

# JYOTIRAO PHULE VIS-À-VIS MAHATMA GANDHI: INTERPRETATIONS OF HINDUISM IN MODERN INDIA

**Dr. M.Sandhya Rani**

Lecturer in History

Smt.NPS Govt. Degree College for women(A)

Chittoor

Andhra Pradesh

## ABSTRACT

Hinduism, one of the oldest religions, confined to India, in the world give importance to ‘Sanatana Dharma’ denoting three basic elements, i.e, Creed, Code and Cult, corresponds to head (creed), hand(code) and heart(cult) of human being illustrating three forms of Jnanamarga, Karmamarga and Bhaktimarga, by considering ‘wisdom’ of its religious doctrine for ultimate salvation which emphasizes the stress on personal inner experience and higher state of consciousness and proclaims the method and way of life. In this regard two personalities have played important role for striving new renaissance and glory in the history of Hinduism namely Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), because both of them were firm believers of Hinduism but their approach has been slightly differ, the former was a strong believer and follower of Advaitam, the doctrine of Monism and essence of Truth and Ahimsa, which always reiterated in Hindu Scriptures emphasizing the eradication of ‘untouchability’(anti-thesis of Varnashrama) meant for national growth and spiritual development, whereas, the latter’s concept was entirely materialistic, truth-oriented and love for humanity for the welfare of all human-beings and religion according to public truth of liberalism and humanitarism.

The present paper deals with views of Mahatma Gandhi and Jyothi Rao Phule regarding Hinduism in socio-religious point of view and analysis of their philosophical thinking in making the society aware of these facts. It elaborates their opinions in socio-philosophical view point for the cause of Indian society and culture.

**Keywords:** Advaitism, Asceticism, Bigotries, Hinduism, Idolatry, Monism, Renaissance, Ritualism and Theistic system.

## INTRODUCTION

Hinduism, being one of the oldest religions in the world, signifies ‘Sanatana Dharma’ (Vaidhika Dharma or Eternal Religion) denotes three basic elements (C-3), i.e., Creed, Code and Cult, corresponding to head (creed), hand(code) and heart(cult) of man illustrating the forms of Jnanamarga, Karmamarga and Bhaktimarga, hence been considered as wisdom religion through which one can attain the ultimate salvation. It emphasises the stress of personal inner experience and higher state of consciousness as an essential element that tends to Unitarian, even monistic view of the universe, hence been proclaimed as the method and way of life. However, it has been a change in its behavioural character during medieval period of Indian History because of the rise of a number of theistic systems of thought and action, namely the Age of Reform Movements (1750-1885 A.D.) and the Age of Renaissance (1885-1950), the latter attains importance in socio-philosophical point of view which affected almost all departments of national life in India as there had been new developments not only in religion, but also in literature, art, science, education, politics and social arrangements and related matters. In this regard two personalities have played an important role for striving new renaissance in the history of Hinduism namely Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), as both of them were firm believers of Hinduism but their approach has been slightly different as the former was a strong believer and follower of Advaitam, the doctrine of Monism and the essence of Truth and Ahimsa, hence always reiterated in Hindu Scriptures but emphasized the eradication of untouchability as an integral part of his life and recognised that caste is harmful for national growth and spiritual development, therefore advocated

the concept of inter-caste marriage, whereas the latter intended to enlighten man in religious bigotries and wished them grow in their social and spiritual way of life by discarding idolatry, ritualism, asceticism, fatalism and the idea of incarnation, consequently visualised Sarvajanic Satya Dharma (Public True Religion) based on principles of liberty and equality, neutralism in matters of religion and advocated philosophy of education, human rights, women empowerment, socio-political and religious ideas for the betterment of Hindu society. The present paper deals with an elaborate ideology and opinion of these two social philosophers for the cause of Indian society and culture.

## MAHATMA GANDHI'S VIEW OF HINDUISM

From his writings and speeches, it is clear that he was not only a philosopher and but also a Hindu reformer and a humanist as he claims himself rather than a politician in 1931 and for him religion is a matter of life and death. He believed in the formal or customary nature of religion and exemplifies that it should underlie all religions.<sup>1</sup> He was critical about Hinduism as it should be rational, hence demonstrated his approach towards it in a practical way of concerned action being it as a constructive programme, hence all his speeches, writings and actions were motivated by the true spirit of love and service towards humanity, however, all his religious life and faith in Hinduism was developed under the guidance of Raichandrabai and influenced by the Bhagavad Gita which denotes the Karma theory, therefore call himself a Sanatana Hindu and at the same time spoke and wrote about it on different occasions differently. He expressed in his autobiography namely 'The story of My Experiments with truth' in 1925 and declared that 'God is Truth' and later on 'Truth is God' and accordingly further emphasized 'To me religion means Truth and Ahimsa'<sup>2</sup>. He was in, one way, the seeker after truth and advocated to reject whatever is contrary to it and Ahimsa, the true foundations of all religions.<sup>3,4</sup> He was a believer of Advaitam, the Indian doctrine of Monism (existence of duality, e.g. matter and mind or God and the world), and the Nature in which all that exist are parts of the divine, As a worshiper of Truth, he firmly believed in the Hindu theory of Guru and his importance in spiritual realization which had left a deep impression on him towards life, hence in every field of his social activity a scientific approach can be noticed even towards thinking about the problem of untouchability as he believed in the absolute oneness of God and man, therefore oriented towards humanity and one God as the cornerstone of all religions.<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi said that the central principle of Hinduism is that of Moksha as he ever strived for it and all his activities were for it. Moreover, he declared that he had more faith in the existence of atman, its immortality and its transience.... believed that there are no more than four varnas, hence numerous castes should become fewer, and this can be brought by the councils of various castes without injury to Hinduism and about untouchability for him being not Hinduism but a Dyerism- a satanic activity or dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> He insisted for the abolition of untouchability to demolish all the social inequalities, hence there is a possibility of the eradication of caste-hierarchy. He also elaborated his idea that caste system is anti-thesis of Varnashrama, the sooner it is abolished the better, then all become casteless and monopoly occupations world would go,<sup>7</sup> further he meant to say that caste is harmful to national growth and spiritual development.

## MAHATMA JYOTIBA PHULE'S VIEW OF HINDUISM

Jyotiba Phule was an activist, thinker and social reformer, hence occupied a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra, of course India. As a revolutionary he has identified and theorized the most important question of his time-religion, the caste system, ritualism, the gender question, hence analysed the society and rejected Chaturvarnya system (division of Indian society based on four varnas), therefore formulated two fold division of society, the Brahman and the shudratishudra, and recommended to forge a unity going beyond respective castes of latter group, sought to create a dichotomous conception of Hindu social structure, especially Brahmanical structure of ideas and beliefs.<sup>8</sup> His conceptual ideology rejected the centrality of pollution principles and notion of pure and impure, touchable and untouchable, etc., in order to attack on the exploitative and oppressive nature of Brahmanism.<sup>9</sup>

His concept of God is totally different from the old traditional Hinduism, as he believed that God is the creator (Nirmik) of the whole universe and never used terms like Dev, Ishawar, Bhagvan, Allah, etc. He did not like the method of worshipping God in old Hindu fashion, did not offer any flower or Naivedya (food

offered at the time of worship) to God as the latter created flowers and sweet, hence meaningless. According to him flowers should be used for garlanding men who support their families by honest labour and liberate the poor from the clutches of selfish persons. Man must remember God, the existence of God and his presence should lead to honest and straightforward dealings with all the fellow beings.

Hindu mythology became a target of bitter criticism in Phule's point of view as he thought that it was a strange system, the ordination of caste, and the code of cruel and inhuman laws, to which we find no parallel amongst other nations, hence was against the Brahmins who purposefully managed to tell again and again the fables like Ramayana and Mahabharat to Sudras in order to spoil their minds against Muslims and Christians<sup>12</sup> because

mythology became a powerful instrument in the hands of the priests who exploited the ignorant masses in order to canvass Hinduism. He did not believe in idolatry and treated it as an attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths and his concept of religion is more or less nearer to the materialistic view expressed in Charvak philosophy and incarnation of God. He strongly opposed the theory of Karma and rebirth which is mainly responsible for people's passiveness and believed in the fortune dependent upon Man's will power, desire, ability, hence denounced the concepts of heaven, hell, rebirth, karma, sin, virtue, fortune etc.

In short, he was behind the material happiness of the masses, hence attacked everyone who came in his way and was dead against the concept of mediator, the institution of priest craft, between God and human-beings and practice of performing ritual functions considering it a part of overall mechanism of exploitation in (Hinduism).

He dreamt that all human beings are members of the same family, hence should belong to one religion. He argued in favour of an entirely new religion, therefore, according to him religion being the belief of a God and the practice of moral truth, cannot have connection with mystery, hence truth was spirit of his religion namely 'Satya Dharma' and his concept of religion is not personal but social as he always cared for the welfare of the poor and down-trodden people. He designed to perform various welfare activities of various dimensions for them as he never believed in spiritual life and his religion had nothing to do with this imaginary world, instead of that he traced for the material happiness of the poor people.

In a nut shell, the philosophical idea of Jyoti Rao Phule stood for mass-welfare which can be summarized as, i.e., rejection of mediatorship; use of simple language and replaced Sanskrit with Marathi as a local language from where he comes in every ritual; introduced the intelligibility in the rituals and filled social content; diverting marriage expenditure to student aid fund of masses and encouraged the ritual of Dashpind. In short Phule's concept of religion was entirely materialistic, truth-oriented and love for humanity as its basic ground which has deeply rooted in doing welfare for all human-beings and his religion mean public truth of liberalism and humanitarianism. Love, liberty, equality and fraternity, for the sake of the welfare of the human beings, was the essence of his religion. He proved himself a religious man of unique mind but not a Hindu mind or Christian mind or Buddhist mind or Muslim mind, thus does not belong to any group which calls itself religious. Finally, it can be concluded that Phule's religion of public truth was the religion of truth and humanity<sup>13</sup> which was intended to bring greatest materialistic happiness in the life of all people. Hence, both these personalities and their ideologies still have a hold well as per the acceptance of Indians even though being the followers of several religious faiths which have been working out in view of secularism a strong hold in India.

## CONCLUSION

The comparative examination of Jyotirao Phule and Mahatma Gandhi reveals two distinct yet significant engagements with Hinduism in modern India, shaped by their respective socio-historical contexts and philosophical orientations. While both thinkers sought the moral regeneration of Indian society and the eradication of social injustices, particularly caste-based discrimination, their interpretations of Hinduism diverged fundamentally in method, emphasis, and ultimate vision. Mahatma Gandhi approached Hinduism from within the tradition, grounding his reformist agenda in Advaita philosophy, the ethical principles of Truth (Satya) and Non-violence (Ahimsa), and a deep spiritual commitment to Moksha. His critique of untouchability and caste hierarchy was rooted in the belief that such practices were distortions of true Hinduism rather than its essence. Gandhi's reformism thus aimed at moral purification and social harmony through spiritual discipline, ethical living, and constructive action, seeking to reconcile tradition with social justice.

In contrast, Jyotirao Phule adopted a radically critical and rationalist stance toward Hinduism, especially its Brahmanical structures, ritualism, and mythological foundations. Rejecting metaphysical abstractions and priestly mediation, Phule articulated the concept of *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, a public religion grounded in truth, equality, liberty, and humanitarianism. His emphasis on material well-being, education, women's empowerment, and social equality reflected a pragmatic and human-centered vision of religion as an instrument for collective welfare rather than spiritual salvation. Despite their ideological differences, both Gandhi and Phule converged in their commitment to social reform, human dignity, and the upliftment of the marginalized. Their respective critiques of caste oppression and social inequality significantly contributed to the shaping of modern Indian social thought and laid intellectual foundations for the secular and egalitarian principles later enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Together, their ideas underscore the plurality of reformist responses within Hinduism and highlight the dynamic interplay between religion, society, and ethics in India's journey toward modernity.

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