Savitribai
Journey of a Trailblazer

People and Ideas

An Azim Premji University Publication
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The Peshwa Bajirao II’s rule was marked by inefficient administration and wasteful expenditure. As a Peshwa, he made a terrible ruler. He delighted in humiliating his feudatories, seizing their estates on flimsy pretexts, and imagined that their womenfolk too belonged to him. Societal mores were hidebound and conservative. The caste system was very rigid. The lower castes, Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars, Bhangi, Dhedds, could not even cross paths with people of higher castes.

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Maharashtra in the 19th century

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Sit down fast. Our shadow should not fall on the brahmin’s body.
Although the British criticized the caste system, they were reluctant to do anything drastic that would threaten the continuation of their rule over India, especially after the revolt of 1857.

But clouds of change were appearing on the horizon towards the middle of the 19th century. There was a spread of Western education. Indian students were introduced to the ideas of the Enlightenment, the importance of reason, human autonomy, equality of all humans, and secularism.

The growth of industry, railways, and communication led to the growth of urban centres.

People in these urban centres were less ghettoized than people in the villages and acquired a new sense of public life.
Governor General Ripon wrote to Secretary of State Gladstone in 1882:

“No one who watches the signs of the times in this country with even moderate care can doubt that we have entered upon a period of change: the spread of education, the existing and increasing influence of a free Press, the substitution of legal for discretionary administration, the progress of railways, telegraph, etc., the easier communication with Europe, and the more ready influx of European ideas, are now beginning to produce a marked effect upon the people: new ideas are springing up, new aspirations are being called forth, the power of public opinion is growing and strengthening from day to day, and a movement has begun which will advance with greater rapidity and force every year.”

It was in this era that Savitribai Phule was born and raised. Her story began in a small village called Naigaon in Satara district on January 3, 1831, in the house of Khanduji Newase.

People in Maharashtra were also being influenced by social reform movements in the rest of the Indian subcontinent led by people like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati.

The child was named Savitri.
What are you doing?
Why are you blowing into the chulha?
I also want to do it!

Savitri was a curious child, always eager to learn new things.

Go away and play. I am busy cooking.
To keep the fire burning.

I also want to do it!

More, do it. After that you will leave the kitchen.

When she blew into the chulha, all the ash flew into her face. Savitri ran out of the kitchen, much to her mother’s amusement.
Why is Govind crying?

There is a snake on the tree! He cannot come down!

What is his name?

Jotirao

I have found a groom for Savitri. He is the son of Govindrao and belongs to the Mali caste.

The year was 1840 and Savitri was 9 years old.

Without hesitating, Savitri climbed the tree, picked up the snake, and moved it to another branch. Relieved, Govind stopped crying and came down.

Savitri was also very courageous.

Savitri was 9 and Jotirao was 13 at the time of their wedding.
Savitribai moved to Pune after their marriage.

Her husband Jotirao was educated at a missionary school. His cousin Sagunabai, who was a widow, played a great role in ensuring he completed his education.

Alright, I will.

You must send your son, back to school. My employer Mr. John has promised to help.
Jotirao was greatly influenced by the ideas of Thomas Paine. “I believe in the equality of man... Endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy... The World is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion...”

He was struck by the lack of educational opportunities for women. I have observed that there are no indigenous schools for girls. It is quite a pity because unless the state of women in this country is improved, we will not progress. We should start a girls’ school.

Savitribai then went to Mrs. Farar’s Institution at Ahmednagar and Narman School in Pune to train as a teacher.

Jotirao started educating his wife.
In 1848, Jotirao Phule opened a school for girls in Bhidewada in Pune. Savitribai taught at this school and was its Headmistress.

Fatima Sheikh, sister of Usmain Sheikh, another activist, also volunteered to teach at the school. The school had children from different castes studying together.

I am a Brahmin; I cannot sit with Mukta. She is a Mahar.

In this school everyone is equal. Mukta is a human being just like you. You cannot refuse to sit with her.
God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May God bless you!

Here is a new sari. Every day your sari gets so dirty by the time you reach school, with everyone throwing filth at you. Carry this spare sari with you. Before classes start, you can change into it.

The idea of educating girls was radical at the time and many people opposed the efforts of the Phules. Every day on her way to the school, men would throw dung and stones at Savitribai.

One day, a large, burly man stood in her way as she was going to school.

You know that what you are doing is wrong. Women are not meant to be educated. They have to take care of the house.

Please move out of my way and let me pass.

How dare you speak like that? You are just a woman.

I will not go home!

Savitribai stood her ground. She didn’t let such regular threats and opposition stop her from doing what she believed in.
The School Committee Report

“The state of the school funds has compelled the Committee to appoint teachers on small salaries, who soon give up when they find better appointment... Savitribai, the school headmistress, has nobly volunteered to devote herself to the improvement of female education without remuneration. We hope that as knowledge advances, the people of this country will be awakened to the advantages of female education and will cordially assist in all such plans calculated to improve the condition of those girls.”

The Phules’ educational initiatives picked up steam.

We are fortunate. Our school is well-stocked with supplies thanks to our well-wishers. Major Candy has sent some books.

We can open a second school now. Usman Sheikh said we can use his house.

The odds were stacked against the Phules.

Even nationalists like Tilak opposed education for girls.

People voiced their opposition to the work of the Phules to Govindrao, Jotirao’s father. They pressurized him to make them stop their work or drive them out of his house.

You have to stop running this girls’ school. Everyone disapproves of it.

Even at the risk of life I shall not give up the cause.

Then go where you like but leave my house together with your wife. I cannot live under the same roof as the both of you.

Undeterred and true to their cause, Jotiba and Savitribai left Govindrao’s house.
Report in ‘The Poona Observer’ on May 29, 1852:

“The number of girl students in Jotirao’s school is ten times more than the number of boys studying in the government schools. This is because the system for teaching girls is far superior to what is available for boys in government schools. If this situation continues, then the girls from Jotirao’s school will prove superior to the boys from the government schools and they feel that in the coming examinations, they can really achieve a big victory. If the Government Education Board does not do something about this soon, seeing these women outshine the men will make us hang our heads in shame.”

At a school function, a little girl, Mukta is receiving a prize.

Sir, I don’t want toys or goodies as a prize; I want a library for our school.

Mukta read out her prize-winning essay in front of the school, in which she had detailed the caste-based discrimination of the times.

In 1852, the Education Department organized a felicitation for Jotirao and Savitribai. The Phulees opened more schools in Pune.
They also started a hostel for children who lived outside Pune.

One of the students who lived there, Laxman Karadi Jaaya, described it in his memoirs: “I have not seen another woman as kind and loving as Savitribai. She gave us more love than even a mother could.”

Due to this, their expenses rose.

Another student, Mahadu Sahadu Waghole wrote: “Savitribai was very generous, and her heart was full of kindness. She would be very compassionate to the poor and the needy. She would constantly give the gift of food; she would offer everyone meals. If she saw tattered clothes on the body of poor women, she would give them saris from her own house.

I heard something very upsetting today. You remember Kashibai, the woman who worked in my friend Govande’s house?

Well, some scheming Shastri got her pregnant and then refused to take responsibility for the child. She felt helpless and ended up killing the child. The police have arrested her.

Kashibai was sentenced to life imprisonment in Kalapani (a jail in the Andamans). This prompted the Phules to start a shelter for pregnant widows in their home.

What do we have to take with us when we die?
One day, while returning home, Jotirao noticed a woman trying to commit suicide.

Stop!
Why are you doing this?

I am pregnant. My child and I will get ostracized. It is better that I kill myself and my unborn child.

You will not understand!

You must tell me what is wrong. Perhaps I can help.

My wife and I run a shelter for women like you. Come with me. You can stay there and give birth to your child. No one will harm you there.

Jotirao and Savitribai adopted the widow’s child and named him Yashwant.

One of the many humiliations that widows had to undergo in those days was the tonsuring of their heads. Savitribai supported a barbers’ strike against this practice.

What is wrong with all you barbers today? No one is cutting her hair.

We are on strike today. We are against this barbaric practice and refuse to be part of it.

Savitribai would take care of the widows and assist with the delivery of the babies.

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We must do something to prevent children from dropping out of school. I think we should try to make the lessons more interesting, to keep the children engaged.

Perhaps we can provide some incentive to the students to attend school, maybe a stipend.

A related problem is that parents are illiterate and do not realise the value of education. We should think of starting adult literacy classes too.
Do you know Ganesh the Brahmin?

No I don’t. What about him?

Well, he has fallen in love with Sharja, a Mahar girl. The girl has got pregnant and now six months into her pregnancy, the villagers have discovered the affair. The couple is being paraded through the village and a mob is threatening to kill them.

I must do something to prevent that.

Why do you want to get involved in all this? Just stay quiet. It is none of our business.

The injustice meted out in society is my business. It is also your business. If you and I remain silent spectators, society will never change.

Sometime in 1868, Savitribai was recuperating from an illness in Naigaon.

You cannot kill these two. You know how hard the British law is. All of you will go to jail for murder.

She is right. Maybe we should punish them in some other way.

This wily Brahmin and this untouchable girl should be thrown out of the village!

Thank you very much! You have saved our lives!

We are ready to do that.

Do not thank me. I was doing my duty. Now you two must leave the village. Please go to Pune and meet my husband. He will help you find employment there.
The year 1876 has gone, but the famine has not – it stays in the most horrendous form here. The people are dying. The animals are dying, falling on the ground. There is severe scarcity of food and no fodder for the animals. The people are forced to leave their villages. Some are selling their children, their young girls, and leaving the villages. Rivers, brooks and tanks have completely dried up – there is no water to drink. Trees are dying – there are no leaves on trees. The barren land is cracked everywhere. The sun is scorching – blistering. The people crying for food and water are falling on the ground to die. Some are eating poisonous fruits, and drinking their own urine to quench their thirst. They cry for food and drink, and then they die.

Our Satyashodak volunteers have formed committees to provide food and other life-saving material to the people in need. They have formed relief squads.

Brother Kondaj and his wife Umabai are taking good care of me. Otur’s Shastri, Ganapati Sakharan, Dumbare Patil and others, are planning to visit you. It would be better if you come from Satara to Otur and then go to Ahmednagar.

In 1877, there was a severe drought and a famine in Maharashtra. Savitribai wrote a letter to Jotirao describing the famine.

20 April 1877
Otur, Junnar

The Embodiment of Truth,
My Lord Jotiba,
Savitri salutes you!

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Jotirao set up the Satyashodak Samaj (The Truthseekers’ Society) in 1873. The objective of the Samaj was “to redeem the shudras and atishudras from the influence of the brahmanical scriptures, teach them their human rights and liberate them from mental and religious slavery.” The Samaj declared, “All men are Children of God. There is no need for an intermediary or priest to worship God.”

Savitribai was an active member of the organization. She started the practice of Satyashodak marriages – marriages conducted without any Brahmin priests. The Satyashodak marriage required the bridegroom to take an oath of giving education and equal rights to women. The mantras traditionally chanted by the Brahmin priest were to be sung by the bride and the bridegroom themselves.

I will fight to win rights for all women without counting the cost. I honour all women as sisters and you as my only love. For fear of my duty I will take care of you.

Shubhamangalasavadhan.

The marriage of Radha, daughter of Savitribai’s friend Bajubai Gyanoba Nimbankar and activist Sitram Jabaji Aalhat was the first Satyashodak marriage.

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You may remember R.B. Krishnaji Pant and Laxman Shastri. They travelled with me to the affected area and gave some monetary help to the victims.

The moneylenders are viciously exploiting the situation. Bad things are taking place as a result of the famine. Riots are breaking out. The Collector heard of this and came to ease the situation. He deployed the white police officers, and tried to bring the situation under control. Fifty Satyashodaks were rounded up. The Collector invited me for a talk. I asked the Collector why the good volunteers had been framed with false charges and arrested without any rhyme or reason. I asked him to release them immediately. The Collector was quite decent and unbiased. He shouted at the white soldiers, ‘Do the Patil farmers rob? Set them free.’ The Collector was moved by the people’s plight. He immediately sent four bullock cartloads of (jowar) food.

You have started the benevolent welfare work for the poor and the needy. I also want to carry my share of the responsibility. I assure you I will always help you. I wish the godly work will be helped by more people.

I do not want to write more.

Yours,

Savitri
Jotirao died on November 28, 1890.

After Jotirao’s death, Savitribai led the Satyashodak Samaj. She was the Chairperson of the Satyashodhak Conference held in 1893 at Saswad.

Savitribai also lit Jotirao’s funeral pyre, in defiance of social custom which prohibits women from lighting the pyre. This shocked everyone present.

During his funeral procession, Yashwant was about to carry the tīvive (earthen pot with fire).

You are his adopted son, you cannot carry the tīvive. I am his blood relative. I will carry it.

I was his wife. I will carry the tīvive.

In 1896, there was a famine in Maharashtra and in 1897, there was an outbreak of plague in Pune.

Savitribai was involved in relief work during these two years. She asked Yashwant to take leave from the army and come to Pune to help her with her relief work.
Yashwant started a hospital to treat victims of the plague.

The son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad who lives in the Mahar settlement outside Mundhwa seems to have got the plague.

I will find him and take him to the hospital right away!

As she carried the child to the hospital, Savitribai contracted the plague. Having lived her life for others, she spent her last breath too in an act of courage and service. Savitribai passed away on March 10, 1897.
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The ‘People and Ideas’ initiative of Azim Premji University, is an attempt to explore the ideas, lives and works of the many social reformers, artists, scientists, philosophers and educationists who have influenced us deeply. During this process we hope to develop a platform to understand, engage with, and discuss the ideas that have fundamentally shaped our vision and philosophy.

This graphic novel is on Savitribai Phule’s life and work. Savitribai Phule lived a life of service and extraordinary courage, challenging oppressive social norms in a quest for education, equality, and justice.