

The Concept of Liberation and Caste Rhetoric in Colonial Maharashtra during 19th Century

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Abstract

The caste system is a unique and complicated structure of Indian culture that inherently produces qualities such as inequality, hierarchy, discrimination, and endogamy in those who are subjected to it. Caste is primarily a comprehensive system that views a person not as an individual but as a functioning element of an interconnected system, and hence it thrives on its central plank of 'varna-dharma' or birth-assigned duty. It may appear to be a simple 'division of labour' at first glance, but a critical examination reveals that it is the 'division of labourers' in that it establishes one's social standing based on ascription. Caste is more than a social division idea; it is a whole system of life that includes food, marriage, education, association, and worship. Caste is divided into sub-castes, and Indian society is thus a mash-up of numerous castes and sub-castes, each with its own culture, customs, and hierarchy. As a result, it's fascinating to study the Indian social map, which is divided into thousands of castes and even more sub-castes. The castes, which dominated and suppressed the subordinate and downtrodden strata of the society since immemorial time with other social reforms relating to women and education as well as the development of law were the main focus of the nineteenth century colonial Maharashtra.

Influence of Colonial Society on Caste System in Maharashtra

Christian missionaries played a crucial impact in social transformation in the nineteenth century. To spread Christianity, missionaries began to critique Hinduism, with the caste system as a focal point of their criticism. They began persuading people to join their religion through fairs (melas), weekly markets, and public gatherings. An era of religious changes arrived in the colonial period as a result of the refutation of Hindu religion on the basis of modernity's values. Orientalists initiated this analytical debate in colonial Maharashtra, and reformers and traditional conservatives joined in. The Brahminical idea of the four Varnas was essentially accepted by both Orientalists and missionary organisations. Neither group related what they must have known about the society's structure based on their understanding of it obtained from textual study and interactions with learned Brahmans. They referred to these as traditions, and they included

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Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism under the Hindu religion. Conservatives emphasised traditional Indian customs in their studies of ancient India, and presuming their antiquity, began to look for the foundations of European civilizations in ancient Indian literature¹. The missionaries, on the other hand, came out rejecting Hindu caste system and establishing the essence of caste system grounded in Hindu-Brahminism as non-humanitarian through a comparative critical examination. Colonialism did introduce new ideas and institutions into Indian society, many which gained 'legitimacy' precisely because they were seen as 'superior' to those existing in Indian society. Pre-modern Europeans in contrast with their Enlightenment successors, viewed the 'East' and its cultures more favorably and respectfully. 'Orientalism', as Edward Said has so insightfully argued, became the dominant lens with which the West 'framed' the East. However while much has been written about this type of essentializing of the non-West, it ultimately tells us more about the colonizers than those they colonized.

In response to the Orientalists' attacks on Hinduism, several orthodox middle-class intellectual reformers emerged. Since nineteenth century onwards, the social reform movement in colonial Maharashtra gained traction. Many reformers spoke out against the caste system's repressive structure. Dadoba Pandurang and Lokhitwadi Gopal were two notable names. Hari Deshamukha, Balshastri Jambhekar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Vishnubava Brahamachari, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Lokmanya B G Tilak, Ramkrushna Gopal Bhandarkar, Mahadeva Govind Ranade, Mahatma Phule, Vishnubava Brahamachari, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, who were at the vanguard of Maharashtra's national movement, prioritised social issues in their words and actions. Despite being members of the Indian National Congress and the national movement, led by Congress, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, M G Ranade, and R G Bhandarkar opposed the orthodox system.

The founders of 'Prarthana Samaj' were R G Bhandarkar and M G Ranade, along with their contemporary associates. They were part of Bombay University's newly graduated class. These organisations were influenced by the activity of the 'Paramahansa Sabha' and the 'Brahmo Samaj.' Ranade organized and ran the social reform component of the Congress or the National Social Conference for several years until the 'extremists' led by Tilak successfully managed to push social reform questions out of the Congress in favor of political ones. Through the Prarthana Samaj, Ranade and Bhandarkar led the social reform movement. Phule, Ranade and Savarkar can each be seen to represent a major

¹ Umesh Bagade, *Maharashtratil Prabhodhan Aani Varga Jati Prabhutva*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 2007, p.41.

current of activity (lower caste, social reform and Hindu militant movements respectively) that spanned the gamut of socio-political responses to colonial rule by 'natives' in the region.

Reforms during Nineteenth Century in Maharashtra

M.G. Ranade can be considered one of the most important social reformers in the Presidency at the time. As Rajendra Vohra argues, it is no exaggeration to say that nineteenth century Maharashtra belonged to two people: Jotiba Phule and M.G. Ranade². B.R. Sunthakar also argues that "the last three decades of the 19th century may be called the 'Ranade age' in Maharashtra³." Ranade is remembered in popular Indian nationalist history for his work on social reform alongside his crucial role in the early formation of the Congress. Charles Heimsath points out that social reformers in the Bombay Presidency "could take pride in the fact that their province had the longest and most extensive record of public interest in social reform and of organized reforming activity of any Indian region⁴." These were however largely confined to the upper castes and were embodied in debates such as those over the Age of Consent bill⁵ (which became a law in 1891) and widow-remarriage. The Age of Consent debates brought questions of social reform on the national stage. By means of the Age of Consent Bill controversy the social reform movement achieved national recognition, and henceforth the social reform question was inescapably a part of nationalist ideologies⁶.

The second major trend was the lower caste anti-Brahman movements that found their first major voice in Phule. In the year 1827, Mahatma Jotirao Govindrao Phule was born into the Mali caste (gardener). Phule lived his entire life in Pune, a city ruled by Brahmanical cultural, religious, and political majesty. For Phule, caste and gender oppression were inextricably linked. He believed that unless the condition of Brahman women and women in general did not improve in Hindu society, neither would that of caste relations. Ranade's 'reformist' approach toward women was influenced by both Brahmanism as well as liberal bourgeois notions, as reflected in the manner in which he 'reformed' his wife, holding her up as the 'ideal' Hindu woman, educated, yet obedient.

² Rajendra Vohra, "Prasthavna: Adhunikta Ani Parampara, Ekonisavya Shatkatil Maharashtra," in *Adhunikta Ani Parampara: Ekonisavya Shatkatil Maharashtra*, ed. Rajendra Vohra (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 2000), p. 15.

³ B.R. Sunthakar, *Maharashtra 1858-1920* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1993), p. 139.

⁴ Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 236.

⁵ The Age of Consent Bill refers to a legislation passed in 1891 under tremendous controversy and opposition from conservative Brahmans increasing the age of marriage for girls to twelve and for boys till eighteen.

⁶ Op. Cit. Charles Heimsath, p. 173.

However aspects within his thought such as his interpretation of bhakti principles point to a more 'soft' feminine version of Hinduism to that of Savarkar's hard masculinist one⁷.

Jotirao prioritised education as a weapon for social transformation, believing that educating women was akin to educating society; as a result, in 1848, he established a girl's school, where his wife Savitribai served as the first female teacher in modern times. On September 24, 1873, he founded the 'Satyashodhak Samaj,' a social organisation that would grow throughout Maharashtra and beyond. "This initiative sparked a large and extremely active movement of the lower castes," writes Rosalind O'Hanlon, "which had to have a major effect on the formation of political organisation in the Bombay Presidency, and the shaping of the nationalist movement towards the end of the century⁸." The Satyashodhak Samaj stated in its organisational report in 1875 that their purpose was to free the Shudras (socially disadvantaged castes) from the exploitation of the Brahmin, Bhat, Joshi, and Upadhye. For thousands of years, these inferior castes have been exploiting Shudras through holy texts. As a result, the Samaj's purpose was to educate Shudras about their rights⁹. Another strong advocate of lower caste rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was the Maharaja of Kolhapur, Shahu¹⁰.

All of these reformers were affected by deism, which they acquired via Orientalist philosophy, as most Orientalists were influenced by the enlightenment age, particularly deism. The Orientalists conducted a critical examination of Hinduism using the deist concept as a guide. Sanskrit scriptures were acknowledged by Orientalists as a tool of studying the caste structure. The western worldview of liberalism impacted the new middle class, and through these ideas, they began to reassess Hinduism. And they did so through the lens of European class society.

Liberalism and the Indian Social System

The Varna caste system is a unique feature of Indian social structure. The caste system had religious backing and was referred to be a natural right. Individual rights were denied due to religious law. Throughout Indian history, there have been anti-Varna caste movements that fought for individual rights. As a result, these principles were not novel in

⁷ Uma Chakravarti, "Reconceptualising Gender: Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy," Nehru Memorial Museum Research-in Progress Papers "History and Society", no. No. XCIV, 2nd series (December 1994), p. 37.

⁸ Rosalind O'Hanlon, Caste conflict and ideology, Orient Longman, Cambridge University Press, p.1.

⁹ Y D Phadke (Ed), Mahatma Phule Samgra Vangamaya, Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Aani Sanskriti Mandal, Mumbai.2006. p.205.

¹⁰ Y.D. Phadke, Visavya Shatkatil Maharashtra: 1901-1914, 1st ed., 5 vols., vol. 1 (Pune: SriVidya Prakashan, 1989), 223-38. This includes a useful discussion of Shahu's interventions on behalf of the lower castes and his differences with Brahmans in his court and from Pune, including Tilak.

Indian culture. The lower castes contained the seeds of liberal values; they were conscious of opposition to social and economic exploitation. Ranade's liberal philosophy was inextricably linked to the aristocratic (abhijat) individual economic principle, modern European historical analysis, and pride in Indian culture and traditions¹¹. According to Ranade, accepting a new practise is difficult since society is tied by previous traditions. As a result, Ranade formed an alliance between tradition and liberalism in order to persuade people¹². Ranade had a practical approach to social reform. He combined his legally sound critical arguments with religious scriptures and western knowledge. "Individual liberty of action is no doubt a significant force," Ranade observed, "but this liberty has its boundaries imposed by the reality that no man's liberty should trespass upon the liberty of others who surround him." The state has a function to regulate and limit the bad whenever there is a large amount of unresolved suffering suffered by people who are unable to adopt their own solution¹³."

The French Revolution, as well as the political structure and government in England, drew Maharashtrian socio-political philosophers. In Maharashtra, the process of nationalism's rise had begun at this time¹⁴. Liberal ideas impressed those who studied English history and social philosophy. The rising middle class has begun to internalise new skills and information. This liberal consciousness, however, did not free them from the shackles of caste hierarchy based on status¹⁵. Individuals, according to Agarkar, are sacred entities, and all people, regardless of their castes, creeds, or gender, should be given the opportunity to fulfil their full potential. Because of unprofitable circumstances, this ideal of equality of opportunity was developed. This idea was unable to be assimilated by the society¹⁶. Our social system, according to Bhandarkar, is a major impediment to the realisation of individual rights. People are unable to progress due of social constraints. He claims that the goal of social reform is to eliminate harmful habits that have stifled the Indian people's energies and hindered them from freely expanding their strengths and capacities¹⁶.

¹¹ G B Sardar, Ranade Pranit Samajik Sudharnechi Tatvamimansa, Published by Pune University, Pune, 1973, p. 73.

¹² Nalini Pandit, Maharashtraatil Rashtrwadacha Vikas, Mumbai, 1955, p.41.

¹³ Mahadeva Govind Ranade, Religious And Social Reform-A Collection of Essays And Speeches, Compiled by Kolasker M B, Bombay, 1902, p.103.

¹⁴ Nalini Pandit, Maharashtraatil Rashtrwadacha Vikas, Mumbai, 1955, p.24.

¹⁵ Id, p 18.

¹⁶ R G Bhandarkar, Collected Works of Sir R. G. Bandarkar, 4 Vols, Ed by The Late Narayan Bapuji Utgikar, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune , 1928-1933. p.527.

Most Maharashtrian reformers were influenced by liberalism in the nineteenth century. They exploited the concept of liberalism to promote their beliefs when they first started speaking out about social issues. They discussed issues concerning women, as well as economic, social, and political issues, within the context of liberal values. In the late 1800s, liberalism was a major intellectual supporter of Indian nationalism. The western values of liberalism were passed down to the reformers. Liberalism had brought about significant improvements in western countries, such as the establishment of individualism, human rights, and democracy, which spurred Maharashtra's reformers to implement social reforms.

Comparison of Phule and Ranade

Phule placed myths within a historical framework and rationalized them; Ranade placed religious texts within specific ages or time-periods with their own distinct characteristics. However, while there are similarities, there are also significant differences in the manner in which each dealt with religion. In Phule one sees the attempt to make Hinduism more historically self-conscious by attempting to draw sharp historical boundaries between communities and identify modern political identities that emerge out of these constructed historical unities. Furthermore, he focuses entirely on caste as the distinguishing feature of Hinduism and organizing principle of all social life. In the case of Phule one sees the demarcation of the realm of the 'social' and a newly emerging notion of the 'public' which is distinct from the religious. In Phule's case for instance, the Satyashodak dharam or religion he propagated encompassed politics, morality and social criticism. In Ranade's case morality could not be divorced from science or politics. It was through history writing that he constructed a nation that he referred to as 'India,' but this too was largely regional in character, drawing from local contexts. While Ranade accorded some importance to a national identity, the exact nature of this 'nation' was amorphous. This was made clear in his religious, social and political thought where he advocated Hindu-Muslim unity within the broad framework of the nation.

Phule was a non-Brahmin social transformer who campaigned against Brahminical social dominance while simultaneously advocating for Brahmin widows. Phule staged a protest march with barbers against Brahmin widows' heads being shaved, advocated widow remarriage, and created a home named 'Bal hatya pratibandhak gruh' to help widow pregnant Brahmin women deliver their babies. Phule was the first man to attempt such a

feat. Women were valued more than men¹⁷ by Phule because of their ability to bear children and to always suffer for their family. They play a significant role in his family's success, according to him. Women have been exploited for thousands of years with little opportunity to express their desires or opinions. A woman must end her life as soon as her husband dies, according to the Sati System. The wife was pressured by society to jump into her husband's burning pier. In response to this, Phule inquired as to why not a single man leaps into the fire after his wife dies. He emphasises the point that a man can marry again after his first wife dies, or even if she is still living, whereas women cannot. As a result, she was always denied all basic human rights and was never permitted to attend school in order to maintain her domination.

The reason of this mental slavery, according to Phule, is the divided awareness of Indian society's inhabitants. People are fractured under the caste system, thus it was critical for Phule to unite Shudras and Ati-Shudras' awareness into a new Kshatriya identity. In order to tie all non-Brahmins in one consciousness by providing them a new identity, Phule used the method of myth of Bali's kingdom, a symbol of casteless and democratic society, to dig up history of Shudras and Ati-Shudras, which was a new viewpoint to acknowledge their history. Phule did not articulate any well-demarcated notion of the nation but he was skeptical of claims by Brahman intellectuals in his time who were beginning to propound such ideas. He believed that a unity such as the 'nation' could not come into existence as long as upper caste Hindus oppressed the lower castes. It was the Shudras and ati-Shudras that needed to become historically and politically self-conscious communities, who could then articulate a strong voice within the public sphere, to counter that of the educated Brahmins. Phule's identities were very regional, embedded within the social relations of the Marathi speaking region. He did not attempt to construct shared unities with other lower caste groups in other parts of the country. However, despite Phule and Ranade's clear drawing of boundaries between the historical/secular and religious, both continued to operate within non-modern notions of 'religion' in which the latter had yet to be constituted as an autonomous sphere.

Conclusion

In a pluralistic and extremely diverse country such as India where for instance even the smallest region has its own distinct language and script, the nation-state model poses considerable complications. In the nineteenth century with the process of colonization, the modernity was introduced in Indian society, which questioned and challenged the traditional and inhuman Brahmanical values. Owing to the influence of Western education emblemized in appropriation of the English language the co-mingling of linguistic

¹⁷ Umesh Bagade, *Maharashtratil Prabhodhan Aani Varga Jati Prabhutva*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 2007, p.321.

practices also indicates overlapping of knowledge practices. While it is impossible to attribute a single parameter to a continually shifting aesthetic code, a new axis of understanding could be helpful. The virulent attacks on Hinduism by colonial historians, scholars, and missionaries for its "effeminacy," "superstitions," "irrationality," and "ignorance" irritated Brahmin intellectuals at the time, who often looked for "historical evidence" within ancient texts to refute these colonialist versions and "discover a glorious past." Despite the fact that the emergent Brahmin middle class in colonial Maharashtra was influenced by western concepts, their caste approach was based on Brahminical ancient technique. By the late nineteenth century, battles between 'reformers' and 'orthodox' had become increasingly acrimonious over topics like as caste, liberalism, widow remarriage, and a 'proper' marriageable age for boys and girls. In colonial Maharashtra, the newly Brahmin middle class emerged under the influence of western ideas, despite the western influence, their caste approach was founded on the Brahminical traditional methodology. These newly middle classes wanted to materialize the idea of class upliftment by viewing the modern western class structure. Due to their caste hierarchies, broadly speaking other castes could not change their occupations that they inherited in accordance with their castes. This caste mentality did not allow them to transform their caste into class. It is obvious that the reformers of the nineteenth century were not articulating their views merely as sociologists or anthropologists. Rather they observed and analyzed the society in which they were living from realistic perspective. Therefore, their analytical study became of a great significance because it allowed them to foresee the futuristic social reforms.