

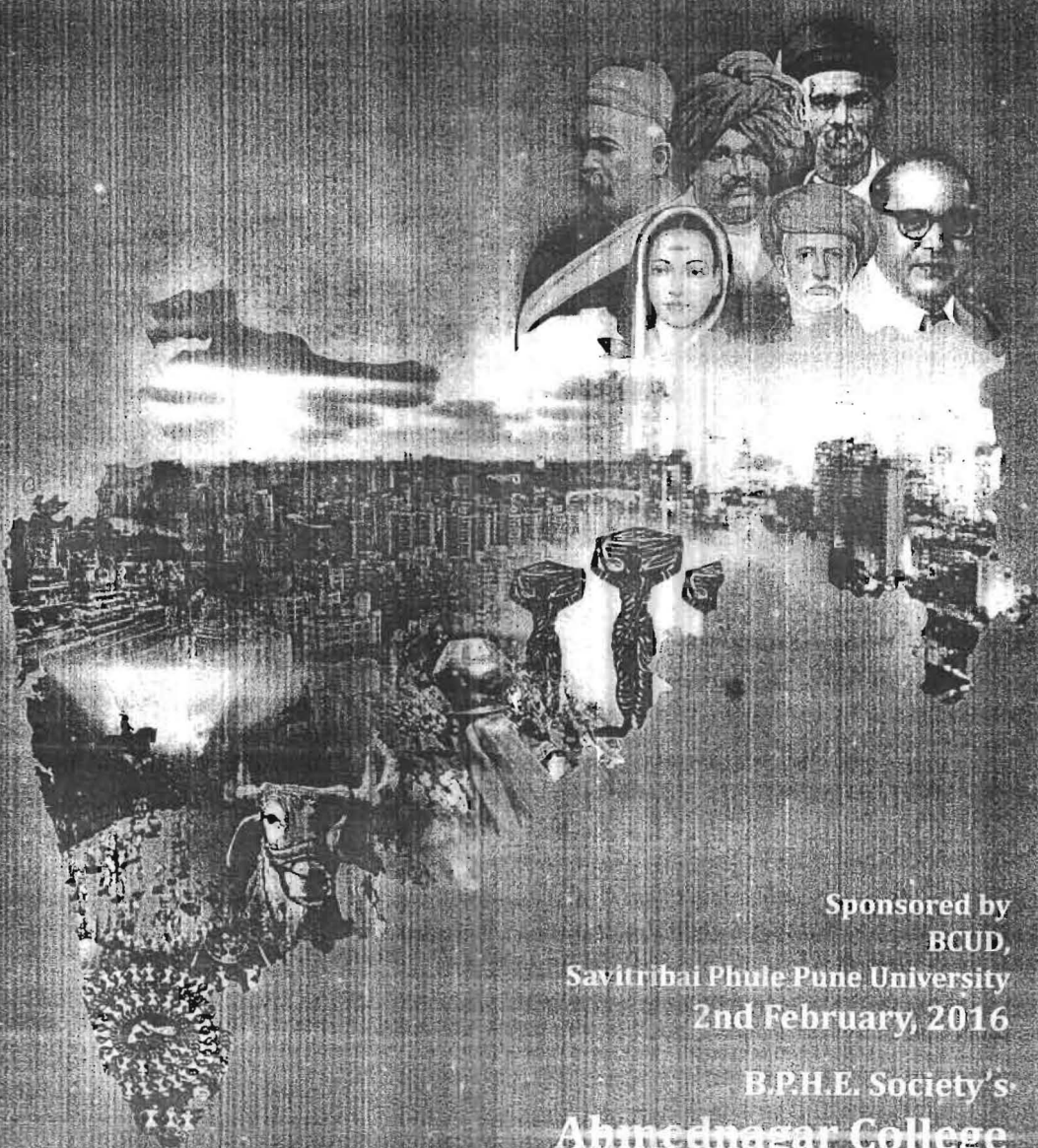
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## Mahatma Phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj

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### Introduction:

Mahatma Jotirao Phule was a well-known social reformer of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He worked ceaselessly for education of the women and the Dalits, for upliftment of the underprivileged and the downtrodden, and for reform of the Indian social structure. He was revolutionary in his thinking and is a constant source of inspiration for new generation of intellectuals.

**Mahatma Phule (1827-1890):** Among the pioneers who revolted against social and religious inequalities in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was Jotirao Govindrao Phule, who came to be known as 'Mahatma' in Maharashtra. While other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the status and rights of women, Jotirao Phule revolted against the unjust Caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. In particular, he courageously upheld the cause of the untouchables and took up the cudgels for the poor peasants.<sup>vii</sup>

Awakening self-respect in the peasants and toiling masses, he infused courage in them to stand up against the poverty and social injustice, and against oppressive, unjust and inhuman Hindu priestcraft and the caste system. He also imbued them with new thoughts, new ideals of human dignity, equality and self-salvation.<sup>vii</sup>

Jotirao wanted now to organize his followers and workers, so that they might assimilate his rational ideas and bring them into effect. It was his aim also to show the Government how the peasants were being exploited and how they were suffering from a desperate, grinding poverty and glaring social inequality. He strove hard to raise the Atisudras to the level of the Shudras, lost rights are not secured without a struggle. Jotirao knew well that the upper castes especially the Brahmins would be not only unsympathetic but also intolerant, and that the tradition-mongers would not easily give up their privileges, position and power.

There was no question of their expecting to get any political rights as they had no strength and organization behind them. So he decided to set up an organization to preach his ideology.

### Satya Shodhak Samaj:

Accordingly Jotirao convened on September 24, 1873 a meeting of all his admirers and disciplines at Poona. About 60 men from many important centres of Maharashtra assembled. Jotirao made an impressive upon his followers the necessity of a central institution for the guidance of the movement. After some discussion and several other speeches, it was agreed to form an institution. There was much enthusiasm among the chosen lieutenants of Jotirao. They decided to organize the mission and to spread the message of the movement. Jotirao named this institution 'Satya-Shodhak-Samaj-Truth Seeking Society.

It must be mentioned here that Jotirao's three Brahmin friends, Vinayak Bapuji Bhandarkar, Vinayak Bapuji Dingle and Sitaram Sakharam Datar helped Jotirao and his colleagues to establish the Satya Shodhak Samaj. Jotirao was elected first President and treasurer of the Satya Shodhak Samaj and Narayanrao Govindrao Kadalak was elected its first Secretary.

### Objectives of the Samaj:

The objects of the Samaj were to redeem the Shudras and Atishudras from the influence of Brahmanical Scriptures under which the Brahmin priests fleeced them to make them conscious of their human rights, and to liberate them from mental and religious slavery.<sup>vii</sup>

A member at his initiation into the Samaj had to take an oath in the name of God Khanderao and declare his allegiance to British rule. Much later, the death of the founder the Samaj, the goal was summarized as follows:

- All men are the children of one God, who is thus their parent.
- As there is no necessity of an intermediary to approach the mother or to please the father, there is no need of an intermediary such as a priest or a preceptor to enable the devotee to offer his prayers to God.
- Anyone accepting that principle is qualified to be a member of the Satya Shodhak Samaj.

### Membership of the Samaj:

Membership of the Samaj was extended to all castes including Brahmins and Maharas and Mangs and even Jews and Muslims were its member in its early stage. The weekly meetings were held Sundays at the places where branches of the Satya-Shodhak Samaj were established.

**Subjects:** The subjects discussed were the

- The necessity of temperance and compulsory education.
- Encouragement of Swadesi goods.
- Dislodging the Brahmin priest from the position he held in the religious field.
- Making arrangements for performing marriage at minimum expenses, and
- Freeing men from the beliefs in astrology ghosts and demons.
- The main attack was upon the caste system and idol-worship. Emphasis was also on the principle of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.
- Medium of instruction in Marathi. Jotirao stated that God read the human mind and understood the yearnings and prayer of every human being.

**Phule and his social reforms:** After founding educational institutions, Jotirao turned his attention to social reforms by striking at age-old social traditions. The issue of widow remarriage was extremely sensitive and Jotirao was deeply moved by the plight of Hindu widows.

1. **Women's Education:** Education of women and the lower castes, he believed, deserved priority. Hence at he began educating his wife Savitribai and opened a girl's school in August 1848. Jotirao Phule opened two more girls' schools during 1851-52.
2. **Primary Education:** Jotirao Phule was aware that primary education among the masses in the Bombay presidency was very much neglected. He argued that 'a good deal of their poverty, their want of self-reliance, their entire dependence upon the learned and intelligent classes' could be attributed to the 'deplorable state of education among the peasantry'.
3. **Widow Remarriage:** The issue of widow remarriage was extremely sensitive and Jotirao was deeply moved by the plight of Hindu widows. In 1864 he got a widower of the Shenvi caste remarried. He founded an anti-abortion centre where widows could deliver their babies and have them cared for. This was the first institution of its kind. It saved the widows from loneliness and from the killing of their infants. Jotirao gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage run by Jotirao that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jotirao adopted him as his son.
4. **Equality of Sex:** Jotirao refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct. He opposed idolatry and denounced the Chaturvarnya. In his book Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Pustak published in 1891, his views on religious and social issues are given in the form of a dialogue. According to him, both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex. He stressed the unity of man and envisaged a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He was aware that religious bigotry and aggressive nationalism destroy the unity of man.
5. **Upliftment of Untouchables:** Jotirao took an important step towards solving the problems of the untouchables by training activists from the untouchable castes. He taught them to write and give speeches and guided them in social work.
6. **Orphanage:** In 1876, Jotirao was nominated as a member of the Poona Municipality. He tried to help the people in the famine stricken areas of Maharashtra when a severe famine in 1877 forced people in the rural area to leave their villages. Some of them had to leave their villages. Some of them had to leave their children behind and an appeal issued on 17 May 1877 by Jotirao indicates that the Victoria Orphanage was founded under the auspices of the Satya -Shodhak Samaj to look after these unfortunate children. From the beginning of the year 1879 Krishnarao Bhalekar, one of his 'Deenabandhu' which was the organ of the Satya -Shodhak Samaj. The weekly articulated the grievances of the peasants and workers.

**His writings:** Jotirao wrote numerous books of prose and abhangs in Marathi in persuasive style. He called his abhangs, akhanda ( endless). He also composed Mangalashtakas to be sung at weddings. These songs were included in the Sarvajanic Satyadharma.

1. Gulamgiri ( 1873)
2. Shetkaryacha Asud ( 1883)
3. Sarvajanic Satya Dharma ( 1891)

4. Shivaji Powada ( 1869)
5. Tritiya Ratna ( 1885)
6. Eshara (1885)
7. Brahmanache Kasab ( 1869)

**Conclusion:** Great men of all ages speak in different languages, but their teaching is the same. Each sun brings a new day, so every great man offers a chance to society for improvement.

Jotiba's thoughts were undoubtedly inspired by noble, lasting human values. The language he used to express these thoughts was infused with the ardour of fiery emotion. His genius had the power to transcend the present and to look into the remote past and the very distant future.

Makers of a new world or a new society are always out of step with society. Men of dominant will, they overstep ancient laws and customs. The ignorant always live in slavery; ordinary men live in submission; but a man of mission breaks all bonds. Jotirao broke the bondage of Indian woman and enabled her to make herself free. He broke the bonds of mental slavery that were tied to the neck of the lower classes by scriptures and priestcraft. He broke the fetters of the untouchables which they had borne for ages. It heralded a new dawn for them. It was he who raised a hue and cry against their exploiters and contented, the whole nation would be happy and contented. Jotirao was thus the face of liberty in revolt. Filled with a heroic ethical purpose, Jotirao's ethico-religious personality stands on a high spiritual plane. By his emphasis on truth, Equality and Humanism, Mahatma Phule occupies a place in the pantheon of great thinkers and sages of India. When our society will attain the goal of social and economic equality and every man will uphold every right of every other man which he himself enjoys, Jotirao's aim will be fulfilled.

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