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Research Article

Savitribai Phule: Pioneering Women's Education in Colonial India

Virender Kumar ¹, Bhart Singh ^{2*}

¹⁻² PhD Students, Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author: * Bhart Singh

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Abstract

This paper looks at how Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) changed women's education in India during British rule. She was India's first modern woman teacher and headmistress. At that time, society did not allow women, especially lower-caste women, to get an education. Savitribai fought against these unfair rules. Through her new ways of teaching, the schools she started with her husband Jyotirao Phule, her social work, and her writings, she turned education into a tool for freedom. This paper studies her ideas about education, the schools she opened, her other social work, and why she still matters today.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1848 is very important in the history of Indian education. In a small room at Bhide Wada in Pune, a 27-year-old woman started a school for girls from poor and lower-caste families. This was a bold step because for centuries, only upper-caste men were allowed to learn. That woman was Savitribai Phule. Her act of teaching was not just about giving lessons—it was a direct attack on the unfair systems of caste and gender that controlled Maharashtra in the 1800s.

Savitribai's life story shows how powerful education can be. She was born on January 3, 1831, in Naigaon village in Satara district. Her family belonged to the Mali community (gardeners and farmers), which was considered a lower caste. She was married at age nine to Jyotirao Phule, a 13-year-old boy who would later become her partner in fighting social injustice. Unlike most husbands at that time, Jyotirao encouraged her to study, even though people thought it was wrong and dangerous for women to read and write.

This paper aims to document and understand Savitribai Phule's work for women's education.

It asks three main questions: What schools did she start and what were her teaching methods?

How did her work for education connect to her fight against caste and gender injustice? And what can we learn from her today?

These questions matter not just for history. Even today, India struggles with unfairness in education caste still affects who gets to study, girls still drop out more often than boys, and true learning should empower people, not just give them certificates. Savitribai's ideas can help us think about these problems. She saw that education and social justice must go together, that good teaching should make people question unfair systems, and that the most oppressed communities must be reached first.

2. Historical Background: Women's Education in 19th Century

2.1 Colonial India Education Before British Rule and Women's Exclusion

Before the British came, education in India was mostly for upper-caste men. Village schools and centers for learning Sanskrit and Persian did not allow lower-caste people or women to study. Ancient texts like the Manusmriti said women had no right to learn the Vedas and that educating them would create problems in society.

In Maharashtra, the Peshwa rulers (1713-1818) created a very strict social system that kept Brahmins at the top. Communities considered "untouchable" faced cruel rules—they could not enter temples, use public wells, or go to schools. Women from lower castes suffered the most because they faced both caste and gender discrimination.

2.2 British Rule and Missionary Schools

When the British took over, education began to change slowly. The Charter Act of 1813 allowed Christian missionaries to

open schools in India. Missionary groups especially the American Marathi Mission and Scottish Presbyterian missions started schools for girls in Bombay, Pune, and Ahmednagar. These schools were small and often wanted to convert people to Christianity, but they created the first real chances for Indian women to study.

Savitribai herself got teacher training at a school run by Cynthia Farrar, an American missionary in Ahmednagar. She also trained at a Normal School in Pune. This training taught her how to teach, but she used these skills for a different purpose not to spread Christianity but to fight caste and gender oppression. However, the British government did not do much for girls' education. The Wood's Despatch of 1854 said girls' education was important but gave little actual help. By 1882, a government commission found that girls' education was still ignored less than 0.5% of women could read in most areas.

2.3 Indian Reform Movements

The 1800s saw new movements started by Indians to change unfair Hindu practices. Groups like the Brahmo Samaj (started 1828) and Prarthana Samaj (started 1867) supported women's education and widow remarriage. But these groups mostly worked within upper-caste communities and did not challenge the caste system itself.

Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule went further. Unlike these other groups, they said caste itself was the real problem. Their work for women's education was part of a bigger goal uplifting the most oppressed communities (Shudras and Ati-Shudras) by giving them knowledge and tools to free themselves.

3.The Educational Journey: From Uneducated Child Bride to Pioneer Teacher

3.1 Learning to Read

Savitribai's own education started after her marriage, with her husband as her teacher. Jyotirao Phule had studied at a Scottish missionary school. He saw that his wife was intelligent and taught her to read and write Marathi at home. This was a bold act—at a time when even upper-caste women rarely could read, a lower-caste man teaching his wife challenged many social rules at once.

She later continued her studies with help from Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar, two friends of Jyotirao who supported their reformist ideas. In 1846-47, she passed exams at an English school, showing she was ready for formal teacher training.

3.2Teacher Training

Savitribai joined two teacher training programs: first at Cynthia Farrar's school in Ahmednagar, then at a Normal School in Pune. These programs taught teaching methods, lesson planning, and school management. After finishing, she became India's first trained woman teacher and headmistress a huge achievement for a lower-caste woman who could not read just a few years earlier.

3.3 Working with Fatima Sheikh

An important but often forgotten part of Savitribai's story is her partnership with Fatima Sheikh, India's first Muslim woman teacher. Fatima Sheikh already knew how to read and trained alongside Savitribai at the Normal School in Pune. Together, they opened a school in the Sheikh family home in 1849, after the Phules were forced to leave Jyotirao's family house because people opposed their work for education.

This partnership between a Hindu lower-caste woman and a Muslim woman was unheard of. At a time when society kept different communities apart and worried about caste purity, these two women ran a school together for girls from all backgrounds. Fatima Sheikh's home became a safe place for learning and gave shelter to the Phules when they faced problems from society.

4. Major Educational Work

4.1 The First Girls' School at Bhide Wada (1848)

In January 1848, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule, along with Sagunabai Kshirsagar a revolutionary feminist and mentor to Jyotirao started India's first girls' school at Bhide Wada, the home of Tatyasaheb Bhide. The school began with nine girls, and soon had 25 students.

The location was important. Bhide Wada was an ordinary house, not a special school building. This showed that the Phules believed education should be part of everyday community life. Students learned math, science, and social studies—not just religious texts. The Phules believed modern knowledge was essential for true empowerment.

Upper-caste people reacted with anger. They attacked Savitribai daily on her way to school—throwing stones, mud, and dung at her, and shouting insults. She reportedly carried an extra sari to change into after these attacks. She refused to let violence stop her from teaching. The Phules' own family cut ties with them. Jyotirao's father made them leave his home in 1849 because their work was considered a sin according to religious texts.

4.2 Starting More Schools

Despite fierce opposition, the Phules kept going. By the end of 1851, they were running three girls' schools in Pune with about 150 students. According to Jyotirao Phule's interview with the missionary magazine *Dnyanodaya* in 1853, these school 'taught girls from many castes, including Mahar and Mang communities considered "untouchable."

The teaching at Phule schools was reportedly better than at government schools. One scholar notes that more girls enrolled in Phule schools than boys in government schools at that time—a sign of their good teaching and the trust they built with poor communities.

In the 1850s, Savitribai and Jyotirao set up two educational trusts: the Native Female School, Pune, and the Society for Promoting the Education of Mahars, Mangs, and Etceteras. These trusts gave stable support for their work. Some records say they eventually opened 18 schools across the Pune region.

4.3 New Ways of Teaching

The Phules taught differently from both traditional Indian schools and British government schools. Their methods included:

Open to all: They admitted students regardless of caste, which was very unusual at that time. Lower-caste children, kept out of education for thousands of years, found welcome in Phule schools.

Practical learning: Instead of just teaching religious texts or old languages, they taught math, science, and social studies—subjects that gave students useful knowledge for their lives.

Teacher training: Savitribai's own professional training shaped how she trained teachers. She knew that good education needed skilled teachers, not just kind volunteers.

Connecting with communities: The Phules understood that families were afraid to send daughters to school, so they offered small payments to keep girls in school. They also worked through community leaders who convinced their caste groups that education was valuable.

Safety and dignity: Savitribai carried an extra sari to change into after attacks. By refusing to let violence shame her, she showed her students that education was worth fighting for.

4.4 Facing Challenges

The Phule schools closed by 1858 for several reasons: European donors stopped giving money after the 1857 uprising against British rule, government support decreased, and Jyotirao left the school management committee because he disagreed with the curriculum. But even though these schools did not last forever, they proved something important. They showed that girls from poor communities could learn, that lower-caste women could become teachers, and that education could happen outside upper-caste control.

5. Beyond School: Education as Full Empowerment

5.1 Home for Pregnant Widows (Infanticide Prevention Home)

In 1863, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule, with their friend Sadashiv Ballal Govande, started the Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha (Home for Preventing Infanticide). This place helped pregnant widows who were rejected by society and often killed themselves or their babies. Advertisements for the center said: "Widows, come here and deliver your baby safely and secretly. You can decide whether to keep the baby with you or leave it at the center. This orphanage will take care of the children left behind."

This work was part of Savitribai's educational mission. By giving shelter, medical care, and protection to weak women, she dealt with the real problems that stopped women from getting an education. A widow with no food or home could not go to school. A woman hurt by violence could not learn. The home for widows worked together with the schools by removing barriers to women's empowerment.

5.2 Women's Groups and Satyashodhak Samaj

In 1851, Savitribai helped start the Mahila Seva Mandal (Women's Service Organization) to support women's rights and create spaces where women could talk about their problems. When Jyotirao founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) in 1873, Savitribai led its women's wing.

The Satyashodhak Samaj fought for social equality, rejected Brahmin priestly authority, and supported the rights of lower castes and women. It conducted marriages without Brahmin priests—opening up a ritual previously controlled by upper castes—and encouraged couples to promise they would support education and equality. These marriage reforms, known as Satyashodhak marriages, still happen in parts of Maharashtra today.

Through these groups, Savitribai created organized ways for people to work together for change. She understood that individual education, while important, was not enough without collective action. The Samaj gave poor communities a platform to share their problems, develop group awareness, and fight unfair systems.

5.3 Fighting Social Evils

Savitribai worked hard against practices that hurt women: child marriage, sati (burning widows on their husband's funeral pyre), dowry, and the ban on widow remarriage. She challenged the custom of shaving widows' heads—a practice meant to make them unattractive and confirm their social death—by organizing barbers to refuse this work.

In 1868, the Phules opened their household well to "untouchable" communities, defying the rule that lower castes could not use common water sources. This act of practical help was also a lesson: it showed that caste discrimination was not God's command but something humans created and could destroy.

5.4 Writings: Teaching Through Poetry

Savitribai's poems were another part of her teaching work. Her first poetry collection, *Kavya Phule* (1854), used simple Marathi to share reformist ideas. Her second collection, *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1892), continued this tradition.

Her poems dealt with themes central to her educational philosophy: the value of knowledge, the injustice of caste, and the dignity of work. In one poem, she wrote:

"Wake up, arise, and educate
Smash the chains of caste
Throw away the scriptures that enslave"

These verses were not just art but teaching tools—meant to be read aloud, discussed, and understood by women learning to read. Through poetry, Savitribai made learning to read also mean learning to think critically about society.

5.5 Adoption and Family as a Learning Space

Savitribai's personal life showed her principles. She and Jyotirao had no biological children but adopted Yashwant Rao,

son of a Brahmin widow who had given birth at their home for widows. When Yashwant grew up and had trouble finding a wife because of his birth background, Savitribai arranged his marriage to the daughter of Dynoba Sasane, a worker in their organization.

This adoption and marriage showed Savitribai's commitment to living her principles. She did not just talk about widows' rights—she opened her home to a widow's child. She did not just condemn caste discrimination—she created family bonds that crossed caste lines.

6. Basic Ideas: Savitribai Phule's Vision of Education

6.1 Education as Freedom, Not Adjustment

Savitribai's ideas about education were different from both British and mainstream reformist approaches. British education, as described in Macaulay's *Minute* (1835), aimed to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"—basically, educated Indians who would help the British rule. Upper-caste reformers often wanted education to modernize society while keeping caste hierarchies intact.

For Savitribai, education was neither helping the British rule nor selective modernization within caste limits. It was, instead, a tool for collective freedom—what one scholar called "a way of teaching the oppressed." She understood that knowledge could not be neutral in a society built on caste and gender injustice. Education must either support these systems or challenge them.

6.2 How Caste and Gender Work Together

Long before the word "intersectionality" was invented, Savitribai understood that caste and gender oppression could not be separated. Upper-caste women faced unfair rules because of their gender but also enjoyed advantages because of their caste. Lower-caste men faced caste discrimination but held power over women in their communities.

Her educational work dealt with this complexity by fighting both caste exclusion and gender oppression at once. Schools welcomed girls from all castes but especially reached out to Dalit and Muslim girls who faced the worst discrimination.

6.3 The Teacher as Revolutionary

Savitribai had a completely different idea of what a teacher should be.

In traditional India, a teacher (guru) was always a Brahmin man who taught sacred knowledge only to upper-caste boys. Under British rule, the teacher became a government worker who just taught whatever the British wanted. But for Savitribai, a teacher was much more. A teacher was someone who could change society.

Her own life showed this. Every day she walked through streets where people threw stones and mud at her. She carried an extra sari to change into after these attacks. She kept going even when her own family threw her out. She made friends with Muslim and lower-caste communities that others would not touch.

This was her way of teaching. She was not just giving lessons from books. She was showing her students through her actions that courage matters. She was proving that another world was possible—a world without caste and gender injustice. For Savitribai, teaching was not a job. It was a way to fight for freedom.

6.4 Knowledge as Power for the Powerless

Savitribai deeply believed that knowledge was power. And she believed this power belonged to those who had been kept powerless. Think about what it meant in those days. Upper castes had kept reading and writing to themselves for thousands of years. When Savitribai taught a lower-caste girl to read, she was taking power from the powerful and giving it to the powerless. When these girls learned to write, they could finally document what happened to them. They could speak about their pain. They could demand their rights. No one could cheat them as easily anymore.

This is why Savitribai taught math and science along with reading. She knew that religious knowledge alone would not help poor communities fight their real problems. But if a girl learned math, no one could cheat her on wages. If she learned science, she could understand the world better. If she learned to write, she could file complaints and sign documents herself. Savitribai understood something very important: education that just teaches you to obey is not real education. Real education gives you tools to fight back.

7. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

7.1 Recognition and Institutional Commemoration

For many years after her death, Savitribai's work was forgotten by mainstream history. But slowly, people began to remember and honor her. In 1998, the Indian government issued a postal stamp with her picture. In 2014, the University of Pune was renamed Savitribai Phule Pune University. The Maharashtra government started an award in her name for women who work for social change. In 2017, Google honored her 186th birthday with a special Google Doodle.

These honors are good, but they are not enough. The danger is that we remember her name but forget what she actually stood for. The real way to honor her is to understand her ideas and put them into practice today.

7.2 Relevance to Today's Educational Challenges

Savitribai's work is not just history. It speaks directly to problems we still face:

Girls and education today: India has made progress. In 1951, only about 9% of women could read. Today, about 70% can. But big gaps remain. Girls from Dalit, tribal and Muslim communities still drop out more often. Girls still struggle to reach higher education.

Savitribai's focus on the most excluded, the poorest, the lowest castes, the most oppressed is exactly what we still need today. Caste still matters in schools: Even now, Dalit and tribal children face discrimination in classrooms. They are made to sit separately. Teachers ignore them. They drop out more often

and learn less. Savitribai's message is clear: it is not enough to just let these children enter schools. Schools must actively fight caste prejudice, not just quietly accept it.

Access versus quality: Today we talk a lot about getting children into school. But what happens once they are there? Are they learning things that empower them? Or just memorizing and obeying? Savitribai showed that real access means access to education that sets you free, not just a seat in a classroom.

Teachers matter: Savitribai herself was a trained teacher who took her work seriously. Today, we often do not respect teachers enough or train them well. Her model of the teacher as someone who can transform society is very different from today's trend of treating teachers like machines who just follow orders.

7.3 Critiques and Limitations

We must also be honest about what we do not know. Most of what we know about Savitribai comes from missionary records, British documents, and writings by later reformers. We do not have the voices of her students the Dalit and Muslim girls who actually studied in her schools. What did they think? How did their lives change? We can only guess. Also, her schools closed by 1858. They did not last very long. Yes, there were good reasons money dried up, government support ended. But the schools depended heavily on a few dedicated people. When those people faced problems, the schools could not survive.

Still, these limitations do not take away from her importance. She showed what was possible. She created examples that others could follow. She established principles that still guide those who fight for fair education today.

8. CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule's contribution to women's education in India cannot be measured just by counting schools or students. Her real importance lies in how she completely changed what education could mean.

She turned education from a sign of privilege into a tool for freedom. She proved that the most oppressed people lower-caste girls, Muslim women, widows, survivors of violence could not only learn but could become teachers and leaders themselves. She insisted that education must deal with real life problems, not just pass on abstract knowledge. She built schools, shelters and organizations that put her ideas into practice and gave people lasting ways to work together for change.

Think about what she achieved in her time:

At a time when people thought teaching women to read was dangerous, she became India's first trained woman teacher. At a time when caste rules controlled every aspect of life, she taught children from all castes together and worked alongside a Muslim woman. At a time when women were supposed to stay inside the home, she walked through streets where people attacked her daily to reach her students. At a time when upper castes said lower castes could never learn, she proved through

her own life and her excellent teaching that the ability to learn has nothing to do with caste.

One historian has described the Phules' work as "a lower-caste protest movement that sought to create a new community and a new awareness among the oppressed of western India." Savitribai's educational work was central to this movement. Not because she used education for politics, but because she understood that true education is always political—it either supports unfair systems or challenges them.

Today, as India thinks about its educational future through new policies, through struggles for equal access, through debates about what children should learn Savitribai Phule's legacy offers both inspiration and important lessons. She reminds us that the best education does not produce obedient workers or maintain social hierarchies. It gives oppressed people the tools to understand, question and change their world.

Her call to "wake up, arise and educate" still speaks to us today. Each generation must take up this fight for education that truly frees people.

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About the Author



Virender Kumar is a PhD scholar at Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India. He is actively engaged in advanced academic research and scholarly inquiry. His academic interests focus on developing research-based knowledge, critical analysis, and contributing meaningful insights to his field through systematic investigation, academic writing, and intellectual exploration.



Bhart Singh is a PhD scholar at Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India. He is actively involved in advanced research and academic activities. His scholarly pursuits emphasise systematic investigation, critical thinking, and knowledge development, with a commitment to contributing valuable perspectives and research-based insights to his respective academic field.