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11. Savitribai Phule's Contribution to Society as A Poetess: An Overview

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Abstract

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. She is the pioneer of Marathi poetry who used her poems to fight against caste discrimination and to encourage and push people towards education for a better future. Undoubtedly her poems continue to inspire generations after generations to fight against India's caste system. She worked tirelessly to abolish discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on caste and gender. She is considered as one of the earliest crusaders of education for women who played an important role in improving women's rights in India during British rule. This research article is a humble venture wherein I have tried to study Savitribai Phule's contribution to society through her poems. This paper discusses her thoughts and ideas on different social issues like gender discrimination, sexual violence, caste discrimination, education system and women's rights.

Keywords: Discrimination, feminist, casteism, untouchable, gender discrimination, Kavya Phule

Introduction

This year India is going to celebrate the 188th birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule, who was born at Naigaon near Pune, Maharashtra on January 3, 1831 as the eldest child to Khandoji Nevshe Patil, who belonged to the Shudra community. She was married to Jyotirao Phule, the great social reformer and writer at the age of nine. At that time, the male-dominated Hindu society treated women as their slaves who had to follow the orders of the men of the family submissively. It was common for women in India to get married at such a young age then. But despite of the adverse circumstances, with the assistance and constant encouragement from her husband Jyotirao, Savitribai learned to read and write and became the first woman teacher of



India of her time. She will always be remembered for her innovative ways of teaching in classrooms through short stories and poetry written by her.

Among the writings of Savitribai **Kavya Phule** (collection of poems, 1854), **Jyotirao's Speeches**, edited by Savitribai Phule (25th December, 1856), **Savitribai's Letters to Jyotirao**, **Speeches of Matoshree Savitribai**, (1892) and **Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar** (1892) are the most prominent. All these writings have been collected in a volume titled "**The Complete Works of Savitribai Phule**," edited by Dr. Mali. Savitribai published her first collection of poems "**Kavya Phule**" in 1854 when she was only 23 years old. This anthology includes 41 poems dealing with nature, social issues and education, self, prayers, morals and values and also about history. Her poems are indeed a diverse blend of the serious, the sensuous, the playful and the ambitious. If we study her poems properly, we can clearly see the woman that emerges through her poems is modern, committed, rational and fun-loving.

The two poems from the collection "**Go, Get Education**" and "**Rise, to Learn and Act**" are translated in German, Spanish and Italian languages. They highlight the multifaceted personality of the reformer, who through her poems depicts the tragic social scenario of her time. In these two poems we can see a passionate and committed woman who is not only completely devoted to education of the downtrodden but also passionate to see them empowered. In her poems **Go, Get Education** and **Rise, to learn and act**, Savitribai writes,

"Be self-reliant, be industrious Work, gather wisdom and riches, All gets lost without knowledge We become animal without wisdom, Sit idle no more, go, get education End misery of the oppressed and forsaken, You've got a golden chance to learn So learn and break the chains of caste.

Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast." (From Kavya Phule p.82)

Throughout her poems Savitribai expresses an unwavering faith in the power of education and firmly believes that knowledge can save people from slavery, ignorance and sufferance. She makes a powerful appeal to her countrymen to "learn and break the chains of caste" and to "throw away the Brahman's scriptures" for their own dignity. Her words are so powerful and effective that they still give us hope and strength even in 21st century. The theme of the most of Savitribai's verses was centred at educational and social reforms. In her poem **she writes**, "Awake, arise and educate, Smash traditions-liberate." (Kavya Phule p.82) In the poem **The Greatest Wealth**, Savitribai advises the children of the country to be industrious and

focused. She writes, "Knowledge is wealth, Greater than all riches." (Kavya Phule, p.77) She stressed upon the importance and need of education and the necessity of English throughout her poems. In **Learn English** she writes,

"The opportunity is here,
For the Shudras and Ati Shudras,
To learn English
To dispel all woes.
Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English." (Kavya Phule, p.80)

The selected verses from the collection of Savitribai's poems reflect the pathetic condition of women and the untouchables and other social realities of her time. The language used in her poems is direct, sharp and harsh while raising either caste discrimination or gender discrimination issues and criticizes the customs and Brahminic-Casteist culture bitterly. In her poem **So Says Manu** she writes, "The social customs created thus are based on discrimination; This policy of the shrewd and devious is oh so inhuman!" (Kavya Phule, p. 76)

Savitribai and her husband Jyotirao Phule, fought against the prevalent caste system at the time and worked towards the emancipation of the underprivileged people. She campaigned against untouchability through her poems and worked actively in abolishing caste and gender based discrimination. The issue of untouchability emerged from the four-fold division of society. According to Hindu caste system, the people belonged to 'lower castes' were considered as 'impure' and therefore untouchable or 'Shudras' who were not supposed to cross the path of the upper castes or draw water from wells and lakes in the villages. In her poem **Meaning of the word 'Shudra'** she writes,

"The word "shudra" in truth, connoted a native
But the powerful victors made "shudra" an invective
The ultimate victors, over the Iranis and the Brahmins
Over the Brahmins and the British; the most radical were the natives
Wealthy were they, the original inhabitants
They were known by the name of "Indians"



Such heroic people were our ancestors, you see
And the descendants of such people are we" (p.79)

The Phules protested against this practice and threw open the well in their compound to the Untouchables in 1868. This was a bold step that shook up the caste status quo at that time.

Savitribai Phule is considered as the most important feminist social reformer in India. During the British rule she dedicated her life to improving women's rights and introduced education for women in Maharashtra together with her husband Jyotirao Phule and founded the first girl's school in Pune at Bhidewada. She took great pains and efforts in educating and emancipating child widows, campaigned against child marriage and sati pratha, and promoted widow remarriage. Her efforts made a significant impact on the condition of women, and also on the social attitudes towards them. She along with her husband established a home for widows who had been thrown out by their families after being sexually abused by other men. In the poem **The Butterfly and the Bud**, she expresses the plight of women and how men use them as a toy to satisfy their carnal lust and abandon them. She writes,

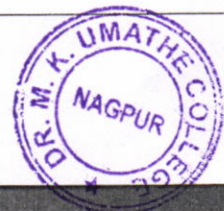
"He just shatters her beautiful form
And ravages her like a storm
Sucks her dry of all her nectar
Lifeless, wasted he discards her...
Which flower bud? He conveniently asks
Forget the old and search anew is his task
Ways of the world deception and promiscuity
I am aghast!" (Kavya Phule, p.73)

In the poem **Should they be called Humans?** Savitribai expresses men's inhuman attitude towards women. She painfully asserts that,

"The woman from dawn to dusk doth labour
The man lives off her toil, the freeloader
Even birds and beasts labour together
Should these idlers still be called humans?" (P. 84)

Savitribai expresses her views on education in her poem **Golden Chance**. She says,

"To attain self-reliance let us pledge
And accumulate a wealth of knowledge



Without learning, life is an animal existence, waste

Don't rest, get an education, make haste

should they be called humans?

No knowledge, no learning

No affinity for either

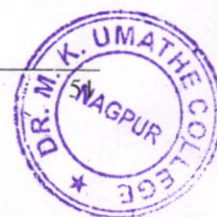
A brain that lies fallow

Should they be called humans?" (Kavyaphule p. 77)

Another collection of Savitribai's poems, **Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar** (The Ocean of Pure Gems), is a biography of her illustrious husband Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, which was published in 1891. In this collection she described Jotirao's devastating criticism of the Brahmin interpretation of Maratha history in the ancient and medieval periods. Savitribai also edited and published Jotirao's four speeches on Indian history. Her own speeches were also published in 1892. Savitribai's three letters to Jyotirao are also precious and rare piece of literature as in those days women seldom wrote letters. She wrote letters to her husband, addressed him by his name and discussed social issues in her letters. It clearly shows their mutual respect and trust. Although she selected traditional form, she constantly propagated the values such as humanism, brotherhood, liberty and equality. Mountain Peak Publishers published a book in 2008 titled "Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule in order to make people aware of her devoted work towards Society.

Many of Savitribai's verses in *Kavya Phule* (1854) express ideas similar to those found in the *Gulamgiri* written by Jotirao Phule in 1873. She, being a committed worker, was constantly moving, visiting and talking to the villagers in and around Pune, reprimanding them for their vices and motivating them to educate themselves and improve their lives. Her speeches on debt, social evils, drunkenness and education as a tool of liberation are available in print and are a moving testimony to her passionate involvement with people.

Savitribai's poems and other writings are still an inspiration to others and the future generation. Her literary work has a simple yet distinctive style and her poetic zeal and literary merits are also beyond doubt. Her writings exhibit the influence of folk songs, bhakti and poetry. Eventually, the government has taken her contribution into consideration only after a century from her death. The University of Pune was renamed as the "Savitribai Phule University of Pune" in March, 2015. In 1998, the government of India released a stamp in her honour. The



Maharashtra government has also started **Savitribai Phule Puraskar** to identify women social reformers in order to encourage them. Providing education and equal opportunities to girls and children will be a real tribute.

Conclusion

Savitribai Phule was the first Indian woman who fought against oppression of women and untouchability. The practice was eventually abolished and made illegal but even today, we find the instances of caste-based discrimination in society. She strongly believed that education can liberate women from oppressive patriarchal system. Women, of all castes across the spectrum, remained suppressed, with marginalized communities also being major sufferers. Though she has not been given the space in History textbooks of our country, still she is remembered by many and take an inspiration to stand against discrimination, prejudice and inequality.

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