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Q11

Mahatma Jotirao Phule's writings and efforts of social reforms touched issues of almost all subaltern classes. Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · GS I · 15 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Place **Phule** in nineteenth-century Maharashtra
- Show how his writing and work reached women, Dalits, peasants and the labouring poor - the subaltern field
- Do not reduce him to a single community reformer

Revision summary

Phule wrote *Gulamgiri* and *Shetkaryacha Asud* to name caste as slavery and to defend the peasant.

With Savitribai he opened schools for girls and for Mahar and Mang children in Pune.

The Satyashodhak Samaj (1873) sought ritual and marriage without priestly monopoly.

Women, Dalits and cultivators were treated as one excluded order, which is why "almost all subaltern classes" is a fair phrase.

His world was Deccan and agrarian; mill labour would be a later chapter.

Introduction

Jotirao **Phule** (1827-1890) wrote and organised in colonial Maharashtra when caste was both a **social prison** and a **land-and-labour order**. **Subaltern here means those who were not invited to write the official story: women, Dalits, peasants, artisans.** **Phule's** pages and schools were aimed at almost that whole field, not at a single polite reform of the upper caste home.

Body**Writing that named the structure**

In *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) **Phule** compared caste to American slavery and attacked the **Brahmanical** claim to knowledge. *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The cultivator's whipcord) turned to the **peasant** crushed by moneylender, official and priest. He used the **Bali** legend to give the labouring majority a history in which they were not born to serve. That is writing as **social theory from below**. He and **Savitribai Phule** also wrote for girls' schooling when female literacy was treated as a scandal.

Work that was not only a book

In 1848 they opened a **school for girls** in Pune. They opened schools for **Mahar and Mang** children. The **Satyashodhak Samaj (1873)** asked for **truth-seeking without a priestly middleman: cheaper marriage, no ruinous ritual, a language the peasant could hear**. **Phule** supported **widow** dignity and argued against infanticide. He saw **British rule** as a possible lever against local tyranny, which later nationalists found uncomfortable, but his test was always **who ate and who read**.

Almost all subaltern classes

Women, Dalits, peasants, and the urban poor of the Deccan were not separate files in his head. A girl kept from school, a Mahar kept from the well, and a kunbi kept from the crop surplus were **one order of exclusion**. **That is why the question's "almost all" is fair**. **Limits exist: industrial labour in Bombay mills would become a later socialist subject; Phule's world is still agrarian and small-town**. He did not write a complete theory of class in **Marx's** sense. He did write the first sustained modern Marathi case that **caste and gender and the field** belong in one reform.

The discussion is complete only if Savitribai is not a footnote. The school gate was their joint politics.

Flow diagram

Jotirao and Savitribai Phule -> Girls schools
Jotirao and Savitribai Phule -> Dalit education
Jotirao and Savitribai Phule -> Peasant Gulamgiri Asud
Jotirao and Savitribai Phule -> Satyashodhak Samaj
Girls schools -> Subaltern field
Dalit education -> Subaltern field
Peasant Gulamgiri Asud -> Subaltern field

Conclusion

Phule's books attacked priestly slavery and the peasant's whip. His schools and the Satyashodhak Samaj reached girls, Dalits and cultivators together. That is a subaltern reform of almost the whole excluded field of his Maharashtra, not a single-caste charity.

Facts & figures

Satyashodhak Samaj, 1873

Truth-seekers' society founded by **Phule** for social and religious equality without Brahmin mediation.

Gulamgiri, 1873

Phule's book comparing caste hierarchy to slavery and dedicating the argument to American abolition.

Savitribai Phule

Co-worker and first generation of modern Indian women teachers in their Pune schools.

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