

# Sociological Analysis of the Film Phule: Social Reform, Caste Dynamics, and the Emancipatory Power of Education

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## Abstract

In this paper, we embark on a sociological journey to explore the 2025 Marathi film *Phule*, a deeply moving and meticulously crafted portrayal of the revolutionary lives and transformative work of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule. We delve deeply into how the film captures the complex and often heartbreaking interplay of caste, class, and gender within the rigid social hierarchy of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial India. By dissecting the film's nuanced representation of their pioneering efforts in social reform, the profound and transformative role of education as a tool for liberation, their unwavering and courageous resistance to Brahminical oppression, and their relentless advocacy for gender empowerment, this paper reveals *Phule* as a powerful and truly essential cinematic tool for comprehending historical social justice movements. Our analysis is framed through the insightful and interconnected lenses of Ambedkarite sociology, Marxist theory, and feminist thought, illuminating the profound, often perilous, and always inspiring nature of their struggle for a more equitable society.

## Introduction

Cinema is more than entertainment; it is a cultural force that shapes, shapes, and questions the world around us. Movies give insight into different eras and societies, allowing for empathy across generations and allowing for critical reflection on the social structures that underlie human life. They challenge narratives that are dominant, spark debate, and even catalyze social movements. This potential is illustrated in 2025 Marathi film *Phule* by Ananth Narayan Mahadevan, who directed the 2025 Marathi film *Phule*. It is more than a biopic, but it is a historically grounded and sociologically rich narrative that pays tribute to the visionary reformers Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule. The Phules, who fought to free the caste and patriarchal norms of the colonial India of 19<sup>th</sup> century, led radical challenges to caste oppression and patriarchal norms in 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial India.

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*Phule* is treated in this research paper as an important sociological artifact rather than just a movie. In addition to speaking urgently to current struggles, it depicts the intricate relationships between caste, class, and gender in a particular historical moment. The movie shows how social injustice still exists and the various forms of resistance it inspires, ranging from organized collective action to individual defiance, through its plot, characters, and aesthetics. Furthermore, the way it depicts public areas like streets, schools, and protest platforms encourages comparison and contemplation on the ways in which marginalized voices have traditionally occupied and changed these spaces, both in colonial India and elsewhere. By doing this, *Phule* advances our knowledge of Indian social history while also advancing discussions of public discourse, memory, and emancipatory politics.

## Methodology

For this study, we employ qualitative content analysis - a method particularly effective for uncovering the deeper meanings within cultural works like films. This approach enables us to move beyond plot summaries and examine the social messages, symbolic representations, and ideological implications embedded in the cinematic narrative. Through systematic coding and interpretation of textual and visual data, we identify patterns and themes. Thematic analysis highlights recurring philosophies, such as the Phules' belief in education as a tool for liberation and their emphasis on human dignity over inherited status. Semiotic analysis deciphers visual cues like the avoidance of a Dalit's shadow or drawing water from a shared well, symbolizing caste discrimination and access struggles. Narrative analysis traces character arcs—especially Jyotirao and Savitribai—revealing how personal journeys reflect societal transformation. Our analysis is further strengthened by secondary research, including scholarly articles, historical texts, biographies, and critical reviews, grounding our interpretations in historical context and sociological theory.

Our analytical framework rests on three key sociological theories, each providing a distinct yet wonderfully complementary lens through which to interpret the complex social dynamics depicted in *Phule*:

### Ambedkarite Theory

This framework is utilized for its incisive critique of caste hierarchy, its profound understanding of untouchability as a system of dehumanization, and its unwavering focus on Dalit assertion, social mobility, and the ultimate annihilation of caste. It provides the foundational understanding of the structural oppression that the Phules fought against.

### Feminist Theory

This theoretical lens is employed to unpack and understand the nuanced portrayal of gender roles, the pervasive nature of patriarchal structures, and the specific challenges faced by women, particularly Savitribai

Phule, in their struggle for education and empowerment. It highlights the intersection of gender with caste oppression.

## **Marxist Theory**

While acknowledging the distinct nature of caste from class, this theory is applied to illuminate the dimensions of class struggle and economic exploitation that were inherently intertwined with the social reform movements depicted. It helps in understanding the material conditions that underpinned the caste system and the economic disenfranchisement of marginalized communities. Marxist material conditions analysis emphasizes how economic systems influence society and propel historical transformation. For instance, during the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of factory labor led to a distinct separation between the proletariat, who were exploited for their labor, and the bourgeoisie, who controlled the means of production. Consistent with Marxist predictions of class struggle, the 1917 Russian Revolution saw the working class and peasantry rebel against the ruling elite due to widespread poverty and inequality. The use of sweatshops by multinational firms in the Global South in the modern era is a reflection of ongoing capitalist exploitation, which uses cheap labor to maximize profit. Likewise, the 2008 financial crisis exposed the inconsistencies in capitalism, as financial institutions received bailouts while common people lost their homes and jobs, illustrating how capitalist systems put profit ahead of people's needs.

By bringing these theoretical perspectives together, we aim to offer a comprehensive and multi-layered sociological analysis of *Phule*, showcasing its profound significance both as a historical document and as a powerful contemporary tool for social commentary.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Ambedkarite Perspective**

This theoretical approach is truly fundamental to how we understand the struggles depicted in *Phule*. It offers a critical and historically grounded lens through which to analyze the oppressive caste hierarchy. It emphasizes the imperative of Dalit assertion, social mobility, and ultimately, the annihilation of caste as a prerequisite for genuine human liberation.[4, 5] The film's narrative, illustrating the Phules' relentless challenge to Brahminical dominance and their pioneering advocacy for the rights and upliftment of the marginalized, aligns seamlessly with these core tenets of Ambedkarite thought, demonstrating their historical continuity in the anti-caste struggle.[6, 7]

The very existence of *Phule*, particularly as a mainstream Hindi production, offers a significant and unprecedented platform for mainstreaming anti-caste figures like the Phules, whose immense contributions are regrettably often overlooked or minimized in dominant academic narratives and popular culture.[8, 9] The film's profound focus on education as a primary instrument for social emancipation directly echoes

Ambedkar's unwavering belief – a belief we should all share – that intellectual and moral development is crucial for challenging entrenched social hierarchies, fostering critical consciousness, and ultimately achieving Dalit liberation.[3, 5]

## **Marxist Lens**

While it's important to acknowledge that caste is distinct from class, with its unique ritualistic and social dimensions, a Marxist perspective still offers incredibly valuable insights into the economic exploitation and material deprivation systematically faced by lower castes, as the film so powerfully depicts.[10, 11]

The rigid control over resources and opportunities by upper castes, as shown in the film through their dominance in land ownership, trade, and traditional professions, aligns with the Marxist understanding of how dominant classes maintain their power through economic means. For instance, the film subtly highlights how the economic power of the Brahmin community allowed them to enforce social boycotts, effectively cutting off essential services to those who defied them. This demonstrates how economic leverage was used as a tool of social control, reinforcing the social hierarchy through material deprivation. While the film may not explicitly delve into the intricate nuances of labor relations or surplus value extraction as a purely Marxist text might, its depiction of the systemic denial of economic agency and the resulting material deprivation for marginalized communities powerfully illustrates the economic dimensions of caste oppression.[11] This portrayal truly underscores how the social hierarchy of caste wasn't just about rituals or culture; it was deeply embedded in and perpetuated by economic structures, leading to systemic and intergenerational material deprivation for marginalized communities – a cycle of hardship that is truly painful to witness. The film, therefore, invites us to consider the material basis of caste oppression, complementing the sociological and cultural analyses.

## **Feminist Sociology**

Savitribai Phule's portrayal is, without a doubt, central to the film's sociological depth. It beautifully elevates her from a supportive figure to a truly formidable revolutionary in her own right. Her pioneering role as India's first female teacher and a formidable social activist directly challenges deeply ingrained gender norms, and in doing so, reveals the intricate and often brutal ways in which caste and gender oppression are intertwined, creating a compounded burden for women that is truly difficult to bear.[12, 13] Her journey, as depicted in the film, is a powerful testament to the incredible agency of women in leading social change, resonating deeply with the core feminist sociological principles that highlight women's experiences, their struggles, and their invaluable contributions to transforming society.[2]

Feminist theory, particularly through the lens of intersectionality, is crucial here. Intersectionality highlights how different social identities—such as gender, caste, class, religion, and sexuality—intersect and combine to create unique systems of oppression and privilege that cannot be understood by examining each identity in

isolation.[14, 15] Uma Chakravarti's seminal concept of Brahminical patriarchy, which defines a system where power is predominantly controlled by upper-caste men and maintained through the control of women's sexuality and reproduction, is vividly illustrated through Savitribai's experiences and the societal resistance she faces.[14, 16, 17] The film portrays how women, especially Dalit women, face compounded discrimination due to their caste and gender, with their bodies and autonomy often subjected to violence, surveillance, and control – a heartbreaking reality designed to maintain caste purity and patriarchal dominance.[14, 15, 17] Savitribai's evolution from what might have been a "docile partner" to a "revolutionary leader" who actively confronts Brahminical patriarchy, establishes schools, and advocates for widows, truly underscores her profound feminist agency and her defiant resistance against the dual burden of caste and gender oppression. It's a story of immense courage and a powerful illustration of intersectional feminism in action, demonstrating that the fight for social justice must simultaneously address multiple axes of oppression.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Representation of Caste Discrimination**

The film masterfully sets its historical stage, opening with visceral and unflinching scenes that lay bare the brutal and dehumanizing realities of untouchability in 19th-century India – a truly painful glimpse into the past.[1, 18] We, as viewers, are confronted with the systemic denial of fundamental human dignities to Dalits: their exclusion from access to potable water, their prohibition from entering temples, and their systematic denial of the right to education. These scenes are not just abstract historical facts; they are rendered with a raw emotional intensity that truly underscores the pervasive nature of discrimination, making it impossible to look away.[1, 18] Jyotirao's personal confrontations with the pervasive caste hierarchies, both within the confines of schooling environments and the broader societal fabric, vividly illustrate the deeply entrenched Brahminical control over knowledge, power, and social order – a control that stifled so many lives. For instance, the film depicts upper-caste Brahmins meticulously avoiding Jyotiba's shadow, a seemingly minor act that powerfully conveys the everyday indignities and profound social exclusion faced by those deemed 'untouchable'. Similarly, a courtroom exchange where Jyotiba subtly questions a lawyer about his barber highlights the absurdity and hypocrisy of caste-based purity rules, exposing the illogical foundations of discrimination.[1, 18]

The controversies surrounding the film's release, including demands from certain groups to remove specific scenes or dialogues, paradoxically amplified its message, turning the film itself into a catalyst for broader public discussion about historical oppression and the ongoing need for social reform. This deliberate portrayal of systemic discrimination ensures that *Phule* serves as a crucial historical and sociological document, forcing viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about India's past and present, and to reflect on how these historical patterns continue to manifest in contemporary society. The film's visual language, often stark and

unembellished, reinforces the brutal reality of the caste system, making the abstract concept of untouchability tangible and emotionally resonant for a modern audience.

## **Education as Emancipation**

Perhaps one of the most inspiring and truly central narrative arcs in *Phule* is the courageous establishment of India's first school for girls and lower castes – a groundbreaking moment. [1, 7, 12, 13] The film unflinchingly depicts the immense, and often violent, resistance the Phules encountered in this revolutionary endeavor. They faced severe social boycotts, cutting off their access to essential services and community support; endured relentless verbal abuse and public humiliation; and even faced direct physical threats from orthodox elements who viewed their work as an affront to established social order – a struggle that would test anyone's spirit.[13, 18, 19] Yet, their unwavering persistence in the face of such adversity underscores a central philosophical tenet, one beautifully espoused by both Jyotirao Phule and later profoundly articulated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: that education is not merely about gaining knowledge, but is, in fact, the indispensable path to liberation and social emancipation.[3, 6]

The film powerfully demonstrates how literacy and critical thinking were perceived as direct threats to the established Brahminical order, which sadly thrived on the ignorance and subservience of the lower castes and women. By educating the marginalized, the Phules directly challenged the monopoly over knowledge and power held by the upper castes. Yet, simultaneously, the film portrays education as the most potent tool for social emancipation, enabling individuals to question injustice, assert their rights, and achieve self-respect and dignity.[3] The film subtly suggests a curriculum that went beyond rote learning, aiming to foster critical consciousness and a sense of agency among the students, preparing them not just for jobs, but for active citizenship and social transformation. Savitribai's remarkable journey, from being home-schooled by Jyotirao to becoming India's first trained female teacher and headmistress, is a profound testament to the transformative power of education, both for individuals and for society at large.[12, 13, 18] The film highlights their comprehensive vision for social change through knowledge, extending their efforts to provide education not just to girls and lower castes, but also to marginalized groups like widows, who were often doubly victimized by societal norms.[1, 13] Their dedication, even to the point of Jyotiba selling family property to sustain their educational work, truly emphasizes their profound belief in education as the ultimate means to uplift the marginalized and prepare India for a deeper, more equitable revolution against both colonial rule and internal social oppression.[1, 20]

## **Gender and Patriarchy**

Savitribai Phule's character is rendered with exceptional strength, unwavering resilience, and profound agency, making her a truly central and inspiring figure in the film's sociological depth. The film vividly portrays her courageously confronting myriad forms of abuse, enduring public humiliation such as being

pelted with dung by orthodox men, and even facing the extreme measure of expulsion from her in-laws' home – all for the sake of continuing her vital and truly revolutionary work as an educator and social reformer. Her spirit is simply indomitable.[13, 19]

The film significantly redefines the marital relationship between Jyotirao and Savitribai, portraying them not merely as conventional partners in life but as "comrades in a revolutionary struggle" that defied both deeply ingrained gender norms and entrenched social hierarchies.[2] This partnership, built on mutual respect and intellectual camaraderie, was itself a radical act in a society that prescribed rigid gender roles. Unlike conventional biopics that often relegate female partners to supportive or secondary roles, *Phule* foregrounds Savitribai's agency, depicting Jyotirao as a radical ally who actively nurtured her leadership and helped her become a powerful voice for girls' education and women's rights.[2] Her pioneering actions, such as establishing the first girls' school, and later an infanticide prevention center for widows, directly challenge Brahminical patriarchy and its control over women's sexuality, reproduction, and autonomy.[12, 13, 21] It particularly highlights the plight of Dalit women, who face compounded discrimination at the intersection of caste and gender, often bearing the brunt of both social and sexual violence to maintain caste purity and patriarchal dominance.[14, 15] Savitribai's defiance, her brave public presence, and her unwavering commitment to social justice serve as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of feminist agency in challenging deeply entrenched systems of oppression.

## **Resistance to Religious Orthodoxy**

A core conflict driving the narrative of *Phule* is the Phules' direct and truly audacious confrontation with orthodox Brahmins and the religious orthodoxy they represented – a brave stand indeed.[7, 19] The film powerfully depicts how Jyotirao and Savitribai audaciously challenged scriptural interpretations and religious rituals that were meticulously used to justify, perpetuate, and sanctify caste inequality – practices that caused so much suffering. These rituals and interpretations served as powerful ideological tools to maintain the social hierarchy and the dominance of the Brahminical elite. For instance, the film shows direct confrontations where Jyotirao questions the divine origin of caste and the sanctity of texts that promote discrimination, challenging the very intellectual foundations of the oppressive system. His arguments, rooted in reason and humanism, directly counter the dogmatic assertions of the orthodox.[7, 19] Their seminal act of forming the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seeking Society) in 1873 is portrayed as a truly radical act of social awakening, emphasizing rational thought, scientific inquiry, and inherent human dignity over blind faith, superstitious practices, and inherited privilege based on birth – a profound shift in thinking.[7, 22, 23] This highlights their unwavering commitment to establishing a more equitable, humanistic, and just social order, one truly free from the shackles of religious dogma and caste-based discrimination.

The Satyashodhak Samaj was founded with the explicit mission to mitigate the distress and sufferings of Dalits and women, advocating fiercely for their right to education and increased social rights, including the right to



perform their own rituals without Brahmin intermediaries.[22, 23] It aimed to unite and uplift Shudras and other lower-caste people, encouraging revolutionary practices like priest-less weddings and inter-caste marriages, which directly challenged Brahminical authority, customs, and their economic dependence on religious ceremonies.[7, 22] The film depicts the Brahmin elite as maintaining social hierarchy through their pervasive domination in religious, governance, and education spheres, all of which the Phules actively opposed through their reformist and revolutionary activities.[23] While some critics suggest that the film, perhaps due to censorship pressures, "douses" the more radical aspects of Phule's profound critique of Hindu dharma, it still effectively showcases their defiance against the religious orthodoxy that legitimized and enforced caste injustice.[19, 24] This section of the film thus serves as a powerful reminder of the intellectual and social courage required to challenge deeply ingrained religious and social norms for the sake of justice, demonstrating that true reform often requires confronting the most sacred cows of society and questioning the very foundations of established power structures.

## **Reclaiming Public Space and Voice**

The movie *Phule* also powerfully illustrates how Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule strategically reclaimed and redefined public spaces for marginalized communities – spaces that had been historically denied to them and monopolized by upper castes. [1, 18] These acts are presented not just as practical reforms aimed at improving living conditions or literacy rates, but as potent metaphors for asserting voice, visibility, and inherent human dignity for those who had been systematically denied them for centuries – a truly inspiring assertion.[2, 25, 26]

The establishment of the first girls' school in Bhidewada, and later other schools for marginalized children, was a direct and revolutionary act of reclaiming public space for education, which was historically denied to girls and lower castes.[12, 13] The film visually emphasizes this by showing Jyotirao teaching children from oppressed communities, including girls, in open, accessible spaces, symbolizing a defiance against the traditional restrictions on knowledge access and the physical segregation imposed by the caste system.[1, 20] The act of opening their own well for Dalits, an act depicted in the film, was a profound symbolic and practical reclamation of a vital resource and public space, directly challenging the exclusionary practices of upper castes. This simple act of providing water was a radical assertion of shared humanity and a direct affront to the purity-pollution paradigm of caste. The film itself, by bringing the story of a Shudra revolutionary couple to mainstream cinema, expands India's public iconography and includes those who have long been marginalized in the nation's historical narrative, effectively reclaiming a vital space in our collective memory.[26] The public mobilization and social media support for the film, viewing it as an "important social message" and a necessary counter-narrative, further demonstrate how the film itself became a powerful platform for reclaiming public discourse and asserting marginalized voices in contemporary society.[21]



## Impact of the Movie

### Contemporary Relevance and Counter-History

*Phule* holds significant contemporary relevance, making a profound and necessary impact on modern social discourse in India and beyond. In an era where historical narratives in India are, sadly, often prone to being "Brahminized" or sanitized – selectively presented to exclude, minimize, or even distort the voices and contributions of marginalized communities – this film functions as a vital and powerful counter-history. It's a necessary corrective.[26, 27] It effectively gives voice to the oppressed, bringing their historical experiences of discrimination and resistance to the forefront, and celebrates the extraordinary courage and intellectual contributions of social reformers like the Phules, whose legacies are regrettably often overlooked or minimized in mainstream textbooks, academic curricula, and popular media. This film helps to right that wrong.[26, 27]

The film's entry into mainstream cinema marks a crucial departure from a long-standing tradition of Indian films that, for too long, largely catered to the sensibilities of the nation's dominant social elites, systematically sidestepping narratives that question the entrenched Brahminical social order and its historical injustices. This film bravely steps into that void.[9, 27] *Phule* represents an unsettling yet essential cinematic intervention that directly challenges the monopolization of cultural production and the framing of collective memories by dominant groups. It forces us to re-evaluate who gets to tell history and whose stories are truly deemed worthy of national recognition – a conversation long overdue.[25, 27] The controversies and censorship it faced, including demands from certain sections to remove caste-specific terms and tone down criticisms of religious custodians, paradoxically amplified its message. These attempts at suppression, perhaps ironically, inadvertently turned the film into a catalyst for public mobilization, sparking widespread debate and transforming it into a powerful symbol of ongoing struggles against historical erasure and for social justice. It's a testament to the power of truth.[8, 21, 25, 27] This demonstrates that attempts to suppress a narrative can, in fact, increase its public awareness and transform it into a social movement, re-centering vital debates about caste and social justice in the national consciousness.[21] The film thus becomes a living document, actively shaping how history is perceived and discussed in the present, and encouraging a more inclusive understanding of India's past. Its very existence is an act of resistance against historical amnesia.

### Pedagogical Utility and Social Activism

Crucially, beyond its captivating narrative, *Phule* has sparked a renewed and vibrant interest in Dalit-Bahujan movements, inspiring a new generation, particularly young people from marginalized communities, to delve into and honor the rich and often suppressed legacy of these foundational anti-caste revolutionaries. This is truly heartening to see.[3, 27] Its powerful and emotionally resonant narrative is increasingly being adopted by educators and social activists as a compelling teaching tool, facilitating crucial conversations about

historical injustices, the complexities of caste dynamics, and the ongoing struggles for equality in contemporary India. This is exactly what we need.[3, 20, 21, 28]

Broader research consistently supports the significant pedagogical benefits of integrating film into educational curricula. Film, as we know, has a unique capacity to inspire imagination, motivate learning, foster diverse and critical thinking skills, and support social and moral understanding in ways that traditional texts sometimes cannot. It truly brings history to life.[28, 29, 30, 31, 32] *Phule*, in this context, serves as an exemplary case study for using cinema to address complex social issues, promote social justice awareness, and cultivate empathy among diverse audiences.[21, 29] The film's ability to transcend traditional academic boundaries and function as a potent tool for public education underscores the transformative power of cinematic representation. Its potential move to Over-The-Top (OTT) streaming platforms, partly influenced by censorship pressures and the desire for wider reach, further expands its accessibility to a national and international audience – a wonderful development. This widespread accessibility is vital for educating a broader demographic about the Phules' enduring legacy and its profound relevance to modern social issues globally, including ongoing struggles against discrimination and for human rights. It's a story that deserves to be heard by everyone.[21] This ensures that the film's significance extends far beyond its narrative content, solidifying its function as a crucial cultural and educational intervention that plays a pivotal role in shaping collective memory and promoting social justice awareness, especially for narratives often marginalized in mainstream discourse. The film's impact lies not just in its ability to inform, but to inspire action and critical thought.

## Conclusion

The movie *Phule* transcends its identity as merely a cinematic tribute to historical figures; it stands as a truly pivotal and indispensable sociological document that rigorously challenges dominant, often sanitized, narratives of Indian history. It's a film that demands our attention. Through its compelling and emotionally resonant portrayal of the lives and work of Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, the film powerfully illuminates the transformative potential of education as a tool for liberation, the inherent power and necessity of grassroots social reform, and the profound courage and resilience required to confront and dismantle systemic oppression. Their story is a beacon of hope.

The film's analysis through the interconnected Ambedkarite, Marxist, and feminist lenses reveals the multifaceted and intersectional nature of the Phules' struggle, demonstrating the intricate and often brutal interplay of caste, class, and gender in 19th-century colonial India. It serves as a vital counter-history, giving voice to the oppressed and actively challenging historical accounts that have long overlooked or minimized the contributions of marginalized communities. This is a crucial step towards a more honest understanding of our past. By sparking renewed interest in Dalit-Bahujan movements and serving as a powerful pedagogical tool in educational and activist circles, *Phule* actively shapes contemporary public discourse and fosters

critical reflection on historical injustices and ongoing struggles for equality. It's a film that truly makes a difference. The film substantially enriches the broader discourse on caste, class, and gender in India, urging us, as viewers, not just to passively observe these historical narratives, but to actively reflect, critically question societal norms, and ultimately, to act in pursuit of a more just and equitable society. This is the call to action it inspires. Its enduring legacy lies not only in its artistic merit but, more importantly, in its profound capacity to inspire continued efforts towards social justice, human dignity, and the annihilation of all forms of discrimination. And that, I believe, is its greatest contribution.

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