

Women, Labor, and Caste in the Poetry of Jyotirao Phule in Nineteenth-Century India

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Abstract

This paper examines Jyotirao Phule's poetry as a significant site for understanding the intertwined structures of caste, gender, and labor in nineteenth-century India. Focusing primarily on Kulambin (A Peasant Woman) and the Akhands contained in Sarvajanik Satya Dharma (The Universal Religion of Truth), the study argues that Phule's poetic writings constitute a radical critique of Brahmanical social order and an early articulation of themes that later emerged in anti-caste theory, Dalit feminism, and intersectional scholarship. Drawing upon the works of Rosalind O'Hanlon, Gail Omvedt, Uma Chakravarti, Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Gopal Guru, and B. R. Ambedkar, the paper argues that Phule transformed poetry into a medium of social mobilization and democratized knowledge by creating a counter-public for Shudras, Atishudras, women, and laboring communities.

Keywords: Jyotirao Phule, Kulambin, Dalit Feminism, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Women's Labor, Anti-Caste Thought.

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Introduction

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890) occupies a foundational position in the intellectual history of modern India. Gail Omvedt argues that Phule should be understood not as a moderate reformer but as an architect of social revolution whose ideas challenged the very foundations of Brahmanical power and caste hierarchy (Omvedt 1976, 98-100). Similarly, Rosalind O'Hanlon contends that Phule developed a coherent ideological critique of religion, history, labor, and social authority that transcended immediate political grievances and sought to construct an alternative worldview for oppressed communities (O'Hanlon 1985, 17-25). Rather than merely demanding reforms within the existing social order, Phule sought to transform the cultural and intellectual foundations upon which that order rested. The expansion of colonial administration, missionary education, and print culture generated new possibilities for social critique, yet caste hierarchy remained deeply embedded within social relations. Shudras and Atishudras continued to occupy subordinate positions within agrarian society, while women experienced varying forms of subordination mediated by caste, class, and patriarchal structures. Phule emerged as one of the first Indian intellectuals to identify caste as a system of historical domination rather than a natural or divinely ordained social arrangement. The intellectual influence of Phule upon later anti-caste traditions is perhaps most clearly reflected in B. R. Ambedkar's dedication of *Who Were the Shudras?* to "Mahatma Jotiba Phule, the Greatest Shudra of Modern India". This dedication was not merely symbolic. Ambedkar's later analyses of caste, graded inequality, and Brahmanical domination built upon intellectual foundations that Phule had established decades earlier. Anupama Rao identifies Phule as one of the earliest theorists of caste radicalism who transformed caste from a question of ritual hierarchy into a question of political domination, labor exploitation, and social exclusion (Rao 2009, 28-31).

Despite extensive scholarship on Phule, academic attention has concentrated overwhelmingly on his prose works, particularly *Gulamgiri* (1873) and *Shetkaryacha Asud* (1881). His poetry has received comparatively limited scholarly engagement. Unlike elite literary traditions that addressed educated audiences, Phule's poems employed vernacular language, familiar imagery, and accessible forms of expression to communicate radical ideas to ordinary people. Sharmila Rege argues that the Satyashodhak tradition created alternative counter-publics through which marginalized communities could participate in intellectual and political life (Rege 2006, 7-8; 36-39). Phule's poetry must therefore be understood not merely as literary production but as a strategy of democratizing knowledge. Among his poetic works, *Kulambin (A Peasant Woman)* occupies a particularly important position. The poem provides a detailed portrayal of the everyday life of a lower-caste agricultural woman

whose labor sustains both household and agrarian production. Through vivid descriptions of grinding grain, carrying water, collecting dung, cultivating fields, harvesting crops, and caring for children, Phule constructs a portrait of labor that directly challenges dominant social values. The peasant woman is neither romanticized nor portrayed as a passive victim. Instead, she emerges as the productive foundation of rural society. Yet despite her indispensable contribution, she remains socially devalued within a caste order that privileges ritual status over productive labor. This contradiction between labor and status lies at the heart of Phule's social criticism. As O'Hanlon observes, Phule consistently opposed a social system in which ritual authority enjoyed prestige while those engaged in productive labor remained socially degraded (O'Hanlon 1985, 209-214). Similarly, Omvedt argues that labor occupied a central place within Phule's alternative moral vision because social value derived from productive contribution rather than inherited status (Omvedt 1976, 110-114). Indeed, one of the central arguments of this article is that *Kulambin* anticipates key insights of contemporary Dalit feminist theory. Rege identifies Phule's project as one of the most significant nineteenth-century critiques of both caste and gender hierarchy, emphasizing that his concern for women cannot be separated from his critique of Brahmanical domination (Rege 2006, 35-36). Rather than treating women as a homogeneous category, Phule highlights the specific experiences of lower-caste women whose lives are shaped simultaneously by economic exploitation, caste subordination, and patriarchal expectations. The peasant woman in *Kulambin* occupies precisely such a position.

Historiography and Literature Review

The historiography of Jyotirao Phule has gone through a significant transformation over the past few decades. Early nationalists generally portrayed him as a social reformer concerned with women's education, widow remarriage, and the eradication of social evils. While these interpretations acknowledged his contributions to reform, they often minimized the radical implications of his critique of caste hierarchy. Subsequent scholarship challenged this limited characterization and repositioned Phule as one of the most important anti-caste intellectuals in modern South Asia. Some scholars have argued that Phule was primarily an anti-caste thinker whose engagement with women's issues remained secondary. Others maintain that his critique of caste necessarily involved a critique of patriarchy because Brahmanical domination operated through the subordination of women as well as lower castes. Rege strongly supports the latter position, demonstrating that Phule's analysis consistently linked caste hierarchy to gender oppression (Rege 2006, 35-36).

The most influential revision of Phule scholarship emerged through the work of Rosalind O'Hanlon. In *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, O'Hanlon argued that Phule developed a rational ideological project that generated alternative understandings of history, religion, labor, and social authority (O'Hanlon 1985, 17-25). According to O'Hanlon, Phule viewed Brahmanism not merely as a religious tradition but as an ideological system that legitimized social domination and produced what she describes as a form of "false consciousness" among subordinate castes (O'Hanlon 1985, 123-124). A different but equally influential interpretation was developed by Gail Omvedt. In her landmark study *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, she argued that the Satyashodhak movement represented a "cultural revolt" against the ideological foundations of caste society rather than a narrow reform movement (Omvedt 1976, 1-3). Gail Omvedt argued that Jotirao Phule's true genius wasn't just in fighting oppression but in building a coherent political ideology that united peasants, workers, Shudras, and Atishudras under the broader category of *Bahujan Samaj* (Omvedt 1976, 4-5). Omvedt argues that Phule's writings consistently elevated productive labor above ritual status and sought to establish a moral order in which social worth derived from contribution rather than birth (Omvedt 1976, 110-114). Such an interpretation is particularly relevant for understanding *Kulambin*, where the laboring woman emerges as the embodiment of productive social life. The emergence of Dalit studies further transformed interpretations of Phule. Anupama Rao argues that rather than treating caste as a religious or ritual category, Phule reconceptualized it as a system of political domination, economic exploitation, and social exclusion (Rao 2009, 28-31). Rao's contribution is particularly important because she links anti-caste thought to processes of political subject formation. According to her, caste radicalism enabled subordinated groups to reinterpret their experiences of humiliation and exclusion as forms of collective oppression rather than individual misfortune (Rao 2009, 11-15).

A major development in recent scholarship has been the incorporation of feminist and Dalit feminist perspectives into the study of Phule. Feminist historians challenged this tendency by demonstrating that caste itself is deeply gendered. Uma Chakravarti argues that caste hierarchy survives through the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, labor, and reproductive capacities (Chakravarti 2018). By regulating who women can marry or associate with, the dominant social order ensures that power, property, and caste status are neatly passed down without disruption. Caste and patriarchy cannot be analyzed as separate systems. Rather, gender constitutes one of the foundational mechanisms through which caste operates (Chakravarti 2018). Sharmila Rege critiques both mainstream feminism and conventional sociology. Rege argues that caste has often been marginalized within feminist scholarship, while gender has frequently been ignored in studies of caste (Rege 2006, 1-4). According to her, Phule's struggle for the liberation of Shudras, Atishudras, and women constituted a unified political

project rather than separate reform agendas (Rege 2006, 35). She further argues that *Kulambin* explicitly contrasts the labor of the peasant woman with the leisure and privilege associated with Brahmin womanhood, thereby exposing the caste dimensions of gender relations (Rege 2006, 35). In *Against the Madness of Manu*, Rege argues that caste and violence against women are inseparable because caste reproduces itself through endogamy and the regulation of female sexuality (Rege 2013, 62). It suggests that women's oppression is structurally necessary for the reproduction of caste itself. Rege further emphasizes that many historical and Marxist interpretations either ignored caste altogether or reduced it to class relations while remaining largely gender-blind (Rege 2013, 72-73). Such critiques are particularly relevant for understanding *Kulambin*. The poem does not present labor, caste, and gender as separate spheres. Rather, it depicts them as interconnected structures that shape the lived experiences of lower-caste women. Ambedkar also challenged explanations that viewed caste as natural, racial, or divinely ordained. Instead, he argued that caste emerged through historical processes and was maintained through institutional mechanisms such as endogamy and the denial of educational rights (Ambedkar 1946, iv-v; 29-45). These arguments align strongly with Phule's critique of Brahmanical domination and his insistence that social inequality was historically produced rather than naturally given. Another major contribution of Ambedkar's scholarship concerns the relationship between labor and status. He demonstrates that Brahmanical law associated productive labor with lower social rank while reserving ritual authority and educational privileges for upper castes (Ambedkar 1946, 39-42). This context is essential for understanding why Phule celebrates the labor of the peasant woman. His representation of agricultural work constitutes a direct challenge to an ideological system that devalued productive activity and elevated ritual status.

The historiography of Phule therefore reveals several important shifts. Early scholarship emphasized social reform and education. Later studies highlighted ideology, anti-caste politics, peasant mobilization, and cultural revolt. More recent feminist and Dalit feminist scholarship have demonstrated that caste cannot be understood independently of gender and labor. Together, these approaches provide the intellectual foundation for a new reading of *Kulambin* as a text that simultaneously critiques caste hierarchy, patriarchal domination, and the devaluation of productive labor.

Reading the Text: Method and Perspective

This study adopts a qualitative methodology; the primary sources consist of Phule's poem *Kulambin* (*A Peasant Woman*) and selected *Akhands* from *Sarvajanic Satya Dharma* (*The Universal Religion*

of Truth). These texts are analyzed not merely as literary compositions but as political interventions within the social and intellectual context of nineteenth-century colonial India.

1. Anti-Caste Theory: Anti-caste theory views caste not as a cultural identity but as a structure of power governing access to labor, knowledge, status, and resources. Ambedkar argued that Brahmanical ideology transformed historically contingent social divisions into sacred and permanent hierarchies through texts such as the *Purusha Sukta* (Ambedkar 1946, 15-16). By presenting inequality as divinely ordained, caste society naturalized domination and obscured its historical origins. This framework allows us to interpret *Kulambin* as a critique of the ideological foundations of caste rather than merely its social consequences.

2. Brahmanical Patriarchy: According to Uma Chakravarti, caste hierarchy depends upon the regulation of women's sexuality, labor, and reproduction. Endogamy functions as the principal mechanism through which caste reproduces itself across generations (Chakravarti 2018). This is particularly useful because it explains why caste and gender cannot be separated analytically. The peasant woman depicted in *Kulambin* occupies a position shaped simultaneously by labor exploitation, caste subordination, and patriarchal expectations.

3. Dalit Feminist Theory: It derives from the work of Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru. Rege argues that lower-caste women occupy a distinct social location that remains invisible within both mainstream feminism and traditional caste studies (Rege 2006, 3-6). Similarly, Guru emphasizes that Dalit women generate forms of knowledge rooted in experiences of caste and gender oppression that are often excluded from dominant intellectual traditions (Guru 1995). This enables a reading of *Kulambin* that focuses on the specific experiences of a lower-caste laboring woman rather than treating her as a representative of women in general.

4. Graded Inequality: Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality reminds us that caste society is not organized through a simple opposition between oppressor and oppressed. Instead, it consists of layered hierarchies in which power and privilege are distributed unevenly (Ambedkar 1946, 8, 16).

Taken together, these allow *Kulambin* to be interpreted not merely as a poem about rural life but as a critique of caste, labor, gender, and social power.

Phule and Vernacular Radicalism

In nineteenth-century India, access to learning remained highly restricted. Brahmins exercised disproportionate influence over education, religious interpretation, and cultural production, while Shudras, Atishudras, and women were systematically excluded from formal knowledge systems. Phule recognized that political emancipation required not only economic reform but also the transformation of the structures through which knowledge was produced and circulated. Rosalind O'Hanlon notes that education occupied a central place in Phule's emancipatory vision because he believed oppressed communities required the intellectual capacity to distinguish between right and wrong and critically evaluate social relations (O'Hanlon 1985, 120-121). Phule's literary writings, including *Kulambin*, should be understood as part of his larger effort to educate and politically empower oppressed communities. Sharmila Rege argues that the Satyashodhak movement created alternative public spheres through which marginalized communities could challenge Brahmanical authority and participate in intellectual life (Rege 2006, 7-8; 36-39). Unlike elite literary culture, which addressed educated upper-caste audiences, Phule's writings spoke directly to cultivators, artisans, laborers, women, and lower-caste communities. Phule employed vernacular language and popular literary forms to communicate complex social and political ideas. Unlike elite Marathi literary traditions that primarily addressed educated readers, *Kulambin* employs everyday vocabulary, familiar rural imagery, and recognizable labor practices. The poem therefore democratizes literary representation itself. Grinding grain, collecting dung, carrying water, and cultivating fields become worthy subjects of poetry. By elevating ordinary agricultural activity into literary discourse, Phule challenges dominant assumptions regarding who deserves cultural visibility. Such a strategy expands the social boundaries of literature and contributes to the creation of what Rege identifies as an anti-caste counter-public. Omvedt characterizes this process as a cultural revolt directed against the ideological foundations of caste society (Omvedt 1976, 1-3). Through poetry, songs, speeches, and pamphlets, Phule sought to cultivate critical consciousness among those who had historically been denied intellectual agency. Literature became a form of political mobilization. Anupama Rao argues that caste radicalism involved the production of alternative histories and forms of political subjectivity that enabled subordinated groups to reinterpret their social position (Rao 2009, 28-31). *Kulambin* contributes to this process by presenting the peasant woman as a central actor rather than a marginal figure. The poem therefore participates in the construction of a counter-public in which lower-caste experiences become sources of knowledge and political insight.

Women, Labor, and Productive Knowledge in *Kulambin*

The most striking feature of *Kulambin* is its sustained attention to labor. Unlike dominant literary traditions that celebrated kings, saints, warriors, or divine figures, Phule places an agricultural woman at the center of poetic representation. The opening stanzas of *Kulambin* provide a remarkably detailed account of women's labor. Phule describes the peasant woman grinding grain before sunrise, cleaning the cowshed, carrying baskets of dung, preparing bread and curry, and then proceeding to the fields where she works alongside other laborers. Even after a full day of agricultural work, she returns home to continue domestic responsibilities. Such descriptions reveal that productive and reproductive labor are inseparable in the lives of lower-caste women. Phule opens *Kulambin* with a vivid image of rural labor:

"The Shudra's wife has to sit at the grinding stones at the first cock-crow. Her husband is awakened by the sound of the rural ditties she sings while grinding the corn." (Phule 1991, 76)

The image of the grinding stone carries symbolic significance; it represents repetitive and often invisible labor that sustains everyday life. The grinding stone appears before any reference to family, husband, religion, or caste, suggesting that labor rather than ritual identity constitutes the foundation of social existence. By beginning the poem with this image, Phule inverts Brahmanical value systems that privilege scriptural knowledge over productive work. This opening is significant because the peasant woman is introduced through labor rather than through conventional patriarchal categories such as beauty, motherhood, or domestic virtue. Before the rest of the household awakens, she is already engaged in productive activity. The grinding stone becomes a symbol of the hidden labor upon which agrarian society rests. Phule thereby challenges elite literary traditions that centered kings, warriors, or religious figures while ignoring laboring women. Omvedt argues that Phule consistently privileged productive labor over ritual status. The woman's labor literally awakens the household, suggesting that social life itself depends upon her work. Yet the absence of recognition for this contribution reveals what later feminist scholars would identify as the invisibility of reproductive labor. The peasant woman rises before dawn, grinds grain, prepares food, cleans animal sheds, collects manure, carries water, cultivates fields, removes weeds, harvests crops, and cares for children. Her labor extends across both domestic and agricultural spheres. Every aspect of household and rural

production depends upon her work. Immediately after describing her labor, Phule writes:

“Though she does not lack in any virtues, the cunning Brahmin calls her by the contemptuous name of ‘a peasant woman’, says Joti.” (Phule 1991, 76)

This refrain appears repeatedly throughout the poem and constitutes one of its central political arguments. The woman possesses virtues, skill, discipline, and social usefulness, yet Brahmanical society reduces her identity to a derogatory caste label. Ambedkar’s concept of graded inequality helps explain this contradiction. In caste society, social worth is not determined by contribution but by ritual rank. Consequently, those who produce food and sustain economic life occupy inferior social positions while those associated with ritual authority enjoy prestige. O’Hanlon argues that Phule regarded Brahmanism as an ideological system that naturalized such inequalities. The phrase “cunning Brahmin” is therefore crucial. It implies that caste domination is maintained through cultural and ideological processes rather than through physical force alone. The peasant woman’s degradation is socially manufactured. Phule repeatedly emphasizes the physical intensity of this labor. The woman carries water, prepares cow-dung cakes under the scorching sun, transports fuel on her head while balancing a child on her back, and participates directly in sowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing operations. Far from portraying her as weak or dependent, the poem constructs her as the principal productive force of rural society. Phule further observes:

“She cooks curry in a pot... puts the pieces of bread and the pot of curry in a basket, puts the basket on her head and proceeds to the farm. She works on the farm along with all others.” (Phule 1991, 76–77)

The verse collapses the distinction between domestic and agricultural labor. Before entering the fields, the woman has already prepared food for the household. Yet her responsibilities do not end within the home. She also participates in agricultural production alongside men. Contemporary feminist theory describes such conditions as a “double burden,” whereby women perform both reproductive and productive labor. What is remarkable is that Phule recognized this reality in the nineteenth century. The woman’s labor sustains the family biologically while also contributing directly to economic production. Uma Chakravarti’s concept of Brahmanical patriarchy is particularly relevant here because it demonstrates how caste society allocates labor through gendered hierarchies. The verse reveals that the lower-caste woman is simultaneously worker, caregiver, producer, and household manager.

At one level, the poem functions as a detailed record of agrarian life. By documenting the numerous tasks performed by the peasant woman, Phule exposes the extent to which women's labor remains socially invisible despite its indispensability. Phule writes:

"She does not comb her hair and her body is sticky with perspiration. She hates all finery and finicking. She has to make do with one rough sari, and is quite content with porridge and buttermilk." (Phule 1991, 77)

Perspiration functions as a recurring metaphor of productive citizenship in the poem. In dominant upper-caste discourse, bodily labor often signified social inferiority. Phule reverses this symbolism by presenting sweat as evidence of social contribution. The laboring body becomes morally superior to the idle body. Through this inversion, the poem constructs an alternative ethical order in which dignity derives from productive effort rather than ritual purity. This passage directly challenges upper-caste ideals of femininity. Rather than celebrating ornamentation or domestic refinement, Phule valorizes labor and simplicity. Perspiration becomes a marker of dignity rather than shame. Omvedt's interpretation of Phule is particularly useful here because she argues that his writings sought to establish an alternative moral economy in which productive contribution rather than inherited privilege became the basis of social respect. The woman's lack of adornment does not signify inferiority. Instead, it reflects her commitment to productive work. Rege observes that Phule recognized the material consequences of Brahmanical patriarchy for lower-caste women and highlighted their labor both inside and outside the household (Rege 2006, 35). This insight is crucial because it distinguishes *Kulambin* from contemporary reformist discourses that often portrayed women primarily as wives, mothers, or moral guardians.

The poem also challenges conventional distinctions between productive and reproductive labor. Modern economic discourse frequently separates domestic activities from economic production. In *Kulambin*, the same woman who prepares meals, raises children, and maintains the household also participates directly in agricultural production. Her labor sustains both family life and the rural economy. Uma Chakravarti's analysis of caste and labor helps illuminate this aspect of the poem. Chakravarti argues that caste society depends upon the labor of subordinated groups while simultaneously denying them dignity and recognition (Chakravarti 2018). One of the most powerful images in the poem depicts the woman carrying heavy loads while simultaneously caring for children. Such scenes reveal what contemporary feminist scholars describe as the "double burden" of labor. Yet Phule goes

beyond simply documenting hardship. He portrays the woman as skilled, resilient, and indispensable. Her labor becomes a source of dignity rather than shame.

Women's Labor and the Politics of Knowledge

One of the most original dimensions of Phule's thought concerns the relationship between labor and knowledge. Modern scholarship often treats labor as an economic category. Phule, however, understands labor as a way of knowing society and exposing its structures of domination. O'Hanlon notes that Phule consistently contrasted productive labor with ritual privilege (O'Hanlon 1985, 209-214). For him, cultivators, artisans, masons, and workers possessed a deeper understanding of social reality than those who derived authority from inherited status. This perspective anticipates later subaltern and Dalit scholarship. Knowledge is not monopolized by educated elites. Rather, it emerges from the experiences of those who participate directly in production. The peasant woman in *Kulambin* exemplifies this principle. Through her daily activities, she acquires practical knowledge regarding agriculture, animal care, food production, environmental conditions, and household management. Yet such knowledge remains unrecognized because dominant definitions of intelligence privilege scriptural learning and ritual expertise. Phule notes:

"She walks behind the sowing implement, sowing tur and thus helps her husband in his sowing operation. She helps her husband faithfully in stormy wind or driving rain."
(Phule 1991, 78)

This verse challenges assumptions that agriculture is primarily male labor. The peasant woman participates directly in cultivation and performs physically demanding tasks under adverse environmental conditions. Her contribution is neither supplementary nor occasional. By centering a woman engaged in sowing and cultivation, Phule restores visibility to forms of labor excluded from dominant accounts of rural society. The verse also undermines patriarchal representations of women as economically dependent upon men. Instead, the woman emerges as a co-producer of agricultural wealth. Ambedkar was of the opinion that Brahmanical law systematically denied Shudras access to sacred learning and educational opportunities (Ambedkar 1946, 29-45). The monopoly of knowledge functioned as a mechanism of social control. Chakravarti similarly argues that Brahmanical dominance depended not only upon economic power but also upon monopolizing education and intellectual authority (Chakravarti 2018). Lower castes and women were excluded from institutions of learning pre-

cisely because knowledge represented a source of power. Phule's educational initiatives and literary writings directly challenged this monopoly. Through *Kulambin*, he redefines knowledge itself. The laboring woman becomes a producer of knowledge rather than merely an object of observation. This interpretation aligns with Rege's argument that Dalit and lower-caste experiences generate distinctive forms of understanding that have often been excluded from mainstream intellectual traditions (Rege 2006, 3-6). The peasant woman's labor reveals realities that remain invisible within elite discourses. Consequently, *Kulambin* should be read not merely as a celebration of labor but as an argument about knowledge. Productive work becomes a source of social insight, and the laboring body becomes a site of intellectual authority.

Social Reproduction and the Political Economy of Women's Work

Contemporary feminist theorists use this concept to describe the activities necessary for sustaining human life and labor power across generations. These activities include childcare, food preparation, household maintenance, and caregiving. The peasant woman not only cultivates fields but also prepares meals, raises children, cares for animals, and manages domestic responsibilities. Mainstream economic thought has historically treated such activities as non-productive. Feminist historians have challenged this assumption by demonstrating that household labor constitutes an essential component of economic life. Perhaps the most moving passage in the poem states:

"She is so busy with her work in the field that she forgets even to suckle her child which cries piteously." (Phule 1991, 78)

This line illustrates the brutal pressures imposed upon lower-caste women. The issue is not maternal neglect but the overwhelming demands of labor. The woman must balance agricultural work with childcare, and the two responsibilities frequently come into conflict. Dalit feminist scholars have emphasized that lower-caste women experience motherhood under conditions fundamentally different from those of privileged women. Rather than romanticizing motherhood, Phule reveals its material realities. The crying child becomes a symbol of caste and economic exploitation. By documenting the interconnected nature of domestic and agricultural labor, Phule reveals that social reproduction and economic production are inseparable. Moreover, the burden of this labor falls disproportionately upon lower-caste women. As Chakravarti argues, caste and gender interact to assign particular forms

of work to subordinated groups (Chakravarti 2018). The peasant woman experiences exploitation not simply because she is a woman or because she belongs to a lower caste, but because these identities intersect within a hierarchical social order. The significance of *Kulambin* thus lies not only in its representation of women's labor but also in its analysis of the social structures that organize that labor. The poem reveals how caste society depends upon the work of lower-caste women while simultaneously denying them recognition and status.

Brahmanical Patriarchy and Graded Inequality in *Kulambin*

The concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, developed by Uma Chakravarti, is useful for interpreting *Kulambin*. According to Chakravarti, caste and patriarchy are not separate systems but mutually constitutive structures. The preservation of caste depends upon regulating women's sexuality, marriage, labor, and reproductive capacities (Chakravarti 2018). Endogamy functions as the principal mechanism through which caste boundaries are maintained across generations. A powerful contrast emerges later in the poem:

"The Bhat woman does not follow the cattle, collecting the cow-dung, nor does she turn the cow-dung into dung-cakes because of her over-weening pride." (Phule 1991, 79)

This passage is central to a Dalit feminist reading of *Kulambin*. Phule demonstrates that women do not occupy a uniform social position. The Brahmin woman enjoys privileges unavailable to the peasant woman precisely because caste shields her from productive labor. Rege's idea of universal womanhood is anticipated here. Gender oppression exists, but it is profoundly shaped by caste location. The peasant woman experiences exploitation through labor, while the Brahmin woman benefits from a social order sustained by that labor. Rege's interpretation of Ambedkar strengthens this analysis. She argues that caste and violence against women are inseparable because caste reproduces itself through the regulation of female sexuality and marriage (Rege 2013, 62). Women's oppression is therefore not incidental to caste hierarchy; it is structurally necessary for its continuation. This insight is crucial for understanding why the experiences of the peasant woman in *Kulambin* cannot be explained solely through economic exploitation. Her position is shaped by a social order in which caste and gender operate together. The contrast between the peasant woman and the Brahmin woman constitutes one of the poem's most important political interventions. Rege notes that *Kulambin* explicitly contrasts

the labor of the peasant woman with the leisure and ornamental existence associated with Brahmin womanhood (Rege 2006, 35). This contrast demonstrates that femininity itself is differentiated by caste location. Women do not experience gender oppression uniformly. Rather, caste profoundly shapes access to resources, labor responsibilities, social status, and bodily autonomy. Mainstream feminist discourse has often treated women as a homogeneous category. Dalit feminist scholars have challenged this assumption by emphasizing that lower-caste women experience forms of oppression fundamentally different from those faced by upper-caste women. The peasant woman in *Kulambin* exemplifies this insight. Her life is structured not only by patriarchal norms but also by the demands of agricultural labor and caste-based marginalization. Ambedkar argued that caste society is not organized through a simple binary between oppressor and oppressed but through a complex hierarchy in which privilege and disadvantage are distributed unevenly across multiple groups (Ambedkar 1946, 8, 16). This concept helps explain why the peasant woman occupies a particularly vulnerable position. Ambedkar's analysis of caste demonstrates that social degradation was historically produced rather than naturally given. The subordination of Shudras emerged from political and historical processes rather than inherent inferiority (Ambedkar 1946, iv-v). Phule's poem reflects a similar perspective.

Caste-Gender Intersection and Dalit Feminist Readings

A Dalit feminist reading of *Kulambin* reveals dimensions of the poem that are often overlooked within conventional understanding of Phule's work. Sharmila Rege argues that Phule's project of liberating Shudras, Atishudras, and women constituted one of the most significant nineteenth-century critiques of caste and gender hierarchy (Rege 2006, 35). Rather than treating women's emancipation as secondary to anti-caste politics, Phule understood both struggles as interconnected. This perspective distinguishes him from many contemporary reformers whose concern for women remained confined to questions of morality or domesticity. Similarly, Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women occupy a distinctive social location that generates forms of experience and knowledge often ignored within mainstream feminist discourse (Guru 1995). One of the most revealing passages states:

"The Bhat woman does not apply scents and scented pastes to the person of the Shudra female nor does she massage her body and bath her with hot water." (Phule 1991, 79)

The significance of this verse lies in its portrayal of social distance between women belonging to dif-

ferent caste locations. Gender alone does not create solidarity. The Brahmin woman refuses intimate forms of contact with the Shudra woman because caste hierarchy regulates bodily interaction. The female body becomes a site upon which notions of purity and pollution are enforced. Phule thereby demonstrates that caste divisions penetrate everyday social relations, including relationships between women themselves. This argument becomes even more explicit when he observes:

“The Bhat female does not condescend to look after the Shudra’s children, nor does she caress them.” (Phule 1991, 79)

The verse is significant because it reveals how caste extends beyond economic inequality into the realm of affective and social relations. Even children become subject to caste distinctions. The refusal to care for or nurture the children of Shudra families reflects a broader social order in which human relationships are structured by hierarchy and exclusion. Phule thus exposes the limitations of any understanding of womanhood based solely upon shared gender identity. The Brahmin woman and the Shudra woman occupy fundamentally different positions within the social structure. The poem further emphasizes these differences through repeated references to labor. Phule notes:

“The Bhat woman does not work as a (daily-wage) labourer on the Shudra’s farm.”
(Phule 1991, 79)

He similarly remarks that:

“The Bhat woman despises to work as a labourer on the Shudra’s farm, and indulges in idle tricks and finery.” (Phule 1991, 79)

These observations are important because they reveal that caste determines not only status but also the distribution of labor. The Shudra woman is compelled to participate directly in agricultural production, while the Brahmin woman remains insulated from such work. Consequently, gender oppression is experienced differently across caste locations. Although both women live within a patriarchal society, only one bears the burden of stigmatized physical labor. Phule’s analysis therefore anticipates a central claim of Dalit feminist scholarship: women’s experiences cannot be understood apart from caste relations. The protagonist experiences caste through labor, deprivation, and social stigma. An-

upama Rao's discussion of caste radicalism is particularly useful here. Rao argues that caste operates through embodied experiences of humiliation, exclusion, and labor exploitation (Rao 2009, 11-15). The peasant woman's body becomes the site upon which these social processes are enacted. At the same time, the poem resists portraying her as a passive victim. She emerges as resilient, resourceful, and productive. Rege further notes that caste and gender should serve as fundamental categories for understanding historical change (Rege 2013, 75). This observation is particularly relevant for interpreting *Kulambin*. The poem does not simply describe an individual woman's life; it reveals historical processes through which caste society organizes labor and social relations. Classical literature frequently portrayed women as symbols of beauty, devotion, or moral virtue. Phule instead centers a laboring woman whose significance derives from her contribution to collective life. By doing so, he transforms the social meaning of womanhood itself.

Critique of Brahmanical Hegemony

At its core, *Kulambin* is a sustained critique of Brahmanical hegemony. Phule's opposition was not directed merely against individual acts of discrimination but against the ideological structures that legitimized inequality. One of the most striking features of the poem is the language Phule employs to describe Brahmanical authority. Throughout *Kulambin*, the Brahmin is repeatedly characterized as "cunning," "false," or a "shirker," while the peasant woman is depicted as industrious, productive, and socially indispensable. In one stanza, Phule remarks that "The drone (shirker) of a Brahmin calls the hard working one by the disparaging name of a 'peasant-woman', says Joti." (Phule 1991, 78). This contrast is significant because it reverses the conventional hierarchy of caste society. The laboring woman possesses the qualities that contribute to collective welfare, whereas the Brahmin is represented as parasitic upon the labor of others. Yet social status operates in the opposite direction. The hardworking cultivator is stigmatized, while the non-producing caste enjoys prestige and authority. Phule's critique becomes even more explicit in the stanzas that contrast the Shudra woman with the Brahmin woman. He observes:

"The Bhat woman does not feed the crops in the fields with the human excreta (night-soil) as manure... She does not follow the cattle, collecting the cow-dung, nor does she turn the cow-dung into dung-cakes because of her over-weening pride." (Phule 1991, 79)

The significance of this passage lies not in its criticism of individual behavior but in its exposure of caste privilege. The Brahmin woman is exempt from the forms of labor that sustain agricultural production. She neither collects manure, prepares fuel, nor participates in the countless activities necessary for rural survival. Yet caste ideology assigns greater social respectability to her position. By emphasizing the absence of labor, Phule challenges the moral legitimacy of caste hierarchy itself. Social prestige appears disconnected from social contribution. The critique deepens further when Phule notes that the Brahmin woman considers it beneath her dignity to perform tasks associated with Shudra households. He writes that she “thinks it below her dignity to sweep the Shudra’s courtyard” and refuses to engage in activities considered polluting within Brahmanical ideology. Such passages reveal how notions of purity and pollution function as instruments of social domination. Work essential to the maintenance of everyday life is rendered degrading, while avoidance of labor becomes a marker of superiority. Rosalind O’Hanlon argues that Phule viewed Brahmanism as an ideological system serving the interests of Brahman social groups across religious, educational, and political spheres (O’Hanlon 1985, 123-124). Through myths, rituals, and cultural narratives, Brahmanism transformed historically contingent relations of power into seemingly natural and sacred hierarchies. Ambedkar developed a similar critique in *Who Were the Shudras?*. He argued that texts such as the *Purusha Sukta* sanctified social divisions and converted them into permanent institutions (Ambedkar 1946, 15-16). By presenting inequality as divinely ordained, Brahmanical ideology obscured its historical origins and protected existing structures of domination.

Phule’s poetry directly challenges this ideology. O’Hanlon notes that Phule consistently celebrated cultivators, artisans, masons, and workers while criticizing the privileges enjoyed by Brahman priests (O’Hanlon 1985, 209-214). *Kulambin* extends this critique by centering the labor of a peasant woman and presenting her work as the true foundation of agrarian life. This inversion of values constitutes one of the poem’s most radical features. Labor becomes a source of dignity, while inherited privilege appears parasitic and unproductive. Such a perspective directly challenges the ideological foundations of caste hierarchy. Omvedt similarly argues that Phule interpreted Brahmanism as an ideology of domination that legitimized exploitation and inequality (Omvedt 1976, 110-114). Religious authority functioned not merely as a spiritual institution but as a mechanism of social control. Through *Kulambin*, Phule present an alternative moral order in which labor, equality, and social contribution replace ritual status as the basis of worth.

Universal Religion of Truth and Egalitarian Ethics

While *Kulambin* focuses primarily on labor and social inequality, the *Akhands* contained in *The Universal Religion of Truth* articulate the positive ethical principles underlying Phule's critique. In the *Akhands*, Phule shifts from critique to ethical vision:

"The Creator has created this earth which sustains us all... There should not be different religions for different human beings, as our Creator is one." (Phule 1991, 97)

This verse attacks the theological foundations of caste hierarchy. Nature sustains all human beings equally, yet society imposes artificial distinctions. The earth becomes evidence against caste ideology. O'Hanlon argues that Phule sought to construct an alternative worldview capable of replacing Brahmanical hegemony. This passage illustrates that effort. Equality is grounded not in scripture but in universal human existence. These poems advance a vision of society grounded in equality, rationality, education, and universal human dignity. Phule repeatedly emphasizes that all human beings share a common creator and therefore belong to a single moral community. Nature itself serves as evidence of this principle. The earth, rivers, sun, and wind provide sustenance without regard to caste, religion, or social status. This universalism stands in direct opposition to Brahmanical hierarchy. Rather than dividing humanity into ranked groups, Phule imagines a society organized around shared humanity and mutual respect. Phule further asks:

"How is it that there are different religions for different people? Why have you gone mad?" (Phule 1991, 97)

The rhetorical question is deliberately provocative. Phule treats caste-based religious divisions not as sacred truths but as irrational absurdities. The use of reason against tradition reflects the rationalist orientation of the Satyashodhak movement. By portraying discrimination as madness, he reverses conventional assumptions about authority and legitimacy. Education occupies a central place within this vision. O'Hanlon notes that Phule viewed education as a means of cultivating critical consciousness among oppressed communities (O'Hanlon 1985, 120-121). Rege similarly emphasizes that education formed an essential component of his anti-caste project (Rege 2006, 35). The *Akhands* also reflect a rationalist orientation. Truth is to be discovered through reason and observation rather than unquestioning obedience to tradition. Such an approach directly challenges the authority of sacred

texts and inherited customs. Omvedt argues that Phule's later writings reveal a utopian vision rooted in equality and social justice (Omvedt 1976, 98-100). The *Akhands* support this interpretation by providing the ethical foundation for the social critique developed in *Kulambin*. Together, these texts articulate both a diagnosis of oppression and a vision of emancipation. Perhaps the most important verse is:

"You should send all your children (sons and daughters) to school." (Phule 1991, 98)

This line encapsulates Phule's entire emancipatory project. Education appears as the antidote to caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and social ignorance. The explicit inclusion of both sons and daughters is especially significant because it rejects patriarchal restrictions on female education. For Phule, knowledge is not a privilege reserved for upper castes but a universal right. This commitment links his educational activism with his anti-caste politics and explains why later thinkers such as Ambedkar regarded him as a foundational intellectual predecessor.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Jyotirao Phule's *Kulambin* should be understood not merely as a literary representation of rural life but as a sophisticated critique of caste hierarchy, gender oppression, and the devaluation of productive labor. Through the figure of the peasant woman, Phule exposes the contradictions of a social order that depends upon lower-caste labor while denying it dignity and recognition. Engaging with the scholarship of O'Hanlon, Omvedt, Ambedkar, Chakravarti, Rege, Rao, and Guru demonstrate that *Kulambin* occupies a significant place within the intellectual genealogy of anti-caste thought. The poem anticipates later theories of Brahmanical patriarchy, graded inequality, Dalit feminism, by revealing how caste and gender operate simultaneously within everyday life. The central argument of the article has been that labor functions in *Kulambin* not only as an economic category but also as a source of knowledge and moral value. Phule challenges dominant definitions of dignity, intelligence, and social worth. Productive labor becomes the foundation of an alternative ethical order grounded in equality and justice. The poem also contributes to the creation of a counter-public in which marginalized communities become producers of knowledge rather than passive objects of reform. Through vernacular language and accessible literary forms, Phule democratized intellectual life and encouraged critical reflection among those historically excluded from education.

The significance of *Kulambin* extends beyond nineteenth-century Maharashtra. The poem remains relevant because it identifies a relationship between labor, knowledge, caste, and gender that continues to structure social inequality in contemporary India. By centering a lower-caste laboring woman, Phule challenged dominant assumptions regarding who possesses knowledge, who produces wealth, and who deserves dignity. Read in this way, *Kulambin* emerges not merely as a poem of social protest but as an early theory of labor-centered epistemology whose insights resonate with contemporary Dalit feminist, subaltern, and anti-caste scholarship.

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