



UNSUNG HEROES Volume I

A compilation

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

In the 19th century India was under British rule. It was also a land in need of social reform. This period gave rise to several movements in the country, some of them reformist, others fighting for independence. In the course of these struggles, many individuals distinguished themselves by leading the campaign for change and bringing about a new awakening in the country. In the face of great adversity they worked selflessly to achieve their objectives. *Unsung Heroes* is a tribute to the courage, vision, and sacrifice of some of these brave sons and daughters of India. This volume features Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Sarojini Naidu, Bal Gangadhar Kher, Maulana Azad, and Captain Lakshmi. All these visionaries fought for justice and the betterment of their fellowmen. Their commitment, heroism, selfless service, and compassion are an inspiration for all humanity.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule

1827 –1890

Crusader for Social Justice

J. V. Naik

Jotirao Govindrao Phule, an ardent votary of universal humanism, who devoted his life to the uplift of the downtrodden masses, occupies a unique place in the social history of modern India. He was not an armchair reformer, nor merely a theorist of reform. All his activities, all his writings and doings, were directed to one end—the liberation of the lower classes from the Brahmanic religious and social domination. He was a social revolutionary and crusader for social justice.

Jotiba, as he was affectionately called, belonged to the Mali (gardener) caste. He was born in Pune a few years after the British overthrow of the degenerate Peshwa rule in 1818. Although there is no unanimity on his exact date of birth, it is generally accepted that he was born in 1827. The original name of his family was Goreh. His great grandfather, who was Chaugula (low village servant) at Lalgun in Satara district, had migrated to Pune under some compelling circumstances. Jotiba's father, Govindrao, and his two brothers, followed the trade of florists and supplied flowers and flower-related articles to the Peshwa household. Hence they came to be known as florists or Phule.

Jotiba had his early education in a traditional Marathi school run by a Pantoji. From all accounts he was a hardworking student and was making good progress. Unfortunately, on the ill-advice of some orthodox persons, his father removed him from the school and made him work in the family garden with a view to continuing the traditional family business of horticulture. In 1840, Jotiba was married to Savitribai. A few years later, some enlightened neighbours of Govindrao impressed upon him the value of education and prevailed upon him to send his son to the Scottish Mission School. This was a turning point in Jotiba's life. He read the books of such authors as Thomas Paine, who ignited the American War of Independence, and Theodore Parker, the abolitionist who fought against slavery of the Blacks, which made a deep and lasting impact on his receptive mind. He established in 1848, against overwhelming odds, the very first school anywhere in India for Shudratishudra girls. He personally educated his devoted wife, Savitribai, and made her the teacher in that school, which was a remarkable, indeed a revolutionary feat at that point of time. Jotiba's father, fearing a high caste backlash,

drove his son and daughter-in-law out of his house. But nothing would deter Jotiba from his chosen path. In 1851 he established another school, this time for girls of all castes. Thus began the illustrious revolutionary social career of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, which ended only with his demise on 28 November 1890.

It is an indisputable historical fact that the notion of social justice implying equality was practically unknown in this country throughout its long history. The ancient Indian law-givers, symbolised by Manu, not only did not recognise equality—social, economic, political—but even created laws and institutions to enforce inequality and sanctify invidious distinction between man and man and between man and woman which they had purposefully made. Understandably, therefore, from Manu to Mandal has indeed been a long and arduous march in quest of social justice. In this quest, many a modern reformer, beginning with Raja Rammohun Roy, played an active role but none took so revolutionary a leap, both in terms of ideology and practical action, as did Mahatma Jotirao Phule, who has justly been hailed as the “Father of our Social Revolution”. Though the practical work that he did for the uplift of the downtrodden was confined to Pune and the surrounding region of Maharashtra, the ideals and the values he stood for have universal validity. No wonder, therefore, that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, regarded him as one of his three Gurus (the other two being the Buddha and Kabir), which is proof enough of his invaluable historical legacy.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule was the chief ideologue as well as the first most influential leader of the determined low caste protest movement in 19th century Maharashtra, and by the same token, the conscience-keeper and the revolutionary spokesperson of the nameless, faceless, voiceless millions of India. During his lifetime he did his best to infuse a new spirit in the dormant oppressed masses to fight for their rights, and thus in many respects he anticipated Mahatma Gandhi on the one hand, and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on the other. His revolutionary ideas were the product of his deep reflection on the social history of India from ancient times, of his keen perception of the existing social reality, of his appreciation of the Western influences that came in the wake of British rule, of his own painful practical experience and of his preparedness to fight every form of injustice—all informed by a comprehending credo, resulting in an irresistible urge to create a new life and new society, on the basis of rationality and equality.

“Every reform,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson, “was once a private opinion.” And the social reformer, like the intellectual, is by definition a disturber of the status quo. Mahatma Phule was no ordinary social reformer; he was a social revolutionary who

aimed at a total break with the brutal social past of the country, with a view to ushering in a total revolution. His philosophy of total revolution is to be gleaned from his numerous writings, and to be understood by the practical work that he did to ameliorate the condition of the oppressed. A man of strong convictions, his practice, unlike most other contemporary reformers, never fell short of his precepts. He always lived up to his ideals. The late Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde, himself a noted reformer and the founder of the Depressed Classes Mission Society, very aptly likened Phule's writings to a "wild fruit; it is perhaps not very juicy, but full of medicinal qualities".

A careful historical inquiry into the development of Phule's ideology reveals that though he had ever been a liberal-radical, in the first phase of his illustrious career his "liberalism was inclusive and not exclusive of the Brahmans", and that his later day iconoclasm displaying a militant anti-Brahman stance, was essentially a strong reaction to the collapse of the anti-caste movement, initiated by Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1814-1882) in the early 1840s through a reform association called the Paramahansa Sabha, due to the reactionary aspirations of the dominant upper caste Hindu orthodoxy to maintain the status quo. There is also enough evidence to suggest that Phule's utter disillusionment with the Prarthana Samaj of Bombay (1867) (counterpart of the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal), which emerged out of the ashes of the Paramahansa Sabha, may have substantially contributed to his growing conviction that emancipation of the Shudras and ati-Shudras could be achieved only through the total annihilation of the Brahmanical culture system that lay at the root of all social ills. Only a powerfully original mind can emancipate itself as completely as did Phule from the centuries old load of the tyranny of custom and tradition.

For a proper appreciation of Phule's ideology of universal humanism, in a historical perspective, the main features of his social philosophy need to be first noted:

First, Phule, in leading the low caste protest, put himself outside the Brahmanical culture system, and sought to create a counter-culture based on truth, justice and humanity.

Second, his fight was against Brahmanism and not Brahmans per se. He had a number of enlightened Brahman friends such as Govande, Walvekar, Paranjape and others who shared his perception of the existing reality and helped him in his endeavours to secure social justice for the downtrodden. He was also, to use modern terminology, perfectly secular in his outlook, free from any kind of communal bias. He likened Christ to the mythical Shudratishudra King Baliraja, who according to him, was crushed by the

Brahmanical avatara Waman. He also wrote a poem on Prophet Muhammad, which is indicative of his admiration for the Prophet and for the liberal, progressive potential of Islam.

Third, Phule, as rightly pointed out by G. P. Desphande, took “a remarkably modern and gendered view, which saw gender itself, not Varna, as the basis of oppression that women faced”. He did not categorise women on the basis of caste and creed; he “included all women in his notion of Shudratishudra and pleaded for equal and common rights for all men and women”. He was the first Indian to do so and, by the same token, to anticipate the UN Charter of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first article of which states: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Fourth, as a Satya Shodhak or Truth-Seeker, his sole concern was humanity, with the value of truth as a sure guide for human conduct, the test of which lies in the promotion of human welfare, and not traditional values. He was a humanist who developed his own unique brand of radical humanism which did not exclude even God or Nirmik. Thus as a rationalist his position was akin to that of the founders of “Philosophical Rationalism” viz. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, as distinguished from the empiricism of John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell.

Fifth, for Phule, social justice was that which assured the dignity of the individual. His view of social justice was akin to “the respect for person view” associated with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the famed German philosopher, and his concept of “categorical imperative” which is radically different from the Contract Theory of justice associated with Hobbes, Rousseau, and most recently with John Rawls as also from the Utilitarian Theory of “greatest happiness of the greatest number” of Jerome Bentham. Kant’s maxim enunciates the principle of respect for humanity: “People must be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means.” “It places in the people inalienable rights that cannot be contracted away, need not be established by contract, and do not depend upon whether they increase the sum of happiness.”

Later, Mahatma Gandhi became the votary of the “respect for person” view of social justice and so did his follower Martin Luther King in the United States. The social revolt of Periyar Ramaswami Naicker (1879-1973) and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar emanated from the same view of social justice.

Lastly and most importantly, in its concrete form, Phule's ideology, as explained by Gail Omvedt, was based upon his "identification with the peasant masses and an attachment to revolutionary values of equality and rationality". This inevitably led him to reinterpret Indian history and culture and develop his "non-Aryan Theory" with the concomitant theory of exploitation of the masses by the dominant class—the foreign Bhat—Brahmans.

In sum, Phule's social philosophy rested on the twin principles of rationalism and humanism.

Lal Bahadur Shastri **1904 – 1966**

The Little Giant

Gayatri Pagdi

Sixty-three years after the eclipse of the colonial presence ended, India's sun blazes in glory on the world sky as a source of inspiration to developing countries and an emerging superpower. While the powerful bright lights of attention and admiration remain focused on the contributions of a few prominent figures that made this possible with their leadership, there are those who lit up the darkness of a dispirited and disillusioned country with the quiet persistence of an oil lamp. In the black of tough circumstances they shone with the white wicks of hope, wisdom and courage. The sun made its entry and their undertaking was quickly forgotten.

Says a lovely little poem by Marathi poet Kusumagraj, an ode to an oil lamp, "Now that the sun dazzles, bringing in the glory of the day, you are being blown off. But it was none other than you who had dispelled the deep darkness of last night while the dawn seemed so far away. We acknowledge your contribution and honour you." In Buddhist and Hindu belief an oil lamp is a symbol of wisdom and light of hope. No one in the post-Gandhi days epitomises it better than Lal Bahadur Shastri. On 2 October, as the country remembers the Mahatma, there are very few who also remember this man, born on the same day in the year 1904, who followed in the footsteps of the Mahatma better than anyone else.

But if destiny hadn't played its hand, the man born in UP's Mughalsarai to a school teacher turned revenue clerk, would not have become the prime minister of the country.

Instead, he would have probably ended up as a cowherd. It so happened that as an infant, while in his mother's arms for a bath in the Ganga, Lal Bahadur, with all the jostling and pushing of the crowds, slipped out and fell into the basket of a cowherd. The crowds made it impossible to find him and the parents, shocked and disconsolate, lodged a complaint with the police. The cowherd took the arrival of this baby as a gift from God. But, with the help of the police, the baby safely returned to his mother's arms. The family was overjoyed.

Unfortunately, the joys did not last long for the family. By the time he was one and a half, his father, Sharada Prasad, passed away. The family was poor and his mother, Ramdulari Devi, moved back to her father's house in Mirzapur with her son and two daughters. Till the age of ten, Lal Bahadur grew up under the watchful eye of his maternal grandfather, Hazari Lal. The low financial status of the family, coupled with the realisation of the fact that he was fatherless, shaped his childhood psyche. One incident in particular was to leave its mark on him forever. As a six-year-old, one day, on his way back home from school, Lal Bahadur and his friends went to a mango orchard. As he stood at the tree, his friends climbed up to pluck mangoes. Meanwhile, the gardener came and caught hold of him. He scolded Lal Bahadur who pleaded with him to leave him, telling him that he was an orphan. The gardener said, "Because you are an orphan, it is all the more important that you must learn to behave right." The words left a deep imprint on Lal Bahadur's mind. They laid down the foundation of a life of strict morals, self-control, patience and humility. The frail child was going to be very strong in character. Young Lal Bahadur decided that he would always be honest and proud. He never forgot the lesson.

There was no high school where the family lived and at ten he was sent to Varanasi to his maternal uncle where he joined the Harishchandra High School. While in Varanasi, he once accompanied his friends to a fair on the other bank of the Ganga. On his way back he had no money for the boat fare so instead of borrowing it, he jumped into the river and swam to the other side. At another time, on being told by his mother that they did not have enough money to buy him the English reader being taught in school, he borrowed it from his friend and copied down the entire book.

As a boy Lal Bahadur loved reading and was devoted to Guru Nanak's verses. He idolised Bal Gangadhar Tilak and was an avid reader of his speeches as those of other leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, Lajpat Rai, and Gokhale. He was strongly influenced by the stories told to him by one of his teachers about the way the British took over India's independence. He also read Tulsidas and Kabir and the words of the saints reinforced his belief in humility and fuelled his rebellion against bigotry and injustice. In 1915, he

listened to a speech of Mahatma Gandhi. That became a turning point of his life. He decided to devote himself to the country's struggle for independence.

In 1921, when Mahatma Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement, Lal Bahadur was only seventeen years old. He was arrested for his participation but was let off because he was a minor. He then joined Kashi Vidyapeeth, an institution inaugurated by Gandhi for the students who boycotted the English educational system. Bhagwan Das, the first vice chancellor of the university, was a philosopher, thinker and humanist. He had a big impact on Lal Bahadur. It was here that Lal Bahadur studied works of many great eastern and western minds. He was greatly influenced by the works of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna.

In 1925, he graduated from the Kashi Vidyapeeth and was bestowed the title of *Shastri*. Being strongly against the caste system he dropped his surname Shrivastav and the title, instead, became a part of his name. He also enrolled himself as a life member of the Lok Sevak Mandal (Servants of the People Society) and began to work for the uplift of the oppressed classes in Muzaffarpur. Lala Lajpat Rai soon enlisted him as a life member in the Society, which meant that he could not seek any elective office for at least ten years. He dutifully fulfilled his pledge. Receiving a salary of rupees eighty per month for his services, he worked on promoting khadi, carrying bundles of it on his head and selling them from door to door.

In 1927, Shastri married Lalita Devi. The marriage ceremony was simple and in spite of the prevailing tradition of a hefty dowry, Shastri accepted only a charkha and a few yards of khadi. By 1930, he threw himself into the freedom struggle with Mahatma Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha.

The satyagraha saw him leading a door-to-door campaign, urging people to not pay land revenue and taxes to the British authority. He was jailed for a while. Young Shastri also displayed a taste for adventure and enterprise when in 1932, as the British refused to let the Indian nationalists fly their flag on the Allahabad clock tower, he, disguised as a veiled Muslim woman, managed to get past the British guards and raise it before they could stop him.

Shastri, who started off by being the secretary of the Congress Party, later became the president of the Allahabad Congress Committee. He was elected to the UP Legislative Assembly in 1937.

He was sent to prison several times for a total of nine years. On 8 August 1942, when Mahatma Gandhi gave a call of Quit India, Shastri, who had just come out after a year in prison, travelled to Allahabad where he was sure to be arrested again. When Lalita Devi mentioned that the jails were full, he said in his characteristic fashion, "Yes, but there's still room for me." He used the time to read the writings of Western philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, and Marx. He also translated the autobiography of Marie Curie into Hindi.

Shastri was a man of his word. Once, while he was in prison, one of his daughters fell seriously ill. He was released for fifteen days on the condition that he would keep away from political activities. However, tragically, his daughter passed away before he could reach her. He voluntarily returned to prison after performing her last rites before the expiry of the period. He had given his word; he would honour it no matter what. He remained in prison till 1946, a year away from India's freedom.

Following his country's successful unfettering of itself from foreign rule, this little dynamo of a man was called upon to play a bigger role in the governance of the country. He was appointed as parliamentary secretary in his home state of Uttar Pradesh and became the minister of police and transport under Govind Ballabh Pant's chief minister-ship. As the transport minister, he was the first one to appoint women conductors and as the minister in charge of the police department, he ordered that the police use jets of water instead of lathis to drive off unruly crowds.

In 1951, he was made the general secretary of the All-India Congress Committee, with Jawaharlal Nehru as the president. He became a close confidant of Nehru. Impressed with his efforts in reforming the state police department, Nehru invited Shastri to join the Union Cabinet as a minister for railways. Son of a humble schoolmaster and orphaned at a tender age, Shastri knew what poverty meant and understood the people's wants and sufferings. He provided more facilities to travellers in third class compartments and reduced the vast disparity between the first class and third class in the railways. Once during his tenure as minister, he was travelling on government business. When his train reached the station, his unassuming nature and his Gandhian simplicity saw him pick up his bag and alight from the train. A large group of dignitaries, waiting at the station to greet him, was looking for him in the first class compartment and was disappointed not to find him. When they passed by him, Shastri asked one of them who they were looking for. The sight of the minister quietly travelling second class without any fanfare and carrying his own luggage stunned people. Today, this lack of affectation on the part of a person in power would seem mythical.

Shastri's inherent humility made him tolerant of opposing viewpoints but he never wavered from his convictions. It was his conviction that made him resign as the minister for railways and transport following a train accident near Ariyalur in Tamil Nadu. Shastri accepted constitutional and moral responsibility for the unfortunate incident and stepped down. The gesture was unprecedented and both the Parliament and the country appreciated it greatly. Nehru, speaking on the incident as the prime minister, extolled Shastri's integrity and high ideals. He said he was accepting the resignation because it would set an example in constitutional propriety and not because Shastri was in any way responsible for what had happened.

A year later, as chief strategist for the Congress Party, Shastri masterminded the 1957 elections with great success. Soon he returned to the Cabinet, first as the minister for transport and communications, and then as the minister of commerce and industry. In 1961, he became minister for home. A man known for his ethics and morality, he was instrumental in appointing the Committee on Prevention of Corruption.

The responsibility of being the home minister of a nation with such varied religions, languages and heavy regionalism was great. Shastri's greatest strength was his ability to bring people together. When a volatile language dispute broke out in Assam, Shastri quietly worked out a settlement. When the Sikhs campaigned for a separate state, he was able to talk the Sikh leader out of a planned fast unto death. "I listen to different viewpoints," he said. "I have the capacity to understand them. I keep an open mind." As home minister, he noted, "Although I am a mediocre, yet I find that a mediocre like me is able to produce something new and original, not in a very high sense, but whatever new things are suggested in the Ministry, well, they generally come from me, and the officers who are far, far abler than myself go on with their routine way of thinking and, perhaps, their routine way of working." Said Nehru of him, "No one can wish for a better colleague in any undertaking. A man of the highest integrity, loyalty, devoted to ideals, a man of conscience and a man of hard work."

Nehru and Shastri shared a warm relationship. Recounts Sunil Shastri, his son, in an interview in 2004: "Once he was sent to Kashmir by Nehru to help resolve the theft in the Hazaratbal shrine. Nehru asked him whether he had enough woollens for the trip. 'Are you aware Kashmir must be having snowfall at this time?' he asked.

"My father showed him the jacket he was wearing and Nehru immediately gave him his own mink overcoat. My father was short in stature so he told Nehru the coat was quite long. But Nehru said woollen overcoats were always longer. That no one would know it was a borrowed one.

“On his return from Kashmir when father went to him to return the overcoat, Nehru asked him to keep it. The next day newspapers reported: ‘Nehru’s Mantle Falls on Shastri’.”

Following the Chinese invasion in 1962 Shastri played a key role in maintaining the internal security of the country. He declared on 4 February 1962: “If the Chinese will not vacate the areas occupied by her, India will have to repeat what she did in Goa. She will certainly drive out the Chinese forces.” He resigned his post after a few months now to be appointed a minister without portfolio, in which capacity he was a trusted adviser to the prime minister. Dynamic without being obtrusive, humble, open to ideas, and eager to maintain harmony, Shastri was growing in stature constantly. He was now second only to Nehru himself.

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