

Savitribai Phule: Champion of Women's Education

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Abstract

The advent of the 19th century witnessed numerous social reformers playing pivotal roles in transforming India into a more progressive and forward-looking nation. These social reformers fought against various social evils like sati, widow remarriage, child marriage, casteism, and more. These great visionaries worked tirelessly towards progress and also encouraged women to liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and assert their self-respect. One such visionary who emerged as one of India's most eminent role models was Savitribai Phule, The ever-positive and pragmatic wife of Jyotirao Phule. Savitribai is widely credited with laying the foundation for educational opportunities for women in India and also contributed significantly to the women's rights movement during the British rule.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Casteism, Pragmatic, Jyotirao, Savitribai Phule, Educational, Opportunities, Intervention, Propagated, Fervent, Ardently, Orthodox, Harassment.

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, India experienced a notably inflexible caste system that surpassed the present-day structure. The narrative often conveyed implies that the caste system originated from divine intervention, categorizing individuals based on their occupations, seemingly innocuous and legitimate. The disparity was starkly different from the commonly propagated narrative. Those who belong to the upper castes have often constructed regulations that favor their own interests over others, leading to a system that is unfair and unequal. They systematically subjugated the lower castes and Dalits, who were perceived as inferior even among the lowest castes, ensuring their subordination to sustain the economy while affording comfort to the upper castes. Educational opportunities remained exclusive primarily to upper-caste children, predominantly boys while learning itself was perceived as a threat. Women were also denied access to education, by and large, regardless of caste and social class. It is disheartening to think that women were once expected to stay at home and provide labor and services¹ without receiving acknowledgment or compensation. However, it is heartwarming to know that there were individuals like Savitribai Phule who

were inspired by the efforts of social reformers and dedicated their lives to helping women in such situations.

Objectives of the Study

- To promote a society without any discrimination against women.
- To study the impact of her efforts on women's education in India.
- To Identify the challenges encountered by Savitribai Phule in her mission for women's education.
- To sort out programs for the betterment and liberation of women
- To know the various achievements of Savitribai Phule

Methodology

The narrative and analytical methods have been used in the present study. It critically examines the works and contributions made by Savitribai Phule in the realm of women's education, social reforms, and contributions to Indian society.

In India's social and educational history, Savitribai and her spouse Jyotirao Phule were a noteworthy marriage. Their passionate dedication was focused

on promoting social justice and gender equality. Recognizing the critical role that education plays in strengthening underprivileged groups, such as women and lower castes, they committed their lives to promoting education in these communities. Alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule was a Marathi poetess, teacher, and social reformer who passionately supported women's rights and education.²

The foundation for women's empowerment via education was established by Savitribai Phule's groundbreaking work, which has enabled numerous Indian women to succeed in a variety of sectors today³ This essay aims to highlight Savitribai Phule's contributions and accomplishments.

Savitribai was born in Naigaon⁴ in the Satara district of Maharashtra, on January 3, 1831. Back then, it was customary to wed a girl at a young age. Unfortunately, she married Jyotirao Phule at the young age of 10, despite her wish to study. But Jyotirao was a visionary who began teaching his wife at home because he genuinely believed that education was important for women. Seeing how determined he was to educate his wife and advance women's education in general is encouraging. Because of his influence, Savitribai decided to make it her life's work to advance women's education and freedom from society's patriarchal restrictions. Savitribai became India's first female teacher when Jyotirao established a school for girls on January 14, 1848, and she began teaching there. The schoolmistress, Savitribai, has selflessly offered to dedicate herself to the advancement of women's education without receiving any compensation.⁵

Many girls from different communities were able to receive an education at her school, but girls from lower castes were not allowed to attend. She used to be severely harassed every day as she walked to school by a group of orthodox males who would follow her and verbally attack her. As she went by,

they threw stones, mud, and dirt at her. She began carrying an additional sari to wear to school. This couple continued to educate girls from all walks of life because they were driven by a strong sense of purpose.

Savitribai took an inclusive stance toward society. She engaged in revolutionary efforts on behalf of all oppressed groups, including Muslims, women from all backgrounds, Dalits, and members of the lower castes. Savitribai knew that knowledge was not going to be enough to lift those ladies out of their enslavement on its own. She believed that education was a growth of the intellect itself, not just a matter of memorizing alphabets. Her creative teaching strategies must have struck a chord with the neighborhood. Her ability to grow to three schools and enroll 150 female pupils by 1851 is quite remarkable. Children were given stipends by Savitribai to keep them from quitting school. In order to promote awareness of women's rights in India, she formed the Mahila Seva Mandal, a women's group. Seeing such measures being taken to effect positive change is encouraging.⁶ worked to reestablish women's rights, instill in them a sense of self-respect, and, if need, use agitation to get what they wanted. Despite strong criticism from the dominant castes towards the couple's efforts in women's education, the British Government acknowledged and commended them for their services. It was decided that Savitribai was an "Excellent Teacher."

Phule's Initiatives Still Inspire the Modern-Day Education System

- She started teaching innovatively by telling short stories, reading poems, and introducing sports sessions
- The school conducts regular parent-teacher meetings.

- She took initiatives to reduce malnutrition in children by taking care of the health of every child in school
- Savitribai Phule published "*Kavya Phule*" in 1854⁷ marking her debut collection of poems.

Those days, child marriage produced child widows. When young females lost their spouses, they were forced to lead austere lifestyles, had their heads cut off, and were not allowed to apply makeup. Savitribai and her spouse Jyotirao Phule orchestrated a groundbreaking demonstration in opposition to this abhorrent behavior. She gathered all of the local barbers and forced them to stage a protest in which they refused to tonsure widows' heads. Savitribai spearheaded the first-ever Indian protest against the dishonor meted out to widows. Remarrying as a widow was encouraged for Savitribai.

She continued to support widow remarriage even into the nineteenth century after this. The atrocities committed against widows continued even after widowhood was imposed. The wealthier individuals were actually taking advantage of these poor women. Widows were subject to harsh penalties and social disgrace, along with their impoverished offspring.

Savitribai Phule and her husband challenged the caste system and worked to uplift the underprivileged. To protect survivors, they founded a "Home for the Prevention of Infanticide" in their own home in 1863.⁸ She committed her life, along with her husband's, to advancing the fight against the caste system and starting a movement for gender parity. For those social reformers who are dedicated to this cause, they remain role models.

Their adopted son, Yeshwant, became a doctor by training and finally assisted his mother in all the wonderful deeds she performed. Setting an example for others, she married him in 1873 under the auspices of the truth-seeker's organization, or 'Satya Shodhak Samaj'. The samaj believes that the caste system should be totally eliminated. It held that a kind

and merciful creator bestowed universal rights upon all creatures at birth. The Samaj disapproved of Vedic society, Vedic literature, and Upanishads, and the dominance of Aryan society.⁹

Above all, Savitribai was a gifted writer. She was an accomplished Marathi and English poet. She discusses the need of education in one of her poems, saying, "everything gets lost without knowledge, we become animals without wisdom."¹⁰ She also writes about the oppression of Brahmins and the emancipation of women. She had to be the first Indian lady poet to tackle such contentious subjects. Her first book of poetry was published in 1854, and the next one followed in 1892. When Savitribai led her husband's burial procession, and she carried the funeral mud-pot, or "titve," herself.

A terrible famine that struck Maharashtra between 1876 and 1887 claimed many lives due to malnutrition and suicide. As antisocial individuals exploited the circumstance and went back to usury and illicit selling, Savitribai organized 52 relief centers and provided free food for the public. She repeated the same action in 1896. When the plague was spreading widely in 1897, she formed relief camps and worked nonstop to provide for the needs of children. Because of this, Savitribai herself developed the illness, which ultimately claimed her life on March 10, 1897. Despite this, she made history and left a lasting legacy that now serves as an inspiration to the next generation of leaders.

Conclusion

She was among the first female social reformers in the nation, defying the ludicrous Hindu social traditions that prevailed and the male-dominated society at large to pursue her mission of helping women and the oppressed. Yet, because of Brahmanical hegemony over the intellectual sphere, she couldn't secure a rightful position in the historical records. The government's recognition of her

contribution came a century after her passing. In March 2015, the University of Pune was renamed as the "Savitribai Phule University of Pune." Additionally, in 1998, the government of India issued a stamp in her honor. She remains an inspirational figure whose courage and dedication to social reform continue to inspire generations, leaving a lasting impact on India's history and the fight for equality.

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