



## Revisiting Insights of Jyotiba Phule, Sahu Ji Maharaj and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on Women-Empowerment: An Analysis

**Dr. Vinod Kumar Yadav**

Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Email: vinod.yadav@rgu.ac.in

**Dr. Tashi Phuntso**

Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Government College Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Email: Phuntsotashi007@gmail.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i2.3171>

---

### **Abstract**

Women-empowerment is the concept of fostering and promoting economic, educational, political, psychological, and social autonomy and independence among women. It is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept that has an ever lasting impact on the inclusive and sustainable development of our society. The lifelong struggle of Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and Savitribai Phule was dedicated to women-empowerment in India. The Phule couple were 19th century social reformers who confronted many adversities and challenges while working to transform an exclusive society into an inclusive society. Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj, the King of Princely State of Kolhapur, was a champion of women-empowerment campaigns during the early 20th century period. Sahu Maharaj did a commendable and an emulating job as a ruler of the state by making an appropriate use of the power and authority vested in him towards to establishment of an egalitarian and inclusive society. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, as an architect of the Constitution of India, exerted his utmost efforts to translate the visions of Phule and Sahu Maharaj into reality. He materialized this vision by incorporating appropriate provisions across different sections of the Constitution, ensuring social, economic, and political justice in India. Thus, these distinguished social activists, social reformers, and social engineers played a substantial role not only in the realization of vision of an inclusive society but also in integrating women as an integral and inseparable part of our diverse and multicultural society. These luminaries considered education an essential element of women-empowerment. This research article aims at analyzing the perspectives and contributions of Phule, Sahu, and Ambedkar to women-empowerment in India.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar; Education; Inclusive Society; Phule; Sahu; Women-Empowerment

### **Introduction**

Savitribai Phule and Jyotirao Govindrao Phule have made an exceptional history in the field of social justice and women's education in India. Savitribai Phule was a notable educationist, philanthropist and social reformer of her time. The society regards her as a mother of feminism in India. The Phule

couple devoted their entire lives to the dignified and decent existence of women, as well as socially and educationally weaker sections of the society. She materialised the concept of secular education by way of imparting education to girls from all sections of the society irrespective of their caste, creed and community. It's a worth mentioning the fact in this context that education for girls was strictly prohibited during her time. Moreover, it was a punishable offence to impart education to girl children during this period. Hindu religious norms were against the female education. The Phule couple introduced the system of parents-teacher meeting to win the trust of parents and to help them understand the significance of girls' education. They introduced many other measures, including construction of hostels, preparing syllabus to serve the needs of female students, imparting vocational training, etc. to attract and encourage children towards school and education. They were of progressive and rational nature. They were against superstitions, wrong traditions and practices spread across the society (Biswas, 2020). The Phule couple will remain immortal and unforgettable for their significant contributions towards the upliftment and betterment of the marginalised sections of society. They tried their level best to provide education to the underprivileged and vulnerable sections of society, including women. They took many initiatives and measures for the promotion and expansion of education among women.

Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj was a spectacular social reformer and social revolutionary. He was an unparalleled king of Kolhapur Kingdom who channelized the power and authority vested in him towards the social and economic upliftment of society. He made primary education mandatory for all and heavily emphasised women's education. He established schools for girl children in backward, hilly, remote and rural areas and encouraged girls to study together with boys where there were no separate schools for girls. Sahu Maharaj made special provision for the promotion of education among adult women. He offered scholarship to the meritorious girls to continue their education free of cost. He not only focused on primary and secondary education of girls but also on their higher education. Shahaji Maharaj not only made provisions for the women's education but also ensured their participation in the politics. In his perspective, the wheel of transformation of a woman's life wouldn't turn in the absence of education. He attempted to bring radical change in the lives of women by way of enacting different legislations in the direction of women-empowerment (Jaya, 2021). The presence of ruler like Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj in a state is in the larger interest of the people of state because he was not only the king of State but the King of its subjects also. He was the supporter of inclusive, sustainable and social justice based development. He made his utmost efforts to provide mandatory and free education to all, especially girl children.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was not only a renowned intellectual figure but also a social thinker, social activist, social reformer, an economist and a philosopher of twentieth century India. Furthermore, he was the foundation of Indian Constitution, based on social justice principles and values. He always believed in the movements led by women. He had an important and active role in eliminating prevalent social issues. He manifested the idea of gender equality and women's education in the interest of society by launching journals, namely Mook Nayak (1920) and Bahishkrit Bharat (1927). In his opinion, education is the most powerful instrument that could withhold every woman from the shackles and bondages of society across the world. He as a Law Minister of India introduced the Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament. This Bill aimed at gender equality and women-empowerment. However, this Bill could not attract required support to make it a law. Therefore, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet by conveying his disagreement over the deprivation of women's right by the Parliament. His dreams with regard to the equality of men and women are yet to be materialised (Choudhury, 2020). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is not only known for his wisdom but also for his social engineering as reflected in the Constitution of India built under his abled leadership. He was a great visionary and an insightful leader as well. His contributions towards the social, economic and political development of society have been recorded in the history forever.

These personalities were associated with the socially and educationally backward sections of society. They had observed discriminations, social injustices, and inhumane treatments against

vulnerable and marginalised sections of society, including women, in their personal lives. As a result, they were well aware of atrocities, discriminations and injustices experienced by backward communities, inflicted by the upper caste people. Therefore, they had sharp understanding of the significance of education for the backward sections of society and for women.

### ***Review of Literature***

Mahatma Phule i.e. Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was not only the founding father of social revolution but also an architect of the gender revolution in India. He worked hard for more than half a century towards the women's reform movement in Maharashtra. He belonged to a lower caste community in the Brahmanical caste system that was not allowed to get education but to be subservient to the higher castes. He obtained his education from the Scottish Mission in Pune and the government institution. The British government could be attributed to his fearless and independent views. There had been a great influence of the thoughts and writings of Gautam Buddha, Kabir Das, Sant Tukaram and Ashwaghosh, and teachings of Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad on the personality of Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. In his perspective, education was the only instrument to the emancipation of Shudras and women as they were deliberately and forcibly kept away from education by the Brahmanical caste order. The first example of his women-empowerment initiative was the encouragement of his own wife Savitribai Phule to read and write. The Phule couple established their first school for the girls' education on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1848 at Bhidewada, Puna where Savitribai was its headmistress. They established no less than 18 schools for women in the next four year period. Sagunabai and Fatima Sheikh also served in these schools as teachers. According to him, the overall improvement of society is based on women's education, and education is an integral part of women's human rights. They were against the injustices to women and patriarchal mind set of the society. In his view, the root cause of women's oppression exists in Hindu religion in India. However, the fundamental reason behind the worldwide secondary position of women is organised religions. He promoted widow remarriage and discouraged child marriage (Dhara, 2016).

Savitribai Phule is widely appreciated for her unprecedented role in the expansion and promotion of women's education. She was an ardent supporter and promoter of women-empowerment. The deprived and downtrodden sections of India were enslaved for thousands of years. She used education as an instrument for emancipating vulnerable sections of society. Savitribai Phule was in no way less than her husband Jyotirao Govindrao Phule in terms of her revolutionary efforts and enthusiasms. She organised the Mahila Sewa Mandal whose prime objective was to spread awareness among women to their rights, roles and responsibilities. She headed many movements and campaigns. Savitribai was perhaps the only revolutionary woman leader in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India (Siviah, 2018).

Savitribai Phule has left an unparalleled impression in the history of women's education in India. She was India's first woman teacher who struggled for the all-round progress and development of women. She established India's first school for women. The upper caste society was not in support of running schools for girls. Furthermore, upper caste individuals were strongly against the education of Dalits. In those days, education was reserved for the upper caste people. Therefore, she had to face many atrocities and injustices while running schools for the education of Dalits and girls. However, she fought ceaselessly for the universal education. According to her, education is one of the most basic needs of human beings. She worked hard for a long time to end female infanticide, child marriage and sati pratha that lowered the status of women in the contemporary society ("International Girl", 2022).

The Marriage Registration Act was passed in 1919 during Sahu Maharaj regime. This law allowed and validated inter-caste and inter-religious marriages and widow remarriages, and empowered women to choose their life partners at their own. Sahu Maharaj attempted to stop child marriage by enhancing the legal age of marriage for women. The Prevention of Cruelty to Women Act was another achievement in

the direction of women-empowerment. The Kolhapur Divorce Act was a significant piece of legislation that empowered women to leave their husbands with whom they were experiencing troubled marital relationships. However, men were already enjoying this right. Sahu Maharaj supported and encouraged women's education. He was against purdah system and different other prevalent social evils (Dhara, 2016).

Rajarashi Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj was a renowned king of the Princely State of Kolhapur. He had a very sharp understanding of the significance of education for all. He decided to provide education to the deprived, downtrodden and oppressed sections of society in order to accommodate them in administration and bureaucracy. Therefore, he made education compulsory for all. In his view, no nation could progress and prosper in the absence of education, and hence, it is the onus of the government to provide free and compulsory education to the society. He left no stone unturned in providing education to women. Moreover, he made his efforts to impart English language education to girls. According to Sahu Maharaj, equality in society is not possible at all in the absence of education to all. In his opinion, the lack of proper nutrition causes physical weakness, while the absence of education leads to backwardness, therefore, education serves as the ultimate solution to almost all the problems. He not only realised the significance of free and compulsory education for all, but also worked for the same goal to bring about social change (Gaikwad, 2019).

The rule of Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj itself is an exemplary rule for societal harmony and transformation, and for the establishment of equitable and just society. He served as a ruler of Kolhapur State for around three decades. He was not just a ruler but an idea, institution, and an ideology. He ensured education for all, reservation for the socially and educationally backward sections, modernisation of city, development of dam and sports during his rule. He issued a Manifesto against Observance of Untouchability, 1919. This manifesto strictly ensured the universal practice of equal treatment for all the members of society. Sahu Maharaj eliminated the practice of bonded labour. He supported women's education and equal rights for women. Moreover, he legalised divorce, banned Devadasi system, and passed a law against domestic violence to end the exploitation of women. His top priority was to provide education to all sections of the society irrespective of caste, creed and community (Mishra, 2021).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a strong supporter of gender equality that have been backed by constitutional provisions of Article 14, 15 and 16. The principle of gender equality has been incorporated in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. He was the person who laid down the foundation of social justice in the Indian Constitution. In his opinion, it is impossible to envisage social justice in the absence of gender equality. He made an extensive study on the status of women in India. Education is an essential element of the empowerment of an individual. According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, education has an instrumental role in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The approach of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to women-empowerment was quite different from other social reformers working on the women-empowerment. The fundamental objective of his life was to establish a social justice based society. He provided women with equal position on par with men, aligning with his objectives by incorporating supportive and substantial provisions in the Indian Constitution for this purpose. He not only extensively and intensively worked for untouchables but also for the progress and prosperity of women across the society (Yeasmin, 2018).

Women-empowerment is a multidimensional, multifaceted and multi-layered concept that as a mechanism attempts to develop greater social, economic and political autonomy and independence among women. He worked a lot for women-empowerment throughout his life. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his wife Ramabai established a women's association in 1928. According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the overall progress of a society is determined by the degree of progress of women in the society. He opined that the relationship between a husband and his wife should be like the relationship between friends (Dubey, 2020).

Indian women have been observing confinement and restrictions for a long period of time. Women in India have come across two different phases in their lives, namely subjugation phase and liberation phase. The traditions of Sati, Jauhar, and Devadasi have been largely defunct in India today. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made significant efforts to lead the society on the way of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was the person who dismantled the barricades on the path to progress and prosperity of women in India. He had a strong faith in the potential of women in the social reform process. Therefore, he used to measure the progress of society by the degree of progress being experienced in the lives of women. Significant and impactful changes in the status of women had been contemplated through the introduction of social legislations. The Constitution of India has guaranteed fundamental rights and freedom, such as protection of life and personal liberty, which can be availed by both men and women in the same manner. Government of India and state governments have implemented a large number of schemes aimed at women-empowerment after taking into the consideration the guidelines, recommendations, suggestions and statutes put forth by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Solkhe, 2018).

## ***Objective of Study***

This article is driven by the following two major objectives:

- To analyze the perspectives of Jyotirao Govidrao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj, and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar with regard to the women-empowerment in India.
- To evaluate the contributions of Jyotirao Govidrao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj, and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar with regard to the women-empowerment in India.

## ***Research Methodology***

This research article is of descriptive cum exploratory nature. This article is primarily based on secondary sources of information, facts and figures. Different newspaper articles, research journal articles, and articles available on different websites related to this research article have been accessed in order to write this research article.

### **Jyotirao Govidrao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj, and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar: Perspectives on Women-Empowerment**

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and Savitribai Phule were social architects who made up their minds to redesign and redevelop the Indian society to make it an inclusive and egalitarian society. In their opinion, education was the sole weapon to eradicate social injustices, discriminations, and substandard treatments experienced by deprived and downtrodden sections of society, including women. It aimed to emancipate them from all constraints and restrictions imposed by the upper caste people. They were against the superstitions, wrong traditions and practices, and religious rituals and ceremonies. According to them, Hindu social order is liable for the widespread discrimination and women's exploitation in the society. Education is a powerful weapon that can emancipate the majority community from various forms of exploitations and limitations. Furthermore, it is the primary means to guide women towards empowerment and emancipation.

Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj was an outstanding social architect and social reformer of his time as a King of the Princely State of Kolhapur. He had very good understanding of underlying causes of prevailing exploitations, discriminations, and hardships of majority community, including women and vulnerable sections of society. In his personal view, it is unimaginable to think about the future progress

and prosperity of a state in the absence of education for all; hence, it is one of the most significant responsibilities of the state to ensure the delivery of free and compulsory education to all. He believed that education is an essential element in establishing equity and equality in society. As a result, achieving equity and equality within society is difficult without ensuring access to universal education. He expressed that just as lack of nutrition causes physical weakness, the absence of education similarly leads to societal backwardness. His perspective to education can be summarized as the absence of education is the root cause of almost all the prevalent social, economic and political issues. Thus, his overall understanding of the role and relevance of education in society was both extensive and intensive. Furthermore, he recognized education as a fundamental element of women-empowerment.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a great scholar and a social scientist as well. He was the man of social justice whose contribution in the Constitution of India laid down the foundation of social justice and welfare state in the governance of India. Moreover, he was an eminent social thinker of his time. In his opinion, social justice can no more sustain in the absence of gender equality i.e. gender equality or women-empowerment is essential for the sustainable social justice. He believed in the fact that education is an integral part of women-empowerment that has potential to emancipate them from their various restraints and restrictions. Thus, he was an ardent advocate of women's education and gender neutral society. Therefore, his parameter for the measurement of societal progress was the degree of freedom being experienced by women in society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's insight to women-empowerment can be summarized as education is the most powerful weapon of women-empowerment.

Phule, Sahu and Ambedkar's perspectives to women-empowerment are crystal clear as evidenced by their lifelong efforts and emphases with regard to the women-empowerment. All these social scientists and thinkers were in no way against the women-empowerment but they were ardent advocates of women-empowerment in Indian society. In nutshell, their ultimate way to make the women-empowerment a reality at ground level was education. As their ideological expressions claim that the absence of education is the most significant factor that restricts women-empowerment in different explicit and implicit ways. Thus, women's education is the key to women-empowerment.

## **Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj, and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar: Roles and Contributions to Women-Empowerment**

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and Savitribai Phule were originally social reformers who decided to bring about radical change in the society through the instrument of education. They were aware of the prevalent discriminations, injustices and inhumane treatments faced by the deprived, downtrodden, and socially and educationally backward sections of the society, inflicted by the upper caste individuals. As a result, they decided to provide education to the vulnerable sections of society, including women, for whom education was strictly prohibited during that time. They made significant efforts towards the expansion and promotion of education among the deprived and downtrodden sections of society. Their efforts are spectacular in the expansion of education that is evidenced by the introduction of large number of schools for women's education. Thus, the Phule couple played an unparalleled role in the women-empowerment as education is the part and parcel of women-empowerment. They are regarded as the founder of feminism in India.

Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj was a ruler turned social reformer and social engineer who channelized the powers and authorities vested in him as a ruler of a Princely State towards social transformation and social revolution. He was well aware of the various prevalent social issues of contemporary society. The overall mission and vision of his life can be summarized as the establishment of a fair and equitable society. In his opinion, absence of education is the root cause of prevailing atrocities, discriminations, substandard treatments, and various other social issues in the society. He as a ruler of the state left no stone unturned to bring about social change that is evidenced by the introduction of different laws during his rule concerning the eradication of social evils, establishment of social justice, and all round and

inclusive development of society. His topmost priority was to provide education to the exploited, deprived, downtrodden, and socially and educationally backward sections of society, including women, enabling them to be accommodated in the state administration and bureaucracy. Furthermore, he heavily emphasized women's education to make them an integral and indispensable part of the society. Thus, it can be inferred that Chhatrapati Sahu Maharaj played an unmatched and inspiring role in women-empowerment and emancipation. Continuing his legacy will undoubtedly pose a significant challenge for the future politicians and policymakers.

Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar was not just a man but an idea, institution and an ideology as well. He was a distinguished scholar of Law and Economics in India. Moreover, he was an eminent social architect as evidenced by his massive contributions towards the establishment of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity across society in India; and his profound popularity among the exploited, deprived, downtrodden, oppressed, and socially and educationally backward sections of society. He was not only a social architect but also an architect of Indian Constitution. As a social architect, he taught the majority society to be united, law abiding, mentally and morally strong, and committed to social justice. As an architect of Indian Constitution, he laid down the foundation of egalitarian society, liberty, fraternity, socialism, social justice, and welfare state in the Constitution of India. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a member of Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India tried his level best to build an inclusive and integral India in order to promote and prosper unity in diversity. He was a staunch supporter of women-empowerment, as evidenced by his consistent support for women's movements and various initiatives aimed at women's right and respect.

Phule, Sahu and Ambedkar's contributions to women-empowerment are worth appreciable and apparent in India. It can be observed and analyzed by comparing the status of women before and after their efforts and emphases on women-empowerment. Each one of these luminous social architects and engineers played a significant role in their own styles to let the women-empowerment be a reality at ground level.

## Conclusion

It has been rightly articulated that a society that does not value and respect women cannot progress. This small statement in itself is enough to have a comprehensive understanding of women-empowerment in the contemporary modern world. Women-empowerment is not just essential for the progress and prosperity of women but more important for the all-round, inclusive and sustainable development of society. Following statement has added a new dimension to women-empowerment:

“Unity is meaningless without the accompaniment of women. Education is fruitless without educated women, and agitation is incomplete without the strength of women.”-**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar**

There is a great role of omen behind a significant unity and integrity of nation, and education has its no significance unless it benefits women. Furthermore, an agitation can never achieve its inherent goals until and unless women power is involved in it. In nutshell, it can be summarized as women are an integral and inseparable part of society. It implies that a society can never progress and prosper further unless it considers the role and relevance of women in society. Therefore, women-empowerment is an inevitable element of societal growth and development process. Following quote is truly correct when we take the underlying role of women in the overall social, economic and political development process into the consideration:

“Education is the primary requirement of men and women.”-**Mahatma Jyotiba Phule**

Education is one of the most important and unavoidable basic needs of human beings in addition to other well-known basic needs. Education is the only factor that makes human beings different from rest of the living beings on the earth. Thus, education is the most significant part of a civilized society that converts humans into human resource. All these great personalities of our country have duly recognized the significance of women-empowerment in the development of society in particular, and in the progress and prosperity of state in general. Moreover, they believed that women's empowerment is a myth in the absence of women's education. Therefore, they made efforts to educate women to make them strong and independent. Their efforts and contributions in this direction are noteworthy and unimaginable.

### **References**

1. Dhara, L. (2016, February 15). Feminist Phule. *Forward Press*. <https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/02/feminist-phule/>
2. Sivaih, T. (2018, June 5). Savitribai Phule: The Lady who changed the face of women's right in India. *Vikalp Sangam*. <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/savitribai-phule-the-lady-who-changed-the-face-of-womens-rights-in-india/>
3. International Girl Child Day 2022: Savitribai Phule, the role she played in upliftment of girls' education. (2022, October 11). *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/savitribai-phule-the-role-she-played-in-upliftment-of-girls-education/>
4. Biswas, P. C. (2020). Pioneer of women-empowerment: Savitribai Phule. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(5), 3063-3068. <https://www.jcreview.com/admin/Uploads/Files/62dfaba7249045.07540965.pdf>
5. Dhara, L. (2016). Chhatrapati Sahu and gender justice. *Forward Press*. <https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/08/chhatrapati-shahu-and-gender-justice/>
6. Jaya (2021, June 29). What are Rajashri Maharaj's thoughts on women's education? *HubPages*. <https://discover.hubpages.com/politics/What-Are-Rajshri-Shahu-Maharajs-Thoughts-On-Womens-Education>
7. Gaikwad, R. (2019, January 4). Shahu Maharaj, the original champion of right to education. *Round Table India*. <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/the-historical-founder-of-rte-act-chh-shahu-maharaj/>
8. Mishra, S. (2021). The eternal essence of Rajarshi Sahu Chhatrapati. *News Bharati*. <https://www.newsantariksh.com/Encyc/2021/6/26/Shahu-Maharaj.html>
9. Yeasmin, M. (2018). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision for women-empowerment. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 6(2), 1-4. <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1892838.pdf>
10. Dubey, K. (2020). B. R. Ambedkar and women-empowerment. *PalArch Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 17(7), 10825-10830.
11. Solkhe, M. (2018). Role of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar towards women-empowerment in India: An Assessment. *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*, 15(5), 520-527. <http://ignited.in/I/a/200842>
12. Choudhury, S. B. (2020). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Role in empowering the women of India. *International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(4), 1-5. <https://core.ac.uk/download/329080915.pdf>

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).