



Beyond formal equality: Mahatma Phule's anti-caste framework and the Musahar struggle

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Abstract

In the context of Indian social thought, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule occupies a distinct and foundational position as one of the most non-traditional and critical scholars who recast history to interrogate the commanding social architecture of his era. Through a critical textual analysis of his writings, primarily *Gulamgiri* and *Shetkaryacha Asud*, this paper examines the contemporary significance of Phule's historical-materialist critique of Brahminical hegemony, religious myth-making, and economic exploitation. It applies this framework to the Musahar community, a Dalit community in Bihar. The study draws on existing empirical field studies, government reports, and news documentation to examine the contemporary lived realities of one of the most marginal communities. The analysis reveals that despite constitutional egalitarianism and protection, Musahars remain structurally marginalised through severe landlessness, bondage labour, educational exclusion, social humiliation and superficial electoral co-optation. In conclusion, the paper explains how Phule's diagnostic and radical framework, particularly through the concept of *Tritiya Ratna*, can be applied to achieve the emancipation of the Dalits.

Keywords: Phule, caste, history, cultural hegemony, inequality

Introduction

Every social progress aimed at justice, equality, and inclusive human rights was initiated by visionaries who challenged irrational social divisions and worked to unite people and eliminate evil. These prudent altruists are shaped by their specific sociocultural background and personal experiences. Similar to Gail Omvedt (1971) ^[24], who called Phule the 'primary renaissance figure', Braj Ranjan Mani (2005) ^[17] noted Phule as the first pioneer in modern India to launch a movement for the emancipation of caste-oppressed, labourers, peasants and both men and women. Phule, the ideological-political founder of the anti-caste movement, analysed the history of caste and Brahminical domination from a historical-materialist perspective. Mr and Mrs Phule and their colleagues had envisioned a *samaj* of truth, rationality, equality and castelessness, a *samaj* where people of any socio-economic strata, any religion, from any location do not have to fight for basic educational rights. As Mani (2005) ^[17] noted, long before scientists such as Edward Said and Foucault, Phule grasped that power is closely related to knowledge and, hence, that education is an essential prerequisite for change, resistance, and power, which is why he called knowledge 'Tritiya Ratna' (Third eye). In addition to founding *Satyasodhak Samaj* in 1873, he introduced *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, a new universal religion rooted in a radical monotheistic principle. Phule aimed to create a society founded on scientific reasoning rather than on religious or caste-based beliefs. He envisioned a space for open, logical discussions on social, political, and economic matters where individuals foster awareness of equality, liberty, and fraternity, ideals essential for a modern multicultural society, along with egalitarian ideals. Consequently, in the stratified Indian society, this egalitarian horizon envisioned by Mahatma Phule cannot be examined in historical isolation; rather, his thought is equally relevant in a post-colonial democratic republic. It is useful to examine whether modern political institutions

dissolve traditional caste hierarchies or merely modernise the instruments of upper-caste hegemony.

To understand the historical continuity of caste domination, we must delve into the concrete realities of those relegated to the lowest rungs of the social order. The following section examines the contemporary condition of the Musahar community in Bihar, which Risley considered an offshoot of the Bhuiya tribe of Chotanagpur (Mitra, 1953). By examining their continued economic dispossession through landlessness and unfree labour, institutionalised segregation in modern schooling, exposure to everyday state violence, and reduction to symbolic vote-bank politics, the study asks whether modern democratic institutions have dismantled dominant-caste hegemony or simply refined its mechanisms of exclusion.

Jyotirao Phule: Challenge to the caste system and the British-Upper Caste alliance

In colonial India, philology was an instrument of rule. The structural affinities between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin that William Jones and the early Orientalists tracked were questions of comparative morphology, not genetics. But an expanding colonial state had little use for a grammar that could not help manage a population. As Romila Thapar (1996) ^[34] has argued, the category of the "Indo-European" was severed from linguistics almost immediately and remade into an argument about blood, antiquity, and civilizational hierarchy. Friedrich Max Müller gave this conceptual leap academic legitimacy. By reading the *Rigveda* as an unvarnished historical record rather than liturgical poetry, Müller transformed Vedic confrontations between Aryas and Dasas into an ancient racial conquest: fair-skinned invaders subjugating a dark native population (Lee, 2024; Thapar, 2006) ^[16, 35]. The thesis moved quickly from Oxford lecture halls into district administration, offering the British Raj an empirical rationale to classify caste, entrench social divisions, and justify imperial authority. By the late nineteenth century, Herbert Hope

Risley (1891) ^[30] had armed district ethnographers with callipers and skin-colour scales, attempting to anchor social hierarchy in the measurable bridge of a nose. This anthropometric cataloguing was far from an innocent exercise in Victorian natural history; it provided the Raj with an empirical pretext to reify and freeze the internal fractures of the subcontinent, ensuring that any nascent, unified anti-colonial consciousness remained permanently divided along communal and caste fault lines. At the same time, it extended a calculated political overture to orthodox elites. By framing Brahmins and Britons as distant branches of the same prehistoric stock, the administration forged a narrative of racial kinship that tied high-caste preservation directly to the administrative stability of British rule (Bandopadhyay, 1990).

Upper-caste reformers were remarkably quick to warm to the idea. Far from resisting a foreign ethnology, they recognised that the Aryan myth offered a modern, European-sanctioned pedigree that legitimised their customary social dominance over agrarian labour (Omvedt, 1971). Keshab Chandra Sen (1904 ^[24, 32]/1988) spoke directly to this shared vanity when he celebrated the imperial connection as a providential “Indo-British fraternity.” Yet the theory performed its most enduring ideological labour in the hands of revivalist leaders, who realised that an imagined Vedic antiquity could mobilise mass anti-colonial sentiment while quietly shielding hereditary caste hierarchies from any domestic critique. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for instance, subordinated social reform to the immediate demand for political sovereignty, insisting that social democratisation could only follow political emancipation from British rule (Oak, 2022). Yet his editorials in *Kesari* and *Maratha* revealed the limits of that anti-colonial critique: Tilak consistently shielded *Varnashrama* hierarchies from scrutiny, using the authority of Vedic orthodoxy to protect the hereditary privileges and land monopolies of dominant groups like the *Khots* in Maharashtra against peasant claims (Rao, 2010) ^[28]. Concurrently, Swami Dayananda Saraswati sought to resolve the contradiction of caste by characterising the marginalised Shudras as culturally degraded Aryans and advocating their reintegration through Vedic revivalism (Singh, n.d.). However, these reformist projects maintained an ideological limit: by restricting their critiques to the parameters of scriptural sanctity, both revivalists and political nationalists preserved the theological foundations that legitimised Brahminical hegemony.

Jyotirao Phule disrupted this epistemological consensus by constructing a counter-hegemonic, materialist historicization of the subcontinent. In *Gulamgiri* (1873) ^[26], Phule rejected the metaphysical legitimacy of the sacred texts, diagnosing Brahminism not as authentic spiritual devotion, but as an institutionalised system of ideological hegemony and economic expropriation. Employing rationalist critique alongside biting polemical satire, Phule inverted the Aryan migration hypothesis: the Aryans were theorised as predatory Iranian invaders whose maritime arrival displaced the sovereign indigenous inhabitants, who were identified as virtuous Kshatriya rulers, as in figures like King Bali (Lee, 2024) ^[16]. He fiercely ridiculed and contended that Brahmins rewrote the defeat of indigenous rule into cosmic, supernatural myths (such as Sage Bhrigu kicking Lord Vishnu, implying that if even the Gods cannot retaliate against Brahmins, then who are the Shudras and Ati-

Shudras to do so) to psychologically terrify the poor masses through claims of magical supremacy and framing the silence tolerance of Brahminical violence as the ultimate religious virtue. Phule approached the Sanskrit canon not as sacred revelation, but as an archive of ideological conquest. In *Gulamgiri* (1873) ^[26], he brought an unsparing, commonsense rationalism to the foundational myths of Brahminical supremacy, dismissing the *Manusmriti*’s account of caste groups emerging from Brahma’s anatomy as biological nonsense. The *Dashavatar* of the Bhagavata Purana received the same treatment. According to Phule, the divine incarnations of Vishnu, such as Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha, were not purely spiritual events but represented military invasions. Each avatar represented a different attack aimed at dismantling independent local communities, such as those governed by kings like Bali. He also dismissed the notion that traits like intelligence or virtue are inherited. In his 1881 publication, *Shetkaryacha Asud*, Phule contended that human capabilities around the world, from Britain to Egypt, are mainly shaped by material circumstances, livelihood, and access to education, rather than through divine favouritism transmitted through bloodlines.

By demystifying these texts, Phule exposed the economic interests behind traditional rituals. In *Shetkaryacha Asud*, he demonstrated that the priesthood acted as a formal form of agrarian taxation. The liturgical calendar covered nearly every month, featuring seasonal festivals like Ram Navami and Nag Panchami alongside vital lifecycle ceremonies such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. At each occasion, Bhat-Brahmins collected tithes, grain, livestock, cooking oil, and even cash from impoverished farmers (Phule, 1881) ^[27]. The cycle of exploitation relied on ignorance, as historically, lower castes were barred from Sanskrit literacy by religious restrictions and received little educational support during colonial rule. Vernacular education was underfunded and inadequate, hindering Shudra and Ati-Shudra children from reading legal documents, accessing revenue records, or challenging Brahminical corruption (Phule, 1873, 1881) ^[26, 27]. Not only did he correlate Iranian Aryans with the foreignness of *Indian Brahmins*, especially *Bhat-Brahmins* of Maharashtra, but also correspondingly reversed the social status of the castes. In his portrayals of the premise, the current lower caste is the “original rulers, warriors and cultivators of India before the invasion of the Aryans and the subsequent Brahminisation of the subcontinent,” and he mentioned indigenous kings as *Kshatriya* (Lee, 2024) ^[16].

British rule altered the form of oppression but did not reduce its burden. While the fall of the Peshwa dynasty ended an openly despotic Brahminical state, the Raj replaced it with widespread economic exploitation. British industrial capitalism turned rural areas into raw material suppliers for overseas factories, and the rigid, cash-only revenue systems of the Ryotwari and Mahalwari land revenue systems drained peasant savings, pushing them toward moneylenders (Jayaram, 2006) ^[8]. The Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 worsened this by enclosing traditional woodlands. Forest communities and smallholders, who had farmed cattle and collected timber for generations, were criminalised on their ancestral lands, increasing rural poverty and resulting in more suicides due to debt (Keer, 1960; Rao, 2017) ^[29]. Phule argued that farmers’ hard-earned money is largely exploited for the urban luxury of elites, pensions, and education, while rural

villages remain impoverished and deprived of educational opportunities. While nationalists blamed British rule alone, Phule argued that lower-caste groups were exploited by both the British and upper-caste elites. If Shetji (upper-caste moneylenders) deceived, Bhatji (upper-caste clerks, judges, and bureaucrats) came to support them. Omvedt (1971) ^[24] noted that, driven by identity insecurity, upper castes claimed to represent 'Hindu tradition' and 'Indian Nation,' but ultimately their actions served the interests of a specific class rather than the entire population. He demanded that the state fund infrastructure directly for cultivators, including dams, irrigation systems, soil conservation, scientific breeding, and practical farming schools.

The failure of the colonial system was most clearly seen in the interactions between British authority and villages: the local bureaucracy. The Raj heavily depended on hereditary Brahmin scribes and accountants, the Bhat-Kulkarnis, whom Phule compared to Narada. These officials fostered local disputes, manipulated land surveys, and guided police investigations to sway court decisions in favour of wealthy landowners. While claiming legal equality under the empire, the peasantry remained caught between foreign taxes and native clerical corruption. Phule's main point was to reveal how religious myths, manufactured illiteracy, and colonial economic policies formed an interconnected system of oppression for the oppressed.

Constitutional and legal abolition versus structural continuity in post-colonial India

Following the establishment of the sovereign republic in India, the Constitution guaranteed all citizens social, economic, and political justice, along with equality of status and opportunity. Here, we have to remember that 'We, the People of India' practically never felt like a single nation community. Even with independence, the new state retained many of its past elements: hierarchy of caste, market relations, patriarchal kinship and family codes, elite monopoly, the ritual purity of labour, and the elitist distance of public servants (political and non-political), amongst others. So, regardless of a modern vision, it was an unequal start for a highly stratified society. The Constitution of India itself never explicitly mandated the 'abandonment,' 'abolition,' or 'annihilation' of the caste system as an entire social institution. A dual approach was taken by the framers: i) Untouchability was criminalised (Article 17), and the state was prohibited from discriminating based on caste (Article 15 (1)); ii) codified caste categories into law to administer compensatory affirmative action. Needless to say, untouchability alone is not the reflection of caste discrimination and humiliation; it could be more inhuman and more subtle. So, by prohibiting caste-based discrimination in public-funded educational institutions and public sector employment, or by outlawing caste-based restrictions on access to public shops, hotels, wells, tanks, and roads, the Constitution only approached caste civil rights issues as a state-regulated matter, rather than apprehending them as sociological issues. That is why the hereditary, caste-exclusive privilege and monopoly over the temple priesthoods or even regular priesthood was not outlawed or open to all castes, the everyday social interaction based on caste relations remains disregarded, leaving the ritual core of Brahminical supremacy outside state control. Except for specific access to public facilities (Article 15(2)), the constitution did not provide horizontal

fundamental rights against caste discrimination in private housing, private employment, or private social associations. Post-independence tenancy reforms and zamindari abolition failed to alter the caste relations over land control. Using legal loopholes, dominant-caste intermediaries and occupancy tenants evicted actual tillers. Land ceilings largely failed because of fictitious transfers (*benamdari*) and bureaucratic collusion. Dalits and the underclass suffered severe educational deprivation, worsened by poverty, discrimination, and bribes required for formal employment. By contrast, upper castes and, later, the upper layers of middle castes (Yadavs, Kurmis, Koeris) turned education into a source of political, administrative, and economic power (Chakravarty, 2001) ^[4]. The state serves dominant-caste class interests. Revenue officials, police, and a conservative judiciary collude to undermine land-ceiling and minimum-wage laws (*ibid.*). On the other, Kothari (1970) ^[12] rejected the dichotomy between 'traditional society' and 'modern polity'. According to him, a "modernising" society is neither modern nor traditional. It simply moves from one threshold of integration and performance to another, in the process transforming both the indigenous structures and attitudes and the newly introduced institutions and ideas" (p. 3-4). Caste gets politicised as democratic institutions bring traditional identities into secular competition, mobilisation and interest aggregation. Against this backdrop, the discussion will now carry forward the existence of caste-based exclusion and ignorance in social, economic, and political fields.

Experiencing social stigma, economic exploitation and political ignorance: A study on the Musahar Community

1. Socio-economic adversity of the community

The Musahar is a community classified as a Scheduled Caste (SC) under state law, recognised in seven Indian states: Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal. They are also present in Nepal. Of these states, Bihar has the highest concentration, accounting for 88.6% of India's Musahar population, making it the third-largest SC community (Census of India, 2011) ^[23]. In 2007, the community was classified as 'Mahadalit,' highlighting their marginalised status even amongst the Dalit communities. Following the colonial censuses, they were called an Aboriginal tribe, a semi-Hinduised tribe, and a Dravidian tribe. Being lower in ritual rank, they also continue to face social stigma. They regularly encounter slurs and proverbs that mock them, such as *Kuthe ki poonch aur Musahar ki soch barabar*, which implies that an entire community is being insulted by comparing them to a dog, thus questioning their intelligence and capability to comprehend (Sahay, 2019) ^[31]. These uncivilised proverbs are part of Brahminical discourse, which has long been associated with myths that they were cursed and are a matter of disgust. Sahay (2019) ^[31] shows how the colonial administrators also looked at these lower caste communities from a Brahminical gaze, as if a community's social position, culture, livelihood, and their own lifestyle should be judged with the so-called divine scale of Brahmins. The colonial documentation of the British observers saw Musahar settlements, clothing, diet, and occupation through the vocabulary of dirt, primitiveness and disgust, an elitist observation that aligned with the native dominant groups and tended to detach visible marginalisation from the social and economic relations that

produced it. Lockwood (1878) went so far as to describe the Musahar's food choice as worse than that consumed by an English pig. In this sense, caste-based subjugation is made to look like evidence of an inherent lack of civilisation. The irony lies in how the majority of the lower castes, primarily tribal groups, were assimilated into Hinduism (Jaffrelot, 1993) ^[6] to serve the strategic interests of those occupying the apex and purportedly pure tiers of the caste hierarchy. Similarly, the Musahar community, as noted by Kumar (2006) ^[13], was included in the Hindu caste system but kept as untouchable, outside the four *varnas*. The closer they came from the mountain hills to the paddy fields, the worse their misery became. Kumar speculated that they must have been brought into the caste order first, then were made bonded labour, that way cultural-religious super-ordinations might be legitimised and solidified, reducing the probability of resistance.

The social ostracism, economic exploitation through cheap labour, bonded labour, seasonal migrant workers, Kamiya system and denial of access to resources for development (especially education) still continue. They also work under MGNREGAS, where, besides gender-based wage disparities, the male members of the community receive lower wages. Only 2.7% of Musahars are cultivators, and 92.5% are agricultural landless labourers (Kumar, 2023) ^[14]. According to the Bihar caste survey 2022-23, of the approximately 40 lakh Musahars living in the state, only 0.3% hold government jobs (Mishra, 2025). Jha (2021) ^[9, 18] noted that the upper castes' hegemonic interests ensure that the community remains illiterate, thereby sustaining the flow of cheap labour. Musahar children encounter daily displeasure and discouragement from fellow caste Hindu students, as well as the teachers who mostly belong to the upper castes. Being students does not confer on them a neutral status or a space to overcome their stigma and deprivation. Kumar (2006) and Jha (2021) ^[9, 13] noted that, unlike others, these children, who already have to help their parents with collecting food, household work, and even accompany their parents in agricultural labour, have to clean school toilets, run errands for the teacher, sit in a way that does not touch other students, having to drink water from a separate pitcher and tolerate heavy punishment for even a little mistake. A field study by Jha (2019) shows that parents in the community, especially those under bonded labour, still have to ask permission from their Bhumihar landlord before sending their children to school. The community's children have very limited opportunities for higher education, and as a result, they are automatically excluded from reservation policies in education and employment. So, living in the constantly challenging economic conditions, the supposedly liberating space made the reproduction of casteist stigma that does symbiotically lead to dropping out of school, pass the poison of casteism in the next generation. The dominant castes, with their cultural and social capital, ensure psychological dominance in any way possible. As Jaspal (2011) ^[7] argued, using identity process theory, that by stigmatising, demoralising SCs and maintaining spatial and social segregation, Higher caste groups engage in downward comparison that bolsters their collective self-esteem and distinctiveness. This continuation of the social process gradually and firmly undermines the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the SCs, as they tend to prefer sticking to the old order rather than resisting it, fearing that the unknown future after change might bring greater uncertainty

and risk. Even within the capitalist mode of production, their situation remains unchanged, as the highest positions are occupied by those possessing economic capital, mainly held by the upper castes. Iliah (2002) called this the "casteisation of capital," where the labour and surplus produced by Dalits are monopolised by the upper castes.

A documentary by the independent YouTube news channel News Pinch, released in October 2025 ^[15], vividly captures the ground reality through real footage and direct interactions with locals. This approach creates a powerful impact, surpassing traditional academic limitations and reaching a broader audience. The video shows untouchability, exploitation, deprivation, and humiliation, everything exists against their basic human rights and that too not out of the sight of state, government representatives, and bureaucratic officials who are supposed to use their authority to establish those ideals and promises ensured by our constitution and subsequent laws.

2. Political situation of the community in a representative system

Speaking of the political right, in the Ambedkarite tradition, political inclusion is not the ritualistic casting of a vote or 'Bhakti' or 'hero-worshipping' (Ambedkar, 1979 ^[1]/2020b); rather, it is the opportunity of historically oppressed groups to command the state apparatus, influence decision-making, and dismantle graded inequality. To date, the community has produced very few MLAs and MPs, and only one Chief Minister (CM), who was unable to complete a full five-year term. It is often alleged that former CM Jitan Ram Manjhi, who belongs to the community, won only because of Nitish Kumar's favour and, when disagreements grew, was made to quit his post. Ambedkar argued that political democracy must ensure economic and social democracy. He argued that without economic democracy, individuals cannot truly vote freely or have the full opportunity to act according to their wishes. Genuine inclusion requires, for Ambedkar, the unity of trinity that is liberty, equality and fraternity that will ensure social democracy. In the absence of any one of these, the others become weak (ibid.). True inclusion depends on self-empowered political agency, where individuals have the capacity to govern instead of just being ruled. Ambedkar questioned the idea that voting together the day after a long-fixed tenure fosters solidarity between higher castes and untouchables, given that they live in separate spaces the rest of the time (Ambedkar, 1979 ^[1]/2020a). Iliah (2002) said that in post-colonial India, anglicised Brahminical elites turn "parliamentary democracy" into "Brahminical democracy" and "colonial bureaucracy" into a "Brahminical bureaucracy", thereby excluding Dalitbahujans from decision-making power.

According to the 2023 Bihar survey, the Musahar people constitute 3.08% of the population (Mishra, 2025) ^[18], holding electoral influence in both north and south Bihar. Before every election, political parties make empty promises of development, jobs, permanent homes, skill centres, and financial aid, which are only deceptive election spells without moral commitment, evident in the community's actual condition and in the government's own survey report. Given their current drain from poor economic conditions and widespread insecurity, it's wrong to assume they can vote freely. Even if they do, there's little reason to believe a change in power will improve their lives. For example, in incidents of children's deaths under the

contractor system of exploitation, the police, bureaucracy, government and opposition remained silent, and even the police tried to play a blame game against the victims (Kumar, 2025) ^[15]. As Phule anticipated, only through knowledge, material progress, and the complete dismantling of Brahminism's cultural dominance by the Shudras and Ati-Shudras can true social change be achieved. Without this, political freedom and modernisation alone will not lead to genuine social transformation.

The myths reinvented by these marginal groups, using the same Brahminical grammar to replace inherited caste stigma with collective pride and dignity, often become political currency. Narayan (2009) ^[21] demonstrated how the BJP is competing to gain the cultural capital of this marginalised community by reshaping their identities and revising the memories and myths associated with the Musahar community. As democratic processes grow more intense, small communities feel a growing pressure to participate. Meanwhile, political parties are also compelled to incorporate these communities into their discourse to leverage them as vote banks. Among the many myths, the story of Savari is particularly popular; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeks to mobilise the community by invoking this sentiment, arguing that, as descendants of Savari, a devotee of Lord Rama, the community should help build Ram Rajya, which, according to the BJP, can be achieved only by the BJP. The myth of Dina-Bhadri is also used by Hindutva forces to portray the two heroes of the Dalit community as the reincarnations of Rama and Laxman. Thus, the community either gains social dignity and cultural acceptance within the hierarchical order, or it does not; either it gains substantive political power, or it does not; and its numbers are easily used by political parties for vote-bank favour.

Conclusion

The contemporary condition of the Musahar community exposes the structural limits of post-colonial constitutionalism. Although Article 17 abolished untouchability and Article 15 prohibited de jure caste discrimination, the post-colonial Indian state largely treated caste as an administrative issue rather than an entrenched sociological structure. Consequently, private and agrarian production relations, where ritual purity, epistemic violence, and labour exploitation converged, remained largely intact. In examining this structural impasse, the socio-political thought of Jyotirao Govindrao Phule offers both an indispensable diagnostic framework and an emancipatory praxeology. As Gail Omvedt demonstrated in her foundational analyses of the non-Brahman movement, Phule initiated a "democratic revolution" by understanding caste not as an accidental deviation or mere ritual prejudice, but as an institutionalised totality comprising cultural hegemony, ideological deception, and material expropriation.

In the contemporary context, this dynamic can be seen in what Badri Narayan describes as the strategic assimilation of Dalit cultural memory by Hindutva forces. By incorporating Musahar figures such as Dina-Bhadri and mythological figures like Savari into the dominant narrative of Ram Rajya, majoritarian politics creates the appearance of subaltern consent without providing land redistribution, educational opportunities, or genuine political autonomy. Cultural assimilation therefore takes the place of material

justice, turning a historically marginalised community into a dependent electoral vote bank while leaving the hereditary social order intact. Against this sophisticated reproduction of dominance, Phule's normative project provides a blueprint for substantive social transformation. At its core lies Tiritiya Ratna, the 'third eye' of critical education, a radical epistemological weapon. For Phule, knowledge is not merely a means of securing formal employment; it is a revolutionary, demythologising tool essential to subaltern awakening.

Overcoming the long history of Musahar subjugation requires returning to Phule's theory of counter-hegemonic mobilisation. This means moving beyond fragmented and hierarchical identity politics to build horizontal solidarity among Shudras and Ati-Shudras, as envisioned historically by the *Satyashodhak Samaj*. As Gopal Guru (2009) ^[5] has argued in his discussion of the politics of humiliation, institutionalised stigma cannot be eliminated through paternalistic state welfare or superficial inclusion. It requires the assertion of subaltern moral agency and the radical democratisation of both public and private life. Ultimately, Phule's vision of Sarvajanic Satya Dharma, a universal moral order grounded in rationalism, human dignity, and social equality, remains a vital conceptual antidote to the nexus between Brahmanical ideology and bureaucratic power. Only by confronting both ideological mystification and material expropriation can the postcolonial republic fulfil its unrealised promise and transform Dalit communities such as the Musahars from structurally excluded subjects into sovereign, self-determining political agents.

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