



SAVITRIBAI PHULE: LIFE AND TIMES OF THE WOMAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

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ABSTRACT

Savitribai Phule is a relatively unknown personality to Modern India. Due to inadequate information about her life and her work, many modern historians and social scientists have missed to acknowledge her contribution to the domain of anti-caste politics and women's' movement in modern India. The aim of the article is primarily to recover her role from the larger unobtrusiveness about her work in the field of history and gender studies. This article seeks to emphasize that Savitribai was not just a wife of a famous social reformer of the 19th century. On the other hand, she was actively involved in the public life as an educational campaigner, poet, women's leader, and leading social reformer. This article is not a biographical account of Savitribai Phule. It is rather an attempt to highlight her work and situate it into a larger history of modern India.

KEYWORDS: Gender studies, Caste, Bombay Presidency, Satyashodhak Samaj, Jotiba Phule, Pune

Introduction

Savitribai Phule was one of India's pioneer feminists and leading social reformers of the 19th century. Yet she is generally known to us as a wife and an ideological comrade of Jotiba Phule, who himself was one of the 19th century India's most well known and radical social reformers. Apart from being a wife of Jotiba Phule, her life and works has been relatively unexplored. The

association with her husband was indeed crucial and decisive, which resultantly helped her to actively enter into the public life and significantly shape the public opinion of the period. But while depicting the life and works of the Phule couple, there is a greater tendency amongst many mainstream historians, social scientists, and scholars, to mainly emphasize on the contribution made by Jotiba Phule thereby, assuming Savitribai as a mere follower of her husband (For example, O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1976; Keer, 1974). Against this backdrop, the present essay seeks to explore the life and works of Savitribai Phule. In doing so, it will highlight the contribution made by Savitribai in reframing and altering the mainstream public discourse of the late 19th century. Her immense body of work profoundly helped in creating a powerful voice of Non Brahmins in the 19th and 20th century western India. This essay will also try to situate Savitribai's work in the wider framework of 19th century social and political discourse.

Colonial Intervention and Social Reforms

The English East India Company was successfully able to establish its military and political hegemony in India by the first half of the 19th century. With the defeat of the Marathas in 1818, the Company was not only able to overpower its most formidable challenger in the subcontinent, but was also able to conquer an important piece of territory from them. The Company assumed the power by seizing complete hegemonic control over this region by means of erecting bureaucratic and administrative networks, and setting up railways, posts and modern means of communications. Pune, the erstwhile capital of the Maratha Peshwas, became the hub of political and cultural discussions of the newly acquired Marathi speaking region. It was a vibrant centre of both cultural conservatism and political nationalism which stridently led discussions on the possibility of reviving the 'Hindu' nation. Vishnushastri Chiplunkar and Bal Gangadhar Tilak became it's the city's prominent political voices. In the course of time, there was a concomitant rise of two conflicting opinions on the nation making, which led to a vociferous debate between the conservatives and the liberal intelligentsia. It was the question regarding as to what will proceed first in the process of nation making. Would the reformation of Hindu society be given a priority over the question of political liberation of India from the colonial clutches, or vice versa, was the moot the question in this debate. It was clearly a battle between liberal values which supported social reforms in the Hindu society, and conservative values which solely supported the ideas of political reforms through silencing the question of reformation. Social conservatives like Tilak and his followers sided with the latter while clearly denigrating the former.

Till the 1850s the colonial state tried to actively involve itself in bringing about, albeit in a very limited manner, the question of social reforms to the fore. It was mediated through formidable men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. The optimism that the colonial state would eventually eradicate evil social practices ended with the revolt of 1857. The Queen's declaration of 1858 promised the colonial Indian subjects that the colonial state would distance itself from the contentious matters of social reforms (Heimsath, 1964, p.172). Moreover, political and economic interests were prime concerns for the colonial state. The British colonial policy of non-interference in the religious and societal matters clearly exemplified their commitment towards the indigenous elites, who not only helped in legitimizing the hierarchical structures of caste but were also politically a significant class for the colonial state. The colonial knowledge systems and the Orientalist understanding of the past profoundly shaped the public discourse on caste, society and history. It complicated the question of religion, hierarchy, caste, and historical past.

At this backdrop, the Phule couple conducted their activism. Before the launch of Satyashodhak Samaj, Jotiba Phule had established himself as one of the most powerful critics of social conservatism and religious nationalism in western India. By the 1870s, he had become one of the leading and well known Non Brahmin leaders of the region. His most famous works, *Gulamgiri*, which was published in 1873, is considered as one of the first modern and influential critiques of the caste system (Phadke, 1991). His ability to connect caste question with the women's oppression and patriarchy deeply influenced the agenda of social reforms in the later period. His phenomenal contribution in promoting women's education by establishing schools for girls, highlighting to the government the growing need of compulsory education (Phadke 1991, pp. 715-725), and even organizing resistance movement for the widows, attracted the activists and intellectuals of the later generation to take note of him. Savitribai readily joined him in his activism and profoundly shaped the contours of movement.

Savitribai And Educational Activism

Savitribai was born on 3rd January 1831 to the couple belonging to the Mali (gardener) caste, at a village called Naigaon, which was situated in Khandala Taluka of Satara district. Her biographers have tried to reconstruct her childhood, but not much is known about this aspect of her life. An oldest biography on Jotiba Phule, published in 1891, on the occasion of his first

death anniversary, provides scanty but vital information on her early life and personality (Narke, 1993, pp.179-187). Naro Babaji Mahaghat Patil, the author of this biography writes that Savitribai's father, Khandoji Nevase Patil was an affluent farmer of the same village. She was married at the age of 9 in 1840 to Jotiba, who was a resident of Pune. Jotiba then was 13 years old. According to Patil, it was Sagunabai Kshirsagar, the woman who brought up Jotiba after his mother's death, chose Savitribai as Jotiba's wife. She was, as Patil describes, deeply impressed by Savitribai's bubbly and intelligent demeanor. Within few years, Sagunabai too became closely associated with the educational movement started by Jotiba and Savitribai (Narke, 1993; Mali and Upadhye, 2006, Zodge, 2013).

The marriage with Jotiba exposed Savitribai to different ideas and alternative worldviews. Jotiba firmly believed that all institutions, religions and traditions need to be subjected to discussion and criticism. His views were particularly dominated by the 18th century radicals like Thomas Paine, who crucially shaped his ideological orientation. Savitribai must have been impressed by Jotiba's firm stance when he refuted his family's immense pressure to remarry on account of the couple's childlessness. He instead questioned them as to why only men, and not women, were allowed to remarry due to childlessness. Why would Savitribai be not allowed to remarry instead of Jotiba, her remarked? (Patil, 1974, p.25) This illustrates that Jotiba not just understood radical ideas but was also an active practitioner. All these things must have hugely impacted Savitribai, and would have probably motivated her to further understand the dynamics of religion, gender, caste, and marginalization.

The next challenge Savitribai faced was when Jotiba decided to open girls' school at Pune in 1848. One of the first of this kind, this school primarily meant for lower caste girls was started by Jotiba with the help of his Pune based Brahmin friend, Tatyasaheb Bhide, who provided his house space for the school premises (Keer, 1974, p.24). The establishment of this school irked many conservative Brahmins and they pressurized Govindrao, Jotiba's father to act upon his son's supposed sacrilege. As a result, Jotiba and Savitribai were thrown out of the house by Govindrao, which exposed them to vulnerable condition of poverty. *The Bombay Guardian*, in 1851 while felicitating Jotiba's contribution to the cause of education, carried a heart-wrenching story for the first time, regarding the crisis which deeply shook the Phule couple in 1848. Within few years, Jotiba himself testified how he was compelled to work as a teacher on salary in a missionary school to sustain his family (*Bombay Guardian*, 16th December 1853). It was here that Savitribai rose to the occasion and played a pivotal role that changed the course of

educational activism in western India. At the time of this crisis overwhelmed with acute scarcity of resources, Jotiba decided to appoint Savitribai as a teacher at his newly founded school while he worked elsewhere for the livelihood.

Balwantrao Sakharamji Kolhe was closely associated with the Phules from the beginning of the latter's public life. In 1848, he was assigned a job, along with another individual, to protect Savitribai who had to regularly walk down from her house to the school premises, situated at the Bhidewada. Kolhe testified that Savitribai was subjected to immense harassment, which included hurling of abuses and taunts, pelting of stones and throwing cow dung and dirt on her, while she walked from to the school to teach her students. Occasionally, as Kolhe depicts, she used to respond to the abuses by addressing them patiently right in the middle of the road (Narke, 1993, p.24). Thus, it is important to recognize the difficult context in which she continued her teaching work. She was vulnerable to double edged anger of the conservative society: First, for being an activist committed to the cause of education of women and the lower caste community; and second, for being a woman, who openly contested the traditional role of women in the caste society. Savitribai accepted this challenge of everyday public shaming with extraordinary courage. She executed that challenge not merely as a dutiful wife of a well-known social reformer, but as a committed activist, leader and ideologue of the movement. The documents related to her and Jotiba's life provides a sufficient testimony to this claim.

Girl students who had enrolled in the first school started by Jotiba belonged to different castes; some of them were even Brahmins (Zodge, 2013, p.58; Mali and Upadhye, 2006, p.26). The school founded in 1848 was briefly shut due to the want of resources and worsening of their financial crisis. As their situation improved, Jotiba and Savitribai reopened the school, but now at a different location in the Pune city. The place for the school was provided by yet another Brahmin friend of Jotiba, Sadashiv Govande, at Juni Ganj Peth (Keer, 1974). But, according to Jotiba's biographer Dhananjay Keer, it was Lahuji Mang, one of the well known physical instructors of the city, and Ranba Mahar, both from the untouchable Dalit community, took major efforts to enroll large number of students of both sexes in this school (*Dnyanodaya*, 15th September 1853). Within few months of the establishment of this school, they had to arrange additional space in another house, which was provided by the family of Savitribai's famous Muslim colleague, Fatima Shaikh. She also worked as a teacher in different schools started by Jotiba along with Sagunabai Kshirsagar.

Savitribai took keen interest not only in teaching her students but also extensively campaigning for the propagation of education for women and lower castes. Due to an active involvement of Savitribai along with the continuous help from their friends, Jotiba, who was now instilled with new confidence, started yet another school for girls in 1851. It was situated at Hari Raoji Chiplunkar's house in Budhwar Peth, a hustling marketplace of the city. Chiplunkar, a progressive Brahmin was closely associated with Phule's activism, and in the later years, became a prominent activist of the Satyashodhak Samaj. The school that started with 8 students at Chiplunkar's house eventually increased its capacity to 48 (Bombay Public Consultations, G.D., 1852). Savitribai was the Head Master of this school. Her contribution was duly acknowledged by the Bombay government with glowing tributes:

Savitribai the School Mistress has nobly volunteered to devote herself to improvement of female education without any remuneration. We hope that as the knowledge advances the people of this country will be awakened to the advantages of the female education and they will cordially assist in all such plans as are calculated to improve the condition of those who have hitherto been unaccountably neglected....(Bombay Public Consultations, G.D., 1852)

In 1855, Muktabai Salve, a fourteen year Dalit student and a niece of Lahuji Mang, who gathered immense attention, was a student of Savitribai. She wrote an incisive essay on caste hierarchy and the condition of Dalits, which was published in the *Dnyanodaya*. Muktabai's clear thoughts and radical language clearly indicate the influence of Jotiba and Savitribai on her writings.

It is important to direct our attention to a commentary published in a local newspaper, *Poona Observer* (dated 29th May 1852) that made observations on the condition of the girls' schools administered by Jotiba and Savitribai (Mali, 2006, p.42). It generously praised the overall management of the girls' schools and compared it with the Government administered Boys' Schools. It pointed out that the quality of management and the kind of facilities offered to its students in Savitribai and Jotiba's school were much better than the one provided at the Boys' Schools. Interestingly, the report further wittily stated that "If things are allowed to go on long in this way, the girls will surpass the boys of the Government schools (Keer, 1974, p.42)." Positive feedbacks offered in the local newspapers and government reports illustrate the disciplined nature of work carried out by Jotiba, and particularly by Savitribai, in raising the quality of teaching and management of the girl schools. Jotiba himself publicly acknowledged the work done by Savitribai and even argued that whatever he was able to do in the public life, it was primarily due to the generous support provided by his wife. This public acknowledgement was

not compelled by usual protocols of the husband-wife relationship. It was a genuine recognition of her commitment and work that she conducted in the difficult times.

A Leader and Ideologue

Savitribai's public life was not limited to the educational activism, though it played an influential role in defining her politics and personality. She was simultaneously a teacher, educationist, women's leader, poet, wife, mother, activist, and leader. It would be relatively easier for a 21st century woman to acquire these epithets without experiencing any significant resistance from the society and the family. But for India of Savitribai's times, it was rarely possible to be an accomplished, versatile and multifaceted woman. Moreover, the distinctiveness of Savitribai's work lie in the ability to maintain extraordinary discipline in her work and activism, lifelong consistency to actively participate in the public affairs, and lastly, the coherence in her political thought and ideas, which is usually needed for a good ideologue of the movement. Which is why, she was able to maintain her immeasurable influence over the larger number of masses all her life. Additionally, it helped her to decisively shape different contours of the political and social discourse in western India.

Savitribai evolved over the years into a powerful and inspiring leader, writer, organizer and social activist. In her letter to Jotiba Phule in 1868 written from her ancestral village in Satara district, she wrote about how she rescued a Brahmin boy from the wrath of villagers. The Brahmin boy was in love with an untouchable girl who had become pregnant. It was due to her intervention that they were saved (Mali, 1988, p.75). She asked Jotiba to help the boy whom she had sent to Pune. It does tell us something about Savitribai's personality. It was possibly due to her extraordinary courage and conviction she was able to assert herself in a phenomenal manner. With the onset of the 1850s, the educational activism started by Jotiba and Savitribai had gained substantial momentum. Jotiba had recently begun to actively organize and articulate on behalf of the 'Non Brahmins', a social class other than Brahmins, which began to evolve as a category of social discourse in western India from the mid 19th century onwards. On the other hand, Savitribai also began her stint as an active organizer. In the early 1850s, she actively participated in establishing a women's organization, which was called Mahila Seva Mandal. Ms. E.C. Jones, the wife of the then district magistrate, was made the honorary president of the Mandal, while Savitribai became its secretary. There is a reference to the invitation card, printed in January

1852, pertaining to an event organized by the Mahila Seva Mandal to celebrate Marathi festival Makar Sankranti. The content of the invitation was undersigned by Savitribai urging the invitees to participate in the *Til-gul* ceremony (exchanging sweets made by sesame seeds and jaggery) and *Haldi Kumkum* (a social gathering of married women). Additionally, the invitation card also made clear that the invites were distributed to the women of all castes and religion, and all women would be treated equally. This clearly highlighted the radical political ideas of Savitribai (Mali and Upadhye, 2006, p.50). We do not have any substantial information about the activities of the Mandal except few references in the local newspapers. Hence we do not know for how long this organization existed.

In 1863, Savitribai and Jotiba established an orphanage and a maternity home primarily catering Brahmin widows and unwed women in order to facilitate birth of their newborn child, born out of wedlock. Brahmin women contemporaries of Savitribai's times, like, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati and Parvatibai Athavale have eloquently put forward the predicaments of the Brahmin widows of the 19th century in their writings (Saraswati, 1981; Athavale, 2013). In her lucid and expressive language, Ramabai provides a horrifying account of the condition of the widows in the 19th century,

Among the Brahmins of Deccan the heads of all widows must be shaved regularly every fortnight. Some of the lower casts, too, have adopted this custom of shaving widows' heads and have much pride in imitating their high- caste brethren. What woman is there who does not love the wealth of soft and glossy hair with which nature has so generously decorated her head? A Hindu woman thinks it worse than death to lose her beautiful hair. Girls of fourteen and fifteen who hardly know the reason why they are so cruelly deprived of everything they like, are often seen wearing sad countenances, their eyes swollen from shedding bitter tears (Saraswati, 1981, p.32).

Long before the above text was written, Jotiba and Savitribai had already started a movement against the ill treatment of widows. Jotiba had consistently attacked the patriarchal norms upheld by the society. In 1890, Savitribai under her leadership even managed to organize a strike of barbers to protest against the inhuman tonsuring of Brahmin widows. The strike was successful enough to attract the attention of the Times, London which published the news of the strike (9th April 1890) in its newspaper (Sundararaman, 2008, p.18). Jotiba and Savitribai's work therefore, stands out as a significant intervention which questioned the patriarchal norms of the society. There is also reference to, in one account by Sahadu Waghole on Jotiba Phule, regarding how

printed hoardings of advertisements on the maternity home were being pasted and publicized in different towns of India, including Banaras, Pandharpur, Nashik and Wai (Narke, 1993, p.76). It clearly tells us the magnitude of the work launched by the Phules. Moreover what was more interesting in this story was that, this intervention (howsoever small it was) to emancipate the upper caste women was made by none other than one of the pioneering ideologues of the Non Brahmin movement of India. Here, the ability to collectively comprehend the questions of gender and caste marginalization together was an immensely innovative form of politics for that period.

Savitribai's role here was not merely confined to being a follower of Jotiba. She was responsible for managing the maternity home and orphanage. In his memoir, Jotiba's nephew Gajanan Ganpat Phule as informed that around 35 children used to stay (during the mid 1860s and 70s) in the orphanage founded by Jotiba and Savitribai (Narke, 1993, p. 60). The newly born child in the maternity home was usually admitted in the orphanage as most mothers refused to carry them outside after their birth due to immense fear of societal reaction. Despite financial constraints and public pressures, Savitribai and Jotiba thus were successful in continuing their work. The couple not only stopped here but adopted a child from their orphanage, Yashwant, who became a well-known physician in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was Savitribai who insisted upon Yashwant to continue to serve the plague patients during the horrifying plague epidemic that hit Pune city in the 1890s.

Thus, it was rare for the 19th century India to think about any women to be a mass leader and a popular organizer of nascent peasants' and women's movements. Historical accounts by Jotiba's contemporary clearly tell us the extent of political versatility of Savitribai. She was clearly a leader who had requisite public skills to deal smartly with public matters. Waghole's account does tell us how Savitribai skillfully managed the refugee camp opened by Jotiba and his comrades near Pune, during the famine of 1876-77 (Narke, 1993, p.79). Around 1000 men and women were provided food and shelter for many days.

Very few of us know that she was one of the most influential leaders of the Satyashodhak movement in the 19th century. After the death of Jotiba, it was Savitribai, who took a courageous decision to lead the funeral ceremony with her adopted son, Yashwant, despite immense opposition from the family and relatives. In the post-Phule Satyashodhak Samaj, she confidently led the Samaj and its followers. She presided over the 20th annual session of the Satyashodhak

Samaj conference held at Saswad. Many contemporary accounts have established that Savitribai was one of the top leaders of the Satyashodhak Samaj. She took active interest in the public affairs even after the death of Jotiba. Mama Parmanand, one of the leading colleague's of Jotiba provides a testimony in 1890, regarding the extraordinary contribution made by Savitribai. In a letter to the *Dewan* of the Maharaja of Baroda, he wrote about Savitribai, "The woman deserves even more than the man for cooperating with her husband and suffering 'with him in that work in a manner not yet witnessed in the highest educated of the higher castes (Narke, 1993, p.115)."

Interestingly, she has also left a substantial corpus of her writings that would significantly help us to understand the politics and society of her times. Therefore, it becomes immensely necessary to examine and contextualize Savitribai's life and works, as it would help us to understand the genealogy and different aspects of contemporary gender discourses in India. Additionally, her life and works could possibly provide some hints regarding the rise of alternative politics in India. Savitribai was also a literary personality. She penned hundreds of poems which illustrates her literary ability and a poetic bent of mind. Her first collection of poems *Kavyaphule* was published in 1854. It could be one of the first collections of Marathi poems published by any poet in modern Maharashtra. The second publication of her poems *Bawannakashi Subodh Ratnakar* [literally, Fifty two offerings –a Poetic biography of Jotiba] was released in 1891. After the death of Jotiba in 1890, she edited collection of his speeches and published it a year later. In her poems and speeches (some of them have been documented) there is a demonstration of her political sharpness to be aware of the complexity of caste and patriarchy. Her poems highlighted many issues which included education, untouchability, caste, women and the contemporary peasant conditions. In one of her poems she spoke on how Famine was the force of sin and lower-castes were its major victims because the privileged ones (the upper caste men) were able to easily access good food while the peasants lay distraught (Mali, 1988).

Savitribai's death was as phenomenal as her extraordinary life was. In 1897, Pune city and its adjoining localities were badly hit by the plague epidemic. Before the arrival of this epidemic, western Maharashtra was horribly preoccupied with one of the worst famines in the recent times. Like the previous famine of 1876-77, Savitribai was deeply preoccupied, this time as well, in providing food to the affected populace and establishing refugee camps in the worst affected areas. On the other hand, no one imagined the possible terrible the consequences the plague

epidemic of 1897 had unfolded. The plague epidemic began to affect the residents of Pune in a worst possible manner. It killed thousands of residents which resulted in the practical abandonment of the city by many. Despite knowing the risk in it, Savitribai personally involved herself in launching a care relief camp. While visiting the epidemic hit Mahar neighborhood near Mundhwa, she found out that a child residing in the settlement needed urgent attention of doctors. She carried him on her back to the hospital and in the course of time, was subsequently afflicted by the disease. With the death of Savitribai Phule, on 10th March 1897, an extraordinary saga of an extraordinary life came to an abrupt end.

Conclusion

This article, thus, sufficiently illustrates that Savitribai's identity was not just confined to being a wife of Jotiba Phule. She was an active public personality who phenomenally contributed to the social and political life of western India of the 19th century. Her life and works does indicate scope and limits of the 19th century colonial social and political discourse. Despite several odds, Savitribai, along with her husband, was able to carve their imprint on the then political and social consciousness by innovatively imagining solidarities for the marginalized. Savitribai's importance does not merely lie merely in her radical thinking, but also in her extraordinary ability to sustain herself in a male dominated public sphere. She was perhaps one of the first women leaders of modern India, who understood the Indian woman's issue by aligning it with the caste question. Which is why, Savitribai's contribution is more important in order to understand the intimate relationship between caste and gender in India.

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