

# Savitribai Phule: First Female Teacher and Feminist Philosopher in Colonial India

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**Archana**

Associate Professor,  
Department of History,  
Meerut College, Meerut,  
Uttar Pradesh, India



**Reetu Singh**

Dy. Registrar,  
MNIT, Jaipur,  
Rajasthan, India

## Abstract

Gender theorists have evolved different approaches to study gender. Under the influence of Jyotirao (her mentor and supporter) Savitribai had taken women's education and their liberation from the cultural patterns of the male-dominated society as mission of her life. She worked towards tackling some of the then major social problems, including women's liberation, widow remarriages and removal of untouchability. The social reforms movement initiated by Jyotiba Phule gained strength and undoubtedly brought about changes in the social structure, promoting in the process, equality and fraternity in the supervision of Savitribai not only during Jyotiba lifetime but also after that. Raising the problem of women's oppression and her thoughts on resolving women's domination through their own efforts and autonomy makes her compare with the other nineteenth century male feminist Philosophers. The present article will endeavour to bring out the salient points in the feminist ideology of Savitribai Phule as a crusader for gender justice and will try to locate her feminist ideology in the overall social environment in the colonial India.

**Keywords:** Savitribai Phule, Jyotiba Phule, Education, Gender Justice, Untouchable, Equality.

## Introduction

*Go and read and write, be self-sufficient, be a hard worker*

*Work - gather knowledge and money*

*All is lost without knowledge, without knowledge we become animals*

*Therefore, do not sit empty, go and study*

It was the fact that women in nineteenth century India were leading the life of a subordinate human being. Women were considered an object of male-longing. During this period a ray of light shone in the form of Savitribai Phule. Born into a family of farmers in 1831, in the backward Mali community in Maharashtra, Savitribai, as was the practice then, was married (when she was just nine) to activist and social-reformer Jyotirao Phule, who was 12. Jyotiba Phule was a strong supporter of women education. He knew education can be an instrument for the independence and freedom of woman. Therefore, he educated Savitribai himself and with her husband's support, Savitribai learned to read and write<sup>1</sup>. Since at that time the idea of teaching girls was considered to be a radical one, both Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule recognised that education was one of the central planks, through which women and the depressed classes could become empowered and hope to stand on an equal footing with the rest of the society<sup>2</sup>. For this, both of them eventually went on to found India's first school for girls called Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848<sup>3</sup> and Savitribai was nominated as the first women teacher of the school<sup>4</sup>. After starting the first school in 1848, school for adults was started at Usman Sheikh's wada in Pune. Left home with Jotirao for educating Shudra and Ati Shudra's in 1849<sup>5</sup>. The orthodox Brahmins were very much disturbed by this act. They met father of Jyotirao – Govindrao and convinced him to stop his son and daughter-in-law from such activity of educating the Shudra-Ati-Shudras and the females, as it was considered as a-dharma. It is against the will of the Hindu dharma shastras. They convinced Govind Rao to the extent he told his son that he would expel him from the house if he did not stop this activity and he did accordingly. Initially, he tried to convince his son Jyotirao, but when he failed to convince him not to educate the

downtrodden people, the father threw him out of the house at midnight. Savitribai accompanied her husband in this critical moment; instead of staying back with the orthodox in-laws, she preferred to be with her husband. Jyotirao worked part-time in a missionary school for his livelihood and dedicated the rest of the time to their school, while Savitribai would work full-time, without any remuneration, at the school.

#### Review of Literature

Braj Ranjan Mani & Pamela Sardar, *A Forgotten Liberator; The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*, Mountain Peak, New Delhi, 2008.

"*A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*", is the first endeavour in English to spotlight upon one of the supreme names who fought against the totalitarianism of caste and other social evils in India. The book brought out by "Mountain Peak Publishers" on the life of Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) is a collection of essays written by six authors, those account the life struggle of marginalized and lower class women.

Ms Reeta and Dr. Vineet Raj, *First Indian Women Teacher Savitribai Phule: Biography of Savitribai Phule*, Educreation Publishing, New Delhi, 2013.

In this book "Speeches of Savitribai Phule" discusses the five speeches which she basically delivered on issues which are relevant in social economic and political spheres. Similarly, poems of Savitribai Phule" deals in detail with poems Kavya Phule. The poem and their explanations are systematically discussed in this chapter. Her poem clearly shows the bad condition of women and Shudras. Some poems strongly suggest that, education is God and English is mother without which men are like animals. Most part of her poems strongly opposes Brahmin ideology which is hegemonic over Shudras and women.

Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste Conflict and Ideology, Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

This book concentrates on the first leader of this movement, Jotirao Phule. It shows him as its first ideologist, working out a unique brand of radical humanism. It analyses his contribution to one of the most important and neglected social developments in western India in this period. This process of identity formation is studied against the background of the earlier history of caste relations in this area of India. The movement illustrates the role of ideology and religion in the struggle against British colonial power. The leaders of this movement were convinced that religious hierarchies had combined with the effects of British colonial rule to produce inequality and injustice in many fields, from religion to politics and education.

Luise von Flotow and Hala Kamal (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender*, Taylor and Francis, New York, 2020

The book provides a comprehensive, state-of-the-art overview of feminism and gender awareness in translation and translation studies today. Bringing together work from more than 20

different countries including India, this Handbook represents a transnational approach to this topic, which is in development in many parts of the world. It provides an overview of key questions and case studies of work of eminent scholars worked/working on feminism and gender. In the second chapter of the book, Volga an Indian translator, who is popular for translating feminism into telugu, is highly inspired by Savitribai Phule. He wrote that Savitribai should be highly appreciated and he is first to translate her works into telugu.

Rajiv Kumar Jha, *Changes in Socio Economic Status of Women in Bihar after Independence*, Educreation Publishing, New Delhi, 2017.

Women represent nearly half of the country's population. Therefore, the need to bring women into the mainstream of the development is the prime concern of the country today. Investment towards women's capacity building and empowering them to exercise their choice is not only valuable in itself; simultaneously it is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development of society. The broad objectives of study are to examine the changes of socio economic status of women in Bihar.

#### Nurturing the Approaches of Jyotiba Phule

*"More than Jotirao, his wife deserves praise. No matter how much we praise her, it would not be enough. How can one describe her stature? She cooperated with her husband completely and along with him, faced all the trials and tribulations that came their way. It is difficult to find such a sacrificing woman even among the highly educated women from upper castes. The couple spent their entire lifetime working for people."*

– Narayan Mahadev alias Mama Paramanand (31st July 1890) <sup>6</sup>

The desire to reform the society was so strong that both Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule were then ready to face challenges as well as resistance from the orthodox Indians at that time. They started movements like girl education and upliftment of untouchables to bring desirable changes in the Indian society. They were engaged in a passionate struggle to build a movement for equality between men and women and for social justice<sup>7</sup>. According to them, society should be based on the concepts of liberty and equality both for men and women and this was possible only by the spread of modern and scientific education especially among women. Recognising that knowledge is power and that the progress of women and *Dalit-Bahujans* was impossible without it, they dedicated their entire life to spreading education. From 1848 to 1851 Jyotirao and Savitribai founded 18 schools at Pune in Maharashtra<sup>8</sup>. They lived in the Dalit-working class locality in Pune. The cultural environment surrounding them had an extremely important role to play in their socialization. A night school was also opened by the Phule couple in 1855, for agriculturist and labourers, so that they can work in

daytime and attend school at night<sup>9</sup>. In September 1873, Jyotirao along with Savitribai and his followers formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj<sup>10</sup> (Truth searchers society)<sup>11</sup> with the main objective of liberating the lower caste and protecting them from exploitation and atrocities<sup>12</sup>. It must be mentioned here that Jyotirao three Brahmin friends Vinayak Bapuji Bhandarkar, Vinayak Bapuji Dentor and Sitaram Sakharam Datar helped Jyotirao and his colleagues to set up the Satya Shodhak Samaj<sup>13</sup>. According to Rosalind O'Hanlon, "this initiative set off a broad and very active movement of the lower castes which had to have a profound effect upon the growth of political organization in the Bombay Presidency, and the shaping of the nationalist movement towards the end of the century"<sup>14</sup>. Phule and the society developed programs to educate the masses and reduce Brahmanical ritualistic power<sup>15</sup>.

The objective of the samaj, which included Muslims, Non-Brahman, Brahmans, and government officials as members, was to free women, Shudra, Dalit and other less privileged ones from getting oppressed and exploited. In 1875, in its organizational report, the Satyashodhak Samaj described its goal as the emancipation of the Shudras (socially backward castes) from the Brahmin. When Phule established to the Satya Shodhak Samaj Savitribai became the head of the women's section which included ninety female members<sup>16</sup>. Savitribai worked as head of its women's section and following the demise of her husband on November 28, 1890, she became the chairperson of the samaj. Savitribai carried forward the work of her husband through the samaj leading it till her last breath.

#### **Savitribai Ideas of Education and Social Work**

Jyotiba was not only an innovator of consciousness but also a visionary. Jyotirao educated and trained Savitribai, his first and ideal candidate for this job of a teacher. Savitribai compares Jyotiba with Sant Tukaram<sup>17</sup>. She says, as the Sant Tukaram, similar is Sant Jyotiba. Jyotiba's biggest contribution is to show the way to deal with the hypocrisy of the weapons of Brahmanism by motivating the Shudra Dalit masses towards education. Savitribai and Jyotirao faced fierce resistance from the orthodox elements of society for this. Jyotirao was Savitribai's mentor and supporter. Under his influence Savitribai had taken women's education and their liberation from the cultural patterns of the male-dominated society as mission of her life. She worked towards tackling some of the then major social problems, including women's liberation, widow remarriages and removal of untouchability. Even though her poems, which were written in Marathi, she advocated values such as humanism, liberty, equality, brotherhood, rationalism and the importance of education among others. In 1863, Jyotirao and Savitribai also started a care center called 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha,' possibly the first ever infanticide prohibition home founded in India. It was set up so that pregnant Brahmin widows and rape victims can deliver their children in a safe and secure place thus preventing the killing of widows as well as reducing the rate of infanticide<sup>18</sup>.

The British government honoured the couple in 1852 for their contribution to the cause of women's education<sup>19</sup>. Savitribai Phule wrote two poetry books in her lifetime. The first poetry collection 'Kavya Phule' was printed in 1854, when he was only 23 years old. The second book of poems 'Bawanakashi Subodharatnakar' came in 1891, which was written by Savitribai Phule as a biography of her soulmate Jyotiba Phule after attaining Parinirvana. According to the famous author MG Mali, 'Bawanakashi Subodh Ratnakar is the first authentically available biography of Jyotiba Phule, written by Savitribai Phule in poetic style. Savitribai Phule describes the entire society and its contractors disciples from the religious hypocrisy of that time in Bawan Kashi<sup>20</sup>. She also edited four of Jyotiba Phule's speeches on Indian history in 1856. Savitribai's three letters to Jyotiba spread over twenty years is also a precious and rare piece of literature as women rarely wrote letters in those days, leave alone to their spouses. She discussed social issues in her letters. Savitribai's correspondence is also remarkable because they give us an insight into life and into women experience of the time.

Savitribai's literature expressed the pain, ambition and feeling of the modern, liberated Indian woman. She was able to develop her own voice and agency at a time when women of all classes were ruthlessly suppressed and lived a secondary-human being existence. She discussed many important subjects in these poems like education, caste distinction and child welfare along with the subjects of social reform. Savitribai has placed the importance of education through her poems. A broad analysis of her poems in Kavyaphule reveals that Savitribai had many sides and shades to her nature and personality. It is a piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery. In her poem titled, "Go, Get Education" in Kavya Phule, she wrote<sup>21</sup>:

*"Be self-reliant, be industrious  
Work, gather wisdom and riches,  
All gets lost without knowledge  
We become animal without wisdom,  
Sit idle no more, go, get education  
End misery of the oppressed and forsaken,  
You've got a golden chance to learn  
So learn and break the chains of caste.  
Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast."<sup>22</sup>*

The influence of Jyotiba's thought on Savitribai is quite clear in her writings. She had internalized Phule's thought and had the intellectual capacity to understand its significance in society. She seems to be the first person who had understood and assessed Phule's pioneering role in the liberation of the exploited masses. She categorically states in her last poem 'Dialogue at dawn' that Jyotiba is the new dawn on the untouchable's horizon<sup>23</sup>. She visualized the dream and philosophy of Phule and became dedicated supporter of his work. In her literature she has repeated the distress, aspirations, and feelings of modern, liberated woman of India. The influence of Jyotiba's thought on Savitribai is quite clear in her writings. She said that<sup>24</sup>...

"...Let knowledge be your God, pursue it all the way

With determination attain success, don't let your mind sway

Knowledge is so precious; it is the greatest gift of all

One with a treasury of knowledge, a wise person people do call."

### **Savitribai Phule as an Inspiration for Future Generation**

Savitribai founded a school for untouchable girls in 1852<sup>25</sup>. She remained an inspiration for the young girls she taught. She encouraged them to take up activities like writing and painting. One of the essays written by a student of Savitribai called Muktabai Salve became the face of Dalit feminism and literature during that period<sup>26</sup>. Savitribai had many firsts to her credit — she was the first woman teacher of the first women's school in India and a pioneer in modern Marathi poetry. She was the first social reformer who is considered to be one of India's first modern feminists. Among her other accomplishments, she is especially remembered for being India's first female teacher who worked for the upliftment of women and untouchables in the field of education and literacy. She is known as harbinger of modern Marathi epic. Savitribai was a "Vidya Jyoti" for all those who want to do something in the field of education.

In her writings also she constantly emphasizes the importance of education and physical work for knowledge and prosperity. She felt that women must receive an education as they were in no way inferior to men; they were not the slaves of men. Savitribai set up a care centre for widows and even encouraged them to remarry. She also fought for the rights of the untouchables. She and her husband worked dauntlessly during the famines starting from 1876. They not only distributed free food in different areas but also launched 52 free food hostels in Maharashtra. Braj Ranjan Mani praises the efforts of Phule couple and writes, "Savitribai Phule struggled and suffered with her revolutionary husband in an equal measure, but remains obscured due to caste and gender negligence. Modern India's first woman teacher, a radical exponent of mass and female education, a champion of women liberation, a pioneer of engaged poetry and a courageous mass leader who took on the forces of caste and patriarchy certainly had her independent identity and contribution. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite-controlled knowledge-production that a figure as important as Savitribai Phule fails to find any mention in the history of modern India<sup>27</sup>."

Savitri and Jotirao were childless. There was immense pressure on Jotirao to remarry in order to produce an heir but he would have none of it. Instead, they chose to adopt a child. It so happened that once, in the year 1874, while taking a stroll in the dead of night on the banks of the River Mutha, Jotirao saw the figure of a woman, about to dive into the river to end her life. He ran and caught her. He learnt that she was a widow, six months pregnant and a victim of rape. Jotirao consoled her and took her home. Savitri accepted her with open arms. The woman delivered a

male child who was named Yashwant. The Phules adopted Yashwant, made him their legal heir and educated him. Yashwant became a doctor<sup>28</sup> later on and lit the pyre of Jyotiba. This incident opened new horizons for the couple<sup>29</sup>. Savitribai also persuaded the British government to initiate relief work during the 1897 draught. When bubonic plague spread in Pune in 1897, Savitribai and her son opened a clinic to treat the sick. However, she succumbed to the disease in March the same year.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To discuss the practical aspect of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule Philosophy.
2. To examine the social reform movement made by Savitribai Phule as first women reformer.
3. To scrutinize the role of Savitribai in dalit and widow women upliftment.
4. To judge the contemporary relevance of Savitribai's Philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

Under Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule's leadership and example the anti-Brahman, anti-caste movements, women inequality and transformation movement slowly began to take on a bottom-up revolutionary character. They was not interested in reform—a term he found to be too wedded to preserving the status quo—but interested in revolution—a revolution beginning first in the shudratishudra psyche, in women education and then spreading out into society. Phule couple introduced a new image of religion which was known as universal religion. Savitribai Phule wanted to introduce practical philosophy of human being, individual growth from education; love, care and humanism as virtue, her emphasis on self-reliance and wants to interpret Indian tradition in her own way. Despite tremendous obstacles, she rose to become a productive, inspiring and capable teacher, leader, thinker and writer. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite-controlled knowledge production that a figure as important as Savitribai Phule fails to find any mention in the history of modern India. Her life and struggle deserves to be appreciated by a wider spectrum, and made known to non-Marathi people as well. Savitribai was a visionary who visualized gender justice through various activities by civil society and the State. Today, government programmes like the 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan', the Right to Education Act, free education to girls (in some States) and the Dalit Upliftment schemes, that incentivize education, may seem like modern concepts, but even 150 years back Savitribai had set a precedent.

### **Endnotes**

1. *Ms Reeta and Dr. Vineet Raj, First Indian Women Teacher Savitribai Phule: Biography of Savitribai Phule Edu creation publishing New Delhi 2013, p 2.*
2. *For this, Jyotirao prepared his wife Savitribai to teach in the girls' school, with a view to educating the women first, in order to bring in the value of equality at home.*
3. *Before this, she had started a school with Jyotirao's cousin SagunaAau (maternal cousin sister of Jyotirao Saguna, lovingly called*

- SagunaAau by JyotiRao, Aaee = mother) in Maharwada in 1847 in a backward community. SagunaAau worked as a nanny for a British officer's son. She therefore understood and was able to converse in English. She used this knowledge to inspire JyotiRao. JyotiRao was thus attracted towards education. The first school had stopped working abruptly due to lack of acceptability for education for lower caste people in those days.
4. Rajiv Kumar Jha, *Changes in Socio Economic Status of Women in Bihar after Independence*, Educreation Publishing, 2017, New Delhi, p 23.
  5. Jyotiba Phule was strongly against exploitation. He wrote this book 'Ghulamgiri' to reveal the dirty face of this mental slavery to the people of the world. This book is characterized by how the Bhatt-Brahmins deprived the Shudras and Atishudras of the means of education, land and property. Bahujans are native here, they are the Bhumiputra of this country. The Aryans came from outside and fought with the Shudras and Atishudras here for centuries. With the help of many types of conspiracies, the Brahmins won the Shudratishudras and then pushed them into the abyss of slavery. Mental slavery makes the person and society stagnant. The Brahmins here did a great job of keeping the Bahujans motionless for years, according to Jyotiba Phule. (Jyotiba Phule, *Gulamgiri*, Translated by Dr. Anil Surya, Gautam Book Centre, New Delhi, 2007, p 23)
  6. Dr. T. Sundararaman, *NCERT Memorial Lecture Series: Savitribai Phule First Memorial Lecture*, 12 December 2008, Mumbai, P 7.
  7. While studying in school, Jyotirao read a book- 'Rights of Man', written by Thomas Paine. This book gave him a new insight into social transformation.
  8. Op. Cit. (Ms Reeta), p 3.
  9. Prof. Santoshkumar M Katke, *Savitribai Phule Contribution towards Indian Social Elements – A Study*, *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, November 2019, Volume 6, Issue 11, p 26.
  10. Mr. Debabrata Bhattacharjee, *Women's Issues: Contribution of the Reform and Reformers in Colonial India*, *Economic and Business Review*, February 2015 Vol - 3 Issue- 2, p 250.
  11. In 1949 Padmanji and Narayan Raghunath after leaving the Mandali on some issue set up the Satyasodhak Sabha the 'Truth Seeking Society'. This group came much closer to a definite adoption of the bible as divine revelation and some of its members converted to Christianity soon afterwards. As Jyotiba was closely associated with Padmanji he got the idea about Satyashodak Samaj from them. As quoted in "Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India" by Rosalind O'Hanlon Cambridge University Press, 2002, Cambridge, p 101.
  12. Dr. Meena Gaikwad, *The Ideas of Modern Indian Political Thinkers on Women*, Laxmi Book Publication, Solapur, 2017, p 83.
  13. Sanjay Paswan, Pramanshi Jaideva (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India (in 11 Volumes): Movements (Volume 3)*, Kalpaz Publication, Delhi, 2002, p 140.
  14. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.1
  15. For the latter, Phule encouraged shudratishudras to develop their own religion and rituals and he himself developed a rural marriage ritual that excised the role of the Brahman priest from the proceedings. Omvedt describes Phule's project as, 'Ideologically, the unity, rather the community of the exploited was sought to be built up first, by emphasizing the attack on Brahmanism and exploitation through religion, and second, by stressing the necessity of modern education and the acquisition of scientific knowledge, described as vidya, seen as in contrast to the Brahmanic and ritual-bound shastra.' As quoted in Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 99.
  16. Op. Cit. (Meena Gaikwad), p 83.
  17. Sant Tukaram (1577–1650) was Varkari Sant and spiritual poet of the Bhakti. He is widely considered to be the first modern poet of Marathi. Tukaram was a devotee of Vitthala or Vithoba and a disciple of Bahagat Namdev. His poetry is considered to be the zenith of the literary development by the Varkari sect in Marathi Language.
  18. Op. Cit. (Prof. Santoshkumar M Katke), p 26.
  19. Google doodle pays tribute to social reformer Savitribai Phule, *The Hindu* Last Updated November 17, 2017 available at <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/internet/google-doodle-pays-tribute-to-social-reformer-savitribai-phule/article16982122.ece1> assessed on August 02, 2020.
  20. M. G. Mali, *Krāntijyotī Sāvitrībāī Jotīrāva Phule, Āśā Prakāśana*, 1980, p 62.
  21. Available at <https://velivada.com/2015/01/03/few-poems-by-savitribai-phule/> assessed on August 02, 2020.
  22. Dr. Renu Pandey, *Crusaders of Female Education in Colonial India: A case study of Savitribai Phule*, *International Journal of Innovative Social Science & Humanities Research*, Vol (2), Issue-1, March-2015, p 3.
  23. Lalitha Dhara (ed.), *Kavya Phule (English translation by Ujjwala Mhatre)*, Dr Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai, 2012, p 11.
  24. Op. Cit. (Lalitha Dhara), p 67.
  25. Op. Cit. (Ms Reeta), pp 2-3.
  26. The essay by her, which was published in the paper *Dyanodaya*, in 1855, to which a chapter has been devoted in this book, is called 'Mang

*Maharacha Dukhvisayi', which translates as 'Grief of the Mangs and Mahars', two dalit caste groups that were exploited in the Maharashtra of those times. The essay is deemed to be among the earliest surviving documentations by a woman writer of the atrocities committed against untouchables, and is gripping even in English translation. The writer's lambasting of the caste system, and the religion that upholds it, reveals the 'potential explosiveness' of education that the Phules were so keen to create.*

27. *Braj Ranjan Mani & Pamela Sardar, A Forgotten Liberator; The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule, Mountain Peak, New Delhi, 2008, p. 28.*
28. *Translated from Pankaj, Mahatama Jyotiba Phule, Prabhat Prakashan, New Delhi, 2009, p 18*
29. *Sushila Nayar and Kamla Mankekar, Women Pioneers in India's Renaissance, as I Remember Her Contributions from Eminent Women of Present-day India, National Book Trust, India, 2002, p 52.*