

# Savitri Phule Is An Epitome Of Women's Empowerment Of Colonial India: An Assessment

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## Abstract

Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) was a prominent social reformer and feminist thinker of nineteenth-century India. She also a pioneer for women's education in India and fought for the education of girls throughout her life. From the duration of the British decree or rule, she (Savitribai) dedicated her existence in flourishing women's civil rights and introduced education for girls in Indian society jointly with her husband. She also founded the first school for girls in the Pune province of Maharashtra. Phule's social thought are based on humanism, on the values of equality, fraternity and justice. In these perspectives, the great philosopher Swami Vivekananda said, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved." It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to assess how, as a visionary, Phule's thinking and activities on women's empowerment impact nineteenth-century British India.

**Keyword:** Reformer, Feminist, Education, Justice.

## Introduction

The concept of traditional and modernity are very much known to all human societies, which is widely used as a popular theory of social change and India has in no way stayed away from the touch of this social change and empowerment, which is become popular and relevant in recent times to describe an enabling process for socially marginalized persons (Singh, 2006), lower caste communities (like Dalits or untouchables) and groups to gain advantage and opportunities which otherwise are non-available to them. By means of education and empowerment of people, they do get control over their lives by way of awareness that helps in exercising greater control. The Empowerment renders people in a position where they can do what they want to do. It also energizes people psychologically to accomplish their goals. From institutional point of view the right environment is set through the process of empowerment and such circumstances are created to help people to use their faculties and potentialities. In order to achieve empowerment, the women should have access to those modes and mediums by means of which they can express their self-actualization (ibid, 2006). Although the idea of women's empowerment was the most difficult in colonial society. Which had an impact in the past of the countries like India. In addition, during pre-British and subjugated India, Savitribai Phule, an extraordinary woman in society during the colonial period, played an extraordinary role in women's empowerment in educational filed. Such "Empower," means making one powerful or to equip one with the power to face the challenges of life to overcome disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. Therefore, empowerment is an active multidimensional process, which should enable girls to realize their identity and power in all spheres of life in the society.

It is true that a country's status and character is indicated by the status of women, if they are delightful, their blessing would make every effect, fruitful in the institution as mentioned on the Manu that "when they are honored, then Gods are pleased, where they are not honored, all effort becomes fruitless". In the

developmental history, women are equally significant as man. It can be said that position, social service and job performed by women in the social order is the indicator of a country's progress (Chakravarty et al, 2013) and there is no chance for welfare of the world unless the condition of women is better. The empowerment of education would be consistent with the better access to knowledge. Information and resources, more autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan about one's lives and freedom, belief and practices (Pandya, 2008). David and Julia (2006) also mentioned in Collins internet-linked dictionary of Sociology that the dominant features of the discourses on education in mid-twentieth century was the growth of the social perspective. For an extensive of time, this perspective had been missing in the discussions pertaining into educational studies. The main reasons for this neglect are the late development of education as an independent discipline, the inadequate space given to education in society and the changes in the aims and nature of educational system (Chanan, 2002).

## Objectives of the Study

We know that any kind of society has both men and women. Vivekananda considered men and women as two wings of a bird, and the bird could not fly on only one wing. Thus, for Phule, like John Dewey, education can empower and make society more democratic. In this point of view, my objective is to determine the relevance of girls' education, and the objectives of the study is to establish a relationship between education through empowerment and Savitribai Phule's role to women's empowerment in the nineteenth-century British Indian .

## The Background History of Savitribai Phule

The late nineteenth century was significant for much institutionalization of women's education in India. The chief agencies in the process are particularly Christian Missionaries, organizations and the colonial state or British Government. Although the British government, did not take direct initiative for the spread of women's education (Cotton, 1898). In that situation the introduction of various social reformers in colonial period in India and among them the most significant feminist social reformers was Savitribai Phule. Savitribai was one of the supreme names who fought against the totalitarianism of casteism and other social evils in pre-British Indian times (Thakur, 2010).

Savitribai Phule was born on 3rd January, 1831, in a poor family of farmers in Naigaon of Khandala thana (Police Station), a place situated in Pune Satara district Road, about five (5) kilometers from Shirval and about 50 (fifty) kilometers from Pune in the state of Bombay Presidency in the British India (presently Maharashtra). Her father's name is Khanduri Neveshe Patil and mother Lakshmi. This family of farmers belonged to Mali (Gardener or Scientifically called Horticulturist) community. She was the eldest daughter of Mali community. In the year of 1840, at the early age of nine (9) years, Savitribai was married to a 13 years of old man, activist and social reformer Jyotirao Phule (full name Mahatma Jyotirao Gabindrao Phule). When Savitribai was living at her parents' house, she never received formal education before her marriage (Patel, 2017). After marriage, impressed by Savitribai's thirst for learning and with her husband's wish, support and motivation; she got education and learned to read and write a venture that met fierce resistance from his family. Government records show that Jyotirao educated his wife Savitribai Phule at home after their marriage. She passed third and fourth year examination from a normal school between the year of 1846-47. Savitribai had been given a book by the then Christian Missionary before her marriage, which she brought with her to father-in-laws house. This shows the attraction she had for the words and books despite being uneducated. According to the Education report for the period between 1st May 1851 to 30th April 1852, Jyotirao Phule educated his wife at the home with the help of school education and trained her to become a teacher (Pandey, 2015; Pandya, 2008). According to a news item, which appeared in the Bombay Guardian on 22 November 1851, Jyotirao's friends Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar (Joshi) took up the responsibility of Savitribai's further education. After that, Ms. Phule wants to spread education in society. Unfortunately, Savitribai and her husband success came with much resistance

from the local community with conservative views. Where Savitribai Phule often traveling to her school carrying an extra sari because she would be attacked by the conservative opposition with stones, cow dung and verbal abuse she faced such strong opposition because of the conservative and marginalized caste to which they belonged. The Community of Sudra had been denied education for thousands of years. For this reason, many Sudras began to oppose Savitribai's work and labeled it as social 'evil'. This uproar was often instigated by the upper castes. At that time, in 1849, Jyotirao's father Govindrao Phule also sent for them and asked the couple to leave their homes because their work was considered a sin in the Brahmanical texts. The couple of Phule community started living with Fatima and her brother Usman Shaikh in their house in Mominpura in Ganjpath locality after they were ostracized by the Mali community (Dr. Sundararaman, 2008). Before that, Savitribai and Jyotirao lived in the Dalit or untouchables working class locality in Pune. Where the cultural environment surrounding them had a tremendously important role to play in their socialization and Savitribai Phule was forced to stop her education by father-in-law due to complaints from the orthodox Brahman community (ibid; O'Hanlon, 2002). When the worldwide Third Pandemic of the bubonic plague badly affected the area around Nallaspora, Maharashtra in 1897, there was a severe Plague epidemic in Pune. Hundreds of people were dying every day. Rand, a dedicated officer of the then British government, tried to control the epidemic also. Along with social worker Savitribai and her adopted son Yashwant as a doctor, also set up a hospital to take care of the Plague patients. Although she knew the disease was infectious, she would pick up society's sick people by herself and bring them to the hospital and treat them. Savitribai also got infected and died at 9 p.m. on 10 March 1897 (Savitribai Phule women education; Dewey, 2004).

### **India's First School for Women**

The social aspect of education was largely neglected. Because of this neglect the prevailing social and gender disparities in education remained largely unaddressed. Furthermore, the role of social institutions such as the family and of the community the educational process also was not addressed. The need to bring in the social perspective for a comprehensive and dynamic view on education was felt around the mid-twenties. During this period a phenomenal growth in educational institutions around the world took place. As female education was not given importance in the colonial era or moment and people were not in favour of her (Savitribai Phule) running a school for girls (<https://indianexpress.com/article/education>). Especially, the upper castes strongly opposed lower castes and Dalit education. Once in order to discourage her, they threw cow dung and mud at her while she was walking towards the school. But even after bearing such types of cruelty and inhumanity, she was never obstructed by failure and carried two sarees. Because Education was considered to be a privileged only meant for the higher castes, but Savitribai emphasized on secular education. She believed that the need for proper education was as basic need as that of the requirement of food, water and She preached the importance of getting an education for both boys and girls. Jyotirao Gabindrao Phule not only helped her in attaining good education but also supported her in achieving her dream of an India where women can live with their heads held high (Thakur, 2010).

From the duration of the British system (called rule, law), she (Savitribai) dedicated her existence of life in flourishing women's civil rights and introduced education for girls in the Indian society jointly with her husband. Savitribai Phule earned the distinction of being the first Indian woman to become a teacher (Savitribai Phule). Jyotirao Phule established a girls school and his wife Savitribai to teach there. Later, they opened two more schools for girls, especially for the lower caste Mahars and Mangs, Even after the death of her husband Jyotirao in 1890, she continue to lead the Satya Shodhak Samaj(1873) till her death. For this she undertook training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in Ms. Mitchell's school in Pune. Long believe of the Brahmins was that, children from other castes and communities were denied the right to an education. After completing her studies, Savitribai and her husband broke the rules and established the India's first school for girls in Bhide Wada at Pune and eight (8) girl's students enrolled on the first day, belonging from different castes. Along with her husband, she also worked towards preventing female infanticide and set up a home, "Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha" (literally means, "Child Killing Prohibition

Home"), to prevent the killing of widows (Dr. Sundararaman, 2008; Savitribai Phule; Patel, 2017). She also campaigned against cruel or abnormal social practices like "Child Marriage", shaving the head of widows, isolation of child widows and "Sati Partha", which undermined the existence of women. 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 children understand the importance of education and therefore used to conduct parent- teacher meetings, making parents understand the need for the same. Later on, she also built eighteen (18) such schools in the colonial period

### **Women Empowerment through Education**

It is true that a country's status and character is indicated by the status of women, for if they are honored, their blessing would make every effect, fruitful as Manu Smriti rightly printed out that "where are honored, there the Gods are pleased, where they are not honored, all work becomes fruitless". In the human history of development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the social status, employment and work performed by women in society are the indicator of a nation's overall development. Without the women participation in national activities, the social, economic or political development of a country will be stagnated (Chakravarty et al. 2013) and there will be no chance for welfare of the world unless the condition of women is advanced. The Greatest Hindu Monk, Swami Vivekananda said the best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women and it is impossible to get back India's lost pride and honor unless they try to prosper the situation of women. Vivekananda considered men and women as two wings of a bird, and in this context he (Vivekananda) imposes that "the bird could not to fly on only wing" and he also said that can the societies cultivate the provision of your women? Then there will be hope for your wellbeing. Otherwise you will remain as backwards as you are now" (Singh, 2014; Teaching and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda). Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of our country, said that "If you educate a man you educate an individual; however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means Mother India also possess" (Thakur, 2010; Ray, 1992; Pattanaik et al, 2015). As a visionary, Savitribai Phule's had realized the importance of education for women and lower castes, and she work for that. The primary cause of degradation of lower caste was the denial of education to them by the Brahmins. "Without knowledge, intelligence was lost, without intelligence morality was lost and without morality was lost all dynamism. Without dynamism money was lost and without money the shudras sank. All is misery was caused by the lack of knowledge" (Despande, 2002). Around her time, society was patriarchal, and the position of women was especially abysmal. Female infanticide was a common occurrence as was child marriage. During this time, young girls were being married to much older men. These girls often become widows before they even hit puberty and were left without any family support. Savitribai and her husband Jyotirao realised the pathetic conditions of widows and established an ashram for young widows, eventually becoming an advocate of widow marriage. In 1873 Jyotirao formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj and jointly laid the foundation of the movement of social equality. Truth and humanity were the breath of the Satya Shadhak movement. They made it clear that all people are the children of God, so they are equal. The society's main aim was to stop the exploitations of the Sudras and Ati-Sudars by the Brahmin domination and advocate for true social equality and religious, social and economic rights must be the same for everybody. But Phule was firm and decided to continue the movement against caste and gender discrimination. They exposed the Brahminical pretensions and appreciated the Christian Missionaries for their noble work in school education (Omvedt, 1971).

### **Savitribai Phule as a Mother of Modern Education**

Herbert George Wells was a British writer in 19th century; he also remarked, that Civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. Let us learn the truth and spread it in our society as far and far extended as our places allow. For the authenticity is the utmost weapon we have (Thakur, 2010). Although, Savitribai Phule may not be as famous as Mahatma Gandhi or Swami Vivekananda. However, her impact on the enlargement of the Indian woman has been no less impressive or momentous in the society. One of the



earliest mothers of modern education for girls, and dignity for the most vulnerable sections of Dalits society, women and widows. As we already know that, the position of Women deteriorated during Vedic period. There was a gradual decline in female education as the period advanced. Education of women was given low priority and the introduction of early marriage acted as a grievous pitfall on the way of education. Religious rights and privileges of the average women were curtailed and education remained in the hands of religious people who did not allow co-education for girls (Kely et al, 1984; Dewey, 2004).

During the period of Jainism and Buddhism, the position of women was subjugated by the Brahmins, education will improve for their belief in self-culture and self-restraint. There were highly educated man holding honorable positions in society and equality was there with less inferiority towards women. It is significant to mention that the social reformers, the British Govt. made positive attempts to educated Indian Girls. Indian social reformer and first modern feminist in the British period, Savitribai Phule, who has develop initiatives for girls education and she established the first girls' school in India also and Savitribai was addressed as the 'Mother of Modern Girls' Education. She is the first Indian woman in British colonial India, who placed the foundation of educational opportunities for women in India and broke all the traditional boundaries of the 19th century to boost a new age of thinking in British colonial India & that time it is interesting to say that Savitribai was declared as the best women teacher (First Lady teacher of India: Savitribai Phule; Patel, 2017).

## Conclusion

With a change in women's personal and social status resulted a change in her way of philosophical thinking and feelings, and in the past several centuries have witnessed great changes in attitudes towards sex, gender, and marriage relations. As far as women's educational empowerment is concerned, one of the components of indigenous education for women was the oral tradition. Oral tradition was one of the earliest modes of communication, particularly among illiterates, and in simple terms, oral tradition means just sharing and understanding the collective cultural knowledge of a community verbally. The oral tradition included folklore, which was the primary means of imparting ideas, and other forms of knowledge to the unlettered people (Altekar, 1957).

In ancient times, men and women received the same type of education. Both sexes occupied the same status. Women were mostly respected and honored equally with men in ancient society. But this situation changed when the Manu Smriti stopped the practise of Upanayana for girls. Women were denied equality of treatment. The education of women received a setback with the introduction of "child marriage." When they were given training in "housekeeping" at home to equip with the married life (Altekar, 1957), They were confined within the four walls of the houses. The production and rearing of children were considered their central functions. However, both the laws and the customs conspired to enslave women in society. Yet the profound impact of social institutions on girls' education necessitated the study of women's education from a sociological point of view. This perspective largely covered the subject of prevailing social customs, gender roles, and social values, as well as social aspirations with respect to women. As we are aware, the social dimension is essential for understanding women's education in traditional societies such as India in general. For this reason, Savitribai Phule established the first school for women (Savitribai Phule was India's first female teacher), which was an unprecedented event in Indian society, and it can be said that "Every Indian woman who is educated today owes Savitribai a debt of gratitude" (Patel, 2017). Phule was a great social reformer and feminist who worked for the emancipation of the women, and her social philosophy has relevance even today. After the 70 years of India's independence, still independent values are not there in our society because varna and the caste system still exist in some parts of the country. Her education ideas and principles, especially in the field of women's education and universal, free, and compulsory primary education, are most relevant in modern Indian society. It is not exaggeration to say that the history of women's education in India would be incomplete without making reference to Savitribai Phule's contribution.

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