

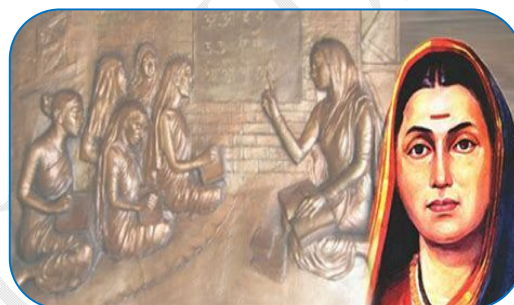


## SAVITRIBAIPHULE FORERUNNER OF WOMEN SOCIAL ACTIVIST IN MODERN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT :

*Savitribaiphule was a trailblazer in providing education for girls and for ostracized portions of society in India. She dared to pursue the Nobel profession of teaching in the 'Dark Age' and became first lady teacher and started first school for females in India. She not only fought for the right to education, but for the right to dignity for widows, unwed mothers, and women with unwanted pregnancies. In the nineteenth century her work was revolutionary. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite controlled knowledge – production that a figure as important as Savitribaiphule 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 as others not in India but in the world.*



**KEYWORDS :** Savitribaiphule, First woman teacher, Female Education, Caste Discrimination, Women Liberation.

### INTRODUCTION

Savitribaiphule was a prominent Indian social reformer, educationalist and poet who played a key role in improving women's rights in India during the British rule, aside her husband Jyotirao Phule – another famous social reformer. She vigorously fought and raised her voice against society's ignorant, archaic and barbaric views with regards to women. A crusader for women empowerment, Savitribai Phule's contribution in the field of education has left an evergreen mark on India's historical pages. At a time when India was plagued with women's outraged modesty, she acted as a messiah for all those women who were living a life of servitude.

Savitribai Phule was born in Naigaon village in Satara District to her mother Laxmibai and father Khandoji Navsepatil on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1831. She was the only daughter of the poor –low caste family and had three younger brothers. Her father a peasant had limited means but was a respectable man in the village. This was a time when educating a girl was frowned upon and savitribai was never sent to school. She spent most of her childhood at home and helping her mother with household chores.

Savitribai Phule got married at a very young age to Jyotirao phule. He is regarded as one of the most important figure in the Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra and under his strong influence's she too got attracted to social reform movement. Savitribai first teacher was her husband. Jothirao phule began to informally teach her at home and after a few years got support from his friends to continue her education. After six years of rigorous home tuton, she along with another young woman

Fatima Sheikh sent to Mrs. Mitchell's school at Pune. Soon after she moved to Ms. Farar's Institution run by an American missionary in Ahmednagar and she trained as a teacher.

### WOMEN EDUCATION

A year after completing her training in 1848 Jyothirao Phule opened a girls school with Savitiri as headmistress. She setup India's first women's school. As female education was not given importance that time, people were not in favour of her running a school for girls. Especially the upper castes strongly opposed Dalit education. Her first batch had only nine students from the Sudra - Atisudra community which sat at the lowest rung of the caste ladder. The school functioned for six months had to shut down due to lack of funds. They opened a second girl's school at Rastapeth, Pune. They later opened a third girl's school at Bataalpeth, Pune. The subject included Grammar, Maths, Geography and the History of Maratha's instead of Brahmanical texts like Vedas and Shastras. On November 16<sup>th</sup> 1852 Phule family was honoured by the British Government for their works in the field of education and Savitribai was declared as the best teacher. All the three schools were closed by 1858. There were many reasons for this including drying up of private European donations post the Indian Rebellion of 1857, resignation of Jyotirao from the school management committee due to difference of opinion on curriculum and withdrawal of support from the government. Undeterred by the circumstances both of them and Fatima Sheikh took charge of educating people from the oppressed communities as well. Over the years Savitribai opened 18 schools and taught children from different castes. To discourage her, the high caste people threw cow-dung and mud at her apart from verbal abuses while she walks towards the school. But even after bearing such atrocities, she was never deterred by failure and carried two sarees with her everyday and continued on her journey.

Jyotirao and Savitiri were a formidable team, their ultimate aim the unity of all oppressed communities. They were the first in Modern India to launch a full-blown attack of the Brahminical casteist framework of society. In time they also included Adivasis and Muslims and fought hard for their emancipation as well. In order to control the school dropout rate, she gave stipends to children for attending school. She believed that parents played a significant role in making their child understand and importance of education and therefore used to conduct parent -teacher meetings making parents understand the needs for the same.

In the 1850's the Phule couple initiated two educational trusts - the Native Female School in Pune and The Society for promoting the Education of Mahars, Mangs and Etceteras which came to have many schools under them. Savitri was the headmistress of one of these schools. Fatima Sheikh was asked to take over the responsibility of a school in 1855. Apart from this, the couple had established a night school in 1855 for peasants and workers. There were many downtrodden people who had no option to go to regular schools but could themselves available only at night so to cater their needs Phule couple started the night school.

### SOCIAL ACTIVIST

Savitribai was a revolutionary on par with her husband, spearheading many progressive movements in her individual capacity. She started the MahilaSeva Mandal in 1852 which worked for the awareness of women's rights and rigorously campaigned against the dehumanisation of widows and advocated widow remarriage. She also spoke against infanticide and opened a rehabilitation centre for illegitimate children. Savitribai also organised a successful barber's strike in Mumbai and Pune, denouncing the inhuman practice of shaving widow's heads. She also never shied from bringing her reformations to her own home.

Savitribai respected Jyotirao not just as a husband but also as her teacher. He had given her a new lease of life, armed her with an education and helped stand on her own feet. She cooperated with her husband completely and along with him, faced all the trials and tribulations that came their way. While education was their main aim the Phule couple also engaged with several other charitable efforts. A young Brahmin widow working as a cook in the house of Jyotirao's friend was raped by a neighbourhood satri. The widow Kashibai became pregnant and the satri refused to take

responsibility. When all efforts to abort the baby failed, she gave birth to a son. Afraid of the social stigma attached to conceiving outside of wedlock, she killed the baby. The police filed a case against Kashibai and she was later sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andaman Islands. Phule couple set up an infanticide prohibition home for the welfare of unwed mothers and their children in 1863. They advertised the facility by distributing rather provocatively worded pamphlets in Brahmin colonies. This earned them the ire of a lot of Brahmins but also saved the lives of many pregnant widows. Because at a time when upper-caste Hindu widows were not allowed to remarry and were shunned by society.

At a time when even the shadow of untouchables was considered impure when the people were unwilling to offer water to thirsty untouchables. Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule opened the well in their house for the use of untouchables in 1868. This symbolic act challenged notions of purity and pollution inherent to the caste system.

The high point in their social activities was the establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873. Accordingly the aim of the Samaj included educating backward communities about their rights as human beings and helping them liberate themselves from Brahminical society. This was a bold step that challenged the authority of Brahmins who had for ages presided over religious ceremonies. Savitribai took the lead here and helped a girl, the daughter of a close friend, marry young widower she was in love with. Despite opposition the wedding happened without a Brahmin presiding over it. This was perhaps one of the first civil weddings in British India. The second wedding garnered even more opposition but Jyotiba had already arranged for police protection and it took place unhindered. Their son Yashwant too married a woman of a different caste at the age of sixteen. This was the first recorded inter-caste marriage in British India. Much before the date Jyotiba and Savitri invited Radha, Yashwant's betrothed, to stay in their household so that the young couple could get to know each other better and test their compatibility. During this time, Savitri personally tutored Radha and sent her to school. This was a revolutionary step in a society that believed in marrying off children without their consent.

The famine of 1875 wreaked havoc in Maharashtra and the couples extended all possible help to the victims with the help of Satyashodhak volunteers. They also started as many as fifty-two boarding schools to educate and feed children who had been orphaned.

When Jyotiba passed away in November 1890 Yashwant objected to Jyotiba's cousin lighting his funeral pyre, arguing that this right belonged to the heir to Jyotiba's property. Accordingly it was Savitribai who led Jyotiba's last journey, walking ahead of the procession. She lit the pyre an act that invites censure even today. In nineteenth-century India this was probably the first time a woman had performed death rites. When another dreaded famine hit Maharashtra in 1896, she once again threw herself into relief work. The famine also brought with it the highly contagious plague and she worked to feed over 2000 children every day during the epidemic. However because she came in close contact with the patients, Savitribai also contracted the disease and breathed her last on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1897.

Apart from being a teacher and a philanthropist Savitribai was also a pioneer of modern Marathi poetry and the first woman to be published in modern India. She had made a conscious decision to compose poetry in traditional Marathi forms such as the abhang, a folk form usually used to sing praises of the God Vithoba and used by saint poets such as Tukaram to denounce various societal evils. Her abhanga were lucid and effective in calling out social injustice. Most of her poems focus on the evils of the caste system and the need to abolish caste slavery. For instance *Go Get Education* urges the oppressed to free themselves from the clutches of religious slavery:

“Be self-reliant, be industrious  
Work –gather wisdom and riches  
All gets lost without knowledge  
We become animals without wisdom  
Sit idle no more, go get education  
End misery of the oppressed and the forsaken  
You've got a golden chance to learn  
So learn and break the chains of caste

Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast."

In another poem "English the Mother" Savitri articulates how important is to learn English in order to annihilate caste. She also condemns the Peshwa rule [the dynasty that rule major parts of Maharashtra in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] and echoes the views of Jyotiba who regarded it as autocratic and responsible for perpetuating the caste system.

"English Language, our English mother  
With verse and zeal sets us yonder.  
Mother English is not of a mughal  
A Peshwa Brahman or the gullible.  
Mother English imparts true wisdom  
With love revives the oppressed one.  
Mother English embraces the downtrodden  
Caressing and bringing up those are fallen.  
Mother English breaks shackles of slavery  
Replace bestiality with the glory of humanity."

Savitribai even wrote essays on issues like alcohol addiction and debt traps. In "Karz" [Essays] she vehemently denounced the practice of borrowing money to celebrate festivals as it led to massive debts. She wrote of how the poor got entrapped in religious superstitions. She was also an excellent orator and many of them were published during her lifetime. In one of them she said, "The Shudras are irrevocably blinded due to lack of education the Shudra does not understand his happiness, he considers his sorrows to be his blessings. For 2000 years he has been bearing this burden". It was a burden that she along with her husband had tried to shake off.

As an ode to Jyotiba's exemplary life, Savitribai wrote his biography in verse titled Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar or The Ocean of Pure Gems. She also edited and published four of Jyotiba's speeches on Indian History. Savitribai continued to carry forward the vision she had shared with Jyotiba. She took over the leadership of the Satyashodhak Samaj and was elected president.

She was the only women leader of 19<sup>th</sup> century India who understood the inter sectionalism of patriarchy and caste and fought hard against it. Known as Kaku [paternal aunt] by all her students, Savitribai was a loving but fiercely revolutionary soul who transformed many lives. Pune City Corporation builds a memorial in the memory of Savitribai Phule in 1983. A century after her death on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1998 a stamp was released by India Post in honour of Savitribai. In 2015 the University of Pune was renamed as Savitribai Phule Pune University in her honour.

## CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule struggled and suffered with her revolutionary husband in an equal measure. Apart from her identity as Jyotirao Phule's wife she is little known even in academia. Modern India's first women 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 has her independent identity and contribution. She wrote many poems against discrimination and advised people to get educated. Savitribai was the first Shudra woman in fact the first Indian woman whose poems got noticed in the British Empire. She was the mother of modern poetry stressing the necessity of English and education through her poems. Her life and work is a testament to social reform and female empowerment in Indian society. She remains an inspiration for many women rights activists in modern times. She is often referred to as the mother of Indian feminism.

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