

Impact of Savitribai Phule on Education: A Study in the Context of NEP 2020

Anusmita Bose

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Kalyani, Nadia, WB-741235

Abstract:

Savitribai Phule, one of the earliest pioneers of modern education in India, played a transformative role in challenging social inequalities through education. This study explores her contributions with special reference to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Using a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis of historical records, academic literature, and policy documents, the study examines the relevance of her ideas in the present educational context. Savitribai Phule redefined education as a means of empowerment by promoting access for women and marginalized communities and by encouraging dignity, equality, and critical awareness. Her vision extended beyond basic literacy to what this study describes as “deep inclusion,” where education actively challenges social barriers and reshapes individual and collective identities. While NEP 2020 reflects similar goals such as equity, inclusion, and holistic development, the study finds that these principles are often implemented at a surface level.

The analysis identifies a gap between policy intent and actual practice, particularly in addressing structural inequalities, empowering teachers, and fostering meaningful community participation. To bridge this gap, the study proposes a contextual and transformative approach to education that integrates local realities, critical pedagogy, and active social engagement. It emphasizes the need to move beyond policy frameworks and focus on real classroom and community practices. The study concludes that Savitribai Phule’s educational philosophy remains highly relevant today. Achieving the goals of NEP 2020 requires not only policy alignment but also a deeper commitment to social justice, where education becomes a tool for genuine transformation and inclusive development.

Keywords: Savitribai Phule, Inclusive education, NEP 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a powerful instrument for social transformation and national development. Among the many contributors to educational reform in India, Savitribai Phule holds a prominent place due to her pioneering efforts in promoting inclusive education. In the 19th century, access to education was largely restricted by caste and gender hierarchies. Savitribai Phule challenged these barriers by establishing the first girls’ school in Pune in 1848, thereby initiating a transformative movement in Indian education (Chitnis, 2019; Wankhede, 2020). Her work not only expanded educational access but also redefined education as a means of social justice and empowerment (Kumar, 2023). She believed that education should not only teach knowledge but also nurture confidence, self-respect, and the courage to question societal norms. Her vision encouraged communities to recognize the potential of every individual, regardless of their social background.

Phule’s philosophy emphasized equality, dignity, and critical consciousness, inspiring learners to question social inequalities and oppressive practices. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to reform the Indian education system by focusing on equity, inclusion, and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020). It emphasizes universal access, gender inclusion, and the integration of ethical and

experiential learning. This study examines the impact of Savitribai Phule's contributions and evaluates their relevance in the context of NEP 2020.

2.BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education in India has historically been shaped by strong social hierarchies, where access was often limited by caste, gender, and economic conditions. In such a context, Savitribai Phule emerged as a pioneering reformer in the 19th century. She strongly believed that education could serve as a tool for social justice and empowerment. By opening schools for girls and marginalized communities, she directly challenged existing social norms and helped lay the foundation for inclusive education in India (Chitnis, 2019; Wankhede, 2020).

Her approach to education went beyond basic literacy. She emphasized moral development, critical thinking, and respect for human dignity. These ideas continue to resonate with present-day reforms, especially the National Education Policy 2020, which highlights equity, inclusion, and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020). Issues like structural inequality, limited teacher empowerment, and weak community participation still affect the full implementation of inclusive education (Sharma & Devi, 2022; Kumarasamy & Saikumari, 2023).

This study therefore looks at how Savitribai Phule's contributions continue to influence modern education. It also examines how her ideas align with NEP 2020 and identifies the gap between her transformative vision and current practices. Understanding this connection can help in developing more inclusive, socially responsive and meaningful educational environments in India.

3.REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Kumar (2023) explains that true inclusion goes beyond simply providing access; it also requires creating learning environments that bring meaningful change. Referring to historical examples such as Phule's schools, Kumar emphasizes that education should encourage critical thinking, ethical understanding, and social awareness. This view helps in better understanding how the goals of NEP 2020 can be applied in real situations.

Kumarasamy and Saikumari (2023) examine how NEP 2020 incorporates inclusive curriculum elements like human values and respect for diversity, highlighting its potential to strengthen equity and unity within education.

Rajkonwar (2023) provides a critical perspective by identifying various barriers to inclusion under NEP 2020, particularly focusing on infrastructural and systemic issues that limit equal educational opportunities.

Sharma and Devi (2022) analyse NEP 2020 and point out that its focus on equity, inclusion, and holistic development reflects long-standing educational goals in India. They also note that several policy provisions, such as universal access and gender inclusion, align closely with the ideals associated with Phule's legacy.

Wankhede (2020) further explores the relationship between caste, gender, and education, showing that Phule's efforts were not only symbolic but had a real impact on marginalized communities. The study suggests that her work helped change social attitudes towards education and dignity, paving the way for future reforms.

Chitnis (2019) offers a detailed historical account of how Phule challenged both caste and gender discrimination by starting schools for girls and lower-caste students at a time when education was largely inaccessible to them. This work remains important for understanding the context and significance of her contributions.

Mehta (2019) discusses broader aspects of inclusive education and argues that the core ideas behind Phule's work—such as equity, community involvement, and moral development—are closely connected to the aims of modern educational policies. Mehta highlights that reformers like Phule continue to provide valuable insights for making education more socially responsive.

Florian (2009) also stresses that inclusive education cannot be achieved through policy alone; it requires deeper systemic change that brings social justice into everyday classroom practices.

Overall, these studies indicate that Phule's educational philosophy, based on equality, empowerment, and social change, remains highly relevant even today. While policies like NEP 2020 attempt to address these goals in a structured manner, the real challenge lies in effectively implementing them. This requires stronger engagement with social realities and a focus on practical classroom experiences.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the impact of Savitribai Phule's educational contributions on inclusive education in India?
2. How does the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reflect the principles of Savitribai Phule's educational philosophy?
3. What gaps exist between Savitribai Phule's vision and the implementation of NEP 2020 in achieving social justice and inclusion?

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using documentary analysis. The data sources include academic literature and policy documents such as NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020). Secondary sources such as journal articles and scholarly works are also utilized.

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Transformative Impact of Savitribai Phule on Inclusive Education in India

Savitribai Phule's contributions represent a foundational shift in the development of inclusive education in India. Her pioneering efforts to educate girls and marginalized communities directly challenged the rigid caste and gender hierarchies of 19th-century society (Chitnis, 2019; Wankhede, 2020). By opening the doors of education to those historically excluded, she not only expanded access but also redefined education as a means of empowerment and social justice. Her work emphasized dignity, equality, and critical awareness, aligning closely with contemporary principles of inclusive education (Kumar, 2023). Her legacy continues to shape present educational discourse, particularly in promoting equity and participation. However, limiting her impact to historical achievements underestimates the depth of her educational vision.

From a deeper analytical perspective, this study proposes the concept of "Deep Inclusion." This concept argues that true inclusion is not achieved merely through access or representation, but through the transformation of social consciousness, institutional culture, and learner identity. Savitribai Phule's work reflects this deeper level of inclusion, where education enables individuals to critically engage with and resist structures of inequality.

Extending this idea, the study introduces “Inclusion as Transformation, not Accommodation.” Modern systems often accommodate marginalized learners within existing structures, whereas Phule’s approach sought to transform those structures themselves. This distinction is crucial for rethinking inclusive education in contemporary India. Thus, her contribution should be understood as a dynamic framework that continues to challenge and reshape the meaning of inclusion in education.

6.2 Philosophical Convergence between Savitribai Phule’s Ideas and NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 incorporates several elements that resonate with Savitribai Phule’s educational philosophy. Its emphasis on equity, inclusion, and holistic development reflects a commitment to addressing disparities in the education system (Ministry of Education, 2020). Provisions such as universal access, gender inclusion, and support for disadvantaged groups demonstrate a clear alignment with her vision of education as a tool for empowerment (Sharma & Devi, 2022; Chase & Keneiseno, 2022).

The policy also promotes experiential learning, ethical values, and learner-centered pedagogy, which parallel Phule’s emphasis on meaningful and socially relevant education. These features suggest that her philosophical influence is embedded within contemporary policy discourse.

However, this alignment remains largely structural and rhetorical rather than deeply transformative. NEP 2020 emphasizes skill development, innovation, and economic productivity, which, while important, may dilute the emancipatory potential of education (Kumar, 2023).

To deepen this analysis, the study introduces the concept of “Surface vs. Transformative Alignment.” Surface alignment refers to the presence of similar goals and terminology, whereas transformative alignment requires a shared commitment to social change, critical awareness, and redistribution of power. Building on this, a new idea proposed is “**Policy Translation Gap.**” This suggests that even when policies reflect progressive ideals, their translation into practice often reduces them to measurable outcomes such as enrollment rates, performance indicators, and employability. In this process, the deeper purpose of education as a tool for liberation is weakened.

- Contextual relevance is crucial: Phule’s approach was deeply rooted in local communities, addressing social realities and cultural needs. NEP 2020, while promoting flexible curricula, still faces challenges in ensuring education meets local needs effectively.
- Teacher empowerment matters: Phule viewed teachers as agents of social change, not just deliverers of content. Giving teachers more autonomy and professional support can strengthen the transformative potential of education.
- Community engagement is essential: Phule’s model relied on collective participation to achieve educational equity. NEP 2020 encourages involvement, but effective and sustained community participation remains limited. Strengthening these processes can help translate policy into real social transformation.

Therefore, while NEP 2020 reflects Savitribai Phule’s philosophy in intent, it requires a stronger emphasis on critical pedagogy and social justice orientation to fully embody her vision.

6.3 Gaps and the Need for a Contextual-Transformative Educational Framework

Despite conceptual similarities, significant gaps exist between Savitribai Phule’s vision and the practical implementation of NEP 2020. One of the most critical gaps lies in addressing structural inequalities. Savitribai Phule directly confronted caste-based discrimination and gender oppression, whereas NEP 2020 adopts a broader and less specific approach to marginalized groups (Wankhede, 2020). This generalization risks overlooking deeply rooted social realities.

Another gap is related to the role of teachers. Phule envisioned teachers as active agents of social transformation, whereas current frameworks primarily emphasize instructional competence and professional standards (Sharma & Devi, 2022). This limits the transformative potential of education. Additionally, the absence of strong community engagement mechanisms in NEP 2020 contrasts sharply with Phule’s grassroots approach, where education was closely connected with community life and social reform (Pushpa & Nitin, 2025).

To address these limitations, this study proposes a “Contextual-Transformative Education Model.”

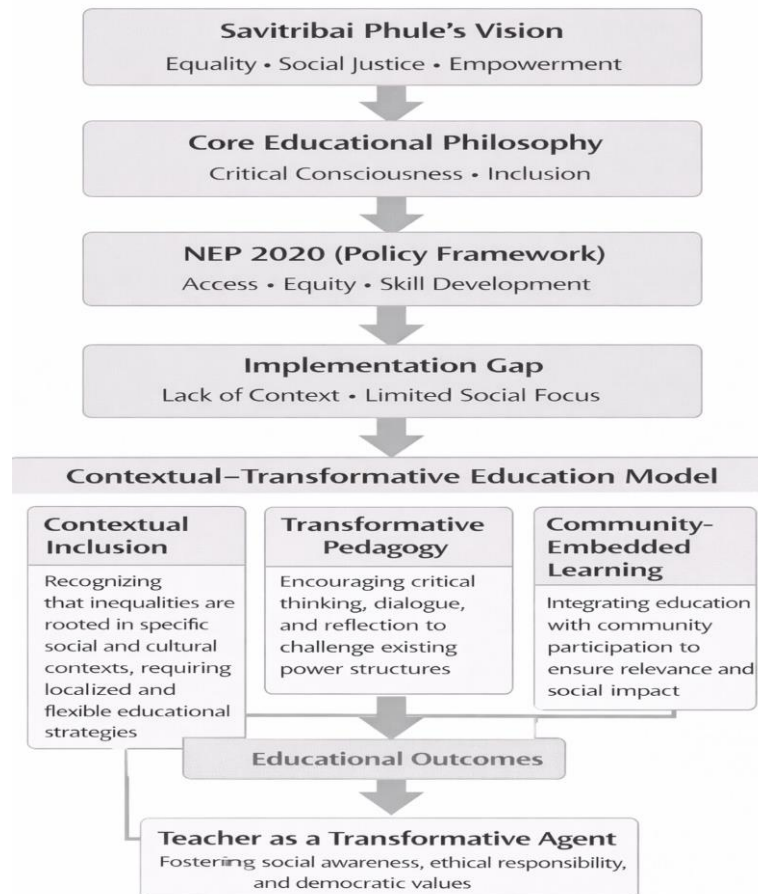


Figure: Contextual-Transformative Education Model

This model is built on three key pillars:

- **Contextual Inclusion:** Recognizing that inequalities are rooted in specific social and cultural contexts, requiring localized and flexible educational strategies.
- **Transformative Pedagogy:** Encouraging critical thinking, dialogue, and reflection to challenge existing power structures.
- **Community-Embedded Learning:** Integrating education with community participation to ensure relevance and social impact.

Further extending this framework, the study introduces the concept of the “Teacher as a Transformative Agent.” In this role, teachers move beyond content delivery to actively engage in fostering social awareness, ethical responsibility, and democratic values among learners.

Another original idea proposed is “From Policy to Praxis.” This highlights the need to shift focus from policy formulation to its lived implementation in classrooms and communities. Without this shift, inclusive education risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

Ultimately, achieving meaningful inclusion requires a transition from standardized policy approaches to context-sensitive, practice-oriented transformation, where education becomes a lived experience of equality and empowerment.

7. CONCLUSION

Savitribai Phule’s pioneering work demonstrates that education is not just about learning facts, but about creating opportunities for social change and equality. Although NEP 2020 reflects her ideals of inclusion and equity, truly fulfilling her vision requires going beyond policy-engaging communities, empowering teachers as agents of change and fostering critical thinking in students. Her legacy continues to inspire a form of education that is transformative, participatory and socially conscious.

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