

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

Savitribai Phule: A Crusader of Downtrodden

B.K. Bhosale

Affiliated to University of Mumbai
Head, Department of History
C. K. Thakur A.C.S College, New Panvel

Article History: Submitted-10/04/2017, Revised-04/07/2017, Accepted-07/07/2017, Published-12/07/2017.

Abstract:

Savitribai is hailed as the foremost women social reformer not only in Maharashtra, but also in all over India for unprecedented work for the girls in this country. Along with educational service, she devoted entire life for social and educational cause of downtrodden classes, started a shelter home for widows, opened a Balashram in severe drought period, she led the last journey of Jotirao, walking ahead of the procession and was the one who set fire to his dead body. In the history of India, menace of plague played havoc in the country she pick up sick people and brought them to hospital and treated them.

Keyword: Social service, Slavery and bondage, Caste discriminations, Threshold, Viable and practical solution.

Savitribai and her husband Jotirao Phule's contribution in educational awareness among women and downtrodden sections of society can never be ignored in the history of progressive Maharashtra. Savitribai is hailed as the foremost women social reformer not only in Maharashtra, but also in all over India for unprecedented work for the girls in this country. She became the first ever women as teacher, headmistress in modern India to learn and teach the girls in society. Along with educational service, influenced and encouraged by her husband Jotirao Phule, she devoted entire life for social and educational cause of downtrodden classes. This section of the chapter aims to explore Savitribai's contribution in the upliftment of women and downtrodden classes. She joined Jotirao in social service with same dedication without complaining. Not only she assisted Jotirao Phule in his social service with love and compassion for poor, needy people but also after his death continued his Satyashodhak samaj movement. She boldly rejected shackles of age old slavery and bondage on women and paved way for their liberation by opening gates of knowledge for the girls and untouchables. Following is the brief survey of her service towards betterment of girls and dalits in contemporary society.

Savitribai was born on 3rd January 1831 at Naigaon, taluka Khandala in Satara district. NeveshePatil ancestry enjoyed power and prestige in society. KhandojiPatil was an industrious and generous man. He used to solve problems of people in the area. She was the eldest daughter of Khandoji Neveshe Patil. Savitribai inherited all the attributes of her father. In 1840, at the age of 10, she got married to Jotirao. Jotirao educated Savitribai and his maternal sister Sagunabai at home. Savitribai came to know about human values and concepts like human rights, caste discriminations, casteism in Hindus society. According to the Education Report for the period 1 May 1851 to 30 April 1852, Jotirao educated his wife at home and trained her to become a teacher. Further Savitribai also took teacher training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. These documents suggest that Savitribai

Phule had been the first Indian woman teacher and headmistress. Her stepping across the threshold of the home to teach students marked the beginning of the public life of the modern Indian woman.

Work of education for girls and downtrodden people began when Savitribai was merely 18 years old with her husband Jotirao. Community members started opposing their work. However, their passion for social cause did not stop their efforts. Jotirao worked full-time, without any remuneration, at the school. The contemporary newspapers of that time report, that often, this couple did not even have the time to eat food. It was a revolutionary work by so-called untouchable castes that had been denied education for thousands of years.

Jotirao and Savitribai lived in the Dalit-working class locality in Pune. The couple started a school for Dalit- Muslim girls in the August of 1848. The school was stopped for a couple of years due to resentment from family members but again in 1851 the couple resumed their work of imparting education to girls and downtrodden community.¹ Jotirao clarified his reasons behind starting a school for girls: He said “Ignorance, caste discrimination and discrimination based on language are the bane of this country. When everyone is sad, the question often arises of whom to help. But instead of being paralyzed by this question into inaction, it is better to help those for whom the suffering is the most. The Mahars and Mangs have to suffer inevitably due to caste discrimination. They can only overcome this suffering through knowledge. So, I first started work for them.”²

Jotirao and Savitri realized that only education will change the condition of Mangs and the Mahars. The couple got to work. As apart of organized efforts for eradication of ignorance and giving justice to women, Jotirao established a *mandali* i.e. an institution where people gathered and shared their vision and collectively work for social reformation. Institutionalized social work proved to be the foundation of Modern India. As per the newspapers *Dnyanodaya* and *Bombay Guardian*, Jotirao-Savitribai started two institutions- Native Female School, Pune and the Society for Promoting the Education of Mahars and Mangs in 1848. They built a network of schools in the Pune region through these institutions.

As per the documents at the Mumbai Archives, an application dated 5th February 1852, by Jotirao asked for economic assistance from the government for his educational institution. The documents clearly mention the first phase of educational institutions. Accordingly, the first three schools for girls were started on 3 July 1851, 17 November 1851 and 15 March 1852 at the Chiplunkar Wada, Rasta Peth and Vetar Peth, respectively. There were four, three and one teachers and forty eight, fifty one and thirty three girls respectively in these schools. Savitribai Phule was the Headmistress in the first of these schools along with Vishnupant Moreshwar and Vitthal Bhaskar as co-teachers. There were eight girls on the first day of the first school. Soon their numbers went up to more than forty eight.

Similarly, a published report of the examination for the schools for the untouchables held on 2nd February 1858 in the Coach Factory of Babaji Manaji, is available in the Archives. The institution was running three schools. A total of two hundred and fifty eight students were studying in three schools. Jotirao, Ganu Shivaji Mang and Dhuraji Appaji Chambhar taught in these schools.

The major thrust of Jotirao and Savitribai was on providing girls and boys with education that enabled them to get jobs and become self-reliant. As a result the educational work of Jotira-Savitribai received attention from other schools in Pune. Even government schools for upper caste students in Pune expressed concerns over quality of education imparted in their institution. A report published in news daily stated that ‘The number of girl students in Jotirao’s school is

ten times more than the number of boys studying in the government schools. This is because the system for teaching girls is far superior to what is available for boys in government schools. If this situation continues, then the girls from Jotirao's school will prove superior to the boys from the government schools and they feel that in the coming examinations, they can really achieve a big victory. If the Government Education Board does not do something about this soon, seeing these women outshine the men will make us hang our heads in shame' ³

The contribution of Jotirao and especially Savitribai characterized by different ideas implemented in schools in order to generate awareness among girls and downtrodden communities. To reduce drop-out rate of girls and untouchables in schools they came up a viable and practical solution. First they came to know that the reasons for the drop-out were, for most part, poverty and disinterest in education. So they introduced provision of salary to the students and planned a syllabus which was geared to the interests of girls and boys, who came from the poorer sections of society. One of the ideas was to generate awareness among the Dalit-Bahujans to introduce them to the advantages and happiness after getting educated. Instead of directly asking students they started literacy campaign for parents. Jotirao surveyed the *Jatra-Khetra* i.e. fairs and pilgrimages, caste panchayats to make aware the masses about importance of education in order to eradicate poverty and live a happy life.

Jotirao and Savitribai's purpose of imparting education to girls and downtrodden classes was more than just enabling them to get jobs. Jotirao and Savitribai wanted that education should give one the ability to choose between right and wrong and between truth and untruth in life.

Imparting education for girls and downtrodden classes was not easy task. It required strong determination as the caste community members would oppose the education; moreover, the Brahmin community too expressed displeasure when the couple used to receive applause from government officer or any thinker in those days. In spite of bitter opposition from society and in the face of abuses, Savitribai continued her work peacefully. Men mocked at Savitribai and purposely wait in the streets as she went to and from school and pass vulgar remarks. Sometimes she would get hurt by the pelted stones and cow dung or mud thrown by the orthodox culprits. So, Savitribai used to carry two saris when she went to school, changing out of the soiled sari once she reached school, which would again be soiled on her way back, and yet, Savitribai continued her work with determination and without interruption. This abuse continued for many days. So the institution had to appoint a guard who escorted her and also look after the girl's safety. According to Balwant Sakharam Kolhe, Savitribai would reply those who bothered her in educational service, "As I do the sacred task of teaching my fellow sisters, the stones or cow dung that you throw seem like flowers to me. May God bless you!"⁴ these expressions shed light on Savitribai's immense courage.

One can observe an acute difference between other social reformers and Savitribai. The establishment of 'Home for the Prevention of Infanticide' in 1863 is sufficient to highlight this fact. It was especially meant for Brahman widows about which majority of the Brahmin community or upper caste member showed just superficial sympathy. But when the issue of unmarried women came to be discussed in society, Savitribai took the initiative and established the Home for the Prevention of Infanticide. Jotirao Phule's letter to the Under Secretary, Government of Mumbai on 4th December 1884 gave details about it. It states why and how the 'Home' came into being.

The heart wrenching incidence was about a young Brahman widow named Kashibai and her baby born out of illegal relations with *Shastri*. It all happened that Kashibai used to work as a cook at the home of Jotirao's Brahman friend, Govande. She was an underprivileged, young,

beautiful Brahman widow from a good family. A cunning *Shastri* took advantage of this illiterate widow and as a result, she became pregnant. When she could not abort the baby, she gave birth to a beautiful baby. *Shastri* rejected the responsibility of baby from the relationship. Kashibai found herself in difficulty. Fearful about the baby's life that the society would not let her live, she killed the innocent baby by slitting its throat. She threw the body in the well in Govandes compound, where it was later discovered. The Police filed a case against Kashibai and she was sentenced for life imprisonment in the Andamans. The incident took place in 1863. Such was the condition of women in patriarchal Hindu society that first time a woman, who bore the child, was sentenced to such severe punishment.

Savitribai and Jotirao felt very sad for the plight of such widow women. They gathered courage and without delay started a shelter home for such Brahman widows in their own house at 395, Ganj Peth, Pune. They placed an advertisement announcing it as a way to avoid *kalepani* (life imprisonment in the Andamans). And thus soon the information about the shelter home became all over the city. By 1884, around 35 Brahman widows gathered there from different places. Savitribai herself helped them in the delivery of their children and also took care of the widow mothers.⁵

In 1874, an exploited widow came for shelter at the 'Home'. Savitribai and Jotirao adopted her son. They brought up this child and educated him to become a doctor. On 10 July 1887, Jotirao made his will and got it registered at the office of the Deputy Registrar. In that, he notes with pride that Savitribai would take care of all these women as if they were her own daughters.

Savitribai became inspiration for many social activists. Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, the editor of *Deenbandhu* and the leader of the working classes, motivated by her work took initiative to put stop the pitiable condition of widows. He organized a strike to bring issue in front of society. It was one of the first strike for the rights of women in Maharashtra.

Savitribai and Jotirao were always keen to help needy people in the face of adversity. Savitribai could not stay inactive in the year 1877 when Maharashtra was experiencing severe draught. The couple opened a Victoria Balashram in Dhankawadi with the help of Dr. Shivappa. Along with Jotirao, Savitribai went from place to place to collect funds for the poor. The Balashram fed meal for as many as thousand needy people. Savitribai herself used to cook and serve the food.

Savitribai extended motherly caring towards the students at the hostel in her own house for the students from distant place. One of the students named Laxman Karadi Jaaya, overwhelmed by her motherly care and concern writes, "I have not seen another woman as kind and loving as Savitribai. She gave us more love than even a mother could." Another student named Mahadu Sahadu Waghole wrote about Savitribai's simple nature. He says, "Savitribai was very generous, and her heart was full of kindness. She would be very compassionate to the poor and the needy. She would constantly give the gift of food; she would offer everyone meals. If she saw tattered clothes on the body of poor women, she would give them saris from her own house. Due to this, their expenses rose. Taty (Jotirao) would sometimes say to her, 'One should not spend so much.' To this, she would smile and ask 'What do we have to take with us when we die?' Taty would sit quietly for some time after this as he had no response to the question. They loved each other immensely."⁶

Jotirao Phule established *The Satyashodhak Samaj* i.e. The Truth-Seeker's Society on 24 September 1873. Savitribai was dedicated and passionate activist of the Samaj. Savitribai was the main inspiration behind revolutionary initiative to reject traditional bondage of women which

begins from marriage. She herself conducted such a marriage. The marriage of Radha, daughter of Savitribai's friend Bajubai Gyanoba Nimbankar and activist Sitram Jabaji Aalhat was the first Satyashodhak marriage that took place on 25 December 1873. Savitribai herself bore all the expenses on this historic occasion. Owing to her initiatives the Samaj arranged marriages without a priest, without dowry and at minimum costs. The first such marriage was arranged on. This movement spread across the nation.

On account of the new method of marriage priests and Brahmins opposed it, and some of them even lodged complaint in court. But Savitribai and Jotirao never gave up their revolutionary work. On 4th February 1889, at the age of 16, they also got their adopted son Yashwant married Radha alias Laxmi the daughter of Satyashodhak Samaja leader Gyanoba Krishnaji Sasane according to new method of marriage. It was first inter-caste marriage.

Savitribai herself set forth an ideal Mother-in-law in her house. The description of how Savitribai would behave with Radha during this time is found in a letter written by Jotirao on 24 September 1888. In a letter to the Sasane family, he writes, "My wife has taken up all responsibility of household chores and ensured that Laxmi has leisure, so that her studies can progress smoothly"⁷ Savitribai took up the entire household responsibility for continuation of her daughter-in-law's education.

Savitribai never deterred amidst of sever financial crises in family she stood firm with Jotirao till his death. In July 1887, Jotirao suffered from a heart attack, and got his right side paralyzed. Savitribai nursed him night and day through this illness. Poona Construction and Contracting Company experienced huge loss. In order to support the deteriorating financial condition of family Jotirao's friend Mama Paramanand wrote letters to the King of Baroda-Sayajirao Gaekwad asking for financial help for the family. He says, "In very adverse situations, Jotirao educated his wife and through her, educated the Brahman girls, and that too, in the very fort of the orthodox and much against their will. The task of starting schools for people from the Mahar-Mang classes and running them is akin to asking a dog at a lion. More than Jotirao, his wife deserves praise. No matter how much we praise her, it would not be enough. How can one describe her stature? She cooperated with her husband completely and along with him, faced all the trials and tribulations that came their way. It is difficult to find such a sacrificing woman even among the highly educated women from upper castes. The couple has spent their entire life working for people".⁸

Savitribai was the first Indian women who displayed extreme sense of righteousness without bothering age old traditional customs. As the letters by Mama never reached the Baroda King and the timely financial assistance never helped to cure Jotirao's illness. At last on 28th November 1890, Jotirao passed away due to illness. According to customs whoever holds the earthen pot during the last journey is considered the successor of the deceased and gets all the property of the deceased. At this time in order to grab an opportunity, Jotirao's nephew came forward and started quarreling with Yeshwant's rights to hold the earthen pot. Savitribai boldly came forward and held the earthen pot herself. Thereby she led the last journey of Jotirao, walking ahead of the procession and was the one who set fire to his dead body. In the history of India, in a thousand years, this was probably the first time a woman had performed the death rites.

After Jotirao's demise, Savitribai led the Satyashodhak movement. She lonely handled the proceedings of the Samaj despite her daughter-in-law passed away. She Chaired the Satyashodhak Conference held in 1893 at Saswad. Again she did a lot of work during the drought of 1896.

In the beginning of the year 1897 menace of plague played havoc in the country. Every day, hundreds of people were dying of the scourge in the Pune region. Savitribai asked Yeshwant to come back and set up a hospital in farm land. The Savitribai herself picked up sick people and brought them to the hospital and treated them. She knew that the disease was contagious, although she continued to serve the patients. As soon as she came to know that the son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad in the Mahar settlement outside the village of Mundhwa was afflicted with plague, she went there and rushed back to the hospital with the sick child on her back. She herself caught the disease in this process, and at night on 10th March 1897, she passed away. The news of her death was great grief and regret. Savitribai's work remained ignored in this patriarchal society despite her heroic deed of serving sick child, carrying him on her back.

Conclusion

From 1848 to 1897, for about 50 years she continuously displayed dedication for service towards subjugated women as well as poor needy people. Savitribai worked tirelessly for the needy people when other social reformers in society were busy in writing articles; Savitribai took the charge of situation and set an example by breaking traditional bondages for women. She set an extraordinary example of service and compassion for subjugated, ignored condition of women and downtrodden needy people in society.

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