

## **PIONEER OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: SAVITRIBAI PHULE**

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### **Abstract:**

Today Indian women are not lagging behind of men in any respect. Women have excelled in each and field be it governance, education, science, politics, judiciary, sports, business and almost all others field. Today our women have held high portfolio like President, Prime Minister, and speaker of Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Chief Minister, and Governors. But Indian women are not fully empowered. Still there are many barriers in the way of advancement of women. In India the process of empowering women was initiated by Savitribai Phule. This paper focuses Savitribai Phule's contribution to women empowerment as a pioneer of education, social reformer, poetess and women liberator.

**Key words:** women empowerment, education, social reformation, Savitribai Phule, religion, restriction etc.

### **Introduction:**

In the social and educational history of India, Savitribai and her husband Jyotirao Phule have left an indelible mark. The couple fought for equality between men and women as well as social justice. Savitribai and her husband established a girl's school in pune at Bhide Wada in 1848 and started its journey with seven girls. She herself becomes the head teacher of the school. With a short span of time from 1848 to 1851, they founded 18 schools. She was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1831 in a poor family in Naigaon in Satara district limits in Maharashtra. Her father was Khandoji Nevase Patil and her mother was Laxmi. And her parents were not educated. She was got married of at the age of nine to Jyotiba Phule. She was illiterate when she was got married. She was made read and write by her husband. She went to Mitchell teachers' training school in Pune.

### **Pioneer of Women Education:**

Savitribai Phule observes 'The person who educates and the person who gets education both become true human beings.

Savitribai Phule was a great social reformer, philanthropist, educationist, first Indian female teacher and a prolific poetess of Marathi. She was regarded as the mother of Indian feminism.

She and her husband dedicated their lives for women education and for the rights of the downtrodden. She along with her husband fought for the dignity and rights for the women and marginalized. They established a girl's school in pune in 1848 and started its journey with seven students and it was the first Indian run school. Savitribai started teaching in this school and she became the first woman teacher of India. She herself becomes the head teacher of the school. With a short span of time from 1848 to 1851, they founded 18 schools. They founded a girl school for the untouchable girls' even when they had no access in education nowhere in India. She introduced secular education as she started educating girls from all sections of the society irrespective of caste, creed and religion. It may be mentioned here that education for girls were considered as a sin at that time. So, teaching by a female teacher for girl students was very difficult. She strongly believed that only education can liberate our women from the oppressive patriarchal structure. She waged a war against casteism and Brahminic caste culture for the upliftment of women. She with her husband took a great task of spreading education among all section of society when women were considered mere object to be used. It was a punishable offence to literate girl children at that period. As Hindu religious norms and injunctions were against female education people were unwilling to send their children to school. Manu strictly prohibited it. So Phule couple conducted parent-teacher meeting at a regular interval to encourage them for sending their children to school and up held the benefits of education before them. She dedicated herself to spread education among girl children and established women rights. Wandering door to door she urged the villagers to send their children to school and subsequently the number of students started increasing rapidly. They set up hostel for the students. The Phule couple used to hold parents-teacher meeting to ensure the active participation of parents so that they could understand the importance of education and sent their girls to school to receive education. To attract and encourage students towards school and education she adopted many measures like setting up hostel, designed the syllabus according to the need of the students, vocational training, attendance allowance for students. Reciting her own poems from 'Kavyaphule' she used to encourage her students, like:

**Go, get education,  
Be self-reliant, be industrious  
All get lost without knowledge  
We become animal without wisdom.  
Sit idly no more, go get education...  
You have got a golden chance to learn  
So, learn and break the chain of slavery.  
And  
First work is study then homely deeds  
... Forliving self respect go to school.  
The real jewel of the men and women is education  
Now go to school.  
And**

**Let us go to school for study  
We will not waste time  
Now we bow to get education, and knowledge  
Let us break the slavery of ignorance and poverty.**

She was of the opinion that discriminatory measures imposed on women lead to oppression. Savitribai and her husband Jyotiba were honoured by the government for their contribution in the field of education. She was declared best teacher by the British government in 1852. It is evident from the above-mentioned lines of her Poem that she was a lady with free thoughts and ideas about the empowerment of girls. She felt that education is better than domestic works for girls.

### **As Social Reformer:**

She was the first women social reformer in India. She was a great social reformer as well as a great teacher. Savitribai and her husband Jyotiba Phule founded Styashodhak Samaj in September, 1873 and through this organization they undertook many social reformative works. This organization Started registered marriage and it was first time in India that registered marriage was initiated. This type of marriage was performed without any priest, religious rituals and dowry. They also called it Styashodhak marriage. As per this marriage the bridegroom had to take oath that he would support and stand by his wife at every step of life. He had to also promise that he would help his wife to get educated. The Phule couple arranged their son's marriage according to this system i.e., registered marriage. But the priest community and the orthodox Hindu society were deadly against of this type of marriage. As it was against religious scriptures and Hindu customs, except some progressive people most of the people were against this form of marriage. At that time many girls became widows as they were married off at a very early age with old age men. And remarriage of widows was strictly prohibited then. Widows were forced to shave their heads. Savitribai protested against it and she convinced the girls not to shave their heads. She also requested the barbers not to shave heads of girl widows. She was able to convince the barbers and the barbers joined her movement. Finally, the barbers called a strike demanding withdrawal of this bad system. And they announced that henceforth they would not shave the heads of widows. It was revolutionary and a big achievement for the Indian women. In 1852 she founded an organization namely Mahila Mandal in Pune. Under the banner of this organization, they started campaigning against child marriage, mismatch marriage, exploitation of widows, and oppression on women. They also campaigned for widow remarriage. She started calling meetings of women and women cutting across caste line used to attend the meetings where they shared their problems. On hearing their problems, she tried to boost their Morales. The Main objective of this organization was to create awareness of women rights. This Mahila Mandal succeeded in empowering Indian women to great extent.

**Setting up Infanticide Prohibition Home:**

‘In 1863 she started an infanticide prohibition home for pregnant widows to provide them a safe space to give birth without the fear of society. The Phule couple adopted the son of Kashibai, a Brahmin widow. He was named Yashwant Rao and went on to become a doctor.’ It is seen in the history that women were made victim of social evil system. Religious customs, evil traditions and blind beliefs put various restrictions on women. Widow Remarriage was strictly prohibited and child marriage was prevalent among the Hindus in the then society. According to Phule couple, both men and women are entitled to enjoy equal rights and it is a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis sex. During Savitribai Phule’s time girls were got married off at the early age. Many of them became widow and on many occasions they were sexually exploited. As a result sometimes they became pregnant and most of the cases they had to kill themselves. Phule couple emerged as the saviour of such illfated women. They stop such victim women from killing themselves or foeticiding. They consoled them and give them shelter. Savitribai herself took care of them and arranged the safe birth. Under the banner of this infanticide prohibition home they were able to save many lives.

**ACrusader Against Superstition:**

Savitribai Phule was rational and progressive in thinking. She was against all kinds of superstitions and evil customs and wanted people to be rational in their thinking. She waged a war against superstition of believing in heaven and hell, astrology etc. she was a nice poet of Marathi and English. In one of her poems, she remarks:

Fools believing in astrology  
Panchangs, hand line,  
Lost in imagination of heaven and hell.

According to Phule people have been enslaved in evil traditions and superstitions by injecting the religious bad notions in their mind and keeping them uneducated. She was against worshipping god. Ridiculing worshipping, she said:

Giving vermilion to stone  
And dipping it in the oil,  
Which we know no god in real  
That is only stone.

During her period many people worshipped idol in order to get son. Ridiculing it she questioned if we get children by worshipping stone then why do men and women marry together? Her life and philosophy clearly tell us that we should not follow the worship of dev, dharma etc. Defying religious norms and social customs she herself performs the last rites and ritual of her deceased husband. It is only education which can bring people out of these bad traditions and superstitions.

**Why the Orthodox Society was Against Women Education?**

Though Savitribai and her husband Jyotiba Phule dedicated themselves to educate and secure the right of girls, the orthodox Hindu society considered it as an attack to their religion, beliefs, customs and traditions. They started creating obstacles in the way of advancement of girls. Like Rajarammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar they also faced vehement opposition from the religious orthodox Hindu society. The conservatives and superstitious people even made disrespectful comments on Savitribai and sometimes they hurled stones and mud on Savitribai on her way to school for teaching. But they did not stop her from teaching girls. She kept an extra dress in her bag for changing in school if anyone made her dress dirty. She said, "I am doing my pious work to educate my sisters but you throw stone and dung on me. They seem me like flowers."

But why the orthodox society was deadly against of girls' education and women empowerment? There may have been many reasons behind their opposition. But I think, the religious belief was one of the major factors as it played a very important role to shape the mindsets of the society as well as individual. It is a fact that most of our religious scriptures gave low grade to women very disgracefully. The orthodox society could not tolerate these revolutionary and daring steps. They were against women education. They believed that Savitribai's efforts for uplifting women were against Hindu religion and traditions. Now I wish to quote some verses from our religious scriptures which may be helpful to understand my point of view. In the Ramachrita Manas, Tulshidas advocated women for torture. He says:

Dhol, Gawar, Shudra, Pashu, Nari  
Sakal Taran Ke Adhikari

The Manusmriti was considered the Hindu Code of Life because it ordained Hindu life from birth to death. It says in the verse:2 chapter:11 Day and night women must be kept under one's control. Women are not to be free under any circumstances. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never for independence. (11, 3) A woman shall not perform the daily sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. (chap.11, verses: 36, 37). Liquor, slaying women, shudras, vaishyas, or kshtriyas, and atheists are all minor offences. Taittiriya Sanghita says, at the sacrificial performance one should not look at dog, woman and shudra (6/5/8/2). Maitraiyani Sanghita depicts women as evil (3/8/3). Girl child is a curse (Aitaryia Brahmana). In Atharva Veda there we find the mention of co-cremation of widow on the pyre of her deceased husband. We can recall here Simon De Beauvoir observation: 'One is not born, rather becomes a woman'.

Now it is evident from the above discussion that religious restrictions create major barrier in the way of women education, women empowerment. Religious blind beliefs and customs were the major barrier before Savitribai in educating and empowering women. During Savitribai Phule's time it was not easy to come out of religious barricades. The Indian patriarchal society was of

the view that the task of women is child and chulla. And that was why she faced vehement opposition from orthodox Hindu society.

**Conclusion:**Savitribai Phule succeeded in bringing a new age of thinking in India by spreading education. Studying her life, we learn the best way for the enlightenment of human beings from ignorance. If she would have not taken initiative in educating women, uplifting their social position the status of Indian women would have been worse.Wandering door to door and breaking blind beliefs she lit a enlightened revolutionary flame of education. Women in our society were less than an animal Savitribai gave them a respectful life. For her great works and contribution, she will remain immortal in the society.

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