



## A Play with Ideas

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THE THIRD EYE AND OTHER WORKS: MAHATMA PHULE'S WRITINGS ON EDUCATION by Translated from the original Marathi by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar. Foreword by Bhalchandra Nemade *Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2023, 248 pp., INR 855.00*

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In the middle of the 19th century, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule began their systematic critique of how they believed caste, gender, and power worked together to suppress women, Shudras, and Dalits. Faced with the prospect of trying to change an ancient system accepted as normal by millions of people, and etched into all aspects of everyday life, the Phules started small: they opened a school for girls in Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848. This led to two more schools, and by 1852 they ran three schools open to people of all castes, genders, and religions. They could have rooted their social justice work in any field, but they chose education because they identified at the heart of the gender-caste-power complex a system of knowledge segregation by virtue of birth. They argued that if one can address and eradicate this knowledge segregation through universal education, one could begin to unravel a primary impediment to social equality.

This core principle of the Phules' political thought is brilliantly expressed in the play *Tritiya Ratna*, written in Marathi by Jotirao Phule in 1855, but never published and essentially forgotten until 1979. Now, for the first time in English, Rohini Mokashi-Punekar presents to the world her lyrical translation of this key text within the Phules' critical and artistic thought. Given its long hiatus from the public eye, attention to this play has been minimal in the English scholarly sphere, both in India or outside. With Mokashi-Punekar's superb translation, we now have ample space for scholarly studies and uses in English of this extraordinary play.

Built around the content of the play and its times are three path-breaking essays by Mokashi-Punekar contained in this book. One essay historicizes Phule and his politics, another engages with the 'play of ideas' within the text itself, and a third situates Phule within the politics of education in the 19th century. This latter essay stands on its own as an exemplary engagement with the interflows of colonialism, missionary work, Brahmanical male 'reform' efforts, pre-existing Indian modes of public education, and the long-standing efforts of women, Shudras, and Dalits to find avenues toward education in India over centuries.

Mokashi-Punekar translates the title of the play as *The Third Eye* though the Marathi title shifted between *Tritiya Ratna* ('The Third Jewel') and *Tritiya Netra* ('The Third Eye') in Phule's own designation. The many generative concepts around these three renderings of the play's name—two in Marathi and one in English—are fully engaged with by Mokashi-Punekar in her carefully crafted introduction to the work. Is this a reference to the angry third eye of Shiva leashed upon a cruel and unjust world, or the jewel uncovered at the churning of a violent ocean? This title will pique the interest of those who know of Jotirao Phule's many critiques of normative, mythological, and traditional Hinduism, and Mokashi-Punekar leads the reader carefully through these possibilities.

The play itself has a 'ripped from the headlines' quality that would not be out of place even today: Expectant Couple Duped by Crooked Astrologer. The couple in this case are Shudras who are made to fear for their unborn child's future after a greedy Brahman astrologer warns them of the dangers the stars pose to their daughter. Their common sense is overwhelmed by the dark auguries of the astrologer, and bereft of education, they place their trust in the knowledge of the soothsayer. As the astrologer's fees mount, and he draws in his wife and brother-in-law to deepen the shakedown, Phule inserts a Vidushak into his play, a role classically assigned to a kind of Brahman-buffoon character, but here, though his caste is never identified, he functions as a voice of reason highlighting the greed of the Brahman astrologer and the ignorance of the Shudra couple. As Mokashi-Punekar convincingly argues, the Vidushak ventriloquizes Jotirao Phule's position and politics most directly in the play (44, 51ff), inverting the 'fool' character of the Vidushak to make him wise as Phule places his own thoughts and politics into the traditional voice of a Brahman male character on stage. This was perhaps Phule's way of suggesting that not all Brahmans are the same, as indeed he counted some Brahmans among his allies and supporters.

As the couple goes deep into debt to be able to pay for the astrologer's services, they come into the company of a Christian missionary, a Padre, portrayed without the many complications of Christian missionizing in India, but rather as a clear voice of reason guiding the Shudra couple toward a rational view of the astrologer's con game, and stopping short, Mokashi-Punekar reminds us, of an actual attempt at converting the Shudra couple. Through their interaction, the Shudra man turns his 'inward eye upon the whole wide world', seeing the ploys of the astrologer in the new light of reason. Now with the benefit of this mode of knowledge, the couple breaks the thrall of superstition, even while they must settle the bill with the astrologer. In debt but closer toward freedom, they dine together as something like equals and commit themselves to education 'where...Savitribai Phule has started a school for young girls and women...and...adult men which Jotirao Phule has begun right next to it'. The play, in other words, leads to the open doors of the Phules' schools and beyond, to a world of education set against the regime of knowledge segregation.

Mokashi-Punekar renders Phule's words with the colloquial flow the play deserves, perfectly pitching the English translation to capture which liminal space between spoken and performed language. She wisely retains Marathi words in the English, reminders to the reader of the vernacular roots of this text. Phule was a writer with a sense of humour, and Mokashi-Punekar allows the drama and comedy of this play the space to speak into a new language. One can imagine that with this new translation Phule's play might yet find a stage in India and beyond.

In addition, Mokashi-Punekar includes a new translation of an early ballad or povada by Phule, 'Brahmin Teachers in the Education Department', as well as a reprint of the English preface to *Gulamgiri* from 1873 and an English address to the Hunter Commission in 1882. The inclusion of this additional translation and two reprints of Phule's English work provide a greater empirical scope for understanding how Phule's commitment to education as a means of eradicating caste-gender injustice was sustained, but it is also vital in contextualizing the last of the three important essays Mokashi-Punekar includes in this volume.

Mokashi-Punekar begins by noting that those who struggle against the caste-gender-power complex today do so publicly and too often tragically within the field of education, and in particular, higher education. While she focuses primarily on situating Phule and this work within its historical contexts, underwriting her scholarly engagements is an eye toward the contemporary political relevance of the play. There are many ways that Mokashi-Punekar's analysis of this play and other work presented here move forward our collective analysis of Jotirao Phule's legacy, but two especially stand out to me.

After the first essay that introduces Phule and his times, a second essay engages the significance of the play and privileges an aspect of Phule's legacy often missing or muted in scholarly writing and public memory, which is the role of Phule as a writer and an artist, in particular as a political performance artist who used his tremendous gift of writing to render lyrical and

literary his political thought. Phule the Artist is a figure that Mokashi-Punekar carefully draws from his texts and from history itself. She positions him and the play within larger histories of drama and theatre in India, engaging in a wide-ranging discussion that includes classical forms and Marathi ones like kirtan, tamasha, sangeet natak, and bharud, but also the emergence of modern theatre influenced by English and global trends. She also situates Phule within the worlds of subaltern and Dalit writing that will emerge in the century after his life. She sets these histories within the political forces of the day, including the enduring forces of Maratha and Peshwa history felt in the colonial period in Western India, and especially in Pune. Her extended analysis of the play will help the reader understand the many nuances, tropes, and references of Phule's work.

Phule as political performance artist can also be seen in the fact that this play was written specifically to be an entry into the annual Dakshina Prize, a hold-over from the Peshwa period when Brahman men were awarded gifts (dakshina) for their literary work, competition maintained during British rule. It was doubtful the 28-year-old Jotirao Phule thought he stood a chance of winning such a prejudicial competition. The play instead also took the form of protest itself, a wrench inserted into the cogs of the old caste-patriarchy intended to cause a catalyst, as well as a self-reckoning, delivered by an artist who also knew how to deploy his art in its own highly public and performative way. One may marvel at the brilliance and the courage of the Artist as a Young Man.

As Bhalchandra Nemade, the famous Marathi writer and scholar, says in his provocative Foreword to this work, Phule often appears to elide the violence, ruthless extraction, and racism of British colonialism. This is true of the characters of the play as well who 'do not seem to know that they were working tirelessly for the farmyard of England' (p. xii). This is of course at the heart of many debates about colonialism, subaltern politics, and the 'liberalism' of Empire that have shaped academic thought over the last thirty years. Just as many caste and class elites took advantage of the imposition of colonialism upon India, so too did women, Shudras, and Dalits make such strategic use of this political force on the subcontinent when it could improve their condition in some way, especially in relation to missionary and liberal ethics toward education—loaded as they were with producing certain kinds of subjects (Christian, docile, etc.). Mokashi-Punekar in her second essay suggests that Phule's occlusion from the main of post-colonialist historiography may be due to his 'rather soft position on imperialism, colonialism and missionary activity' and yet 'Phule reposes hope in the British rule, even as he interrogates the lacunae in their administrative capacity and will [because]...Only British rule, in his view, holds the promise of the overthrow of the Brahmins and their duplicitous hegemony' (pp. 73-4). This problem is brilliantly explored in the last of her substantive essays, 'Situating Phule within the History of Education in India'. In this work, Mokashi-Punekar skillfully intertwines an astute assessment of the invested politics of several players within nineteenth-century India. Eliding the 'sharp binary' of West and non-West, colonial and colonized, inaugurated by Said's work and underwriting all postcolonial thought, Mokashi-Punekar instead shows how multiple spheres overlapped in the nineteenth century around what education and the reform of educational systems meant both for those who sought to preserve their elite power and those that hoped for a means toward a better life and basic rights. She nuances Macaulay's (in)famous Minute as not an assault on all Indian literature and thought, but specifically on Brahmanism and caste patriarchy. She sustains a significant engagement around the differing class backgrounds of Protestant and Catholic missionary work—and why the former may have been more inclined to read caste opposition as a mode of class upliftment. Protestant missionary writing led to ways of reading Hindu mythological and iconographical materials and modes of argumentation that the Phules would also adopt in some measure. This essay crucially helps contextualize the role of the Padre in the play as a metonym for the kinds of rhetorical strategies the Phules would adopt. She outlines the collusion with the Imperial Government of a broad class of 'upper-caste' men. Alongside these state and social structures, Mokashi-Punekar engages with parallel movements where Protestant missionary concepts and rhetorical styles entered the Marathi and bilingual public sphere through new publications that offered radical critiques of normative and Brahmanical Hinduism. Mokashi-Punekar argues that in this sea of crosscurrents and eddies, non-elite and subaltern people sought ways to leverage all possibilities toward actual political change in their favour. While she does not make this connection explicitly, I read this cogent and careful essay as a direct response to how Phule felt about imperialism and colonialism—a moment of disruption in traditional regimes of knowledge segregation that might open spaces for the oppressed to seek the light of day. In other words, for the Phules there was not a question of the freedom of an abstract Indian nation, but a question of what kind of nation might have the moral and social capacity to stand free. Mokashi-Punekar's translation of *The Third Eye* and its accompanying set of essays is a gift to anyone with an inner eye open to the wide world.