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SAVITRIBAI PHULE: PIONEER OF WOMEN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL REFORM

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ABSTRACT

Savitribai Phule was a prominent social reformer and leading character who played an important role in women education and empowerment during 19th century in India. She was not only a social reformer but also a teacher, an educationist and a poet. Savitribai Phule with her husband Jyotirao Phule established a girls' school with nine students in 1848 at Pune in Bhide Wada and she was the first lady teacher of first girls' school in India. She was a power source of women education and women empowerment and also raised voice against the practice of child marriage, and Sati Pratha for the improvement of society. At this time, she also advocated for widow remarriage. She is regarded as an icon of Dalit Mang caste along with Dr. B R Ambedkar and was a leading figure in Maharashtra's social reform movement. She actively participated in campaigns to abolish caste, and gender based discrimination and untouchability.

KEYWORDS: *Savitribai Phule, women education, social reformer, educationist, Dalit education.*

INTRODUCTION

Savitribai Phule is a renowned name closely associated with women education, social reform and also Dalit society. She was born on 3rd January 1831 in Naigaon village, Satara district in Maharashtra. Her parents were Lakshmi Bai and Khandoji Nevse Patil (Gorain and Sen, 2021). In 1840 she got married with Jyotirao Phule at the age of nine. Jyotirao Phule was also a social reformer, social activist and writer. At the time of marriage Savitribai Phule has no formal education because women education was highly neglected then. After marriage her husband educated her at home, breaking societal norms (Majhi, 2022). This experience strongly influenced her mind to understand the importance of education in life. Savitribai Phule played a vital role in transitioning society from darkness to light through the breaking of gender barriers via education (Sing, 2023). She was regarded as a pioneer of Indian feminism.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Katke (2019), in the article, *"Savitribai Phule Contribution towards Indian Social Elements- A study"*, highlighted that Savitribai Phule was a great social reformer who played an important role for empowerment of women education in the nineteenth century. She with her husband Jyotirao Phule established the first girls' school in Pune, Bhide Wada. She played a major role in Maharashtra's social reform movement and actively participated in campaigns to abolish gender based discrimination and untouchability.

Biswas (2020) in his article *"Pioneer of Women Empowerment: Savitribai Phule"*, highlighted Savitribai Phule as a pioneer of women education, social reformer and poetess. She wrote a poem entitled *"Go, Get Education"*. She and her husband dedicated themselves to educate and secure the rights of girls.

Gorain and Sen (2021) conducted a study entitled *"Savitribai Phule the First Lady Teacher and Social Reformer in Nineteenth Century of India"*. In this study it was mentioned that Savitribai Phule was an important social reformer as well as a teacher and an author. She was the first lady teacher in India. In her whole life she struggle with her husband, Jyotirao Phule, for the rights and upliftment of Dalits and women education. She was a power source of women education and empowerment.

Sunita (2023) conducted a study entitled *"Women Education in India and Contribution of Savitribai Phule"*. In this article, it has been portrayed that she was a motivator of women and spread women education. She was a leading figure in Maharashtra's social reform movement to abolish gender based discrimination and untouchability. Representing the women of Indian society in history, she lived her life as a mission.

Das and Halder (2023) in their article *"Contribution of Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule in Education and Empowerment of weaker sections in India"* portrayed Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule as an exceptional couple in India's social and educational history. The major objectives of this study was to find out the contribution of how they empowering women and backward classes of society. They started schools for girls

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because they thought that education was crucial to bring about social changes.

Mondal and Farabi (2023) conducted a study entitled *"Savitribai Phule's Contribution to Education with special reference to Dalit Education"* and depicted that Savitribai Phule realized the need of education after getting education from her husband. She tried to spread education among women and backward classes of society as well as established school for girls and she was the first women teacher from Dalit community. She was a revolutionary poet. Through her poetry she tried to express the importance of education.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To find out the contribution of Savitribai Phule on women education and women empowerment.
2. To analyze the role of Savitribai Phule as a social reformer.
3. To find out the role of Savitribai Phule as an author and a poet.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative method and associated with historical method. This study is based on the interpretation of primary and secondary sources (Sunita, 2023). The primary source were the biographies of Savitribai Phule and Jyotirao Phule, poems and essays written by them. The secondary sources are the published articles, thesis, and books on Savitribai Phule. So, it is a descriptive study.

CONTRIBUTION OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE ON WOMEN EDUCATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Savitribai Phule was a renowned social reformer, educationist, philanthropist (Biswas, 2023) and also famous for her contribution on women education and empowerment during nineteenth century. Educating girls was a punishable offense at that time. Savitribai Phule realized the need of education in life after getting education from her husband. She tried to spread education among women and backward classes of society for the improvement of society. She and her husband dedicated their lives for the dignity and rights of women and downtrodden. They established a girls' school in 1848 at Pune in Bhide Wada. Savitribai was the first lady Teacher of this girls' school. In 1852 they also started schools for the children of Mang and Mahar castes, who were considered untouchables then. In the year 1852, they established three schools for girls, where 150 students were enrolled. Over the years Savitribai opened 18 school. Savitribai Phule along with Fatima Sheikh began teaching women as well as children from downtrodden castes. During that time, the upper caste people of Pune opposed Dalit education. Locals threatened Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh, as well as harassed and humiliated them socially. Savitribai was pelted with cow dung, mud and stones while walking to school. However such atrocities didn't deter Savitribai from her purpose, that's why she carried two sarees with her. In 1855 a night school was also established by the Phule couple for agriculturists and labourers, so they may work during the day and go to school at night. They also conducted parent-teacher meeting at regular intervals to create awareness among parents about the importance of education, so that they can send their girls to school for education. On November, 1852 the British government honoured the Phule family for their remarkable contribution in the field of education and Savitribai Phule was regarded the best teacher.

ROLE OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

Savitribai Phule was the first women social reformer as well as lady teacher in India. In 1852 Savitribai with her husband Jyotirao Phule started Mahila Seva Mandal to create awareness among women about their rights, dignity and other social issues. In 1863 they also started a care centre namely Balhaty Pratibandhak Griha. This care centre was set up for pregnant Brahmin widows and rape victims to deliver their children safely and securely. In this way preventing the killing of widows as well as reducing the rates of infanticide, Savitribai with her husband founded Satyashodhak Samaj in September 1873 in Pune. The meaning of Satyashodhak is truth seeker. The main objectives of this Samaj is to promote education and uplift the oppressed communities including the Dalits and women. This Satyashodhak Samaj initiated registered marriage called it Satyashodhak marriage. This type of marriage took place without any priest, religious ceremonies and dowry. As per this marriage the bridegroom had to take promise that he would support his wife at every step of life and also help to get educated (Biswas, 2020). However, this type of marriage was strongly discouraged by the orthodox Hindu and priest community. Most people criticised this type of marriage as it ignored religious scriptures and Hindu customs. Also remarriage of widows was prohibited and they were forced to shave their heads. Savitribai Phule protested against this practice and able to convince the barbers not to shave heads of widows and finally the barbers called a strike. With the help of barbers, Savitribai Phule was able to remove this bad custom. It was a big contribution of Savitribai for the Indian women.

ROLE OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE AS AN AUTHOR

Savitribai Phule was also an author and a poet. In her whole life she struggle for the rights and upliftment of Dalits and women education. Her valuable writings is an inspiration for women and backward classes of society. She published various books and poems, such as, *Kavya Phule* (1854), *Speeches of Matoshree Savitribai* (1892), *Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1892), *Go, Get Education* (an entitled poem) etc.

CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule is a name that is closely related to women education, women empowerment, social reform and upliftment of backward classes. She strongly believed that society could not improve and develop without appropriate education and her primary goal was to educate all spheres people. That's why she

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established schools for girls and backward classes children. She was an educationist as well as the first lady teacher. As a social reformer she actively participated in campaigns to abolish gender based discrimination, untouchability and other social issues. For her remarkable contribution and work the Pune City Corporation established a monument in her memory in 1983. On the other hand, in 2015 the University of Pune was renamed Savitribai Phule Pune University in her memory. On January 3, 2017, the search engine Google remembered the 186th anniversary of the birth of Savitribai Phule with a Google Doodle.

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