Savitribai Phule's name is not in the history books alongside the Rani of Jhansi and others. But it deserves to be. She, along with her husband Jotiba Phule, was a pioneer in the struggle against oppression of women, dalits, adivasis and religious minorities. A new book sketches her life and work.

Another International Women's Day has gone by feting the women of the 21st century who have achieved, held their own and beaten all odds to claim their place in the sun. But it must be remembered that women's claims to equality today come on the back of the struggles of many who have gone before them. These were women who fought the good fight against patriarchy and other social evils in not-so-congenial times. Foremost among them is Savitribai Phule whose name deserves to be etched in the annals of history. Born in the 19th century, Savitribai was a woman well ahead of her time.

To celebrate her life and her contribution to society, Mountain Peak Publishers brought out a book in 2008 titled *A Forgotten Liberator -- The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*. The book is a compilation of articles edited by Braj Ranjan Mani and Pamela Sardar. The former is the author of *Debrahmanising History, Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, whilst the latter is an educationist and founding member of Truthseekers International, a local and global organisation that has its roots in the Satyashodak Samaj started by Savitribai and Jotiba Phule, with the intention of continuing their work of bringing about a socio-spiritual transformation in India.

From the brief chronology listed at the end of the book, one can trace Savitribai's 66-year life (1831-1897), of which a large part was devoted to serving society.
Married to Jotiba Phule at the young age of nine, Savitribai's life subsequently changed. In his introduction to *Forgotten Liberator*, editor Braj Ranjan Mani contests the dominant class's constructs of history that have been handed down by selective culling from modern European ideas and institutions. He is perhaps right when he says that "meta-narratives of the past and present by the marginalised majority -- dalits, adivasis, other backward classes (OBCs), Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and other suppressed ethnic and regional communities -- remain confined to the margins, while brahmanical hegemony continues to overwhelm the intellectual domain". Otherwise how could it be that Savitribai Phule's name does not grace the history textbooks as do those of other legendary figures such as Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi or Ahalya Holkar? A student of history will quickly recall these names, as also those of Putlibai and Swaroop Rani, the mothers of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru.

Jotirao and Savitribai Phule were among the first in modern India to present a major anti-caste ideology and evolve a brand of socio-cultural activism based on uniting the oppressed whom they classified as stree, shudra and ati-shudra. It should be a matter of great interest to feminists and historians that even in the 19th century, here was a couple from a backward class background who understood that it was as important to address the subjugation of women as the oppression of shudras and ati-shudras. In their understanding of the oppressed, the Phules included other marginalised groups such as adivasis and Muslims too.

Whilst Mahatma Jotiba (as he was popularly known) got belated recognition as the father of India's social revolution "after a century of elitist trivialisation," Savitribai, who struggled and supported her husband through all the trying times, was condemned to obscurity on account of caste and gender discrimination. Though there have been a few Marathi authors who wrote and highlighted her achievements, her life and work have largely been restricted to a Marathi audience, when it is actually deserving of wider dissemination. The two editors and publishers of *A Forgotten Liberator -- The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule* must be commended for taking the first step towards addressing this lacuna. They have acknowledged the works of Marathi writers, especially M G Malli and Hari Narke, whose writings were the main source of information for this book.

In the chapter 'The Stuff Legends Are Made Of', independent researcher and writer Cynthia Stephens gives a background to Mahatma Phule's life, enabling the reader to understand those times of brahmanical hegemony in Maharashtra. Those were the days when someone born into a shudra community (as was Phule), as well as those who were left out of the caste system, the ati-shudras, were denied access to education. Besides delineating the struggles of Phule in his effort to acquire an education and make it available to his wife, whom he married at the age of 13, Cynthia quotes from Phule's writings to highlight how "the highly restrictive caste structures of society subjugated the toiling castes and communities, exploiting their labour, ignorance and religious fervour".

The chapter brings out the interesting fact that it was Jotiba's fortunate introduction to an English education, his reading of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* and his exposure to Christian missionaries in India that laid the foundation for his revolutionary thoughts on education, especially with regard to women's empowerment.

The strong opposition to women's education by the ancient texts lay in misogynistic beliefs that
women "would start writing letters to all, the food her husband ate would turn to worms and he would die an untimely death". Phule, who was determined to free the oppressed from the shackles of 'brahmanical patriarchy and caste enslavement', wrote scathing critiques of the dominant religious beliefs, campaigned for mass education and, most importantly, founded an organisation called the Satyashodak Samaj to challenge the slavery brought about by the caste system. What is important to note is that whilst Phule might have shunned the brahmanical concept of religion, he propagated belief in a compassionate creator who was interested in the welfare and liberation of all human beings. His religious vision culminated in the founding of the Sarvajanik Satya Dharma, or Universal Religion of Truth.

Living in a country where there are many interpretations of secularism and where many equate faith with religious obscurantism, it is a pleasant surprise to read about a firebrand reformer in the 19th century who did not see any dichotomy in combining the sacred with the secular. In these days of 'sanskritisation' of the dalit, with even a DMK chief minister like Karunanidhi stating that in Tamil Nadu, dalit priests would be asked to conduct religious ceremonies in temples, it is telling to note that Phule, like Ambedkar (who, along with his followers, converted to Buddhism) did not see redemption for the shudra and the ati-shudra in Hinduism but in a universal religion with a compassionate creator who believed in the equality of all human beings.

Phule was a visionary who understood the value of education in the empowering of women. He started by sending Savitribai to school and then training her as a teacher to run schools for girls from oppressed communities. Savitri's courage in withstanding opposition, even physical discomfort, to achieve her goals made her a true Ardhangini of Phule. That the education department of the government should honour them for their efforts in 1862 shows the change in attitude that they were able to bring about.

Savitribai’s greatest literary contribution is her collection of poems titled *Kabya Phule* (Poetry's Blossoms) which she published in 1854. This pioneering work has value as a historical document recording those times, as it covers subjects as varied as education, nature and, most importantly, the caste system, where the poet exhorts the subjugated to throw off the shackles of the caste system. Savitribai followed this up with another anthology in 1893. Titled *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (The Ocean of Gems), this collection is a biography of Phule that reiterates his critique of the brahmanical constructs of the times, and the decadence and exploitative nature of the Peshwas. Again, this is in complete contrast to the way the Peshwas are glorified in most history books.

The Phules can be considered path-breakers in subaltern writing, with their ability to convert their revolutionary thoughts into words. Savitribai's essay on debt, 'Karz', deserves special mention as in it she condemns the practice of incurring loans to celebrate festivals, thereby placing the borrower in a debt trap.

Savitribai’s remarkable influence through her teaching and writings is evident in an essay by her 11-year-old student Muktabai, which was published in the paper *Dyanodaya*, in 1855. The essay, to which a chapter has been devoted in this book, is called 'Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi', which translates as 'Grief of the Mangs and Mahars', two dalit caste groups that were exploited in the Maharashtra of those times. The essay is deemed to be among the
earliest surviving documentations by a woman writer of the atrocities committed against untouchables, and is gripping even in English translation. Its questioning of the discriminatory practices of the Hindu religion reflect anger, frustration, bewilderment and incisive thoughts like: "The Creator is the one who created the Mangs, the Mahars and also the Brahmans, and He is the one who is filling me with wisdom to write." "Oh, the Mahars and Mangs, you are poor and sick. Only the medicine of knowledge will cure and heal you." The writer's lambasting of the caste system, and the religion that upholds it, reveals the 'potential explosiveness' of education that the Phules were so keen to create.

Muktabai's writing reflects the thoughts of the Phules even with regard to an acknowledgement of the British as liberators of the lower castes in India. In the chapter devoted to Savitribai's poems, there is the acknowledgement of British rule and English in the removal of the caste system: "Brahman's role is now in ashes/Under the Englishman's whips and lashes./It is all for the good of the poor./Manu's dead at English mother's door."

The equal relationship of the Phules and the revolutionary vision that Savitribai imbibed from her husband are visible in the three letters that she wrote to him when she was away from him. There is a chapter devoted to this, titled 'Love Letters Unlike Any Other'. The letters reveal how Savitri's spousal love was inseparable from the larger commitment to the redemption of the downtrodden through education. She says: "There are many idiots here, as in Pune, who poison people's minds and spread canards against us. But why should we fear them and leave this noble cause we have undertaken? It would be better to engage with the work instead. We shall overcome, and success will be ours in the future. The future belongs to us."

Besides worthy contributions from Braj Ranjan Mani, Cynthia Stephen, Gail Omvedt, Pamela Sardar, Sunil Sardar and Victor Paul, there are images in the book of Savitribai and Jotiba Phule that offer rare glimpses into the life and times of this pioneering couple.

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