
Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite Thought and the Social Justice Discourse in India

Siddhi Nitin Kurkute M.A. Political Science Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Contact No.: 9657954891 Email id.: siddhikurkute267@gmail.com

Abstract

The discourse on social justice in India cannot be understood without engaging with the intellectual and political contributions of Jyotirao Phule, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, and B. R. Ambedkar. Together, they articulated a distinctive tradition that addressed caste-based inequality through social critique, state intervention, and constitutional reform. This paper examines how the Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite tradition shaped the meaning, scope, and practice of social justice in India. Rather than presenting a descriptive account of their ideas, the paper analyses how each thinker conceptualised social injustice, identified appropriate instruments for redress, and contributed to an evolving discourse that linked dignity, equality, and democratic governance. The paper argues that the originality of this tradition lies in its emphasis on substantive social transformation rather than formal equality alone. A separate section highlights the contemporary relevance of this discourse in debates on reservation, representation, and democratic inclusion, thereby demonstrating its continuing significance in Indian political life.

Introduction

Social justice occupies a central place in Indian political thought because Indian society has historically been structured by deep and enduring forms of social inequality. Unlike societies where injustice was primarily linked to economic exploitation or political exclusion, India's experience of injustice was inseparable from caste hierarchy, social stigma, and denial of dignity. Consequently, the idea of justice in the Indian context developed not merely as a legal principle but as a broader project of social transformation.

Within this context, the ideas of **Jyotirao Phule**, **Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj**, and **B. R. Ambedkar** form a coherent and influential tradition in Indian political thought. While separated by time and social position, these thinkers were united by a shared concern for the emancipation of historically oppressed communities and the creation of an egalitarian social order. Their contributions collectively shaped what may be described as the Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite discourse on social justice.

This paper examines how this discourse evolved through their ideas and actions. It argues that Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and Ambedkar did not merely respond to injustice but progressively redefined the meaning of social justice itself—moving from moral critique to institutional reform and finally to constitutional entrenchment. By analysing their thought in a connected manner, the paper highlights the distinctive features and continuing relevance of this tradition.

Key Terms

Social Justice; Caste; Equality; Dignity; Representation; Reservation; Indian Political Thought; Democracy

Objectives

1. To examine the concept of social justice as articulated in Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite thought

2. To analyse the distinct contributions of Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and Ambedkar to social justice discourse
3. To understand how their ideas collectively shaped the Indian approach to equality and inclusion
4. To assess the contemporary relevance of this discourse in Indian democracy

Hypotheses

1. The Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite tradition offers a distinct and coherent understanding of social justice rooted in social transformation.
2. Social justice in this tradition goes beyond legal equality and emphasises dignity, representation, and structural change.
3. Contemporary debates on reservation and inclusion continue to draw implicitly or explicitly from this tradition.

Discussion / Analysis

1. Jyotirao Phule: Social Justice as Moral and Social Emancipation

Jyotirao Phule represents the earliest systematic articulation of social justice in modern Indian political thought. His critique was directed at the ideological foundations of caste inequality, particularly the religious and cultural narratives that legitimised hierarchy. For Phule, injustice was not accidental but structurally embedded in social institutions and belief systems.

Phule’s understanding of social justice was grounded in the principles of equality and rationality. He believed that denial of education was the most effective instrument of oppression and therefore treated education as the primary means of liberation. His emphasis on women’s education and the upliftment of Shudras and Ati-Shudras expanded the scope of justice beyond political reform to include social dignity and self-respect.

What makes Phule’s contribution distinctive is his insistence that social justice requires a transformation of social consciousness. Legal or political reforms, in his view, would remain ineffective unless accompanied by a fundamental challenge to caste-based social values. Thus, Phule located justice not merely in institutions but in the moral reconstruction of society.

2. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj: Social Justice as State Responsibility

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj marks a crucial transition in the social justice discourse—from moral critique to institutional practice. As the ruler of Kolhapur, he operationalised the idea that the state has a positive responsibility to correct social inequalities. His introduction of reservations in education and government employment was a pioneering attempt to translate egalitarian ideals into concrete policy.

Shahu Maharaj viewed political power as a means of social reform rather than as an end in itself. His governance was guided by the belief that social justice could not be achieved through moral persuasion alone and required active state intervention. By promoting education among backward classes and ensuring their representation in administration, he challenged entrenched elite dominance.

Analytically, Shahu Maharaj’s contribution lies in demonstrating that social justice can be institutionalised through public policy. He shifted the discourse from abstract equality to practical inclusion, thereby redefining the role of the state as an agent of social transformation. At the same

time, his experience also revealed the limitations of reform from above, highlighting the need for sustained social support and political commitment.

3. B. R. Ambedkar: Constitutionalising Social Justice

B. R. Ambedkar represents the most comprehensive articulation of social justice in Indian political thought. Unlike earlier reformers, Ambedkar located justice firmly within the framework of constitutional democracy. He argued that political democracy without social and economic democracy would remain hollow and unstable.

Ambedkar's conception of social justice was rooted in the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He insisted that caste discrimination was incompatible with democratic citizenship and therefore required strong legal safeguards. His role in drafting the Indian Constitution ensured that social justice became a constitutional obligation rather than a matter of political discretion.

Ambedkar's emphasis on representation, particularly through reservations, was not merely compensatory but structural. He viewed political and administrative representation as essential for ensuring that marginalised groups could influence decision-making processes. In this sense, Ambedkar transformed social justice into a question of rights, dignity, and democratic participation.

4. The Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite Continuum

While Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and Ambedkar differed in approach and context, their ideas form a continuous and evolving discourse on social justice. Phule laid the intellectual foundation by exposing the moral illegitimacy of caste hierarchy. Shahu Maharaj translated these ideas into state policy, and Ambedkar embedded them within constitutional law.

This continuum highlights an important feature of Indian social justice discourse: its emphasis on substantive equality. Unlike liberal traditions that prioritise formal equality before the law, the Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite tradition recognises that historical injustice requires differentiated remedies. Social justice, in this framework, is not achieved by treating unequals equally but by addressing structural disadvantages.

Contemporary Relevance

The relevance of Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite thought remains evident in contemporary Indian politics. Debates surrounding reservation, representation, and social inclusion continue to reflect the core concerns articulated by this tradition. Persistent inequalities in education, employment, and political participation underscore the unfinished nature of the social justice project.

Moreover, contemporary discussions on dignity, identity, and democratic participation resonate strongly with Ambedkar's emphasis on fraternity and representation. At the same time, criticisms regarding the implementation of reservation policies and issues of intra-group inequality highlight the need to revisit and refine the instruments of social justice rather than abandon them.

From a research perspective, this tradition offers valuable analytical tools for examining how democracy responds to historical injustice. It encourages scholars to evaluate justice not only in economic terms but also in terms of social respect, institutional access, and political voice.

Conclusion

The Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite tradition represents one of the most significant contributions to social justice discourse in Indian political thought. By addressing caste-based inequality through moral critique, institutional reform, and constitutional safeguards, this tradition expanded the meaning of justice beyond formal equality. Its enduring relevance lies in its insistence that democracy must be socially grounded and ethically informed.

This paper has argued that social justice in the Indian context is best understood through this continuum of ideas and practices. While challenges remain in translating these ideals into contemporary policy, the Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite framework continues to provide a critical lens for evaluating equality, representation, and democratic inclusion in India.

Recommendations

1. Greater emphasis on Phule–Shahu–Ambedkarite thought in political science curricula
2. Continuous evaluation of reservation policies to enhance substantive inclusion
3. Strengthening democratic institutions to ensure representation and accountability
4. Encouraging research that links social justice with dignity and democratic participation

References

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1916). *Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development*. New York: Columbia University.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Bombay: Self-published.
3. Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr. Ambedkar and untouchability: Analysing and fighting caste*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
4. Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
5. Phule, J. (1873). *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*. Pune: Self-published.
6. Phule, J. (1885). *Shetkaryacha asud (Cultivator's whipcord)*. Pune: Self-published.
7. Rodrigues, V. (Ed.). (2002). *The essential writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
8. Shahu Maharaj. (1919). *Speeches and writings*. Kolhapur: Kolhapur State Press.
9. Zelliott, E. (2010). *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar movement*. New Delhi: Manohar.
10. Keer, D. (1971). *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and mission*. Bombay, India: Popular Prakashan.