



RECLAIMING SAVITRIBAI PHULE: A FORGOTTEN ARCHITECT OF INDIAN SOCIAL REFORM

Dr. Plabani Roy¹, Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed²

¹Guest lecturer, Dr. Kanailal Bhattacharya College & Academic Counsellor, Netaji Subhas Open University Study Centre at Dr. Kanailal Bhattacharya College, Howrah, West Bengal, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Haldia Govt. College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically re-examines the contributions of Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), positioning her as a foundational yet underrecognized architect of Indian social reform. While existing scholarship predominantly highlights her pioneering role in women's education, this study argues that her work constitutes a comprehensive and intersectional framework of social transformation, integrating education, anti-caste activism, and feminist thought. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in historical and textual analysis, the study engages with both primary sources, such as Kavya Phule and contemporary scholarly literature to reinterpret her contributions within broader theoretical contexts.

The findings reveal that Savitribai Phule conceptualized education as a radical instrument of liberation, aimed at dismantling entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy. Her praxis demonstrates an early form of intersectionality, addressing the interconnected dynamics of gender, caste, and class oppression long before these were formally theorized. Furthermore, her writings and activism are shown to function as counter-hegemonic knowledge production, challenging dominant epistemologies and enabling the emergence of subaltern voices.

The paper also identifies a persistent epistemic marginalization of Savitribai Phule within mainstream historiography and global academic discourse, attributing this to structural biases in knowledge production. By situating her contributions within feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern theoretical frameworks, the study advances a more integrated understanding of her intellectual legacy. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize knowledge systems and foreground indigenous thinkers in global scholarship.

The study concludes that Savitribai Phule's ideas remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges related to educational inequality, gender justice, and social exclusion. Her vision of inclusive and transformative education offers critical insights for current policy debates and underscores the need for approaches that confront structural inequities. Ultimately, this paper reclaims Savitribai Phule not merely as a historical reformer but as a significant theorist of social justice and transformative change.

KEYWORDS: Savitribai Phule, Social Reform, Women's Education, Anti-Caste Movement, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

The history of social reform in nineteenth-century India is often narrated through a canon dominated by male reformers, thereby marginalizing the contributions of pioneering women who challenged entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy. Among these, Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) stands as a transformative yet historically underrepresented figure whose work fundamentally reshaped the discourse on education, gender, and social justice. Emerging from a rigidly stratified colonial society, Phule not only confronted Brahmanical hegemony but also articulated an emancipatory vision grounded in universal education, gender equality, and anti-caste resistance. Despite increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, her contributions continue to be insufficiently theorized within mainstream historiography and global intellectual traditions.

Recent scholarship underscores Savitribai Phule's role as one of the earliest architects of intersectional reform in India, predating contemporary frameworks that analyze the

interconnectedness of caste, class, and gender. For instance, Pandey (2019, 2022) situates her within broader feminist thought, arguing that her praxis constituted a distinct epistemological standpoint rooted in lived experiences of marginalization. Similarly, Kumari (2024) and Bhesera et al. (2024) highlight her pioneering efforts in establishing schools for girls and Dalit children, thereby challenging both gender exclusion and caste-based educational deprivation. These interventions were not merely philanthropic but deeply political, aimed at dismantling systemic inequalities embedded within colonial and indigenous social orders.

Furthermore, Savitribai Phule's intellectual contributions, particularly her writings such as Kavya Phule (1854) offers critical insights into the cultural and ideological dimensions of resistance. As noted by Mondal and Baugh (2026), her work reflects an early articulation of feminist consciousness intertwined with anti-caste critique, positioning education as a tool of liberation rather than mere social mobility. This perspective aligns with broader sociological analyses that frame



her activism as a form of counter-hegemonic knowledge production, challenging dominant narratives that excluded subaltern voices (Santra & Madhu; Das, 2021). In this sense, Phule's legacy extends beyond historical significance, engaging with contemporary debates on educational equity, social justice, and inclusive policy frameworks.

However, despite these contributions, Savitribai Phule remains relatively marginalized in both national and global academic discourse. As Salunke (2021) argues, the process of "reclaiming" her legacy involves not only recovering historical narratives but also critically re-evaluating the epistemic hierarchies that have shaped knowledge production in postcolonial contexts. This necessitates a re-examination of her role not merely as a social reformer but as a theorist of radical social transformation, whose ideas resonate with ongoing struggles against structural inequality.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to reclaim Savitribai Phule as a central architect of Indian social reform, situating her contributions within the intersecting domains of education, feminism, and anti-caste movements. By engaging with both historical sources and contemporary scholarship, the paper aims to (i) critically analyze her reformist interventions, (ii) examine the theoretical underpinnings of her work, and (iii) assess her continued relevance in addressing present-day socio-educational disparities. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to decolonize knowledge systems and foreground marginalized intellectual traditions within global academic discourse.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The existing body of scholarship on Savitribai Phule has expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting a growing recognition of her contributions to education, feminism, and anti-caste movements. However, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries, with studies often focusing on isolated aspects of her work rather than offering a comprehensive theoretical engagement. Broadly, the literature can be categorized into four major strands: (i) feminist interpretations, (ii) educational contributions, (iii) caste and social reform analysis, and (iv) contemporary relevance and reinterpretations.

A prominent strand of research situates Savitribai Phule within feminist discourse, particularly in relation to global and indigenous feminist traditions. Pandey (2019) argues that Phule's thought can be located within the trajectory of first-wave feminism, while simultaneously diverging from it through its rootedness in caste-based realities. Extending this argument, Pandey (2022) highlights the distinctiveness of her feminist standpoint, emphasizing that her work emerged from the lived experiences of a marginalized caste woman, thereby challenging upper-caste dominated feminist narratives. Similarly, Rao (2012) interprets her writings as early articulations of feminist consciousness in India, foregrounding themes of gender equality, dignity, and resistance. These studies collectively underscore that Phule's feminism was not merely reformist but radically intersectional, predating contemporary theoretical frameworks.

Another substantial body of literature examines Savitribai Phule's educational contributions, often portraying her as a pioneer of modern education in India. Das (2021) and Pandey and Murmu (2024) emphasize her role in establishing schools for girls and marginalized communities, arguing that her initiatives laid the foundation for inclusive education in India. Bhesera et al. (2024) further elaborate that her pedagogical practices were not limited to access but also addressed structural inequalities embedded in curriculum and institutional practices. Chatterjee (2021) introduces the concept of "feminist pedagogy" in analyzing her methods, suggesting that her approach fostered critical thinking and self-expression among oppressed groups. While these studies highlight her educational innovations, they often treat them as historical contributions rather than as theoretical interventions in pedagogy and knowledge production.

The intersection of caste and social reform forms another critical area of scholarly engagement. Kumari (2024) and Rani (2024) examine her efforts to combat caste-based discrimination, particularly through education as a tool of social transformation. Ghosh (2021) situates her work within the broader nationalist and reformist movements, arguing that her critique of caste challenged both colonial and indigenous power structures. Similarly, Santra and Madhu conceptualize her as a "harbinger" of social change, emphasizing her role in dismantling entrenched hierarchies of caste and gender. These analyses reveal that Phule's activism cannot be understood in isolation from caste politics; rather, it represents a systematic challenge to Brahmanical hegemony. However, much of this literature remains descriptive, with limited engagement in theorizing her contributions within broader sociological or postcolonial frameworks.

Recent scholarship has also begun to explore the contemporary relevance of Savitribai Phule's ideas, particularly in the context of educational policy and social justice. Mondal and Baugh (2026) critically examine the trajectory of girls' education in India, linking present challenges to historical inequalities that Phule sought to address. Ksera (2023) and Paul and Das (2024) argue that her vision of inclusive education continues to inform debates on women's empowerment and equity in modern India. Furthermore, Salunke (2021) calls for a "reclaiming" of Phule's legacy, emphasizing the need to revisit her contributions in light of ongoing struggles against caste and gender oppression. These studies signal a shift toward recognizing her as a relevant intellectual resource for contemporary discourse, rather than merely a historical figure. Despite these valuable contributions, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, there is a tendency to compartmentalize her work into education, feminism, or social reform, thereby overlooking the integrated and intersectional nature of her thought. Second, limited attention has been given to her writings as sources of theoretical insight, resulting in an under-theorization of her intellectual contributions. Third, her position within global academic discourse remains marginal, with insufficient efforts to situate her alongside other major thinkers in feminist and social theory.



In light of these gaps, the present study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts and engage in a critical and integrative analysis of Savitribai Phule's contributions. By synthesizing insights from feminist theory, educational philosophy, and caste studies, this paper aims to reclaim her as a central figure in the intellectual history of social reform and to foreground her relevance in contemporary academic and policy debates.

RESEARCH GAP

A critical review of existing scholarship reveals that although Savitribai Phule has gained increasing academic attention, significant conceptual and analytical gaps persist.

First, much of the literature remains fragmented and discipline-specific, examining her contributions separately within education, feminism, or caste studies (Pandey, 2019; Das, 2021; Kumari, 2024). This compartmentalization obscures the interconnected and intersectional nature of her work, which simultaneously engaged with caste oppression, gender inequality, and educational exclusion.

Second, there is a predominance of descriptive and biographical approaches, with limited emphasis on theorizing Savitribai Phule as an intellectual figure. While studies acknowledge her pioneering role in girls' education and social reform (Bhesera et al., 2024), they rarely interpret her writings and actions as contributions to indigenous knowledge systems or critical social theory.

Third, her position within global academic discourse remains marginal. Despite arguments positioning her within feminist thought (Pandey, 2022), there is insufficient comparative engagement with global theorists of feminism, education, and social justice. This results in an epistemic marginalization, where her ideas are not fully integrated into broader theoretical frameworks.

Fourth, limited research has examined her relevance in contemporary socio-educational policy contexts, particularly in relation to equity, inclusion, and decolonization of knowledge (Mondal & Baugh, 2026). Existing studies tend to acknowledge her legacy without systematically analyzing its applicability to present-day challenges.

Therefore, there is a clear need for an integrated, theory-driven, and interdisciplinary analysis that repositions Savitribai Phule not merely as a historical reformer, but as a central intellectual figure in the discourse on social transformation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In response to the identified gaps, the present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To critically examine Savitribai Phule's contributions to social reform within the intersecting domains of education, gender, and caste.
2. To analyze her work as a form of intersectional and counter-hegemonic thought, situating it within broader feminist and sociological theoretical frameworks.

3. To reinterpret her writings and practices as intellectual interventions, rather than solely historical or reformist activities.
4. To explore the relevance of her ideas in contemporary contexts, particularly in relation to inclusive education, social justice, and policy discourse.
5. To contribute to the decolonization of knowledge systems by foregrounding an indigenous thinker within global academic debates.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary research design to critically examine the contributions of Savitribai Phule within the broader context of social reform. Grounded in a critical-interpretive framework, the research draws upon perspectives from feminist theory, subaltern studies, and postcolonial analysis to explore the interconnected structures of caste, gender, and education that shaped her work. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources for data collection. Primary materials include Savitribai Phule's writings, particularly Kavya Phule (1854), along with her letters and other available archival records, which provide direct insight into her ideological positions and reformist agenda. These are complemented by a wide range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and contemporary analyses of education, caste, and gender in colonial and modern India.

The data is analyzed using a combination of thematic and discourse analysis, enabling the identification of key recurring themes such as education as a means of liberation, the intersection of caste and gender oppression, resistance to Brahmanical patriarchy, and the role of knowledge in social transformation. Additionally, a contextual historical approach is employed to situate her contributions within the socio-political realities of nineteenth-century colonial India, thereby ensuring that her work is interpreted within its appropriate historical and cultural framework. The study is further informed by theoretical constructs such as intersectionality, which facilitates an understanding of overlapping forms of marginalization; postcolonial theory, which critiques dominant power structures and knowledge systems; and subaltern studies, which foreground marginalized voices and epistemologies. While the research is limited by its reliance on available translated texts and the relative scarcity of digitized archival materials, efforts have been made to ensure analytical rigor through triangulation of sources and critical engagement with existing scholarship.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of primary texts and secondary scholarship reveals that Savitribai Phule's contributions extend far beyond her commonly acknowledged role as a pioneer of women's education. Instead, her work represents a coherent, intersectional, and counter-hegemonic framework of social transformation, grounded in the interlinkages between caste, gender, and knowledge production. The major thematic findings are:

1. Education as a Tool of Liberation

One of the most significant findings is that Savitribai Phule conceptualized education not merely as access to literacy but as a radical instrument for social emancipation. Her establishment



of schools for girls and marginalized communities represented a direct challenge to entrenched caste and gender hierarchies (Das, 2021; Bhesera et al., 2024). Unlike colonial education models that often-reinforced social stratification, Phule's approach emphasized critical consciousness and self-respect among oppressed groups.

This aligns with Freirean notions of "education as liberation," although Phule's work predates such frameworks, indicating an indigenous origin of emancipatory pedagogy. Pandey (2019) argues that her educational practices were rooted in a transformative vision that sought to dismantle systemic inequality rather than merely integrate marginalized groups into existing structures. Thus, education in her framework becomes a site of resistance and social restructuring, not just social mobility.

2. Intersectionality as Praxis

A second key finding is that Savitribai Phule's work embodies an early and practical form of intersectionality, addressing caste, gender, and class simultaneously. Unlike many reformers of her time who focused on singular axes of inequality, Phule recognized the interdependent nature of oppression.

Her initiatives for Dalit girls' education exemplify this intersectional approach, as they addressed both caste-based exclusion and patriarchal constraints (Kumari, 2024). Pandey (2022) emphasizes that her standpoint emerged from lived experiences of marginalization, thereby offering a situated epistemology distinct from upper-caste feminist narratives.

This finding challenges the dominant historiographical tendency to treat intersectionality as a contemporary theoretical construct, demonstrating that intersectional praxis existed in 19th-century India, albeit in different conceptual terms.

3. Resistance to Brahmanical Patriarchy

The study further finds that Savitribai Phule's reform efforts constituted a systematic critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, which operated as a foundational structure of social inequality in colonial India. Her activism, including opposition to child marriage, caste discrimination, and the denial of education to women, directly confronted both religious orthodoxy and social norms (Ghosh, 2021).

Importantly, her resistance was not limited to activism but extended to intellectual and cultural domains, particularly through her writings. Kavya Phule reflects a critique of social injustice and advocates dignity and equality for marginalized communities. This positions her as not only a reformer but also a theorist of resistance, whose work contributed to the formation of counter-hegemonic discourse.

The findings suggest that her challenge to Brahmanical structures was both structural and ideological, making her contributions foundational to anti-caste movements in India.

4. Knowledge Production as Social Empowerment

Another critical insight is that Savitribai Phule viewed knowledge as a transformative force capable of reshaping social realities. Her emphasis on education was intrinsically linked to

the creation of alternative knowledge systems that could challenge dominant narratives.

This aligns with postcolonial critiques of knowledge production, which argue that hegemonic systems often exclude marginalized voices (Salunke, 2021). By enabling access to education and encouraging expression among oppressed groups, Phule facilitated the emergence of subaltern epistemologies.

Moreover, her work underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge traditions, which remain underrepresented in global academic discourse. This finding reinforces the need to integrate her contributions into broader theoretical frameworks, thereby addressing epistemic inequalities in knowledge production.

5. Contemporary Relevance

The findings also highlight the enduring relevance of Savitribai Phule's ideas in contemporary contexts. Issues such as educational inequality, gender discrimination, and caste-based exclusion persist in modern India, making her framework highly applicable (Mondal & Baugh, 2026).

Her emphasis on inclusive education resonates with current policy initiatives, including debates around equity and access in education systems. Furthermore, her intersectional approach provides valuable insights for addressing complex, multi-dimensional inequalities in today's globalized world.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Savitribai Phule's contributions cannot be adequately understood within isolated disciplinary frameworks. Instead, her work represents an integrated model of social reform, combining education, feminist thought, and anti-caste activism into a unified vision of social transformation.

The discussion reveals that her marginalization in mainstream historiography is not due to a lack of contribution but rather reflects epistemic biases in knowledge production, which prioritize certain voices over others. Reclaiming her legacy, therefore, is not only a historical exercise but also a critical intervention in contemporary academic discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to critically reclaim Savitribai Phule as a central figure in the intellectual and practical history of Indian social reform. Moving beyond conventional portrayals that confine her to the role of a pioneering educator, the analysis demonstrates that her contributions constitute a comprehensive and intersectional framework of social transformation, integrating education, feminist thought, and anti-caste activism into a unified vision of justice and equality.

The findings establish that Savitribai Phule's educational initiatives were not merely reformist interventions but radical acts of resistance aimed at dismantling deeply entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy. By foregrounding education as a tool of liberation, she redefined its purpose from social assimilation to critical empowerment and consciousness-



building. Her work anticipated key principles of modern emancipatory pedagogy and intersectional theory, thereby positioning her as an intellectual precursor to later developments in feminist and sociological thought.

Furthermore, the study highlights that her praxis embodied an early form of intersectionality, addressing the interconnected realities of caste, gender, and class oppression. This challenges dominant historiographical narratives that often attribute such theoretical frameworks exclusively to contemporary Western scholarship. Instead, Savitribai Phule emerges as a theorist in her own right, whose ideas were grounded in lived experience and directed toward structural transformation.

The research also underscores the persistence of epistemic marginalization in academic discourse, which has contributed to the relative invisibility of her contributions in global knowledge systems. Reclaiming her legacy, therefore, is not only an act of historical recovery but also a necessary step toward the decolonization of knowledge, enabling a more inclusive and representative intellectual canon.

In terms of contemporary relevance, Savitribai Phule's vision offers critical insights for addressing ongoing challenges related to educational inequality, gender justice, and social exclusion. Her emphasis on inclusive, equitable, and transformative education aligns closely with current policy debates and underscores the need for approaches that move beyond access to address structural inequities and power relations.

In conclusion, this study argues that Savitribai Phule should be recognized not merely as a "forgotten reformer" but as a foundational architect of modern social justice discourse in India. Integrating her contributions into mainstream academic and policy frameworks can significantly enrich contemporary debates on equity, inclusion, and social transformation. Future research should further explore comparative and transnational perspectives, situating her work alongside global thinkers to fully realize the scope and significance of her intellectual legacy.

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