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Mahatma Jyotirao Phule — 200th Birth Anniversary: Social Reform, Education & Satyashodhak Samaj

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HISTORY & CULTURE**SOCIAL ISSUES**

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WHY IN NEWS

April 11, 2026 marks the **200th birth anniversary** of Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827–1890) — Maharashtra’s pioneering social reformer, educationist, and anti-caste activist. The President and Prime Minister paid tribute, and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment held national commemorative events marking two centuries since his birth.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule stands as one of independent India’s most consequential social thinkers — a figure whose influence on B.R. Ambedkar, and through him the Constitution itself, is direct and traceable. Two hundred years after his birth, the struggles he identified — unequal access to education, caste-based occupational segregation, and the social subordination of women — remain live constitutional concerns.

EARLY LIFE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born on **April 11, 1827**, in Pune, into the Mali (gardener) caste — a Shudra community placed in the social hierarchy well below the upper castes but above those classified as “untouchables.” This liminal position gave him an intimate understanding of the caste system’s internal gradations and its mechanisms of exclusion.

His education at a Scottish Mission School in Pune exposed him to Enlightenment ideas — equality, reason, and human dignity — that he would spend his life applying to Indian social conditions. A key intellectual turning point came after a 1848 incident at a Brahmin friend’s wedding, where Phule was humiliated for sitting in the wrong section. That experience crystallised his lifelong commitment to dismantling caste privilege through education and social organisation.

EDUCATION REFORM — OPENING THE SCHOOLROOM

First Girls' School (1848)

On **January 1, 1848**, Jyotirao and his wife **Savitribai Phule** established India's first school for girls at **Bhide Wada, Pune** — making Savitribai the country's first female teacher. At a time when educating girls from lower castes was considered socially impermissible, this act was both a political statement and a practical intervention. Savitribai faced stone-throwing and verbal abuse while walking to school; she carried extra saris and changed them on arrival.

Schools for Lower Castes and "Untouchables"

By 1852, the Phules had opened **18 schools** across Pune, including schools specifically for "untouchables" — a category entirely excluded from formal education at the time. He later opened his own home's water source to all castes, an act of symbolic significance in a caste-segregated world.

SATYASHODHAK SAMAJ (1873)

On **September 24, 1873**, Phule founded the **Satyashodhak Samaj** (Truth-Seekers' Society) in Pune — a formal organisation dedicated to the liberation of Shudra and Ati-Shudra (untouchable) communities from Brahminical domination.

Core Principles

PRINCIPLE	MEANING
Universal brotherhood	All humans equal before God — no priestly intermediaries needed
Anti-priesthood	Rejected Brahmin monopoly on religious rituals
Widow remarriage	Advocated for the legal and social right of widows to remarry
Critical of idolatry	Opposed purely ritual religion; emphasised ethics and conduct
Social service	Founded orphanages and a home for widows

The Satyashodhak Samaj conducted marriages without Brahmin priests — a radical act that rejected the economic and social power of the priestly class.

LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Gulamgiri (1873)

Phule's most significant work, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), was dedicated to the Black Americans freed by the abolition of slavery after the US Civil War. The dedication was a deliberate statement: Phule drew a direct moral parallel between American chattel slavery and India's caste system.

WORK	YEAR	KEY ARGUMENT
<i>Tritiya Ratna</i> (Three Jewels)	1855	Play exposing Brahmin priestly exploitation of peasants
<i>Gulamgiri</i> (Slavery)	1873	Caste oppression = slavery; dedicated to freed Black Americans
<i>Shetkaryacha Asud</i> (Cultivator's Whipcord)	1883	Condition of peasants and agricultural exploitation
<i>Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak</i>	1891 (posthumous)	Universal ethical religion independent of caste

CONFERRED "MAHATMA" (1888)

On **May 11, 1888**, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar of Bombay conferred the title "**Mahatma**" (Great Soul) on Jyotirao Phule — making him, chronologically, the first Indian public figure to receive this honorific. Mohandas Gandhi would receive the same title from Rabindranath Tagore in 1915, over 25 years later.

INFLUENCE ON B.R. AMBEDKAR AND THE CONSTITUTION

Phule is acknowledged by B.R. Ambedkar as one of his three principal intellectual mentors — alongside Kabir and the Buddha. The constitutional provisions most directly traceable to Phule's work include:

- **Article 17** — Abolition of untouchability
- **Article 21A** — Right to free and compulsory elementary education
- **Articles 15, 16, 46** — Prohibition of discrimination; protection of weaker sections
- **Part IV (DPSP)** — Provisions for free legal aid and promotion of educational/economic interests of SCs and STs

UPSC RELEVANCE

DIMENSION	DETAIL
GS1 — History	19th-century social reform movements; comparison with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Bengal) and Narayana Guru (Kerala)
GS1 — Society	Caste, education access, women’s rights
GS2 — Governance	Constitutional provisions against caste discrimination; NEP 2020 and inclusion
GS4 — Ethics	Equality, justice, social courage; ethical dimensions of systemic change
Interview	“How did Phule’s reform differ from Brahmo Samaj’s approach?”

*Born April 11, 1827 — Died November 28, 1890 (Pune) | Wife: Savitribai Phule — India’s first female teacher | First girls’ school: **January 1, 1848, Bhide Wada, Pune** | Satyashodhak Samaj: founded **September 24, 1873** | Gulamgiri: 1873 — dedicated to freed Black Americans | Title “Mahatma”: **May 11, 1888** by Vithalrao Vandekar | 18 schools opened by 1852 | Intellectual mentor to B.R. Ambedkar | GS1: History, Art & Culture; GS4: Ethics*

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