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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Phule's Life and Thought — The Constitutional Project Unfinished

INDIAN EXPRESS

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Phule's Life and Thought — The Constitutional Project Unfinished

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CONTEXT

The **Indian Express** editorial explores the intellectual legacy of **Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890)** — Maharashtra's founding anti-caste thinker — and argues that his project was not merely social reform but a **proto-constitutional vision** of radical equality, universal education, and rational governance that predates and informs India's post-independence Constitution. The editorial makes the case that the constitutional project remains fundamentally **incomplete without serious engagement with Phule's challenge to inherited social hierarchies**.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

1. Phule as a Constitutional Thinker Before the Constitution

The editorial argues that Phule's intellectual project was inherently constitutional in character — he was articulating a theory of **equal citizenship, universal education, and freedom from caste-based exploitation** 75 years before the Constitution was written.

His key works:

- **Gulamgiri (1873)** — compared Brahminical caste domination to American slavery; dedicated to African American abolitionists
- **Shetkaryacha Asud (1883)** — exposed exploitation of agricultural labourers by upper-caste landlords and money-lenders
- **Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak** — a rational theology that rejected caste distinctions in religious practice

Phule's central claim was that caste was not a divinely ordained cosmic order but a **human-made property arrangement** that concentrated land, knowledge, and social authority in Brahmin hands. This economic-materialist reading of caste preceded Ambedkar's by decades.

2. The Constitution's Debt to Phule

The editorial traces specific constitutional provisions to Phule's framework:

- **Article 17** (Abolition of Untouchability) — the most direct constitutional expression of Phule's anti-caste project
- **Article 21A** (Right to Education) — Phule opened the first school for girls (1848, Pune) and later for Shudra children, arguing universal education was the precondition for any democratic society
- **Part III (Fundamental Rights)** broadly — the claim that all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of caste or birth

Ambedkar explicitly named Phule as one of his three intellectual gurus (alongside Kabir and the Buddha).

3. What Remains Unfinished

The editorial argues that the constitutional project in Phule's sense remains unfinished because:

- Caste discrimination in private economic life (land ownership, credit access, marriage markets, private employment) remains largely outside constitutional protection
- The **judiciary's caste composition** remains skewed — over 90% of High Court judges come from upper castes
- **Land ownership patterns** remain caste-concentrated in rural India despite land reforms
- **Inter-caste marriage** remains socially persecuted — honour killings still occur

4. The Contemporary Relevance

The editorial connects Phule's thought to contemporary debates: caste census, sub-categorisation of reservations (Pankaj Pooja judgment, 2024), and the ongoing struggle for dignity of Dalit and OBC communities. It argues these debates are not departures from the Constitution but continuations of the Phule-Ambedkar constitutional project.



PHULE'S KEY CONTRIBUTIONS — TIMELINE

YEAR	EVENT / WORK
1827	Born in Pune (Mali/Shudra caste)
1848	Opened first school for girls in Pune (with wife Savitribai Phule)
1851	Opened school for Shudra and Ati-Shudra children
1873	Founded Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth)
1873	Published Gulamgiri — comparing caste to American slavery
1883	Published Shetkaryacha Asud — peasant exploitation
1888	Received title “Mahatma” from Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar
1890	Death in Pune
1956	Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism — completing the Phule-Ambedkar tradition

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1 — Indian Society & Social Reform

- 19th century social reform movements in Maharashtra
- Anti-caste movements — Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar compared
- Women’s education and social reform linkages

GS Paper 2 — Polity

- Constitutional provisions reflecting social reform — Articles 17, 21A, 46
- Directive Principles on education (Articles 41, 45)

Mains Angle

“Jyotirao Phule’s vision of radical equality and universal education was a proto-constitutional project. To what extent has India’s Constitution fulfilled this vision?” (GS1 + GS2)



FACTS CORNER

ITEM	FACT
Jyotirao Phule	Born 1827, died 1890, Pune (Mali/Shudra caste)
First girls' school	1848, Pune (with Savitribai Phule)
Satyashodhak Samaj	Founded September 24, 1873 (Society of Seekers of Truth)
Gulamgiri	1873 — compared caste to slavery, dedicated to African Americans
Shetkaryacha Asud	1883 — peasant exploitation analysis
Title Mahatma	Conferred 1888
Ambedkar's gurus	Phule, Kabir, the Buddha
Constitutional link	Article 17 (untouchability), Article 21A (education)
Pankaj Pooja case (2024)	SC allowed sub-categorisation of SC/ST reservations
Phule's caste	Mali — classified as Shudra (lower but not untouchable)

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