

Hats off to Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule

-AMPASHAYYA NAVEEN

The 186TH birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule was celebrated on 11th April at many places in Andhra Pradesh. His statues were unveiled by ministers and many rich tributes were paid to him.

Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule was one of the earliest pioneers of social reforms in India. He strived to root out social evils like discrimination against women, child marriages and advocated the development of women and backward sections of the society, particularly in the field of education. The government had taken lot of interest in celebrating Jyothi Rao Phule's birth anniversary in this year only. Common people do not know much about Jyothi Rao Phule. Many people know more about our great social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr.BR Amedkar etc but not about reformers like Jyothi Rao Phule and Narayana Guru even though they were equally great and did extraordinary service to women and backward sections of the society in 19th century itself. He was a contemporary of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and did more service to the weaker sections of the society than Mr Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

Jyothi Rao Phule was born on 11th April 1827 at a village called Kavadi near Pune in Maharashtra. He belonged to a backward caste family. His parents were Govinda Rao Phule and Chimmabai. He was the second son of his parents. He lost his mother when he was only one month old. A lady who was a relative of Phule's family bred and brought him up.

Since his childhood Jyothi Rao faced many hardships. He never experienced the motherly love and concern in his early life. There is an interesting story behind the surname Phule of Jyothi Rao's family. The forefathers of Jyothi Rao were in the business of flowers and they were known for their expertise in making floral decorations and designs. They were supplying different varieties of flowers and floral designs to Peshwas, the then rulers of Maharashtra. Thus their surname became Phule as Phule means flowers in Marati. Their original surname was Gore.

During those days only three upper castes were dominating over the other backward communities. Their oppressive and suppressive nature towards downtrodden, backward and Dalith communities was most inhuman and atrocious. The backward and Dalith communities were not allowed to go to schools to get education. As Jyothi Rao Phule belonged to a backward caste community his education was disturbed when he was studying in a primary school. His father stopped sending him to school when upper caste people pressurised him not to send his son to school. But Jyothi Rao was a very intelligent student. He wanted to pursue his studies at any cost. After observing his keen interest in studies two scholars – Munisse Gafarbeg, (an Urdu scholar) and a Legit (a Christian father) admitted Jyothi Rao in an American Scottish Mission school. This was a turning point in the life of Jyothi Rao. He was extremely brilliant in his studies. He used to get better marks in Tests compared to the students of forward castes. During his student days Jyothi Rao

studied the books written by John Stuart Mill and Thomas Paine. J.S. Mill's on 'LIBERTY' and Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man' influenced Jyothi Rao to a great extent. In all his future actions he was guided by the philosophy of these two great liberal thinkers.

Jyothi Rao married Savitri Bai when he was only 13 and Savitri bai was only 8. Child marriages during those days were very common. In later years of his life Jyothi Rao fought against the evils of child marriage. Jyothi Rao's wife Savitri bai was an ideal wife and became a part and parcel of all the future social activities of Jyothi Rao.

Jyothi Rao was also greatly influenced by the teachings of Gautam Budha, Sant Tukaram, Sant Gyaneshwar and Martin Luther King. As a social reformer the first problem that attracted his attention was education. He strongly believed that educating women and backward classes would solve many problems. When British rulers established schools all over India women and backward caste communities were not allowed to study in schools. So Jyothi Rao started a movement for creating special schools for educating women and downtrodden people.

Jyothi Rao was greatly moved by the plight of women in Hindu families. Women belonging to all communities irrespective of their economic positions were put to terrible suppression and humiliation at every juncture in the society. They should always be subservient to their husbands. The dominant view was if women were allowed to get education they will revolt against this suppression. The backward and Dalith communities were also put to inhuman suppression and humiliation. Jyothi Rao Phule was the first social reformer in India who seriously worked to put an end to these problems. He started a number of schools in Maharashtra exclusively for women. He taught his wife Savitri bai Phule and moulded her into a capable teacher. Savitri bai Phule started working as a teacher at a school meant exclusively for women from 1848 onwards. She created a record as the first lady teacher in India. A notice was put up in front of the school where Savitri Bai was working as a teacher on which it was written that 'No Admission' to people belonging to forward castes. Such was the commitment of Jyothi Rao Phule and Savitri bai Phule to downtrodden sections of the society.

A woman working as teacher was unheard of during those days. People of forward castes brought tremendous pressure on the parents of Jyothi Rao to stop Savitri Bai from working as a teacher. Yielding to their pressure, his father sent the couple out of his house. Even then, Jyothi Rao and his wife continued their movement. A number of schools were established at many places in Maharashtra exclusively for these sections.

Jyothi Rao Phule's other great movement was to save the widows from their utter subjugation and humiliation. Even before our own Kandukuri Veereshalingam started his movement for alleviation of widows, Jyothi Rao Phule was at it in Maharashtra. He had written several plays advocating the liberation of widows. Among his plays 'Thrutheeya Ratna' was very famous. It was written in 1858 and had a great impact on the society.

Jyothi Rao and his wife fought against all sorts of superstitions prevalent during those days.

In 1885 Jyothi Rao Phule established an institution called Satya Shodhak Samaj to carry forward his main ideals like education of women and backward communities and fighting against superstitions. On the occasion of 60th birthday (shashtipurthy) on 11th May 1888, he was conferred the title of 'Mahatma' (Great soul). From then onwards he came to be known as Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule. He breathed his last on 26th November 1890 at the age of 62. What Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule did for the empowerment of women and downtrodden can never be forgotten. Hats off to them!

www.ampashayyanaveen.com