

Foraging the Nationalist Movement through Women's Education: Decoding Savitribai Phule and the Cultural-reformist Critique of Caste

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Abstract: *Savitribai Phule is regarded as one of the towering figures of the nationalist movement for her pioneering role in women's education which set the stage for the cultural renaissance of our motherland. Her passionate struggle for women's empowerment, to build up the equality for men and women made possible for the growth of nationalist movement against the colonial rule. Savitribai dedicated her entire life to fight against the rigid patriarchal structures of the caste system with the help of her husband Jyotirao Phule through the establishment of the Satysodhak Samaj in Maharashtra that initiated the progress of women hailing from diverse corners of the society. The seed for social equality sowed against the practice of untouchability and cultural deprivation marked a 'paradigm shift' of such alternative principles with respect to tradition that brought women into the mainstream society. Sociologists interested in social movements have often conveyed about the guidelines of this "truth seeking" program as facilitating the creation a counter- ideological rubric of humanity that could be achieved only through the total annihilation of the Brahminical system. The present article intends to reflect upon Savitribai's role in the work of this culturally homogenous and pluralist organization whose novel character helped in inducing a political upheaval replacing the patriarchal hegemony of caste by a new secure tradition.*

Keywords: Annihilation, Brahminical, Caste, Empowerment, nationalist, hegemony, pluralist.

Introduction

If one has to search for the sociological underpinnings of gender justice that ultimately took the shape of a feminist movement in the early nineteenth century, he will immediately draw out its roots in remarkable contributions of Savitribai Phule. This is largely because of the pioneering role that she has played in the development and maturity of women's education that had consequently set the stage for the cultural renaissance of our motherland. One cannot ignore that her passionate struggle for women's equality, directed against the atrocities of caste, made possible for the impending growth of nationalist reform that ended the colonial rule. Savitribai dedicated her entire life to fight against the rigid patriarchal structures of the caste system through the establishment of the *Satysodhak Samaj* in Maharashtra that initiated the progress of women hailing from diverse corners of the society. Indeed, one would agree, that the canvas of Hindu social reform that later moved beyond the traditional concerns of education, legislation and social welfare only achieved self-expression through the participatory role of this grass root organization serving as the mechanism of women's empowerment (Patel 1998). Born in 1831, in a poor family in Naigaion, Savitribai embarked upon a goal of freeing the country from the rigid rituals of a religious tradition that engulfed and afflicted large sections of the society. Ironically, she received her education only after marriage from her husband Jyotirao Phule, who taught her and imbued within her the need to develop a philosophy of humanism that would emphasize on self-reliance, individual growth, care, virtue and human development. The problems associated with the institution of female education which was at that time deeply embedded in the traditional norms and social customs that ingrained notions of sex segregation made schooling for young girls an extremely difficult task. In fact, Savitribai herself was deeply ostracized by her family and community members from a very early age. To counter this seclusion Savitribai took the revolutionary strand to integrate all the shudras of the country by establishing the Satyasodhak Samaj for accomplishing the task for female education.

Legacy of the Satyasodhak Movement

The goal of the Satyasodhak movement was universal in nature that is to execute a model of gender development that would convert the ideals of gender equity into practice. Savitribai's vision in this regard was to devise a curriculum that would allow for the operation of collective action and organized movement, and she sought to achieve this with the help of her

fellow colleagues and friends all of whom belonged to the lower caste who have completed their studies. The Satyasodhak Samaj took as its agenda to make amends for the neglect of natural rights of human beings especially of people belonging to the lower castes. It sought to take pervasive action against the misery of the Shudras, Ati-Shudras or the ex-untouchables by nullifying the distinctions between pure rights and natural rights and negate role of the Brahmin priest in performing socio-religious ceremonies and thereby dispensing the political ideology of the Brahmins. In this way it fulfilled its task of establishing the untouchables as a new moral community. In this regard Savitribai's visions were similar to the Marxian conceptions of revolutionary ideology and praxis. The Brahmin priest in particular was conceived as the middleman and exploiter between man and God in terms of its religious rituals and ceremonies. Such an expression of ideological opposition has been advocated in the works of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai's colleagues such as 'Gulamgir', 'Shetekarayanacha-Asud', Tatyapa Pandurale, 'Jyotibhed Nirnay' and many others which were significant for understanding the contradictions and opposition to the cultural system that was built up and enforced by the Brahmins for their selfish interests¹. They opposed and rejected all the Brahmin texts that were in tune with the caste system and the mythical tradition which served as the bases for social inequality. Careful distinctions were being made between the native culture and the culture of the Brahmin elite which so far dominated the society. More particularly the Satyasodhak made the following oaths and affirmations that served as their principal guidelines.

- 1) The necessity for the spread of education for people belonging to all classes and castes.
- 2) The promulgation of cottage industries and production of Indian goods.
- 3) Eradication of all sacred texts that were meant for the Brahmins which includes rejection of the basic four folded Varna division of society and believing that man's supremacy is determined by his qualities and not by his caste.
- 4) The opposition of child marriages, support of widow remarriages and inter-caste marriage and making such changes in a way which would allow them to marry at an affordable cost. Although the frequency of such type of action was very low in its earlier phase but it started a new innovative form of opposition.
- 5) The main target, which they wanted to fulfill was to eliminate is the bureaucracy of aristocrats and abolish the social status of Brahmins

6) To consider God as their father and ask an individual to live with fraternity and brotherhood between them.

The Satyashodhak Samaj was the first premier institution to have sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propound the spread of rational thinking. It developed into a movement in the later years that reached to every section of the society- and was the first of its kind to reach the remote villages. The principal feminist agenda in this regard was the fight for equal rights. It repeatedly stressed that equality in the society was meaningless without equality of man and woman in the family. It propagated universal humanism based on values of freedom, and universal brotherhood. The principle means by which the Satyashodhak Samaj sought to fulfill this task was through the introduction of new schools. In 1851 girl schools were introduced in Pune as recourse to introduce girl's education. Apart from the British missionary schools, no other indigenous schools existed at that time. In the year, 1853 this school was handed over to the management of a committee of educated natives. Savitribai hence became the first female teacher of India. Few years later under her auspices, two more schools were opened in different parts of the town. A year after the introduction of the girls school, Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule also established indigenous mixed schools meant especially for the lower castes especially to the Mahars and Mangs and consequently more schools for these castes were subsequently added. This movement was widely accepted by the British Officials. Sir Erskine Perry, the President of the Educational Board, and Mr. Lumsdain, the then Secretary to Government took the initiative of visiting the schools and gifted Jyotibai a pair of shawls. The couple continued to work in those schools for nearly ten years. Later these girls' schools were handed over to the Educational Department under the Management of Mrs. Mitche. Thus both Jyotirao and Savitribai established a schooling system that was trade-oriented in nature-provided training to young minds so that they become much more self-reliant and capable of independent thought. Additionally, to resolve the problem of drop outs in school education (which was even graver at those times) they provided reasonable and practical solutions in way of providing salary to the students and made a syllabus which was directed to the interest of girls and boys who came from poorer sections of the society. The stage was hence set to build the revolutionary platform for liberating women's rights.

The Introduction of Health Care in School Education

A major contribution of the Satyasidhak Samaj was the introduction of Health care in school education. Health education was introduced in schools because it was part of the major concern to promote additional dimensions of equality other than education. More importantly, Savitribai contended that children's health should be regarded as the most important element of every social body as it contributes to the overall development of a particular society. Health, nutrition and education are the absolute necessities for a child to grow and therefore such inputs are required to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. While in a general sociological sense the relationship between health and education is broadly conceived as a functional role that social institutions play in creating awareness about individual wellbeing, the schools have to make sure that they are adequately represented in every section of the society, especially when it comes to child care. In a short interview of Jyotibai Phule (taken by Christian missionary periodical Dnyanodaya), he conveyed:

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. (Phule 1853: 56)

In the year 1897 Savitribai and her adopted son, Yashwant, opened a clinic for the treatment of people affected by plague when it was affecting large sections of the Nalasopara region located at outskirts of Pune city, which was an area free of infection. In fact there is a story that Savitribai died a heroic death trying to save the son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad. When she learned that Gaekwad's son had contracted the Plague in the Mahar settlement outside of Mundhwa, Savitribai rushed to his side and carried him on her back to the hospital. However she was herself, caught with Plague in the process and met her death at 9:00pm on the 10th of March, 1897. Many people also regard Savitribai as an anti-infanticide activist because 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. Savitribai cared for the children in the orphanage as if she were their mother. She had no child; but with her kind and generous disposition she tenderly and lovingly cherished the infants. It was her practice to invite, from time to time, all neighboring children to dinner. She was happiest and smiled her sweetest when she was left among children. So dearly she loved children. She would invite her female neighbours to help her to dress and feed the children. For several years she had worked in the girl's school until 1873 a woman's appointment to the post of teacher was noted in leading papers like the Native Opinion as a matter of respect and pride. Thus, her efforts became the pinnacle of social reform that later transformed into a movement for social reconstruction.

Liberalizing Dalit Education: The Reformist Critique

In the Indian social context the term, 'dalit' refers to the untouchable part of the Hindu social ladder. According to the Chaturvarna system there are four varnas which constitute the Hindu social ladder-The Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras. But there exists other strata in the Hindu Varna system under the Shudras who are called 'Atishudra', they are untouchables. They are known as 'untouchables', fifth varna", "mlechcha", "Chandal". In our present administration 'Tapashili Jati' and 'Tapashili Upajati' are called the 'dalits'. They generally belong to the backward castes and those who lived in below poverty line in our society. Mahatma Gandhi named these 'dalits' as 'Harijans' as the concept of untouchable did not exist in any religion in the past. The Varnashrama dharma of the Hindus was more of an economic division than a class or caste based one. Gandhi's idea of using the word "Harijan", many argue, was to avoid other words like 'untouchables' or 'bhangis' which were then used to refer to the *dalits*, because they were strongly stigmatised. He used the word "harijan" to bring the untouchables closer to God and thereby to those who believed in God, which was the rest of the Hindu society. Gandhi is also known to have said that he felt using the term 'depressed class' reminded people of slavery and was offensive to them, so he preferred the more benign term 'Harijans'. The Sadhyasodhak Society under Savitribai and her husband Jyotirao Phule's influence attempted to formulate a new cultural identity for the *dalits* as an alternative strategy of negating their earlier identity that had been imposed by the Brahmanical tradition. As a strategic step to heighten the social aspirations of the dalits a certain kind of

glorification of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses were being made whom they conceived of as the protectors of Shudra interest. As an opposition to the Brahmanical elite tradition a number of myths and symbols were provided such as God Khandoba, King Bali, Chatrapati Shivaji, were considered as protectors of Shudra interest. In this way Savitribai through wisdom of motherhood and social protection successfully sought to integrate the *dalits* by providing a common identity based on common practices, beliefs and symbols. This 'collective effervescence' in terms of altering the course of social life had another surface objective in the form of cultivating relations with the British Government in terms of a successful employment generation to the Government offices. This twofold strategy had the consequence of speeding up the social liberation of the Shudras. The non-Brahmin movement reawakened the dehumanized castes of 19th Maharashtra - Mangs, Mahars, Chambhars, Kumbhar, Kolis, Koshtis, Kunbis, Malis, Ramoshis and several other castes. It worked for uniting and mobilizing the backward Shudras and the untouchables, the workers and the small and marginal farmers.

The progress of women's education was achieved at a remarkable pace in the later years. The School Inspection Committee in Poona awarded Savitribai with the Ideal Teacher Award in 1852. It apparently became more significant when the *Poona Observer* revealed the number of girl students in Savitribai's school to be ten times more than the other government schools in Poona. However, Savitribai was faced with severe opposition from all the sections of the society. It has been said that she was even attacked with stones and mud by people in the streets. But Savitribai took up the role of an erudite activist and faced everything courageously. On 14th January 1852, she took an active part in a Til-Gul Program that was arranged by the Mahila Seva Mandal and thereafter received the best teacher's award for her contributions. Savitribai and Jyotibai started a hostel in their residence where students from far off places could stay for the purpose of education. One of the students of the hostel Laxman Karadi Jaaya had written. "I have not seen another woman as kind and loving as Savitribai. She gave us more love than even a mother could".

Spiritualizing Womanhood through Self Reflection

The introduction of widow remarriage was the next crucial step to fight against caste oppression. This had many important consequences. For one it brought the ideals of women's emancipation and liberation into public life. The ideals of equality and oneness were instigated as a moral dictum, and

in order to empower women Savitribai vehemently advocated widow-remarriage and even got a home built for housing upper caste widows in 1854. Savitribai's motherly voice touched the heart of the masses as she repeatedly requested people all the time to send their children in schools he opened for downtrodden and women.² The home facilitated widow remarriage and heavily opposed child marriage. The plight of the widows in India at that time was deplorable. Many of them were young and could only dream of leading a life of the orthodox Hindu widow. Some of them even resorted to abortion and left their illegitimate child on the streets to decide their own fate. Thus, realizing the dangers of a widow giving birth to a child conceived in unfortunate circumstances after her husband's death, Savitribai and her husband opened a home for newborn infants in 1863 to prevent infanticides and suicides". The Satyasodhak Samaj introduced a system of conducting marriage ceremonies without the presence of a Brahmin priest. Such a system of performing marriages quickly spread to the villages. For example it has been said that a barber's wedding was performed in Taligaon village by socially boycotting the Brahmins of the villages and it eventually created a rift between the Barber and the Brahmin community.

Social Transformation through Community Development

Both Savitribai and Jyotibai criticized the policy of the British Government regarding education of the rural masses. The hegemony of Brahmins systematically affected the moral and intellectual foundation of education that prohibited upward mobility of the lower castes. The process of recruitment of teachers in school administration was a derogatory outcome of this practice. The majority of the schools that existed at that time were meant for upper caste Brahmins who reaped the benefits of better education and excluded the lower castes from the opportunities of better employment. In order to free the Shudras from the traditional bondages of caste oppression Savitribai and Jyotibai suggested several policy implementations which would trigger a change in which certain professions were tagged into the practice of the varna. Therefore, the only means to resolve such a problem is to allow the Shudras to take control over educational and development initiatives through a bottom-up approach rather than a trickle down approach. Such a resolution should be carried to the rural sector where the majority of the laboring population is engaged in physical labor of low status. The social mechanism of democracy demands that it should always acknowledge the interests of the lower castes and they should therefore be readily allowed

to take educational initiatives at the highest level. The institutional hegemony of the traditional Brahminical system of production and representation of knowledge of the untouchable castes should be removed. In traditional Rural India, Shudras, Ati-Shudras, peasants and artisans suffered tremendous exploitation in the hands of the Bhatji (priest) and Shetjis (money lenders) and they should be successfully mobilized through a system of rural education to get rid of this oppression.

Conclusion

Thus, as a pioneer of anti-caste movement, Savitribai was without doubt, the leading social reformer who founded and started the dalit feminist movement in India. Her passionate endeavor to uplift the women of the society and her far sighted and clear vision of saving people from the clutches of Brahminical exploitation became an inspiration of mass movements that followed and stimulated social reform. Her relentless efforts to protect the rights of the backward castes not only helped to delineate the fundamental principles of caste-gender system in contemporary India but also helped the nationalist movement to achieve cartographic and political space for the fight against freedom. Not, surprisingly the first report of the Satyashodhak Samaj proudly notes Savitribai to be “the inspiration behind this revolutionary initiative of a constructive revolt to reject centuries old religious traditions” (Sundararaman 2008). The passionate companionship and support that she gave to her husband throughout her life is a prime commitment to the ideal of equality that transcends time and place. Social change through modernity becomes possible only within the terms of such revolutionary movements within an operative tradition whose individual elements are able to expand their implications to the extent that they are capable of adapting to some new externally defined challenges. This becomes more eminently fruitful in a pluralist society like ours/India whose dynamism of social reform is reflected by its storehouse of cultural resources that has helped to achieve a new consensus which emerged through refurbishing its old established principles. The work of Savitribai is a reflection of such a legacy whose path lies not in the metaphysical reflections of a human being, but practical experiences of everyday life that each tradition unfolds.

Notes

¹Jyotiashree Phule is regarded as the founder of the Satyasodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and is credited with the crucial role in offering social and political leadership to the mass movement.

²Savitribai is also known to be a prolific author and a poet and much of her published works including *Kavya Phule*, (1854), *Bhavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1892) was written during this time of the Satyasodhak movement to encourage those who were oppressed and wanted to free themselves by obtaining education.

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