

MAHATMA JYOTIBA PHULE: HISTORY

PM Modi announces events for social reformer Jyotiba Phule's 200th birth anniversary

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a pioneering 19th-century social reformer who challenged Brahmanical dominance by championing education for women and Dalits. Through his organization, the Satyashodhak Samaj, and writings like *Gulamgiri*, he advocated for a society based on equality and rationalism.

Commemorations

Upcoming Bicentenary

The Prime Minister of India, during an Independence Day address, announced the forthcoming celebration of the 200th birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule.

Recent Anniversary

On April 11, 2025, India commemorated the 198th birth anniversary of the social reformer, an event widely celebrated as Jyotiba Phule Jayanti.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890)

Early Life and Formative Years

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, who came to be popularly known as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule.

Birth and Background

1. Date: Born on April 11, 1827.
2. Place: Pune, Maharashtra.
3. Caste: Belonged to the Mali (gardener) community.

Marriage and Partnership

In 1840, at the young age of 13, he was married to Savitribai Phule. Savitribai later became his active partner in all social reform activities and is recognized as India's first female teacher.

Formal Education

He received his education at the Scottish Mission High School in Pune. He successfully graduated in the year 1847.

Intellectual Influences

His worldview was significantly shaped by the works of Western rationalist thinkers. He was particularly influenced by Thomas Paine's book, *The Rights of Man*, and the ideas of philosopher John Stuart Mill.

The Turning Point (1848)

A pivotal moment in his life occurred in 1848 when he attended the wedding of a Brahmin friend. He was subjected to humiliating caste discrimination, which served as a profound awakening, exposing him to the deeply entrenched systemic injustice of the caste system.

Core Ideology and Vision

Equality and Justice

Phule's primary goal was the creation of a society completely free from the hierarchies of caste and gender discrimination.

Rationalism over Dogma

He was a strong proponent of rational thought and staunchly rejected:

1. Blind faith and superstition.
2. The rigid orthodoxy of Brahmanical traditions.

Universal Social Justice

He championed the inherent dignity of all human beings, asserting that it must be upheld regardless of an individual's caste or gender.

Defense of Religious Pluralism

Phule was a firm believer in individual freedom of belief. He famously defended the rights of individuals like Pandita Ramabai when she chose to convert to Christianity, showcasing his commitment to religious pluralism.

Conferment of the 'Mahatma' Title

In recognition of his monumental social work, he was honored with the title of 'Mahatma' (Great Soul). This title was conferred upon him on May 11, 1888, by fellow social activist Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar.

Major Social Contributions

Educational Reforms

Pioneer of Girls' Education

In 1848, along with Savitribai, he founded India's first school for girls in Pune, a revolutionary act at the time.

Education for the Marginalized

He established numerous schools specifically for children from Dalit and other backward castes, aiming to break the monopoly of education held by the upper castes.

Innovations in Education

In 1855, he started night schools to cater to the educational needs of workers, farmers, and women who could not attend classes during the day. He advocated for universal, compulsory, and practical education, viewing it as the most powerful weapon against the oppression perpetuated by the caste system.

Critique of Educational Policy

He famously opposed the "filtration theory" of education (the idea of educating the upper classes who would then educate the masses), arguing for direct mass education when he gave evidence to the Hunter Commission in 1882.

Women's Empowerment

Education and Social Reform

He was a tireless champion of girls' education and actively promoted the cause of widow remarriage, which was a major social taboo.

Protection of Women and Children

He established centers to prevent female infanticide (anti-infanticide centers) and built orphanages to care for destitute children.

Advocacy for Independence

Phule strongly encouraged the economic and social independence of women, believing it was crucial for their liberation.

Caste and Social Reform

Challenge to Brahmanical Dominance: He was an outspoken and fierce critic of Brahmanical supremacy and the practice of untouchability.

Satyashodhak Samaj (1873)

He founded the Society of Truth-Seekers to institutionalize his fight against caste discrimination. The society's core principles were:

1. Promoting equality and rationalism.
2. Encouraging inter-caste marriages.
3. Training non-Brahmin priests to perform religious ceremonies, directly challenging the religious monopoly of the Brahmins.

Stance on Nationalism and British Rule

He opposed contemporary nationalist leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, whom he saw as defenders of the old Brahmanical order. He often aligned with British-led reforms, viewing them as a necessary tool to uplift Dalits and women from centuries of oppression. Critique of the 1857 Revolt: He perceived the revolt not as a war for independence, but as an attempt by the upper castes to overthrow the British and restore the old, oppressive Brahminical rule.

Agricultural and Economic Reforms

Voice of the Farmer

In his seminal work, *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The Farmer's Whip, 1881), he provided a sharp critique of the exploitation of peasants by both Brahmin moneylenders and British bureaucrats.

Practical Solutions

He advocated for practical agricultural reforms, including the construction of dams and bunds for water management and the promotion of modern agricultural education.

Innovative Ideas

He suggested using military labor for rural development projects to improve infrastructure and provide employment.

Integrated Vision

He intrinsically linked agrarian reform with social justice, arguing that the emancipation of the Shudra peasants was central to India's progress.

Labor Rights and Public Advocacy

Public Service

As a Municipal Member in Pune, he actively advocated for civic improvements like better water supply, sanitation, and the rights of workers.

Support for Labor Movements

He collaborated with Narayan Meghaji Lokhande and was instrumental in the formation of the Bombay Millhands Association, recognized as India's first modern workers' association.

Major Literary Contributions

Gulamgiri (Slavery, 1873)

His most famous work, it drew a powerful parallel between the caste oppression in India and the system of slavery in America. He dedicated the book to the African-American freedom fighters.

Shetkaryacha Asud (The Farmer's Whip, 1881)

A detailed analysis of agrarian distress and a call for comprehensive reforms to protect farmers.

Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak

Considered his philosophical testament, this book outlines his vision of a universal humanism based on rationalism and truth.

Satsar (The Essence of Truth)

A work written in dialogue form that passionately defends religious freedom, notably in the context of Pandita Ramabai's conversion.

Manav Mahamand (Muhammad the Man)

A poetic tribute that praises the Prophet Muhammad as a liberator who fought against inequality.

Other Significant Works

1. *Tritiya Ratna* (1855): A play highlighting the oppression faced due to caste.
2. *Powada: Chatrapati Shivajiraje Bhosle Yancha* (1869): A ballad that reinterpreted Shivaji as a hero of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras, not just a Hindu king.
3. *Trutyache Bhashan*: A collection of his speeches and thoughts reflecting his reformist ideology.

Associated Organizations and Legacy

Key Organizations

Satyashodhak Samaj (1873)

His primary vehicle for carrying out anti-caste and rationalist movements across Maharashtra.

Din Bandhu Newspaper (1877)

A publication closely associated with the Satyashodhak Samaj that served as a powerful platform for the voices of the oppressed.

Influence and Inspiration

His movement received significant support from progressive rulers like Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. He profoundly inspired later leaders of the anti-caste movement, most notably Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who regarded Phule as one of his three gurus.

Enduring Legacy

He is revered as the "Father of the Indian Social Revolution" for his foundational work in challenging social hierarchies. He was the first prominent leader to use the term "Dalit" to refer to the oppressed and broken castes. Together with Savitribai Phule, he laid the indispensable foundation for women's education and the anti-caste movement in India. His core ideas of rationalism, universal humanism, and social justice remain deeply influential and are reflected in the modern constitutional ethos of India.

Source: <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/pm-modi-announces-events-for-social-reformer-jyotiba-phules-200th-birth-anniversary/>

