

Savitribai Phule's Educational Contributions to Girls' Education in India: A Contemporary Discussion

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Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) is a seminal figure in Indian history, recognized as a pioneering social reformer who fought for the rights of women and marginalized communities, and made substantial progress in the promotion of girls' education. Her pioneering endeavors established the groundwork for contemporary educational methodologies that prioritize women's empowerment. Despite the advancements made over the years, there are still numerous obstacles to females' education in modern-day India. This article highlights the enduring significance of Savitribai Phule's contributions, analyzing her impact on societal perceptions of girls' education, pedagogy, and policy, as well as the ongoing challenges to attaining gender equity in education.

Keywords: girls' education, India, Savitribai Phule

Introduction

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) is a seminal figure in Indian history, recognized as a pioneering social reformer who fought for the rights of women and marginalized communities. She was the first female teacher in the country (Raj, 2018). Together with her husband, Jyotirao Phule, she confronted the profoundly ingrained patriarchal and caste-based systems that limited education to specific groups (Braganza, 2021). Their endeavors established the foundation for the integration of females and other marginalized groups into India's educational system. Savitribai Phule's activism and vision continue to be pertinent in the ongoing fight for girls' equitable access to education throughout India (Rao, 2012). Additionally, the educational institutions that Savitribai established were not merely centers of learning; they served as symbols of resistance against deeply ingrained social norms and were instrumental in challenging the oppressive hierarchies of caste and gender. Her dedication to the removal of educational obstacles was not only groundbreaking during her lifetime, but it also established the foundation for educational equity that continues to motivate reforms to this day. Savitribai Phule's work is particularly pertinent in contemporary India, where gender and caste-based discrimination continue to be prevalent (Borade & Patil, 2016). Despite the substantial progress that India has made in enhancing educational access, the complete realization of the right to education is still impeded by deep-rooted inequalities that affect many girls and children

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from marginalized communities. Savitribai Phule's legacy is a critical reminder of the transformative potential of education, encouraging ongoing endeavors to establish safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments for all (A. Das & A. C. Das, 2021).

Savitribai Phule's activism emphasizes that genuine social reform necessitates the abolition of the structures that perpetuate exclusion in the contemporary context, where education for girls remains a critical component of attaining gender equity (Malik-Goure, 2016). Her vision extends beyond the mere education of women and marginalized communities; it prompts to reconsider education as a transformative instrument for addressing more significant social issues. As India endeavors to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which encompass gender equality and quality education, her principles serve as a robust foundation for these objectives (Srivastava, 2018). The ongoing testament to the role that committed individuals can play in the creation of a more equitable society is Savitribai Phule's influence in the field of education and social reform. Her pioneering endeavors and their extensive repercussions continue to resonate in India's educational and social policies, as her work has become a symbol of justice and opportunity, motivating future generations to maintain her vision of a truly inclusive society.

Early Life and Marriage

Savitribai Phule was born on January 3, 1831, in Naigaon, Satara district, Maharashtra, to Lakshmi and Khandoji Nevase Patil. Her family belonged to the Mali community, which was traditionally a community of gardeners. Savitribai Phule, at the age of nine, married Jyotirao Phule, a revolutionary thinker, philosopher, and social reformist. The commencement of a journey dedicated to social and educational change was marked by her marriage to Jyotirao Phule, who is frequently referred to as the "Father of Social Revolution" in India (Salunke, 2021).

Savitribai Phule's keen interest in learning, which was uncommon among females of her era, particularly those from marginalized communities, was acknowledged by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule initiated her education in 1841, shortly after their marriage, in order to cultivate her enthusiasm. Savitribai Phule completed her third- and fourth-year examinations from a school in 1846 and 1847. She was distinguished by her unwavering dedication to self-improvement and her unwavering thirst for knowledge, which equipped her for a life of service to social justice and education (Mani, 2008).

Educational Contributions and Social Reforms

The establishment of the first school for girls in Pune by Savitribai Phule and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in 1848 was a revolutionary move in a society that regarded women's education with suspicion and hostility. The school's dedication to social equality and inclusivity was demonstrated by the inclusion of nine females from diverse castes at its inception. She bravely continued to pursue her mission, despite the frequent harassment she received from conservative locals. She frequently encountered physical threats and verbal abuse from those who were opposed to her ideals (Das, 2021).

Savitribai Phule's contributions were not limited to education; she also addressed deeply rooted social issues. In 1852, she established the Mahila Seva Mandal with a focus on women's rights. She also established night schools for laborers and farmers to encourage adult literacy. In an effort to combat social prejudices against widows, she even organized a barber's strike to protest the traditional practice of shaving widows' skulls. In 1863,

she and Jyotirao founded the “Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha”, India’s first infanticide prevention center. This bold initiative, which provided sanctuary to pregnant widows and victims of sexual violence, exemplified her revolutionary vision and compassion (Braganza, 2021).

Savitribai Phule, a poet and activist, emphasized the transformational potential of education in her literary works. She encouraged the oppressed to pursue knowledge as a means of breaking free from caste and patriarchy in her renowned poem “Go, Get Education”. According to her, “All is lost in the absence of knowledge...”, do not remain inactive; instead, pursue an education. She was recognized as the first female teacher in modern India for her contributions to education, advocacy, and poetry (Braganza, 2021).

After Mahatma Jyotirao Phule’s death in 1890, Savitribai Phule continued to serve as the leader of the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers), a progressive organization that they had jointly established. The society’s efforts to assist the underprivileged were bolstered by her leadership, which ensured that the impoverished received assistance during the 1896 famine. In 1897, she succumbed to plague while caring for contaminated patients, but her dedication was evident until her final days (Mani, 2008).

Savitribai Phule’s legacy underlines the fact that education is not merely a means of individual advancement, but also a potent instrument for the empowering of communities and the promotion of social justice. She is still relatively unknown, a figure that is obscured by casteist and misogynistic biases in historical narratives, despite her groundbreaking contributions (Das, 2021). Her story serves as a call to action for contemporary society to acknowledge and continue her vision for a just, inclusive, and educated nation, which was posthumously honored by the Maharashtra government and commemorated with a postage stamp in 1998 (Salunke, 2021).

The ethos that education should elevate the marginalized is exemplified by Savitribai Phule’s works, and her narrative inspires future generations to pursue social reform as a component of their dedication to democracy and learning. It is imperative for those who advocate for social democracy to comprehend and respect Savitribai Phule’s legacy. She is a beacon of fortitude and inspiration, deserving the respect and gratitude of all those who walk in her path today, due to her courage, compassion, and dedication to the betterment of humanity (A. Das & A. C. Das, 2021).

Savitribai Phule’s Influence on Girls’ Education Today

Policy Impact

The Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009, which mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14, irrespective of gender, caste, or socioeconomic background, was significantly influenced by Savitribai Phule’s legacy; this is particularly true in the context of Indian educational policies. Savitribai Phule’s commitment to educating marginalized communities is evident in policy frameworks like the National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which prioritize gender parity and inclusive education (Phogat, 2024). For instance, the NEP 2020 incorporates critical components of her vision, advocating for a comprehensive educational approach that prioritizes regional languages, emphasizes socio-emotional learning, and reduces gender disparities in school attendance. Furthermore, programs such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) align with Savitribai Phule’s principles by raising awareness of the significance of girls’ education and confronting deeply ingrained prejudices against female education (Donglikar, 2023).

Pedagogical Influence

Savitribai Phule's curriculum was revolutionary in that it acknowledged the distinctive requirements of marginalized communities and females. This method is in alignment with contemporary culturally responsive teaching methods, which prioritize contextualized learning that is customized to the cultural and social backgrounds of students (Wolf, 2011). For instance, Savitribai Phule's integration of practical life skills into her instruction is indicative of the current endeavors to incorporate life skills education into schools in order to enhance the relevance and practicality of the learning experience (Rege, 2021). Additionally, the development of alternative educational models that prioritize community engagement, a practice that is particularly significant in rural and underprivileged communities, was also inspired by Savitribai Phule's progressive pedagogy. These models cultivate a support system that is essential for overcoming obstacles related to household duties, early marriage, and societal pressures by encouraging family and community involvement in girls' education (Pandey & Murmu, 2024).

Challenges and the Continuing Struggle for Gender Equity in Education

Barriers to females' education persist, despite these policy and pedagogical advancements. In rural and backward regions, girls' school attendance and retention rates are still influenced by factors such as poverty, cultural expectations, and gender-based violence (Ghosh, 2021). The education of males is still a top priority in many families, and girls are frequently responsible for household chores, which results in a limited amount of time for studying. Additionally, child marriage continues to be a substantial impediment, with nearly one-third of females in India having married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024). The cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement that Savitribai Phule dedicated her life to breaking is perpetuated by early marriage, which often forces girls to opt out of school and limits their access to educational opportunities.

Reimagining Girls' Education: Lessons From Savitribai Phule

In order to entirely realize Savitribai Phule's vision for equitable education, India must address these structural challenges by concentrating on several critical areas;

- **Community Awareness and Advocacy:** It is imperative to engage the community in order to alter the societal perspective on girls' education. Programs such as public demonstrations, street plays, and village meetings, similar to those conducted in the village schools on Girl Child Day, which were inspired by Phule's advocacy, can assist in the transformation of community perceptions.
- **Strengthening Policy Enforcement:** Although policies such as the RTE Act establish a robust foundation, it is imperative to implement more stringent enforcement measures to guarantee that all girls remain in education. The economic pressures that frequently result in early marriage and school withdrawals can be alleviated through the implementation of programs that offer financial incentives to families and allocate funds specifically for girls' education.
- **Promotion of Role Models:** Female educators are influential role models for young females, demonstrating the potential and value of education. India can motivate a new generation of girls to pursue education and make a positive impact on society by acknowledging and promoting the role of female educators, particularly in rural and remote areas, in the same way as Savitribai Phule.

Conclusion

Savitribai Phule's contributions to the education of females in India were transformative and continue to be profoundly relevant. Her dedication to the removal of caste, gender, and poverty barriers established the foundation for a more inclusive education system that cherishes the right of every child to study. Nevertheless, the necessity of ongoing endeavors to achieve her vision is highlighted by the existence of substantial obstacles. India can continue to progress toward a future in which every girl has access to quality education, is empowered to define her own life, and contributes meaningfully to society by drawing upon Savitribai Phule's legacy.

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