

Women, Emancipation And Equality: The Contribution Of Savitribai Phule In The Latter Half Of The 19th Century

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Abstract

The efforts of Savitribai Phule in revolutionising women education during the 19th century stand as a testament to her visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to social justice. This paper explores the pioneering contributions of Savitribai Phule in transforming the landscape of women education in 19th-century India. In a society marred by deep-seated patriarchy and caste discrimination, her fearless reforms challenged the status quo and laid the groundwork for educational empowerment. The study explores her vision of education as a tool for liberation and her resistance to caste and gender-based oppression. It also examines the barriers she faced in establishing schools for girls and marginalised communities and highlights how her efforts reshaped attitudes toward education. Furthermore, her writings, which reflect her educational philosophy and equality, are studied to understand her contributions more deeply. By analysing the historical and social context of her work, this paper discusses how the initiatives of Savitribai Phule laid the foundation for women emancipation and equality, making her a central figure in the history of social reform and education in colonial India.

Keywords: Women Education, Caste and Patriarchy, Gender Justice, Social Reforms.

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I. Introduction

In the annals of history, some remarkable individuals have played crucial roles in catalysing change, their lives woven into the socio-cultural fabric of their times. A notable example of this is Savitribai Phule, whose story unfolds against the backdrop of 19th-century India, a period defined by social upheaval, colonial influence, and the rise of reform movements. From the late 19th century, the struggle for women rights, particularly in Maharashtra, appears remarkably progressive. The movement is paradoxically rooted in the efforts of a small group of reformers who worked within the limitations of the norms of their society. Savitribai Phule is a significant figure in this movement. She was recognised for her groundbreaking work in promoting the education and empowerment of women. She stands out as a rare female leader in a predominantly male-dominated reform landscape.

Savitribai is distinguished by her courage to challenge the rigid caste and gender structures of her time, as well as her legacy as the first female teacher of India. As the first leader of the women liberation movement, a champion of the downtrodden, and an advocate of adult education, her contributions are unmatched in the long History of India. It is unprecedented in the two thousand years of Indian History that an uneducated woman became a teacher and illuminated the path of knowledge for women and Shudras, who had long been trapped in the darkness of ignorance (Mali, 2006). Despite her significant accomplishments, the contributions of Savitribai were often overshadowed by larger social and political movements, and she was merely depicted as the better half of Jyotirao Phule rather than as an individual in her own right.

It is unfortunate that the contributions of Savitribai Phule have been overlooked by many historians of Marathi literature. There have been only a few biographical accounts of her life, and a serious analysis of her work remains scarce (Salunke, 2022). However, the efforts of scholars like G.B. Sardar and M.G. Mali have brought her legacy to light. Sardar and Mali published the biography of Savitribai in 1980 and later compiled her collected works in 1988, which helped highlight her significant role in the social and educational reform movement (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

The study seeks to reassess the role of Savitribai. It examines her work within the patriarchal and colonial context of 19th-century Indian society, the particular challenges women faced, and the transformative nature of her educational reforms. It positions her as a key figure in the struggle for equality, justice, and the empowerment of marginalised communities. The ongoing struggle for modernity and education among Indian women and the

marginalised castes remains incomplete without acknowledging the indispensable role of Savitribai Phule (Stephen, 2008).

II. Method And Materials

The present study employs a qualitative methodology to examine historical documents, records, and texts related to Savitribai Phule. It analyses primary sources, including her poems, letters, writings, and government records. Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, books, and research papers, provide historical context and enhance the analysis. The study highlights the transformative impact of Savitribai Phule on education and social justice, positioning her legacy within the broader reform movements of colonial India.

III. Historical Context

Cultural and Social Barriers to Women Education

In the 19th Century, education was not freely accessible to all sections of Indian society. Access to knowledge was strictly regulated by caste and gender. The caste system and hierarchical social structure based on birth and occupation played a significant role in shaping Indian society during the 19th century. Caste divisions influenced social interactions, economic opportunities, and political power dynamics, which led to discrimination and marginalisation of certain communities. Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege, through their research, have shown that the caste system is deeply patriarchal. This system strongly influences gender relations and social behaviour. It often treats women as possessions rather than as independent individuals (Chakravarti, 2000), (Rege, 2006). The condition of women was similar to that of Shudras and Ati-Shudras. They faced social oppression and discrimination. Traditional gender roles were dominant in society. Women were mainly confined to household work. They were denied access to education and excluded from public life.

Education was mainly focused on the learning of mantras, rituals, recitations, and sacred texts. It was used primarily for religious purposes such as fixing calendars, reading manuscripts, and performing rituals. Although religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism challenged certain orthodox practices, they also did not fully support gender equality in practice. Similarly, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, women were not granted equal status. Across religions, women were frequently associated with sin and temptation. Such beliefs justified their exclusion from education and public life.

The Hindu social system was strongly rooted in religious scriptures, which were considered divine and unquestionable. This belief ensured the continuation of rigid social practices for long periods. Lokhitwadi, in *Shatapatra No. 64*, criticised blind faith in tradition and argued that unquestioned reliance on ancient scriptures slowed social progress. He supported rational thinking and collective discussion over knowledge produced solely by ancient sages. According to him, Indian society declined due to rigid religious beliefs and growing superstition (Keer, 2008).

Nalini Pandit examined why Indian society remained socially and economically backwards despite its natural wealth. She argued that religion played a significant role in maintaining inequality. She compared Indian society with European societies, where tribal communities gradually became part of the mainstream. In contrast, in India, large sections of the population continued to live in poverty and social exclusion. Shudras were denied basic rights, including freedom of occupation, wealth accumulation, and access to religious knowledge. Control over sacred learning became a tool of social domination (Daya et al., 1993).

Women faced strict social restrictions. They were portrayed as morally weak and intellectually inferior. Women education was viewed as dangerous and corrupting. It was believed that an educated woman would bring misfortune to her family. Every day practices reflected this control. Women were discouraged from speaking openly, eating in front of elders, or displaying independence. Such conditions made the idea of women education socially unacceptable.

Traditional Sanskrit schools, run by teachers known as *Pantopis* or *Shenavis* in regions like Konkan, taught grammar, astrology, and religious texts. Access to Sanskrit learning was strictly restricted to Brahmins. Other castes were forbidden from reading, writing, or even hearing Sanskrit. Knowledge was believed to exist only within sacred texts, and questioning tradition was discouraged. Education thus functioned as a means of preserving caste hierarchy.

There was strong resistance to modern education. Printed books, schoolbags, and English education were viewed as impure. Children were required to bathe after returning from school to maintain ritual purity. Learning English was considered especially polluting. Gopalrao Deshmukh, a contemporary of Jyotirao Phule, was not allowed to take his schoolbag home and had to keep his books near a well to avoid impurity (Keer, 1968). Such practices reflect deep-rooted superstition and fear of social change.

Public anxiety about education was evident in a poem published in *Gyan Prakash* in October 1854. The poem expressed fear that education would corrupt families and weaken religious faith. During this period, education was largely limited to upper-caste boys. The idea of educating girls was considered a serious social offence. Despite these barriers, education slowly created social awareness. Newly educated individuals began to

question traditions using reason. Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule recognised education as the only path to liberation for Shudras and women. He believed that ignorance led to the loss of wisdom, morality, progress, and material well-being. According to him, the suffering of Shudras and women was largely the result of the denial of education.

The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule

Savitribai Phule was born on 3 January 1831 in Khandala Taluka of the Satara district. She was born into a Bahujan agrarian family headed by Khandaji Nevse Patil and Laxmibai. Savitribai grew up in a social environment marked by caste discrimination, gender inequality, and economic hardship. Her village lacked access to education and faced recurring droughts. Like most girls of her time, she assisted in agricultural and domestic work. These early experiences exposed her to social injustice and shaped her awareness of the challenges faced by marginalised communities.

After their marriage, Savitribai began her education at home under the guidance of Jyotirao. According to the *Education Report* for the period of May 1, 1851, to April 30, 1852, 'Jyotirao educated his wife at home and trained her to become a teacher.' Additionally, a news article in the *Bombay Guardian*, dated November 22, 1851, noted that a friend of Jyotirao, Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe, and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar later took responsibility for advancing the education of Savitribai (Narke, 2006).

Sagunabai, a close relative, studied alongside Savitribai. Recognising the need for formal training, Jyotirao sent Savitribai and Sagunabai to the Normal School in Pune, established in 1840 at Chhabildas Wada and headed by Mrs Mitchell. They were admitted directly to the second class after adequate preparation and received systematic teacher training. By 1847, Savitribai had completed her formal education. Their marriage symbolised a progressive and egalitarian partnership, rooted in mutual respect, empowerment, and a shared commitment to building a more just and equitable society.

IV. The Trajectory Of Savitribai Phule Towards Female Education

Savitribai Phule is often regarded as the Mother of Modern Indian Education. She was the first Indian woman to become a teacher and the first to transform education in India by making it accessible to girls and children from marginalised castes. Savitribai was a pioneer who placed universal, child-centred, intellectually stimulating, and socially transformative education at the heart of her vision for all children in India (Wolf & Andrade, 2008).

Vision for Education

Savitribai Phule dedicated her life to promoting education, especially for women and marginalised communities. She believed education was the key to breaking societal barriers and empowering the oppressed. Savitribai encouraged women and lower-caste individuals to seek knowledge as a way to overcome discrimination. She emphasised that learning could elevate the social status of women and provide dignity and equality.

Her efforts, however, faced severe resistance. Orthodox groups opposed her mission and harassed her daily. On her way to school, people threw stones, mud, and insults at her. Despite this, Savitribai responded with remarkable patience and forgiveness, often saying, '*My brothers and sisters, you are not throwing this mud to harm me, but you are blessing me with flowers. I am doing the sacred work of teaching. May God keep you happy*' (Narke, 1993), (Pawar, 2004). She carried an extra sari to school to change into after facing those challenges. The memories of Balwant Sakharam Kolhe highlight her resilience. Her courage and calm determination became an inspiration for others.

After this, the pressure was placed on the father of Jyotirao, Govindrao, to stop their work. He was persuaded that their efforts went against religious teachings. This led to Jyotirao being expelled from the family home in 1849. Savitribai chose to support her husband. She stands by him through these challenges. Together, they continued their educational work despite the hostility. The vision of Savitribai for education was inclusive and transformative. She viewed knowledge as a tool to combat inequality and foster a fairer society. Her work laid a strong foundation for future education and social reform efforts.

Founding of Schools for Girls

Savitribai is recognised for starting the first girls' school in Pune at Bhide Wada in 1848, alongside her husband, Jyotirao Phule. This initiative is documented in both *Dnyanodaya* and *Bombay Guardian* newspapers. *Dnyanodaya*, in its obituary on December 18, 1890, noted that Jyotirao began his educational work in 1848. The *Bombay Guardian*, on November 22, 1851, also confirmed these efforts, highlighting the work of Sadashiv Ballal Govande in 1848 (Narke, 2006). After growing the demand for female education, they opened 18 schools for girls in Maharashtra between 1848 and 1852. Their work gained recognition from the British government. Additionally,

they established a night school for working-class women and children and set up 52 free hostels to support disadvantaged students across Maharashtra.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Savitribai Phule was a forward-thinking educational reformer who introduced new ideas to make education more accessible and practical. Along with Jyotirao Phule, she emphasised vocational and trade-oriented education. This approach aimed to make students self-reliant and capable of thinking independently. In their 1852 report, they stated that schools should include industrial training. This would help children learn useful skills and support themselves after completing school (Narke, 2006).

Savitribai and Jyotirao identified poverty and a lack of interest as major reasons for students dropping out of school. They provided students with stipends to address this, which makes education more accessible and affordable. They also developed a curriculum that catered to the needs of children from low-income backgrounds. Their work went beyond schools, as they raised awareness among Dalit-Bahujan communities about the benefits of education. They also organised literacy programs for parents to involve them in their children's learning.

The Phules found practical ways to reduce dropouts caused by fairs, pilgrimages, caste rules, and economic difficulties. For instance, Jyotirao worked to address superstitions and caste restrictions that kept children away from schools. Today, similar ideas inspire modern programs, such as the 'attendance allowance of Maharashtra' for tribal students, which helps prevent dropouts.

The schools of Savitribai introduced several innovative practices. Vocational training was a key part of the curriculum, preparing students for real-life challenges. She also encouraged group discussions, a new method at the time, to promote active learning. Her efforts motivated students to think creatively and prioritise education. At an award ceremony, a student, inspired by her teaching, requested a library for the school instead of personal gifts.

Savitribai promoted English education, believing it could break down caste discrimination and social barriers. She encouraged people to learn English to challenge orthodoxy and gain new opportunities. Through her writings, she emphasised that learning English could help marginalised groups achieve equality. They also believed that primary education was vital for social progress. They criticised government policies that focused on higher education while neglecting primary schools. They argued that primary school teachers, who shape the foundation of education, should be paid more than secondary or higher education teachers (Gupta, 2002). They also believed in making education practical and relevant. The Phules prioritised practical knowledge over rote learning. They proposed that rural and urban schools should have separate curricula to address their unique needs. Subjects such as health, agriculture, and useful trades were included to ensure that students could apply their knowledge in everyday life.

Through these efforts, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule created a system of education that empowered individuals and addressed social inequalities. Their work remains a source of inspiration for creating an inclusive and equitable education system.

V. Social Reform And Women Issues

The Phule couple was involved in various social service activities. In 1863, they established an orphanage to provide shelter for orphaned children. Later, on September 24, 1873, they established *Satya Shodhak Samaj*, which was open to all, irrespective of caste, religion, or class hierarchies. The main objective of the platform was to promote social equity. To further this cause, they launched *Satya Shodhak Marriage*, where the married couple pledged to promote education and equality. Savitribai demonstrated remarkable bravery in promoting and supporting inter-caste marriages at a time when such alliances were met with severe social backlash. In one notable instance, she personally facilitated the marriage of Radha, the daughter of her friend Bajubai Gyanoba Nimbarkar, to activist Sitram Jabaji Aalhat. This union, celebrated as the first *Satyashodhak* marriage under the principles of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, was entirely funded by Savitribai herself. These efforts exemplified her resolve to challenge caste hierarchies and establish new social norms. Her commitment to these causes predated and influenced later calls for inter-caste unions as tools to dismantle caste barriers, most prominently advocated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

They also encouraged widow remarriage and conducted simple wedding rituals without the presence of priests. Moreover, they organised campaigns to raise awareness about dowry. Additionally, they built a well in their courtyard for the untouchables who didn't have access to public drinking water.

Savitribai, a true feminist, established the *Mahila Seva Mandal* to educate women about the sati system, female foeticide, and child marriage. During this time, widows were often sexually exploited, and pregnant widows experienced much more physical abuse and humiliation. The couple opened a children's centre for pregnant widows and rape victims in order to deal with this problem. Additionally, Savitribai supported the adoption of children who had experienced sexual assault. She established an ashram and orphanage for widows

and orphans. She planned a boycott of barbers in opposition to the widow's custom of tonsuring her head. Savitribai encouraged women to attend her sessions together to shatter down boundaries based on caste.

VI. The Writings Of Savitribai Phule As Instruments Of Social Awakening

Savitribai Phule used her writings as powerful tools for the social awakening of women and marginalised communities. Her poems and prose were written to educate society and to challenge social injustice. Through her writings, she addressed issues of caste discrimination, gender inequality, superstition, and ignorance. She strongly believed that education was the most effective way to bring social change.

In her poetry collections, especially *Kavyaphule*, Savitribai repeatedly stressed the value of education. Poems such as *Wake Up for Learning*, *Shreshtha Dhan*, *Navas*, and *Balas Upadesh* encourage women, Shudras, and Atishudras to seek knowledge. She argued that ignorance keeps people trapped in social bondage, while education gives self-respect and freedom. Her language was simple so that common people could understand her message.

Savitribai openly criticised religious customs and traditions that supported inequality. In poems like *Navas* and *So Says Manu*, she questioned blind faith and ritual practices. She opposed religious ideas that denied education to women and lower castes. Such views were bold and progressive in the nineteenth century, when society strongly resisted reform.

She also supported English education as a tool for empowerment. Savitribai believed that Sanskrit education was limited to the upper castes. English education, on the other hand, gave marginalised communities access to modern knowledge. In the poem *Mother English*, she describes English education as a force that breaks caste barriers and restores human dignity. Her writings show deep concern for the suffering of poor and marginalised people. Poems like *The Malady of the Outcasts* describe poverty, exploitation, and social neglect. She rejected the belief that suffering was caused by past sins. Instead, she held unjust social systems responsible for the misery of the people.

Women empowerment is central to the writings of Savitribai. She challenged ideas about women intellectual and moral weakness. She encouraged women to pursue education and develop self-confidence. Her writings were closely linked to her work as an educator, as she actively worked to educate girls and women. In conclusion, Savitribai Phule used literature as a tool for social reform. Her writings promoted education, rational thinking, and human values. They played a significant role in awakening social consciousness among women and marginalised communities.

VII. Conclusion

The legacy of Savitribai Phule extends far beyond her contributions to education. Her courage and determination in challenging deeply ingrained social norms and religious practices laid the foundation for the modern social reform movement of India. Her work establishing schools for girls, particularly when education for women was widely opposed, helped shape the future of female education in India. She not only promoted the importance of education but also broke down barriers by advocating for the education of marginalised communities, including Shudras and women from lower castes.

Her impact was recognised during her lifetime and continues to be celebrated today. Her efforts were instrumental in highlighting the role of women in social reform, and her life serves as an inspiring example of sacrifice, resilience, and dedication to the cause of social justice. The recognition of her contributions has been slow, but growing awareness in contemporary India is beginning to honour her rightful place in history. On 31st July 1980, Narayan Mahadev alias Mama Parmanand, a founder and promoter of a prayer society, praised the Savitribai Phule: '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' (Narke, 2006). He wrote letters to the King of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad, requesting financial assistance for Jyotirao and Savitribai. In a letter dated July 31, 1890, Mama Parmanand recommended that financial help should be given to Jyotirao and Savitribai, and recorded the historic work that the couple was engaged in.

The legacy of Savitribai Phule lives on in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice. Her work continues to inspire those fighting for women rights, social justice, and education. Today, her contributions are celebrated not only for their historical importance but also for their continued relevance in the fight against social injustices that persist in various forms.

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