

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

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Mahatma Jyotiba Phule : Breaking Barriers of Caste, Class, and Gender

Context

India recently celebrated the **197th birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule on April 11, 2025**. Phule is remembered as a pioneering social reformer who relentlessly fought against caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social injustice. His progressive ideas laid the intellectual foundation for future reformers like **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**.

Phule's legacy continues to shape India's constitutional and social framework, especially its commitment to **equality, dignity, and social justice** — key themes for any UPSC aspirant studying India's reformist movements.

Who was Mahatma Jyotiba Phule?

- Born on **April 11, 1827**, in **Pune**, into the **Mali caste** — a backward community traditionally involved in gardening and floristry.
 - His family acquired the surname 'Phule' as his father and uncles served as florists under the last **Peshwa rulers**.
 - Early exposure to **Christian missionary education** and **Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason"** shaped his critical thinking on **religion, equality, and justice**.
 - His own experiences with **caste discrimination** deeply influenced his life's mission for **social upliftment**.
 - Advocated for collaboration with the **British administration** to address social issues, especially the condition of the **depressed classes**.
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Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth-Seekers)

- Founded in **1873**.
 - Objective: To **institutionalize social reform** and challenge the **inequities of the caste system**.
 - Focused on the emancipation of **Shudras and Atishudras (Dalits)** from Brahminical domination.
 - Different from movements like **Brahmo Samaj**, **Arya Samaj**, and **Prarthana Samaj** due to its **grassroots-driven and inclusive** approach.
 - **Weekly Deenbandhu**: The main communication platform for the movement, which highlighted the **grievances of peasants, workers, and the oppressed castes**.
 - In recognition of his reformist efforts, he was awarded the title "**Mahatma**".
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Views on Religion and Caste

- Published "**Sarvajanik Dharma Pustak**" (**1891**) — a critique of sectarianism and religious orthodoxy in dialogue form.
- Condemned the **chaturvarna system**, which institutionalized social, economic, and political discrimination.
- In his work "**Gulamgiri**" (**1873**), he compared caste oppression in India to **racial slavery in America**.
- Advocated **secular humanism** and rejected the **supremacist ideas** found in orthodox religious texts.
- Openly supported **voluntary religious conversions** as a path for oppressed communities to escape caste hierarchies.
- Defended **Pandita Ramabai's** right to convert to Christianity in his work "**Satsar**" — a rare move for a non-Christian social reformer.

- Authored "**Manav Mahammand**" (an abhang) that praised Prophet Muhammad's role in challenging superstition and social orthodoxy.
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View on the Revolt of 1857

- Phule did not romanticize the **1857 Sepoy Revolt**.
 - Considered the uprising a **reactionary attempt to restore Peshwa-era theocracy** rather than a true people's revolution.
 - Worried that a Peshwa restoration would push **Dalits and marginalized castes** back into deeper social exclusion.
 - In "**Gulamgiri**", he critiqued both the Peshwa regime and Brahminical social order for maintaining **systemic slavery**.
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Contribution to Women's Empowerment and Education

- Advocated **equal rights for women and men**.
- Actively fought against social evils such as:
 - **Female infanticide**
 - **Child marriage**
 - **Mistreatment of widows**
 - **Polygamy**
- Established one of India's **first orphanages for widows and their children**, offering protection and dignity to socially abandoned women.
- Co-founded **India's first school for girls in Pune (1848)** with his wife **Savitribai Phule**.
- Started **night schools** for laborers by **1855** to extend education to working-class men and

women.

- Recommended to the **Education Commission**:
 - Making **primary education compulsory** for all children up to age **12**.
 - Providing **scholarships and prizes** for students from marginalized communities.
 - Establishing **more schools** in rural and backward regions.
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Economic and Environmental Vision

- Emphasized the **economic empowerment** of marginalized communities as the key to breaking caste-based exploitation.
 - Advocated for using **military labor** for **public works** like:
 - Construction of **small dams and bunds** for groundwater recharge and soil fertility.
 - Recommended that the government:
 - Return **pasture lands** (now marked as forest) to village communities.
 - Restrict **deforestation and commercial exploitation** of forests.
 - Dismantle the oppressive structure of the **Forest Department**, which exploited poor farmers.
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Legacy

- Mahatma Phule's advocacy for **social equality, gender justice, and economic empowerment** shaped modern India's reformist discourse.
- His ideas inspired later social reformers, including **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**.

- Phule's lifelong commitment to the marginalized made him a cornerstone of India's broader struggle for **justice, dignity, and equality**.
- His vision remains relevant today, as India continues to confront the challenges of **social inclusion and empowerment**.



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