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Rajesh Kumar Gauher
Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of History
University of Delhi, Delhi,
India

Jyotirao Phooley to Dr. Ambedkar: The unaccomplished revolution

Rajesh Kumar Gauher

Abstract

Phooley believed that the British being committed to democracy and modernization would eventually find it necessary to come to the assistance of the Sudras and Untouchables and to curb the power of the Brahmans and high caste. It seems to me that what Dr. Ambedkar succeeded in achieving were first to bring the issue of the Untouchables sharply to public awareness secondly to develop at least in a section of the Untouchables will to resist caste Hindu dominance and to fight for their human right by providing them with an ideology.

Keywords: Jyotirao Phooley, Dr. Ambedkar, Vedas, Shastras

Introduction

In 1873, Jyotirao Phooley (1827-90) published his historic manifesto, *Gulamgiri* ("Social Slavery in the Guise of Brahmanical Religion under the Civilized British Rule"), which he dedicated to "all those American citizens who strive for the liberation of the Negroes" [1]. It was to date the most thorough and devastating critique of the Hindu social order from the point of view of those who suffered the most from it but the dedication gave it a universal signification. As Phooley saw it the condition of the sudras and the untouchables in Hindu India represented the worst form of indignity and exploitation that any society had ever devised and perpetrated upon a section of its members and the struggle for their emancipation was a part of the global struggle for securing the rights of the dispossessed against varieties of entrenched and oppressive elitistic system.

There had of course, been other Indian critics of Hindu religion and society during the nineteenth century but nearly all of them came from the higher castes and their approach was basically reformist rather than radical. Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) and Iswaechandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) in Bengal were both Brahmans while the former attacked Hindu polytheism and the practice of sati (self-immolation of widows) and the latter advocated widow remarriage and opposed polygamy neither contemplated any structural transformation of the Hindu social order [2]. This was even more obvious in the case of Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) a member of the chitpavan Brahman caste of Maharashtra: the faith of this great liberal reformer in social evolution ruled out anything drastic, whether in society, religion or politics [3]. True the 'young Bengal' group of Calcutta during the 1830's did make radical attacks on Hinduism but the phenomenon was a flash in the pan: at the end of their all too brief salad days the members of this group readily acquired the wisdom of compromise [4]. Gopal Hari Deshmukh 'Lokahitawadi' (1823-92) was possibly the only Maharashtra intellectual of a high caste to undertake a systematic radical exposure of Hindu society and tradition (his work *Sataputre* or *Hundred Letters*, published in 1866 is another landmark in the history of radical thought in India) but even he submitted under pressure to go through a *prayaschitta* (penance) for having attended a widow re-marriage [5].

Phooley was doubly remarkable in that not only was he committed to a structural revolution of India society but he was also the first intellectual of stature to emerge from a plebian caste in modern India [6]. He was born in a Mali (gardener) family a sub caste of the Kunbi caste of Maharashtra. The kunbis were cultivators most of whom lived at the level of subsistence caste wise they were above untouchable groups like the mahars and the mangs but they suffered hardly less from the oppression of high castes and vested interests [7]. To Phooley the key to all that was basically wrong with Hindu society was the monopoly of power and

Correspondence

Rajesh Kumar Gauher
Ph. D Research Scholar
Department of History
University of Delhi, Delhi,
India

privilege traditionally enjoyed by the Brahmans: and all his writings and public activities were directed to the subversion of this monopoly by organizing the most deprived sections of the non-brahman castes. In the manner made familiar by the radical intellectuals of the west Phooley combined in his writings an analysis and description of contemporary society with an interpretation of the historic process which had brought about that situation. In his view the social history of India during the last three thousand years was the history of a perennial struggle between the Brahmans and the non-brahmans. The Brahmans he claimed were the Aryans who came from outside and then subjugated the indigenous population to whom they gave the name Sudra. To perpetuate their stranglehold the Brahmans devised elaborate ideological institutional structures the myths of the origin of the vernas the doctrines' of karma and rebirth the pernicious system of caste hierarchy the invidious laws and codes of the dharmasastras etc. A section of the indigenous population, initially called kshatriyas, who put up a strong fight against the gods, festivals beliefs and ritual of the non-brahmans and absorbed them within the complex structure of brahmanical religion and culture thereby greatly undermining indigenous resistance and they maintained their control over the community by keeping to themselves the exclusive functions and privileges of priests and scholars. During periods when Brahmans managed to combine their religious-cultural monopoly with possession of political power the non-brahman would be reduced to virtual slaves. However the latter never completely gave up the fight and from time to time they found their chance when political power was in non-brahman hands (e.g. under the Muslims and the British) ^[8].

There were obvious flaws in Phooley's historiography (especially his thesis that Aryans and Brahmans were interchangeable terms would not be acceptable to historians) but it did contain many valuable insights and make a refreshingly new departure in the interpretation of Indian history. More valuable was his critical description of the Indian social structure as he found it especially in Western India during the nineteenth century. Even under the British he pointed out: 'the hierarchical caste rules are being observed with the same rigidity as under the Peswas.' The sudras and untouchables were poor and illiterate they were ruthlessly exploited by landlord's money lenders and government officials who were mostly Brahmans (had Phooley lived in Bengal he would have included kayasthas and vaidyas along with Brahmans): they were treated as the lowest of the low and subjected to every conceivable form of indignity and punishment. Although the British had introduced new principles and concepts of social order neither were they know to the oppressed nor were there serious efforts being made by the government to put these principles into practice. Instead the Brahmans (and in eastern India certain other traditional high castes along with the Brahmans), by taking full advantage of western education had come to reinforce their position by monopolizing all jobs and professions under the British ^[9].

Phooley believed that the British being committed to democracy and modernization would eventually find it necessary to come to the assistance of the sudras and untouchables and to curb the power of the Brahmans and high castes. He felt little enthusiasm for the rising tide of Hindu nationalism which was very largely the ideology of the western educated high caste Hindus; he feared that

political independence without a social revolution would only mean combination of political power with cultural social privileges in the hands of the entrenched caste elite groups. However instead of depending on the British he took the initiative to instruct inspire and organize the non-Brahman castes of Maharashtra. Besides writing extensively and running a journal *Dinabandhu* (started 1871), he founded in 1873 the 'Satyashodhak Samaj' (society of the Seekers of Truth) with the aim of saving the lower castes from the hypocritical Brahmans and their opportunistic scriptures. He also started the first schools in India for the children of untouchables (1852), and a home for the Prevention of infanticide (1863) where widowed mothers of illegitimate children were given protection and care. In his major work *Sarvajanik Satyadharm* (Universal or Everybody's Religion of Truth), he elaborated a humanistic philosophy which proclaimed complete social equality of all human being irrespective of sex race religion or caste. Rejecting unambiguously the traditional system of Hindu beliefs in karma, rebirth, moksha, practice of caste rules pollution, purification and penance he argued in favor of a rational-secular approach to human needs and problems and offered the ideal of a society in which every individual would have the fullest opportunity to develop his or her creative potentialities on the basis mutual co-operation. He advocated a sociocultural revolution in India which would give to the poor and dispossessed dignity and self-respect and a dynamic role in the shaping of their history.

But the odds against Phooley were much too heavy. India's tradition-oriented rural population could hardly be expected to respond to his radical ideas. On the other hand those sections of urban middle class elite groups which were beginning to move nineteenth century did not have any sympathy for his views either. The exponents and supporters of extreme nationalism in India came almost entirely from the Hindu castes they wanted political power but not at the cost of their privileged positions they persuaded themselves and tried to persuade others that political independence had absolute priority over social change ^[9a]. to them any demand even of social reform (not to speak of social revolution) which might delay the achievement of political power was unpatriotic they passionately resented any suggestion that independence on their terms might mean Concentration of all power in the hands of the established elite groups. And so to them Phooley the social radical was no more than a political reactionary. With the progress of the nationalist movement in India this distorted view came to prevail so much so that in most accounts of modern Indian history Phooley's name rarely occurs ^[10]. The hiatus between social and political radicalism which is one source of the tragedy of modern India still remains to be bridged when that is done the positive significance of Phooley is certain to be recognized as being at least as great as (if not greater than) that of his much more highly publicized younger contemporaries like V.S. Chiplunkar (1850-1882), or B.G. Tilak (1856-1920) ^[11].

During the three decades which followed Phooley's death, little progress was made in articulating or gaining recognition the problems and aspirations of the plebian castes in Indian society. The nationalist movement was dominated by high caste Hindus who were beginning to be troubled by the challenge to their position from the newly emerging political leadership of the Indian Muslims. During the twenties and thirties however, Indian politics started to

move out of its elitistic framework. In the aftermath of the war, there were stirrings of new forces in Indian public life the ideology of Russian revolution began to make an impact on sections of the urban educated but most noticeable of all the Indian nationalist movement under Gandhi's leadership became much more broad-based drawing into it large sections of the general population^[12].

Gandhi was particularly disturbed by the plight of the untouchables but his approach was one of persuading the high caste Hindus to abandon the practice of untouchability. He did not reject the Hindu caste system which he thought was necessary to social harmony but he considered untouchability to be an excrescence of Hinduism^[13]. An Untouchable should be regarded as a Shudra he wrote in *Young India* (23-04-1925), because there is no warrant for belief in fifth caste. In this as in his general style of political leadership he tried to be the great harmonizer he could not see that without a total breakdown or overthrow of the caste system untouchability was never likely to disappear from India. That had been the point made by Phooley in 'Gulamgiri' it was waiting for another vigorous spokesman which it now found at last in Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956)^[14]. The ideological kinship between the two was underlined by the latter when he dedicated his classic *Who were the Shudras* to the former describing him as the Greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule^[15].

Dr. Ambedkar was a mahar. This was the largest untouchable caste of Maharashtra currently constituting about 10 per cent of the population. Ambedkar knew from his own experience what it meant to be born an untouchable in India. The traditional duties of the mahars involved the maintenance of streets wells and cremation grounds carrying messages hauling away dead cattle and similar menial and polluting tasks^[16]. Ambedkar's father and grandfather however had served in the army an opportunity which had been made available in the 19th century by the establishment of the British rule. He was fortunate in that his exceptional intellectual gifts were recognized quite early and thanks to the patronage of the enlightened Gaikwad of Baroda he was able to go abroad for advanced studies. He returned to Bombay in 1923 having obtained a PhD from Columbia University, a D.Sc. from London School of Economic, London University and entrance to the Bar from Grey's Inn London. Instead of allowing his personal achievements to blunt his social conscience he now devoted himself to the task of organizing the untouchables in their struggle for fundamental human right.

From the founding of the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Organizing for the Welfare of the Excluded) in 1924 to his conversion to Buddhism, establishment of the Republican Party, and death (all in December 06th 1956), Dr. Ambedkar's public life was a record of total dedication. He was convinced quite early that to establish their rights the untouchables needed political power and for this they must have organization and modern education. Experience also convinced him that the untouchables would never gain manuski (humanness) within the framework of traditional Hinduism with its social organization of caste hierarchy. When in 1927 during conferences of Depressed Classes at Mahad he publicly burnt the Manusmriti it was a clear

notice of the arrival of a new force in Indian public life. Manus had been the highest authority on social matters to all high caste Hindus; his codes enshrined the doctrine of caste hierarchy with the Brahmans at the top and the untouchables at the bottom^[17]. The influence of Manusmriti on Indian social history had been much more profound (and pernicious) than that of any other single work ancient and modern. In repudiating Manus Ambedkar repudiated the ideological basis of Hindu society like Phooley; he wanted it to be replaced by an ethic of human equality in every sphere of public life.

Between 1927 and 1935 Dr. Ambedkar conducted several Mahar Satyagrahas at Mahad and Nasik to establish the right of the untouchables to use the water of the village tank and to enter temple. His campaigns received no support from the Congress. Instead his demand for separate electorates for the untouchables brought him into headlong conflict with the Congress leadership in particular Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar was not opposed to independence but he argued quite rightly that the proposition that no country was good enough to rule over another ought to be extended to include that no class or caste was good enough in rule over another. His efforts to secure separate electorates were however failed by Gandhi who went on a fast on this issue. Ambedkar was forced to accept a compromise but this only deepened his distrust of the Indian nationalist leadership^[18]. In 1935, Dr. Ambedkar publicly announced his total break with Hindu religion. The following year he founded the 'Independent Labor Party', which did reasonably well in the 1937 'Bombay Legislation Assembly' elections. In 1942 he formed the 'Scheduled Castes Federation' and three years later the 'People Education Society' devoted to the spread of higher education among the untouchables. In his writings he on the one hand carried on a fierce campaign against Gandhi and the Indian nationalist for their failure to recognize the political aspirations of the untouchables on the other he also offered his own unorthodox interpretations of Indian history especially of the origins of the sudras and the untouchables. Unlike Phooley he did not see the conflict to be of racial origins. In his view the sudras originally did not form a separate varna but were a part of the kshatriya varna in the Indo-Aryan society there was a continuous feud between the Brahmans and the sudra kings which resulted in the Brahmans refusing to perform the upanayana of the sudras the sudras thereby were society degraded and came to constitute the fourth varna^[19]. As for the untouchables he held they were originally Buddhists during the period of the Hindu resurgence those Buddhists were refused to acknowledge the superiority of the Brahmans was denigrated deprived of their land and relegated beyond the pale of civilized society^[20]. In this thesis he was already anticipating his later recommendation to the untouchables to embrace Buddhism and use its egalitarian ethic against the hierarchical ideology of Hinduism^[21].

By the time India gained independence even Ambedkar's worst critics could not but recognize his position as the principal leader and spokesman of the untouchables of India. The partitioning of the subcontinent which accompanied independence made the Indian nationalist leaders particularly wary of any further political cleavages they were anxious to win the confidence of the untouchables and willing to commit themselves to measures which would give the untouchables a stake in Indian society. They sought Ambedkar's co-operation and it was not refused. Although a

revolutionary in his social objective, Ambedkar had always been a moderate in political he had no taste for violence instead like Phoolley he had great faith in education and law as instruments of change. His competence as jurist and constitutional expert was well known. The co-operation took the form if his being appointed as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly which was to draw up a constitution for the new nation. He was also made Law Minister in the first cabinet of independent India.

He had now the chance to provide the country with an alternative to Manusmriti which he had publicly burnt twenty years ago. And he look if by playing a central role in drafting a democratic constitution and piloting it through the Constituent Assembly. Part 11 of the Constitution devoted to Fundamental Rights which besides incorporating the right to Equality, specifically made 'the enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability' 'an offence punishable in accordance with law' (Article 17) and Part XVI of the Constitution which spelled out the special provisions relating to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were clear vindication of the principles for which Phoolley and he had fought throughout their lives. At least on the level of official ideology and the fundamental laws of the land the right of the traditionally dispossessed sections of the community to manuski was established beyond doubt. But not on the level of actual social attitudes and behavior. The cultivated elitism of the majority of caste Hindus nourished by their obsession with pollution and purification and the material advantages of a hierarchical order could not be expected to change simply because some of the national leaders had officially committed themselves to democratic ideas especially since even in the case of the latter the commitment was more often superficial than genuine. Ambedkar's co-operation with the nationalist leaders came to an end when in frustration he resigned from the cabinet in 1951. He returned to his work of organization and education of the untouchables. Before his death in December 06th 1956, he announced the formation of the Republican Party which was to carry on the political fight over three million people from among the untouchables of India.

In the years since Ambedkar death there has been no significant improvement in conditions of the untouchables. It is true that thanks to the provisions in Part XVI of the Constitution the Scheduled Castes continue to have certain reserved seats in the legislative bodies they have also a number of reserved government jobs and there is legal machinery to protect them against discriminative practices. But they still live mostly in rural areas and urban slums are mostly very poor and illiterate and their organizations are weak not very effective. On the other hand the attitudes of the caste Hindus do not seem to have become more enlightened instead reports from various parts of the country indicate that they have possibly hardened and in many cases become more aggressive and the administrative machinery especially at the district and lower levels is not sympathetic to plebian castes and classes. There is accumulating evidence that despite the special provisions in the Indian constitution the social revolution desired by Phoolley and Ambedkar remains as far from being accomplished as ever even a quarter century after independence ^[21].

According to a recent survey of 8 Maharashtra districts made by the Gokhale Institute, Poona. 90 per cent of the untouchable families there still live outside the village boundaries and only 50 per cent are able to use public wells

for drinking water. According to an official statement in the Gujarat Assembly in 1972, 62 untouchables were murdered in Gujarat alone by caste Hindus in 30 months. From other official reports it transpires that on average murders of this nature number nearly 200 each year for the whole of India of course this does not include many which are never reported. The conclusion reached by the Elayaperumal Committee which was appointed by the Indian government to investigate the condition of the untouchables makes dismal reading 'Untouchability' reported the Committee' is still being practiced in a virulent form all over India.

It seems to me that what Ambedkar succeeded in achieving were first to bring the issue of the untouchables sharply to public awareness secondly to develop at least in a section of the untouchables the will to resist caste Hindu dominance and to fight for their human right by providing them with an ideology a political organization and educational institutions and thirdly to secure from the Indian national leadership (comprised mainly of caste Hindus) a formal commitment to principles and policies which favored the untouchables. His total dedication to the cause of the dispossessed combined with his extraordinary intellectual gifts made him a charismatic leader. However the conditions of a social revolution are not created by any single individual however dedicated or gifted he may be. Western Europe had to go through three major movements the Renaissance the French revolution and the industrial revolution before the ancient regime gave way the forces of social and political democracy. In India the ancient regime is still enormously powerful especially in the social and cultural life of the people most of whom continue to live in village. The framework of political democracy which the national leaders have given to the Republic is very much an epiphenomenon. Without an intellectual and industrial revolution, no structural transformation of Indian society is ever to be effected. Dr. Ambedkar fully recognized this and he passionately advocated both. In doing so he became more than a leader of the untouchables, he became a leader of the forces of modernization in India. India 's future no less than the future of its eighty million untouchables continues to depend on whether these forces eventually succeed in breaking the ideological institutional stranglehold of the ancient regime.

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