

CONTESTING PATRIARCHY AND CASTE: A CASE STUDY OF SAVITRI BAI PHULE

BODA VEERU BHAI

S G T Medak

Telangana

veerubhai2@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the subjectivity and agency of a woman in Western India who relentlessly fought against patriarchy and the caste system. Not much has been written about her. Savitribai was known only as the wife of Jyotirao Phule or a teacher of female education. However, this article argues that Savitribai took patriarchy head on and fought against child marriage, female infanticide, opened orphanages, worked for widow remarriage and female education. She created her own identity by coming out of shadows of her husband and became a bread winner and carried the mantle handed over by Jyotirao Phule after his death. She was far ahead of nationalist discourse on women in 19th Century Colonial India.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Caste, Inter caste Marriage, Orphanage, Socially Reforming Education, Female Subjectivity

Content

The experience of Colonialism in India gave rise to notions of social reform, cultural nationalism which led to conflicted relationships with feminism. Modernity also resulted in the relative marginalisation of those figures who proposed notions of revolutionary ideas opposed to tradition. One such figure in Indian Feminism was Savitri Bai Phule (Mary E. John 2014: 416). Born in 1831, Savitri Bai Phule got married to Jotiba Phule in 1840 at an early age of nine years only. Though she was initially illiterate, she started getting educated after marriage (Braj Rajan Mani and Pamela Sardar 1988: 29) She Passed third and fourth year examination from a school in 1846-47.

CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Apart from her identity as Jotirao Phule's wife, she is little known even in academia. She was modern India's first woman teacher, a radical exponent of mass and female education, a champion of women's liberation, a pioneer of engaged poetry, a courageous mass leader who took on the forces of patriarchy and caste certainly had her independent identity and contribution. (Braj Rajan Mani and Pamela Sardar 1988: 7) She along with her husband realised that the Indian women do not have monolithic identity and the issues of caste and gender are interrelated. Her thoughts show the sensitivity and understanding of the existing diversity of patriarchies in terms of castes in India with varying degree of women's exploitation. Savitri Bai's role in the anti-caste and women's struggle is unique and unparalleled in a way among all the social reform movements in nineteenth century as it linked patriarchy with the caste.

Savitri Bai Phule started several initiatives for social transformation much before the early nationalists took up the social reform as a campaign strategy. One of the main focuses of her interventions was the challenge she posed to the well-established patriarchal and brahmanical relations especially in terms of combating female illiteracy and caste. For Savitri Bai Phule, social and economic power was located in traditional social structures and practices. The traditional social order signifies a dominant system, ideology and a set of institutions that perpetuate the process of exploitation. It is interesting to note that both shudras and atishudras

are generic terms for those who provide service. Hence oppression, exploitation and social discrimination define the shudra and atishudra castes. In this sense, all women are considered shudras by the Phules, since they are also oppressed. Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule are the pioneers for their numerous attempts amongst Stree-Shudra-Atishudra, such as throwing open their doors of learning to “women and lower castes”, opening drinking water well to the untouchables, throwing upon their home to the child widows and to orphan children (Lalita Dhara 2011: 13).

CHAMPION OF FEMALE EDUCATION

Savitri Bai Phule was the Mother of modern Indian education and the liberator for the women and lower caste people. Savitri Bai's strong desire and determination for learning English becomes clear by her bringing a bible to her in laws house which she got from a missionary. Jyotirao Phule's maternal cousin sister Saguna worked as a nanny for a British officer's son. She therefore understood and was able to converse in English. She used this knowledge to inspire Jotirao and Savitri Bai .

She was the first Indian woman teacher and the first Indian to revolutionise the traditional fabric of Indian society by opening the education to girls and to lower caste children. “She was the first Indian to place universal, child sensitive, intellectually critical, and socially reforming education at the very core of the agenda for all children in India.” (Thom Wolf and Andrade: 2008.)

Saviri Bai understood that self-realisation through education is the key to social as well as gender equality. She believed firmly that only education can liberate women from the oppressive patriarchal structures. She goes to the extent of saying that if tradition is bondage for liberation, then smash that tradition. As a first step in this direction she started a school with Sagunabai in Maharwada in 1847. Later on, on 1st January 1948, country's first school for girls was started at Bhide's wada in Pune and Savitri Bai was nominated as the first head mistress of the school. This was her first dent to the patriarchy when she was appointed as a teacher at a time when teaching of girls was supposed to be an unholy, unheard of thing, moreover an affront to traditional honour. In times when women were treated no better than the cattle at home, Savitri Bai Phule earned the distinction of being the first Indian woman to become a teacher. For this she undertook training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in Ms. Mitchell's school in Pune.

She faced severe opposition from almost all sections. Savitri Bai was subject to intense harassment everyday as she walked to the school. Stones, mud and dirt were flung at her as she passed. But Savitri Bai Phule faced everything courageously. Dhananjay Keer describes Savitri Bai's response to the situation: “Embarrassed by this unholy uproar and upsurge, she would stop in the street and say serenely to her persecutors: ‘God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May He bless you’” (Keer 1974: 68). Relying on contributions from friends, the generosity of individual British administrators, and their own labour, Savitri Bai and her husband endured the opposition and continued the school, and even replicated the project, proceeding to found several more schools throughout Pune over the next few years. However, Phules were not exclusivist. The teachers appointed in the schools run by Phules included Brahmins as well as other caste people and a large number of women. Fatima Shaikh, who worked with Savitri Bai from the beginning, is said to be the first Muslim woman teacher in a modern school in India.

First public Til-Gul programme was arranged by Mahila Seva Mandal on 14th January, 1852 in which she took active part along with her husband. Their family was honoured by British government for their works in the field of education and Savtri Bai was declared as the best teacher in 1852. Savitri Bai also learnt English language. When Revenue Commissioner went to school for inspection on February 12, 1853, where Savitri Bai was engrossed in teaching, he praised her a lot and Savitri Bai also spoke to him in simple English. The report says that "The prejudice against teaching girls to read and write began to give way ---the good conduct and honesty of the peons in conveying the girls to and from school and parental treatment and indulgent attention of the teachers made the girls love the schools and literally run to them with alacrity and joy" (Keer 2011: 28).

In 1853, the Government and the Board of Education honoured their efforts in public ceremony, presenting them with a pair of shawls. This incidence is not a normal one and bears special relevance. This was an official and public commendation of gifting the shawls in pair to both Jotirao and Savitri Bai. This is perhaps the first known presentation of shawl to a woman and an indelible mark on the head of patriarchal agenda that Indian society was facing during this period. Also by 1853, the Phules and their companions founded an Education Society that continued to open schools for girls and for the lower castes, as well as to give lectures to the lower castes in Pune, explaining the benefits of education. Dhananjay Keer, says for this memorable moment "For the first time in India during her history of three thousand years...the gates of knowledge were opened to the lowest of the low." And, it was Jotirao and Savitri Bai Phule who effected this "miraculous change"(Keer 1974: 29).

Savitri Bai Phule and Mahatma Jotirao Phule were on the same wavelength as far as female education was concerned. In a statement made before the Education Commission" (1882), Jotirao Phule's first three opening sentences note the compatibility of thoughts on education between himself and his wife: "My experience in educational matters is principally confined to Poona and the surrounding villages. About 25 years ago, the missionaries had established a female school at Poona but no indigenous school for girls existed at the time. I, therefore, was induced . . . to establish such a school, and in which I and my wife worked together for many years" (G.P.Deshpande 2002: 102) Again, when Jotiba and Savitri Bai were being honoured in a public function in Pune on 16th Nov. 1852, Jotiba Phule, honestly accepted his wife's contribution. This is the first time in the history of India when an Indian leader publicly admitted the share of his wife in his thoughts and works.

Savitri Bai agreed with her husband in conceptualizing the knowledge as Tiritiya ratna, the 'Third eye', which they saw as knowledge that went beyond merely alphabetical competence to the power to see through hegemonic ideology. They also felt the same knowledge also will help people liberate from the system of oppression and to dismantle it. For Savitri Bai, truth is the true home of genuine spirituality, so critical thinking is never an enemy in the educational process.

Savitri Bai and the Truth Seekers community envisioned a social function for education, and believed that "in education...lay the key to a fundamental change in social attitudes" (O' Hanlon Rosalind 1985: 119). Her goal in promoting education for the masses was not simply to raise the temporary standard of living for a few individuals, but to reshape the entire future of the nation of India.

She was an educational philosopher well ahead of her times. She incorporated innovative methods for spreading the education – she gave stipends to prevent children from dropping out of school. She was the teacher who inspired a young student to ask for a library for the school at an award ceremony instead of gifts for her. She even conducted the equivalent of a parent-teacher meeting to involve the parents so that they would understand the importance of education and support their children. Her schools imparted vocational training as well. Savitri Bai motivated her 11-year-old student Muktabai, to write an essay that became the cornerstone of 'Dalit literature'. Savitri Bai's remarkable influence through her teaching and writings is evident in an essay by her, which was published in the paper Dyanodaya, in 1855. The essay 'Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi', which translates as 'Grief of the Mangs and Mahars', is deemed to be among the earliest surviving documentations by a woman writer. It portrays the atrocities committed against untouchables and received accolades even in English translation. The writer's lambasting of the caste system, and the religion that upholds it, reveals the 'potential explosiveness' of education that the Phules were so keen to create. Similarly, no other women's writing could show the radical spirit which was shown late by Tarabai Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulna"

OPENING OF ORPANAGE

It was only after spreading education to the women, Savitri Bai took head on to other taboos of the society which victimized the women lot for long. Savitri Bai developed a framework of education that sought to revolutionize the society. Savitri Bai was not a typical docile woman who blindly followed her husband. She was a courageous woman who stood by her husband and supported all his radical initiatives when no other family member or relative assisted him. Savitri Bai's first collection of poetry "Kavya Phule" echoed the agony, aspirations and feelings of the modern, liberated Indian Women.

She opined that the practice of unequal marriage and child marriage has led to abortion and infanticide. They condemned the double standards of the Hindu traditional patriarchy which while disallowing widow remarriage happily permitted remarriage for men. Phules showed the courage to start an orphanage for such fallen women and their children in 1864.

She looked unflaggingly after the children in the orphanage established by her and her husband as if she were their mother, although she had no child and yet with her kind and generous disposition she tenderly and lovingly cherished the infants. It was her practice to invite from time to time, all children from neighbourhood to dinner. She was the happiest and smiled her sweetest when she was left among the children. Savitri Bai and Jotirao were moved by the plight of such widows and castigated the barbers for tonsuring their heads. They even organized a strike of barbers and persuaded them not to shave the heads of widows. She is also known to have taken the lead in organizing the boycott by the barbers against shaving the heads of widows in the 1860s. Once Jotirao stopped a pregnant lady from committing suicide, promising her to give her child his name after it was born. Savitri Bai readily accepted the lady in her house and willingly assured to help her deliver the child. Savitri Bai and Jotirao later on adopted this child who then grew up to become a doctor. This incident opened new horizons for the couple. Many women were driven to commit suicide by men who had exploited them to satisfy their lust and then deserted them. Therefore, Savitri Bai and Jyotirao put boards on streets about the "Delivery Home" for women on whom pregnancy had been forced. The delivery home was called "Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha".

Her life style was very simple, she used to wear sari blouse of khadi. Under the supervision of Phule, Savitri Bai founded 'Mahila Seva Mandal' which was first institution of its kind. In one of her letters to Jotiba, she came to the aid of a couple entering an inter caste marriage. Inter caste marriages were later cited by B. R. Ambedkar as an important tool to annihilate the caste. To support such marriages in the late nineteenth century required exemplary courage and commitment.

Rosalind O'Hanlon opines that "Phule's main point" about the interconnected problems of the 19th century low caste majority Indian traditional religious disabilities thus lay at the root of the frustration and backwardness of the low castes. These interconnected problems required a radical solution: a revolution in the worldview of the lower caste individual. In stripping the priestly class of their religious authority, and the social hierarchies of Hinduism of their religious sanction, this would free the lower caste man or woman to understand for themselves, both the workings of the natural world, and the distribution of power and authority in their own society" (O' Hanlon Rosalind 1985: 125-128).

FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY AND AGENCY

Savitri Bai was probably one of the first Indian women in modern India whose works got published, and was able to develop her own voice and agency at a time when women of all classes were ruthlessly suppressed and lived a sub-human existence. Savitri Bai was a "Vidya Jyoti" for all those who want to do something in the field of education. Savitri Bai's writings were an independent expression. Her writings demonstrate the influence of folk songs, bhakti, poetry and the shayari from (ballad literature). Though, she selected traditional forms, she consistently stuck to rationalism in all her writings.

Savitri Bai published two works Kavya Phule in 1954 and Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar in 1982 (Susie Tharu, and K. Lalitha 1991: 211-212). Her poetry, Kavya Phule is a historical document of the time. While some of her poems are basically nature poems, in others she engages with issues like education, equality, slavery, caste system and patriarchy. In Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar which is a biography of Phule, she narrates Phule's devastating critique of the brahmanical interpretation of Marathi history.

One of her poems described the new Indian man- one who looks after his family with care and responsibility, one who is always industrious and inquisitive, who has quest for knowledge, who is worshipper of freedom, who is caring, sacrificing and dedicated is a good man. She was also aware of the differences among women of different classes and castes, something which the women's movement of today is much concerned with. Women of different castes had different roles in the domesticity and in the public. She refers to the fact that even though the shudra man and shudra woman work side by side, it is the woman who wakes up earlier and takes care of the family's needs as well as agricultural duties.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude that as early as the mid19th century, Savitri Bai, through her works and thoughts, sought to bring about a complete change in all spheres of women's lives. Savitri Bai was also the first woman to enter into male bastion and light her husband's pyre in the history of India. Her choice to light her husband's funeral pyre, which would still be considered audacious, must have sent shock waves across the land at that point of time. This act speaks her subjectivity and tells us that she was not a conventional Indian Pativrata (devoted wife) following in her husband's footsteps. She became a breadwinner after her



husband's death and took the leading role in running Satyashodhak Samaj. Her compassion was seen during the draught of 1896. An able and committed companion to her husband, Savitri Bai was a revolutionary leader in her own right. Despite tremendous odds, she rose to become a productive, inspiring and capable teacher, leader, thinker and writer. Savitri Bai's life shows that the strongest dent against the patriarchal system has to come by a woman herself. Savitri Bai Phule was perhaps the greatest female leader of colonial India who thrashed upon the age old patriarchal system by linking caste to patriarchy.

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