Social Revolution of Jyotiba Phule

Prelims – *History of India and Indian National Movement.*

Mains (GS I) – *Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present- significant events, personalities, issues.*

Why is in News?

Recently, the 197th birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was celebrated on April 11th, who is remembered as a pioneering figure in India's social reform movement.

Who is Jyotiba Phule?

- **Personal background** - He was born on April 11, ***1827, in Pune,*** into the Mali caste—a backward community traditionally engaged in gardening and floristry.
- Since Jyotirao's father and 2 uncles served as florists under the last of the Peshwas, they came to be known as '*Phules*'.
- **Inspiration** – His early exposure to *Christian missionary schools* and the rationalist thought of *Thomas Paine's Age of Reason* helped shape his revolutionary ideas about religion, equality, and justice.
- **Social emancipator** – His personal experiences with caste-based discrimination began early.
- He worked for the *empowerment of women and for upliftment of lower caste people* and he preferred to work with the British government to improve the conditions of untouchables and depressed castes.

Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth-Seekers)
• **Founded in** – 1873. • **Aim** – To institutionalize his reformist vision. • To overcome the inequities and inequalities that the caste system entailed. • **Focus** – It was dedicated to the *liberation of Shudras and Atishudras (Dalits)* from Brahminical dominance, caste oppression, and gender inequality. • Unlike elite-led reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Prarthana Samaj, which often remained restricted to upper castes, it was *inclusive and grassroots-driven.* • It provided a platform for non-Brahmins to challenge hierarchical social norms and claim dignity, rights, and justice. • **Weekly Deenbandhu** – It was main print medium of this organisation which *articulated the grievances of the peasants sand workers.*

*Jyotiba Phule was awarded the title "**Mahatma**" for his innumerable social*

services and reforms

What are his views on religion and caste?

- In his ***book Sarvajanik Dharma Pustak*** published in 1891, his views on religious and social issues are given in the form of a dialogue.
- **Rejected sectarianism** – He said that the pernicious practice of caste is a human invention.
- He *condemned the chaturvarna system* because depressed class people faced serious discriminations and atrocities in social, economic, political and cultural realms due to that.
- In ***Gulamgiri (slavery)***, he drew parallels between caste oppression in India and racial slavery in America.
    - In 1868, he decided to give access to the untouchables to a small bathing tank near his house.
- **Denied supremacism** - All human beings on our planet are equipped with similar physical and intellectual facilities.
- **Critiqued senseless scriptures** – In *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak*, he mentioned that all the religious and revelatory books that man has produced on our planet, one and all, do not contain a consistent universal truth.
- **Followed secular approach** – Naturally the planet earth which we inhabit are *created by one Creator*.
- He wrote an abhang titled ***Manav Mahammand (Muhammad the man),*** which *extolls the prophet of Islam* as having *liberated his people from the yoke of superstition and orthodoxy of his age.*
- His approach was deeply inclusive, advocating harmony over division, and compassion over orthodoxy.
- **Supported voluntary religious conversion** – He believed people should be free to choose their religion.
- In his booklet ***Satsar (The Essence of Truth)***, he defended Pandita Ramabai's right to convert to Christianity.
- Notably, his defense was unique as it was the only one of its kind offered by a non-Christian.

Phule's view on 1857 Revolt
• He could not come to affiliate with the sepoy revolt, seeing it as a retrogression towards the ascendant theocracy of the Peshwa rule. • He could not see a way to resolve his social revolution with the tempest of 1857. • He felt that the *obstinacy of the orthodox upper-caste Hindus* would consign the Dalits back into a state of destruction. • In Gulamgiri (Slavery), he condemned the practice of slavery followed by Brahmins and during the rule of Peshwas.

What is his contribution for women empowerment and education?

- According to him, both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a *sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex.*

- **Against ill practices on women** - He was instrumental in the fight against practices like *female infanticide, child marriage, and the mistreatment of widows.*
- He also condemned men who practice polygamy.
- **Established orphanages** - It was possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu which gave protection to pregnant widows & assured them that their children would be taken care.
    - It was in this orphanage that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jyotirao adopted him as his son.
- **Girl schools -** In 1848, Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule co-founded *India's first school for girls in Pune*, an act of radical defiance against the conservative orthodoxy of the time.
- **Night Schools -** By 1855, Phule also started night schools *for working-class men and women*, making education accessible to laborers and farmers.
- **Inducting a taste of learning** - In his '***A Statement for the information of the Education Commission',*** he had recommended various schemes for inculcating education to poorer sections among the lower castes.
    - Increase in the number of schools
    - Special inducements in the shape of *scholarships and half-yearly or annual prizes*
    - Making *primary education of the masses compulsory* up to a certain age, say at least 12 years.

What are his recommendations in economic and environmental sector?

- He was also able to see that economic strengthening of the working poor among the lower castes could be a key to overthrowing the social imbalances.
- **Involving military in civil construction** – *Constructing small dams and bunds* in such a way that this 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.
- **Agricultural and farmers welfare** – Government should allow the *farmer to collect all the silt* and other things extracted from rivers and lakes, as in the olden times.
- It should also return all the *cow pastures to the villages*, which it has included in its 'forest'.
- **Environmental protection** – Government should make sure that no firewood is collected, or land tilled in the areas that belong to it.
- It should also *forbid the cutting of wood for selling* as wood for construction and *destroy the oppressive the Forest Department*.

What is his legacy?

- His vision of an equitable and inclusive society laid the foundation for many social reform movements in India.
- His work inspired generations of reformers, including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and played a crucial role in shaping modern India's commitment to social justice and equality.
- His life and legacy remind us of the power of compassion, resilience, and the unwavering pursuit of justice.

Reference

[The Hindu| Social Revolution of Jyotiba Phule]

