

Krantijyoti Savitribai Jyotirao Phule

In the social and educational history of India, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule stand out as an exceptional couple. They were engaged in a passionate struggle to build a movement for equality between men and women and for social justice. Recognizing that knowledge is power and that the progress of women and lower castes was impossible without it, they dedicated their entire life for spreading education.

Savitribai Jyotirao Phule was born on January 3, 1831, at Naigaon. In 1840, at the age of 10, she was married to Jyotirao, who was 13 at that time. After marriage, Savitribai and Jotiba lived in a Dalit-working class locality in Pune. Savitribai's education began at the age of ten, immediately after marriage. The subsequent fifty-year journey of togetherness is ideal for any socially active couple. The Phule couple started a school for women and Shudras and worked for their enlightenment. This incident is very important from the point of view of the time but also when compared to the contemporaries, the uniqueness of their work is witnessed in that environment.



While reviewing the work of Savitribai Phule, we cannot forget the support of Mahatma Phule. Savitribai learned; it was because of the Mahatma Phule. It was a time when the wife could not identify the letters without the husband's insistence or initiative. At that time many so-called upper caste women could not get education easily, because of Mahatma Phule Savitribai got an opportunity to learn.

In those days, there was a lack of education not only among the women but also among men of other castes except Brahmins (upper castes). There is a shameful history of the so-called high-caste educated people using their knowledge only for exploitation of the other. They imposed many oppressive customs and traditions such as child marriage, widow remarriage ban, keshavpan, sati practices on women. No one raised their voice against it for centuries because of the lack of education. This is a strange paradox that we get to see in those days.

Mahatma Phule knew that education generates the power to think and that thinking installs the power to fight against injustice. This is why he introduced Savitribai to letters for a specific purpose. Mahatma Phule said,

“Vidyevina mati geli; mativina neeti geli; neetivina gati geli; gativina vitta gele; vittavina shudra khachale; itke anartha eka avidyene kele”

(Lack of education leads to lack of wisdom, which leads to lack of morals, which leads to lack of progress, which leads to lack of money, which leads to the oppression of the lower classes. See what state of the society one lack of education can cause!)

Savitribai was also aware of it; that’s why when she learned reading and writing, she did not keep a record of her life struggles and work. She took efforts to bring into action the transformation that took place through enlightenment and to reach out to other exploited, ignorant sections of society. Both of them were longing for women’s education. The term education is not limited to literacy. ‘Education’ here is all-around development because if she wanted to introduce the letters only, she need not take teacher training from ‘Normal School’. After such training, there was no need for opening a school with registration at the government office. They could have done this by gathering women around them inside the four walls of the house. They could introduce basic reading to women. If they had declared that the intention behind literacy is to make women read the Pothi Purana, reciting and remembering it, they would not face opposition from society. But their perception was different. The knowledge gained by the Phule couple created coherence in their thinking. So, at the age of 21, Phule started the first-ever school for girls, and 17-year-old Savitribai became the first teacher of that school. In the most adverse times, Savitribai not only follows her husband’s footsteps but worked shoulder to shoulder and sustained all her responsibilities.



Like women’s schools, Phule started a school for the untouchables too. Their contribution did not remain to the field of education, but their work for eradicating caste was far ahead of the times. The Phule couple stood firmly behind the remarried couples instead of only preaching that the widows should get remarried in the rallies and meetings. At times, they even arranged such marriages with bestowing financial help. In 1873, Mahatma Phule founded Satyashodhak Samaj in order to end the dominance of priests in religious traditions. The activists of this movement simply adopted the way of marriage, without any dowry, at a low cost, by rejecting the priest in the marriage ceremony. Some priests opposed such marriages from all over the country. They dragged Phule couple to the courts, which made them suffer a lot. But without getting bogged down by it, they performed the inter-caste marriage of their adopted son, Yashwanth, in the same way. Not only that, they let their daughter-in-law Radha Gyanba Sasane stay at home before marriage. Savitribai also took all the responsibility of one-time work at home so that her studies were not interrupted. This is mentioned in the letter sent to Gyanba Sasane by Mahatma Phule.

Because of their bold reforms and rebellion against the social ills of that time; the Phule couple had to face a severe resistance from the so-called upper caste people whose interests were haunted by the couple's activism. The establishment of the 'Juvenile Prevention Home' shows that their work for social reform was not for revenge but to establish equality, truth, and humanism. Savitribai carried out this responsibility with utmost care. Savitribai worked tirelessly to free women from the double whammy of widowhood and abuse caused by the situation at home. They ran the prevention home openly by giving an advertisement in the newspaper. In the organization established only for Brahmin widows in 1863, Savitribai herself had looked after the babies of 35 Brahmin widows by 1884. They adopted and raised a child who was born and was likely to grow up as an orphan in the future without regretting having no child of their own. They taught him and made him a doctor as well as declared him as an heir on paper. He also accepted parenthood by running ashrams for many orphaned children like their adopted son. By starting food pantries during the drought, they left behind a great legacy of humanity.

This couple has a wonderful combination of patience, perseverance and consistency in action. Savitribai was not an imitative follower of Jyotiba but a true heir to his ideas. At the time of Jyotiba's death (1890), Savitribai stood against the injustice against their adopted son Yashwant and Performed the last rites defying the biased traditions against women. Even after Mahatma Phule's death, his work was not interrupted. She also presided over the 20th conference of the Satyashodhak Samaj held at Saswad in 1893. She was active in the Satyashodhak movement until the end. In 1897, during the plague, while serving the same society that consistently rejected her, she passed away. Savitribai was a true social revolutionary and is aptly remembered as Krantijyoti by hundreds of thousands of her followers.

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Reference –

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