

Savitri Bai Phule: Warrior of women education in India

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Abstract- Indian Society is Patriarchal society where women is considered lower to men and also a society in which caste system prevails. As per report of NCRB, there is 19.4 % increase in atrocities against Dalit every year. The Equity watches Report (2015) also revealing that atrocities against Dalits are rising and if data concern with Dalit women it is worst. This is the data of independent and democratic India and. So, situation of Dalit women can be imagined easily at the time when India was not independent. But, Savitri Bai Phule who belongs to lower caste stood as milestones not only for women of lower class but all the women in society. She became famous as a social reformer and educator. It can be understood how much adverse situation, atrocities and discrimination were suffered by Savitri Bai Phule. The paper focuses on the life of Mrs. Phule, her contribution towards women education in India, challenges faced by her in journey of social reform as well as her relevance in present context

Keywords: marginalized section, women empowerment, education, challenges, patriarchy society.

INTRODUCTION

Savitri bai Phule was born in 1831 in a small village of Maharashtra but she stood a landmark for whole society. Though born in small village facing patriarchy and traditional norms, she recognized as a social reformer, educator. Her journey to be recognized as a key figure was not easy; it was very challenging. She fought against caste-based oppression. She did remarkable stands for women empowerment and marginalized section. She dedicated her life for women education and thus remembered as the first female teacher. In her journey towards social reform, her husband Mahatma Jyotiba Phule fully corporated her. He always stood hand in hand with Savitri Bai Phule in all the social movement initiated by her. She was also fond of writing poem and used her poem as a tool to aware society towards conservative thoughts which were hurdle in empowerment of women as well

as marginalized section of society. She is also famous a great poet. Thus, She is remembered still for her pioneering work in women's education and the social upliftment of oppressed communities in 19th-century India.

PERSONAL LIFE AND EDUCATION

She was born in a very small village of named Naigaon situated at Satara district of Maharashtra on January 3, 1831 in the family of Laksmi and Patil belongs to mali community which was considered as a lower-caste family. This community was traditionally involved in gardening. She faced various challenges and barriers in getting access to education and her personal growth being born in a society entrenched in rigid caste hierarchies. Savitri Bai faced numerous barriers to education and personal development. In her time, girls were generally not allowed to get an education and birth in lower caste family worsens her condition. At very early age of 9, she was married to Jyotirao Phule who is now known as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule a prominent social reformer. He always advocated for rights of marginalized section specially women and Dalits. He encouraged and motivated Savitri too for her education and become her mentor/ partner in her revolutionary work for women and marginalized section. He became very instrumental in shaping Savitri Bai's intellectual and ideological framework. Her exposure to education and ideological framework shaped by her husband becaome pivotal for transforming her into an educator and social reformer. The support of her husband gave her motivation to learn, to read and write despite of numerous social challenges and rigid caste hierarchies. Her determination towards breaking the stereotype of society for women and marginalized section became a dynamic force for social change in India.

ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Savitri Bai Phule's main contribution to India was her groundbreaking effort for women's education. At the time of mid 19th century when patriarchal society prevails and educating women was considered as useless and even disruptive, she herself receive education and started movement to educate other women. There was the general consensus that women must be involved only for household chores and they were not need to be focused on their intellectual growth. Her intellectual power was disregarded. In such adverse situation, Savitri Bai with the help of her husband Jyotirao established first school for girls in the year 1848 just to mark the beginning of their attempts to reject/disprove such stereotype belief and notion. Her efforts to open a school for girls proved significant and marked as milestones in Indian educational history as it gave a new path and vision to young girls who were being deprived to attend formal access to education. In the following years several schools were opened for girls. Savitri Bai and her husband continuously engaged to promote women education. They were tirelessly working to promote the idea that women deserved equal access to education. She also focused to impart education to children from lower caste which was rigorously opposed by upper caste community. They throw stones, mud and even cow dung on her to demotivate her and compel her to gave up but she did not care about anything. She continuously stood against all the adversities created by society and did efforts to impart education to girls of lower caste community. By way of their school, they not only imparted academic knowledge but keep the seeds of constitutional values and spirit (values of equality, self-respect, and social justice). Such schools became pivotal in dismantling the societal barriers that were preventing women to access education. But through her journey of uplifting the idea of women education, she faced huge opposition from the society who were having conservative thinking for equality of women. According to them, educating women was immoral and it would be responsible for the disruption of traditional social structures. But, Savitri Bai stood still and gave response to them by resisting undeterred. She continued her work to promote women education with immense courage and perseverance.

ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Savitri Bai is remembered as a first female teacher for her contributions and extensive efforts for women education but her efforts were not only limited to the women education or empowering her but she was a also vocal for social justice. She advocated that every person is having equal rights despite of his/her caste and religion. She also worked tirelessly to combat caste-based discrimination. Being born in Mali community which was the lower caste she understood particularly the oppression of Dalits and women in Indian society. She advocated social justice by means of public speeches and her writings. With the help of her husband, she initiated movement against caste system, child marriage, and other social evil practices and thus created a vision for a society based on equality and justice. For this, organisation called Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) in 1873 was formed by her husband, which was focused to promote social justice and the abolition of caste-based discrimination. Apart from it, she also fought for rights of widow and aroused her voice for widow remarriage. She worked for prohibition of child marriage. In the 19th century the status of women was very bad but the condition of widows were even worse. They were subjected to severe social ostracism, Thus, Savitri Bai's efforts to mitigate the challenges faced by widows were ground-breaking which led reform movements initiated later by the social reformers to improve the conditions of widows and women in general.

CONTRIBUTIONS IN LITERATURE

Apart from her contribution to women education and social justice, she was also a good poet and writer. She used her literary talents to advocate for social reforms. In her writings and poems, she commented on the evil practice of caste system and promoted the idea of social justice and rights of marginalized sections specially women and Dalits. Her famous poem, "Go, Get Education" ("Shikshanacha Path"), written in Marathi was direct critiques to social norms specially, associated with women and Dalit community. Her poetry was also the great motivation and encouragement for women to raise voice for their rights and get their rights to get education. Her poetry was to urge the women in society to be free from

limitations imposed by society. Her writing and poems were indispensable to shape the discourse around social reform, specially women and lower caste people

HER RELEVANCE IN PRESENT CONTEXT

Savitri Bai Phule's legacy extends far beyond her lifetime. Her efforts and contributions to social reform especially for women and lower caste section have led the long lasting impact on Indian society. Her efforts formed the foundation for later movements for social reform. She became the inspiration for later reformers to work entirely and dedicate their life for uplifting the status of marginalized class. Her legacy were followed by later reformers like Annie Besant, Fatima Sheik, Sister Nivedita etc. She had a profound and enduring impact on the development of women's education in India. Today, the literacy rate among women in India is significantly higher than it was in the 19th century. To mark her achievement and contribution, Central government celebrates her birth anniversary as National Women's Day. Various schools, colleges, and institutions across India bear her name, ensuring that future generations remember her as a pioneer and champion of social justice.

CONCLUSION

The life of Savitri Bai Phule is a potent reminder of the transformational potential of education, and her unwavering commitment to equality and justice is still felt in the current battles for social justice and women's rights in India and other countries. Savitri Bai Phule established herself as a genuine figure of social change by her bravery and tenacity. In addition to being commendable, her contribution to education is revolutionary. Her contributions to education have greatly influenced the current, egalitarian educational system.

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