



Colonialism, Caste and Resistance: A Comparative Analysis of German Imperial Discourse and Phule's Gulamgiri

Sakshi Kumari

Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, Email Id: krisakshi722@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The histories of European colonialism and caste-based oppression in India are intertwined by complex structures of domination, ideological justification and resistance. In this way, this paper explores the intersections between German colonial discourse in the late 19th century and Jyotirao Phule's critique of Brahmanical supremacy in *Gulamgiri*, in which it shows the common experiences of social marginalization by Dalits and Afro-Americans. Friedrich Fabri's *Bedarf Deutschland der Kolonien?* (1879) adduced German colonial expansion as a means of economic stability and civilizational uplift, a rhetoric strikingly similar to the justifications for caste hierarchies in India. Such colonial and caste-based domination was reinforced through policies as well as through manifestos, advertisements, and print media that attempted to normalize these hierarchies and convince the masses of their legitimacy. In contrast, August Bebel, a prominent German socialist exposed the exploitative nature of colonialism in his speech in German *Reichstag* in 1889, paralleling Jyotirao Phule's anti-caste arguments and historical oppression of Dalits in *Gulamgiri*, which challenged Brahmanical dominance as a system of institutionalized servitudes. Both figures strategically used print media to spread their resistance, mirroring how dominant ideologies relied on manifestos and propaganda to maintain control. Thus, the paper poses some insightful questions with this comparative analysis of colonial discourses -How did colonial and



casteist hegemonies use print media to legitimize oppression while resistance movements reclaimed the same medium to challenge such narratives? This paper tends to draw attention to the ways that resistance movements have historically contested hegemonic discourses, illustrating that combating structural inequality involves both changing policies and tearing down narratives.

1. Introduction

Through intricate systems of dominance and resistance, the histories of caste-based oppression in India and European colonialism are intertwined. Around the 1880s, imperialism—which is generally defined as “the political action aimed at the subjugation and domination of foreign territories” (Winfried, 1972, p.21)

In the 1880s, European powers sought the possession and control of overseas colonies, especially Africa, which became markers of national prestige, economic strategy and civilizational superiority. Germany engaged actively in the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, formalizing colonial ambitions. Simultaneously, Casteism in India under British rule was deeply entrenched in every aspect of social, religious and economic life, particularly under traditional systems. A comparative analysis highlights the intellectual underpinnings of colonization, with Friedrich Fabri’s *Bedarf Deutschland der Kolonien?* Is advocating for German imperialism while August Bebel criticized it as exploitative. Likewise, Jyotirao Phule’s *Gulamgiri* condemned Brahmanical dominance, connecting the ramifications of German imperialism and Indian caste oppression in late 19th-century contexts. Like Bebel, Phule espoused a counter-narrative based on equality, justice, and emancipation, rejecting the moral arguments for institutionalised servitude. Notably, both thinkers used books, pamphlets, and speeches to mobilise public opinion against hegemonic structures, utilising the print medium as a platform for ideological intervention. This paper adopts a comparative historical and discourse analytical approach, in which the postcolonial theory and anti-caste epistemology play important and persuasive roles and also Jyotirao Phule's critique of Brahmanical dominance alongside Bebel's anti-colonial stance, and the use of print media and public speech as persuasive counter-hegemonic tools in India and Germany.

1. In what ways does Jyotirao Phule’s critique of Brahmanical dominance in *Gulamgiri* reflect similar logics of resistance as seen in Bebel’s anti-colonial stance?



2. How were print media and public speech employed as tools of persuasion and counter-hegemony in both the German and Indian contexts?

2. Friedrich Fabri's Colonial Imperative and Phule's Dalit Counter-Colonial Vision

Friedrich Fabri's colonial ideology articulated in his 1879 work or pamphlets "*Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien?*" reveals a calculated fusion of economic reasoning, national ambition and moral righteousness. Fabri believed colonial expansion addressed Germany's internal issues and ethical obligations, asserting that overseas colonies were essential for managing overpopulation and industrial overproduction in the unified German Empire. Fabri aimed to solve the Empire's issues through colonial expansion in East Africa, portraying European powers as Enlightenment bearers tasked with uplifting "backward societies" via Christianity, Western education, and governance. Fabri viewed most of the world, particularly Africans, as inhabited by Barbarians incapable of work. He framed imperialism as an ethical duty for 'superior' races to guide 'inferiors', rooted in Social Darwinism and Christian ideologies. His arguments reinforced racial hierarchies, depicting colonized peoples as passive and needing European intervention. He described the colonial mission as benevolent, emphasizing cultural elevation through education, while using media to influence public opinion and justify German colonial ambitions in Africa. As Marshall McLuhan reminds us, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p.7), in which Fabri's selection of pamphlets and reports actively influenced the reception and legitimization of colonial ideology.

Simultaneously, According to Phule, the primary concern of the Hindu society is the Preservation of the established Hindu social order rather than any effort at the improvement of human welfare and well-being. "A Shudra, through emancipated by his master, is not released from his state of servitude; for, being born in a state which is natural to him, by whom can he be divested of his natural attributes?" (Priyadarshi, 2020, p.2801) With this rhetorical question, he further challenges the Brahmanical control of knowledge and learning. According to him, Brahmins denied the Shudras access to education precisely to keep them in a state of dependency. It shows the fear of Enlightenment- that would awaken critical thinking and lead to rebellion. In this way, he also emphasized on color consciousness, leading to inferiority complex. He exposed how color consciousness was used as a tool for enslavement and marginalization. Phule challenged the myth of purity and superiority based on color and caste, advocating for the dignity of all laborers and oppressed communities. "The Brahmins, by the sheer strength of their cunning and fair complexion, established their supremacy over the indigenous dark-skinned people and labeled them as low-born."(Chauhan, 2022, p.13) Based on these lines one can analyze the



deconstruction theory of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she attempts to narrate the binary opposition between Subjects and object, self and other, center and margin. In her opinion, marginalized people perceive themselves as "The Subject in Oppression" (Spivak, 1998, p. 280)

2.1. August Bebel and Jyotirao's Critique of Oppression

In 1885, Bebel, a key figure in the SPD, opposed German colonialism, labeling it 'robbery' serving capitalist interests rather than the populace. He rejected any notions of "charity" or "civilization" as justifications for oppression, identifying this as psychological colonization that erodes identity and dignity. Bebel emphasized that any development under colonialism aimed solely at resource extraction. Through the SPD's newspaper 'Vorwärts', he exposed the brutalities of German imperialism, particularly the genocidal campaign against the Herero people in Namibia. He condemned how colonial powers used brutal force- "What we are doing in Africa is robbery and murder, wrapped in the language of civilization." (Horst, 2012, p.80). Bebel emphasized how human beings are presented objectively when the emotional context is removed from the capitalized system, echoing Marx's insight on Reification that "the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character of the products" (Marx, 1976, p.164)

Half a world away, Jyotirao Phule was waging his own battle- not against external colonizers, but against the internal system of caste that dehumanized their people of their own country. In *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873) Jyotirao Phule presents a radical critique of the caste system, particularly targeting the Brahmanical social order. He highlights a fierce and pioneering caste-based social hierarchy in India, in which the caste system as a deliberately constructed form of social control. Phule revealed how Dalits (Atishudras) and Shudras were treated like animals and dehumanized by the Brahmanical social system. These communities lived under social and spiritual slavery, denied access to public water, appropriate education, and even temple admittance. This aligns with "Spivak's idea of epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1998, p. 251), where the oppressed are denied subjectivity. In contrast to Bebel, who could speak in legislative assemblies and party meetings, Phule depended solely on books and pamphlets, and these were in Marathi. His approach was unprecedented: he sought to challenge the age-old religious beliefs through education, the printing press, and public discussions. Both men understood the issue of relentless oppression to be fundamentally a problem of deeply ingrained misleading beliefs. In one there is an external form of subjugation and in the other, caste, there is a form of subjugation that is internal and societal. Using Adorno's analysis, the commonly accepted ideas about colonialism, caste, and civilization function as part of a "culture industry", (Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W., 2002, p.78) that depicts



oppression as something that is justified. Both men used their evidences — for Bebel, his speeches in the parliament and the SPD newspaper and for Phule, his scathing pamphlets — “to bring issues into public consciousness” (Chauhan, 2022, p.15). It shows how media can be a platform for counter-hegemonic struggles where oppressed people reclaim their dignity and subjectivity instead of being neutral transmitters.

Conclusion

In my opinion, both Phule and Bebel reveal how media is not only a tool of the “culture industry” but also a powerful means to reclaim dignity and resist such narratives. Role of Media shows pervasive role here, in which oppressive media discourses constructed Africans and Dalits as inferior, while their pamphlets and newspapers tends to awaken critical consciousness.

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