

## Non-Brahmanism and Nature: An Intellectual Environmental History of Jyotirao Phule

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### Abstract

This paper explores the ecological dimension of non-Brahman discourse and practice by focusing on Jyotirao Phule who happens to be one of the critical thinkers of modern India. His ideas on non-Brahman movement received wider popularity within Indian public and academia. This paper proposes that the ideas of Phule have exciting ecological dimension which are extremely useful in the contemporary times. By focusing on ecological dimension of Phule, this paper proposes that he puts equity at the centre stage of rural development and ecological progress. By exploring the ideas of Phule this paper attempts to construct a theory of non-Brahman perspective of nature. This theory enables us to look at nature beyond Hindu nationalist and Brahmanical perspective which needs to capture the non-Brahman perception of nature.

**Key Words:** 1.Ecology, 2.Environmentalism, 3.Non-Brahman, 4.Nature, 5. Caste, 6.Shudras, 7.Ati-shudras

### Introduction

Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) has been one of the important critical thinkers of Modern India. He was a reformer, writer, activist, educationist and champion of downtrodden sections of Indian society. He advocated critical views on Indian cultural and social systems and practices. Undoubtedly, the ideology of Phule emerged as a discourse representing a set of ideas which questions the dominance of the upper strata over the lower strata of Indian society. This paper proposes that the intellectual vision of Phule is not only confined to non-Brahman ideology and movement but also has an interesting dimension on rural ecology. By exploring the ideas of Phule, this paper attempts to construct a theory of non-Brahman perspective of nature. His ideas on rural development with particular reference to management of ecologically important resources are very much relevant in contemporary India. The social dimension of the relationship between human beings and ecology can effectively be captured from the ideas of Phule.

For analysing the ideas of Jyotirao Phule from ecological perspective, this paper has been organised into three sections: the first section proposes a brief review of representation of Phule in the existing academic literature, the second section documents the ecological dimension of Phule's ideology and final section analyse the ecological vision and strategies suggested by Phule.

### I

#### Jyotirao Phule and academia

Exploring the ideas of Jotirao Phule from ecological perspective is such a task which necessitates a marriage between environmental and Dalit histories. It would be useful to initiate a dialogue between Dalit and environmental histories to capture the differential impact of contemporary climate changes that had exercised impact upon complex social structure of India from historical perspective. Ranjan

Chakraborty pointed out that environmental history needs to be located into different areas of Indian history to make it more meaningful body of knowledge (Chakraborty, 2007). While environmental history in India mainly confined to an analysis on the impact of colonial rule over ecologically important resources, Dalit history mainly focused on oppression of the upper strata of Indian society and its implications for Dalits and other marginalised sections (Jangam, 2017). The combination of environmental and Dalit histories enable us to trace the complex interaction between socio-cultural structure and natural and ecologically important resources. This paper is an attempt to evolve a linkage between Dalit and environmental histories by focusing on ideas of Phule.

The pioneering scholars, who worked on Phule, mainly focused on documentation of his biographical details. Keer's biography on Phule is a classic example of this trend (Keer, 1962). Attempt was being made to document the life of Phule as a message to the young generation for inspiring them to be aware of their rights (Thakur, 2016). The interesting fact about biographies on Phule is that his biographies have been written in several regional languages and Hindi as small booklets to convey the main message of his life and ideology.

Phule has undoubtedly been one of the chief architects of non-Brahman ideology in India which questions the hegemonic domination of Brahman community over non-Brahman communities. Attempt has been made to capture the role of Phule in shaping non-Brahman ideology in western India (Gore, 1989). Omvedt's study on non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra provides graphical details on how Phule has launched his attack on Brahmanical hegemony (Omvedt, 1976). Malik's *Dissent Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation*, highlights the radical ideology of Phule for liberation of working masses and socially marginalised (Malik, 1994). Some of the foreign scholars carried out penetrating research on life and ideas of Phule and his radical critique of Brahmanical hegemony. Hanlon Rosilind's *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* is a critical reflection Phule's engagement with countering the cultural domination imposed by Brahmanical culture (Rosilind, 1985). These studies made a valuable contribution to the knowledge on various aspects of Phule's thought and practices.

As a public intellectual, Phule was very much concerned for exploring the exploitative system that evolved in British India with the combination of both Brahmanical culture and British rule. Environmental historians of India similarly engaged in unearthing the process of exploitation of ecologically important resources and people in India. The main argument of pioneers of environmental history of India is that Indian culture influenced by Brahmanical world view embedded with ecologically sensitive socio-cultural practices and such practices are destroyed by British colonial rule (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). This approach strongly defends the environmental ethos of Brahmanical culture and highlights the ideas of those thinkers who echo these ideas. Particularly M.K. Gandhi was natural choice for constructing Indian environmentalism an extended modern version of Brahmanical values. According to Mukul Sharma consequent upon this trend the ideas of non-Brahman thinkers did not receive attention of environmental historians (Sharma, 2017).

The ideas expressed by Dalit/non-Brahman thinkers in India articulate emancipatory project from the burden of the British oppression at one level and Brahmanical exploitation at another level. Besides this, the ideas of Dalit/non-Brahman thinkers also possess a fascinating ecological dimension which treats the relationship between human beings and nature as an organic rather than a romantic relationship. In one of my papers I had documented the ecological dimension of Dr. Ambedkar thought and activities (Kumar, 2016). I had similarly attempted to capture the ecological dimension of Phule in one of the papers (2013). In his latest study Mukul Sharma aptly documented the ecological dimension of Phule and visions on rural

ecology (Sharma, 2017). The fact however is that these studies attempted to locate Phule in the environmentalism of India, but could not see a potential theory that the ideas of Phule offer in the form of non-Brahman perspective of nature which essentially means critiquing the hierarchical way of looking at nature and proposing an egalitarian or inclusive framework for looking at the relationship between human beings and nature.

## II

### **Human beings and Nature in the Discourse of Phule**

Social philosophy of Phule was mainly aimed at questioning the exploitative process of the upper strata over the lower strata of Indian society. He attempted to conceptualise the exploitive relationship between lower and upper classes in India. Engaging with history he proposes that shudras and ati-shudras are not only original inhabitants but also rulers of India. But such status according to Phule was gradually lost on account of the conquest of India by the Aryan Brahmans and alienation of the non Aryans from access to resources of nature and wealth. The standard nationalist narrative of history in British India was that India was guided by the spirituality rooted in the Vedic period, and such a glory was eroded on account of Muslim and British rule. Phule inverted this narrative by making the Vedic Aryan values as factors that are responsible for decay of original Indian civilisation. Here we can see a potential theory which proposes that the access to resources in India was determined by socio-cultural and religious systems embedded in caste practices.

The core philosophy of non-Brahman movement in general and Phule in particular is that Brahmanical beliefs and practices are one of the important reasons for deprivation of non-Brahman and working masses in India. Here I do not subscribe to the view that whatever Phule said and wrote is absolutely appropriate. Non-Brahman ideology needs to be seen in the context of three processes that took place in Maharashtra. Firstly, on account of the Peshwa rule dominated by Brahman aristocracy, socio-economic and cultural hegemony was enjoyed by Brahman community of Maharashtra. Secondly, on account of access of education, Brahman community was able to acquire substantial benefit in the colonial rule. The third factor is that, the significant control of Brahman over governance and resources acted as a stumbling block for advancement of non-Brahman class in British rule. It was in this process from which the ideas and activities of Phule needed to be seen. He was indeed critical of Brahman community which for him acted as deterrent force for the progress of working masses of India. But Phule animosity to Brahmanism was basically theoretical than rather personal. His theoretical commitment was that all oppressive forces need to be countered. Hence he was also highly critical of British colonial rule in India

Phule's ideology is basically an anti-oppressive discourse. He was not selective in attacking the source of oppression. He was critical of both Indian and non-Indian agencies which produce oppressive conditions. He was often critical of British colonial rule for not doing adequate work for advancement of lower sections of Indian society. He has explicitly identified the exploitative role of the British rule and its impact on various sectors of India. He was openly critical of the British for not giving serious attention to the education of lower class. His book *Gulam Giri* presents an incisive critique of colonial rule in the domain of education. He alleged that the British government spent money on training Brahman teachers, but unwilling to spend the same on training depressed classes teachers (Deshpande, 2002). He was also critical of the British for allowing privileges of Brahmans by excluding non-Brahmans. The ideas of Phule thus exhibits a genuine concern for questioning the exploitative forces be it Indian or foreign and imagining a society based upon notion of equity.

The significant aspect of Phule's ecological dimension is that his ideas allow us to problematise the existing theory on ecological dimension of castes system propounded by environmental historians. He was one of the pioneers who rejected the Brahmanical framework to look at Indian society. Particularly Phule was critical of caste based hierarchical system (Jaffrelot, 2011). Caste system in India has generally been analyzed from socio-economic, political and cultural perspective caste system has been represented as social relationship which does not have strong connection with geo-ecological conditions. Environmental history seriously investigated upon the role of ecological conditions in shaping and sustaining the social grouping in India. Environmental history thus offers a fresh perspective on origin, evolution and sustenance of caste system from the perspective of human ecological nexus in India. This theory is devised based upon the Brahmanical view of nature which imposes restrictions on use of resources based upon the social rank of communities.

Madhav Gadgil happens to be an earliest exponent of ecological dimension of caste system. He applies the biological species modal to analyse the resource use adaptations by the population of India. Like multiple species survive by restricting themselves to particular resource base, Gadgil proposes that human population evolved caste based ethnic restrictions on use of living resources to achieve sustainability and minimise competition for resources. Advancing the answer to the question of how caste system sustained in India, Gadgil argued that caste system acted as deterrent to unhealthy competition among multiple ethnic communities to share resources. This situation according to Gadgil provides resource niches to various communities and thereby provided structural and functional unification and stability to society in India (Gadgil, 1985).

Gadgil's theory of eco-caste system embedded two important characteristic features: firstly, he proposes that caste system is perceived as a form of social stratification rooted in the process of evolving exclusive control of one particular community over a particular resource, secondly, caste system is a socio-cultural organization of human groups which practice certain profession based upon specific resources and finally caste system is based on the use of living resources not only to avoid competition among communities but also to promote social and ecological stability. This theory acquired prominence in the context of the government of India's shift toward community based solutions for management of natural resources. Gadgil's views are given wider coverage after his teaming up with historian Ramachandra Guha. The book *This Fissure Land* advances their views on ecological dimension of caste system. They perceive caste system as 'remarkable system of ecological adaptation' (Gadgil and Guha, 1992: 95). This theory finds an endorsement from Kavoori who proposed a notion of Verna tropic system as a factor facilitating ecological niche formation and socio-ecological stability to Indian society (Kavoori, 2002).

The aforementioned theory has been devised with the assumption that caste occupations have evolved as natural phenomenon without influence of any ideological and institutional agency. If we go by this theory, the occupations that are practiced by untouchable communities are embraced voluntarily and happily. The role of power relations in shaping the resource allocation process has not been taken into consideration by eco-caste theory. This theory attempts to naturalise the human inequalities with the argument of ecological adaptations of communities. This theory has been countered by several studies. By analysing indigenous irrigation management system in South India David Mosse documents the role of elites in imposing their control over common pool resources and excluding Dalits in the name of purity (Mosse, 1997). This critique can be seen in the study of Mukul Sharma offers an incisive critique of Gadgil's theory of eco-caste. He terms the Indian centric ecological approach of Gadgil and Vandana Shiva as neo-Brahmanical

discourse of representing nature (Sharma, 2017). The ideas of Phule are cable of providing a firm footing to the non-Brahman ecological theory.

Environmental thought and movement in India perceives Indian culture as guiding and influencing factor for promotion of sustainable use of resource. The fact is that Indian culture is equated with Brahmanical culture which in turn constitutes bedrock of Hindu culture. Indian socio-cultural systems were attributed to Brahmanical values. This perception was extended to ecological phenomenon as well. It has been proposed that the way Brahmanical values are providing stability to Indian society, the same values are capable of promoting sustainable use and effective conservation of environment. To be frank the Indian ecological wisdom is attributed to Hindu religious ideas and practices. A binary categorisation of ecologically prudent Indian culture and ecologically destructive Western civilisation has been evolved by environmental historians. Intellectual environmental history has also been drawn into this framework. The ideas of Gandhi on village communities have been interpreted in the language of ecological wisdom inspired Indian culture. Similarly the ideas of Vandana Shiva, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Baba Ampte, Anna Hazare and others received public and academic attention in India. At the level of environmentalism, cultural ecology influenced by Hindu culture which is termed as traditionalism by some studies (Sinha, et al, 1997) acquired prominence and at activist level too Hindu cultural practices were projected as effective solutions for saving ecology. In this steel frame of neo-Brahmanical discourse and practice in the domain of ecological process non Brahman ideas on nature did not receive adequate attention.

The concepts of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical perspective of nature/ecology are complicated domains. While the Brahmanical views look at nature a sacred and its use and protection constitutes dharma to be adhered by practicing cultural and social codes rooted in sastras, non-Brahman perception looks at nature as organic entity with which human beings needed to be engaged and protected for survival. Brahmanical world view bestows access to resource of nature to privileged sections determined by birth of individual and non Brahman thought recognise the naturalist principle of equal access of nature to all human beings. While Brahmanical notion of nature legitimise the access and domination of nature by the upper strata of society, non-Brahman notion of nature proposes ability and need based access to resources of nature. Finally Brahmanical views of nature endorse exploitation of nature by privileged sections, non-Brahman thought delegitimise exploitation of nature and proposes harmonious relationship between human beings and nature as they intimately connected with it in everyday lives. It would thus be useful for us to deliberate upon non-Brahman thought and its ecological dimension. Non Brahman thought, particularly in modern India has rich historical tradition. Ramaswami Naicker, Swami Naryana Guru, Ambedkar and Phule nurtured this thought and evolved a constructive critique of Brahmanism. Non-Brahman thought mainly proposes cosmopolitan perception to look at Indian society and reject the view of Brahmanical culture as framework for looking at Indian society which empowers a few and alienate many. It critiqued hierarchical notion of Indian society and proposes egalitarian ethos as framework of modern India. The subsequent section attempts to explore the ecological dimension of non-Brahman discourse and practice by focusing on Jyotirao Phule.

The ecological dimension of ideas and practices of Phule are useful in liberating the Indian ecological discourse from the clutches of Brahmanical framework and look for alternative way of perceiving the relationship between Indians and ecology. This process is important for the fact that Brahmanical notion of ecology proposes sacredness rooted in purity as guiding principle for addressing ecological issues. This logically means that hierarchy based on pure and impure would become a determinant factor for the relationship between human beings and nature. Consequently, vast sections of non-Brahman population

such as tribes, Dalits, minorities, women etc would be alienated from engaging with ecology as they do not come under the category of pure. It was this principle that systematically excluded vast sections of Indians from access to resources of nature and depriving them from better life. The ideas of Phule are useful in exploring the non-Brahman vision of ecology. This attempt has been done at three levels: firstly documentation of ideas of Phule on how Brahmanical culture alienated the vast sections of non-Brahmans from access to resources of nature, secondly an analysis of Phule ideas on development of rural areas by focusing on ecology and lastly the vision of Phule of non Brahman nature.

### **Alienation of non-Brahman from nature**

As per the law of nature all human beings possess equal rights to resources of nature. Their ability to access nature is determined by physical strength, topography and ecological conditions. According to Marx, the process of alienation human beings from nature started after invention of notion of private property (Forester, 2002). Phule arrive at similar conclusion by analysing Brahmanical culture and its impact on Indian society. For Phule Brahmanism created a hierarchical social system which gives access to resources of nature to some social groups and alienate some other social groups. He proposes that Brahmanical culture believes that by virtue of proximity to spirituality and sacredness some communities have unquestionable control over resources, while others have restricted control over nature on account of their lower social status. This premise exposes the limitations of Gadgil theory on ecological dimension of caste system. Ecological adoption of different castes is not a voluntary process rather forced upon some communities by some communities in a bid to grab and monopolise valuable resources and exclude other communities from access to resources. In fact the ideas of Phule and several other critical thinkers have immense potential for creation alternative theory of ecological dimension of caste system.

As a thinker Phule was concerned with tracing the roots of exploitation of shudras and ati-shudras that constitutes bulk of the poor in India. He located the roots of ecological exploitation in both British rule and Brahmanical domination. He was aware of the exploitive system that evolved during the British period with the collaboration of British officers and the upper strata of Indian society particularly of Brahman employees. He ideas on this phenomenon can be captured from the following quote: 'European employees are engrossed in luxury and laziness in all government departments large and small, and the departments are filled with bhats, the losses they cause to the farmer, like the khot in Konkan cannot even me made up.' (Deshpande, 2002: 140). Phule did not follow the dominant nationalist thought of his times and preferred to propagate his critical engagement with Indian social and cultural values. For him the misery of Indians was not only because of the British but also due to selfish interests of some of the upper strata of Indian society.

Jyotirao Phule exhibits remarkable insights into the ecological background of alienation of rural poor from access to natural resources during the British. While the pioneers of environmental history of modern India mainly focused on the Marxist notion of alienation of man from nature by exploring the impact of British rule on forest dependent communities, Phule attempted to capture the realistic picture on the main reason for alienation of the poor from access to nature. His ideas can be captured from the following passage:

In the past, those farmers who had very little land and could not survive on its products, would go into nearby forests and would gather wood, fruits and leaves from tress like palash and muha. By selling these things they managed to collect money for their basic

needs, and depending on the town pastures for cattle-feed, could maintain a cow or two and a few sheep, manage on their produce and live happily in their own town. But now the cunning European employees of our honourable government have spent all their foreign and multi-faceted intelligence to establish a massive Forest Department; including all mountains and hills and valleys. This culminates in the inclusion of unused lands and the pastures as well. Now our poor and handicapped farmers' sheep and goats have no place to feed even on the air in the forests. Now if they want to work to fill their bellies they have to work in the factories as weavers, iron-smiths or carpenters or as casual labourers (Deshpande, 2002: 132).

The aforementioned passage of Phule shows his remarkable observational capacity to capture the process initiated by promulgation of forest policies all over India including Maharashtra. Implementation of the Indian forest act of 1878 has brought most of the economically valuable forests and wastelands under the control of forest department (Pathy, 1982). This process has created a massive havoc not only to the forest dependent tribes but also rural society, particularly rural poor. It was this process that was resulted in rural unrest expressed in the form of several peasant and tribal movements in different parts of India (Guha and Gadgil, 1989).

Phule located the process de-industrialisation and alienation the rural poor from access to forests and village commons to the exploitative state apparatus that was created to cater to interests of the British and Indian upper class mainly consisted of Brahmans. It was this process according to Phule mainly responsible for rural poverty during the British rule in India. Contrary to the views of nationalist intelligentsia which was obsessed with urban affairs, Phule ideas shows his deep understanding on the happenings in the rural areas on account of implementation of forest policies.

Environmental historians of modern India by and large confine their analysis on colonial exploitation and conservation of forests and other resources. The destruction of ecology and alienation of the poor was exclusively attributed to the British rule (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). This approach did not give importance to the role of Indian social structure in exploitation and alienation of the poor from access to nature. Foucauldien environmental historians who promised to construct plurality of the relationship between human beings and nature during the British colonial rule, mainly confined to tracing the plural nature of colonial policy making process (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, Guha, 1999, Sabrwal, 1999). The differential impact of colonial environmental policies on rural society remained a less explored terrain.

The ideas of non-Brahman thinkers in general and Phule in particular are useful in addressing intellectual apathy in recognising the exploitative role of Brahmanical culture in depriving vast masses of non-Brahman population from access to resources and wealth. In his *Gulamgiri*, Phule reinterpreted the Hindu mythological history. For him Hindu mythology is an attempt of Aryans to subjugate the original inhabitants (Phule terms them as shudras and ati-shudras) of India. He proposed that Aryan Brahmans not only subjugated the original inhabitants of India but also its resources. He also proposed that triumph of Brahmanism resulted in wasteful use of resources such as killing of animals in yagnas and emergence of Brahmans as a parasitic class which eats the surplus generated by hardworking peasants. Phule was in fact attempted to trace the economic and ecological roots of caste system by engaging with critical interpretation of Brahmanism. The following quote demonstrates his views: 'They (Brahmans) wanted to exploit the labour of the shudras and atishudras to sustain not only their own luxurious lifestyle but also that of their future generations. To achieve this devious goal they created the fraudulent rigmoral of the caste system and wrote several books to legitimize the caste system' (Deshpande, 2002: 45). By applying

critical perspective, Phule represented the Brahmanical literature and value system as an ideological tool to control labour of non-Brahman working masses. The ideas of Phule are useful to reformulate the romantic Hindu ecology which is projected as indigenous ecological wisdom in the existing literature of environmental history. He has brought out the social dimension of ecological process in India by the way of projecting the exploitation of upper strata of society over lower strata. For him Hindu ecology is not a sustainable model of resources use rather a system of grabbing of resources by upper strata of society by alienating the lower strata of society.

Another interesting aspect of Phule's thought was that location of human deprivation and ecological degradation in historical perspective. For him both Europeans and Brahmans have a similarity in terms of ability to exploit human beings and resources of nature. This proposition made Phule to use the approach of sons of the soil. While Europeans and Brahmans are perceived by him as outsiders of India, the working mass constitutes original inhabitants of India. This theory of Phule was not based on ethnicity, rather based on the characteristic feature of exploited and exploiter. For him exploited are original Indians and exploiter are foreigners. For Phule India history represents a classic example of deprivation of sons of the soils by migrant communities. The following passage of Phule shows these views:

The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of the people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favourable land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western nations, attracted the Aryans. The original inhabitants with whom these earth-born gods, the Brahmans, fought, were not inappropriately termed Rakshasas that is the protectors of the land. The cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India in the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines. They originally settled on the banks of the Ganges whence they spread gradually over the whole of India. In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of crude and inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations (Deshpande, 2002: 27).

Phule had shows a remarkable insight on the nature of alienation of shudras and ati-shudras from access to resources of nature. For him this process was initiated by Aryans in order to grab the resources of shudras and ati-shudras. Phule thus developed a bitter critique of Aryanism and tried to delegitimize its dominance on the socio-cultural aspects of India.

The agency for exclusion of the rural poor from access to nature for Phule not only lies in the British rule but also in the dominant sections' interests. It has been proposed by some studies that the expansionist process of colonial rule mainly structured from the Brahmanical notion of hierarchy of Indian society. In this process Brahmanical values acquired hegemonic status (Bose and Jalal, 2001). In this rank based society, communities subscribing to Brahmanical values gained access to resources and those communities outside of Brahmanical framework were alienated from access to nature. Phule engaged with this process seriously in his writings. In case of access of rural folks to forests and grazing sources, Phule shows that poor shudras and atishudras who live on keeping a cow or goat for sustenance, selling firewood, and collection of minor forest products were excluded by the British forest policies which are executed by the officials of forest department mainly consisted of Brahman employees.



In case of access to water, Phule explicitly shows the discriminatory attitude of Brahmans towards lower sections of Indian society. He provides a graphical account on how Brahmans who occupied majority posts in the water department of Poona municipality ensured water supply to their localities and neglecting the same to the areas wherein Shudras and Dalits live. Phule also mentions that most of the wells are drilled in the Brahman localities to ensure continuous supply of water (Desponded, 2002: 92). Existing scholarship has analysed the colonial impact on Indian ecology and society mainly from the perspective of coloniser and colonised. This approach could not be able to capture the deeper impact of colonial rule on different social groups in generally and socially marginalised sections in particular in the domain of ecology. Such views enable us to assess who gained and who lost during the British colonial rule.

### **Rural Agro-Ecology and Phule**

Economic nationalism has emerged in India mainly after 1880s. Documentation of economic exploitation of India and consequent poverty was centrality of economic nationalism. The poverty and miserable conditions in India were attributed to the capitalist exploitation of Indian resources for advancement of British industry (Chandra, 2010). But these writings did not give importance to the participation of Indian upper classes in this process. Here the agrarian ideas of Phule are useful in understanding the collaborative enterprise of the British and Indian upper class/caste in exploitation of the labour of underprivileged.

Phule's ideas on Indian agriculture represent agrarian egalitarianism. His description on conditions of Indian farmers was mainly organic in nature as he himself belongs to agrarian class. He exhibited keen empathy on the pitiable conditions of Indian farmers. The following quote shows his reflection of agrarian conditions in India:

Since our generous and kind government began to rule this Brahmanical nation, they have started killing bullocks and cows and calves, without any proper ritual, and have started eating them, along with Mussalmans, mangs and mahars, one of the important resources of the farmers is diminishing. On top of that, because of the lack of rain there was a drought, and the cattle were destroyed by lack of fodder. Secondly, because of the rules of Forest Department and the inadequacy of pasture, the cattle could not be fed, their off-spring became weak and cattle was seized by disease, and thousands died, and the farmers had to uproot their pegs. Next, because there was not enough cattle to labour on their farms, the farmers could not take proper care of his field, and the yield had decreased. Moreover, our cunning government, thought its Brahman employees, had carried out surveys every thirty years and have established levies and taxes as they willed and the farmer, losing his courage, has not properly tilled his land, and therefore millions of farmers have not been able to feed themselves or cover themselves (Deshpande, 167).

Phule exhibited remarkable insights in grasping agrarian crisis in colonial India. The crisis in agrarian sector for Phule was not only due to the policies of the British, but also due to parochial attitude of Brahman employees who occupied most of the government machinery and aided the British in exploitation of peasantry. It was this condition according to Phule that had crippling effect on the agrarian society mainly consisted of small peasants, rural artisans and landless. Alarming voice of Phule could be seen in the manifestation of agrarian crisis in the form of the Deccan riots took place in Maharashtra in 1874 which mainly attacked money lenders and corrupt government officials.

Besides critique, Phule also put forward constructive ideas on how rural agro ecology of India should be managed for achieving desirable progress. Firstly, Phule demanded education to sons and daughters of framers which for him a pre-condition for advancement of agrarian society. He stressed that education of farmers would improve their ability to choose profitable crops, better knowledge on market and importantly saving themselves from the cheating strategies of government clerks and oppressive money lenders.

Intelligentsia in British India was keenly interested in promotion of science and technology as factor to accelerate the progress of India. Phule too was keenly interested in the science and technology based strategies in development of rural society. Writing in 1883 Phule has proposed a vision for modernisation of Indian agriculture by the way of introducing machinery which was already in use in European countries. He proposed that: 'The benevolent government should educate all the farmers, until they became mature enough to use machines to do the usual things on the farms like European farmers' (Deshpande, 2002: 180). Phule had advocated for dynamic agriculture which was capable of improving productivity of Indian agriculture and improve the income level of agrarian society. In short Phule wanted to make Indian agriculture as profitable enterprise than simple subsistence phenomenon for of farming class.

Phule was very much concern for cattle which constitutes one of the important inputs of Indian agriculture. His concerns need to be seen in the context of British forest policies that were implemented from 1865 onwards. Most of the forests, grazing grounds and wastelands were brought under the category of reserved forests. In these forests, the entry of cattle was allowed on payment of prescribed taxes. It was an additional burden on the peasantry which was already improvised due to the British agrarian policies. While engaging with this issue Phule boldly proposed the following suggestion on this issue: 'all white people and Mussalmans should slaughter goat and sheep instead of slaughtering cows and oxen: or they should import cattle and slaughter and eat them here, because otherwise there will not be sufficient supply of cattle for farms, and neither the farmers, nor the government will benefit' (Deshpande, 2002: 180).

Phule was extremely concerned about the soil conservation and preservation of soil nutrients for achieving better agricultural productivity. He proposed an interesting suggestion to British government to conserve soils in a natural way. He proposed that: 'The essence of leaf, grass, flower, dead insects and animals is washed away by summer rain, therefore our industrious government should, as and when convenient, use the white and black soldiers and the extra manpower in the police department to construct small dams and bunds in such a way that water would seep into the ground and only later go and meet streams and rivers. This would make the land very fertile, and the soldiers in general, having got used to working in open air will also improve their health and become strong' (Deshpande, 2002: 180-81). Phule thus identified the ecological dynamics which is an important component to strengthen agrarian economy. In this way he subscribed to naturalist methods to enhance the soil fertility methods. Obviously the ecological insights of Phule exhibit a rare reflection in the intellectual history of India. He engaged himself with grass root levels of Indian agriculture and prescribed very important measures for soil fertility management. This suggestion of Phule needs to be seen in the context of commercialisation of agriculture and promotion commercial crops such as cotton. To meet the demands of land revenue Indian farmers were compelled to over exploit the soil. As an agrarian intellectual Phule engaged with this issue and demanded the government to address this problem in a more innovative way.

Water management has been one of the critical components of agriculture in India. British government paid serious attention to irrigation systems as a means to promote commercial crops. Several canals and

barrages on rivers were constructed to divert water from rivers to agriculture. In this context it is useful to assess the ideas of Phule on water management systems. He was aware of the importance irrigation systems in tropical countries like India. He advanced the following suggestions: 'The government should in all the hills and valleys, build lakes wherever possible, so that the small dams in the lower areas will fill with fruit and flower and vegetable will be used, and government too will benefit along with farmers. Therefore the government should maintain these bounds in good condition, especially in the backwaters. The government should conduct surveys of all the lands in its territory, employing water specialists, and wherever it is found that there is enough water to be drawn in the maps of the towns, and the government should give some award to farmers who dig wells without its assistance' (Deshpande, 2002: 181).

The fascinating aspect of Phule's water policy is that he suggested the government to focus on indigenous irrigation systems for maximising the utilisation of water sources. Contrary to dominant perception of promoting large scale irrigation projects, Phule opted for efficient maintenance of rural water management systems in order to promote the farming of small and tribal farmers. It was this agrarian egalitarianism that Phule was deeply concerned with.

Agrarian society critically dependent upon grasslands and several other inputs from forests such as wood, firewood etc. This dependency between rural society and forests was critically affected by British forest policies. The impact of this process has been a well documented domain in the literature on colonial forest policies. Phule also put forward interesting proposals for creation of village forests which would supply agrarian inputs to farmers. He was indeed a pioneer of contemplating village forest policy in India. Existing studies on community centric or village forests in modern India mainly deal with the ideas of village forest articulated by organisations such as Poona Sarvajanika Sabha and Indian National Congresses etc (Guha, 2001). But the ideas of Phule on village level forests as an organic part of agro ecology did not receive adequate attention. The idea of village forests according to Phule consist of three essential principles: sufficient extent of forest areas should be allotted for each village settlement as village forests, products for domestic purpose should only be allowed to obtain and finally proper check and vigilance needed to be placed to control the exploitation of village forests. The ideas of Phule on village forests can be captured from the following sentence: 'the government should allow the farmers to collect all the silt and other things extracted from rivers and lakes as in the olden times, and it should also return all the cow pastures to the villages, which it has included in its 'forest': it should however, make sure that no firewood is collected, or land tilled in the areas that belong to it, and it should also forbid the cutting of wood for selling as wood for construction and destroy the oppressive the Forest Department.' (Deshpande, 2002: 181).

### **Ecological Vision of Phule**

Even though the ideas of Phule did not directly address the ecological issues, but his writings implicitly brought a vibrant socio-ecological understanding of Indian rural ecology. His ecological ideas mainly rooted in two broad aspects: firstly, exclusionary forms of socio-cultural beliefs created and propagated by Brahmanical value system and secondly, his ideas on agro ecology. So far as first domain is concern, Phule proposed that Brahmanical religion and culture is basically anti-human in nature. The upholders of these values for Phule imbibed anti-human spirit which essentially manifest in the form of hatred towards other communities. He was deeply concerned to explore the way in which the productive class consisting of shudras and ati shudras were excluded from good life and responsibility of Brahmanism for this process. He argued that shudras and ati shudras were not allowed to have access to education, knowledge and wealth. It was this process according to Phule driven the majority of working masses to remain the poor having been deprived of learning. This process was also responsible according to Phule for alienation of human beings from nature and its resources.

The second aspect of Phule ecological vision was his future vision of rural agro-ecology. He wanted a vibrant and egalitarian agrarian society in India by the way of providing access of natural resources to all sections of people in India. He also wanted the government to play an active role in minimising the problems of agrarian society. What distinguishes Phule from other contemporary thinkers is that his vision for rural agro ecology. This vision essentially consisted of three aspects. Firstly, Phule recognised the importance of ecologically important resources such as soil, water, forests, pastures etc for healthy agrarian society. He wanted a systematic and scientific management of these resources on account of their critical importance to agrarian economy of India. Secondly, he was critical of both the British and Indian elite who created policies for excluding farmers from access to vital resources such as forests and pastures. He attacked the state policies and executors of such policies he felt perpetuates of backwardness of rural areas. Finally, Phule wanted enlighten government policies and more importantly vigilant observation of shudras and ati shudras by gaining access to education and knowledge. He wanted an active and vibrant society to be constructed based upon knowledge, compassion and equality. Phule thus formulated egalitarian environmentalism which means everyone entitled for resources of nature and everyone has responsibility of safeguarding the resources of nature. The need of ideas of Phule is very much relevant in the contemporary context wherein the impact of climate changes started exercising differential impact on different social sections. This trend is more so in a country like India which has complex hierarchy based society.

The agro-ecological vision of Phule aimed at bringing ecologically important resources under systematic management practices. He was well aware of the fact that agrarian economy of India critically dependent upon the resources such as water, grass, cattle, forests etc. The management of these resources for Phule needs to be done by both centralised government policies at one level and active participation of local communities at another level. It was this judicious combination of central and local level participation for Phule is needed for management of ecologically important resources in rural India. He in fact suggested government to use the services of military and police service in reconstruction of village resources as an efficient way of using their free time. The point to be noted here is that Phule advocated for careful and dynamic planning for management of resources that are critically required for not only agriculture but also for rural society at large.

### **Conclusion**

The ecological thinking of Jotirao Phule provides an important intervention in the historiography of environmental history. In the existing literature on Indian environmentalism, the socio-cultural ethos of Brahmanism at one level and intellectuals who cherish Brahmanical ethos at another level have been given priority. Consequently cultural environmentalism in India remained to be neo-Brahmanical ideology. The ideas of Phule enable us to construct Indian environmentalism beyond Brahmanical values. The ideas of Jotirao Phule show organic understanding on rural development by focusing on systematic management of ecologically important resources in rural areas. Ecological dimension of Phule is important to modify historiography of environmental history in India. European scholars' writings on environmental history claim that anxieties about ecological conservation were an exclusive domain of colonial scientists and administrators. The writings of Indian scholars on the other hand mainly focused on environmentalism of Brahmanical thinkers. The ecological dimension of Phule provides a fresh perspective to Indian environmental history in the form of putting equity and social inclusiveness as centrality of environmental discourse in India. The most important contribution of Phule for Indian ecological thought is that the phenomenon of ecology needs to be seen from the perspective of social structure. Because it the social structure that determines the access and exclusion human being to the resources of nature.

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