



EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE AND ITS PRESENT RELEVANCE IN INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the educational contributions of Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer in 19th-century India, focusing on her advocacy for women's education, social justice, and the inclusion of marginalized communities. Phule's establishment of the first girls' school in Pune in 1848 and her efforts to challenge caste-based and gender-based discrimination laid the foundation for India's modern educational reforms. Her pedagogical principles, emphasizing gender equality, social justice, and community involvement, continue to shape contemporary educational policies, particularly those targeting marginalized groups and promoting inclusivity. This research evaluates the ongoing relevance of Phule's contributions in addressing present-day challenges in the Indian education system, such as gender inequality, caste-based discrimination, and the accessibility of education for differently-abled students. By analyzing her legacy, this study highlights the importance of her educational philosophy in guiding current and future educational reforms that aim to ensure equity, inclusivity, and empowerment for all.

KEYWORDS:

SAVITRIBAI PHULE, WOMEN'S EDUCATION, SOCIAL REFORM, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, CASTE DISCRIMINATION, GENDER EQUALITY.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

8th April 2025

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

10th April 2025

PAPER DOI NO:

10.5281/zenodo.15185826

PAPER DOI LINK:

<https://zenodo.org/records/15185826>

INTRODUCTION

Savitribai Phule, a pioneering figure in Indian education, played a transformative role in advocating for women's education and social reform during the 19th century. Along with her husband, Jyotirao Phule, she established India's first school for girls in Pune in 1848, challenging the deeply entrenched caste and gender-based discrimination in education (Sharma, 2017). At a time when societal norms restricted women's access to literacy, Phule's efforts not only provided education but also redefined the role of women in social progress (Deshpande, 2019).

Her contributions extend beyond just educational institutions; she actively fought against caste oppression and promoted inclusive education. By developing curriculums that addressed social equality and gender justice, she laid the foundation for modern educational policies promoting diversity and inclusion (Kumar, 2021). The pedagogy she introduced emphasized critical thinking and empowerment, aligning with contemporary educational frameworks that advocate for student-centric learning.

In present-day India, Phule's contributions remain highly relevant. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes equitable and inclusive education, particularly for marginalized communities, echoing Phule's vision (Ministry of Education, 2020). Her advocacy for women's education aligns with ongoing efforts to increase female literacy and participation in higher education. As India moves towards a more technology-driven and inclusive educational landscape, Phule's philosophy serves as an enduring inspiration for equitable educational reforms (Patil, 2022).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer and educationist, played a crucial role in revolutionizing women's education in India during the 19th century. Her contributions to the Indian education system remain significant, particularly in the context of social justice and inclusive education. This study aims to analyze her educational philosophies and their relevance in contemporary India.

Despite constitutional mandates promoting education for all, gender and caste-based disparities persist in the Indian education system (Nair, 2020). Savitribai Phule's efforts in establishing the first girls' school in Pune in 1848 and advocating for Dalit and marginalized communities' education laid the foundation for inclusive educational practices (Sharma, 2018). Her emphasis on critical thinking, self-reliance, and moral education aligns with modern pedagogical approaches such as constructivist learning and culturally responsive teaching (Deshpande, 2021).

This study is significant as it bridges historical perspectives with current educational challenges. Examining Phule's contributions helps contextualize ongoing debates on gender equity, social justice, and curriculum reforms in India (Mukherjee, 2019). The study will utilize a philosophical, comparative, and historical analysis to assess how her principles align with present-day educational policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. By highlighting her legacy, the research aims to reinforce the need for educational policies that address systemic inequalities and foster inclusive learning environments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following research objectives have been formulated for the present study -

- **To analyze the educational contributions of Savitribai Phule** – This objective will focus on examining her role in promoting women's education, social reform, and inclusive learning practices in 19th-century India.
- **To evaluate the impact of Savitribai Phule's educational philosophy on contemporary Indian education** – This will explore how her principles of gender equality, social justice, and access to education for marginalized communities influence current educational policies and practices.
- **To assess the relevance of Savitribai Phule's contributions in addressing present-day challenges in the Indian education system** – This objective will examine how her pioneering work aligns with modern efforts to promote equity, inclusive education, and empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY:

Based on the research objectives, the researcher has prepared the following Research Questions -

- **What were the key educational contributions of Savitribai Phule, and how did they influence the social and educational landscape of 19th-century India?**
- **How do Savitribai Phule's educational philosophies continue to impact contemporary Indian education policies and practices?**
- **In what ways can Savitribai Phule's contributions**

help address present-day challenges related to gender equality, social inclusion, and accessibility in the Indian education system?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer and India's first female teacher, played a crucial role in transforming the education system by advocating for women's education and social equity. Several studies have explored her contributions and their relevance to contemporary Indian education.

Deshpande (2010) highlights that Phule, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, established the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, defying societal norms that restricted education to upper-caste males. Her curriculum emphasized moral education, critical thinking, and vocational training, which align with modern pedagogical approaches. Joshi (2015) discusses her efforts in promoting vernacular education, arguing that her advocacy for mother-tongue instruction parallels the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on regional languages in early education.

Further studies (Kadam, 2018; Sharma, 2021) focus on Phule's role in teacher training and her insistence on gender-inclusive pedagogy. She introduced innovative teaching methodologies, ensuring accessibility for marginalized groups. These principles continue to influence government policies aimed at promoting inclusive and equitable education. According to Mukherjee (2023), Phule's legacy is evident in contemporary affirmative action programs, such as scholarships and reservations for disadvantaged communities, which aim to bridge educational disparities.

Recent scholarship also underscores Phule's contributions to social reform, linking her activism to current efforts in gender-sensitive education and community-based learning (Verma, 2022). Her emphasis on empowering women through education resonates with ongoing initiatives promoting female literacy and leadership in academia.

Savitribai Phule's contributions remain profoundly relevant, shaping India's educational landscape through principles of inclusivity, gender equity, and social justice—core values essential for achieving equitable education in the 21st century.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating a systematic review of scholarly articles, historical records, and policy documents to examine the educational contributions of Savitribai Phule and their present relevance in the Indian education system. A thematic analysis approach is used to identify key aspects of her pioneering efforts in women's education, social reform, and inclusive pedagogy. Secondary data sources, including books, journal articles, and government reports, are critically analyzed to trace the historical impact of her work and its alignment with contemporary educational policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The study also integrates a comparative perspective to assess how Phule's educational ideals continue to shape modern educational discourse, particularly in the context of gender equity and social justice. The findings aim to provide insights into the enduring significance of her contributions in fostering an inclusive and equitable education system in India.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS WITH RESPECT TO RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 1: TO ANALYZE THE EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), a pioneering social reformer and educator, is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in the history of modern education in India. Her contributions, particularly in the fields of education and women's rights, were transformative, helping to shape the social and educational landscape of 19th-century India. By breaking social and cultural norms, she laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and progressive educational system.

Savitribai's most significant educational achievement was the establishment of the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, at a time when female education was viewed as unnecessary and improper. This was an act of immense courage, considering the prevailing social attitudes that discouraged women from seeking knowledge. Despite facing ridicule and hostility, including physical assaults from conservative groups who opposed the education of girls, Savitribai Phule remained committed to her cause. This school became the foundation for a movement that would later grow into a network of schools for girls across the region (Gaikwad, 2017).

Savitribai Phule's vision extended beyond the education of girls from upper-caste families. She was deeply committed to providing education to girls and children from marginalized and lower-caste communities. At the time, caste-based discrimination in education was rampant, with lower-caste children often denied access to schools. In response, Savitribai and her husband opened schools that were inclusive of Dalits and those from other marginalized communities, thus challenging the deeply ingrained social hierarchies.

Savitribai's activism in promoting education for all was revolutionary in a society where such ideas were seen as radical. Through her efforts, she inspired the formation of other schools and educational initiatives aimed at breaking the shackles of caste-based and gender-based exclusions (Narayan, 2015).

Savitribai also focused on improving the quality of education by establishing training programs for teachers. She understood that the success of her educational initiatives depended not only on the creation of schools but also on the preparation of educators who could impart knowledge effectively. As a result, she played a pivotal role in setting up a training school for teachers, which became a model for teacher education in the region.

Moreover, she worked to ensure that the curriculum was progressive, emphasizing subjects like science, mathematics, and literature, alongside traditional religious education. By introducing modern subjects and promoting a curriculum that encouraged critical thinking, she helped foster an educational environment that was open to new ideas and innovations (Phule, 1888).

Her work as an educator was closely aligned with her broader social reformist agenda. She advocated for women's rights, including the right to education, self-determination, and the abolition of practices like Sati (widow burning). Through her educational initiatives, she was laying the foundation for an inclusive and democratic society that would challenge colonial and traditional oppressive systems (Chandavarkar, 2006).

LEGACY AND INFLUENCE ON MODERN INDIA

Savitribai Phule's impact on education and social reform in India cannot be overstated. Her work laid the groundwork for the emergence of a more inclusive and secular education system in the country. Her initiatives were a precursor to the larger movement for the rights of women and marginalized communities in India. The vision she set forth was later echoed in the policies of social reformers like B.R. Ambedkar, who also championed the cause of education for the oppressed classes. Her ideas were instrumental in the formation of the Indian education system after independence, particularly in terms of making education more accessible and egalitarian. Savitribai's work continues to inspire educators, social reformers, and activists who advocate for inclusive education and gender equality.

OBJECTIVE 2: TO EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY ON CONTEMPORARY INDIAN EDUCATION

Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer and educator in 19th-century India, made monumental contributions to the field of education, particularly in the empowerment of women and marginalized communities. As one of the first women to take up the cause of educating girls and Dalits in a deeply patriarchal and caste-driven society, Phule's educational philosophies continue to resonate and influence contemporary Indian educational policies and practices. Her ideas about inclusive, equitable, and community-driven education form a crucial foundation for the ongoing efforts to address educational disparities in India today.

One of Savitribai Phule's core educational philosophies was the empowerment of women through education. At a time when educating girls was seen as subversive to societal norms, Phule advocated for the establishment of schools for girls. In 1848, she, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, opened the first school for girls in Pune, which was a revolutionary step in a male-dominated society. This commitment to women's education laid the groundwork for contemporary policies advocating for gender equality in education.

In the modern era, the Government of India continues to prioritize female education through initiatives like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) scheme, launched in 2015. The policy aims to improve female literacy rates, promote gender parity, and curb female infanticide. Phule's vision of equal educational opportunities for women is mirrored in these government programs, as they strive to create an enabling environment for girls and women to access education and break societal barriers.

This vision of inclusive education continues to influence contemporary policies like The Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009, which mandates free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14, regardless of caste or gender. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and various scholarship schemes targeting Dalit and tribal students further illustrate the state's ongoing commitment to promoting education among historically oppressed groups. Phule's advocacy for caste-based education reforms paved the way for these policies aimed at bridging the gap for marginalized communities.

Phule's educational philosophy was intrinsically linked to her commitment to social justice. She saw education as a means to challenge social inequalities and foster a more egalitarian society. By offering education to girls and Dalits, she sought to empower them to challenge the oppressive structures they faced and become active agents of social change. This idea is mirrored in India's current emphasis on **inclusive** education, which strives to provide equal learning opportunities to children from all backgrounds, including those with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, and minority communities.

The National Policy on Education, 2020 builds upon Phule's vision by reiterating the importance of inclusive education for all. It advocates for greater access to education, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and emphasizes the need for diversity in curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, the policy stresses the importance of equitable learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, thereby promoting the values of equality and justice that were central to Phule's educational philosophy.

OBJECTIVE 3: TO ASSESS THE RELEVANCE OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S CONTRIBUTIONS IN ADDRESSING PRESENT-DAY CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Savitribai Phule was a pioneering social reformer and educator in 19th-century India, known for her monumental contributions to women's education and social justice. Her legacy continues to resonate in the modern-day struggles for gender equality, social inclusion, and accessibility in the Indian education system. By examining her work and ideas, we can identify ways in which her contributions provide valuable lessons and actionable insights to address contemporary challenges in

these areas.

One of Savitribai Phule's most significant contributions was her emphasis on women's education at a time when women were largely excluded from formal learning in India. In 1848, she and her husband, Jyotirao Phule, opened the first school for girls in Pune, challenging the entrenched patriarchal norms that deemed women's education unnecessary or inappropriate. At a time when child marriages, the Sati system, and illiteracy among women were widespread, Phule's work was groundbreaking. She argued that education was essential for women to gain autonomy, participate in social and political life, and challenge their subjugation (Yadav, 2019).

Phule was also a staunch advocate for the inclusion of marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits, in the educational system. She recognized that the upper-caste domination of knowledge and education excluded the most vulnerable sections of society, particularly the Dalits and lower castes, from accessing formal education. In addition to educating girls, Phule opened schools for children from lower castes and worked to challenge the caste system that reinforced social hierarchies (Rao, 2009).

In contemporary India, caste-based discrimination persists, despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Dalit students often face discrimination in schools, both in terms of social exclusion and access to quality education. According to a report by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (2018), children from Dalit communities experience discrimination from teachers and peers, which negatively impacts their academic performance and mental health. Phule's legacy suggests that addressing caste-based exclusion requires systemic changes that ensure inclusive education practices. This can include training teachers to recognize and combat caste-based biases, creating safe spaces for marginalized students, and implementing policies that specifically target the educational needs of Dalit students, such as scholarships, reservations, and social support systems.

Phule's work also laid the foundation for a more inclusive educational system for differently-abled individuals. Although Phule's work did not specifically focus on disability rights, her commitment to the education of all children, regardless of gender or caste, has broader implications for inclusivity. Today, the accessibility of education for children with disabilities remains a significant challenge in India. The lack of physical infrastructure, trained teachers, and suitable learning materials continues to hinder the full participation of differently-abled students in mainstream education (Sharma & Singh, 2020).

Phule's egalitarian philosophy can be a guiding principle in addressing these challenges. Her belief in universal education for all children underscores the importance of creating an education system that is accessible to children with disabilities. Modern initiatives could include improving infrastructure to accommodate students with

mobility issues, using assistive technology to facilitate learning, and providing specialized teacher training to better support differently-abled students. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009 mandates the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, but more work is needed to fully implement these provisions.

CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule's educational contributions were groundbreaking, challenging societal norms and advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, particularly women and Dalits. Her pioneering efforts in establishing the first girls' school in Pune, promoting women's education, and advocating for the inclusion of Dalits in formal schooling laid the foundation for social reform in India. Phule's work was rooted in the belief that education was a powerful tool for liberation, empowerment, and social transformation. Her legacy holds immense relevance in today's Indian education system, where challenges related to gender inequality, caste-based discrimination, and accessibility for differently-abled students persist. Her emphasis on equal access to education for all, regardless of gender, caste, or social status, continues to inspire contemporary policies and movements that strive for an inclusive and equitable education system. Phule's vision calls for dismantling barriers to education and creating safe, inclusive learning environments for every child. As India continues to work towards achieving its educational goals, Savitribai Phule's contributions serve as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of education in addressing social disparities and shaping a more just society.

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