

# Contribution of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule to Women's Education and Empowerment in India

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## Abstract

India has long been recognized for its intellectual heritage and diverse philosophical traditions. Alongside these strengths, the country has also witnessed the rise of influential social reformers who laid the foundations of a modern, democratic society. Among them, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule stands out as a leading pioneer of women's education. His progressive outlook, supported by the tireless commitment of Savitribai Phule, opened the doors of education to women across caste and religious boundaries. This article examines the contributions of the Phule couple to the development of women's education in India. It highlights the establishment of the first girls' schools, Savitribai Phule's unprecedented role as India's first woman teacher, and Jyotirao Phule's educational and social philosophy concerning gender equality and social justice. Their writings and reform work helped articulate the principles of equity and democracy that later shaped modern India.

**Keywords:** Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, women's education, empowerment, social reform.

## Introduction

India's social and intellectual history reflects a long tradition of cultural diversity, religious teachings, and philosophical inquiry. Over centuries, various reform movements played an important role in transforming an orthodox social structure into a society that valued equality and access to education (Dua, 2008). Yet, for a significant period—from the Vedic era to the early British period—education remained restricted primarily to upper-caste males. Women and marginalized castes were systematically denied access to schooling. It was in this socio-religious environment that Jyotirao Phule was born on 11 April 1827 in Pune, Maharashtra. His family, known for their florist trade, bore the surname "Phule." Although Jyotirao initially received basic education in a Marathi school, his father discontinued it under pressure from orthodox upper-caste opinions (Beagri, 2010). As a result, young Jyotirao was obliged to work on the family farm. He married Savitribai at a young age, unaware that they would later become the central figures in one of India's most important educational reform movements, dedicated to the upliftment of women and oppressed communities.

## Review of Literature

### Rise of Mahatma Phule

Despite the interruption in his schooling, Jyotirao maintained a strong desire for education. With encouragement from two acquaintances, Baig Munshi and Rev. Legyet, his father allowed him to resume his studies. He later joined the Scottish Mission High School, where the teachings of equality and brotherhood deeply influenced him (Malik-Goure, 2011). Biographies of Shivaji Maharaj and George Washington inspired his ideals of leadership and justice, while Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* strengthened his belief in equality and human rights (Beagri, 2010). These influences led Jyotirao to recognize the deep injustices rooted in caste and gender discrimination. A defining moment occurred in 1848 when he attended the wedding of an upper-caste friend and was publicly humiliated after his caste identity was revealed. This experience motivated him to commit his life to fighting caste oppression and gender inequality. As scholars note, his reform work thereafter developed along two major lines: the upliftment of women and the education of the marginalized (Biswas & Bhattacharyya, 2022).

### Education and Preparation of Savitribai Phule

As Jyotirao planned to start a school for girls from marginalized communities, he realized that there were no women trained to teach. He therefore educated Savitribai himself and trained her as India's first female teacher (Mukherjee, 2023). Savitribai's early teaching years were filled with hostility from orthodox groups who believed that women should not be educated. She often encountered abuse, with people throwing stones, mud, and even cow dung at her as she walked to school. Despite this, she persisted, demonstrating exceptional courage and dedication. Even during periods when the Phule couple faced eviction due to social pressure, Savitribai continued her work steadfastly (Beagri, 2010).

### Initiation of Girls' Education

In 1848, Jyotirao Phule established the first indigenous girls' school at Bhide Wada in Pune. While some sources mention 1 January 1848 as the opening date, others record 15 May 1848 (Malik-Goure, 2011). By 1851, he had established two additional girls' schools.

Recognizing his contributions, the Board of Education honored Jyotirao with a public ceremony at Vishrambag Wada on 16 November 1852, presenting him with a pair of shawls (Beagri, 2010). Phule also expanded his educational efforts by opening:

- a school for children from untouchable communities,
- night classes for laborers, and
- welfare programs for widows (Raza et al., 1990).

In addition, he initiated support systems for upper-caste widows who were socially marginalized and denied dignity.

### Contribution to Women's Empowerment

Jyotirao Phule firmly believed that education was essential for ending social inequalities. He opposed practices such as child marriage, female infanticide, enforced widowhood, and the ban on women's education—customs that had reduced women's lives to suffering and subordination (Dua, 2008).

He actively supported widow remarriage and welcomed the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. In 1864, he helped facilitate the remarriage of a Shenvi widow and supported Vishnu Shastri Pandit's organization that promoted widow remarriage (Mukherjee, 2023).

Phule also established an orphanage—the first known institution of its kind—where widows who became pregnant due to exploitation could safely deliver their children. His efforts extended to organizing a barber’s strike to protest against the humiliating practice of shaving widows’ heads, advocating for the removal of forced widowhood (Rahman, 2020).

## Achieving Gender Equality: Setting a Personal Example

Jyotirao Phule regarded women as independent, equal individuals, often using the phrase “*Surve Ekander Stree Purush*” (all women and men together) in his public speeches. His emphasis on equality was also reflected in the Satya Shodhak Samaj wedding ceremony, which upheld equal rights for bride and groom (Malik-Goure, 2011). A notable incident illustrates his commitment to gender equality: When relatives suggested that he remarry because he and Savitribai had no children, Jyotirao asked whether they would also find a second husband for Savitribai if a doctor determined that she was not at fault. This bold question challenged the double standards of society and demonstrated his belief in equal dignity for both genders. Even today, his philosophy remains relevant. Although female literacy has increased, social discrimination persists in many forms. Phule’s vision calls for a society where women are respected as partners, not subordinates.

## Conclusion

The contributions of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule to women’s education and the upliftment of marginalized communities remain monumental. Their lifelong dedication helped dismantle oppressive traditions and enabled thousands of women to access education and dignity. Their ideas on social justice and equality form an essential foundation for India’s democratic values. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar himself acknowledged Jyotirao Phule as one of his greatest teachers, alongside Gautam Buddha and Sant Kabir (Sankhdher, 1999). The legacy of the Phule couple continues to inspire movements for equality, critical thinking, and social reform. Their vision encourages future generations to challenge discrimination in all forms and uphold the dignity of every individual.

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