

Education as Emancipation: Phule's Vision in Gulamgiri

Dr. Sanjay Kumar

Assistant Professor, PG Dept. of English, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

ORCiD: 0009-0001-3116-1451, Email: skpmubg@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Jyotirao Phule's book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873) is a foundational text in the history of anti-caste activism and social reform in India. The book is in the form of essays and written as dialogue between the writer and Dhondiba, a character. Phule argues that education is the most potent instrument of emancipation, challenges the Brahminical monopoly over knowledge, and lays the groundwork for modern Dalit and feminist thought. This Research paper examines how *Gulamgiri* elaborates education not merely as a means of individual progress, but as a central strategy for resistance and social and political transformation. It exposes how religious scriptures were used to perpetuate myths and traditions that sustained inequality and subjugation of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras (marginalised communities). It places Jyotirao Phule's vision within the larger context of nineteenth-century reformist movements and postcolonial theory, a portrayal upon contemporary scholarship to assess the work's continuing relevance in society. The findings suggest that Phule's educational philosophy foreshadows later emancipatory pedagogies and remains vital in struggles for justice, equality, and fraternity. The book, primarily written in Marathi, has an everlasting impact on regional literature, and its translation has changed the Indian way of Dalit writing. Phule dedicated the book to the African American movement to end slavery, linking the two struggles for freedom.

Keywords: *Gulamgiri*, education, emancipation, caste, social reform, postcolonial

1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century in colonial India was an era of ferment and awakening, marked by pioneering debates on caste, gender, and social justice. Among its most radical figures was Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890), a social reformer whose critique of Brahminical supremacy and advocacy for universal education sparked lasting change. His seminal work, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), published in 1873, is a polemic against the systematic disenfranchisement of Shudras and Atishudras, and a manifesto for the transformative power of knowledge.

Phule's conviction that education was the cornerstone of emancipation was both revolutionary and pragmatic. In a society where access to learning was largely the preserve of upper castes, Phule argued that genuine liberation and social progress could only come through the democratisation of education. He identified ignorance, particularly that which was imposed and perpetuated by the Brahminical order, as the root of "misery and slavery" among India's oppressed class. By foregrounding education as a tool of resistance, Phule laid the groundwork for later anti-caste, Dalit, and feminist movements.

This paper critically examines *Gulamgiri*'s vision of education as emancipation. It traces the work's historical context, Phule's critique of caste-based control over knowledge, and his

pioneering efforts to establish inclusive schools for all sections of society. It also situates Phule's thought within broader debates about social reform, colonial modernity, and the global discourse on education and liberation.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The significance of Gulamgiri in the discourse of social justice and education in India cannot be overstated. While Phule's contributions have been recognised in both scholarly and popular domains, there remains a need for sustained engagement with his educational philosophy as articulated in Gulamgiri. In light of persistent inequalities in access to education and ongoing struggles against caste and gender discrimination, revisiting Phule's vision is both timely and necessary.

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how Gulamgiri frames education as the primary means of emancipation from caste-based oppression. The objective is to clarify the theoretical and practical dimensions of Phule's argument, highlighting his critique of Brahminical power, his advocacy for inclusive and secular education, and his engagement with contemporary reformist models. Through a close reading of the text and a review of relevant scholarship, the paper also seeks to assess the limitations of Phule's vision and its implications for present-day debates on education, equality, and social transformation.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Jyotirao Phule and Gulamgiri has grown considerably over the past few decades, reflecting the work's foundational status in the anti-caste and social reformist canon. Rosalind O'Hanlon's *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (2002) provide a comprehensive account of Phule's political and intellectual context, analysing his challenge to Brahminical authority and his radical reinterpretation of Hindu mythology. Gail Omvedt's *Seeking Begumpura* (2008) and Eleanor Zelliot's *from Untouchable to Dalit* (1995) further explore Phule's role in shaping Dalit consciousness and the broader landscape of Indian social movements.

Dr. Sanjay Kumar, in his research article 'Resistance Literature: Gulamgiri as the First Manifesto of Dalit Literature in India', positions Gulamgiri as a proto-manifesto that anticipates 20th-century Dalit writings, challenging caste's epistemic violence.

Phule's emphasis on education as a tool for emancipation has been widely discussed. Scholars have noted how Gulamgiri frames literacy not merely as a skill, but as a form of political agency (Omvedt, 2008, p. 55). Phule's schools for girls and Shudras, founded alongside his wife Savitribai, are frequently cited as pioneering institutions (O'Hanlon, 2002, p. 91). Recent work by Anupama Rao (2009) and Sharmila Rege (2013) has brought attention to the intersectional dimensions of Phule's thought, examining his critique of gender norms as well as caste hierarchies.

Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha have drawn parallels between Phule's hybrid strategies (e.g., the blending of local and Western educational models) and the concept of the "third space" in resistance literature (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Comparative studies have explored Phule's dedication of Gulamgiri to American abolitionists, highlighting his engagement with global discourses on slavery and emancipation.

Despite this rich scholarship, there remains scope for a focused, textually grounded study of Gulamgiri that foregrounds education as the central axis of Phule's emancipatory politics. This article seeks to fill that gap by synthesizing critical readings with close analysis of primary passages.

4. METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a qualitative, text-based methodology, drawing primarily on close readings of Gulamgiri (Phule, 1873/2002), supplemented by secondary literature in the fields of history, sociology, postcolonial studies, and education. The analysis focuses on key passages where Phule articulates the relationship between knowledge and power, critiques Brahminical control over education, and outlines his vision for inclusive, secular schooling. Comparative references to contemporary and global reformist traditions are included where relevant. The approach is interpretive and critical, aiming to situate Phule's educational philosophy within both its historical context and ongoing debates about social justice.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Education and the Foundations of Emancipation

In Gulamgiri, Phule's principal argument is that education is inseparably linked to social liberation. Unlike colonial or missionary reformers who often saw education as a means to produce loyal subjects or religious converts, Phule envisioned it as a form of collective self-realisation and resistance. He writes, "It is ignorance, and ignorance alone, that is responsible for the misery and slavery of the Shudras" (63). For Phule, education is both the cause and the cure: it is the deprivation of knowledge that sustains subjugation, and it is the spread of knowledge that paves the way for emancipation.

5.1.1. The Historical Denial of Knowledge

Phule meticulously documents the mechanisms by which education was historically denied to the majority. He points out that Brahminical texts and priestly practices declared severe punishments for Shudras who attempted to learn or even listen to sacred texts. He says, "The ban on educating the Shudras... was deliberately imposed by Brahmins to ensure their own continued dominance" (62). The Manusmriti and other scriptures did not merely reflect social prejudices; they institutionalised them by making exclusion from knowledge a religious imperative (O'Hanlon, 2002, pp. 54–55).

Phule's analysis anticipates later theories of how ideology works. Brahminical society, he argues, converted their own self-interest into universal law, thereby justifying the exclusion of Shudras and Atishudras from all forms of learning, government, and social mobility (Phule, 61–62). This "intellectual slavery" was, for Phule, even more debilitating than economic or physical bondage.

5.1.2. Knowledge as Power

Phule's understanding of the "power-knowledge" dynamic is strikingly modern. He exposes the ways in which Brahmins used myths, rituals, and Sanskritic learning to establish themselves as mediators of all legitimate knowledge. By casting themselves as the only interpreters of

sacred and secular texts, they established a regime in which the majority could only serve, never rule or interpret (Omvedt, 41–42).

Within Gulamgiri, Phule reclaims the act of interpretation itself as a political act. He rewrites mythic stories—such as those of Vamana and Parashurama—not as tales of Brahminical heroism, but as narratives of conquest, dispossession, and enslavement (Phule, 48–53). In so doing, he models the kind of critical literacy he wishes to see among the oppressed: the capacity to read against the grain and to construct alternative histories.

5.2. Phule's Educational Praxis: Institutional and Ideological Innovations

5.2.1. The Founding of Schools

Phule's critique was not limited to rhetoric; it was accompanied by direct action. He and his wife Savitribai Phule founded the first girls' school in Pune in 1848, at a time when female literacy was almost non-existent in India (Omvedt, 2008, p. 54). Over the next decade, the Phule couple established several schools for Shudras, Atishudras, and girls, often facing violent resistance from upper-caste neighbours.

Phule insisted that these schools be staffed by teachers from non-Brahmin backgrounds and that their curricula be designed to foster critical thinking, moral reasoning, and social awareness. He writes in Gulamgiri: "Let the children of Shudras and Atishudras be educated in such a way that they can understand the roots of their oppression, and learn to resist it" (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 68).

5.2.2. Curriculum and Pedagogy

The curriculum in Phule's schools was remarkably progressive. In addition to the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, students were taught about the history of caste oppression, the dignity of labor, and the importance of self-respect (Omvedt, 2008, p. 55). Phule's pedagogy was dialogic and student-centered, anticipating later theories such as Paulo Freire's "problem-posing education" (Freire, 1970).

Phule also advocated for night schools for adult labourers and agricultural workers, recognizing that economic realities prevented many from attending school during the day (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 70). This flexible and inclusive approach underlines his commitment to education as a universal right rather than a privilege.

5.3. Secular and Missionary Models: Hybridizing Resistance

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Phule was unafraid to draw upon Western and missionary educational models, even as he was critical of their limitations. He praised the efforts of English, Scottish, and American missionaries in providing education to the lower castes, but he was careful to insist on secularism and cultural adaptation. "These schools should have non-Brahmin teachers so that the poison of Brahminical prejudice does not enter the minds of our children" (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 65).

Phule's embrace of both local and global models of resistance gave his movement a hybrid character. By dedicating Gulamgiri to American abolitionists, Phule explicitly situates the struggle of India's Shudras alongside that of enslaved African Americans:

“To the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro slavery; and with an earnest desire, hope and prayer that my countrymen may take their noble example to heart and be emancipated from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom” (Phule, 1873/2002, Dedication).

This transnational outlook, rare among Indian reformers of his time, allowed Phule to reframe the Indian struggle for justice in terms of universal human rights and global solidarity (Omvedt, 2008, p. 61).

5.4. Gender, Caste, and the Politics of Inclusion

Phule’s educational vision was deeply intersectional. He was among the first Indian thinkers to make women’s education a central plank of social reform. In *Gulamgiri*, he denounces both the Brahminical ban on female literacy and the broader culture of misogyny that sanctioned practices like sati and the prohibition of widow remarriage (Phule, 1873/2002, pp. 70–73).

Savitribai Phule’s role as a teacher and activist was crucial. Together, the Phules demonstrated that the struggle for caste emancipation could not be separated from the fight for gender justice. Girls’ schools run by the Phule’s not only provided literacy but fostered self-confidence, economic independence, and critical consciousness among students (Omvedt, 2008, p. 56).

Phule’s critique extended to social customs that consigned widows and “fallen” women to lifelong marginalization. He wrote, “The Brahmins... have made it almost impossible for Shudra women to remarry, thus ensuring a perpetual supply of slaves for their own households” (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 72). By exposing the gendered dimensions of oppression, Phule’s educational program prefigures later feminist arguments about the intersectionality of caste and gender.

5.5. The Colonial Dialectic: Critique and Ambivalence

Phule’s attitude toward British colonial rule was ambivalent but pragmatic. He was quick to denounce colonial administrators who perpetuated caste hierarchies through land tenure and revenue systems. In Part 13 of *Gulamgiri*, he describes how “Mamlatdars and Collectors” colluded with Brahmin intermediaries to exploit the peasantry (Phule, 1873/2002, pp. 96–98).

At the same time, Phule saw in British “enlightenment” a potential ally for the cause of social reform. He urged his fellow Shudras to “place before Government the true state of their fellow humans” (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 97). This strategy of petitioning the colonial state was not an uncritical embrace of imperialism, but a calculated move to leverage external authority against entrenched local elites (O’Hanlon, 2002, pp. 112–114).

Phule’s position thus parallels what Frantz Fanon would later describe as the “colonial dialectic,” where the colonized subject both resists and appeals to imperial power in the struggle for dignity and rights (Fanon, 1963).

5.6. Limitations and Critiques of Phule’s Educational Vision

While Phule’s work is undeniably pioneering, it is not without its limitations. Scholars have pointed out several areas where *Gulamgiri*—and Phule’s educational practice more generally—warrant critical reflection.

5.6.1. Essentialism and the Aryan Theory

One of the central arguments in Gulamgiri is Phule's use of the Aryan invasion theory to explain the historical origins of caste. He frames Brahmins as "outsiders" or "invaders" who subjugated the original inhabitants of India (Phule, 1873/2002, pp. 48–49). Although this narrative served as a powerful rhetorical device to delegitimize Brahminical authority, later scholarship has criticized it for its essentialism and for oversimplifying complex social histories (O'Hanlon, 2002, p. 144).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Phule's use of the theory was strategic. In a society where Brahminical myths dominated public consciousness, Phule's counter-mythology provided a foundation for collective pride and resistance among the oppressed (Omvedt, 2008, p. 62).

5.6.2. Partial Engagement with Adivasi Issues

Phule's analysis, while radical in its focus on Shudras and Atishudras, pays relatively little attention to the distinct histories and struggles of Adivasi (indigenous) communities. This limitation has been noted by scholars who argue that the framework of Gulamgiri risks subsuming diverse subaltern identities under a single narrative of Aryan vs. non-Aryan (Rao, 2009, p. 77).

5.6.3. Gendered Limitations

Although Phule and Savitribai made extraordinary advances in girls' education, Gulamgiri sometimes reflects the gendered assumptions of its time. While it denounces practices like sati and widow marginalization, the text's primary focus remains on the uplift of male Shudras, with the intersectional realities of Dalit and Adivasi women less systematically addressed (Rege, 2013, p. 44).

5.6.4. Dependency on Colonial Structures

Phule's appeals to British authority, while tactically astute, raise questions about the risks of relying on colonial structures for local emancipation. As later anti-colonial thinkers warn, such strategies can inadvertently reinforce imperial hierarchies even as they challenge local ones (Fanon, 1963, p. 98).

5.7. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Despite its limitations, Gulamgiri's impact on Indian society and its intellectual landscape has been profound. Phule's vision of education as the "fulcrum of resistance" continues to inspire generations of reformers, activists, and scholars.

5.7.1. Influence on Ambedkar and Dalit Movements

B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution and the most influential Dalit thinker of the twentieth century, was deeply influenced by Phule's critique of caste and his insistence on education as a tool for liberation (Zelliot, 1995, p. 98). Ambedkar's own efforts to democratize higher education, establish hostels and schools for Dalit students, and foreground education in the anti-caste struggle can be traced directly to Phule's legacy.

The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by Phule in 1873, laid the groundwork for a vibrant tradition of anti-caste activism that continues in Maharashtra and beyond. Contemporary Dalit literature and activism frequently invoke Phule's vision, particularly in debates around affirmative action, educational quotas, and the democratization of knowledge (Omvedt, 2008, p. 172).

5.7.2. Resonance with Feminist and Intersectional Thought

Phule's early commitment to girls' education and critique of gendered social norms have made him a key reference point for feminist scholarship in India. His recognition that "the chains of ignorance weigh doubly heavy on women" (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 71) prefigures later intersectional arguments about the compounding effects of caste, gender, and class.

5.7.3. Global and Digital Legacies

In the twenty-first century, Gulamgiri's vision of education as emancipation is invoked in new contexts, from #DalitLivesMatter campaigns to digital manifestos for social justice. The hybrid strategies Phule employed—blending local and global idioms, drawing on both indigenous reform and Western abolitionism—continue to provide a template for building solidarities across boundaries (Roy, 2014, p. xxvii).

6. FINDINGS

The analysis of Gulamgiri reveals that Jyotirao Phule's vision of education fundamentally redefined the contours of social reform in India. By positioning education as both a right and a weapon, Phule challenged the Brahminical stranglehold on knowledge and created the conditions for mass resistance. The study finds that:

- **Education is framed as collective emancipation:** Phule links individual literacy to the larger struggle for equality and dignity (Phule, 1873/2002, p. 63).
- **Practical reform accompanies theory:** The establishment of schools for Shudras, Atishudras, and girls demonstrates Phule's commitment to actionable change (Omvedt, 2008, p. 54).
- **Hybrid models and global perspectives:** Phule's embrace of missionary and secular models, coupled with his dedication to American abolitionists, enables a transnational vision of emancipation (Phule, 1873/2002, Dedication).
- **Intersectional awareness and limitations:** While pioneering in its approach to gender and caste, Gulamgiri leaves some subaltern groups, especially Adivasis and women at intersections, less fully addressed (Rege, 2013, p. 45).

7. CONCLUSION

Jyotirao Phule's Gulamgiri endures as a foundational text in the history of Indian social reform—one that radically reconfigures the relationship between education, power, and justice. By foregrounding education as the fulcrum of emancipation, Phule offers a blueprint for dismantling caste-based oppression and envisioning a more egalitarian society. His critique of Brahminical hegemony exposes the ways in which exclusion from knowledge has been systematically weaponized to sustain social hierarchies, while his insistence on universal,

secular, and inclusive education anticipates the most progressive pedagogical philosophies of the modern era.

Phule's practical interventions—particularly the establishment of schools for Shudras, Atishudras, and girls—demonstrate that theory and action must go hand in hand. His hybrid approach, which draws upon both indigenous and global models of resistance, positions *Gulamgiri* as a text with both local specificity and universal resonance. By dedicating his work to American abolitionists, Phule situates the Indian anti-caste struggle within a broader global movement for human rights and dignity.

At the same time, the limitations of *Gulamgiri*—its essentialist use of the Aryan invasion theory, partial engagement with Adivasi experiences, and the gendered gaps in its analysis—invite continued critical reflection. These shortcomings remind us of the importance of intersectionality and the need to continually adapt emancipatory projects to the lived realities of all oppressed groups.

The legacy of *Gulamgiri* is both practical and theoretical. It has directly influenced generations of Dalit and feminist activists, shaped constitutional and educational reform, and continues to inspire contemporary movements for social justice. Phule's vision reminds us that education is never neutral: it can be wielded as a tool of domination or as a weapon of liberation. For Phule, true education is not simply the transmission of facts, but the awakening of consciousness—the capacity to question, critique, and collectively transform society.

In a world where access to education remains deeply unequal, and where old and new forms of exclusion persist, *Gulamgiri*'s call for the democratization of knowledge is as urgent now as it was in the nineteenth century. To honor Phule's legacy is not only to remember his achievements but to continue his unfinished project: making education the common property of all, and the foundation of a truly just and equal world.

REFERENCES

1. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
2. Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington). Grove Press.
3. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.
4. Kumar, Sanjay. "Resistance Literature: *Gulamgiri* as the First Manifesto of Dalit Literature in India." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 13, no. 11, Nov. 2025, pp.175-181. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17542613>
5. O'Hanlon, R. (2002). *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. Navayana.
7. Phule, J. (1873/2002). *Gulamgiri* (trans. Gail Omvedt). Stree.
8. Rao, A. (2009). *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press.
9. Rege, S. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy*. Navayana.

10. Roy, A. (2014). Introduction in B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition. Navayana.
11. Zelliot, E. (1995). From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement. Manohar.