



## Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's Thoughts on Farmer's Poverty and Its Contemporary Relevance in Maharashtra: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer and activist in 19th-century India, is best known for his pioneering work in the upliftment of the lower castes and his critique of social inequality. Among his numerous contributions, his thoughts on the agrarian crisis and farmers' poverty stand out as visionary and prescient, especially when viewed in the context of present-day Maharashtra. This paper critically examines Phule's analysis of farmer poverty and its root causes, exploring how his insights can be applied to understand the current agrarian distress in Maharashtra. By connecting Phule's ideas with contemporary issues like agrarian debt, landownership disparities, and the lack of support for small-scale farmers, this paper argues that his socio-economic critiques offer vital lessons for addressing the ongoing crisis in the agricultural sector in Maharashtra.

### Introduction

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a reformer and thinker of immense stature, dedicated much of his life to challenging the social and economic structures that perpetuated the oppression of lower castes and marginalized communities in India. While his primary focus was on social justice and education, his thoughts on the agrarian distress and poverty faced by farmers remain highly relevant today, particularly in the state of Maharashtra. As one of India's most significant agrarian regions, Maharashtra continues to struggle with issues like farmer suicides, rising debt, and agricultural stagnation—issues Phule had keenly analysed over a century ago.

This paper aims to investigate Phule's thoughts on agrarian distress, focusing on his critique of the landlord-tenant system, his understanding of the socioeconomic forces exploiting farmers, and the structural causes of farmer poverty. Furthermore, this paper evaluates how these insights remain applicable in the present context of Maharashtra, a state that continues to face severe challenges in the agricultural sector.

### Mahatma Phule Understands of Farmers' Poverty

Phule was deeply critical of the social and economic conditions that subjected farmers to exploitation, especially the caste-based divisions that defined agrarian relations in 19th-century Maharashtra. His work, particularly his book "**Gulamgiri**" (Slavery), sheds light on the systemic exploitation that farmers faced at the hands of landlords, moneylenders, and the colonial state.

### 1. The Role of the Landlord and Moneylender System

Phule highlighted how the agricultural economy in Maharashtra was dominated by a small class of landlords and moneylenders who controlled both land and credit. Farmers, especially those from lower castes, were forced into debt bondage and had little to no control over the products of their labour. Phule's critique was not just of the caste system but also of the economic system that entrenched the exploitation of the poor.

The landlord-tenant system forced farmers into perpetual poverty, as they had to pay exorbitant rents to the landowners, often in the form of a fixed share of the crop. Moneylenders, charging high interest rates, further deepened the debt trap. Phule's social philosophy centered on dismantling these exploitative systems. He argued that land should be redistributed to ensure that the tillers of the land were its true owners. He also advocated for access to affordable credit for farmers to break their dependency on exploitative moneylenders.

### 2. Caste-Based Exploitation in Agriculture

Phule believed that caste-based exploitation was deeply embedded in the agrarian structure. Lower-caste communities were not only socially marginalized but also economically oppressed, as they were often relegated to the least fertile lands and denied access to fair compensation for their work. Phule was a strong proponent of land reforms that would empower these communities and ensure that economic resources, including land, were distributed more equitably.

### Phule's Advocacy for Agricultural Reforms

Phule's critique of farmer poverty went hand-in-hand with his advocacy for agricultural reforms. He envisioned a more just agrarian system where the producers (the farmers) would have control over the land they tilled. His thoughts on land reforms, the redistribution of wealth, and social equality laid the groundwork for the future demands of land reform movements in post-independence India.

#### 1. Land Reforms and Redistribution

Phule's vision of land reform was ahead of his time. He believed that the unequal distribution of land was one of the primary reasons for the widespread poverty and suffering of farmers. His proposal was simple: the land should be redistributed to the landless and small farmers, enabling them to own the land they worked on. This would, in his view, lead to economic independence and social justice.

While Phule's ideas were not immediately implemented during his time, they found resonance in later land reform movements, such as the **Bhoodan Movement** led by Vinoba Bhave and post-independence land reform policies in India.

#### 2. The Need for Institutional Support and Credit

Phule also recognized the importance of institutional support to ensure farmers' economic well-being. He advocated for setting up institutions to provide affordable credit, eliminating the need for farmers to depend on exploitative moneylenders. Phule's ideas emphasized creating a system where credit would be easily accessible, particularly to small and marginalized farmers.

#### Present-Day Agrarian Crisis in Maharashtra

Maharashtra today stands as a significant case study for understanding the continued relevance of Phule's thoughts on farmer poverty. The state, which is one of India's largest agricultural producers, has been struggling with an ongoing agrarian crisis. The current scenario in Maharashtra mirrors many of the concerns Phule raised over a century ago, including debt bondage, an unequal distribution of land, and a lack of institutional support for farmers.

#### 1. Debt and Farmer Suicides

One of the most disturbing signs of the agrarian distress in Maharashtra has been the rising number of farmer suicides, often linked to insurmountable debt. The situation has worsened due to a combination of failed crops, lack of irrigation facilities, and soaring input costs. Small farmers, particularly in rural areas, are often caught in a cycle of debt, unable to repay the loans taken from both formal and informal sources. Phule's critique of the exploitative moneylender system can be directly applied to the current issue of farmers' debt and the absence of sufficient credit facilities.

#### 2. Unequal Land Ownership

Despite land reform initiatives post-independence, land ownership remains concentrated in the hands of a few. A significant percentage of the population still does not own land, and those who do often own very little. Phule's call for land redistribution and his advocacy for the rights of the landless and poor farmers remains relevant today, as large tracts of land are still controlled by wealthy, often urban-based, landlords or corporate interests.

#### 3. Lack of Institutional Support

While government schemes like the **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY)** and **National Agriculture Market (eNAM)** have been introduced, their implementation has often been ineffective due to corruption, inefficiencies, and lack of awareness among farmers. Phule's idea of accessible institutional support and affordable credit for farmers still seems elusive, with the majority of the farming community unable to benefit from these initiatives.

#### Relevance of Phule's Ideas in Modern Maharashtra

Phule's advocacy for social and economic reforms remains deeply relevant in contemporary Maharashtra. His emphasis on land redistribution, providing access to affordable credit, and dismantling exploitative agrarian systems resonates with today's demands for agrarian justice. Phule's ideas, if applied today, could potentially address many of the structural problems in Maharashtra's agricultural sector:

1. **Comprehensive Land Reforms:** Strengthening the implementation of land reforms and redistributing land to the landless could help alleviate many of the issues faced by marginalized farming communities.
2. **Accessible Credit Systems:** Revamping agricultural credit systems, including easier access to institutional loans with lower interest rates, could help farmers break free from debt traps.
3. **Farmer Empowerment:** Ensuring that farmers have control over their agricultural resources—through better market access, fair pricing, and technological support—could address many of the economic insecurities that plague rural Maharashtra.

#### Conclusion

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's thoughts on the poverty of farmers and the exploitation of the agrarian class remain a touchstone for understanding the agrarian crisis in contemporary Maharashtra. His critique of the socio-economic structures that perpetuate farmer poverty, his advocacy for land reforms, and his calls for better institutional support are as relevant today as they were in his time. The ongoing challenges in Maharashtra—debt,

landlessness, and exploitation by moneylenders—highlight the continued need for reforms that Phule envisioned. The state of Maharashtra must revisit these ideas and implement comprehensive solutions to address the underlying causes of agrarian distress and to achieve true economic justice for its farmers.

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