

Savitribai Phule

सावित्रीबाई फुले

Most of us know that Savitribai Phule was the first female teacher of India. Born on January 3, 1831, India's first feminist grew up in a country ruled by the British Raj, where women rights were non-existent. We know how hand in hand with her social reformer husband, Jyotirao Phule, she achieved the revolutionary act of establishing the first school for girls.

But what most of us do not know is the kind of abuse Phule had to go through from the regressive society because of her sheer audacity to go teach women.

Pramila Dandavate, a 1928-born political activist from Mumbai associated with the Praja Socialist Party and later with the Janata Party, describes a few tales of the outstanding courage and grit of Savitribai Phule that show how far she was willing to go to emancipate women.

- How Jyotirao Phule's influence transformed Savitribai Phule

Born in a well-to-do farmer family in the backward Mali community, Savitribai Phule was married off to 13-year-old Jyotirao Phule at the tender age of nine in-keeping with the tradition at the time of marrying off girls before they hit puberty. **But little did anyone in their families know that Jyotirao's influence on his young wife would change the very trajectory of India.**



Jyotirao had studied the Hindu scriptures and come to the conclusion that all humans were equal. He realized that education was the one tool that if provided to all humans, would get rid of all social inequalities.

He rejected the high-caste orthodox norms that monopolized education and privileged to keep the other castes downtrodden.

He watched how 'untouchables' were not allowed to pollute others with their long shadows in the mornings and evening and how they had to tie a broom behind their backs to sweep the very street they had walked on.

He saw in particular how young widows whose old husbands had died had to get their heads shaved and refrain from any kind of beautification or pleasure in life.

He also saw how 'untouchable' women were made to dance naked as the very status of women was reduced to a pleasure-object of men.

Observing all these societal evils that furthered inequality, Jyotirao took the decision to educate women. But how would he do this? He knew he needed other women to help train female teachers for girls. He decided to start with his wife.

Every afternoon, when Savitribai Phule came to the fields where her husband worked to give him his food, Jyotirao sat with her and educated her.

When news reached Jyotirao's father, he threatened to throw them out of the house out of fear of attacks from orthodox elements. The fire of revolution already lit, Savitribai Phule decided to follow her husband.



- **Official education received by Savitribai Phule**

Jyotirao sent his wife to get trained at a school and she passed with flying colours along with another women Fatima Sheikh.

In 1848, the emancipated husband and wife finally established India's first school for girls in Vishrambag Wada, Pune.

Only nine girls enrolled all from different castes. Later on, the number rose to 25. While Savitribai became the headmistress, she taught alongside her fellow trainee Fatima Sheikh and Jyotirao's emancipated aunt Sagunabai.

The audacity of this couple determined to educate women enraged and shocked the society. As Pramila Dandavate writes, "It was believed that if a woman starts writing, she would write letters to all and sundry."

Regressive elements claimed that the food eaten by Jyotirao would turn into worms and that Savitribai would lose him to an untimely death.

- **Savitribai's ordeal of going to teach at a girl's school**

When it was obvious that simple words and rumours wouldn't help deter Savitribai and Jyotirao from their goal of providing education to girls, society decided to take another path.

Going to the girls' school to teach became a huge ordeal for Savitribai. She faced innumerable abuses and listened to obscenities heaped on her on the way to teach.

Groups of orthodox men followed the first female teacher of India on her way to work. They threw rotten eggs, cow dung, tomatoes and stones. They abused her in obscene language.

Retired academician Lalitha Dhara who has authored a number of books on the Phules and Dr Ambedkar writes: She would stop by and politely tell them, "My brothers, I am doing the noble job of educating your sisters. The cow dung and stones that you are pelting on me are not a deterrent but rather an inspiration for me. It is as if you are showering petals on me. While I vow to serve my sisters, I also pray, 'May God bless you.'"

Slowly walking, she would arrive at the school, her strength ebbing away little by little each day thanks to the abuse.

Once she couldn't take it anymore and decided to give up. But her husband convinced her to stay strong.

He gave her two sarees a course one to wear on the way to work which would be soiled by the garbage thrown at her; and another fresh saree to change into before she started work when she reached the school.

While returning, she could change into the same course saree to again take the filth from society. She continued in this manner for a while, but one day, things got out of hand. Lalitha Dhara writes about how a well-built ruffian stood in her path and told her that if she did not stop educating the Mahars and Mangs, she would have to pay a heavy prize. A crowd gathered to watch the drama unfold but none helped her. The unfazed Savitribai slapped him hard. The stunned man ran away and so did the onlookers. The shocking news spread like wildfire all over the city of Pune and finally brought a stop to the every-day abuse.



- **Continuing work on social emancipation**

Empowered, Savitribai Phule established herself and more schools for women and girls till she was honoured for her exemplary work by the British government.

Between 1848 and 1852, the couple established no less than 18 schools for women.

In 1852, she and her husband were felicitated with a shawl for their work in Vishrambag Wada, Pune.

She went on to work towards slowly questioning and eradicating a lot of other social evils. From adopting her son' Yashwant after her husband rescued a pregnant woman about to end her life, to setting up a delivery home for women in forced pregnancies called Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha', Savitribai did all in her power to uplift the standard of women.

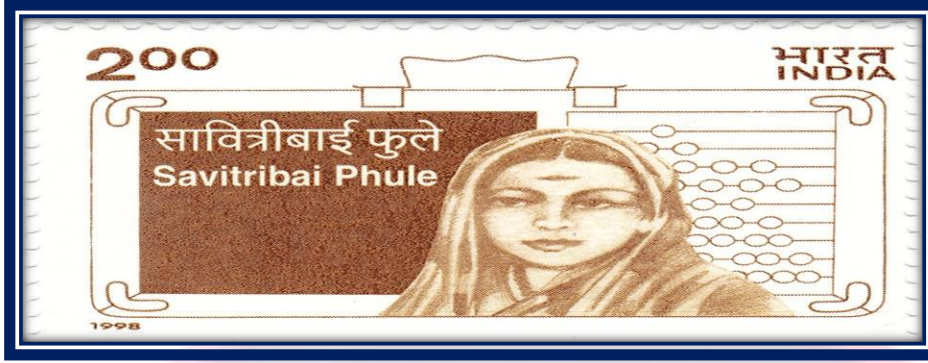
The couple also organized the first-of-its-kind barbers strike after castigating them for shaving the heads of young widows. As an example, against the evil of untouchability, they also opened up their own water reservoir for everyone.

The empowered couple did a lot of work in the famine and established 52 boarding schools for orphaned children.

After Jyotirao Phule died in 1890, Savitribai continued his work. Most notably, she took over the Satya Shodhak Samaj which had been founded by him. She presided over meetings, guided workers and worked for plague victims. As

Pramila Dandavate writes, "It is said that she used to feed two thousand children every day during the epidemic."

Ironically, Savitribai was struck down by disease while nursing a sick child and the pioneer of women's education in India died on March 10, 1857.



A 1998 stamp by the Indian Government featuring Savitribai Phule

The first woman teacher and the first female educationist of India was also the first female poetess. Her two books of poetry 'Kavya Phule' (1934) and 'Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar' (1982) continue to inspire us today with their questions on caste and gender.

'Kavya Phule' was published when Savitribai was just 23.

She also wrote a poem entitled 'Go, Get Education' which encouraged people to free themselves from oppression by educating themselves.

Women's emancipation has never been easy and perhaps would never be. But it is thanks to India's first gutsy feminist Savitribai Phule that the women in the country have reached where they are today. We can only hope for more firebrands like her who simply refuse to bow down to the evils of society and keep fighting for universal human rights.

**“ ती लढली,
म्हणून आम्ही घडलो !!”**

