



CONTRIBUTION OF SAVITRIBAI JYOTIRAO PHULE IN EDUCATION FIELD

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Introductory Remarks

Savitribai Phule was one of the most important personalities who contributed considerably in adding glory to the mission of the modern Indian social scenario. She was the first woman teacher, the first woman educationist, who inspired the downtrodden people to take up education and thereby played an important role in their emancipation. She also conducted many activities in various social fields. However, many felt that her contribution by and large was neglected by the mainstream society. The British government realised her contribution to education from the very beginning and honoured her, but in independent India, she has not been honoured by the social reformers, educationalists, feminists or the human rights activists. Barring a few exceptions, 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 needs to be known among all the Indians.

Mission of Education

The following quote of Mahatama Jyotirao Phule explains the importance of education.

He writes:

“Without education wisdom was lost;

Without wisdom moral was lost;

Without moral development was lost;

Without development wealth was lost;

Without wealth Shudras were ruined;

So much has happened through Lack of Education.”

Mahatama Jyotirao Phule observed that illiteracy damaged the Shudra a lot; he lost his wisdom, moral, wealth and finally gets ruined due to this. Thus, according to him, all sorts of downfall

were caused mainly by illiteracy, and going by this logic, he firmly believed that for regaining all these virtues, education is the only solution. Guided by this thought, he set a lifelong agenda of educating the Shudra, ati-Shudra and women, who were being exploited and subjugated, by keeping them deprived of education. To make them educated, he started a school, but no one; especially, the upper castes teachers were ready to teach them. So, ultimately, he taught his wife Savitribai Phule and trained her as a teacher. Later she joined hand-in-hand with him in the mission of education and adhered to it till her last breath; Of course, she underwent a lot of difficulties during her journey.

Difficulties encountered in educating his wife

Savitribai Phule was born on 3 January 1831 into a family of farmers in the Naigaon, a place situated on Pune-Satara Road, some 50 km from Pune. She was the eldest daughter of Lakshmi and Khandoji Neveshe Patil. At the age of 9 years, in 1840, she was married to 13-year-old Jyotirao Phule. She never received formal education before her marriage; it was her husband, Jyotirao Phule, who wished to educate her, a venture which met fierce resistance from his family. In 1841, Jyotirao started her education and training to become a teacher.

Government records show that Jyotirao educated Savitribai at home after their marriage. According to the Education Report for the period 1 May 1851 to 30 April 1852, "Jyotirao educated his wife at home and trained her to become a teacher." According to a news item that appeared in the *Bombay Guardian* on 22 November 1851, the responsibility of Savitribai's further education was taken up by Jyotirao's friends, Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar (Joshi). Savitribai had also undertaken teacher's training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune.

After completion of the training, she immediately joined her husband Jyotirao Phule in his education mission and started working towards educating the downtrodden people. She successfully carried out this job till her last breath; in spite of many difficulties.

First Women's School

After completing her studies, Savitribai Phule opened her first school in Bhide Wada at Pune for girls on 1 January 1848 and was the youngest female school teacher of modern India, at the age of 17 years.

In an interview, published by *Dyanodaya* (15 September 1853), Jyotirao 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'.

Savitribai, began handling the school administration as a headmistress. If these documents are to be given consideration, Savitribai Phule may well have been the first Indian woman teacher and

headmistress. Her stepping across the threshold of the home to teach marks the beginning of the 'public life' of the modern Indian woman.

Initially, nine girls of different castes were enrolled as students. The school was open to girls from all sections of the society. Girls from different religious, castes, and socio-economic background would come to study. However, the school was temporarily closed due to shortage of funds.

Other schools

Jyotiba and Savitribai, were initially disappointed a little due to the closure of the first school, but they did not lose hope totally. They managed to open five more schools in the year 1848 itself. The number of girls increased from twenty-five to seventy during 1849-50. The growing popularity of the school motivated them to open more such schools. By 1851, Savitribai was running three schools with around 150 female students. Along with her husband, she had opened 18 schools for girls in Pune only. She constantly encouraged the children to pursue education. She along-with her husband untiringly convinced the parents to send their children to take up education.

The couple opened several open schools for girls of Shudra and Ati-Shudra communities. They opened one such school in Rasta Peth and another in Chiplunkar House, Pune. In May 1849, Savitribai also opened a night school for elders in Usman Sheikh Wada.

In the deposition given by Jyotirao to the Hunter Education Commission on 19 October 1882, making a note of his educational work, he said, "There was no school for girls that could be called 'indigenous' at that time here. So, I was inspired to set up such a school. My wife and I worked in that school for several years. The Chairperson of the Education Board, Sir Arskin Perry and the then Secretary to the government, Lumsden visited the girls' school and expressed satisfaction about this new movement in the field of education."

This historic work was started by Jyotirao when he was just 21 years old, while his wife, who supported him in every way, was merely 18 years old. The 'shudra' community, which had been denied education for thousands of years, started opposing Jyotirao's work and calling it 'evil', having been instigated by the upper castes.

Difficulties Encountered

As mentioned earlier, the orthodox society was not prepared for imparting education to the girls and the downtrodden section of the Hindu society; hence, from the very beginning; they opposed these activities vehemently.

A few instances of the difficulties the couple faced are as follows. First, Savitribai Phule used to leave for the school early in the morning. She used to carry one extra sari extra with her. On her way to school, she was routinely harassed by orthodox men, who threw mud, rotten eggs, tomatoes, cow-dung and dirt at her. When she went to school, since her sari was soiled, she would change into another sari. It would again be soiled on her way back home, and yet, she did not give up.

During the journey from her house to the school and back, she was followed by the groups of orthodox men who would abuse her in obscene language. Some bullies even threatened to

physically assault her. Stones were pelted at her often. However, in spite of all this opposition, Savitribai continued to teach the girls.

The guard, who was then appointed for her, wrote in his memoirs about what she would say to those men, “As I do the sacred task of teaching my fellow sisters, the stones or cow dung that you throw seem like flowers to me. May God bless you!”.

After starting the first school in 1848, Jyotirao started a school for the Mahars and the Mangs. Savitribai had become its first teacher. 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 Govindrao 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. The school work came to an abrupt halt for some time, as now they had to face one more difficulty, that of their survival. But, they did not accept defeat the school was started again.

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.

Jyotirao and Savitribai lived in the Dalit-working class locality in Pune. The cultural environment surrounding them had an extremely important role to play in their socialisation. When Jyotirao was a child, his father had stopped his education owing to complaints from an orthodox Brahman. At that time, Munshi Ghaffar Baig and Sir Lijit, having recognised the spark in Jyotirao, had convinced Govindrao to continue his son's education. Jyotirao never forgot this. He first started a school for Dalit-Muslim girls in the August of 1848.

Amazing Work

The Inspector of Schools, Dadoba Pandurang inspected the school and examined the girls on 16 October 1851. Though not much time had passed since the school began, the progress that the girls showed was remarkable. The first annual examination of the schools was held on 17 February 1852, while the second annual examination was held in Poona College on 12 February 1853.

These reports note that unprecedented crowds had gathered in Pune to witness the process of the examinations. About 3,000 people had gathered in the campus of the college and there were even more people waiting outside. Two hundred and thirty seven girls sat for their exams. The annual accounts of the institution were audited. It had collected Rs. 1947 and 50 paise through donations and the participation of the people running the institution. They would receive financial aid to the tune of Rs. 900/- from the Dakshina Prize Fund of the government. Jyotirao-Savitribai, believed in providing accurate and timely accounts for public money in the public domain.

A published, detailed report of the examination in the schools for the 'untouchables', held on 2 February 1858 in the Coach Factory of Babaji Manaji, is available in the archives. The earlier examination was held on 29 August 1856. The institution already had three schools. Though it wished to expand, the Europeans stopped the funding after the Mutiny of 1857, pushing the institution into a financial crisis. Rs. 300 was given from the Dakshina Prize Committee every year and the government had sanctioned a sum of Rs. 5000 towards the Building Fund of the school.

The report rues the fact that the school was facing closure just when the 'untouchable' classes were warming up to the idea of being educated. A total of two hundred and fifty eight students were studying in three schools. Jyotirao's colleagues Ganu Shivaji Mang and Dhuraji Appaji Chambhar also worked in these schools as teachers. In a letter sent to the government, a functionary of the Institution has written, "Teachers cannot be paid good salaries as the economic condition of the institution is not good.

So teachers prefer going to such schools which offer better wages. Teachers leaving out of turn like this leads to the school's loss. The headmistress of the school, Savitribai has generously decided to dedicate her life to the reform of women's education; she does this work without any remuneration. We hope that with the spread of information and knowledge, people will be able to fully appreciate the advantages of women's education."

The Chairperson of the Education Board, Hon'ble John Warden declared in a public function, "When I came to Pune as the Commissioner for the first time in 1851, I visited the girls' school there. After going there, I remembered how Christians would initially run schools by barring the doors on the upper floor, due to the fear of Jews. The teacher in that school was the wife of a 'Mali' (from the gardener caste). This man had taught his wife so that she could be useful in the upliftment of his countrymen and help them overcome their pitiable ignorance. I requested her to ask the girls some questions in my presence. Training classes were also being run there for some young married women."

The progress of Jotirao-Savitribai's endeavours was remarkable. There were government schools for upper caste students. One of them had written in the *Poona Observer* on 29 May 1852, "The number of girl students in Jyotirao's school is ten times more than the number of boys studying in the government schools. This is because the system for teaching girls is far superior to what is available for boys in government schools. If this situation continues, then the girls from Jyotirao's school will prove superior to the boys from the government schools and they feel that in the coming examinations, they can really achieve a big victory. If the Government Education Board does not do something about this soon, seeing these women outshine, the men will make us hang our heads in shame."

Speciality about the School

For Savitribai, education was not simply alphabetical learning, but rather, an evolution of the mind itself. For Jyotirao and Savitribai, education was a means to bring about a radical change in the society. It was means for transformation of the society altogether.

They also focused on providing girls and boys vocational and practical education, to make them capable of independent thought. They believed that an industrial department should be attached to the schools where children could learn useful trades and crafts and be able to manage their lives comfortably and independently.

She took initiatives to reduce malnutrition in children by taking care of the health of each and every child in school. To prevent children from dropping out of school, Savitribai set a precedent 184 years back by giving stipends to children.

She started teaching in an innovative way through telling short stories, reading poems and introducing sports sessions. Savitribai's poems and other writings are still an inspiration to others. She also actively engaged in continuous dialogue with the parents of the students and always motivated them to educate their children for a better future.

Savitribai Phule also tried to inspire the people to take up education through poetry. She was considered a pioneer of Marathi poetry. Her two collections of poems *Kavya Phule* in 1854 and *BavanKashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1892 were published. Both emphasised on the importance of English and education.

She is also said to have inspired a young student to ask for a library for the school at an award ceremony instead of gifts for herself. She inspired young girls to take up painting, writing, and other activities. An essay written by a young girl, Mukta, at that time became the face of Dalit literature.

Death

The year 1897 dawned with the menace of plague in Pune. Hundreds of people were dying daily. The government tried to control the epidemic under the leadership of officer Rand. Savitribai along with Yeshwant set up a hospital to take care of the patients. Even though she knew that the disease was contagious, she used to herself pick up sick people and bring them to the hospital and treat them. Savitribai caught an infection and she died on 10 March 1897.

Recognition

As said earlier, the British authority had not taken much time to recognise the importance of the educational work of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule. They felicitated this couple after four years on 16 November 1852, with a shawl, in Vishrambag Wada. The orthodox, however, expressed displeasure that a Shudra like Jotirao should be felicitated by giving him a 'mahavastra' (ceremonial shawl). Savitribai was hailed as the 'Mother of Modern Girls' Education. Savitribai Phule is the first Indian woman, who laid the foundation of education opportunities for women in India. She broke all the traditional stereotypes of the 19th century to boost a new age of thinking in British colonial India. She was declared as the best teacher. Thom Wolf and Suzana Andrade's piece titled 'Savitribai and India's Conversation on Education', published in the *Oikos Worldviews Journal* in 2008, says the following about Savitribai Phule:

“If you are an Indian woman who reads, you owe her.

If you are an educated Indian woman, you owe her.

If you are an Indian schoolgirl reading this chapter in English, you owe her.

If you are an educated international desi woman, you owe her.”

Savitribai Phule was the first women whose poems got noticed in the British Empire.

On 10 March 1997, Government of Maharashtra instituted an award for female achievers, in Savitribai's memory. Later in 1998, the Government of India released an India Post stamp in her honour. In 2015, the Government of Maharashtra renamed University of Pune to Savitribai Phule Pune University in order to pay homage to the first and youngest female teacher of India. NCERT also published a booklet on 'Savitribai Phule First Memorial Lecture' in 2008. Some scholars have started writing about her. Civil society groups, especially of lower castes are projecting her as one of the icons, a great Mahapurush – a revolutionary figure who worked for the structural change to ameliorate their condition.

More than 200 books have been written on Jyotirao and Savitribai in Marathi. Along with books in Marathi, books have also been published in Hindi, English, Telugu, Kannada, Punjabi, Urdu, Sindhi and Gujarati. About 40 of these books have been written on Savitribai. If we are to look at non-literary, academic books among these, the *Savitribai Jotirao Phule yanche Alpacharitra* written by Shantabai Raghunath Bankar in 1939 and *Krantidevata Sadhvi Savitribai Phule* written by Phulwantabai Zodage in 1966 are especially important. Following in their footsteps, Dr M.G. Mali wrote the biographical book '*Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule*' in 1980 and Dr K. P. Deshpande wrote *Agniphule* in 1982, based on Savitribai's life and literature. The books that were published following these are mostly based on the above and do not contain new information. But, it is sad to note that not even a single critical biography has ever been written on Savitribai yet.

Narayan Mahadev *alias* Mama Paramanand (31 July 1890) rightly made a remark about Savitribai Phule as below:

"More than Jyotirao, 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."

Concluding Remarks

Savitribai Phule broke all the traditional stereotypes of the 19th century to boost a new age of thinking in British colonised India. But the intellectuals, activists, who ought to be free from fear, sincere, open minded, open hearted, truth seeker and also have courage to show the truth at any cost, have remained almost silent about her contribution to the society. All have failed to take adequate note of her. They have done great disservice to her contribution and struggles for the upliftment of the disregarded by erasing her life-story from the books, nationalist mainstream discourse and our memory.

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