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Architect of Indian Feminism: Mahatama Phule

Praveen Ghodeswar

Mahatama Jotiba Phule is known as the 'Father of Social Revolution' in India. He occupies an exceptional place among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the 19th Century. The other social reformers determined more on reforming the social institutions like family, marriage, and widow marriage etc. at the same time Jotiba revolted against the unfair caste system under which million of people had suffered for centuries. Jotiba also pointed out consequences of patriarchal system and its impact on society. This article throws the light on Mahatma Jotiba Phule's contribution towards emergence and development of Indian Feminism.

Jotiba not only was pioneer of social reforms but also the original architect of Indian feminism. The seeds of his sensibilities were sown in his childhood and adolescence and there was Savitribai, with whom he lived and worked for 50 years to contribute greatly to the women's reform movement of 19th century Maharashtra. Jyotiba-Savitri couple was partners in every sense of the term. We cannot disconnect Jotiba's theory from practice, his work from that Savitribai's, their



work from their life! Jyotiba first taught his wife Savitribai to read and write. He encouraged her to do so. This we can say was the first gender sensitive act performed by him. Jotiba taught Savitribai and his aunt Sagunabai while he was still studying in the missionary school. Savitribai was a brilliant and keen student and went on to obtain a teacher's training certificate.

On, 15th May 1848, the Phule couple started their first school for girls in Bhidewada of Pune city. Savitribai was its headmistress. The school brought together girls of all castes under one roof. There were 25 girls in the first batch. In the same year they also set up a school for girls belongs to untouchable community. Savitribai, alongwith Fatima Shaikh, Sagunabai and some male teachers, taught in these schools. In the next four years, the Phule couple set up number of schools for girls. "To educate women and to nurture their intelligence, to give them respect that they deserve and to take responsibility of their wellbeing is against the Hindu religion for suppressing women's right to education," Jotiba had written on the occasion of one of the annual examinations of his schools. He links education with respect and dignity and directly blames the Hindu religion for suppressing women's rights to education.

"We are intensely impressed with the need and significance of ameliorating the condition of the Natives and enlightening minds through the means of female education and under this conviction have instituted a schools with a view of promoting this beneficent object," Jotiba expressed his views in a letter dated 5th February 1852 wrote to the then Governor of Bombay. Jotiba was convinced that the overall enhancement of society hinged on the education of women. On the contrary, other reformers of his time wanted at best limited education for women to enable them to be better wives and mothers. According to Jotiba, education was an undeniable part of women's human rights. Elsewhere he had said, " If men do not come in the way of basic human rights of women, a free world would come into being and all men and women would be satisfied and contented."