

Education for Empowerment: Understanding Savitribai Phule's Educational Philosophy and Contribution

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Abstract-- Savitribai Phule: First feminist of Colonial India, an exemplary teacher, a social reformer, poet, anti-abolitionist, a great leader, and a radical advocate for women's education and the removal of untouchability. She was called "JnanaJyoti," the flame of education, and "KrantiJyoti," the flame of revolution. She was honored with the Best Teacher Award in 1852 by the British Government. She firmly believed that women must receive an education, as they were in no way inferior to men; they were not the slaves of men. She advocated various aims of education, including social transformation, emancipation from oppression, and the development of critical thinking and reasoning. The curriculum she advocated also reflects her philosophy, with a direct link to universal education and practical, not bookish, knowledge. Her methods of instruction are purely pragmatic, including participative, activity-based learning, projects, experiments, and brainstorming. She has also given special space to teachers, portraying them as symbols of independence and free thinking. In her educational philosophy, she has placed stress on women's education and the education of Mahars, Mangs, and Dalits. Her major works include: *Kavya Phule* (1854), Bhavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar (1982), Jyotirao's speeches (1856), etc.

Keywords-- Savitribai Phule, educational philosophy, women's education, liberation, empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Savitribai Phule was born on January 3rd 1831, in Naigaon in the Satara District of Maharashtra, located about 50 km from Pune. Her father's name was khandoji NevasePatil, and her mother's name was Laxmi. As the oldest daughter, Savitribai had a typical childhood, enjoying playtime and laughter. However, she exhibited remarkable qualities from an early age, such as fearlessness and courage. Earlier, she didn't know how to read or write. One day, her father caught her flipping through the pages of an English book and became angry, throwing the book out of the window. Despite not opposing her father directly, Savitribai silently retrieved the book and made a silent vow to herself that she would learn to read it one day. When she was nine years old, in 1840, she was married to Jyotiba Phule, a 13-year-old boy who strongly supported women's education. Recognising that education can empower and liberate women, he personally educated Savitribai.

Along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, she established the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, named Bhidewada or Phule Shikshan Mandir. Later on, they established 18 more schools for girls. After that, they opened a school for adult learners at Usman Sheikh's wada. Then established a society for promoting the education of Mahar, Mang, and Dalits in 1850. Established the MahilaSeva Mandal organisation for raising women's consciousness about their rights in 1852, started the first infanticide prohibition home in 1853, Bal Hatya PratibandakGriha for Brahmin widows. Started night school in 1855 for farmers and labourers and Shudras, and established Satya Shodhak Samaj in 1872 for the liberation of the oppressed class.

Savitribai Phule was a prominent figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra and is considered an icon for the disadvantaged, similar to B.R. Ambedkar & Annabhausathe. Savitribai Phule played a pioneering role in challenging untouchability and discrimination based on caste and gender. She emerged as one of the most significant social reformers of nineteenth-century India, making remarkable contributions towards transforming the social condition of women and marginalised communities. As India's first woman teacher and educator, she encouraged disadvantaged and oppressed sections of society to pursue education and regarded education as a powerful means of achieving social liberation and equality. Alongside her educational initiatives, she actively participated in various social reform movements and worked relentlessly against caste-based oppression, gender inequality, and social injustice. She stood firmly beside Jyotirao Phule and carried forward their shared vision of education, equality, and social emancipation, successfully contributing to several of his reformist endeavours while also establishing her own distinct identity as a pioneering woman reformer. Apart from her educational and social reform activities, Savitribai Phule was also a pioneering writer and poet. Her literary works reflected her deep concern for social inequality, women's emancipation, education, and the liberation of marginalised communities. She published *KavyaPhule* in 1854, a collection of her poems that expressed her progressive ideas and encouraged people to seek knowledge and challenge social oppression.



Her second collection, *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar*, was published in 1892 and further demonstrated her literary engagement with social and moral issues. In addition to her own writings, Savitribai also contributed to preserving and disseminating Jyotirao Phule's ideas by editing and compiling his speeches, which were published in volume form in 1856. Through her literary contributions, she extended her reformist vision beyond the classroom and used writing as another powerful means of promoting education, equality, social awareness, and emancipation.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Today, women participate actively in almost every sphere of life, contributing equally to education, employment, science, technology, administration, sports, and other fields. From travelling into space to exploring the depths of the oceans, women have demonstrated their capabilities and have made significant contributions to the development of society and the nation. Education has been one of the most powerful forces behind this transformation, enabling women to become independent, confident, and active participants in social and national development. However, the journey towards women's educational empowerment was made possible by the tireless efforts of several pioneers who challenged deeply rooted social barriers. Among them, Savitribai Phule occupies a particularly significant place.

Savitribai Phule devoted her life to promoting education among women and marginalised communities at a time when female education was strongly opposed by prevailing social norms. As India's first female teacher and one of its earliest advocates of women's education, she challenged caste and gender-based inequalities and worked towards creating educational opportunities for those who had long been excluded from them. Her efforts not only opened the doors of education for women but also contributed to a broader movement for social equality, dignity, and emancipation. Therefore, examining Savitribai Phule's contribution to women's education is essential for understanding the historical foundations of women's educational empowerment in India. The present study seeks to explore her educational philosophy, reformist initiatives, and enduring contribution to women's education and empowerment.

III. EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE

Savitribai Phule's educational philosophy emerged from her profound commitment to equality, social justice, human dignity, and emancipation through education.

At a time when access to formal education was largely determined by caste, gender, and social status, she challenged the prevailing structures that excluded women and marginalised communities from knowledge. For Savitribai, education was not merely a means of acquiring literacy or academic knowledge; rather, it was a transformative instrument through which individuals could develop awareness, exercise agency, challenge oppression, and participate meaningfully in society. Her educational thought was therefore closely intertwined with her broader vision of social reform.

A central tenet of Savitribai's philosophy was the emancipatory potential of education. She regarded ignorance as one of the major forces sustaining social inequality and believed that access to knowledge could enable oppressed communities to recognise and challenge their disadvantaged position. Her efforts to establish educational institutions for girls and marginalised communities reflected her conviction that education should reach those who had historically been denied it. In this regard, her educational practice represented a direct challenge to the traditional monopolisation of knowledge and sought to democratize access to learning.

Women's education constituted the core of her educational vision. Savitribai recognised that the subordination of women was sustained not only through social customs but also through their systematic exclusion from education. She therefore advocated education as a means of developing women's intellectual autonomy, self-confidence, and capacity for independent decision-making. Her pioneering work in girls' education demonstrated that educating women could have implications extending beyond individual development, influencing family life, social relationships, and the wider structure of society. Her educational philosophy thus positioned women not as passive recipients of social change but as active agents in the transformation of society.

Another significant dimension of her educational thought was its commitment to caste equality and the educational inclusion of marginalised communities. Savitribai worked to extend educational opportunities to communities that had been historically excluded from formal learning, including Shudras and Dalits. Her educational initiatives challenged the intersection of caste-based discrimination and educational deprivation. Education, in her view, could serve as a means through which marginalised groups could acquire knowledge, develop self-respect, and resist social domination. Consequently, her conception of education was fundamentally opposed to any system that reproduced inequality through differential access to knowledge.



Savitribai's philosophy also emphasised critical awareness and the questioning of oppressive social practices. Education, according to this perspective, should enable learners to examine inherited beliefs and social customs rather than accept them uncritically. Her opposition to caste discrimination, untouchability, gender inequality, child marriage, widow oppression, and other forms of social injustice reflected an understanding of education as a process of developing social consciousness. Learning acquired significance when it contributed to the capacity of individuals to recognise injustice and work towards its transformation.

The practical and socially responsive character of Savitribai's educational philosophy is particularly evident in her educational initiatives. Her work was not confined to conventional schooling; she supported educational opportunities for women, workers, farmers, and other disadvantaged sections of society. The establishment of night schools, for instance, reflected an attempt to make education accessible to those whose economic responsibilities prevented them from attending regular schools. Such initiatives indicate that she understood educational access in relation to the social and material circumstances of learners.

Furthermore, Savitribai viewed education as a pathway towards self-reliance and social participation. For women and marginalised communities, educational attainment could provide the intellectual and social resources necessary to challenge dependency and participate more actively in public life. Her educational philosophy therefore connected learning with dignity, agency, and the ability to shape one's own life. In this sense, education acquired both an individual and collective purpose: it could transform the learner while simultaneously contributing to the transformation of society.

Her philosophy also demonstrates an inseparable relationship between education and social reform. Savitribai did not perceive teaching as an isolated professional activity but as part of a larger struggle against social inequality. Her educational work was accompanied by initiatives addressing the conditions of women, widows, marginalised castes, and other vulnerable groups. This integration of education with social reform distinguishes her educational thought from a narrowly instructional conception of education. For her, the ultimate purpose of education was to cultivate a society founded upon equality, justice, dignity, and mutual respect.

Taken together, Savitribai Phule's educational philosophy may be understood as an emancipatory and egalitarian conception of education. It placed education at the intersection of knowledge, empowerment, social justice, and collective transformation.

Her emphasis on women's education, access for marginalized communities, critical consciousness, self-reliance, and resistance to caste and gender oppression provides an important framework for examining education as a force for social change. For a review of her educational philosophy, it is therefore important to understand her contribution not simply in terms of the schools she established, but in terms of the alternative vision of society that those educational initiatives sought to create.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS:

Savitribai Phule advocated an egalitarian education system, compulsory education, and justice for all. She believed that education should foster humanistic values, equality, social justice, and respect for human dignity.

V. AIMS OF EDUCATION

Education for Social Transformation – Education should transform society by challenging caste discrimination, social inequality, superstition, and injustice.

Emancipation from Oppression – Education should liberate individuals, particularly women and marginalized communities, from social, cultural, and patriarchal oppression.

Universal Right to Education – Education should be accessible to every individual, irrespective of caste, gender, class, or social status.

Practical and Life-Oriented Knowledge – Education should provide useful knowledge connected with everyday life rather than being limited to mere bookish learning.

Development of Critical Thinking and Reasoning – Education should develop rationality, questioning, independent thinking, and the ability to challenge blind beliefs and superstitions.

Women's Empowerment through Education – Education should enable women to become self-reliant, confident, dignified, and active participants in social life.

Compulsory and Equal Educational Opportunities – Education should be provided equally and without discrimination, ensuring that disadvantaged sections receive meaningful opportunities to learn.

Development of Moral and Social Values – Education should nurture equality, justice, compassion, human dignity, cooperation, and social responsibility, contributing to the creation of a just and humane society.

VII. CURRICULUM

Savitribai Phule advocated a balanced curriculum combining theoretical knowledge with practical and life-oriented learning. She emphasised subjects such as law, mathematics, history, geography, science, social sciences, English, literature, and medical knowledge, along with the development of problem-solving, logical thinking, and reasoning skills. Her vision of curriculum was broad, aiming to equip learners with knowledge and skills necessary for personal independence and meaningful participation in society. Thus, her curricular vision can be understood as an instrument for empowerment, social justice, equality, and the creation of a more enlightened and equitable society.

VIII. METHODS OF TEACHING

Savitribai Phule advocated learner-centred, participatory, and practical approaches to teaching, emphasising active engagement rather than passive reception of knowledge. Her pedagogical practices can be associated largely with pragmatic principles, as they connected learning with experience and real-life situations. Her approaches included participative learning, activity-based learning, discussion, brainstorming, experimentation, question-and-answer, storytelling, and lectures. These methods encouraged learners to think independently, engage with ideas, develop reasoning abilities, and relate knowledge to their social realities. Her pedagogical vision also reflects elements of pragmatism and essentialism, combining experiential learning with the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills.

IX. ROLE OF TEACHER

According to Savitribai Phule, the teacher should serve as a symbol of independence, rationality, and free thinking. The teacher should create an inclusive and egalitarian classroom environment where every learner is treated with equal dignity and respect, irrespective of caste, gender, or social background. The teacher should encourage learners to question, reason, think independently, and challenge social prejudices rather than merely receive knowledge passively. Thus, the teacher, in her educational vision, is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but an agent of social transformation, equality, and emancipation.

X. DISCIPLINE

Savitribai Phule advocated self-discipline and social discipline rather than discipline imposed through force or punishment. She believed that learners were naturally curious, inquisitive, and eager to explore, and education should nurture these innate qualities.

She therefore favoured a compassionate and empathetic approach based on understanding learners' individual needs, motivations, and challenges. Through encouragement, positive reinforcement, guidance, and mentorship, teachers could cultivate responsibility, self-control, and commitment to learning. Thus, discipline, in her educational vision, was not about controlling learners but about nurturing their potential and developing responsible, independent individuals.

Major Literary Works Of Savitribai Phule

1. *Kavya Phule (1854)* – Her first collection of poems, published at the age of 23. It emphasizes education, knowledge, self-awakening, and social equality, particularly encouraging women and oppressed communities to overcome ignorance.
2. *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar (1892)* – A poetic work depicting the life and social reform activities of Jyotirao Phule. It reflects ideals of equality, rationality, and social justice.
3. *Savitribai Phule's Letters to Jyotirao* – Her letters provide insights into her educational activities, social reform work, women's condition, and commitment to marginalized communities.
4. *Poems on Education and Social Reform* – Her poetry repeatedly highlights the transformative power of education, urging women and marginalised sections to acquire knowledge and challenge social oppression.
5. *Speeches and writings associated with the Satyashodhak Samaj* – These reflect her commitment to social equality, human dignity, rational thought, and emancipation from caste and gender-based discrimination.
6. *Matashree Savitribai (1892)* – Associated with the documentation and remembrance of her life and reformist contribution, providing context for understanding her social and educational philosophy.

XI. CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule holds a distinctive and enduring place in the history of Indian education and social reform. Despite marrying young and living within the constraints of nineteenth-century society, she pursued education and dedicated her life to spreading knowledge and challenging social inequalities. Working alongside Jyotirao Phule, she played a pioneering role in expanding educational opportunities, particularly for women and marginalized communities. Her advocacy extended beyond literacy to women's rights, social equality, economic dignity, and freedom from caste- and gender-based oppression.

Through her teaching, writings, poetry, and social activism, she emerged as a powerful voice for women's emancipation and is widely regarded as one of the earliest pioneers of Indian feminism. Her efforts to establish schools for girls and her courageous challenge to caste and patriarchal structures demonstrate her vision of education as an instrument of empowerment, emancipation, and social transformation. Her educational philosophy—centered on equality, critical thinking, human dignity, practical knowledge, and universal access to education—remains relevant in the twenty-first century. Therefore, integrating her life, ideas, and educational contributions into contemporary curricula can help learners understand the historical struggles for educational justice and inspire continued efforts toward a more inclusive, equitable, and socially just education system.

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