve an equal Labor Force Participation Rate by 2030. However, the Global Gender Gap Report (2021) states that only 22.3% of women in India participate in the labor market, leading to a significant gender gap of 72%.²³

Women's Health and Well-being

Despite legal frameworks, gender-biased sex selection remains prevalent.²⁴ Girls are often perceived as economic burdens, while boys are seen as economic assets. Pre-natal sex determination, despite being a crime, is done at many levels which leads to widespread female foeticide, which is neither officially recorded, nor eliminated from the scene.

According to the National Health Family Survey (NFHS-5), there has been an increase in anemia among women from 53.1 percent to 57 percent.²⁵ Another factor indicating the status of women's health in India is the Body Mass Index. While the percentage of women in India with a Body Mass Index below normal has reduced from 22.9 percent in NFHS 4 to 18.7 percent in NFHS-5, over-nourishment is increasingly becoming a grave concern in the country.²⁶

Labor Force Participation and Unpaid Domestic Work

The Labor Force Participation Rate(LFPR) trend for rural women from 2017 to 2021 shows an increase from 26.6% to 39.2%. On the other hand, the increase is less in the case of urban women – from 22.3% in 2017 to 25.8% in 2020-21. In contrast, LFPR for men in rural as well as urban areas remained steady at around 80%, highlighting the stark gender divide.²⁷

Additionally, according to the Time Use Survey(2019), conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 80% of women in both rural and urban India are engaged in unpaid domestic

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

services, spending an average of five hours per day, compared to only 20% of men, who spend about 1.5 hours per day on such tasks.²⁸

Crime Against Women and Political Representation

In India, women are prone to crimes irrespective of their financial independence or social position. In recent years, the total crime rate against women has remained stagnant at about 56% for the years 2014 and 2020.²⁹ National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data reveals that the rate of crimes against women in India increased by 12.9% between 2018 and 2022.³⁰

In the sphere of politics, the percentage of women MPs in Lok Sabha currently stands at 14%, which is a significant gain from 5% to 10% till 2004, but still far less than their share in the population of India.³¹ However, the representation in State Legislative Assemblies is even poorer with the national average standing at about 9%. Women, therefore, have only been marginally present in the lawmaking process and all has always been controlled by men. This also shows why there is a lack of gender sensitization in India, and women are still facing issues keeping up with their basic amenities.

DALITS IN 21st CENTURY

The caste system in India has severely limited employment opportunities for lower castes, trapping them in a vicious cycle of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. For decades, the caste system has forced many marginalized groups, especially Dalits and other lower castes, to work in the low-paying and menial jobs, traditionally assigned to them. According to the Census (2011), approximately, 16.6 percent of the India's population belongs to Scheduled Castes, with many engaged in occupations classified as unclean, such as manual scavenging, street sweeping, and agricultural labour.³² According to the Census(2011), the average per capita income of Dalits was INR 47,124, which was lower than the national average of INR 74,000. Limited access to quality education and vocational training further restricts their employment opportunities, forcing them into low-paid manual jobs.³³

Caste-Based Violence

In addition to economic disparities, caste-based violence remains a serious concern. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has been tracking caste-based atrocities in India, and the data shows a disturbing trend of increasing reported incidents. By 2001, the number had risen to 31,000, and by 2011 it had reached 40,000. The most recent data from 2022 shows a significant increase, with 57,582 cases recorded, representing a 62 per cent increase over the last decade. The vulnerability of Dalits to violence is often linked to their lower socioeconomic status, which leaves them with little protection against exploitation and discrimination.³⁴

Educational Disparities

Despite government efforts to promote education among marginalized communities, the literacy gap between the Scheduled Castes and the general population persists. According to the Ministry of Education's survey, the literacy rate of the Scheduled Castes is around 66 per cent, compared to the national average of 74 per cent.³⁵ According to the Census (2011), the literacy rate of the Scheduled Castes is 66.1 per cent, while the literacy rate of the general population is 73.0 per cent.³⁶

Employment Discrimination

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁰ Bushra Ansari and Sowmya Rajaram, "It's Women's Day, but on the Ground, Little Has Changed," *ISDM Blog*, March 7, 2024, Accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.isdm.org.in/blog/its-womens-day-but-on-ground-little-has-changed>.

³¹ Rangarajan R., "On Political Representation of Women | Explained," *The Hindu*, July 17, 2024, 11:05 p.m., Accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/on-political-representation-of-women-explained/article68415532.ece>.

³² Remalli Anthony, "Untouchability and Caste Discrimination in India: A Historical Perspective on Reservation Policies," *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science* (November 2024), pp. 31-32.

³³ Manish Kumar Rao, "Socio-Economic Overview of Dalits in India," *Round Table India*, February 19, 2023, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/socio-economic-overview-of-dalits-in-india/>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁶ Mulkh Raj and Virender Kumar Dubey, "Socio-Economic Status of Dalits in India: A Study," *International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary* 3, no. 4 (July–August 2024), p. 200.

Even when Dalits manage to get an education, they continue to face discrimination in employment. A study by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies found that around 60 per cent of employers expressed reluctance to hire individuals from Dalit backgrounds, often preferring candidates from higher castes.³⁷ This reflects the deeply ingrained societal biases that not only hinder social mobility but also reinforce the notion that one's worth is determined by caste.

A report by former education minister Ramesh Pokhriyal in 2019 revealed that about 95% of faculty positions in IITs were held by individuals from upper caste backgrounds. Contrarily, only 5% were allocated to SC, ST, and OBC categories, despite the fact that these groups make up the largest proportion of the population. Moreover, an RTI filed by IIT-Bombay students highlighted the disparities, showing that 24 departments had no SC faculty, 15 lacked ST representation, and nine had no OBC faculty.³⁸ These statistics show the deep-rooted caste-based inequalities that persist in both employment and education.

The National Sample Survey Organization's 2019 data underscores this economic disparity, revealing that about 65 per cent of Dalit households live below the poverty line, compared to around 29 per cent of the general population.³⁹

Caste and the Criminal Justice System

The precarious socioeconomic status of Dalit communities often makes them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including physical violence and sexual crimes. The National Crime Record Bureau's "Crime in India 2021" report shows that between 1991-2021, crimes against Dalits increased by 177.6 per cent and those against tribal communities rose by 111.2 per cent. In addition, Dalits and Adivasis together account for nearly 32 percent of all prisoners in Indian jails, raising concerns about systematic discrimination in the criminal justice system.⁴⁰

Political Representation

Despite these challenges, Dalit communities have made significant gains in political representation. Of the 71 union ministers in the current cabinet, 10 belong to the Dalit community.⁴¹ This puts their representation at 7.1%. However, some analysts argue that these appointments are often made strategically in poll-bound states or regions with large Dalit populations, suggesting a political rather than purely meritocratic rationale for their inclusion.

WAY FORWARD

While the data suggest positive progress, there is still much to be done to bring these communities into the mainstream. Although, social attitude towards inclusiveness is gradually becoming more positive and the government is working on various policies to give these communities a respectable and equitable position, these changes are coming at a slow pace, whereas strong measures are urgently needed that would have a huge impact in a short span of time.

Public awareness was the key to Phule's movement, which is still relevant today. Phule did not have strong support in the nineteenth century, yet he stood his ground and resorted to the most effective way, public awareness. To make a difference on the ground, public awareness is still crucial. It not only prepares the minds to accept all other measures, but also brings about a social revolution that aims to put the subjugated groups on an equal footing.

Fifty per cent reservation for women at all political levels is an urgent need. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1993 mandated one-third reservation for women in local government bodies, i.e. panchayat and municipality. This led to increased representation of women in decision-making at the grassroots level, resulting in significant women-centred policies such as immunization programme

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Sumant Kumar, "Marginalised by Caste, Marginalised in Education," *The Hindu*, December 28, 2024, p. 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, "India: Data Shows Rise in Atrocities Against Dalits, Tribal People," August 11, 2023, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://globalforumcdwd.org/india-data-shows-rise-in-atrocities-against-dalits-tribal-people/>.

⁴¹ Shanker Arnimesh, "Modi Govt 3.0 Has 10 Dalit Ministers, 5 from Religious Minorities but No Muslims," *The Print*, June 10, 2024, 3:50 p.m., accessed on April 5, 2025, <https://theprint.in/elections/modi-govt-3-0-has-10-dalit-ministers-5-from-religious-minorities-but-no-muslims/2124567/>.

for pregnant women and infants, community engagement programme, basic sanitation, campaigns against alcoholism and domestic violence, all of which ultimately made life much easier for women. Most importantly, it paved the way for woman's participation in political affairs, breaking down gender barriers and accepting their role in societal decision-making. It also had some drawbacks, such as the emergence of the concept of sarpanch-pati, but given these drawbacks, the move proved to be a huge success in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment. Going one step further, the country is now demanding fifty per cent reservation for women at all political levels. Previously, women's reservation bills were introduced in Parliament in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2008, but lapsed due to the dissolution of the respective Lok Sabha. The country has witnessed a positive move in the form of the 128th Constitutional Amendment Bill, which was passed by the Parliament in September 2023. The bill seeks to reserve one-third of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women.

This is undoubtedly a positive step towards the inclusion of women in national politics, but there are still some limitations. The reservation for women should have been fifty per cent instead of the proposed one third. One-third was the reservation for women at the local level of politics in 1993. Since then, the country has witnessed the successful inclusion of women in politics at all levels, such as a woman president in the form of Pratibha Patil, a woman chief minister in the form of Mayawati, and women successfully holding important portfolios such as defence, foreign affairs and finance. Therefore, in recognition of women's competence and their share in the country's population, the reservation should have been fifty percent. Another drawback is that this bill seeks to reserve seats for women only in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, leaving the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils out of the reservation. Moreover, it should have included provisions for reservation within political parties as this would inculcate values of equal participation within the party sphere. There is, therefore, a need to rectify these shortcomings as soon as possible and to implement them in a much stronger sense.

There is an urgent need for a nationwide caste census for Dalits. Since the first census in 1872, the colonial state has included categories of caste and religion in the census. The number of castes identified in the 1931 census was four thousand one hundred and forty-seven - the last caste census in India. From the 1951 census onwards, the caste census was discontinued by the Government of India in order to prevent further subdivision of castes and to promote national unity; instead, new official categories called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were created under the provisions of Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution. The demand for a caste census is a long standing one in India. It stems from the fact that there is no documented data on Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in independent India. The argument for the demand for a caste census is that since the government collects data on various parameters such as religion, poverty, languages, Dalits and tribals, why not count OBCs? Moreover, the 1931 caste census included what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh, so it does not give a clear picture of OBCs, and India's population has tripled to 1.21 billion as of the 2011 census. Caste-based discrimination is still widespread in India. Experts argue that the status of only a few backward classes has improved since the implementation of reservation for OBCs in 1990, based on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report (1980). In turn, these castes have attained the status of dominant castes within the OBCs, while others continue to lag behind on socio-economic parameters. Therefore, to maximise the benefits of reservation for OBCs, SCs and STs, there is an urgent need to conduct a caste census so that those castes that have benefited from reservation and have made significant progress can be included in the mainstream society and excluded from reservation, while those that are still lagging behind can be given priority for reservation. It can guide policymakers in formulating policies that address the specific needs of each group, thereby promoting inclusive development. Critics of the caste census argue that it would only reinforce the caste system, but with the reservation system in place, it is necessary to measure progress so that its benefits can be maximised. As Peter Drucker said, "Only what can be measured can be managed".

CONCLUSION

Jotirao Phule, a trailblazer of the social reform movement in India, was deeply influenced by his own experiences and Western ideas of equality and human rights. He emerged as a leading advocate for the upliftment of marginalized communities, particularly Shudras and the Atishudras, and women- groups that had been neglected to secondary status in society. Phule firmly believed education was the most powerful

weapon against social inequality. He began by opening schools for Dalits and women, ensuring that these historically oppressed groups had access to knowledge and self-empowerment. His wife, Savitribai Phule, played a crucial role in this mission and became the first female teacher in India, marking a significant milestone in the struggle for women's education.

As Phule's followers grew, he formalized his movement by founding Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873, which means "truth-seekers society". This organization served as a platform to unite people against social injustice and to spread awareness about caste and gender discrimination. His efforts were unprecedented and initiated a social revolution that challenged the dominance of Brahminical hierarchy, making his movement a direct threat to the existing social order.

The transformation from the 19th century to the present has witnessed significant advancements in the status of women and Shudras. However, despite, constitutional safeguards and modern ideals emphasizing human rights, equality, and liberty, Indian society continues to grapple with deep-rooted caste and gender discrimination. The preference for boys over girls and the dominance of upper castes in education and employment remain stark realities, demonstrating that social inequalities persist despite legal and policy interventions.

Addressing these entrenched inequalities requires concrete policy measures. One significant step would be the implementation of one-third reservation for women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. Such a reform would ensure greater female participation in lawmaking, leading to policies that directly benefit women and promote gender sensitization. Another crucial reform is the implementation of a caste census, which would provide an accurate representation of marginalized communities. A comprehensive database would help evaluate the actual impact of affirmative action policies such as reservations and identify castes that require special attention for their upliftment. By obtaining precise statistics, policymakers can develop targeted initiatives to improve the socio-economic conditions of the weakest sections of society.

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