BOOKS / LITERATURE

To the Presses

Jotirao Phule and the history of Marathi print culture

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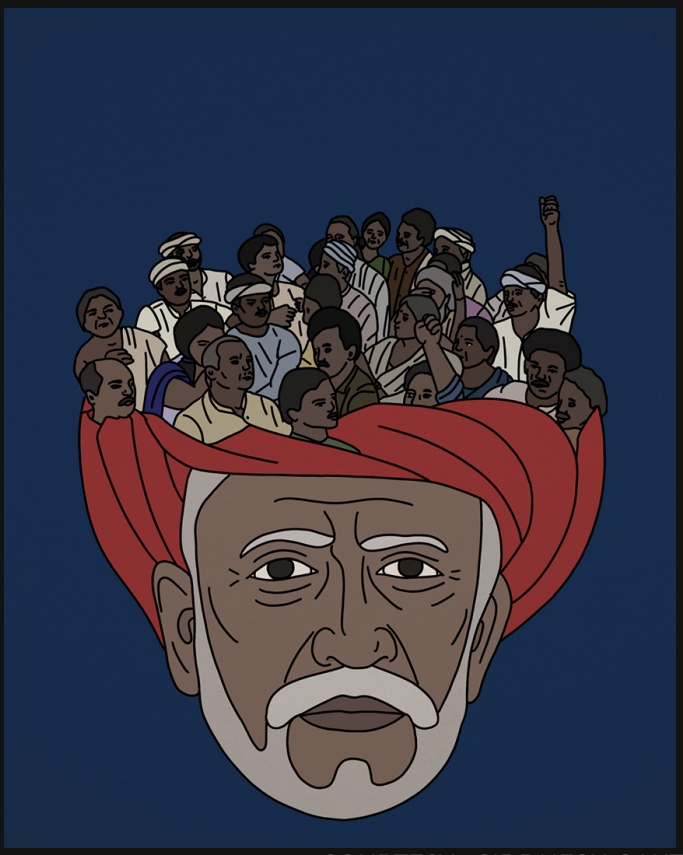

COURTESY - SIDDHESH GAUTAM

THE FIRST FEW PAGES of Jotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* or *Slavery*, published in 1873 and widely considered to be his most important text, opens with a dedication 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"—a reference to the abolition of slavery in the United States, in 1865, that sets the tone for the text's arguments. Phule goes on to quote Homer on slavery and two Western writers on the detrimental role of Brahmins in Indian society.

This is followed by a preface written in English, which was intended for the colonial authorities and written in the formal prose style already customary in English but not yet in Marathi. He gestures to the mythical lineage of the Brahmin community and the spiritual basis of their authority over non-Brahmins but interprets these myths in the context of new developments in history and anthropology, as well as early findings on Indo-European migration into India. He also describes this retelling of the traditional Puranic narrative as "the history of Brahmin domination in India." Then, quoting from the Manusmriti, he describes how Brahmins perpetuated caste by

suppressing non-Brahmins and extracting their labour. The preface ends with a petition to the colonial authorities, who, Phule hopes, "will ere long see the error of their ways, trust less to writers or men who look through high class spectacles and take the glory into their own hands of emancipating my Sudra brethren from the trammels of bondage which the Brahmins have woven round them like the coils of a serpent."

A Marathi introduction follows this English preface. As the text switches between languages, it retains its prose form but now addresses a non-Brahmin Marathi readership instead. Continuing in the same vein as before, Phule writes of how Brahmins tricked non-Brahmins into serving them while retaining control over their resources in a spiritual and secular sense. He then writes of developments in the West, where slavery was abolished.

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Gulamgiri, or *Slavery,* demonstrates Phule's political philosophy and the breadth of his research and reading but, crucially, also points to the various rhetorical styles he employed and a self-consciousness about form

> In the continents of Africa and South America, there was in existence the heinous custom of capturing people from distant lands to be sold as slaves which indeed, had brought shame to all the progressive countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Several generous people, like the English and the Americans, strove hard to abolish this cruel custom with total disregard for their own lives and restored several slaves to their loving parents, brothers, sisters, children and friends from whom they had been cruelly estranged.

The introduction ends with his assessment of the situation with regard to caste that prevailed at the time, while also drawing attention to what he believed must follow.

> The brahmans thus divided the shudras and the atishudras and now are enjoying themselves at the cost of the shudras. It has already been noted above that the shudras and atishudras have been freed from the physical slavery of the brahmans since the advent of the British. But at the same time we are extremely sad to note that the benevolent British government has ignored the problem of education of the shudras. And as a result, they still remain ignorant and captive in the mental slavery which the brahmans have perpetuated through their books.

The text then begins in earnest but, notably, there is yet another stylistic shift: this time from essayistic prose to a dialogic form between two characters, Jotirao and Dhondiba.

> DHONDIBA: The fact that benevolent governments in Europe, like the French, English, came together to prohibit the slave system, demonstrates that they defied the brahman law written in the Manusmriti. The book says that Brahma created brahmans from his mouth and shudras from his feet, only to serve the brahmans.
>
> JOTIRAO: YOU say that the English, French and other governments prohibited the slave system which means they defied the brahman law. But there are so many different people on this earth! Tell me, what does the Manusmriti say about their creation? Which limb of the Brahma were they created from?
>
> DHONDIBA: Regarding this, the brahmans, learned as well as illiterate, say that since people like the English are depraved vulgar sinners, the Manusmriti does not mention them.
>
> JOTIRAO: Do you mean to say that there are absolutely no depraved sinners among the brahmans?

DHONDIBA: Actually, there are far more such people among the brahmans.

JOTIRAO: Then how come the Manusmriti writes about them if they are depraved sinners?

DHONDIBA: This itself proves that the account of the origin of human beings given by Manu is completely wrong, simply because it cannot be applied to all human beings.

The conversation is almost Socratic in its form, containing rhetorical questions and theses followed by antitheses, with Dhondiba asking questions and Jotirao answering them with explanations or counter-questions. Through their dialogue, the text reinterprets various Puranic myths as violent or involving deceit, highlighting how they chronicle the dominance of Brahmins. The dialogue is divided into 16 parts, each covering a different myth, with Dhondiba initiating each part. *Slavery* demonstrates Phule's political philosophy and the breadth of his research and reading but, crucially, also points to the various rhetorical styles he employed and a self-consciousness about form.

Phule wrote extensively in his native Marathi, articulating his political thought and anti-caste social vision through essays, books, letters and even ballads. His writing touched upon themes as varied as women's rights, modern education, historiography, self-respect and labour rights, and his texts found posthumous institutional support through their publication by the government of Maharashtra. Phule's work also came at a crucial juncture in Indian literary history, since it was concurrent with the emergence of public print spheres across different Indian languages.

Print technology had reached Bombay in the late seventeenth century but remained insignificant and scattered for decades afterwards, until sustained commercial printing, primarily in English, began in the late eighteenth century. Writing in print in Maharashtra had come to be dominated by a traditional literate class of Marathi-speaking Brahmins, leaving little room for expressions of other identities.

Phule's pioneering work was shaped by the myriad possibilities offered by the medium and so cannot be viewed in isolation from the technology. Despite this, there has not been much of a concerted effort to place him and his writing in the context of print culture and Marathi literature.

Phule's *Gulamgiri,* published in 1873 and widely considered to be his most important text, opens with a dedication referring to the abolition of slavery in the United States, in 1865, that sets the tone for the text's arguments.

MARATHI HAS A LONG and storied history. It was used by various kingdoms for literary and administrative purposes before it attained a place of prominence among Maratha rulers such as Shivaji. By the early nineteenth century, Marathi literary culture, consisting of manuscript and oral compositions, was dominated by a small cultural elite: the Chitpavan or Konkanastha Brahmins of Pune. Chitpavan Brahmin cultural dominance in Pune dated back to the eighteenth-century rise of the Peshwas, who were members of the community. Originally from the southern Konkan region, Chitpavan Brahmins had

migrated to Pune en masse as well as across Maratha-ruled realms—from Dharwad to Baroda, and Kolhapur to Indore. After decades of expansionism, Peshwa forces were defeated by the East India Company, in 1818, after the Third Anglo-Maratha War. Vast swathes of territory formerly ruled by the Peshwas were annexed to the Bombay Presidency.

In the wake of these tumultuous developments and the complete disintegration of the Peshwa court, local Chitpavans managed to hold on to their social capital, most notably in the former capital of Pune. As the historian Ellen E McDonald explains in a 1968 essay, colonial administrators and their policies ensured the persistence of a literary Chitpavan elite. She writes that Mountstuart Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay from 1819 to 1827, attempted to "conciliate literate groups and disturb as little as possible the social order of the region," thereby helping to establish Chitpavan control over Marathi written culture even after the transfer of power to British authorities. Colonial authorities also employed Chitpavans as clerks, putting their traditional skills to use within the new state, and advocated for the formalisation of the Marathi language to facilitate the printing and distribution of administrative and educational texts. The basis for the standard of written Marathi came from Pune's literate class and largely reflected Chitpavan linguistic and stylistic usage, including a greater degree of Sanskrit words and some features native to the Konkan—but not to Pune—such as nasalised vowels.

After 1825, Elphinstone's administration set up a translator's office, hiring traditional pandits to help draft and produce modern texts in Marathi. These texts largely followed the standard adopted by the local administration. Western forms of knowledge, including historical chronicles, began to enter Marathi through translation. Folk songs, bhakti poetry, folk theatre forms and ballads, including the popular *powada* and *bharud* forms, were widely popular outside the confines of high literary culture, but these were not considered—by local intellectuals or British ones—to be of significance in the way "textual" works were, and they remained in oral form. These genres also

continued to use non-Brahmin linguistic registers and a range of regional and caste dialects for expressive purposes, demonstrating the vitality and range of the Marathi language in ways that early printed texts could not.

Initially, printed texts in India were intended for European readers, including colonial administrators, merchants, missionaries and a budding class of Orientalist scholars. At this stage, Indians were engaged in the printing process largely as skilled and unskilled labour, or as supposed learned informants offering linguistic and literary inputs. The entrance of Bombay's Parsis into the local printing scene, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, was a critical development. As the community's mercantilism and collaboration with British commercial interests began to pay dividends and bring great wealth to its leaders, Parsis sought to engage with the trappings of modernity that proximity to the British had opened their eyes to. In 1812, Fardunji Marzban, a Parsi entrepreneur, set up the first commercial printing press in India run by a "native." He cast a metal font in the cursive script used by the Parsis and Gujarati-speaking merchant castes that is now simply known as the Gujarati script and began printing Gujarati-language texts meant for consumption within his own community. The American Mission Press, set up in Bombay in 1817, printed religious material in Marathi that circulated across mission stations within the Bombay Presidency. After 1835, the blacksmith Thomas Graham headed the press's type foundry and was responsible for improvements in the quality of printed Marathi texts through his typographic innovations.

Ganpat Krishnaji printed an almanac for the first time, in 1841. A wider audience for printed texts had not fully taken shape the way it had for Gujarati. This scenario changed after Krishnaji, a former apprentice to Graham and Marzban, founded the Ganpat Krishnaji Press, in 1840. COURTESY - WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Bombay had become fertile ground for the growth of printed texts but also for technical innovation in printing in Indian scripts. By this point, religious texts and books compiled by the colonial government were being printed in Marathi, but a wider audience for printed texts had still not taken shape the way it had for Gujarati. This scenario changed after Ganpat Krishnaji, a former apprentice to Graham and Marzban, founded the Ganpat Krishnaji Press, in 1840. Crucially, books printed and published at his press were the first Marathi texts intended for commercial circulation, targeting a readership interested in texts that fell outside colonial interests and missionary tracts. *Digdarshan*, the first Marathi monthly, was also printed at his press.

Commercial printing in Marathi, from ownership of the means of production to the labour involved in casting fonts, was controlled by members of non-Brahmin artisan castes, particularly from the

Bhandari community, who were native to the Konkan region and were traditionally toddy tappers. Krishnaji, as well as Javaji Dadaji—the founder of Nirnay Sagar Press, another renowned press and type foundry known for its legible editions of Sanskrit religious texts—were both Bhandaris. According to a biography of Dadaji, he used to advertise the fact that his books used "ink made with cow's ghee" in order to reassure readers that there was no deviation from the norms of Brahmanical ritual purity. As the historian Prachi Deshpande explained during a conversation with me, this August, perceived impurity was another reason Brahmins stayed away from, or were hesitant about, direct involvement in the printing process. Despite their non-Brahmin caste status, most printers, including Krishnaji and Dadaji, worked within the Brahmin-dominated framework of textual production. The texts they printed were primarily reproductions of Hindu religious works and Maratha chronicles. In her book *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere*, the sociologist Veena Naregal explains the limitations these printers faced, writing that "structural constraints prevented such men from initiating alternative attempts to extend the vernacular reading public. As printer-publishers, they remained dependent on brahmins and other upper-caste groups to compose texts for publication." In these early years of printing, then, editorial control and textual curation continued to be the domain of traditionally literate classes, while the labour involved in the technical process of textual production continued to employ members of non-Brahmin castes.

Reformist publications sprang up too, such as the newspaper *Prabhakar*, which the historian Rosalind O'Hanlon describes as having been "the main mouthpiece for the expression of reformist opinion in western India." However, instead of supplanting the traditional literary elite of Maharashtra, printing and colonial administration largely ended up reinforcing its place. The historian Gordon Johnson observes, for instance, that "English literacy gave the Chitpavans a strong position in the administration and professions, but literacy in the vernacular gave them a virtual monopoly of the new methods of communication in Maharashtra."

Books printed and published at Ganpat Krishnaji's press were the first Marathi texts intended for commercial circulation, targeting a readership interested in texts that fell outside colonial interests and missionary tracts.

New methods of communication also flourished after the introduction of print in Maharashtra. As journalism emerged as a medium of discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it also came to be dominated by these dominant groups, Pune-based Chitpavans in particular. Brahmins made up around four percent of Pune's population, according to the 1891 census, yet, in 1902, they formed a little over eighty percent of editors at Marathi newspapers and controlled ninety-five percent of newspaper circulation. The sociologist Gail Omvedt remarked, in *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society* that "for castes that constituted 4% of the population, this was more than simply disproportionate representation; it was monopolization." Their monopoly in journalism, as with literature, allowed them to dictate which matters made it into wider public discourse and whose perspectives were voiced.

Phule attacks Brahmin dominance over Marathi journalism in *Slavery*: "How can all these ritually pure newspapers possibly know what the opinions are of all the Atishudras that they have never had anything to do with?" He also notes that Marathi newspapers were used by Brahmins to trick non-Brahmins into working against their own interests. He alludes, as well, to "newspapers, both Bhat and Christian," referencing the two parties controlling printing and journalism—Brahmin editors and Christian missionaries (for instance, *Dnyanodaya*, a Marathi monthly, was published by the American Mission). After the publication of his 1883 book *Cultivator's Whipcord* was delayed, he even lamented that "we the Shudras have amongst us cowardly publishers." At the end of *Slavery*, Phule also quotes a response to an appeal he had made to his fellow Shudras, in the missionary periodical *Shubhavartaman and Church Sambandhi Nanavidha Sangraha* published from Kolhapur: "This article has been sent to us because the native journalists in Pune did not allow it to be printed in their newspapers. Since Mr Phule has expressed a desire for the article to be published in our newspaper, we have included it in this issue."

IT WAS IN THIS MILIEU that Phule began his work, alongside his wife Savitribai. Educated at a Scottish missionary school in Pune, Phule was comfortable with English and wrote of the influence Thomas Paine's humanist treatise *Rights of Man* had on him and his thought. Phule's criticism of the caste system was rooted in philosophy and a reinterpretation of historical narratives, and was articulated in a range of genres, both traditional and Western. As Prachi Deshpande observes in *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960*, his writing was "wholly modern and represented a radical break from earlier, religiously inclined reformist critiques of caste," appealing to humanist notions of equality rather than looking to show caste as religiously unsanctioned or unjust. Most importantly, Phule expressed these thoughts through print, putting them into writing for wider circulation. By contrast, earlier critics of the caste system had relied on oral forms of expression, and their message was disseminated orally rather than as "texts." In doing so, Phule brought

anti-caste thought into the realm of the written word and, by extension, into modern Marathi literary culture. Such writing could aspire to be placed on equal footing with grammars or tracts on economic matters, something that other ways of expressing frustration against caste were denied at the time.

He was innovative with form too. *Trutiya Ratna*—Third Jewel—his first written work, penned in 1855, features a dialogic form. Phule's writings also demonstrate a familiarity with, and a deep respect for, the African-American resistance against slavery. Besides the dedication in *Slavery*, he referenced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the second edition of *Satsar*, a periodical he published in 1885. In the same year, Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj—Truth-Seekers' Society—in Pune, with like-minded associates. The Samaj formed a platform for anti-caste mobilisation and community organisation, but also for the development of non-Brahmin identities and thought.

Phule's politics extended to how he wrote in Marathi. His writing challenged the linguistic norms of "correct" or "refined" Marathi set by Pune's Chitpavan literary elite and instead reflected non-Brahmin speech. He was abundantly familiar with the normative literary register of Marathi but chose to subvert and even confront it through what Deshpande characterises as the "powerful peasant idiom in all his polemical writings." He went by "Joti." A local Marathi name, which he used in both English and Marathi, it is commonly spelled as Jyoti, including by the Maharashtra government which reflects a conscious and retroactive "correction" of his name to fit a more Sanskritised Marathi.

Phule also consciously eschewed many of the more arcane Sanskrit words that featured in literary Marathi, which a newly literate audience would find hard to follow. He even incorporated slurs and swear words into his characters' speeches, to the shock of some socially dominant reviewers. His language also features Persian words that were avoided in formal writing but were otherwise used in colloquialisms. His language includes many references to livelihoods

centred around agriculture and trades as well, marking its allegiance to non-Brahmin lifestyles. Nor was this merely a stylistic choice; Phule was addressing members of these castes directly, speaking to them in an idiom that reflected their own. In an 1855 letter addressed to Bombay High Court judge and social reformer MG Ranade, for instance, Phule concludes with a line in the Marathi-influenced Dakhini dialect, which was used by local Muslims: "*Sādhe hoke buḍḍe kā yeh pahilā salām lev*," which GP Deshpande translates as "accept the salute of this old man" in the introduction to *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule.* This seemingly throwaway line has literary significance; as Deshpande notes, "the poor Muslim peasant or artisan does not figure in Marathi writing of the nineteenth century at all, with the solitary exception of Phule." The journalist and researcher Tejas Harad told me that Phule wrote as he spoke, choosing to reflect the speech of the non-Brahmin masses of Pune rather than its traditionally literate minority whose linguistic usage dominated in printed texts. Harad added that Phule could easily have chosen to write in a style closer to that of his contemporaries or even the printed materials that preceded his own but must have made a conscious decision not to.

A November 1818 issue of the *Bombay Gazette*. As journalism emerged as a medium of discourse in Maharashtra in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it also came to be dominated by certain groups, such as Pune-based Chitpavans. COURTESY - WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Nor were his efforts without their critics. Notable amongst them was Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, an influential Chitpavan literary critic and essayist who attacked Phule's writing and language, even resorting to casteist terms. In an article for *FiftyTwo*, the academic Suraj Thube writes that "Chiplunkar often ridiculed Phule in his publication, once calling him 'the sorriest scribbler with just the clothing of humanity on him.' In response to Phule's anti-Brahmanism and his critiques of Vedic traditions, he took sly digs at Phule's socio-economic background, labelling him a 'Shudra Jagadguru,' or Shudra world leader; and a 'Shudra Dharmasansthapak,' the founder of a Shudra dharma."

Chiplunkar, according to Prachi Deshpande, also "argued for a modern Marathi idiom squarely based on its Sanskrit roots." The historian Christian Lee Novetzke suggests that Chiplunkar's antipathy to Phule's idiom could have come from his desire to oppose attempts at non-

Brahmin language gaining a foothold in written Marathi. Sadly, many chroniclers of Marathi literature, who were mostly Chitpavan, largely sided with Chiplunkar's assessment of Phule's literary merit, choosing to write Phule out of histories of Marathi literature. For instance, *The History of Modern Marathi Literature* by GC Bhate, published in 1939, was the first English-language text to offer a systematic analysis of literary efforts in Marathi from the nineteenth century onwards. His description of "modern" Marathi is Marathi in the printed form, which he traces back to isolated printing endeavours in Goa, Serampore and Tanjore, before beginning in earnest with sustained Marathi printing in the Bombay Presidency. The book includes a detailed account of various junctures in Marathi print history, across genres, formats, ideological affiliations and region. Bhate categorises modern Marathi writers by era, exploring their writing and thought. However, out of the 128 Marathi authors he lists, 114 were Brahmins. Phule is also included in Bhate's book but portrayed in a largely negative light. Bhate dismisses him as a bigot and rabble rouser, characterising him as "fond of controversy, and … well-versed in the tactics of that game." Bhate describes Phule's *Brahmance Kasab* as being "abusive throughout" in tone, while *The Ballad of Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosle* is depicted as abusing Brahmins in "an irrelevant manner" that reveals Phule's "thoroughly bigoted" nature. Bhate only mentions these two works and *Slavery*, ignoring Phule's many other writings. He reduces Phule's writing to its confrontational tenor, denying its literary merit. On the other hand, Bhate's praise for Chiplunkar and his command over the Marathi language is effusive: he writes the latter "did so much literary work and started so many concerns for all public good that one is dumbstruck by Vishnu Shastri's zeal and energy and the spirit of self sacrifice for his country." Another text, *A Short History of Marathi Literature* by MK Nadkarni, glosses over Phule's writing altogether. It does, however, mention Chiplunkar as the author of "several instructive and critical essays."

AS IMPORTANT AS PRINT TECHNOLOGY was to Phule and his mission, he appears to have been resistant to becoming directly involved in the printing process itself. All his books were printed at

presses belonging to third parties, first at missionary and government presses, and later from private ones—*Slavery* was printed at the government-owned Pune City Press, *The Ballad of King Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosle* (1869) was printed at the missionary Oriental Press and *Sarvajanik Satya Dharmapustaka* (1891) was printed at the commercial Subodha Prakash Press.

In 1874, Ramayya Venkayya Ayyavaru, a Bombay-based Telugu-speaking businessman and member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, donated a printing press worth twelve hundred rupees to Phule. In *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India,* Rosalind O'Hanlon writes that the initial intentions for the press, according to the Samaj, was to "publish before our compassionate English Government what the aims of the society are, and what difficulties and troubles the Shudra people suffer from the Brahman servants of the Government." Krishnarao Bhalekar, a young member of the Samaj, was keen on using the press to print writings by members of the Samaj. Phule was opposed to this, and the two had a bitter falling out over the issue of printing. O'Hanlon writes that the overhead expenses for the press placed a financial burden on the Samaj, which eventually decided to give it away. Frustrated, Bhalekar procured his own press and began printing *Dinbandhu* in 1877. It was the first Marathi newspaper written for the labouring masses and had a very limited circulation, given that most of its intended audience was illiterate. It shut down in Pune in 1879 and was later run by NM Lokhande, an associate of Phule's, from Bombay.

Under Lokhande's stewardship, *Dinbandhu* became the second most widely read Marathi newspaper in the Bombay Presidency, second only to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Kesari*, a paper that represented a traditional Brahmin worldview. It is possible that Phule's opposition to the Samaj getting involved in printing came from a scepticism—not misplaced—about whether it would reach its intended audience, while also diverting precious resources. A Satyashodhak Samaj publication from 1885 outlined guidelines and vows for a self-respect wedding that did away with Brahmanical rituals and instead focussed on mutual respect

between both partners. Its front page credits the text to Phule but the publication to Lokhande. The press is recorded as Dinbandhu Press—presumably the same printing press that was used for the newspaper.

That same year, Phule ventured for the first time into periodical writing, publishing a journal, *Satsar*—The Essence of Truth—printed at the Saujanya Mitra Press in Pune. The journal, intended to be a weekly, ultimately had only two issues in print. In the preface to the first edition, Phule writes that "we shall not bind ourselves to the promise of publishing further issues of this book at any specific time," almost as if he was foreseeing an eventuality that it would not be feasible.

Although Phule's work, politics, writings, and usage of the print medium were a product of modernity, they also made strategic use of traditional oral forms that predated print. He tackled social themes that were very much common to Western-influenced genres, such as the essay, but also infused traditional Marathi oral genres such as the *powada*—ballad—or the *abhang*—hymn—with a modern humanist spirit. He also composed around two hundred *akhands*, a new metric form he innovated that, the political scientist Madhura Damle writes, "resonates with and draws inspiration from abhangs, the metrical compositions by Bhakti poets such as Tukaram, yet breaks away from that tradition."

The powada genre carried a special significance in Marathi. Prachi Deshpande describes it as "a contemporaneous, primarily oral and poetic form of heroic commemoration" that enjoyed wide popularity and was used to celebrate Maratha military prowess of the previous century. Phule's second publication, *The Ballad of King Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosale*, written in 1869, was written as a powada, and intended to be sung. Omvedt notes in *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society* that in this work, Phule cast the legendary king as a peasant king rather than a defender of Hinduism, emphasising his "role as a 'Shudra king' and the populistic basis of his support among Deccan peasants."

The rhythms of oral works were central to much of Phule's writing. Both Harad and Prachi Deshpande believe this was because these writings could then be read out loud to illiterate non-Brahmin audiences across the Marathi-speaking region, while also being easier to read for newly literate Shudra readers. Deshpande also draws attention to "the way he uses patterns of repetition and alliteration to great effect." *Trutiya Ratna*, *Slavery* and *Cultivator's Whipcord* feature back-and-forth dialogues between different characters, interspersing essay-like prose with sections reflecting colloquial speech. Phule would also read out chapters of his works to audiences before finalising a version for print.

Novetzke and Maya Pandit-Narkar, a professor at Hyderabad's English and Foreign Languages University, told me that Phule did not participate in the sort of literary theorising and discourse regarding emerging norms for written Marathi that many of his contemporaries engaged in. His use of written language was more functional, intended primarily for communication. He even refused to be part of a conference for Marathi authors organised by MG Ranade in 1885. In a letter to Ranade, he wrote, "These upper-caste authors who are forever miles away from reality and who can only make ceremonial and meaningless speeches in big meetings can never understand what we the Shudras and Atishudras have to suffer and what calamities we have to undergo," adding that "they cannot concur with what we are trying to say in our books."

(https://caravanmagazine.in/books/jotirao-phule-marathi-print-culture/attachment-19009)

A portrait of Phule and Savitribai, at Phule Wada, in Pune. His place in Marathi modern literature remains to be sketched out fully. However, the medium of print undoubtedly served him and the followers who carried on his legacy by imbuing his teachings with a longevity that ephemeral oral traditions lacked. STEPHEN CHINOY FOR *THE CARAVAN*

In her chapter in *Multilingual India,* Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, a professor at IIT Guwahati, writes that translations of Phule's prose "tend, on the whole, to smooth the rugged quality of his prose," adding that it is difficult "to contain the different linguistic registers of his sharp and rigorous polemic in the single recipient language of the translation." She also notes attempts to trace the influence of missionary literature in English on Phule's writing, such as the writer Bhalchandra Nemade's study, in which he connects the dialogic form to nineteenth-century missionary writing in English. She argues, however, that "there may be yet one more strand of influence on Phule's use of the dialogic form, which points in the direction of Marathi performative literature. Amongst traditional forms of poetry in Marathi literature, the bharud is a genre of drama poem which many of the Varkari poet saints used to express their thoughts on social and religious experience. Unlike the devotional abhanga, which was sung aloud by the Varkaris, the bharud is dramatic and is meant to be acted out by its slender cast of very typical subaltern characters, often just two in number." In a conversation earlier this month, Mokashi-Punekar also elaborated on the form of *Trutiya Ratna*, a play that was never published in Phule's own lifetime but was likely performed at Satyashodhak Samaj events. The play, she said, could be construed as the first modern Marathi "play of ideas," complete with stage directions and a setting far removed from mythology.

Novetzke described Phule's writing as displaying three distinct registers: English prose, Marathi prose and Marathi poetry, often with some degree of code-switching between them within the same text. "With the first two, he wrote in ways meant to target the English-Marathi public sphere and to provoke responses," he told me. "The fact that he is one of the key voices that extends a past tradition of non-Brahman literary culture and fashions new idioms, especially in English, of this culture, is a by-product of his political efforts through language." Phule's use of oral genres stands in contrast to

contemporary currents in Indian literature that instead prioritised the rise of the novel as a uniquely important medium of social discourse. Although the novel was a medium Phule was familiar with, he chose never to write one.

Phule's work was carried on by the Satyashodhak Samaj through their regional meetings across Maharashtra and in the writings and publications of his associates. Yet, the breadth of his oeuvre has escaped attention. This may, in part, be because many of the idiosyncrasies that lend Phule's voice such vigour and originality also make him a frustratingly challenging writer to translate into English, or even to read in the original Marathi. Translations of Phule have acknowledged this difficulty. The second edition to *Slavery*, printed in 1912, alludes to it in a preface by Ayyavaru: "The original text was in a language which was not easy to understand. We have therefore made it a little easy to understand with attention to the correct and incorrect forms of words." GP Deshpande wrote about the challenges of translating Phule too, stating that "it is impossible to translate the vigour and ruggedness of his Marathi." Ambedkar, who had spoken of Phule as a major influence on his thinking, had also planned to translate Phule's works into English, an endeavour that he was eventually unable to undertake. Harad told me that it is often markedly easier to read Phule's Brahmin contemporaries than Phule's own writing, since the norms of standard Marathi today conform more to their language. In fact, there are only a few translations of Phule's works into English. The Maharashtra government commissioned translations of Phule's collected works, carried out by PG Patil. The translations are considered low in quality. Phule's verse has only been translated into English by Patil, selections quoted by O'Hanlon in her book, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, and by Madhura Damle in *Indian Literature*, a bimonthly journal published by the Sahitya Akademi.

In an interview with *Translation Today*, Pandit-Narkar, who translated *Slavery* into English, said that "Phule is a translator's nightmare." She told me that many idioms Phule used in his writing, especially those that refer to pre-industrial agriculture, no longer exist today, since

their social context has largely disappeared. These words and phrases, she explained, are tricky to decode since they are not recorded in older Marathi dictionaries either—such as Molesworth's pioneering *A Dictionary of Marathi and English*, published in 1857, which is referenced today by researchers. Phule also actively repurposed words, using them symbolically beyond their literal meanings. His idiom reflects the different influences on his writing, including missionary prose, traditional oral genres, the Maratha-era *bakhar* tradition of history writing—inspired by Persian history writing common in the Deccan Sultanates—and various dialects of colloquial Marathi. He also writes of contemporary events that are otherwise not well documented, requiring familiarity on the part of both reader and translator to contextualise these references.

Pandit-Narkar noted that Phule's passing in 1890 elicited no response from the established Marathi literati, who ignored his work and presence altogether. At the same time, his standing within the larger non-Brahmin movement was a source of debate, and, as O'Hanlon writes, "his uncompromising radicalism and his abrasive personal style seem to have left him rather isolated during the last years of his life."

As printing became more accessible and literacy spread across non-Brahmin castes, presses owned by non-Brahmins sprang up in numerous cities and towns across the region, publishing tracts and newspapers as part of dispersed, decentralised intellectual networks. Some of these, set up by writers influenced by the Samaj, directly referenced Phule by name and engaged with his work. Clearly, the impulse towards printing that animated Bhalekar, Lokhande and younger Samaj members grew in strength, propelled by a growing readership.

Shraddha Kumbhojkar, a professor at Savitribai Phule Pune University who is currently working on a project that involves archiving non-Brahmin newspapers in Marathi, told me that members of the Satyashodhak Samaj themselves largely refrained from referencing Phule and his work directly, adding that this was likely a reaction to

the confrontational tones his writing often took. Some of them made oblique references to the word *joti* instead, she said, using it as a common noun with the literal meaning of "flame." These publications also served as discursive spaces for social reform and anti-caste thought, featuring a number of writers from diverse non-Brahmin backgrounds, including Dalit leaders such as Gopal Baba Walangkar. Suraj Thube also notes that around 60 newspapers "dedicated to the principles of the Satyashodhak movement" were established between 1873 and 1930.

Dinbandhu ceased publication in 1910. *Dinmitra*, started that year by Bhalekar's biological son (adopted by his nephew) Mukundrao Patil, became an important mouthpiece for the teachings of the Samaj. *Dinmitra* shut down in 1967. Kumbhojkar explained that the two papers provide insights into the work of the Samaj over a good part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Omvedt observes that *Dinmitra* played a key role in building support for the Samaj in rural Maharashtra, which was concurrent with growing support for Tilak among the budding upper-caste Congress-affiliated nationalist intelligentsia. At the same time, Naregal draws attention to how public performances of dramatic and verse forms continued to be the most important means of information dissemination and mobilisation by the members of the Samaj. As Omvedt writes, "spreading the Satyashodhak message in these years took three forms: lectures and instructional tours of leaders; publications of books and newspapers and use of popular song and drama forms."

Thube and Kumbhojkar highlighted how the dispersed nature of these small-scale publications makes them hard to track down and study, particularly since most of them only survive in private archives. Kumbhojkar also drew attention to Shahu, the ruler of Kolhapur who was known for his patronage of the non-Brahmin movement, and added that he financed many non-Brahmin papers during his reign. He also offered to support *Dinmitra*, but Patil politely declined, preferring instead to turn to reader contributions and subscriptions for financial support.

Translations of Phule have been sparse and difficult to locate. *Slavery* was reprinted in 1911, 1912 and, finally, 1921, after which it was difficult to procure, until it was reprinted in 1961 by the Satyashodhak Samaj. Eventually, the Maharashtra government collected Phule's various writings—Marathi and English—and published them in a collected volume in 1969, a project that was initiated during Yashwantrao Chavan's tenure as chief minister. Under Sharad Pawar, the state government resolved to release an English translation of *Gulamgiri* to commemorate Phule's death centenary in 1990, which was to be presented to Nelson Mandela on his planned visit to Bombay. Another volume followed in 1991, and the *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* was published by LeftWord Books, over a decade later. According to Mokashi-Punekar, GP Deshpande also actively attempted to foster literary appreciation of Phule in Marathi, since the late 1980s and before his work was acclaimed or translated into English.

As a consequence of Phule being written out of authoritative and critical accounts of Marathi literature, his texts being out of print for many decades since his death and the difficulty of translating his writing, his place in Marathi modern literature remains to be sketched out fully. However, the medium of print undoubtedly served him and the followers who carried on his legacy by imbuing his teachings with a longevity that ephemeral oral traditions lacked. Print brought together a community, both in the sense of readership but also in the nature of dissemination, serving both community members seeking to form solidarity and scholars researching the non-Brahmin movement.

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KEYWORDS: Jotirao Phule(/tag/jotirao-phule) caste(/tag/caste)

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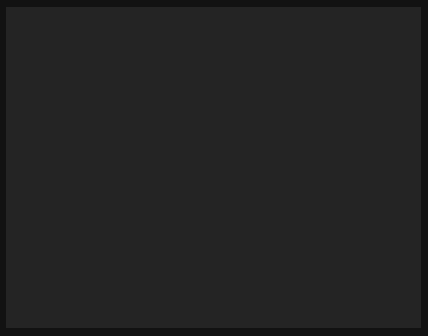

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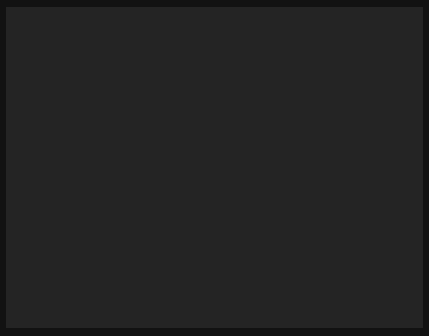

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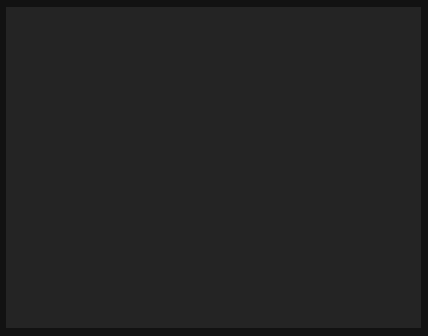

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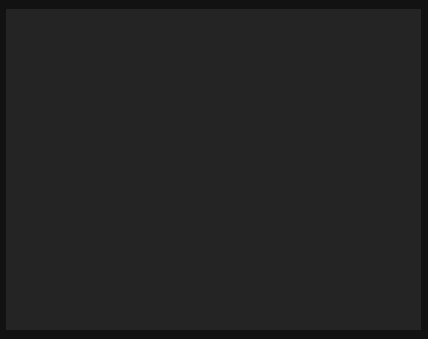

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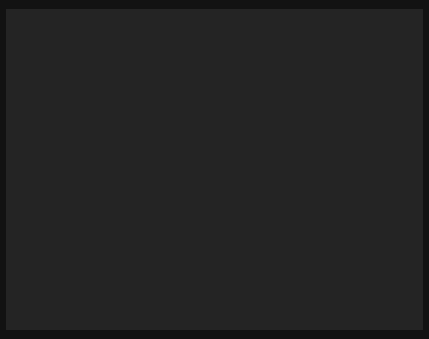

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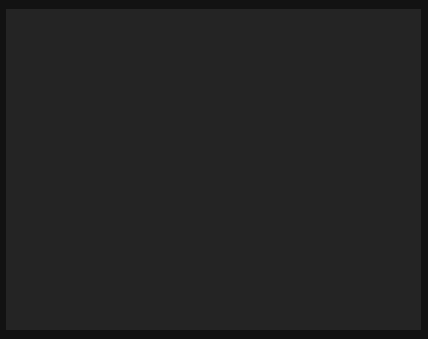

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