



Savitribai Phule's Social Justice Vision as a Critical Lens for the NEP 2020's Treatment of Dalit Women

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Abstract- This article offers a critical examination of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, employing the philosophical framework of Savitribai Phule, India's first female educator and a trailblazer in anti-caste social reform. Although the NEP 2020 is often praised for its progressive rhetoric concerning inclusivity and adaptability, this analysis posits that a Phulean perspective highlights a notable divergence between the policy's universalist language and the specific, intersectional realities of Dalit women. The study assesses the policy's limitations by revisiting Phule's foundational ideas, which emphasize the importance of community-based activism, the value of indigenous critique, and education as a tool for liberation from caste and patriarchal structures. The three main areas of failure are the "knowledge caste system" that still exists because of hierarchical school boards, the removal of anti-caste historiography from curriculum frameworks, and the fact that gender-neutral provisions are not enough to help Dalit women who are doubly marginalised. The article looks more closely at the policy's decentralisation processes and how it treats language. It also finds other levels of exclusion. It concludes by advocating for an educational framework that surpasses superficial inclusion, favouring a transformative, Phulean model of social justice grounded in intersectional resource allocation, narrative control, and community accountability.

Keywords- Pasmanda, Bahujan, Indian Knowledge Systems, Dalit Women, Social Justice, Anti-Caste Education, Intersectionality, Savitribai Phule, NEP 2020.

I. Introduction

Savitribai Phule and her husband Jyotirao Phule started the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, when the Indian subcontinent was still very strict about social order and often didn't let Shudras, Ati-Shudras, or women go to school. This behaviour was not just charitable; it was a radical, revolutionary move that directly attacked the Brahmanical patriarchal order. Savitribai's work was based on one powerful idea: education is the best way to get rid of the two systems of caste and patriarchy. She understood that the struggle for literacy for a Dalit woman encompassed more than mere reading; it entailed the restoration of dignity, the challenge of prevailing epistemologies, and the facilitation of self-assertion. Long before the term became common in academic writing, her work as a teacher, poet, and social activist showed an understanding of how different forms of oppression interact.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, unveiled roughly two hundred years after its predecessor, was billed as a comprehensive blueprint for overhauling India's educational landscape. It pledges inclusivity, transparency, and flexibility, signaling a departure from the colonial and exclusionary approaches that characterized earlier



iterations. The policy specifically identifies Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women as "Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups" (SEDGs) who will benefit from its equality initiatives. However, a key question remains: can the NEP 2020 truly eliminate the structural problems that Savitribai Phule faced? Conversely, does it inadvertently fortify the very power structures she aimed to dismantle, notwithstanding its ostensibly progressive language?

This article contends that the NEP 2020 presents significant shortcomings when evaluated through the framework of Savitribai Phule's understanding of social justice. The policy frequently simplifies the complex and varied forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women into a singular "gender" category or a broad SEDG classification, despite its inclusive terminology. Phule's life and contributions demonstrate that this universalist approach neglects the nuanced interplay of gender and caste-based oppression. Initially, this article will examine the fundamental tenets of Savitribai Phule's educational philosophy. Subsequently, it will analyze the NEP 2020's provisions concerning Dalit women from multiple perspectives. Finally, it will suggest a Phulean framework for transformative education that goes beyond the limits of the policy.

II. Savitribai Phule: The Pioneer of Anti-Caste Education

To use Savitribai Phule as a critical lens, you need to know how revolutionary her work was. Her main concern was not just how to get an education, but also what it should be about and what it should be for.

Education for Liberation, Not Conformity

Savitribai viewed education as a pathway to Bahujan emancipation, a term denoting the majority population, encompassing women, Shudras, Ati-Shudras, and Adivasis who had historically been excluded from the generation of knowledge. She didn't want to teach Dalit women how to fit into a Brahmanical social structure; instead, she wanted to give them the tools to question and bring it down. Kavya Phule (1854), a collection of her Marathi poems, is a powerful way to teach. In "Go, Get Education," she tells poor people to use what they learn to get out of their situation:

- Get out of bed, wake up, and learn something.
- Get away from the chains of ignorance and tradition.
- Learn how to read, write, and think.
- You won't be able to claim your rightful place until then.

It's important to remember that Phule's method changed things instead of just copying them. She thought of education as a way to change the system instead of a way to move up in an unfair system. Her insistence on teaching girls from the Mahar, Mangs, and Mali groups was an act of epistemic disobedience against a social system that linked literacy with Brahmanical status and knowledge with purity (O'Hanlon, 1985).

Intersectionality Before the Word

Long before Kimberlé Crenshaw used the word "intersectionality" for the first time in 1989, Savitribai lived and showed what it meant. As a woman from the Mali (gardener) caste, she worked at the intersection of discrimination based on caste and gender. She



understood that the violence that Dalit women face is a unique and complex form of subordination that needs specific action, not just the result of casteism and sexism. She recognised that the educational needs of women were not homogeneous when she initiated the first school for girls, rather than exclusively for Brahmin or upper-caste girls. A Dalit woman's struggle for education in the 19th century was very different from a Brahmin woman's. The Brahmin woman had to deal with both caste-based exclusion and patriarchal control, while the Dalit woman only had to deal with limitations caused by patriarchy (Kamble, 1983). Contemporary policy frameworks that acknowledge caste and gender as separate, cumulative categories still fall short of this holistic comprehension of intersecting oppression.

The Role of the Community and the Teacher

Savitribai says that a teacher is more than just a teacher; they are a revolutionary. She and her coworkers, including Fatima Sheikh, the first Muslim woman teacher in India, were socially boycotted, physically abused, and left out of things every day. As she walked to school, people threw rocks, mud, and cow poop at her. Still, she kept going, often bringing an extra sari to change into after these attacks. Her determination showed that social and educational progress are closely related. She also put a lot of emphasis on getting people involved in their communities by making schools that were not top-down state programs but instead based on local needs and responsible to the people they served (Keer, 1964). Her ideas are based on the idea of community-led accountability, which means that schools are part of and respond to the communities they serve.

III. The NEP 2020: A mix of hope and confusion

The NEP 2020 is a big change from the NPE 1968 and NPE 1986. It stresses basic reading and writing skills, recognises the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and tries to include early childhood education. Its provisions for SEDGs, which include "female and transgender individuals," "SC/ST," "migrants," and "other disadvantaged groups," show how it wants to achieve social justice.

The Potential of Flexibility

The policy's emphasis on adaptable curricula, diverse entry and exit pathways, a multidisciplinary methodology, and the elimination of rigid streaming across disciplines (NEP, 2020, p. 12) is intended to enhance opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These students often encounter obstacles stemming from social discrimination, familial responsibilities, or economic constraints. Furthermore, the strategy proposes creating a "Gender Inclusion Fund" and a "Special Education Zones" initiative. These would be used to concentrate resources in areas with the most significant educational challenges.

The Paradox of Universalism

From a Phulean viewpoint, the policy's primary shortcoming resides in its tendency toward universalism, which tends to homogenize diverse marginalized groups into a singular entity.



By including Dalit women within the broader category of SEDGs, the NEP 2020 potentially obscures the unique structural challenges they encounter. The policy frequently fails to acknowledge the interconnected and persistent nature of "gender" and "caste," often treating them as distinct forms of disadvantage. A Dalit woman, for instance, experiences humiliation within the classroom setting due to caste-based discrimination, which manifests through segregated seating, restricted access to drinking water sources reserved for upper castes, the assignment of menial tasks, and the subtle (and overt) reinforcement of caste hierarchies within textbooks and teacher conduct (Nambissan, 2010; Thorat & Newman, 2009).

A policy that treats gender and caste separately cannot fully address the caste-gendered nature of this oppression.

IV. A Critical Analysis Based on Phulean Principles

When Savitribai Phule's methodology is applied to NEP 2020, it reveals significant deficiencies in various domains. This section expands the analysis to five main areas of concern.

The "Knowledge Caste System" in the School Structure

One of the most important Phulean criticisms of the NEP 2020 is that it makes a hierarchy of school boards seem real. This policy, in effect, supports a system of educational stratification, giving preference to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE), and international examination boards.

This mirrors Savitribai's historical struggle against marginalization. The state board system, consistently underfunded, lacking resources, and socially devalued, primarily serves Dalit and Adivasi students.

From a Phulean perspective, this structural hierarchy represents a contemporary form of Brahmanical gatekeeping. It ensures that "low" knowledge, as embodied by the state board curriculum in vernacular languages, is disseminated to the general populace, while "high" knowledge, encompassing English-medium education, CBSE curricula, and cosmopolitan perspectives, remains accessible only to those possessing social and economic advantages.

This dual system reproduces the caste logic that Savitribai sought to eliminate, asserting that certain forms of knowledge and the bodies that access them are inherently superior to others. The NEP 2020 indirectly supports this hierarchy instead of challenging it by not requiring resource parity across boards or getting rid of the prestige economy that puts some curricula above others.

Erasing Anti-Caste History from Education

One significant concern regarding NEP 2020 is its focus on "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS). A thorough analysis uncovers a narrow and exclusive definition of "Indian" knowledge, notwithstanding the policy's portrayal of IKS as a vehicle for decolonising education and restoring indigenous intellectual traditions. The IKS framework, as it is currently understood by implementing agencies, is primarily



influenced by the Sanskritic, Vedic, and Brahmanical traditions, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Ayurveda, and texts such as the Arthashastra.

How does Savitribai Phule's knowledge fit into this picture? What are the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and Jyotirao Phule? There are no Bhakti or Sufi saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Chokhamela, or Baba Bulleh Shah who questioned orthodoxy and offered different spiritual and social visions. Where is the Tirukkural? It has deep moral lessons. Where are the indigenous epistemologies, resistance songs, folklore, and oral traditions of Dalit communities?

Savitribai posits that an authentic Indian knowledge system must be anti-caste. The intellectual contributions of historically marginalised individuals must be central. The NEP 2020 could push Dalit students away, and it could also make them study a tradition that has been used to justify their enslavement by focusing on a single, Brahmanical view of Indian history. This is very different from Phule's goal of teaching people to think critically about social inequality instead of keeping it going.

4.3 Caste-Gendered Realities vs. Gender-Neutral Provisions

The NEP 2020 establishes a "Gender Inclusion Fund" to ensure equitable access and participation (NEP, 2020, p. 15). Even though the fund is a good idea, a Phulean lens brings up worries about how it is set up and run. Is the fund meant to help Dalit women with their specific problems, like having to travel long distances alone through dangerous areas where they face violence based on their gender and caste, the financial stress of dowries and early marriage (which is made worse by caste-based economic marginalisation), or the psychological violence of caste-based discrimination in schools?

Savitribai's life shows that not all women's problems are the same. In the 19th century, the struggles of Dalit women for education were very different from those of Brahmin women. A Dalit woman's education today is also affected by things like a curriculum that often shows her community's history in a bad or stereotypical way, microaggressions from upper-caste teachers, the lack of role models from her own community in faculty positions, and the constant threat of caste-based violence both inside and outside of schools. A generic gender fund does not address these issues without a clear mandate for an intersectional, caste-sensitive approach.

Language as a Barrier: How the Medium of Instruction Excludes

Another thing that people often don't think about when they look at the policy is how it handles language. The NEP 2020 says that the "home language" or "mother tongue" should be used as the language of instruction at least until Grade 5 (NEP, 2020, p. 13). This clause seems to be progressive, but it needs to be thought about carefully. Dalit women frequently utilize regional languages or community-specific vernaculars within their households, rather than the officially designated "mother tongue," such as Hindi, Marathi, or Tamil. This lack of recognition can engender a sense of alienation among students concerning the language.

Moreover, the policy's emphasis on the "mother tongue" is problematic due to its failure to acknowledge the caste-based dimensions of language. As Dhananjay Keer and other



scholars have observed, language in the Indian context is not devoid of caste-based implications.

The higher caste has had an effect on the way languages like Tamil and Marathi are written. Teaching Dalit children in a standardized, Brahmanical-influenced version of their "mother tongue" can be just as alienating as teaching them in English. A Phulean approach would advocate for the democratization of language and the recognition of Bahujan vernaculars. This was achieved by Savitribai, who wrote her poems in everyday Marathi instead of the more formal, Sanskrit-influenced literary style.

The Risk of Elite Capture and Decentralisation

The NEP 2020 is all about giving institutions more freedom and decentralising power. This aligns with Phule's emphasis on community governance; however, it presents significant challenges in a context where caste systems are deeply entrenched. Without strong safeguards, decentralization can lead to elite control. When local power structures, often made up of upper caste groups, gain more freedom, they might use that freedom to further marginalize Dalit students.

Savitribai's community-led education program aimed at democratization, not just decentralization. This approach gave those who were usually excluded real power to make decisions.

If there aren't clear ways for Dalits and Bahujans to have a say in government, the decentralisation parts of NEP 2020 could make the same local elites who have always fought against Savitribai's work even stronger.

V. Advancing a Phulean Framework for Educational Justice

Savitribai Phule believes that the problems with the NEP 2020 point to a different way of doing things. A Phulean framework for contemporary education would be underpinned by four pillars:

Historiography and Narrative Control Against Castes

The intellectual traditions of Dalit-Bahujan populations must be integrated into the curriculum as fundamental to Indian modernity rather than merely incidental. This means that all levels of education must teach the works and lives of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Fatima Sheikh, and modern Dalit-Bahujan writers and thinkers in depth. It is also important to teach kids about the history of anti-caste struggles so that they can understand Indian society. As Savitribai's poetry showed, whoever owns the story controls freedom. Education must provide Dalit women not only qualifications but also a critical understanding of their history and the tools to challenge dominant narratives.

Community-Based Governance and Responsibility

According to Savitribai's vision of creating community-based schools that are accountable to marginalised people, the implementation of educational programs must be decentralised and include Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) with reserved representation for Dalit and Bahujan women. To give Dalit moms a lot of power to make decisions, parent-teacher associations need to be changed. To make sure that schools are not only easy to get to but also safe, respectful, and dignified places for



Dalit women, free from gender violence and caste-based humiliation, systems of accountability must be put in place.

Distribution of Intersectional Resources

The Gender Inclusion Fund and similar equity initiatives should be restructured into an Intersectional Justice Fund, incorporating explicit, quantifiable objectives pertaining to the advancement and retention of Dalit women. This fund should encompass the following provisions:

To mitigate the risks associated with travel, the establishment of secure hostels, either on-campus or in proximity to educational institutions, is essential.

Mental health counseling, specifically addressing trauma stemming from caste and gender-based violence, should be provided by counselors representing under-represented groups.

Substantial grants, designed to alleviate financial burdens, should cover all educational expenses, including essential supplies, transportation, and a living stipend.

All teachers need to keep learning about caste-sensitive teaching.

Making Language and Knowledge Available to Everyone

From a Phulean point of view, language is a place where both freedom and oppression happen. Accepting Bahun dialects and vernaculars as valid languages for teaching would be beneficial. Standardized language instruction should be implemented, acknowledging students' caste identities while avoiding their marginalization. Furthermore, to ensure accessibility to these intellectual traditions, anti-caste and Dalit literature should be translated into all Indian languages.

VI. Conclusion

The legacy of Savitribai Phule transcends historical significance; it represents a contemporary concept that necessitates considerable responsibility from our educational institutions. Her goal was never to just give people access to an unfair system that was already in place. It was about creating a brand new system based on fairness, critical thinking, epistemic justice, and getting rid of caste and patriarchy.

The NEP 2020 is a chance for change, but this Phulean ideal is not fully realised in its current form. Its ability to help Dalit women is limited by its universalist philosophy, reliance on a hierarchical educational system, focus on a narrow, Sanskrit-based knowledge system, lack of awareness of caste-gendered realities, and inadequate safeguards against elite capture. To truly honour the legacy of India's first female teacher, as this paper has argued, we need to go beyond the policy's language of inclusion and demand an education system that is transformative, intersectional, and unapologetically anti-caste.

"Education is the path to freedom. Without it, we remain in chains." Savitribai Phule once said, "Education is the path to freedom. Without it, we remain in chains." Dalit women in contemporary India continue to experience these constraints, as demonstrated by both explicit forms of discrimination and legal frameworks that, while



ostensibly liberating, perpetuate underlying structural inequalities. A comprehensive understanding of the revolutionary potential originating from a modest Pune school in 1848 necessitates the adoption of a genuinely Phulean perspective, one that prioritizes narrative agency, communal responsibility, intersectional resource allocation, and linguistic equity.

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