

A FORGOTTEN LIBERATOR, THE LIFE AND STRUGGLE OF SAVITRI BAI PHULE

BY:- BRIJ RANJAN MANI & PAMELA SARDAR

Nationalism enabled the aggressive castes to project the Vedic-brahmanic culture and consciousness as the basis of Indianness. Their selfish ideals and interests became the national ideals and interests. Despite a variety of formulation from the nineteenth century pioneers of socio-cultural regeneration such as Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, Vivekananda, to the rightist and leftist leaders of the Indian National Congress like Tilak, Gandhi, Nehru- the common denominator and trajectory of all of them was to selectively accommodate modernity within the traditional caste-class structure, thus maintaining the high caste privileges and dominance over the masses. The most successful, in concocting this brahmanic synthesis of continuity with change, was Gandhi who deftly straddled the worlds of politics and religion, playing the double role of a half-naked saint and a ruthless politician working at the behest of the rich and the powerful. The wily Brahmans and allied castes knew the value of Gandhi from the very beginning. They gratefully handed Gandhi the supreme leadership and put him on a pedestal so high that his real face remained invisible to the masses who mistook him for their Mahatma (ibid.).

It was this monolithic-brahmanic nationalism that came under frontal attack from leaders of the lower orders, the founders of anti-caste or non-brahman movements that erupted in many parts of the subcontinent during the colonial period. Aligning themselves with the long non-brahmanic tradition of resistance for equality and freedom of all they argued that the brahmanic religio- social system was more sinister than British colonialism, and therefore its annihilation must constitute an integral part of nation building.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity and diversity of articulations depending on time, space and regional variations, what the anti-caste leaders unmistakably stressed and struggled for, was social justice and social democracy. They fought pitched battles for doing away with caste and social justice and social democracy. They fought pitched battles for doing away with caste and social barriers. They took to the streets for civil and human rights of the caste-oppressed. They stood for a new society based on non-brahmanic and democratic values. These leaders who struggled for the deconstruction of brahmanism and demanded socio-cultural reconstruction have been dismissed in the dominant discourse as sectarian, caste representatives, while those who variously defended Brahmanism under the fig leaf of cultural nationalism are glorified as national leaders of vision and integrity (Mani 2005).

Jotirao Phule, and his wife Savitribai, were the first in modern India to declare war on brahmanic-casteist culture and religion. This Maharashtra couple Presented the first major anti-caste ideology and led a mass activism against the ascriptive norms and values. Their distinct brand of socio-cultural radicalism was based on uniting all the oppressed, whom they would call stree-shudra-atishudra. (Literally, stree means women, shudra is productive servile caste at the bottom) of the caste hierarchy, and atishudra means 'those beyond the shudras', earlier despised as outcastes, or untouchables. In contemporary language, shudras and ati-shudras are other backward classes and dalits, respectively. But phules included in their notion of the oppressed, other marginalised groups as well such as adivasis and Muslims.)

After a century of elitist trivialization Mahatma Jotiba Phule (as he is popularly known) belatedly recognized as the father of Indian social revolution. An organic thinker and system builder, he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (the society of Truthseekers) in 1873, the first grassroots anti-caste organisation, and wrote many subversive books, including the whole structure of hierarchy and oppression; his delineation of knowledge-power nexus; his deconstruction of brahmanic myth-history and attempts to replace it with an alternative reading

of the past and present; his subversion of brahmanic religion and scriptures; his highly gendered view of women's oppression and symbiosis between caste and patriarchy; his super exposure of the emergent Hindu-brahmanic nationalism as an extension of obscurantist, self-strengthening movement of the caste elites; and above all, his life-long campaigns for democratisation of education, have been highlighted in some scholarly and popular writings (Keer 1998, Mani 2005).

Savitribai Phule (1831-97), struggled and suffered with her revolutionary husband in an equal measure, but remains obscured due to casteist and sexist negligence. Apart from her identity as Jotirao Phule's wife, she is little known even in academia. Modern India's first woman teacher, a radical exponent of mass and female education, a champion of women's liberation, a pioneer of engaged poetry, a courageous mass leader who took on the forces of caste and patriarchy certainly and her independent identity and contribution. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite-controlled knowledge-production that a figure as important as Savitribai Phule fails to find any mention in the history of modern India. This is not to deny the works by Marathi authors such as M G Mali G B Sardar, Hari Narke, and Phulwantabai Zodge who have attempted to highlight her outstanding public life and contribution. Her life and struggle, however, deserves to be appreciated by a wider spectrum, and made known to non-Marathi People as well. This collection of write-ups is a modest attempt in that direction.

Before underlining the significance of her struggle, let us touch upon the uniquely beautiful relationship that the Phule couple shared with each other. What made their match unparalleled, even in public life. She was still a teenager when she started involving herself in educational activities with her husband-playing an equally important role in founding and running schools for women and dalits- in the face of opposition from the orthodoxy whose power and authority she challenged. Savitri was only 18 and Jotirao was 22 years old when they were maligned, ostracized, and finally turned out of their own home by Joti's Father who Feared a high caste backlash for educating dalits and women, traditionally debarred under the brahmanic scheme from the right to education. Just imagine, two young People in love taking on the home and the world not for their romance but for liberating the shackled and the crushed-with a majestic belief that every woman, every child and every man has a right, a divine right, a natural right, to get educated and remake their life. What is more remarkable, they kept alive this revolutionary spirit throughout their lives, setting a benchmark in social and political engagement that has few parallels anywhere.

To Savitribai and Jotirao, the Idea of Justice and fairness, of equality between man and woman seems to have been instinctive. Perhaps, it was more so in the case of Savitribai as she suffered more as a woman. She never needed convincing for the need of an inclusive and compassionate world. She had her conviction already from the start-straight and clear. Does that make her less revolutionary than the latter-day privileged radicals and feminists who have better mastered the dialectics and duality of the human world but struggle to enact their subversive intellectual constructs in their own lives, let alone animating other people's lives?

Savitribai's life and struggle is an excellent answer to the heart cry of Marx, a revolutionary thinker, "Philosophers have only understood the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." She did not understand the world in different ways; she understood it in one simple way- the necessity and possibility of making it more humane, more inclusive, more compassionate.

What makes her important is that she lived up to this simple understanding in a magnificent way.

Savitribai's role in the anti-caste and women's struggle is unique. She emerges as the only woman leader among all social movements in nineteenth century India who linked Patriarchy with caste. The nineteenth century is celebrated in history textbooks as the century of glorious socio-cultural regeneration led by an array of luminaries such as Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, and Vivekananda. What is not stated is the fact that the Indian Renaissance, confined to the upper echelons of society, was closely intertwined with the hegemonic neo-brahmanic Hinduism and the self-strengthening cultural nationalism. Savitribai Phule, on the other hand, was in the forefront of a socio-cultural struggle that challenged the tendency to focus only on higher social groups- Brahman and allied castes. She encouraged a reversal of traditional subservient roles of women and depressed castes.

Apart from setting up the first ever school for women in India, Savitribai started a women's association called Mahila Seva Mandal as early as 1852. The association worked for raising women's consciousness about their human rights and other social issues. Being a woman, she easily recognized the double downtroddenness of most women as she saw the gender question in relation to caste and brahmanic patriarchy. She engaged herself at various levels to address women-specific problems. She campaigned against victimization of widows. She advocated and encouraged widow remarriage. She canvassed against infanticide of 'illegitimate' children. She opened a home to rehabilitate such children. Her won home became a sanctuary for deserted women and orphaned children. She went on to organize a successful barbers' strike against the prevailing practice of shaving of widows' heads. She did all this taking grave personal risks. Many of these misogynistic practices have now receded in the background. But in her time, they tormented and destroyed countless women. Maligned, humiliated, and attacked for challenging the anti-women practices, Savitribai's struggle encouraged and inspired a whole generation of outstanding campaigners for gender justice in Maharashtra- Dr. Anandi Bai Gopal Joshi, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Ramabai Ranade, and many others have been inspired by her efforts.

Few People know that Savitribai Phule was a trailblazing poet of modern Marathi and an intensely committed writer. Her poetry and her letters to Jotirao, which are included in Marathi and an intensely committed writer. Her Poetry and her letters to Jotirao, which are included in this collection, bring out her sensitive and revolutionary mind. She was also an able orator who thought it worthwhile to publish two collections of her won important speeches. She also collected, edited, and published speeches of Jotiba Phule. Caste and patriarchy have been the prime targets of her intellectual engagement. Above all, her writings give the impression of an ignited mind that wanted to kindle a similar spirit in other people's lives. She was an ardent advocate of modern education and the English Language. "Learn English to annihilate caste" was a common refrain in some of her Poems.

Savitribai Phule was a top leader of the Satyashodhak Samaj. She looked after its day-today functioning. She headed the women's wing of the samaj. She led the Satyashodhak Volunteers in many social campaigns and engagements. After Mahatma Phule's death, She assumed the leadership of the Samaj on the request of many Satyashodhaks who reposed their faith in her for her integrity, commitment, and long involvement in social activism. She also presided over the 1893 session of the Samaj. She led the Samaj from the front during the famine and the plague epidemic of 1896-97.

