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[BOOK EXCERPT](#)

Jotiba Phule's vital anti-caste writings have been translated into English for the first time

An excerpt from 'The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education', translated from the Marathi by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar.

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Jotiba Phule. | India Post, Government of India/Public Domain

No sooner does an infant of the Mali-Kunbi caste come to life in the womb of its mother than the Brahmin Joshi descends upon the poor woman and persuades her with his lies and falsehoods. I have written below an account of how he strips her completely of the family's meagre earnings.

Finding an opportune moment when the pregnant woman's husband is not around, the Joshi presents himself at the woman's doorway, intending to pronounce the date, the

day, the star and other details of the planetary positions. On hearing his voice, the woman of the household comes to the threshold with a handful of grain for the Brahmin's alms.

JOSHI: (mighty vexed on seeing the small quantity of grain) Bai, is this all the alms you have for me, a Brahmin?

WOMAN: Maharaj, what now? What's the matter? Is this not alms? I am a poor woman; my husband earns barely four rupees a month.

JOSHI: Bai, who can say that this is not alms? But how is my stomach going to be satisfied with this much? And how then am I going to be able to think of your welfare?

WOMAN: (tired and exasperated) Oh you Brahmins, we can never shake you off! How long must we care for your stomachs? Why don't you people take up an occupation and earn a livelihood?

JOSHI: (thinking to himself, "This is nothing new she says; occupation and livelihood are written upon our foreheads.") Yes, yes, that's right, that's right. But if you also face a loss, like your neighbour, then I won't let you complain afterwards, you know!

WOMAN: (as if reflecting a little) That woman's baby, it died because that was its fate.

JOSHI: Uh-huh, so you think it died because it was destined to?

WOMAN: What was it then if not its fate? Did it die because you were not given enough alms?

JOSHI: Even if it is a little, it must fulfil us.

WOMAN: Had she given enough to satisfy you, would you have saved her baby?

JOSHI: Can there be any doubt? Had she managed to satisfy me, I would definitely have got rid of all the misfortunes hovering over the baby, and wouldn't she have been the mother of a son today?

VIDUSHAK: (pointing to the audience) You can ask Joshi about how he lets your children die.

WOMAN: I don't understand what misfortunes lay in wait for her son. Why don't you tell me about them?

JOSHI: Don't you know about the inauspicious signs of the planets? My dear, Lord Mahadev himself dived into the water in fear and hid from them! Who indeed is safe from their dreadful influence!

VIDUSHAK: (indicating the audience) It is true that Mahadev was simple! No wonder then that he listened to the Brahmin and was frightened of the stars!

WOMAN: (fearfully) Are those stars making trouble for me?

JOSHI: Not for you, but they hover over the life in your womb. I can't spell out how they may strike to end it all.

VIDUSHAK: If this Joshi can save human beings from death, then why doesn't the British government shove all the drugs and medical facilities into a corner, raze the hospitals and wait upon the Brahmins' tongue for every panacea?

WOMAN: (visibly frightened now, she opens her fist to cast the grain back into the soop, then folds her hands and says beseechingly,) Maharaj, please tell me if there is any way out of this.

JOSHI: You are foolish. Are you capable of bearing the costs of a way out? Your husband barely makes four paltry rupees in all.

VIDUSHAK: Well, if the Joshi can indeed tell the future, where had these skills gone at the time when the Peshwas lay dead? Could he not have leaped beyond and informed their Sardars well in time to stop the events?

WOMAN: (wondering to herself how her husband is going to give the money) All that you say is true, but please be so kind as to at least tell me how much it is going to cost?

JOSHI: All right, all right, let me go now. We'll see about all these things afterwards. It's getting late, and I have to collect my alms.

WOMAN: (beseeching again) Oh, please don't do this Maharaj. I will give you enough grain for your alms.

JOSHI: You might give me the grain! But does it not need to be ground and rolled into bhakris? And then how am I to get some vegetables to go with it and some ghee? If I take back only your grain, shall we eat it plain or boiled?

WOMAN: Maharaj, I will give you all that you require now, but please do tell me how these planetary signs may be warded off. Please do suggest some way of doing this, and I will be so thankful to you.

JOSHI: Oh you Kunbi women! Will you ever keep your word? My dear woman, once your husband comes back, I know you will go inside and sit cozy, and to hell with me waiting outside.

WOMAN: Maharaj, can this ever happen? Because my husband often says: “a Brahmin is of the highest varna and one’s means are not reduced by gifting the Brahmin. But what to do? I have a low paying job. If God can tell my master to increase my wages, certainly then I will be able to give the Brahmin everything he asks.” (*Here Joshi smirks to himself, licking his chops.*) And please don’t hold anything against my husband. Because of his helplessness, he may complain to me a little within doors. But Maharaj, please wait a little till I go inside and come back. (*So saying she darts indoors.*)

VIDUSHAK: Joshi’s crafty ploy has struck home like an arrow, hasn’t it now?

JOSHI: Bai! No, no, let me go now. Enough of your idle talk.

WOMAN: (*turning her head to answer as she hurries inside*) Please trouble yourself to wait a little, Maharaj, I will be back in just a moment.

JOSHI: Ah, you won’t let me go! What work do you have with me now?

WOMAN: (*sounds of the clattering of pots are heard from within as she calls out loudly*) I am trying to put together something for you. Please do not leave without it!

Moments later the woman returns with a basket containing a large measure of bajra and offers it to the Brahmin standing near the doorway.

WOMAN: Please take this grain – it is enough for you, isn’t it?

JOSHI: (*with a show of anger*) Do you think we are like your husband, working with a sledgehammer and pounding away on iron and metal? Ho! ho! What impudence! Will we survive even three days on dry rotis? We are Brahmins; don’t we need rice for one meal at least?

VIDUSHAK: Folks! Just see how the Joshi is scheming to extract rice from the poor woman when even a fistful of coarse grain was in doubt earlier!

WOMAN: Maharaj, don’t be so impatient, I have contrived something about this too.

JOSHI: (*sniggering a little*) Unh! Unh! Is that so? Bai, you understand so much! (*As he speaks, he fishes out from his waist a little box of snuff, and smoothing down his moustache inhales a pinch into his nostrils with great show as if he were indeed the scion of a wealthy businessman.*)

WOMAN: (*taking out a quarter tucked into the knot at her waist*) Here take this, for some dal to go with your rice.

JOSHI: Hold on! Let me inhale my snuff first. You’re always in such a hurry, woman!

VIDUSHAK: It was Joshi who was in a hurry so far; now he says wait, since he's been plied with riches!

WOMAN: Maharaj, you are satisfied now, aren't you?

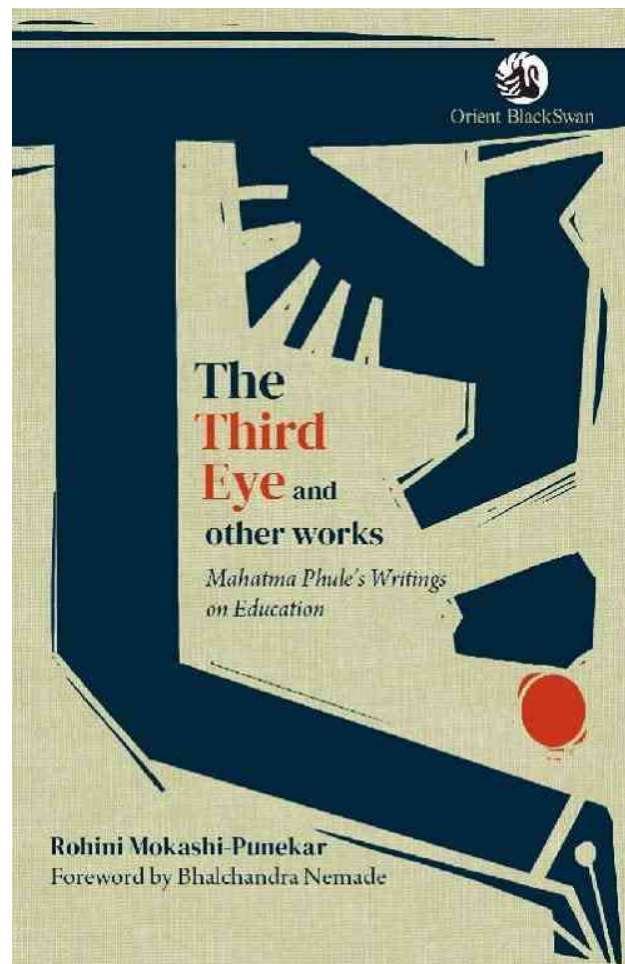
JOSHI: (*shaking his head*) Well yes, but you don't sit around. Hurry up now and offer a paisa and a small betel nut to the almanac, and I can then tell you a way to ward off the ill portents of the planets on the infant in your womb. Now the woman has no money of her own; she borrows a coin from her neighbour, takes out a betel nut tucked in her waist, lays down both offerings and herself prostrates at the feet of Joshi with utmost humility; then she sits a little apart, her hand on her forehead.

WOMAN: (*pensiveness on her face*) Please tell me, Maharaj.

VIDUSHAK: It is a hard thing to bear, Maharaj, the fire in the belly.

JOSHI: Bai, what is the moon sign which gives you your name?

WOMAN: My name? My name is Jogayi.



Excerpted with permission from the play The Third Eye (1855) in The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education, translated from the Marathi by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, Orient Black Swan.