



Original Article

Recalling Jyotirao Phule: Theorizing Slavery and Empowerment in the Contours of Viksit Bharat and Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakum

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Abstract

This paper utilises the lens of critical theory to analyse Jyotirao Phule's empathetic analysis of slavery, empowerment and a fraternal view of international relations. He theorises the causative factors of slavery, explains the processes and impacts as well as the remedial measures to escape the system. His idea of slavery intertwines multidisciplinary approaches, explaining the essence of slavery i.e. the enslavement of the mind. In an effort to examine the institutions of slavery, Jyotirao Phule uses a historical and scientific approach to forge a unity of the vulnerable against the hegemonic elite claiming their superiority based on race, caste, religion etc. Jyotirao equates the Negro slavery with the Shudra slavery, lending a helping hand in realigning the aim of foreign policy towards a more subaltern, inclusive and social justice paradigm. The paper is divided into three sections: 1. Jyotirao's analysis of slavery, 2. Theoretical study of slavery in a global perspective and 3. Reflecting the empowerment of the enslaved. The paper, based on the primary data and secondary authoritative research, progresses to develop theories on global relations in the context of India's 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakum'. It concludes with the relevance of Jyotirao Phule in contemporary times. His thoughts on social and political philosophy provide a glimpse of political realism in the direction of Platonic idealism, promoting social justice and equality among humankind.

Keywords: Jyotirao Phule, Slavery, Viksit Bharat, global affairs, international relations, empowerment, social justice

Introduction

The institution of slavery has profoundly shaped global social structures, perpetuating hierarchies that resonate in modern systems of oppression, such as South Africa's apartheid. The theoretical frameworks underpinning slavery—philosophical, legal, and cultural—provide critical insights into systemic inequality across time and geography. In ancient Greece and Rome, slavery was justified as a natural order, enabling economic and civic prosperity. In ancient India, slavery, intertwined with caste, was legitimized through religious and social doctrines. These historical systems parallel modern forms of institutionalized discrimination, like apartheid, which enforced racial segregation and exploitation. Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) offers a revolutionary lens, framing caste as a form of slavery rooted in Aryan conquest and drawing global parallels with African slavery and apartheid. Through Socratic questioning, dialectical reasoning, and teleological analysis, Phule's work critiques Indian caste oppression and contributes to global liberation discourses. This paper explores the justifications for slavery in Greco-Roman and Indian contexts, analyzes Phule's theoretical contributions, and situates his insights within global systems of oppression, emphasizing their relevance to modern visions of inclusive development and global unity.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative historical and textual analysis, drawing on primary sources from Greco-Roman and Indian contexts, including Aristotle's *Politics*, the *Digest of Justinian*, the *Rigveda*, *Manusmriti*, and Phule's *Gulamgiri*. Secondary sources, such as Chanana (1960), Chakravarti (1985), Kosambi (1956), Thapar (2008), and Sharma (1999), provide interpretive frameworks. Qualitative analysis explores the philosophical, legal, and cultural justifications for slavery, with parallels to modern systems like apartheid.

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Phule's work is examined through his Socratic, dialectical, and teleological methods, as outlined by Patil (1991). Interdisciplinary perspectives, including Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial lenses, contextualize the mechanisms of enslavement and resistance, highlighting their global significance.

Slavery in Greco-Roman Societies

In ancient Greece, slavery underpinned the economy, freeing citizens for philosophy and democracy. Aristotle's *Politics* defended "natural slavery," arguing that non-Greeks or "barbarians" lacked rational capacity, making them suited for servitude (Aristotle, trans. 1995). He stated, "Some are born for subjection, others for rule," framing slavery as mutually beneficial. This ideology, rooted in cultural superiority, justified enslaving war captives, as noted by Thucydides (1972). Slaves powered industries like Athens' Laurion mines, and Plato, while critical of cruelty, accepted slavery's role in an ideal state (Republic, trans. 2000). In Rome, slavery fuelled agricultural estates (latifundia) and urban trades. The Digest of Justinian classified slaves as property (*res mancipi*), justifying absolute control (Justinian, trans. 1985). Cato the Elder's *De Agricultura* treated slaves as profit-making tools, advocating strict management (Cato, trans. 1934). Stoics like Seneca urged humane treatment but upheld slavery as part of the natural order (Seneca, trans. 1969). Cicero glorified enslavement through conquest as a merciful alternative to death (Cicero, trans. 1991). Roman slavery's opportunistic nature, affecting diverse groups, muted moral objections, with manumission portrayed as a moral virtue.

Slavery in Ancient India

In ancient India, slavery manifested as debt bondage, war captivity, and servile labor tied to caste, differing from Greco-Roman chattel slavery. Texts like the Rigveda, Arthashastra, and Manusmriti describe subjugated groups as *dāsa* or *karmakara* (Chanana, 1960). The Manusmriti codified slaves as property, justified through birth, debt, or capture, aligning with the varna system (Davis, 2010). Basham (1954) notes its non-racial, kinship-based nature, with temple slavery framed as devotion. Kautilya's Arthashastra regulated slavery for economic utility (Levi, 2002). Chakravarti (1985) links Vedic servitude to Aryan conquests, with *dāsa* representing subjugated non-Aryans. Kosambi (1956) views slavery as a transitional economic mode, while Chatterjee (2006) highlights gendered exploitation in temple servitude. Srivastava (2024) emphasizes systemic oppression, and Gopal (1965) attributes its decline to caste absorption.

Jyotirao Phule's Theory of Slavery

Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) frames caste-based slavery as a product of Aryan colonialism, drawing parallels with African slavery and apartheid. Phule argues that Aryan Brahmins, originating from Iran, subjugated India's indigenous inhabitants through violence and religious manipulation (Phule, 1873). Quoting Homer, he states, "The day a man becomes a slave, half his virtue is lost," highlighting dehumanization (Phule, 1873). Using Socratic elenchus, Phule questions myths like the Purush Sukta, asking, "From which limb of Brahma was the mother of Brahmins created?" to expose their absurdity (Phule, 1873). His dialectical method juxtaposes Brahmanical claims against his thesis of caste as a tool of conquest, synthesizing equality. Phule's teleological analysis critiques Brahmanical institutions like the Manusmriti as fabricated to perpetuate Shudra subjugation. Phule identifies three stages of enslavement: physical invasion, mental colonization via hegemonic structures, and acculturation through traditions. The Manusmriti declares Brahmins as "lords of the universe," denying Shudras education and wealth (Olivelle, 2005). Phule's psychological insight highlights cognitive biases, like confirmation bias, where Shudras attribute poverty to karma, reinforced by Brahmin priests.

Slavery Thesis and Viksit Bharat

The recognition of Phule's slavery thesis is pivotal for realizing a Viksit Bharat (Developed India) and the ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family). Phule's critique of caste as a form of slavery exposes the historical roots of social division, urging India to dismantle systemic inequalities for inclusive development. A Viksit Bharat envisions prosperity for all, but caste-based exclusion, akin to apartheid's racial segregation, hinders this goal. Phule's emphasis on education as liberation aligns with India's modern aspirations for universal literacy and empowerment, breaking the chains of ignorance that sustain oppression. His global perspective, linking Shudra subjugation to African slavery, resonates with Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, advocating universal dignity and solidarity. By addressing caste as a historical and ongoing form of slavery, India can foster a society where all communities contribute to national progress, reflecting the interconnectedness of humanity. Phule's call for intellectual awakening inspires policies that promote equity, ensuring that Viksit Bharat embodies the inclusive spirit of a global family, free from the legacies of hierarchical oppression.

Mechanisms of Enslavement and Global Parallels

Phule's analysis reveals how Brahmanical institutions—religion, caste, and language—sustained slavery, paralleling apartheid's legal and cultural oppression. Sanskrit's exclusivity marginalized Shudras, akin to apartheid's restriction of Black education (Kaushalya, 2015). The Manusmriti's codes, critiqued by Ambedkar (1936), enforced graded inequality, similar to apartheid's pass laws. Ambedkar's burning of the Manusmriti in 1927 rejected its authority, echoing anti-apartheid defiance (Ambedkar, 1936). Spatial segregation, as per Hennayake (2017), isolated Dalit settlements, like apartheid's townships. Economic dependency, as Ramaiah (2004) notes, locked Shudras into servile roles, akin to Black labor exploitation. Food practices, as Patole (2020) discusses, reflected caste oppression, paralleling dietary stigmatization in racialized systems. Dalit vernaculars became sites of resistance, similar to indigenous languages in anti-apartheid struggles (Kaushalya, 2015).

Resistance and Liberation

Phule's call for Shudras to reject Brahmanical narratives through education parallels anti-apartheid education movements. His celebration of English as a "foster mother" underscores its emancipatory potential (Phule, 1873). By destabilizing

Sanskrit's legitimacy, Phule empowers vernaculars, aligning with Ilaiah's (1996) advocacy for a Dalit-Bahujan identity, offering lessons for global liberation.

Conclusion

Slavery in Greco-Roman and Indian societies was justified through philosophical, legal, and cultural frameworks, embedding inequality. In Greece and Rome, slavery supported economic and civic systems, rationalized as natural. In India, caste-based slavery, legitimized by the Manusmriti, subjugated Shudras. Phule's Gulamgiri frames caste as slavery, with parallels to apartheid, using Socratic and dialectical methods to advocate liberation. His thesis informs Viksit Bharat and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, promoting inclusive development and global unity. This paper highlights the universal mechanisms of oppression and Phule's relevance in combating systemic inequality. Future research should explore how these insights inform contemporary struggles against oppression worldwide.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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