

**Savitribai Phule Contribution towards  
Women Social Reformer in India:  
The Major Education and Social Issues  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Savitribai was born on January 3, 1831, in Naigaon (presently in Satara district) in British India in a farming family to Khandoji Neveshe Patil and Lakshmi as their eldest daughter. Girls in those days were married off early, so following the prevalent customs, the nine year old Savitribai was wedded to 12 years old Jyotirao Phule in 1840. Jyotirao went on to become a thinker, writer, social activist and anti-caste social reformer. He is counted among the leading figures of Maharashtra's social reform movement. Savitribai's education started after her marriage. It was her husband who taught her to read and write after he saw her eagerness to learn and educate herself. She cleared third and fourth year examination from a normal school and became passionate about teaching. She took training at Ms Farar's Institution in Ahmednagar. Jyotirao stood firmly by the side of Savitribai in all her social endeavors. Savitribai Jyotirao Phule was a prominent Indian social reformer, educationist and poet who played an instrumental role in women education and empowerment during the nineteenth century. Those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started the school for girls first. But my caste brethren did not like that I was educating girls and my own father threw us out of the house. Counted among few literate women of those times, Savitribai is credited for founding the first girl's school in Pune in Bhide Wada with her husband Jyotirao Phule. She took great effort towards educating and emancipating child widows, campaigned against child marriage and sati pratha, and advocated for widow remarriage. A leading figure of Maharashtra's social reform movement, she is considered an icon of Dalit Mang caste along with likes of B.R. Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe. She campaigned against untouchability and worked actively in abolishing caste and genderbased discrimination.

**KEYWORDS:**

Brahmin widow, Dalit, social evil, women empowerment, Universal Religion.

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**Savitribai Phule Early life**

Savitribai Phule was born on January 3, 1831 in the village of Naigaon in Satara District, Maharashtra. Her birthplace was about five kilometers from Shirval and about 50 kilometers from Pune. Savitribai Phule was an eldest daughter of Lakshmi and Khandoji Neveshe Patil, both of whom belonged to the Mali Community. At the age of 10, Savitribai Phule was married to Jyotirao Phule, born on the 11th of April 1827. At the time of their marriage, he was thirteen years old. Savitribai and Jotirao had no children of their own needed but they adopted Yashawantrao, a son born to a Brahmin widow. At the time of her marriage, Savitribai Phule had not been educated because Brahmins forbade it for people of her low caste and gender. Jotirao was also forced temporarily to abandon his education because of his caste but eventually was able to enroll in a Scottish missionary school, where he studied to grade seven. According to government records, Jotirao was responsible for educating Savitribai at their home. After completing her primary education with Jotirao, her further education was the responsibility of his friends, Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar. She also enrolled in two teacher's training programs. The first was at institution run by an American missionary, Cynthia Farrar, in Ahmednagar. The second course was at a Normal School in Pune. Given her training, Savitribai may have been the first Indian woman teacher and headmistress. Savitribai Phule was also a prolific author and poet. She published *Kavya Phule* in 1854 and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1892, and also a poem entitled "Go, Get Education" in which she encouraged those who are oppressed to free themselves by obtaining an education. She established the Mahila Seva Mandal to raise awareness for issues concerning women's rights. She also called for a gathering place for a woman that was free of caste discrimination or differentiation of any kind. Symbolic of this was that all the women that attended were to sit on the same mat. Savitribai was also an anti-infanticide activist. She opened a women's shelter called the Home for the Prevention of Infanticide, where Brahmin widows could safely deliver their children and leave them there to be adopted if they so desired. She also campaigned against child marriage and was a advocate of widow remarriage.

**Pioneering Education for all Downtrodden Communities**

Savitribai and Jyotiba faced the ire of the class-divided society that

was not only against the mixing of people but also against women's education. Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule were asked to leave the ancestral house as her father-in-law was upset with the couple's revolutionary activities. It was the late Nineteenth century and society was yet to open up to ideas of equality. The now, the homeless couple took up residence with Mian Usman Sheikh, a friend of Jyotiba's. Fatima Sheikh was the sister of Mian Usman Sheikh. Fatima and Savitribai joined hands to campaign for the education of girls and the Dalits. They also had to counter the clerics of Islam who objected to education for the Muslim girl child. One of the first Muslim women teachers of modern India, Savitribai started educating Dalit children in the Phules' school. Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule along with Fatima Sheikh took charge of spreading education among the downtrodden communities.

### **Role in Women Education & Empowerment of the Society**

The first indigenously-run school for girls in Pune (at that time Poona) was started by Jyotirao and Savitribai in 1848 when the latter was still in her teens. Although they were ostracized by both family and community for this step, the resolute couple was given shelter by a friend Usman Sheikh and his sister Fatima Sheikh, who also gave the Phule couple place in their premises to start the school. Savitribai became the first teacher of the school. Jyotirao and Savitribai later started schools for children from the Mang and Mahar castes, who were regarded as untouchables. Three Phule schools were in operation in 1852. On November 16 that year, the British government honored the Phule family for their named the best teacher. That year she also started the Mahila Seva Mandal with the objective of creating awareness among women regarding their rights, dignity and other social issues. She was successful in organizing a barbers strike in Mumbai and Pune to oppose the prevailing custom of shaving heads of widows. While Jyotirao advocated widow remarriage, Savitribai worked tirelessly against social evils like child marriage and sati pratha, two of the most sensitive social issues that were gradually weakening the very existence of women. She also made effort in bringing the child widows into mainstream by educating and empowering them and advocated for their re-marriage. Such pursuits also met with strong resistance from the conservative upper caste society.

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## **The Savitribai Phule Awarded to Women Social Reformers in Maharashtra.**

Savitribai Phule (3 January 1831–10 March 1897) was an Indian social reformer, educationalist, and poet from Maharashtra. She is regarded as the first female teacher of India. Along with her husband, Jyotirao Phule, she played an important role in improving women's rights in India during British rule. Phule and her husband founded the first Indian run girls' school in Pune, at Bhide wada in 1848. She worked to abolish the discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. She is regarded as an important figure of the social reform movement in Maharashtra. A philanthropist and an educationist, Phule was also a prolific Marathi writer. She opened the first school for girls in Pune.

### **Fight against Social Evils**

On March 10 this year, more than 3,000 women marched on the streets in Nagpur to mark the 120th death anniversary of Savitribai Phule. The march was being undertaken by the activists as part of their fight against caste and religious patriarchy. During her lifetime, Phule stood for the rights of marginalized and fought against caste-based discrimination. In 1863, she set up a home for the prevention of infanticide and to prevent the killing of widows. Her activism against caste discrimination, child marriage, and support for widow remarriage showcases her holistic approach to social issues. The paper underscores her lasting impact on contemporary social justice movements and educational policies. By drawing parallels to modern-day efforts, the research provides a framework for ongoing and future initiatives in gender equality and social reform. Phule actively campaigned against child marriage, Women are coming forward in every field and they should be encouraged. Reservation and affirmative measures meant for them should be properly implemented and reviewed periodically. We should have a multi-pronged approach in bringing women tradition and oppression of the movement in society.

### **Campaigning for Social Justice**

Her emphasis on the English language was to get everyone on the same plane, so that everyone could have equal opportunity to flourish and prosper. Her ideas may deem her anti-national today but on introspection, we would be able to realize that her struggle against caste and patriarchy has paved the way for a better India. Savitribai did not see education just as a means for livelihood but as a tool for liberation from caste enslave-

ment and Brahmanism patriarchy. When their first school for girls was opened, Savitribai became the first female teacher in India. Her struggle encouraged and inspired a whole generation of outstanding campaigners for gender justice in Maharashtra like Dr Anandibai Gopal Joshi, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Ramabai Ranade and many others. The love that the Phule couple shared sustained them in their fight against caste and patriarchy.

They suffered great personal losses trying to liberate people and breaks the shackles of society. Savitribai also organized a successful barbers' strike against the prevailing practice of the forcible shaving of widows' heads. She started a home for the children of widows who were raped. Her own home became a sanctuary for deserted women and orphans. Her motivational ideas should be combined in education because she started a revolutionary wave in the existing period of several parts of education. She also took effort towards many social issues by running drive against child marriage, sati pratha and promoting widow remarriage.

She did not stop herself and keep doing campaigning against many other issues like untouchability and worked actively in stopping caste and gender-based discrimination she was continuously maligned, humiliated and attacked for challenging anti-women practices. Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, tried hard to convince others that the existing reform movements within Hinduism were insufficient to bring any lasting change. They formulated the belief in a compassionate Creator who was interested in the liberation of all human beings, irrespective of caste, class and gender. Their religious vision was finally propounded as the Sarvajanic Satya Dharma, or the Universal Religion of Truth. By this they broke caste enslavement and Brahmanic patriarchy and set Indians truly free, socially and in mind and body.

### **Conclusion**

Jyotirao Phule was a prominent Indian social reformer, educationist and poet who played an instrumental role in women education and empowerment during the nineteenth century Savitribai also organized a successful barbers' strike against the prevailing practice of the forcible shaving of widows' heads. Savitribai Phule for women's wholesome empowerment must be followed by all in its true letter and spirit. She fought for equality for women in all respects. Her vision of social reforms is

aligned to education and economic empowerment of women. She started a home for the children of widows who were raped. Her own home became a sanctuary for deserted women and orphans. She was continuously maligned, humiliated and attacked for challenging anti-women practices. She also made effort in bringing the child widows into mainstream by educating and empowering them and advocated for their re-marriage. Such pursuits also met with strong resistance from the conservative upper caste society.

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