

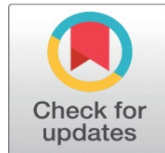
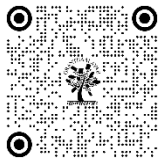
SAVITRIBAI JYOTIRAO PHULE'S FIGHT FOR THE RIGHTS OF INDIAN WOMEN AND MARGINALIZED PEOPLE: A PIONEER INDIAN SOCIAL WORKER

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ABSTRACT

Savitribai Jyotirao Phule was one of the greatest pioneer Indian social reformers, educators, and poets in the 19th century. She played a crucial role in the education and empowerment of women, especially through her efforts in founding the first girls' school in Pune at Bhide Wada, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule. Savitribai worked tirelessly to improve the lives of child widows, fought against harmful practices like sati and child marriage, and advocated for widow remarriage. In addition, she was a strong supporter, as well advocate for the removal of caste and gender discrimination and campaigned against untouchability. The study is conducted to examine the role of Savitribai Phule as a social reformer and also to analyze Phule's contribution to the development of women's education & empowerment. This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing the qualitative content analysis technique to examine the educational and social contributions of Savitribai Phule with the application of descriptive-cum-analytical research design. Study has explored various research studies, books and other research work, which are based on primary sources of data. It is found that Phule viewed education as a powerful tool of liberation, something that could help oppressed and marginalized communities, particularly women and Socio-economically weaker sections, to break free from the societal shackles that kept them ignorant and subjugated. Her vision of education went beyond the traditional curriculum. She aimed to create a system that would foster gender sensitivity, intellectual criticality, and a socially reforming mindset. For Phule, education was not considered just about acquiring knowledge, but about enabling individuals to challenge entrenched social norms, particularly those related to gender discrimination and caste-based exclusion. It is concluded that lesson from the Savitribai Phule's journey; can be undertaken by the social work to advocate and protect the rights of the marginalized communities and women, in advancing comprehensive social justice and equality.

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Keywords: Women Empowerment, Marginalized communities, Oppression, Exploitation, Violence, Gender Equality, Right to Education. Caste-Based Discrimination

1. INTRODUCTION

Savitribai Phule's spirit and determination to challenge the oppressive system were remarkable. Despite facing immense physical, social, and economic obstacles, she remained unwavering in her mission to provide education to those who were most marginalized. As the first female teacher from the marginalized community, she worked tirelessly to break down the barriers that excluded women and Socio-economically weaker sections from education. Savitribai's efforts were not limited to just opening schools for girls and Socio-economically weaker sections but extended to her advocacy for social reform. Her vision of an equitable society where every individual, regardless of caste or gender, has access to education and opportunities continues to guide the fight for social justice in India today.

Her efforts were significant but often overlooked in historical narratives. She worked tirelessly to break down social barriers that prevented women from getting an education. Through her advocacy for gender-inclusive education, she became a key figure in societal transformation, paving the way for women's empowerment. Studies highlight the critical role of her educational initiatives in challenging societal norms and promoting long-term change by fostering equality and breaking down oppressive structures, particularly through innovative pedagogical approaches.

One of her key educational principles was the importance of critical thinking. Through her advocacy for universal and inclusive education, Savitribai Phule laid the foundation for a more egalitarian society and contributed to the future progress of India. She is often hailed as the first feminist and a pioneer in modern Indian education, making the groundbreaking contributions to women's education, social reform, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. As India's first female teacher, Phule fought against the deep-rooted caste and gender discrimination of her time, advocating for universal education that would benefit women, lower-caste individuals, and the oppressed. She established the first girls' school in India in Pune in 1848, defying social norms that prohibited girls and marginalized castes from accessing education.

Savitribai Phule's Role in Women' Education and Social Reformer for the Downtrodden Castes

Savitribai Phule's legacy in the field of education cannot be overstated. At a time when women and Marginalized groups were largely excluded from formal education, she defied societal norms and worked tirelessly to ensure that these communities had access to learning. She was a fierce opponent of child marriage, which was prevalent at the time. She understood the devastating impact it had on young girls and worked to spread awareness about the importance of giving girls the chance to grow, learn, and make their own life choices.

Sati-Practice- In a society where the Sati-practice (the ritual of a widow self-immolating on her husband's funeral pyre) was still practiced, She took a firm stand against it, advocating for the protection and dignity of widows. She championed the right of widows to live a life free from exploitation and discrimination.

Untouchability- Savitribai also worked against the practice of untouchability, which discriminated against people based on their caste. Championing the Rights of the Marginalized and marginalized groups.

Savitribai Phule as a Revolutionary Figure

Savitribai Phule's emergence as a revolutionary figure was defined by her unyielding commitment to eradicate social injustices through education. Her belief in education as the "only weapon" to empower the oppressed is central to her legacy. She knew that education was not just about acquiring knowledge, but about providing a path to equality, social mobility, and respect for the marginalized. For Savitribai, education was the means to offer hope to the hopeless, power to the weak, equality to the neglected, and respect to the humiliated. This vision set her apart as a trailblazer for the gender equality, as well as for the social justice.

The Power of Education as a Tool for Social Reform

Savitribai Phule's work was a testament to the transformative power of education. In a time when women and marginalized groups had little to no access to education, Savitribai gave them a chance to break free from the shackles of ignorance and social inequality.

Her work paved the way for future generations of women and marginalized individuals to pursue education and challenge the norms of their time. Her actions laid the foundation for the creation of a society where social harmony could be achieved through education—a fundamental tool for breaking down prejudices and building a more equal future.

Facing Difficulties in a Caste-Based, Male-Dominated Society

Establishing schools for Dalit, Muslim, and female students was a revolutionary act in itself, given the oppressive social system that existed during British colonial India. In a deeply patriarchal and caste-based society, She faced enormous resistance. Male-dominated structures—especially in rural areas—sought to keep women and marginalized groups from seeking knowledge, as education was seen as a threat to the existing social order.

Savitribai faced social ostracism, physical violence, and harsh criticism from all corners of society for her progressive ideas. It is said that people threw stones and even filth at her while she walked to school, but she never wavered. Her unyielding determination to provide education for the oppressed is a testament to her commitment to social justice and equality. In such a hostile environment, Her struggle was not just about educational reform but also about breaking the shackles of gender and caste-based oppression.

Education as the Key to Wisdom and Development

Savitribai understood that education was the key to unlocking potential, not only for individuals but for society as a whole. Education, she believed, could offer wisdom, which would lead to the development of a justifiable rightful environment and equal society. She saw education as a tool that could empower the marginalized, enabling them to realize their rights, improve their quality of life, and contribute meaningfully to society. Through her schools, she emphasized holistic education, which went beyond just literacy. Her curriculum included practical and vocational training, allowing girls and lower-caste students to learn skills that would help them lead independent, self-sufficient lives. This comprehensive approach ensured that education was not merely theoretical but practical and relevant to their social realities.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Das and Das (2021) In his article "Educational Contribution of Savitribai Phule in 21st Century India" author portrays Savitribai Phule as a trailblazing social reformer whose work continues to resonate in contemporary India. It emphasizes how her contributions to education, particularly for girls and the marginalized communities like Shudras and Ati-Shudras, have laid a foundation for social equality, mobility, and educational opportunity that continues to shape Indian society today.

Bera, M. (2024) highlighted that Savitribai Jyotirao Phule, an influential Indian modern reformer, educationist, as well as a poetess, made remarkable contributions to the education and empowerment of women. As one of the few educated women of her time, she co-founded the first school for girls in Pune at Bhide Wada with her husband, Jyotirao Phule. Savitribai fought against social injustices such as child widowhood, sati, child marriage, and advocated for widow remarriage. She was also a vocal advocate for the abolition of caste and gender discrimination and campaigned against untouchability.

Singh, P (2023) in his qualitative research paper explores the transformative journey of Savitribai Phule, a pioneering figure in Indian history, known for challenging and dismantling gender barriers through education. The study analyzes historical records, primary sources, and narratives to uncover the challenges Savitribai faced, the strategies she employed, and the lasting impact of her efforts in promoting education as a tool for social reform. Her legacy includes groundbreaking initiatives like establishing schools for girls, advocating for women's rights, and fighting social evils such as caste discrimination and child marriage.

Suganya, K. (2024) explored that in the 19th century, several social reformers played key roles in transforming India into a progressive nation. One prominent figure among them was Savitribai Phule, the wife of Jyotirao Phule. She is celebrated for laying the milestone foundation for women's socio-legal rights, liberty, education in India and making significant contributions to the women's rights movement during British rule.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study holds great importance in the context of contemporary education and social reform by Savitribai Phule. Her legacy, as India's first female teacher and a pioneer Social worker of women's education and fighter against the caste system remains highly relevant today. In a society still grappling with gender and caste discrimination, her contributions offer valuable insights and inspiration for modern educational practices and social reforms. Apart from this, the present research work will be helpful for future professional social workers to learn from the life and actions of Savitribai Phule to work on raising the voice of the victims of the Gender and caste based issues.

4. OBJECTIVES

- To understand Savitribai Phule's impact on fighting for the women's rights.
- To examine Savitribai Phule's contribution to the development and empowerment of Socio-Economically Lower Castes.
- To analyze Savitribai Phule's contribution, as Pioneer Indian Social Worker

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND TOOLS

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing the qualitative content analysis technique to examine the educational and social contributions of Savitribai Phule with the application of descriptive-cum-analytical research design. Study has explored various research studies, books and other research work, which are based on primary sources of data. Content analysis is employed as the primary research method for examining written works, biographies, and historical documents related to Savitribai Phule's contribution for women rights and scheduled caste people.

6. MAJOR FINDINGS AND SUMMARY

Education as a Path to Social Justice and Equality

The article asserts that education is indispensable in promoting social justice. It is believed that education was not merely a legalized academic weapon and pursuit but a means of creating equity in society. They argued that true social justice could not be realized without providing equal access to education for all, regardless of caste, gender, or social standing. For these reformers, education was the gateway to liberation, allowing marginalized groups to gain the knowledge and confidence needed to challenge oppressive structures. The Phules were particularly focused on empowering women and marginalized groups, communities that had been historically denied the right to education and kept in a state of ignorance and subjugation. Savitribai, for example, dedicated her life to educating girls and women, while Jyotiba Phule worked relentlessly to uplift Scheduled castes. Through their efforts, they established schools that welcomed those who were denied access to mainstream education, laying the foundation for a more just society.

Savitribai Phule: A Champion for Gender Equality and Education

Savitribai Phule's work is recognized as both praise-worthy and daring, as she fought tirelessly for women's rights in a society dominated by patriarchy and oppressive traditions. Her fight for equality was particularly focused on the intersection of gender and caste. As a woman from a lower caste herself, she was acutely aware of the oppressive structures that marginalized both women and Scheduled castes. She recognized that education was the key to breaking these shackles and providing these groups with the means to uplift themselves. This drive for equity was at the core of her work, as she advocated for the education of women and Scheduled castes, who had historically been denied these basic rights.

Fighting Patriarchy and Caste Based Exclusion Practices

The article also highlights the patriarchal nature of Indian society at the time, which placed women in subordinate roles and often viewed them as incapable of higher intellectual pursuits. Additionally, Caste Based Exclusion, which further marginalized large sections of society, including women and lower-caste individuals. Savitribai's efforts were groundbreaking in that she sought to address not just gender inequality but also the broader social inequities perpetuated by the caste system.

Contribution of Savitribai Phule towards Women education in India

Savitribai Phule's contributions to women's education and empowerment laid the foundation for societal change and gender equality in India. Her tireless work not only impacted the lives of women in her time but also sparked a movement that continues to inspire generations. Here's a deeper look into her key contributions:

- **Creation of Girls' Schools**

Savitribai Phule, alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, was a pioneer in the fields of women's education. They founded the first school for girls in Pune, breaking societal norms that had long denied women the right to an education. This initiative marked the beginning of a revolution in education, where women, who were previously confined to their homes and kept illiterate, were given the opportunities for learning and thriving academically.

- **Promotion of Women's Literacy**

Savitribai believed that education was the key to women's emancipation. She made it her life's mission to promote literacy among women, teaching girls and women in an environment that welcomed them despite the harsh criticisms and social resistance they faced. Her own efforts as a teacher and advocate for female education helped women gain confidence and skills that allowed them to challenge the restrictive roles imposed by society.

- **Advocacy for Women's Rights**

As a firm believer in social equality, Savitribai Phule was vocal about the rights of women to have equal access to education, social participation, and opportunities. She argued against the confinement of women to traditional roles within the home, advocating for their active participation in various aspects of life, including social, academic, and professional spheres. Her work helped challenge and dismantle the rigid gender norms of her time.

- **Caste as a Barrier to Education**

It is found that despite efforts at social and political inclusion, Scheduled castes continued to face severe barriers in accessing education and employment opportunities. The caste system remained a significant obstacle even after India's independence. Scheduled castes were often excluded from formal educational institutions and faced discrimination in schools.

- **Creation of a Shelter for Abused Women**

In addition to her educational initiatives, Savitribai and her husband Jyotirao Phule took another bold step in their mission to protect and empower women. They founded a shelter for women who had faced abuse, neglect, or other forms of injustice. This shelter provided a safe haven for women, offering them protection and support, and underscoring the Phules' unwavering commitment to safeguarding women's rights and dignity.

- **Revolutionary and Unprecedented Educational Reforms**

Savitribai Phule's most significant contribution was in the field of education. Her collection of poems, *Kavya Phule*, published in 1854, reflects her deep concerns about the unequal and discriminatory society that oppressed women, Socio-economically weaker sections, and other marginalized groups. She recognized that education was not just a means to intellectual growth but also a path to personal freedom, democratic environment and social equality.

Education an Authorized Legal Tool for Liberation and Empowerment

Phule viewed education as a powerful tool of liberation, something that could help oppressed and marginalized communities, particularly women and Socio-economically weaker sections, to break free from the societal shackles that kept them ignorant and subjugated. Her vision of education went beyond the traditional curriculum. She aimed to create a system that would foster gender sensitivity, intellectual criticality, and a socially reforming mindset. For Phule, education was not just about acquiring knowledge, but about enabling individuals to challenge entrenched social norms, particularly those related to gender discrimination and caste-based exclusion.

7. LEGACY OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE

Savitribai Phule's work has had a lasting impact on the Indian educational system and the fight for social justice. She, along with her charismatic husband Respected Jyotirao Phule Ji, was a trailblazer who laid the foundation for the right to education for women and marginalized communities. The Phules' combined efforts helped catalyze the larger movement for social reform, making Savitribai Phule one of the most important figures in the history of Indian social movements.

She was not only a visionary educator but also a powerful social reformer who believed that education was the key to freedom, equality, and justice for all. Her life and work continue to inspire those fighting for human rights and equality, and her legacy is a testament to the enduring power of education in transforming society.

Application of Savitribai Phule's Actions and Philosophy by Professional Social Worker

On the basis of the above all facts and deliberations, it is explored that Savitribai Phule's Actions and Philosophy has significant potential to apply in the Social Work Profession to protect and advocate the rights of women and marginalized groups. Social workers play a key role in challenging discriminatory policies and institutions. To offer legal help in case of crime and incidents of brutality with them. As a social worker dedicated to advocating for marginalized communities and their role is also essential in advancing social justice and equality in employment and livelihood opportunities for the marginalized sections. By offering support and empowerment, confronting discrimination, violence, injustices, Social Work can work on creating meaningful change and positive impact over the lives of these marginalized groups. Apart from this, Social workers in the field of women's rights play a vital role in improving their life. Social workers advocate for women's rights and ensure their voices are heard in all spheres of life. Social workers contribute to the policy formation and up-gradation for women rights by advocating for reforms that address inequalities and promote women's life, participating in policy forums and legislative advocacy

8. CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule was indeed a revolutionary figure in Indian history, and her contributions to education and women's empowerment were nothing short of transformative. Her relentless efforts to promote education, particularly for girls and women, played a crucial role in reshaping society's views and advancing social justice in a time when these issues were deeply neglected.

Her journey was not just one of education but also one of empowerment for not only for women but also for marginalized groups of the society. By providing them dignity of equality, free from violence, giving education and helping them find their voice, she created a foundation for future societal progress, ensuring that scheduled caste people and women should remain the creators of the new society.

It is concluded that lesson from the Savitribai Phule's journey, can be adopted and undertaken by the professionally trained social workers to advocate and protect the rights of the marginalized communities and women, in advancing towards progress, comprehensive social justice and equality. By offering care and services, social workers can create a favorable environment, which would bring tangible changes in the lives of women and these vulnerable and poor sections.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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