

Crusaders of Female Education in Colonial India: A case study of Savitribai Phule

Dr. Renu Pandey,

Asst. Professor, Deptt. of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth-century when the colonizer began taking an active role in reforming and governing India, the Orientalist discourse depicted the Indian woman as being passive, hidden behind the veil or purdah, victimized by atrocities such as sati and the domestication of the woman like cattle. There started a search for "civil, political, and religious rights for Indian Women straight from the belly of the great religious and social reform movements of the nineteenth-century." Time and time again in all parts of India whether the women were in purdah, or widows, or housewives without much of a voice, we see recorded stories of female agency as these same women "asserted their rights, addressed social inequalities, and rejected or adapted tradition in an engagement with the world around them in what amounted to Indian feminism." We hear about women contesting divorce in western India in the 1880s, we hear about organizations, such as those of Savitribai to improve the lives of the lower caste. We hear about stories written by widows, such as, Rassundari Devi, which helped improve the lives of widows, and when we examine vernacular plays, poems, folk literature, such as those of Jogeshwari, "a considerable body of literature can be amassed to present a case for the emergence of feminism" and the growth of education for the women of India. Despite the "education" of the respectable Indian woman, she was able to defy her stance by rebelling in understated ways through her writing and through her movement between her inner and outer space created for her by Indian patriarchal and British colonial structures. Although at times, her struggle was a lonely one, there was hope for her to regain a respectability that was independent from her male perpetrators. This paper discusses the role of Savitribai Phule in the development of education of the women of India, with special reference to the women of Maharashtra. The education of the Indian woman is also referenced against the backdrop of the nationalist movement in India against imperialist rule and its effects on the women of the country.

Awake, arise and Educate

Smash Tradition-Liberate!

--- SAVITRIBAI PHULE

Introduction

In the eyes of the British administration, education required the dissemination of the principles formulated during the period of enlightenment in Europe, when education was seen as a means of uplifting the nation. The aim was to raise the level of knowledge and general education, so that interested parties could draw from a reservoir of trained workers and state administrators. The British kept their hands on the field of education throughout the

subcontinent through their system education. Even educated Indians also started thinking of reforming Indian society through various activities. Female education was also one such area where both Indian men and women wanted to reform, democratise so that gender justice may be achieved in the Indian society.

Savitribai Phule was one of the crusaders of gender justice. Born in 1831, Savitri Bai Phule got married to Jotiba Phule in 1840 at an early age of 09 years only. Though she was initially illiterate, she started getting education after marriage

¹ She Passed third and fourth year examination from a school in 1846-47. Savitribai had been given a book by a Christian missionary before her marriage which she brought with her to her in-laws house. This shows the attraction she had for words and books despite being uneducated. Jyotirao Phule's maternal cousin sister Saguna 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 and savitribai . In order to understand and appreciate the life and work of Savitri bai Phule, we must know that her thoughts were shaped and moulded by her husband jotitrao and her aunt- in-law Sagunabai.

Savitribai's passion for female education started by starting a school with Sagunabai in Maharwada in 1847. Later on, on 1st January 1948, Country's first school for girls was started at Bhide's wada in Pune and Savitribai was nominated as the first head mistress of the school. She was appointed as a teacher, at the time when teaching of girls was supposed to be an unholy, unheard of thing, moreover an affront to traditional honour.

In times when women were treated no better than the cattle at home, Savitribai Phule earned the distinction of being the first Indian woman to become a teacher. For this she undertook training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in Ms. Mitchell's school in Pune. "The first Indian to place universal, child sensitive, intellectually critical, and socially reforming education at the very core of the agenda for all children in India", is how Wolf and Andrade describe her in their paper. She faced severe opposition from almost all sections. Savitribai was subject to intense harassment everyday as she walked to the school. Stones, mud and dirt were flung at her as she passed. But Savitribai Phule faced everything courageously.

First public Til-Gul programme was arranged by Mahila Seva Mandal on 14th January, 1852 in which she took active part along with her husband. Their family was honoured by British government for their works in the field of education and Savtribai was declared as the best teacher in 1852. Savitribai also learnt English language. When Revenue Commissioner went to school for inspection, where Savitribai was engrossed in teaching, then he praised her lot and Savitribai also spoke English to him into simple manner.

Savitribai's remarkable influence through her teaching and writings is evident in an essay by her 11-year-old student Muktabai, which was published in the paper *Dyanodaya*, in 1855. The essay, to which a chapter has been devoted in this book, is called 'Mang Maharachya 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.

It was only after acted for spreading education to the women, Savitribai took head on to other taboos of the society which victimized the women lot for long.

Savitribai was probably one of the first published woman in modern India, and was able to develop her own voice and agency at a time when women of all classes were ruthlessly suppressed and lived a sub-human existence. Savitribai was a "Vidya Jyoti" for all those who want to do something in the field of education. Savitribai's writing were an independent expression. Her poetic zeal and literary merits are also beyond any doubt and debate. Her writings demonstrates the influence of folk songs, bhakti, poetry and the shayari from (ballad literature). Though, she selected traditional forms,

¹ Braj Rajan Mani & Pamela Sardar, "the forgotten liberator; the life and struggle of Savitribai Phule" Mountain Peak, New Delhi, 1988, p.29; Gail Omvedt.

she consistently propagated the modern values such as humanism, liberty, equality, brotherhood and rationalism through her writings. The uniqueness of her writings gets underlined when compared and contrasted with her contemporaries' work

Savitribai's poems and other writings are still an inspiration to others. Two books of her poems were published, *Kavya Phule* in 1934 and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1982.² Savitribai, had also poetic bent of mind and there can not be opinions about her poetic contribution in Marathi literature. 'Kavyafule' is the first collection of poems of Savitribai, published in 1854. 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. Education to her was an important instrument to bring up humanism and to eradicate the evil spirit in human beings .

In one of the poems named 'Agyan' Savitribai wrote:-

एक ही शत्रु हमारा
उसे भगाएँ सब मिलकर
उसके सिवा नहीं है दूजा
खोजो मन में सोचो
सुनो गौर से उसका नाम
अज्ञान

Savitribai expressed great respect as a social reformer towards her husband.

She wrote :

" वे हैं अज्ञानी जनों के कर्णधार
देते हैं उन्हें नित सदविचार
वे हैं कृतिवीर तथा ज्ञानयोगी

² Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. Eds. *Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to Early 20th Century*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 211-212

झेलते हैं दुख स्त्रियों-शूद्रों की खातिर³

she further wrote :

" जिनके कारण करती हूँ मैं कविता
जिनकी कृपा से चित्त को आनंद है मिलता
जिनसे मिली है बुद्धि रस सावित्री को
लाख-लाख प्रणाम करती हूँ स्वयं जोतीराव को"

Savitribai said, " work hard, study well, and do good" she constantly underscored in 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 Phule was the mother of modern poetry stressing necessity of English and education through her poems. Her first collection of poems – *Kavya Phule* – was published in 1854.

Go, Get Education

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.³

Savitribai's poetry reflected the anger of the newly-emerging Indian women who wanted to be

³ Braj Rajan Mani & Pamela Sardar, "the forgotten liberator; the life and struggle of Savitribai Phule" Mountain Peak, New Delhi, 1988, p.66

treated us a human being and not just an object of male lust.

Savitribai Phule also expressed her ideas on education in Kavyaphule named as “golden chance”. It is as follow:

To attain self-reliance let us pledge
And accumulate a wealth of knowledge
Without learning, life is an animal existence,
waste
Don't rest, get an education, make haste
She put up the question “should they be
called animals?”
No knowledge, no learning
No affinity for either
A brain that lies fallow
Should they be called humans?⁴

Another collection of Savitri's poems, “Bhavan Kasha Subodh Ratnakar” (the ocean of pure gems) was published in 1852. Savitribai's biography was as much about the Maratha history as it was about her husband. Savitribai also edited and published four of Jotiba's speeches on Indian history in 1856. Savitribai's three letters to Jotiba spread over twenty years is also precious and rare piece of literature as women rarely wrote letters in those days, leave alone to their spouses as it was considered a sacrilege, if not worse. Moreover, she addressed her husband by name and discussed social issues in her letters. Their mutual respect and trust is more evident and they give us a good insight into the experiences of women during social movements.

“Savitribai Phule (1831-97), struggled and suffered with her revolutionary husband in an equal measure, but remains obscured due to caste and gender negligence. Apart from her identity as Jotirao

Phule's wife, she is little known even in academia. Modern India's first woman teacher, a radical exponent of mass and female education, a champion of women's liberation, a pioneer of engaged poetry, 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. 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 and the midday meal scheme that incentivize education, may seem like modern concepts, but even 150 years back Savitribai had set a precedent – she gave stipends to prevent children from dropping out of school. She was the teacher who inspired a young student to ask for a library for the school at an award ceremony instead of gifts for herself. A poet and writer, Savitribai had motivated another young girl, Mukta, to write an essay that became the cornerstone of ‘Dalit literature’. She even conducted the equivalent of a parent-teacher meeting to involve the parents so they would understand the importance of education and support their children. Her schools imparted vocational training as well. I would like to conclude by quoting her poem, “With this clarion call arise and strive hard to gain knowledge; Rise for Education; break the shackles of tradition and bondage”.

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⁴ “kavyaphule” ed. By. Lalita Dhara, Mumbai, 2012, P.77

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