

Life and Works of Savitribai Phule : A Short Historical Analysis

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Abstract: *The dominant Brahmin and upper class of the society at Pune, Maharashtra, in early nineteenth century, did not allow men and women from backward communities to get education properly. Savitribai Phule and her husband Jyotiba Phule had faced these problems as they belonged to Mali community, the Other Backward Caste. So, they had struggled against conservative establishments in the society to establish the basic rights of lower castes such as education. Throughout the life, she had tried to give back the general rights to the women. But that path was not so easy to her. So questions suppose to come that how did she started her works? How did she uplift the women to acknowledge their basic rights? How did she succeed in her work? So, here, in this paper, I am going to throw light on the questions asked above and will attempt to hit upon its possible answers.*

Keywords: *Savitribai Phule, Jyotiba Phule, Women's Right, Education, Empowerment, Dalits, 'Bhide School'.*

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The Nineteenth Century was witness for political freedom movements in all over India against the British colonial power. It was believed that once we get back independence, our social problems would automatically be solved. But this idea was based on illusion. Social reformers, whatever they belong to northern India or deccan, they had given priority the social reformation than freedom. Among them, Savitribai Phule was an important social reformer, and became popular in Pune. Social reforms and developments were more important than independent to her.¹

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) was an Indian social reformer, educationalist, and poet from Pune, Maharashtra. She played an important role for improving women's rights in India during British rule. She worked for the upliftment of women in terms of education. She is regarded as an earliest female teacher of India and as the pioneer of Indian feminism.

Savitribai was born in the village at Naigaon in Satara District, Maharashtra. Her parents Lakshmi and Khandoji Neveshe Patil belonged to the Mali community, now an Other Backward Caste.² At the age of nine, she was married to 13-year-old Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), also known as Jyotirao Phule.

Savitribai was not educated at the time of her marriage, as she was from a backward caste and a woman.³ Dominant Brahmin and upper class of the early nineteenth century society in the context of the place Pune, Maharashtra, did not allow men and women from backward communities to get an education properly. Her husband Jyotiba Phule, once, was forced to leave school because of his caste. But eventually, on the encouragement of the Persian scholar Ghaffar Baig Munshi and a British official, Lizit Sahab, he was able to enroll in a Scottish Missionary School where he studied till class VII.⁴

Education:

It is important to understand the milieu in which the Savitribai and her husband grew up. Public education was yet to emerge. There were only a few missionary schools which were 'open to all'. Brahmins were the only caste group that received an education. In this context, she along with her husband, Jyotiba Phule, played an important role at improving women's rights in India.

Savitribai herself was taught by her husband Jyotiba at their home. He helped her how to read and write. Later, she was enrolled in two teacher's training programs. The first teacher's training course was at the institution run by an American missionary, Cynthia Farrar, in Ahmednagar. The second course was at a Normal School in Pune. After receiving and completing the training she became the teacher and was also treated as one of the earliest Indian woman teacher.

Then, Savitribai Phule started teaching girls at the Maharwada in Pune. She did it along with her mentor Jyotiba. Soon after, the Phule couple along started their own school for girls

known as 'Bhide School' at Bhide Wada, Pune on January 1st 1848. The place of this school was the house of Tatya Saheb Bhide, who provided some rooms to them to start their school, to inspire their works.

Jyotiba, at the age of 21, and Savitribai, 17, opened this school for women. It was not the country's first school for women started by them. But Savitribai was the one of the earliest woman teachers of modern India.⁵ It pained Savitribai that people mainly the Brahmins threw verbal abuses at her because she wanted to teach girls who belonged to the lower caste. But still she went ahead. Jotirao and Savitribai were running a hostel in their own house, where students from far off places would stay for the purposes of education.⁶

The school's curriculum at Bhide Wada was different from what was taught by Brahmin teachers in their home schools. It included mathematics, science and social studies instead of Brahmanical texts like *Vedas* and *Shastras*.

Unfortunately, Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule's success confronted with much resistance from the local community with conservative views. They faced such strong opposition because they belonged to marginalized caste. Savitribai used to carry an extra sari while walking towards her school as her conservative opposition used to throw stones, dung at her. On the other hand many Sudras began to oppose Jyotiba and Savitribai's work as education for Sudra was not legal about thousand years ago. So, work of Phule couple was recognised as 'evil' to the society.

Till 1849, Phule couple was living at Jyotiba's father's home. Once, Jyotiba's father asked them to leave his house because he regarded their work as sinful for him as well as for Brahmanas and Brahmanical texts.⁷

After moving out from father's home, Phule couple took shelter in the house of Usman Sheikh, friend of Jyotiba. Here Savitribai met Fatima Begum Sheikh (sister of Usman) a revolutionary feminist, and very soon they became close friends. Fatima Sheikh knew already how to read and write. Her brother Usman had encouraged Fatima to pursue the teacher training course. She went along with Savitribai to the Normal School and they both graduated together. It is said that she was one of the first Muslim woman teachers of India. Fatima and Savitribai opened a school in Sheikh's home in Pune in 1849.⁸ Their friendship, camaraderie and sisterhood define the core values of what we call intersectional feminism today.

In the 1850s, the Phule couple initiated two educational trusts—the *Native Female School*, Pune; and *The Society for Promoting the Education of Mahars, Mangs and Etceteras*. These two trusts ended up encompassing many schools which were led by Savitribai Phule and later, Fatima Sheikh.

By the end of 1851, the Phules were running three different schools in Pune with around 150 girl students. Phules's teaching methods were regarded as being superior in compare with government schools. As a result of this reputation, the number of girls enrolled in Phule's schools was more than that of the boys in government schools.⁹ Savitribai was the headmistress

of one of these schools. Fatima Sheikh was also asked to take over the responsibility of a school in 1855.

Once, Jyotiba had given an interview regarding women to the Christian missionary periodical *Dynanodaya*, on 15th September 1853. He said,

It did occur to me that the improvement that comes about in a child due to the mother is very important and good. So those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started the school for girls first. But my caste brethren did not like that I was educating girls and my own father threw us out of the house. Nobody was ready to give space for the school nor did we have money to build it. People were not willing to send their children to school but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar convinced their caste brethren about the benefits of getting educated.¹⁰

Savitribai was a crusader for women empowerment as she broke all stereotypes and spent her life promoting the noble cause of women's education. Together with her husband, she taught children from different castes. However, her move had been discouraged by many, especially upper caste, who opposed Dalits' educations. In her lifetime she built 18 such schools in the region Bhide Wada, Pune.¹¹

Savitribai was also a fiery author and poetess. She published *Kavya Phule* in 1854 and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1892. She also wrote a poem entitled 'Go, Get Education'. In her poems, she urges and encourages the oppressed communities to get and obtain education and break free from the chains of oppression. As a result of her experience and work, she became a role model of feminists.

Social Reform:

Savitribai Phule was a pioneer who is remembered for advocating big changes in caste-based Indian society too. She worked to abolish the discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. The practice of child marriage was prevalent in the 19th century and since the mortality rate was high at the time. Many young girls often became widows even before attaining puberty. Such widows used to shave their heads, wear a simple red sari and live a life of austerity. It was Savitribai who decided to stand up against these practices and organize a strike against the barbers in order to persuade them to stop shaving the heads of the widow.

In this connection, in 1852, Savitribai started the *Mahila Seva Mandal* to raise awareness about women's rights. She also called for a women's gathering in a place where members from all castes were welcome and everybody was expected to sit on the same mat. This is a symbolic

phenomenon and through it she wanted to remove caste discrimination or differentiation of any kind.

Savitribai was also an anti-infanticide activist. She noticed that women, – who after falling prey to sexual exploitation, and becoming pregnant, – either committed suicide or killed the newborn due to fear of being ostracized by the society. Then Savitribai decided to open a care centre for pregnant rape victims and helped deliver their children.

In 1863, Savitribai along with her husband opened an infanticide prohibition care centre called *Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha* (literally, 'Child-killing Prohibition Home') for pregnant rape victims. Pregnant widows were to provide them a safe space to give birth and save their children without the fear of society.¹² The Phule couple also simultaneously campaigned against child marriage while supporting and advocating widow remarriage. They strongly opposed to *Sati Pratha* and started a home for widows and forlorn children. The Phules had no children of their own,¹³ but they adopted the son born to a Brahmin widow Kashibai.¹⁴ He was named Yashwant Rao and went on to become a doctor. Later on, Savitribai become as 'mai' (mother) to them who got the opportunity to take breath freely for her.



Description: The painting entitled 'Mai' in Madhubani style by an artist Malvika Raj celebrating the life of Savitribai Phule

In this period religion was the dominant force of the society.¹⁵ Phule couple have tried to refine and revamp the society from conservativeness. The early 1870s marked the beginning of Phules' public activism. There were organizations like *Arya Samaj*, *Brahmo Samaj* and *Prarthana Samaj* started by Brahmin leaders that served only Brahmin interests. These were controlled

by Brahmins and upper castes. Jyotiba and his colleagues saw the need for an organization that would be served the interests of non-Brahmins. Then they started *Satya Shodhak Samaj* founded in 1873. Savitribai had always supported and inspired him to found it.

Jyotiba and Savitribai, – the pioneers of anti-caste movement and no doubt, the leading social reformers, – had started non-Brahmin movements through *Satya Shodhak Samaj*. This institution reawakened the Mangas, Maharas, Chambharas, Kumbhar, Kolis, Koshtis, Kunbis, Malis, Ramoshis etc – the dehumanized castes of nineteenth century Maharashtra.¹⁶ This institution was mainly in the hands of the backward *Shudras*, though many liberal Brahmin friends of Phule were also associated with its activities.¹⁷ Savitribai initiated the first *Satya Shodhak Marriage*—a marriage without dowry, Brahmin priests or Brahminical rituals. Yashwant, too, had a *Satya Shodhak* inter-caste marriage.

After Jyotiba's death in 1890, Savitribai carried forward the work of the organization *Satya Shodhak Samaj* and also chaired the annual session held at Saswad in 1893. She continued to lead the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* till her death. A woman chairing a session in those times was revolutionary in itself.¹⁸

In Savitribai's letter to Jyotiba (published in *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*), Savitribai talks about an incident that took place in 1868 at Naigaon. A Brahmin boy was on the verge of being killed by villagers for his 'unholy' alliance with a Dalit girl when Savitribai intervened. She writes,

I came to know about their murderous plan. I rushed to the spot and scared them away, pointing out the grave consequences of killing the lovers under the British law. They changed their mind after listening to me.¹⁹

Savitribai also worked to abolish discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. She found the treatment of the untouchables a problem and opened a well in her house in 1868 so that, people who were refused drinking water by the upper caste can use it.²⁰

'When Jyotiba died, there was an argument about who would light the pyre, between the adopted son and the family member. While the argument was going on, she (Savitribai) took up the fire and lit the pyre on her own. That is why I feel she deserves the name, Kranti Jyoti,' says Cynthia Stephen, a Bengaluru-based independent writer, researcher and activist.

Savitribai and her adopted son, Yashwant, opened a clinic at stern outskirts of Pune, an infection free area to treat those affected by the worldwide third global pandemic of bubonic plague appeared in the area around Nala-sopara in 1897. Savitribai died of an infection while taking care of patients. Her death was a heroic death trying to save the son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad who bore the virus of Plague. Savitribai rushed to his side and carried him on her back to the hospital. In the process, Savitribai caught the plague and died on 10th of March, 1897.²¹

Savitribai Phule's achievements were diverse and numerous posing a brave and pioneering challenge to Manuwadi culture.

Sonali Meshram, – whose drawings of anti-caste leaders and social activists are widely shared on social media, – says that the schools teach about Saraswati as the goddess of knowledge. But They do not talk about the work done by Savitribai or Fatima in schools, nor do they mention their names on teacher's day. Instead, they influence our kids to be religious.

So, it is true that Fatima Sheikh, Savitribai Phule and people like them are indeed the reason behind women getting education today. It is true that their role is confined to the work done for 'certain' communities, but they are being icons to the modern feminists. They provided messages us that we cannot fight for 'women's rights' without acknowledging issues regarding gender and caste.

But times have changed. People are trying to acknowledge Savitribai for her iconic contribution in the society. Central and State government mutually decided to change the name of 'The University of Pune'. And that is why 'The University of Pune' has been officially renamed to 'Savitribai Phule Pune University' after a ceremony on 9th August 2014. On 10th March 1998, a stamp was released by India Post in honour of Savitribai Phule. A Kannada biopic movie was made on Phule in 2018. On 3rd January 2020, Friday, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid his tribute to Savitribai Phule on her birth anniversary, saying she dedicated her life to social unity, education and women empowerment. Her struggle for social consciousness will always inspire the countrymen.²²

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