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Savitribai Phule's Contribution Towards Education And Indian Society

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Abstract: Savitribai Phule was a prominent Indian pioneer, social reformer, educationist and poet who played an important role in women's education and empowerment during the nineteenth century. Her goal was freedom from Indian tradition, freedom from religious practices and fought for human rights, rights for education. She wanted to introduce practical philosophy of human being and emphasized on self-reliance and wanted to interpret Indian tradition in her own way. Savitribai is the first female teacher and first modern, radical, Marathi poet. She felt that women must receive an education as they were in no way inferior to men, they were not the slaves of men. Probably the first educated woman of that time who along with her husband Jyoti Rao Phule gained credit in the society by setting up the first girls' school 'Bide Wada'. For her work for women education many people called her as '*Jananajyoti*' (Flame of Education) and '*Krantijyoti*' (Flame of Revolution). On the other hand she was against Child marriage, caste system, untouchability and in favor of widow marriage. A leading figure in Maharashtra's social reform movement who is considered a role model by Dalit Manga and Mahar caste like B. R. Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe. Hence, Savitri Phule is called as '*Mother of Indian Feminism*'.

This paper focuses on Savitribai Phule's journey of life, her activities as a poet, social reformer, educationist and feminist. This is a qualitative study and I have used content analysis, secondary data collection method.

Key Words: Savitribai Phule, Social Reformer, Women education, Dalit education, Equality, Discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Savitribai Phule, the first female teacher, was a feminist philosopher. In the life of nineteenth century people were subjected to subordinate. Most of the society was poverty stricken and deprived of education due to colonial exploitation and related reason. Naturally, the magic of various reforms-superstitions kept them bound. Women had no right or freedom in the medieval patriarchal society. The Sudra caste living in the remote areas was completely deprived of the right to education and awareness. In that context, Savitri Phule expressed her ideal thinking through the philosophy of Education. The place of equality and humanity was most important in her thought. She wanted equality, freedom, fearlessness, through education to develop the virtues of justice without giving importance to traditional religious beliefs, untouchability and gender discrimination. According to her, women due to lack of education, have not been able to achieve self-reliance, so the women should be given compulsory education. She focused on complete development of the society will be possible through the development of women. Savitribai had always supported her husband's ventures and stood beside Jyotiba in all his actions. They had fought lifelong for the sake of the neglected society in social reform.

According to Narayan Mahadev aka Mama Parmanand (31st July,1890),

“His wife deserves more praise than Jyoti Rao. No matter how much we praise her, it will not be enough. How can one describe her dignity? She fully cooperated with her husband and faced all problems and miseries with him. It is difficult to find examples of such a self-sacrificing woman even among the highly educated women of the upper classes. The couple spent their entire lives dedicated to the welfare of mankind.”

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Savitribai Phule was born on 3rd January, 1831 at Naigaon village of Satara district in Maharashtra as the eldest daughter of Khandoji Nevase Patil and Lakshmi, one of the farmer families in Mali community. Naigaon about 5km from Shirwal and 50 km from Pune. In 1840, only 9-year-old Savitri Phule and 12-year-old Jyotirao Govindrao Phule got married according to the prevailing child marriage custom at that time. Jyoti Rao was a thinker, writer, anti-caste social reformer. He realized that casteism and gender inequality were seriously undermining the society. He was one of the leading figures of the social reform movement in Maharashtra. For that reasons Jyotiba Phule was known as ‘Mahatma’.

Savitri Phule was not educated before marriage because at that time the lower class and women were not entitled to education according to the rules of the Brahmin society. But after marriage, Jyoti Rao took responsibility of Savitribai’s education at home. After receiving primary education, Jyoti Rao’s friends Sakharam Yashwant Paranjape and Keshav Shivaram Bhawalkar took responsibility of her education. Then she graduated along with Fatima Begum Sheikh who was like Savitribai at that time. Fatima was also the first woman of the Muslim community received education and became known as a teacher. Savitribai was passionate about teaching so she was trained at Cynthia Farrar in Ahmednagar (run by American Missionary) and at a general teachers’ training center at Pune. After being trained she became India’s first teacher and headmistress.

The Phule couple ushered in a new era in India at that time by promoting women education and education for the Dalit class. She established the first girls’ school in India, ‘Bhide Wada’ in 1848 with nine students and Savitribai as its headmistress. After that she established three more schools and later 18 schools for girls of different castes. In nineteenth century Savitribai was a confident woman who works against major taboos like caste, gender discrimination, queer, child marriage, sati practice and makes tireless efforts to improve society’s outlook. But Jyotiba’s father Govinda Phule opposed this function of social development. He even ordered them to leave their home in 1849. At that time Phule couple took shelter in the house of their friend Usman Sheikh and his sister Fatima Begum Sheikh. Usman Sheikh and Fatima Sheikh helped them a lot. Fatima Sheikh was Savitribai’s close friend and later colleague also. Savitribai was a writer and poet. She wrote ‘Kavya Phule’ in 1854, ‘Bhavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar’ in 1892, ‘Go Get Education’ etc. and spread awareness to mankind.

In personal life the couple was childless. In 1874 they adopted Yashwant, the son of Kashibai, a Brahmin widow. Which helps to send a strong message to the progressive society. Yashwant Rao later established himself as a physician. After Jyoti Rao’s death in 1890, Savitribai defied all social norms and performed his last rites herself along with her son. In 1897, the third epidemic plague spread worldwide. At that time son Yashwant Rao was a doctor in Nala Sopara region in Maharashtra. On the call of his mother Savitribai, he came to the village and opened a hospital for the treatment of plague victims. At that time Savitri got the news of Pandurang Babaji, son of Gaekwad, who was infected in the slums of Mundhawa village and took him on her back and brought him to the hospital and served him. She also got infected unfortunately and breathed her last on 10th March, 1897.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Savitri Phule’s educational philosophy ushered in a new set of values in the Indian education system. In the traditional education at that time, only Brahmin boys received knowledge of Vedas and Shastras in ordinary schools. She wanted to provide justice, equality, freedom and fearlessness in the society through the education. Education is based on opportunities and gives equal rights to all, provides justice. The education that binds the

society to the same formula. No one is above anyone else in the society, everyone is equal to everyone. Therefore, there will not be any kind of biased attitude in the field of education. She believed education should be made available to everyone in the society by always maintaining impartiality.

Aims of education

Savitribai focused on compulsory education and justice for all. She added, if the principle of universal and compulsory education is followed only then inequality will be removed. Therefore, to develop and create opportunities for education by providing equal rights to all irrespective of caste-religion-gender. For developing human values and personality Education should be expanded. In the past the Brahmin society exploited the ignorant masses and the Shudras and Atishudras were treated with hatred and contempt, even human rights were denied. Therefore, according to her the education of the Dalit class should be spread. Women have been deprived, neglected and oppressed for a long time, so they should be given utmost importance. So that women become aware of their rights and get freedom of expression. That is why women organization should be formed where the objective will be to spread awareness and eliminate discrimination in the society. Only by providing the right opportunities the main objective of education would be possible to attain.

According to her, develop permanent moral values in students by improving the level of knowledge, development of individual freedom, fraternity, equality, justice which makes the society harmonious. In her poem '*Go, Get Education*' (Ibid,36-71) she focused on learning English for the improvement of Dalit caste and to eliminate caste discrimination. According to her,

To attain self-reliance let us pledge
 And accumulate a wealth of knowledge
 Without learning, life is an animal existence, a waste
 Don't rest, get an education, make haste
 The outcasts can wipe away their woes if they wish
 Here's a golden chance to learn English
 Learn English and do away with caste discrimination
 Cast away the tiresome tales of the Brahmins to damnation (Ibid, 36-71)

Curriculum

Savitri Phule was vocal in establishing education against traditional education. In addition to education as a curriculum, she emphasized on establishing knowledge, equality, empowerment, prosperity and progress, both theoretical and practical education should be implemented so that the student's knowledge become practical. Subjects like- Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Language Education, Sociology, Agriculture, Medicine, Law, Moral Education, Health Education etc. are given importance, which will help to bring about social reform and help the students to develop physically and mentally also. 'Bhide Wada', 1848, the first school built by the Phule couple, employed Mathematics, Science, and Social Science as subjects.

Teaching Methods

In the teaching of Phule, reflections of essentialism and pragmatism can be found. She was strongly in favor of making education practical. Education will be organized in a completely free environment. Because the process of knowledge creation is possible only in a free environment that creates inner creativity. In this case, she started the teaching process through Lecture method, Practical method, Experimental method, Question and Answer method, small stories, Poems and Sports. Each of these processes is hugely significant.

Teacher

Teacher will be the symbol of independent and free thinking. His/her main responsibility is to establish equality, so he/she will always help the society to progress on the path of improvement by applying good mentality and wisdom. A teacher will be included in education impartially without any personal bias.

Students

Students must be hardworking to get education. A student who is concern about getting enlightened will become a conscious and progressive citizen. According to her,

“Work hard, study well and do good.”

School

School is the real place to deliver education to all in the wider society therefore she followed the policy of universal, compulsory and free education. She founded the school with hope that free education would become the backbone of the school. People of any caste will get the opportunity to get education.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION

Savitri Phule specially emphasized the need for education as she believed that only education can help to overcome all limitations and build a bright future. She first started teaching girls with revolutionary feminist and mentor of Jyoti Rao, Sagunabai in Maharwada, Pune. Soon after, Savitri Phule, Jyotiba Phule and Sagunabai built the first school for girls ‘Bhide Wada’ in 1848 in Pune with nine students, where Savitribai became the first teacher. Bhide Wada was the home of Tatya Saheb Bhede who was inspired by their work. Here the curriculum is based on western education which include Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.

In 1850, Savitribai and her husband established two educational trust - one for native women school in Pune and the other for the promotion of education of Manga, Mahar etc. castes. These trusts helped many schools. Later Fatima Sheikh took over those responsibilities.

At the end of 1851, the Phule couple established three more girls’ schools in Pune with about 150 students. These were also different from the traditional system of government schools. It was a collective power but it was not easy for them alone. Their own community and upper castes often went against them and made ugly comments and even threw dung, stones and mud at Savitribai while she was travelling to school. Faced with fierce opposition, the indomitable Savitribai never wavered, always carrying an extra saree with her.

Along with her close friend and colleague Fatima Begum Sheikh, she began teaching women and children of lower castes, including Manga and Mahar, who were considered untouchables. By 1852, the Phule couple had opened 18 more schools for children of various castes. Donation of scholarship inspired girls to enroll in school. The Phule family was honored by British Government on 1st November, 1852 for this contribution to education and nominated Savitribai as the best teacher.

In 1855 this couple opened a ‘Night School’ for farmers and laborers to spread education. This attempt to prevent the education of all the people who are busy in agriculture or housework during the day. According to writer Divya Kandukuri,

“Savitri Phule’s teaching methods were expected to be better than government schools. The reason behind this fame was the number of girls enrolled in their schools exceeded the number of boys enrolled in government schools.”

SAVITRI PHULE’S WRITINGS

Savitribai’s work was important to awaken the awareness of mankind before independent. She was the first female Marathi poet and writer. She opposed India’s system of caste discrimination. Both moral values and full of knowledge was there in her writings.

- *KAVYA PHULE (1854) (Poetry’s Blossom)*: collection of poems which was her first work. The poems highlight in English education and the issues of caste, untouchability and struggle against gender inequality.
- *JYOTIRAO SPEECHES (1856) (The Ocean of Pure Gems)*: Jyotirao’s speeches were published under the editorship of Savitri Phule.
- *SAVITRIBAI LETTERS TO JYOTIRAO (1856)*: Letters written to Jyoti Rao, published in book form.
- *SPEECHES OF MATOSHREE SAVITRIBAI (1892)*: Values of education, right personality formation, concepts of inclination.

- BAVANKASHI SUBODH RATNAKAR (1892): A collection of poems describing the history of India including the activities of Jyoti Rao.
- She talks about English language and English education for Dalits.
- *Karz* (Debt) her essay on *Karz*, she condemned the idea of celebrating festivals by borrowing money and thus being burdened by heavy debts. She realized the poor find themselves helpless and unable to change the realities of their lives, either accepted blind faith or got trapped in different ways. She also wrote on addiction, explaining how it ruined the lives of the addicted and their families: themes that are still relevant in the 21st century. (Dhara, 2011, 29)
- In her poem 'GO GET EDUCATION' (Ibid, 36-71) she gave education to women, oppressed society and through this she called to be freed from the chains of oppression. She was trying to motivate women in her possible way. According to her,

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.

SOCIAL REFORMER

Savitri Phule was a courageous woman who in the nineteenth century campaigned against practices such as sati, child marriage and at the same time advocated widow remarriage.

Established 'Mahila Seva Mandal' in 1852 with the aim of empowering women, autonomy and independence. It was the first women's organization in Pune for women's civil rights, raising awareness and financial development of widows.

Til-Gur organized the participation and interview of all women regardless of caste, gender through the festival. Where they discussed about discriminatory or racial problems and solutions.

In 1853, Jyoti Rao and Savitribai established a women's ashram at their home for the prevention of child abuse under the name 'Baalhatya Pratibandhak Griha', which resulted in banning infanticide for the first time in India. The purpose was to reduce the rate of infanticide along with the prevention of widow murder. Brahmin widows and children of rape victims to reach a safe and secure place.

A civil strike was organized in Mumbai and Pune to oppose the practice of shaving the head of widows which was successful. She tried to change their life and wanted their remarriage to keep them away from oppressed society.

When the shadows of the untouchables were considered impure and common people were reluctant to give water the thirsty Dalits. Then in 1868 wells were installed in Phule's house to provide water to the untouchables.

During the famine in 1876, the Phule couple worked tirelessly and provided free food through 52 food centers in Maharashtra.

She even made free hostels for students.

In a draft, 1897 Savitribai persuaded the British government to start relief work.

SATYASODHAK SAMAJ (Society for Seeking Truth)

On 24th September, 1873, Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Phule founded Satyashodhak Samaj as a socio-spiritual movement. Jyotiba Phule wanted to establish based on values like equality, justice, tranquility which aimed to liberalize, equality, modernize not only the society but every person of India. Emancipation and awareness of untouchable Dalit society from oppression and religious slavery of Brahmins. The society was against marriage by conventional Brahmin scholars. This organization started the practice of marriage without caste related hindrances and started the practice of debt-free marriage. Even Phule couple's adopted son Yashwant's marriage was done according to this method on 4th February, 1889. After Jyotiba Rao's death in 1890, Savitribai became the president of this association and took over all the leadership and responsibilities. At that time the Brahmin community opposed this organization and even filed a case in court.

LEGACY

- Savitribai Phule's tireless efforts to curb the age-old evils of society and her reforms continue to inspire the next generation to flourish. His reformatory works have been recognized over the years. Along with B.R. Ambedkar and Annabhau, the bust of Savitri Phule in Pune has become an icon especially for the backward classes.
- In 1983 the Pune city corporation built a memorial in her honor.
- Indian Post released a stamp in her honor on 10th March, 1998.
- In 2015 Pune University was renamed as 'Savitribai Phule Pune University'.
- Search engine Google commemorated Savitribai with a Google Doodle on 3rd January, 2017 on her 186th birth anniversary.
- Savitribai Phule Award given to women social reformer in Maharashtra.
- 'Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule' an Indian drama based on her life television series aired on DD National in 2016.
- 'Savitribai Phule' was also a biopic about her in Indian Kannada language made in 2018.

RELEVANCE OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE IN PRESENT TIME

Prominent social reformer, educationist, writer Savitribai had raised her voice against the deprived society which has much effects even in modern times. Today The primary reason in gaining rights and freedom of all women dependent on Savitribai's indomitable fight. Even in 21st century the influence of Savitri Phule's thoughts has been successfully accepted. Almost two hundred years ago she fought for justice, equality, rights which are still significant in today's era. She understood every person deserves to be established equally but due to lack of proper opportunities that remains unsuccessful.

Universal, compulsory and free education ensures inclusion of all students in society. Savitribai's efforts are exemplified by the Indian Constitution's 'Right to Education Act', 2009.

The determination with which she proceeded in the society of that time is today's guide for all.

The manner in which she did the activity of caste and gender discriminatory is very practical and far-reaching in opposition to social injustice.

As a teaching method in that era, question answer method, practical method, short stories, poems, games are very significant even today. Classroom teaching alone cannot make a student a complete person, it requires practical knowledge to build outside the classroom in open environment and development of practical thinking.

Messages of social peace and harmony can be found in her work. In the curriculum of the present society, Peace Education election is highly relevant.

Similarity of moral values can be seen in the philosophies of Aristotle and Savitri Phule. Development of moral values is the only ultimate goal of life. So, the influence of Phule's thought, perspective also influence the western ideas. And the curriculum in modern education also aims to develop values that will make ideal citizens of the future.

In Phule's personal life we can see they adopted their son, Yashwant. This was indicative of modern attitude which is worthy of example for everyone in the modern age.

The main basis of her ideology was humanism. In today's society that demands a significant context.

Savitribai Phule will be remembered as a brave hardworking role model in modern times. She fought against all the norms but unfortunately even today the present society is concerned about solving those issues. At that time Savitribai dreamed of creating the kind of society, in modern era we have to reveal our knowledge from its inception. Those efforts will find us the right path.

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