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## Phule's Vision of Equality and Its Relevance in Contemporary India

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### ABSTRACT

Jyotirao Phule was one of the most radical and transformative thinkers in modern Indian history, whose philosophy of equality challenged the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and socio-economic injustices of 19th-century India. His vision of an egalitarian society was rooted in universal education, rationalism, the dignity of labour, and social justice. This research paper critically examines Phule's conception of equality and explores its continued relevance in contemporary India, where issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, economic disparity, and digital exclusion persist despite constitutional safeguards. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology based on historical texts, contemporary policy analysis, and theoretical frameworks. It argues that Phule's ideas are not merely historical artifacts but continue to offer a normative and practical framework for addressing modern inequalities. The paper concludes that realizing Phule's vision requires a deeper commitment to inclusive governance, social awareness, and transformative public policy.

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### Introduction

The idea of equality has been central to political thought across the world, yet its realization has remained uneven and contested. In the Indian context, the struggle for equality has been deeply intertwined with caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and socio-economic exclusion. Among the earliest and most powerful voices against such inequalities was Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890).



Born in a socially marginalized Mali caste in Maharashtra, Phule experienced caste-based discrimination firsthand. These experiences shaped his critique of Brahmanical dominance and motivated him to work toward the upliftment of oppressed communities. Along with his wife, Savitribai Phule, he pioneered education for girls and lower castes, challenging deeply rooted social norms. Phule's intellectual contributions extend beyond activism; they form a comprehensive critique of social inequality and a blueprint for an egalitarian society. His works such as *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) exposed the structural nature of caste oppression and called for social transformation based on equality and justice.

In contemporary India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, disparities persist across caste, class, gender, and region. This raises an important question: How relevant is Phule's vision of equality today? This research paper seeks to answer this question by analyzing Phule's philosophy and examining its application in modern India.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To analyze the concept of equality in Phule's philosophy
2. To examine the socio-political context of his ideas
3. To evaluate the relevance of his vision in contemporary India
4. To suggest policy measures for achieving inclusive development

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the vision of equality proposed by Jyotirao Phule and its relevance in contemporary India. The qualitative method enables an in-depth understanding of his ideas, while the analytical approach helps in critically interpreting his writings in relation to present-day issues of inequality and social justice. The research is based on primary sources, particularly Phule's works such as *Gulamgiri*, along with secondary sources including books, journal articles, and reports. It uses historical and interpretative approaches to understand the socio-political context of his ideas and their deeper philosophical meanings. A comparative approach is also applied to relate Phule's vision with current realities in India. The study is guided by social justice and equality theories, which provide a framework to analyze his ideas and their continuing relevance in modern society.



## Review of Literature

Scholarly work on Phule highlights his role as a pioneer of anti-caste thought and social reform. Gail Omvedt identifies Phule as a foundational figure in the development of Dalit consciousness. Rosalind O’Hanlon emphasizes his critique of Brahmanism and ideological resistance to caste dominance. Recent studies examine Phule’s relevance in contemporary contexts, particularly in education, gender equality, and policy frameworks. However, there remains a gap in linking his ideas to modern challenges such as globalization and digital inequality, which this paper attempts to address.

### Phule’s Vision of Equality.

The vision of equality articulated by Jyotirao Phule was not limited to a single dimension but was deeply multidimensional, radical, and transformative. His understanding of equality extended across social, educational, gender, economic, and cultural domains. Unlike many reformers of his time who focused on partial reforms, Phule sought a complete restructuring of society, rooted in justice, dignity, and human rights. His ideas were not merely theoretical; they were actively practiced through institutions, movements, and social interventions.

#### 1. Social Equality

Phule’s concept of social equality was primarily directed against the **caste system**, which he considered one of the most oppressive and unjust social structures in India. He argued that caste was a man-made system designed to perpetuate the dominance of upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, over the lower castes. According to him, this hierarchical system denied basic human dignity and equality to a large section of society.

Phule rejected the idea that social status should be determined by birth. Instead, he emphasized that all human beings are equal by nature and deserve equal respect and opportunities. His critique was revolutionary because it challenged the ideological and religious foundations that justified caste hierarchy. He envisioned a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity, where individuals are judged by their abilities and character rather than their caste identity.

#### 2. Educational Equality

Education occupied a central place in Phule’s philosophy of equality. He strongly believed that ignorance was the root cause of social oppression and that education was the most powerful tool for liberation. At a time when education was largely restricted to the upper castes, Phule took bold steps to



democratize access to knowledge. He, along with Savitribai Phule, established schools for girls and children from marginalized communities. This initiative was revolutionary, as it challenged both caste-based and gender-based restrictions on education. By promoting inclusive education, Phule laid the foundation for a more equitable society. His efforts marked the beginning of educational democratization in India, which continues to influence modern policies aimed at inclusive learning.

### **3. Gender Equality**

Phule was one of the earliest champions of gender equality in India. He recognized that women, especially those from lower castes, faced multiple forms of oppression. He advocated for women's rights at a time when patriarchal norms were deeply entrenched in society. Phule supported female education, widow remarriage, and strongly opposed practices such as child marriage and the social exclusion of widows. His partnership with Savitribai Phule was not just personal but deeply ideological, as both worked together to promote women's empowerment. Phule believed that no society could progress unless women were given equal opportunities and respect. His ideas contributed significantly to the emergence of early feminist thought in India.

### **4. Economic Justice**

Phule's vision of equality also included a strong emphasis on economic justice. He understood that social inequality was closely linked to economic exploitation. He highlighted the suffering of peasants, laborers, and marginalized communities who were exploited under both colonial rule and traditional social structures. He criticized systems that concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a few while leaving the majority in poverty and deprivation. Phule advocated for the equitable distribution of resources, fair treatment of labor, and recognition of the dignity of work. His economic ideas were rooted in justice and fairness, and they resonate strongly with contemporary discussions on inclusive development and poverty alleviation.

### **5. Religious and Cultural Equality**

Phule's critique extended to the domain of religion and culture, where he challenged religious orthodoxy and priestly dominance. He argued that many religious practices and rituals were designed to reinforce social inequality and maintain the power of the upper castes. However, Phule's critique was not directed against religion itself, but against its misuse as a tool of oppression. He promoted rationalism, humanism, and ethical values as the basis of social life. By rejecting blind faith and encouraging critical thinking, Phule sought to create a society where individuals are free from ideological domination. His



emphasis on cultural equality aimed at ensuring that all communities have equal dignity and representation.

### **Institutional Contributions.**

One of the most significant contributions of Jyotirao Phule was the establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873. The organization, meaning “Society of Truth Seekers,” was founded to promote social justice, equality, and rational thinking. The Satyashodhak Samaj worked actively to eliminate caste discrimination and challenge the dominance of Brahmanical ideology. It encouraged people from marginalized communities to assert their rights and dignity. The organization also promoted education as a means of empowerment and social transformation. Through public discussions, social campaigns, and community mobilization, the Samaj played a crucial role in raising awareness among oppressed groups. It provided a platform for collective action and became a powerful instrument for social change. Its legacy continues to influence contemporary social movements in India.

### **Relevance in Contemporary India.**

The ideas of Jyotirao Phule continue to hold profound relevance in contemporary India, where structural inequalities persist despite constitutional commitments to justice, liberty, and equality. His vision provides not only a moral foundation but also a practical framework for analyzing and addressing modern socio-political challenges. Each dimension of inequality in today’s India reflects, in some way, the issues Phule identified more than a century ago.

#### **1. Caste Inequality**

Caste remains one of the most deeply entrenched forms of inequality in India, even in the 21st century. Despite constitutional provisions such as Articles 14, 15, and 17 that guarantee equality and abolish untouchability, caste-based discrimination continues to manifest in both visible and subtle forms. Instances of caste-based violence, social boycotts, discrimination in housing, education, and employment, as well as practices like manual scavenging, demonstrate the persistence of caste hierarchies. Moreover, caste discrimination has adapted to modern contexts, appearing in urban spaces, digital platforms, and institutional environments. For example, marginalized communities often face exclusion in elite educational institutions and corporate sectors, where caste operates indirectly through social networks and cultural capital.



In this context, Phule's anti-caste ideology is not merely historical but critically relevant. His argument that caste is a socially constructed system of domination challenges contemporary society to confront its hidden biases. His emphasis on dignity, equality, and social justice offers a normative and ethical basis for policies such as reservations (affirmative action), anti-discrimination laws, and social awareness campaigns. Phule's thought encourages a shift from formal equality to substantive equality, where systemic disadvantages are actively addressed.

## **2. Education and Inclusion**

Education remains a key instrument for achieving social mobility and equality, yet access to quality education in India is still uneven. While policies like the National Education Policy 2020 emphasize inclusivity, equity, and multidisciplinary learning, significant gaps persist between policy goals and ground realities.

Marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and economically weaker sections, often face barriers such as poor infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, language disadvantages, and financial constraints. Additionally, the rise of privatization in education has widened the gap between elite and public institutions, making quality education less accessible to disadvantaged communities. The digital divide has further intensified educational inequality, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning became the norm. Students from rural and marginalized backgrounds often lack access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy.

Phule's emphasis on universal and inclusive education serves as a powerful guiding principle in this context. His belief that education is a tool of liberation underscores the need for policies that go beyond mere access to ensure equity in quality, resources, and outcomes. His vision calls for a democratization of knowledge that empowers individuals to challenge oppression and participate fully in society.

## **3. Gender Equality**

India has witnessed considerable progress in women's education, legal rights, and political participation. However, gender inequality remains deeply embedded in social, economic, and cultural structures. Women continue to face challenges such as wage disparities, underrepresentation in leadership roles, gender-based violence, and societal restrictions on mobility and autonomy. Intersectionality further complicates the issue, as women from marginalized castes and communities



experience multiple layers of discrimination. For instance, Dalit and tribal women often face both caste-based and gender-based oppression, limiting their access to opportunities and justice.

Phule's advocacy for women's rights was revolutionary in his time and continues to be relevant today. His insistence on female education, dignity, and equality provides a strong foundation for contemporary feminist movements. Importantly, his approach recognized the intersection of caste and gender, making his ideas particularly valuable in addressing complex inequalities. Modern initiatives such as women's reservation in local governance, legal protections against domestic violence, and campaigns for girls' education reflect Phule's vision. However, his philosophy reminds us that true gender equality requires not only legal reforms but also deep cultural transformation and social awareness.

#### **4. Economic Inequality**

Economic inequality in India has become increasingly pronounced in recent decades. Rapid economic growth has not been evenly distributed, leading to a widening gap between the rich and the poor. A small section of society controls a significant share of wealth, while large segments of the population continue to struggle with poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic services. Marginalized communities, including lower castes, tribal populations, and informal sector workers, are disproportionately affected by economic exclusion. Issues such as landlessness, lack of access to credit, and insecure employment perpetuate cycles of poverty.

Phule's emphasis on economic justice and the dignity of labour is highly relevant in this context. He recognized that social equality cannot be achieved without addressing economic disparities. His critique of exploitation, whether by colonial authorities or indigenous elites, resonates with contemporary concerns about corporate dominance, labour rights, and agrarian distress. Policies aimed at financial inclusion, welfare schemes, rural development, and employment generation reflect attempts to address these issues. However, Phule's vision calls for a more structural transformation of the economy, ensuring that growth is inclusive and benefits all sections of society.

#### **5. Digital Divide**

In the digital age, access to technology has become a crucial determinant of opportunity and empowerment. However, the benefits of digital transformation are unevenly distributed, leading to a new form of inequality known as the digital divide.



Rural areas, economically weaker sections, and marginalized communities often lack access to smartphones, computers, reliable internet, and digital skills. This divide affects not only education but also access to government services, employment opportunities, healthcare, and information.

For instance, digital platforms are increasingly used for governance (e-governance), banking, and job applications. Those without access or skills are effectively excluded from these systems, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Phule's principle of inclusive access to knowledge and resources can be extended to the digital domain. Just as he fought for access to education in his time, today's policymakers must ensure digital inclusion through infrastructure development, affordable technology, and digital literacy programs. His vision reminds us that technological progress must be accompanied by social justice.

## **6. Social Justice Movements**

Contemporary India has witnessed the rise of numerous social justice movements that seek to address issues of caste, gender, environment, and human rights. Movements advocating for Dalit rights, women's empowerment, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and tribal rights reflect an ongoing struggle for equality and dignity.

These movements often draw inspiration directly or indirectly from the ideas of Jyotirao Phule. His emphasis on collective action, awareness, and resistance against oppression continues to shape the strategies and ideologies of modern activism. For example, Dalit movements emphasize self-respect, education, and political representation principles that were central to Phule's philosophy. Similarly, feminist movements that challenge patriarchal norms echo his advocacy for women's rights. In addition, the role of media and digital platforms has expanded the reach of social justice movements, enabling marginalized voices to be heard more widely. However, challenges such as state repression, misinformation, and social backlash remain significant. Phule's legacy serves as a reminder that social transformation requires continuous struggle, critical consciousness, and organized efforts. His vision encourages a participatory and democratic approach to achieving justice, where individuals and communities actively engage in shaping their own futures.

### **Critical Analysis.**

Phule's vision of equality was revolutionary and far ahead of his time. However, it faced significant resistance from dominant social groups who benefited from existing hierarchies. Even today,



while India has a strong constitutional framework promoting equality, the gap between legal provisions and social realities remains wide. The persistence of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and economic disparities indicates that Phule's vision is yet to be fully realized. Structural barriers, cultural norms, and institutional inefficiencies continue to hinder progress. Nevertheless, his ideas provide a powerful framework for critically analyzing these challenges and developing solutions.

### **Findings.**

The study reveals that Phule's concept of equality is deeply comprehensive and multidimensional, addressing various forms of inequality simultaneously. It highlights the central role of education as a tool for empowerment and social transformation. The research also finds that Phule's ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary India, particularly in the context of ongoing struggles for social justice. However, the persistence of structural inequalities indicates the need for more effective implementation of policies and reforms.

### **Suggestions / Way Forward.**

To realize Phule's vision of equality, it is essential to strengthen inclusive education policies that ensure equal access and quality for all sections of society. Awareness programs should be conducted to challenge caste-based discrimination and promote social harmony. Efforts must be made to enhance gender equality through legal reforms, education, and economic empowerment. Bridging the digital divide is crucial in ensuring equal opportunities in the modern era. Additionally, promoting grassroots movements and community participation can play a vital role in achieving sustainable social change.

### **Conclusion**

Jyotirao Phule's vision of equality continues to serve as a guiding light for contemporary India. His emphasis on education, social justice, and human dignity has profoundly influenced the discourse on inclusive development. However, achieving his vision requires more than constitutional guarantees; it demands active social transformation, effective governance, and collective commitment. Equality must be realized not only as a legal ideal but as a lived experience for all citizens. Phule's ideas remain a powerful reminder that true progress lies in building a just, inclusive, and humane society.



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