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## THE FEMALE AGENCY OF 'THINKING': INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE

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### Abstract

*The interpretation of chronicles has always been gauged through the patriarchal optic that tends to marginalize or erase women's experiences and voices. The contribution of the women thinkers, both on the intellectual and social plane hardly finds a place in the meta narrative of champions for social change. However, feminist historiography and alternative approaches seek to reclaim the female agency manifested through varied expressions thus problematising the conventional narratives of gender hierarchies. A significant tool to exercise the female agency is through the act of thinking. The concept of the 'thinking woman' challenges gender roles and norms. This paper explores the attempts at such expressions of thinking by exploring the lives and contributions of Savitribai Phule, a prominent women writer and activist in 19th century colonial Maharashtra. The role she played in intellectual and social activism to recover the woman space, critiquing patriarchal structures and decoding the intersectionality that operate upon varied experiences of women through time and spaces can bring up interesting historiographical possibilities through engagement with multiple models of social, cultural and economic relations.*

### Keywords

*Historiography, Patriarchy, Hierarchies, Intersectional, Space, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

The domain of critical thinking, writing, interpreting histories, examining methods and perspectives to understand society and therefore advocate social change has been primarily a male prerogative. Women thinkers, both on the intellectual and social plane hardly find a place in the metanarratives of champions for social change. Therefore, any attempt at restructuring the historical discourse to bring into prominence the stifled voices and experiences of women and promote female agency is a challenge to the patriarchal narratives of domination and suppression. When women try to question the inequalities in their own lives and the treatment that society inflicts on them, they find themselves turning to history to find the roots of the oppression that impede their development as a human being. It is then that they often uncover the truth that a woman's role is socially constructed within that specific historical context. Therefore, the contributions of women thinkers play a crucial role in which female agency participate and act in the shaping of history. It is through their expressions that the lost stories of women are reclaimed. As Showalter mentions talking about the female phase in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, '...female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature' (Showalter, 1986).

#### **The Concept of Female Agency:**



The question of female agency is a key concept in the contemporary feminist scholarship and discourse. Throughout human history, institutions and practices have subordinated women in different ways at different times in different degrees and in different places. Women have for ages, accepted this subordinate social position and led lives that comply to the feminine norms. This is not because it is natural but because of the all-pervading influence of the traditional heterosexual models and representations. The disadvantages of non-conformity and the sufferings that go along with it is also a reason for submission to social rules and conventions. Thus, the capacity to define their life- goals, make their own decisions and act on them free from constraints and societal expectations is largely compromised. They are forced to lose their voices. ‘There’s really no such thing as the “voiceless”. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard,’ said Arundhati Roy in her lecture accepting the 2004 Sydney peace prize (quote source The Guardian, 2018). It is important to recognize the female agency by being able to discern when women are speaking in their own voices and doing what they really want to do. The feminist theory of agency must therefore attempt to explain how it is possible for women in a male- dominated society to live in ways that reflect their genuine needs and concerns. Through analyzing the ways in which it is possible to develop critiques of patriarchal social and political institutions, the female agency can build up active resistance against them while acknowledging the fact that their viewpoints and actions are socially determined. According to Maria Alexandra Timko, ‘female agency refers to women’s capacity to ultimately effect change that has a ripple effect across society. This involves altering society’s opinion about a woman and constructing an image that previously did not exist’ (Timko, 2020).

### **‘Thinking’ as a form of Female Agency:**

As an intellectual form of activism, thinking as a female agency can be seen as a compelling and nuanced concept. That thinking is an intellectual and reflective process can be a powerful form of agency, particularly for women who have historically been excluded from intellectual and philosophical spaces. This form of female agency needs to be re-imagined and reinforced to set up a resistance to patriarchal structures that have marginalize women’s intellectual contributions. Women, according to Beauvoir have been relegated to the realm of immanence rather than transcendence, ‘representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men: they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth’ (Beauvoir,1949). Reclaiming the mental space where women can exercise autonomy and freedom even in oppressive conditions is the function of female agency. Virginia Woolf believed that even if libraries be locked up, there is no gate, no lock, and no bolt that can set upon the freedom of mind (Woolf, 1929). But thinking is not a sedentary act. According to Bell Hooks, ‘thinking is an action... thoughts are the laboratories where one goes to pose questions and find answers and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together’ (Hooks 2009). Collective thinking can be exercised through women writing about personal and social experiences to challenge dominant ideologies and build movement for social change. The ability to think and speak for oneself and one’s lot thus dismantles the structures that silence them and create spaces for voices and perspectives. Thinking becomes not just an intellectual exercise but a transformative act that can empower women to rescue their voices, histories and the future.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Maharashtra and Social Change:**

The role played by Savitribai Phule to recover the woman space, critique patriarchal structures and decode the intersectionality that operate upon varied experiences of women bring up interesting historiographical possibilities of interrogation and interpretation through engagement with multiple models of social, cultural and economic relations. Maharashtra under the rule of Peshwa



Baji Rao II suffered under the yoke of inefficient administration and thriftless expenditure. Stringent social mores restricted the free mixing among various castes. It was a conservative society based on hierarchical divisions. The lower castes, Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars, Bhangi, Dhedds, could not even cross paths with people of higher castes. With the defeat and deposition of the last of the Peshwa BajiRao II, the Maratha Confederacy collapsed and the territories annexed by the East India Company's Bombay Presidency thus ending the Maratha independence. The defeat of the Bhonsle, Holkars, Shindes and other dominant Maratha ruling families also established the dominance of British in this area. The small Brahman community, constituting less than five percent of the population of the Maharashtra region, accepted Western education and used that education to gain access to professions and positions in the government service that were open to Indians. At the same time the orthodox Hindu upper caste people were exploiting the lower castes under the pretext of superiority dictated by religion.

The British colonial rulers were indifferent to this oppression and did nothing to eradicate the inhuman caste system as that would threaten their power and dominance and make them unpopular among the educated and powerful Brahmin community. The environment during this time was therefore marked by suppression, helplessness and servitude. The position of women under such an atmosphere was terrible. They were 'doubly marginalized' and suffered greatly. Looked upon as mere objects of desire, they had no opinions, no voice and no agency. With no right to education, she had no say in anything, she could ask for nothing, nor had the right to refuse. It was even considered a sin for a girl to be educated. MeeraKosambi has shown how 'the early 19th century saw Maharashtra subjugated by English political supremacy which soon drove a cultural wedge into indigenous society. The resultant reaction spanned the entire spectrum from hostility and resistance to admiration and emulation. In the atmosphere of social turbulence which churned up particularly the upper stratum of society, most of these responses were formulated and articulated by men, who even undertook the task of spearheading the movement for women's emancipation' (Kosambi, 1994).

Western education introduced 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 acquired a new sense of public life. The social reform movements in the rest of the Indian subcontinent led by people like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati created ripples in Maharashtra as well. In the year 1882, Governor General of India Lord Ripon wrote to Secretary of State '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'(quoted in Cotton, 1905).

The social movements perceptible in the 19th century India were mostly initiated by the elite males. 'It was in this era that greatest figures laid the foundation for the cause of women liberation in India. The women, sheltered or withheld from these direct influences, though not from iniquitous social practices which were one of the sites for the cultural confrontation, rarely participated in the debates or figured in public leadership roles' (Kosambi 1994). But gradually, the female education movement pioneered by social reformers during this time together with the initiation of policy reforms by the British colonial rulers likes the abolition of Sati in 1829 by Lord William Bentinck set an example of the possibilities of social change. This inspired the women



who received education to actively come forward and become instruments of change. They began to be associated with social reform movements through platforms that were set up during this time like the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Satyo Sodhok Samaj etc. The enlightened women realized the significance of fighting for their own rights. Through advocating the cause of women education, they increasingly became conscious of women's rights and the position of women in society. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, Swarnakumari Devi, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Rande, Sister Nivedita, Kadambini Ganguly are among the many who pioneered the cause of women emancipation in the 19th century India. Though the theoretical jargon of feminism was unheard of in 19th century colonial India, these women activists, both in the intellectual and the social plane talked about individual growth and development, freedom from oppressive rituals and customs of patriarchal values and embraced empathy and humanism as values and virtues with self-reliance as a means of exercising the female agency.

### **The Legacy of Savitribai Phule:**

Maharashtra in the 19th century colonial regime gave birth to women philosophical thinkers who were pioneers in their respective fields. Savitribai Phule is credited to be the first woman teacher in colonial India and the first woman radical poet in Marathi. Born and raised in a small village called Naigaon in Satara district on January 3, 1831, in the house of Khanduji Newase, she adopted a revolutionary stand in her expression of philosophy of life through her writings and social activism, thus achieving liberating moments for Indian women. She chose to walk otherwise, different from the path laid by society for women. She was ahead of her time by centuries. The historic disadvantages of her caste and gender failed to bow her down. Her thoughts expressed through her writings and social works reflect the philosophical stand as a woman. She endorsed the necessity of female education and physical work to gain knowledge and create identity of one's own. She believed that women were not slaves of men, in no way inferior to men; they too had the right to education.

A committed companion to her husband Jotirao Phule, Savitribai internalized the ideals of her husband. Jotirao was inspired by Thomas Paine, and worked for the cause till the last. She set up schools for young girls, established shelters for the destitute upper-class widows, championed the cause of adult education, initiated relief work during famine and the plague, worked relentlessly to build up consciousness against untouchability as an active member of the Satyashodak Samaj (The Truthseekers' Society), established by Jotirao Phule in 1873. She took up the responsibility to head the Samaj after Jotirao's death. The opening words of the Preface of the book called Slavery published by Jotirao Phule in 1873 states the objectives of writing the book which is also to become the guiding principle for the establishment of the Samaj - 'since the advent of the rule of Brahmins for centuries (in India), the Shudras and the Atishudras are suffering hardships and are leading miserable lives. To draw people's attention to this, and that they (the Shudras etc.) should think over their misfortune, and that they should eventually set themselves free from this tyranny of the Bhats (Brahmins) perpetrated on them—is the main aim of (writing) this book' (quoted in Sivaih, 2016)

The Samaj declared, "All men are Children of God. There is no need for an intermediary or priest to worship God" (quoted in Sivaih, 2016). Titled 'Jananajyoti' (Flame of education) and 'Krantijyoti' (Flame of Revolution) for her revolutionary work in the field of women education, Savitribai's activism finds an equal reciprocation in her orations and writings. Savitribai was a prolific orator and an author. Her first book of poems Kavya Phule appeared in 1854. Her next publication, Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar (The Ocean of Pure Gems) published in 1891 is a biography in verse describing the activities of JyotiRao, her husband. She edited four speeches of Jotirao on Indian history (Jotibanchi Bhashane) for publication. She wrote Karz (Debt), an essay



discouraging the people to fall in the death trap of debt by taking loans for marriages and festivals. Her other contributions include Matushri Savitribai Phulenchi Bhashane VaGaani (Savitribai Phule's speeches and songs), and letters written to Mahatma Phule. Her collection of poems Kavya Phule – (1854) (Poetry's Blossom) which is her first work is a compilation of forty-one poems and is considered to be a historical document of the time. The liberated new woman wanting to break free from the clutches of subjection and exploitation finds a voice in Savitribai's poems. The desire to be treated as an equal, a human being and not as an object of male lust is inescapable in her writings. Instead of re-constructing the images of the mythological pativrata women as was the common theme explored by her contemporaries, Savitribai formed her active agency in addressing social issues like the need for obtaining English education, fighting against caste and gender discrimination, and the problems of untouchability. The intersectionality of caste and gender in her discourse of social relations cannot be missed. That caste and gendered hierarchical structures intersect each other to produce experiences of discrimination, oppression and marginalization is a motif that is often explored in her poems,

'If you have no knowledge, have no education, /And you yearn not for the same, /You possess intellect but work not on the same, /How then can you be called a human being?' (Phule, 1854).

In continuum to the greater social reforms that were happening during the 19th century in colonial India, women's education was of a major concern as it was an important part in the discourse of modernity and progress of society. That knowledge is a power and a tool for emancipating is captured time and again in Savitribai's verse.

We become animal without wisdom,  
Sit idle no more, go, get education  
End misery of the oppressed and forsaken,  
You've got a golden chance to learn  
So learn and break the chains of caste.  
Throw away the Brahman's scriptures fast. - Go Get Education(Phule, 1854)

Struggling all her life for the cause of women education, she thought of reforming the society divided by caste, inequality and gender at a time when education for the girl child was unthinkable. She had to face threats, abuses, insult and physical assaults. Dhananjay Keer records, 'As he (Jyotirao) could not get a teacher to help him, he took the help of his wife whom he had taught at home. A wave of uncontrollable excitement and anger swept over Poona. The learned Brahmins and their hirelings hated the very sight of Savitri. They threw mud, dirt, stones at her when she was on her way to the school... Embarrassed by this unholy uproar and upsurge, she would stop in the street and say serenely to her persecutors, "God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May he bless you". Savitribai Phule appeared on the scene that Indian women began to take part in public work' (Keer, 2000). The couple had to leave their ancestral home as they were the initiators of protest against the age-old customs and practices that held women back from enlightenment. Savitribai started a school with nine girls in 1847 in Maharwada that soon increased in number by three schools with student strength of more than one fifty by 1851. The first girls' school of the country was set up by the Phule couple in Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848. Savitribai was of the conviction that education is the only way to end caste discrimination. In one of her speeches she says, 'What can counter the growth of vices such as lethargy, dependence upon others and promote human virtues is actually dissemination of knowledge. The nature of the person who shares knowledge and the one who receives it contributes in creating a perfect human



being. It makes people more humane and lose their depraved nature' (Phule 1892 trans. Gupta 2021). The one imparting knowledge becomes patient and fearless and the one receiving it becomes capable and wise. While appreciating the British for their encouragement in teaching English, she saw the language as a scope for traversing new vistas, to discover the latent capabilities and talents of the marginalized. 'So English education will fuel people's desire to help others, then we will need a path for reform. This will be beneficial for the society and add to collective happiness' (Phule 1892 trans. Gupta 2021). At a time when the Brahman boys could only have an access to education, her efforts at championing the cause of English education for the Stree-Shudras-Atishudras were perceived as a tool to challenge the Brahmanical hegemony and oppressive social structures.

Don't rest! Strive to educate yourself.  
The opportunity is here,  
For the Shudras and AtiShudras,  
To learn English  
To dispel all woes.  
Throw away the authority  
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,  
Break the shackles of caste,  
By learning English.  
-Learning English  
(Phule, 1854)

In her fight against discrimination, casteism, untouchability and gender inequality, Savitribai's uncompromising character finds expression in her poetic style. She consciously uses the traditional form of writing like abhang, which is a folk form with a language simple and effective.

Haunted by 'The Gods on Earth',  
For two thousand years,  
The perpetual service of the Brahmins,  
Became the plight of the Shudras.  
Looking at their condition,  
The heart screams its protest,  
The mind blanks out,  
Struggling to find a way out.  
Education is the path,  
For the Shudras to walk,  
For education grants humanity  
freeing one from an animal-like existence -The Plight of the Shudras (Phule, 1854)

BrajRanjan Mani writes, 'Savitribai Phule 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 had her independent identity and contribution. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite- controlled knowledge-production that a figure as important as SavitribaiPhule fails to find any mention in the history of modern India. Her life and struggle deserve to be appreciated by a wider spectrum, and made known to non-Marathi people as well'



(Mani,2008). As the first Shudra woman reclaiming the rights of woman in the patriarchal structure of society, Savitribai's active agency served to enhance her character. Even after Jotirao's death, she courageously held the legacy of her husband to free society from the shackles of ignorance, suffocating customs and rituals. The Renaissance ideal of humanism reflected in her spirit paved the way for the 'new woman' to emerge. 'Every girl child, in any school, on any day, in India-sitting alongside boys, reading a book, exploring the Internet, learning new things-is creating a new kind of India. It is a Savitribai-kind of India, where centuries-long deference is haltingly giving way to a barely century-long, Savitribai-led defiance. It is defiance that is struggling to break clear from a 3000-year past of mandatory non-education (Deshpande,1996).

### Conclusion:

As committed proponents of social justice who worked in 19th century Maharashtra, Savitribai Phule was among the very few women whose assertive participation in the public sphere and engagement with critical social questions created a redefined female identity, transcending the narrow confines of domesticity and private life that constituted the prescribed role of women in that era.

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