

# Savitribai Phule Contribution towards Indian Social Elements – A Study

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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. Counted among few literate women of those times, Savitribai is credited for founding the first girl's school in Pune in Bhide Wada with her husband Jyotirao Phule. She took great effort towards educating and emancipating child widows, campaigned against child marriage and sati pratha, and advocated for widow remarriage. A leading figure of Maharashtra's social reform movement, she is considered an icon of Dalit Mang caste along with likes of B. R. Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe. She campaigned against untouchability and worked actively in abolishing caste and gender based discrimination.



## Introduction

Savitribai was born on January 3, 1831, in Naigaon (presently in Satara district) in British India in a farming family to Khandoji Neveshe Patil and Lakshmi as their eldest daughter. Girls in those days were married off early, so following the prevalent customs, the nine year old Savitribai was wedded to 12 years old Jyotirao Phule in 1840. Jyotirao went on to become a thinker, writer, social activist and anti-caste social reformer. He is counted among the leading figures of Maharashtra's social reform movement. Savitribai's education started after her marriage. It was her husband who taught her to read and write after he saw her eagerness to learn and educate herself. She cleared third and fourth year examination from a normal school and became passionate about teaching. She took training at Ms Farar's Institution in Ahmednagar. Jyotirao stood firmly by the side of Savitribai in all her social endeavours.

## Role in Women Education & Empowerment

The first indigenously-run school for girls in Pune (at that time Poona) was started by Jyotirao and Savitribai in 1848 when the latter was still in her teens. Although they were ostracized by both family and community for this step, the resolute couple was given shelter by a friend Usman Sheikh and his sister Fatima Sheikh, who also gave the Phule couple place in their premises to start the school. Savitribai became the first teacher of the school. Jyotirao and Savitribai later started schools for children from the Mang and Mahar castes, who were regarded as untouchables. Three Phule schools were in operation in 1852. On November 16 that year, the British government honoured the Phule family for their contributions in the field of education while Savitribai was named the best teacher. That year she also started the Mahila Seva Mandal with the objective of creating awareness among women regarding their rights, dignity and other social issues. She was successful in organising a barbers strike in Mumbai and Pune to oppose the prevailing custom of shaving heads of widows.

All the three schools run by the Phules were closed by 1858. There were many reasons for this, including drying up of private European donations post the Indian Rebellion of 1857, resignation of Jyotirao from the school management committee due to difference of opinion on curriculum, and withdrawal of support from the government. Undeterred by the circumstances Jyotirao and Savitribai along with Fatima Sheikh, took charge of educating people from the oppressed communities as well. Over the years, Savitribai opened 18 schools and taught children from different castes. Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh began teaching women as well as other people from downtrodden castes. This was not taken well by many, particularly the upper caste of Pune, who were against Dalits education. Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh were threatened by the locals and were also harassed and humiliated socially. Cow dung, mud and stones were thrown at Savitribai when she walked towards the school. However, such atrocities could not discourage the determined Savitribai from her goal and she would carry two saris. Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh were later joined by Saguna Bai who also eventually became a leader in the education movement. Meanwhile, a night school was also opened by the Phule couple in 1855 for agriculturist and labourers so that they can work in daytime and attend school at night.

To check the school dropout rate, Savitribai started the practice of giving stipends to children for attending school. She remained an inspiration for the young girls she taught. She encouraged them to take up activities like writing and painting. One of the essays written by a student of Savitribai called Mukta Salve became the face of Dalit feminism and literature during that period. She conducted parent-teacher meetings at regular intervals to create awareness among parents on the significance of education so that they send their children to school regularly.

In 1863, Jyotirao and Savitribai also started a care center called 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha,' possibly the first ever infanticide prohibition home founded in India. It was set up so that pregnant Brahmin widows and rape victims can deliver their children in a safe and secure place thus preventing the killing of widows as well as reducing the rate of infanticide. In 1874, Jyotirao and Savitribai, who were otherwise issueless, went on to

adopt a child from a Brahmin widow called Kashibai thus sending a strong message to the progressive people of the society. The adopted son, Yashwantrao, grew up to become a doctor.

While Jyotirao advocated widow remarriage, Savitribai worked tirelessly against social evils like child marriage and sati pratha, two of the most sensitive social issues that were gradually weakening the very existence of women. She also made effort in bringing the child widows into mainstream by educating and empowering them and advocated for their re-marriage. Such pursuits also met with strong resistance from the conservative upper caste society.

### **Other Endeavours**

She worked in tandem with her husband in the latter's efforts in eradicating the custom of untouchability and the caste system, garnering equal rights for people of lower castes, and reform of the Hindu family life. The couple opened a well in their house for the untouchables during an era when the shadow of an untouchable was regarded as impure and people were reluctant to even offer water to the thirsty untouchables.

She was also associated with a social reform society called 'Satyashodhak Samaj' founded by Jyotirao on September 24, 1873 in Pune. The objective of the samaj, which included Muslims, Non-Brahman, Brahmans, and government officials as members, was to free women, Shudra, Dalit and other less privileged ones from getting oppressed and exploited. The couple arranged minimum cost marriages in the samaj sans any priest or any dowry. Both brides and grooms took pledges in such marriages that amounted to their wedding vows. Savitribai worked as head of its women's section and following the demise of her husband on November 28, 1890, she became the chairperson of the samaj. Savitribai carried forward the work of her husband through the samaj leading it till her last breath.

She and her husband worked dauntlessly during the famines starting from 1876. They not only distributed free food in different areas but also launched 52 free food hostels in Maharashtra. Savitribai also persuaded the British government to initiate relief work during the 1897 draught.

The educationist and social activist also raised her voice against caste and gender discrimination. Kavya Phule (1934) and Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar (1982) are compilation books of her poems.

### **Death**

Her adopted son Yashwantrao served the people of his area as a doctor. When the worldwide Third Pandemic of the bubonic plague badly affected the area around Nallaspora, Maharashtra in 1897, the courageous Savitribai and Yashwantrao opened a clinic at outskirts of Pune to treat the patients infected by the disease. She brought the patients to the clinic where her son treated them while she took care of them. In course of time, she contracted the disease while serving the patients and succumbed to it on March 10, 1897.

## Legacy

The relentless efforts of Savitribai in curbing the age-old evils of society and the rich legacy of good reforms left behind by her continues to inspire generations. Her reformatory works have been recognised over the years. A memorial was created in her honour by the Pune City Corporation in 1983. India Post released a stamp in her honour on March 10, 1998. The University of Pune was renamed after her in 2015 as Savitribai Phule Pune University. Search engine Google commemorated her 186th birth anniversary on January 3, 2017, with a Google doodle.

The Savitribai Phule award is awarded to women social reformers in Maharashtra.

**Savitribai Phule** (3 January 1831 – 10 March 1897) was an Indian social reformer, educationalist, and poet from [Maharashtra](#). She is regarded as the first female teacher of India. Along with her husband, [Jyotirao Phule](#), she played an important role in improving women's rights in India during [British rule](#). Phule and her husband founded the first Indian run girls' school in [Pune](#), at Bhide [wada](#) in 1848.<sup>[a]</sup> She worked to abolish the discrimination and unfair treatment of people based on [caste](#) and [gender](#). She is regarded as an important figure of the social reform movement in Maharashtra.

A philanthropist and an educationist, Phule was also a prolific [Marathi](#) writer. She opened the first school for girls in Pune.

## Early life

Savitribai Phule was born on January 3, 1831 in the village of Naigaon in [Satara District](#), Maharashtra. Her birthplace was about five kilometers from [Shirval](#) and about 50 kilometers from [Pune](#).<sup>[1]</sup> Savitribai Phule was an eldest daughter of Lakshmi and Khandoji Neveshe Patil, both of whom belonged to the [Mali](#) Community.<sup>[2][3]. [b]</sup> At the age of 10, Savitribai Phule was married to [Jyotirao Phule](#), born on the 11th of April 1827. At the time of their marriage, he was thirteen years old.<sup>[1]</sup> Savitribai and Jotirao had no children of their own,<sup>[4][page needed]</sup> but they adopted Yashwantrao, a son born to a [Brahmin](#) widow.<sup>[5]</sup>

At the time of her marriage, Savitribai Phule had not been educated because [Brahmins](#) forbade it for people of her low caste and gender. Jotirao was also forced temporarily to abandon his education because of his caste but eventually was able to enroll in a Scottish missionary school, where he studied to grade seven.<sup>[3][6]</sup>

According to government records, Jotirao was responsible for educating Savitribai at their home. After completing her primary education with Jotirao, her further education was the responsibility of his friends, Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar. She also enrolled in two teacher's training programs. The first was at institution run by an [American missionary, Cynthia Farrar](#), in Ahmednagar. The second course was at a Normal School in Pune.<sup>[1][3][7]</sup> Given her training, Savitribai may have been the first Indian woman teacher and headmistress.<sup>[1]</sup>

After completing her teacher's education, Savitribai Phule started teaching girls at the Maharwada in Pune. She did so alongside Sagunabai who was a revolutionary feminist as well as a mentor to Jyotirao. Not long after beginning to teach with Sagunabai, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule along with Sagunabai started their own school at Bhide Wada. Bhide Wada was the home of Tatyasaheb Bhide, who was inspired by the work that the trio was doing. The curriculum at Bhide Wada included traditional western curriculum of mathematics, science, and social studies. By the end of 1851, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule were running three different schools for girls in Pune. Combined, the three schools had approximately one hundred and fifty students enrolled. Like the curriculum, the teaching methods employed by the three schools differed from those used in government schools. The author, Divya Kandukuri believes that the Phule methods were regarded as being superior to those used by government schools. As a result of this reputation, the number of girls receiving their education at the Phule's schools outnumbered the number of boys enrolled in government schools.<sup>[3]</sup>

Unfortunately, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule's success came with much resistance from the local community with conservative views. Kandukuri states that Savitribai often travelled to her school carrying an extra sari because she would be assailed by her conservative opposition with stones, dung, and verbal abuse. The Phules faced such strong opposition because of the conservative and marginalized caste to which they belonged. The Sudra community had been denied education for thousands of years. For this reason, many Sudras began to oppose Jotirao and Savitribai's work and labeled it as "evil". This uproar was often instigated by the upper castes.<sup>[1]</sup> Up until 1849, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule were living at Jotirao's father's home. However, in 1849, Jotirao's father, asked the couple to leave his home because their work was considered a sin in the Brahmanical texts.<sup>[3]</sup>

After moving out of Jotirao's father's home, the Phules moved in with the family of one of Jotirao's friends, Usman Sheikh. It was there that Savitribai met a soon to be close friend and colleague named Fatima Begum Sheikh. According to Nasreen Sayyed, a leading scholar on Sheikh, "Fatima Sheikh knew how to read and write already, her brother Usman who was a friend of Jyotiba, had encouraged Fatima to take up the teacher training course. She went along with Savitribai to the Normal School and they both graduated together. She was the first Muslim woman teacher of India". Fatima and Savitribai opened a school in Sheikh's home in 1849.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the 1850s, Savitribai and Jotirao Phule established two educational trusts. They were entitled: the Native Female School, Pune and the Society for Promoting the Education of Mahars, Mangs, and Etceteras. These two trusts ended up encompassing many schools which were led by Savitribai Phule and later, Fatima Sheikh.<sup>[3]</sup>

Jotirao summarises Savitribai and his work in an interview given to the Christian missionary periodical, Dnyanodaya, on 15 September 1853, saying,

It did occur to me that the improvement that comes about in a child due to the mother is very important and good. So those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started the school for girls first. But my caste brethren did not like

that I was educating girls and my own father threw us out of the house. Nobody was ready to give space for the school nor did we have money to build it. People were not willing to send their children to school but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar convinced their caste brethren about the benefits of getting educated.<sup>[1]</sup>

Together with her husband, she taught children from different castes and opened a total of 18 schools.<sup>[8]</sup> The couple also opened a care centre called Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha<sup>[5]</sup> (literally, "Child-killing Prohibition Home") for pregnant rape victims and helped deliver and save their children.<sup>[9]</sup>

Savitribai and her adopted son, Yashwant, opened a clinic to treat those affected by the worldwide [Third Pandemic](#) of the [bubonic plague](#) when it appeared in the area around Nalasopara in 1897.<sup>[10]</sup> The clinic was established at stern outskirts of Pune, in an area free of infection. Savitribai died a heroic death trying to save the son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad. Upon learning that Gaekwad's son had contracted the Plague in the Mahar settlement outside of Mundhwa, Savitribai Phule rushed to his side and carried him on her back to the hospital. In the process, Savitribai Phule caught the Plague and died at 9:00pm on the 10th of March, 1897.<sup>[11]</sup>

Savitribai Phule was also a prolific author and poet. She published *Kavya Phule* in 1854 and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* in 1892, and also a poem entitled "Go, Get Education" in which she encouraged those who are oppressed to free themselves by obtaining an education. As a result of her experience and work, she became an ardent feminist. She established the Mahila Seva Mandal to raise awareness for issues concerning women's rights. She also called for a gathering place for women that was free of caste discrimination or differentiation of any kind. Symbolic of this was that all the women that attended were to sit on the same mat. Savitribai was also an anti-infanticide activist. She opened a women's shelter called the Home for the Prevention of Infanticide, where Brahmin widows could safely deliver their children and leave them there to be adopted if they so desired. She also campaigned against child marriage and was a advocate of widow remarriage.<sup>[3]</sup>

In a letter to Jotirao, Saviribai told a story about a boy about to be lynched by his fellow villagers for having relations with a woman of lower caste when Savitribai intervened. She wrote, "I came to know about their murderous plan. I rushed to the spot and scared them away, pointing out the grave consequences of killing the lovers under the British law. They changed their mind after listening to me".<sup>[3]</sup>

Legacy[[edit](#)]



Bust of Savitribai Phule in Pune

Pune City Corporation created a memorial for her in 1983.

- In 2015, the University of Pune was renamed as [Savitribai Phule Pune University](#) in her honour.<sup>[11]</sup>
- On 10 March 1998 a stamp was released by [India Post](#) in honour of Phule.

On 3 January 2019, the search engine [Google](#) marked the 188th anniversary of the birth of Savitribai Phule with a [Google doodle](#).<sup>[12][13]</sup>

Along with Ambedkar and [Annabhau Sathe](#), Phule has become an icon in particular for the Dalit [Mang](#) caste. Women in local branches of the Manavi Hakk Abhiyan (Human Rights

## Reference

1. <sup>^</sup> The American missionary [Cynthia Farrar](#) had started a girl's school in [Bombay](#) in 1829. In 1847, the Students' literary and scientific society started the Kamalabai high school for girls in the [Girgaon](#) neighborhood of [Bombay](#). The school is still operational in 2016. [Peary Charan Sarkar](#) started a school for girls called [Kalikrishna Girls' High School](#) in the [Bengali town](#) of Barasat in 1847. The Parsi community Mumbai had also established a school for girls in 1847)
2. <sup>^</sup> The Mali belong to a caste of largely agricultural workers that is classified by the Indian government as an [Other Backward Caste](#) (OBC). An OBC describes a caste that is determined to be socially or educationally disadvantaged.
1. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:<sup>a b c d e f g</sup>](#) Sundararaman, T. (2009). *Savitribai Phule first memorial lecture, [2008]*. National Council of Educational Research and Training. [ISBN 9788174509499](#). [OCLC 693108733](#).
2. <sup>^</sup> [O'Hanlon \(2002\)](#), pp. 105–106
3. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:<sup>a b c d e f g h i</sup>](#) Kandukuri, Divya (11 January 2019). "[The life and times of Savitribai Phule](#)". *Mint*. Retrieved 19 April 2019.
4. <sup>^</sup> [Rege, Sharmila \(2009\)](#). *Savitribai Phule Second Memorial Lecture, [2009]*. National Council of Educational Research and Training. [ISBN 978-8-17450-931-4](#).
5. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:<sup>a b</sup>](#) O'Hanlon, Rosalind (2002). *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India (Revised ed.)*. Cambridge University Press. p. 135. [ISBN 978-0-521-52308-0](#).
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8. <sup>^</sup> "[Who was Savitribai Phule? Remembering India's first woman teacher](#)". *The Financial Express*. 3 January 2018. Retrieved 8 March 2018.
9. <sup>^</sup> [Agnihotri, Sanjana \(3 January 2017\)](#). "[Who is Savitribai Phule? What did she do for womens rights in India?](#)". *India Today*. Retrieved 7 May 2017.

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12. [^](#) ["Google doodle pays tribute to social reformer Savitribai Phule"](#). *The Hindu*. 3 January 2017. Retrieved 3 January 2017.
13. [^](#) ["Savitribai Phule, Google Doodle Tribute To Social Reformer"](#). NDTV.com. 3 January 2017. Retrieved 3 January 2017.
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15. [^](#) Waghmore, Suryakant (2013). [Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India](#). SAGE Publications. pp. 34, 57, 71–72. ISBN 978-8-13211-886-2.
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