

Savitribai Phule: A Great Social Reformer

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Abstract

The paper is a humble attempt to draw insights from the life of a great revolutionary educator, Savitribai Phule whose mission in life was to support the downtrodden women. She is an inspiration for all women undergoing suffering in various fields in society. In order to alleviate the position of women, women should get educated. Education was the prerogative of the elite caste, and to initiate the process of the transformation of society, both men and women should be educated. The life of Savitribai Phule is an inspiration for the student and the teacher, the parent and the community at large. With the dynamic backing of her liberal minded husband, Mr Jyotirao Phule, she embarked on a mission to cleanse society of the age old superstitious evils, which debarred the welfare of the lower caste people. Savitribai encountered various challenges from the elite class, which she faced with a steadfast determination, and paved the path for the education of women in India.

Key words: Social Equality, Education and Women.

Introduction

If Civilization is to survive one must cultivate human relationships, and to nurture a civilization we need education. Women have been instrumental in the cause of nation building from times immemorial, and have made important contributions to the progress and happiness of mankind. Christine de Pizan,(as cited in Walters,2005) in her famous work, *The City of Ladies(1404)* agrees that “the man or woman in whom greater virtue resides is the higher”.¹ A study of the dress and ornaments of women give us an idea of the wealth of a community. To understand the condition of women, one has to delve into the general arrangement made for the training and education of women. Women find themselves juggling family, housework and a job. Society has to remove a few cobwebs from its ancient traditions and revolutionise some of its customs and institutions to enable women to occupy the rightful place she belongs to. The rules and regulations framed by society should be conducive for the welfare of all sections of its people. An anonymous work entitled *The Woman’s Sharpe Revenge(1640)*(as cited by Walters,2005) argues that women’s exclusion from learning was devised by men to secure their own continued domination’.² The position of women in Indian civilization has undergone drastic and radical changes from the period of renaissance in Indian society.

Historical Background

The Indian National Movement got its impetus during the nineteenth century with the ushering of the Enlightenment Age in India. In the domestic space discriminations were normalised and silenced. Indian society was predominated by the hierarchy of the caste system wherein the elite mediated control over cultural and religious activities of the village community. The period marks pioneering efforts of Indians in the field of social reforms. It had a vision for a future Independent India which culminated in reviving the social outlook of the masses.

The defeat of the Marathas in the Third Anglo-Maratha War(1818) marks the establishment of colonial rule with the acquisition of the territories of the Peshwa by the British. Mountstuart Elphinstone took charge of the Poona Residency in 1811.He set up an independent kingdom with Pratap Sinha, and changed his title from Chatrapati to Raja, indicating thereby the ruler’s subordinate position under the British.³ The period from 1818 to 1830 witnessed a transformation in the mind-set of the people. The spirit of the Indian Renaissance found its echo in the pride of Maratha intellectuals in their historical heritage. Phulvanta Zodge(2013) states that the colonial period from 1831 ushered in an era of reforms in the Indian society. It coincides with the birth of Savitribai Phule in the village of Naigao, Satara district. Born in the family of a village Patil, whose main source of livelihood was agriculture, Savitri was tough and hardworking. The following incidents during her childhood depicts Savitri’s character and her sense of social equality.

At a tender age of 6yrs, during her visit to the temple of Bhairobha, she observed that a little boy was tortured by another boy, by forcefully taking a rose from him. When Savitri saw this, she was perturbed by the incident, and hence encountered the oppressor, and forced him to return the rose to the child. She strongly opposed social injustice towards the weak and vulnerable even at this age. Her courageous nature is depicted in another childhood incident in which she encountered a poisonous snake who was gulping eggs from a birds nest. She single handedly faced the snake, till she could manage to avail the assistance from the villagers.⁴ During one of her regular visit to the weekly bazaar of Shirwad, she came in contact with some Christian missionaries who gave her a Bible and some biscuits. On the cover of the Bible, she saw the image of Christ

crucified, and began to visualize what this picture would be depicting. When she narrated this incident at the bazaar to her father, he was furious and told her that she was polluted due to her contact with the missionaries. This incident depicts her nature to seek knowledge about the unknown and deal with the situation in a calm manner. The various incidents during her childhood, give a glimpse into her life, and her approach to tackle the problems, and not to shun off and withdraw from situations for the fear of failure.

The turning point in Savitri's life was her marriage to Jyotirao Phule in 1840. Savitri was selected as a bride for Jyotirao by his maternal aunt Saguna. Saguna, Jyotirao's maternal aunt, a young widow, was instrumental in the upbringing of Jyotirao and inculcating in him a yearning for learning.⁵ After Jyotirao's marriage to Savitribai, Saguna motivated Jyotirao to educate Savitri. Jyotirao being a liberal minded husband, was against the discrimination meted out towards women in society. He took the initiative to educate his wife. Jyotirao Phule was the first tutor of Savitri. His methodology of instruction was by using a stick and writing on the wet earth. Jyotirao taught Savitri in the vicinity of his farmhouse, and for formal instruction she later enrolled at the Normal school of Ms Michell, Pune. For further training as a teacher, Savitri joined Ms Farar Training Institute, Ahmedabad and successfully completed her course in Teachers Training. Savitri embarked on her mission to teach the marginalised in society. The social scenario during this period was one in which, education was the prerogative of the upper castes and the elite. Indian society was dominated by the evil superstitious beliefs that women and shudras should not be educated. The Phule couple had to undergo many ordeals in their journey for educating the downtrodden women. To add to their woes, Jyotirao's father Govindrao, was instigated by the upper caste orthodoxy to discontinue the education of Jyotirao. Govindrao was compelled to close the doors of his house to Jyotirao and Savitri. These challenges did not dampen their spirit, and they moved out of their father's home to pursue their goal to impart knowledge to the marginalised in society. Usman Sheikh, their well wisher, supported the couple during this period, by providing shelter and the basic infrastructure to begin their mission.

The Struggle for Revival of Society

Savitri and Jyotirao ushered in social reforms by the establishment of schools for women and the backward classes. Her journey to school was loaded with a number of difficulties. The orthodox people tried to dissuade her from attending school by flinging dung on her. But Savitri's will power was strong, and she always carried another sari, to change after reaching school. Savitri was determined in her endeavours of imparting education to women and the oppressed classes. She was a great social reformer, and infused a spirit of learning among the masses and enlightened them on the relevance of education. The education which Savitri imparted to women was not that which would make them compatible spouses, but one which would empower them to voice their opinion and fight for social justice. The historic handicaps of class and gender in the nineteenth century Maharashtra could not restrain or subdue her indomitable spirit.

An important factor in the life of Savitri was the moral support provided by Saguna, Jyotirao's maternal aunt. Saguna was a widow and the plight of widows was pitiable. Child marriage was the norm in society, and hence a large number of young girls were married to elderly men. These young brides soon became widows and some of them were forced to commit Sati (widow burning) and those who did not commit sati led a life of drudgery and humiliation. A.R. Kulkarni (2008) states that women in general were devoted to their husbands who were gods unto them, they were pious and religious minded. For the solidarity of the family and love of their husbands they bore all hardships. Child marriage and Child widows was a problem of social concern. The practice of woman immolating on the funeral pyre of her husband was condemned by Savitri. She supported widow remarriage, as a large number of widows were exploited by men and faced further disgrace if they happened to be pregnant. Being uneducated women were unable to fight against the exploitation meted out towards them. Savitribai headed the women's unit of the Satyashodak Samaj. She nurtured this movement by helping ordinary people build up their identity and strength. In 1852 the British government honoured the Phule couple for their contributions in the field of education and Savitribai was named as the best teacher. The Mahila Seva Mandal was established to create an awareness among women regarding their rights, dignity and other related issues.

As a poetess

Her poems served as a medium to persuade the masses of the importance of education. In her poems she reflects the dark spectrum which prevailed in the Indian society. Her poems shed light on the social issues which hampered the spirit of national consciousness among the people. It highlights an important aspect of Savitri's personality in her mission of social awakening. As it is rightly said "Zo na dekhe Ravi, wo dekhe Kavi" which means that a poet observes things which are not visible to the average observer. In 1853, Savitri began her journey as a poetess with "Kavyaphule"-a collection of poems. In her poems there is no scope for imagination, but a search for the truth. Some of her poems enlisted below throw light on her personality and her character.

In her poem *Thech Sant* she says that pious persons are those who do not think of their personal happiness or sadness in a selfish manner but think of the welfare of humanity, and hence are great.⁶ The poem *Shudranche dukhane* depicts the atrocities committed for a period of two thousand years on the Shudra community, by the so termed Gods of the Earth who are the Brahmins.⁷ The Shudras being in perpetual service of the Brahmin, have to break the shackles of slavery. She urges them that the only path to break their age old bondage of slavery was through the medium of education. By being educated, an individual will be enlightened and this will liberate people from living the life of an animal. In *Ingreji Shikha* she states that the main occupation of an individual is the attainment of the wealth of knowledge.⁷ The difference between humans and animals, is the ability of human beings and not to accept things by blind faith. She advised the people not to take life as a leisure stay but strive to educate and gain knowledge. She appeals to the Shudras and Atishudras to learn English to discard the authority of the Brahmins and break the shackles of caste. The poem *Shiknea sathi zagewah*. She gives a clarion call to the weak and oppressed to rise up, and stop living the lives of slaves.⁸ Further she states that Manu who banned the masses from attaining education is a person of a bygone era. English education will impart knowledge of different events in the world. Hence people should utilise their time to learn, and this opportunity should be availed by people in this millennium. She further reiterates that the knowledge of the English language will teach our children to become wise. A yearning for acquiring knowledge is within me, due to caste a wound which is within us, lets blot it away from our lives, lets look forth for a glorious future, let misery be our past, and for this we have to awake, arise and educate ourselves.

In *Tayach manavmanaveka* the poetess opines that if one does not possess knowledge and education and makes no attempt to acquire it, one possesses intellect but does not work on it, then one cannot be called a human being, because birds, animals, monkeys and human beings all go to the process of life and death, but if humans don't persevere to gain knowledge, then can they be called human beings. The poem on *Rani Chatrapati Tarabai* depicts the courageous nature of Tarabai.⁹ She refers to her as Jagadamba of Kolhapur and Maharashtra's Amba. the one who shed the blood of the enemy on the battlefield. Tarabai was a warrior of indomitable courage and a source of inspiration for future generations. Savitribai pays tribute to this great queen in her poem.

Conclusion

Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar(1850-82) in his essay *Itihas* argued that History does not mean glorifying the valour of dynasties.¹⁰ It is a wide canvas which includes judicial and revenue systems, arts and crafts, money and banking, literature, forms of popular entertainment such as *tamasha* or vocal music. The social factors occupy a major role in the development of mankind. From times immemorial, education has taken a pivotal position in the revival of society. Education has been an important tool in the development of society. Value education is the foundation for the building of a society. With values such as devotion to one's work, self-independence, hard work and patriotism one can build up a society based on equality and justice and get rid of superstitious beliefs. The gigantic task of nation building will not materialise, unless a just social order is established. Our life is not to merely exist but to live and live fruitfully. An Individual is liable towards the society, and social justice will be viable only through public participation.

Savitribai Phule pursued her education in English which broadened her perspective of principles that contributed for the transformation of society. Savitribai, and her husband, Jyotirao were a historic couple who worked together for the empowerment of women and the oppressed classes. The couple did not have any biological child, so when Jyotirao was coaxed to remarry, he humbly stated that the defect in having a child may be in myself and not in Savitri. The couple adopted a boy who later on became a medical doctor. They considered it their mission to purge society of the evil practices and do away with the misuse of religion as a tool to subordinate the lower castes. India is a nation which is characterised as a *karmabhoomi*, wherein an individual's merits are a criterion for his social status. A person who is virtuous is superior and one of loose character is inferior. The exploitation of the world under the guise of antiquity has to be disapproved because they are trying to gain an advantage for themselves, rather than trying to help other people do what is right. The life of women should not be restricted to her husband and children. The identity of a woman is not restricted only to her husband and children. Today the literacy rate of women is high, but are we really educated or only literate. Feminism outside the academic circle will challenge us in ways, that as yet we cannot even foresee. Women have to build up their identity by their contribution to society and their lives should not be restricted as being just wives and mothers of great reformers. Savitribai proved herself as a woman of substance and not as an appendage of a man. Even after the death of Jyotirao, she continued her mission of empowerment of women. In the famine of 1896, she compelled the British to undertake relief measures. An epidemic of plague swept Pune in 1897. Savitri was personally involved in the relief effort, contracted the disease which resulted in her death on 10th March 1897.

Academic research has given us extremely valuable insights into women's lives in different ages and different cultures. One can get a glimpse of an educated woman through the way she communicates, with other women in society, the women who collect our rubbish, deliver the laundry, work as domestic helps and in menial jobs. Women empowerment will take new strides, when we teach our sons to treat women in a humane manner. Savitribai Phule is an inspiration for the students, the parents and the community at large. In her mission of social resurgence, she encountered a number of adversities, which she tackled sometimes through discussions and at times with debates. In every era a woman may not be blessed with a liberal minded husband like Jyotirao, hence a woman has to light up her own life through the medium of education.

Endnotes

1. Margaret Walters, Feminism, p.19.
2. Ibid. p.18
3. A.R. Kulkarni, The Marathas, p.189
4. Phulvanta Zodge, Saadhvi Savitribai Phule, p.32
5. Ibid, p.33
6. Paikrao, Kiran Shivajirao, KrantiJyoti Savitribai Phule Yanchya wagmyatun pratit honare mulya shikshan vishayak vichar ek chikitsak abhyas. (Doctoral dissertation) p.102
7. Ibid, p.1
8. Ibid p.163
9. Ibid, p.95
10. A.R. Kulkarni, Maratha Historiography, p.119

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11. Zodge, Phulavanta 2013. Saadhvi Savitribai Phule, Pune: Chinar Publication.