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Savitribai Phule: Agency, Authorship and Feminist Pedagogy

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Abstract:
Savitribai Phule occupies a singular position in nineteenth-century Indian history as the first woman teacher and one of the earliest modern women poets in Marathi. This paper argues that Savitribai did not merely *become* a reformer through circumstance; rather, she consciously *created* herself as an authoritative educator and poet through a sustained practice of writing, teaching and public action. From her early poems in *Kavya Phule* (1854) to her letters, speeches and institutional labor, Savitribai crafted a voice that transformed her social marginality into moral and intellectual authority. Her authorship extended beyond printed texts to embodied acts: walking daily to school amid abuse, founding institutions for women and Dalits and documenting her work for posterity. By reading her poetry, epistolary writings, pedagogical practices and public interventions together, this study demonstrates how Savitribai constructed a coherent, authored subjectivity as witness, guide and agent of social change. Her deliberate self-authorship not only challenged caste and gender hierarchies but also produced a lasting model of agentive womanhood in colonial India.

Keywords: Savitribai Phule, agency, authorship, self-authorship, women's education, Dalit feminism, nineteenth-century India

Introduction

On her way to the school she helped establish in Pune in 1848, Savitribai Phule was routinely greeted not with respect but with stones, mud and verbal abuse.[1] Members of the orthodox upper castes hurled cow dung and garbage at her, furious that a woman, particularly one educating Dalits and Shudras, dared to occupy public space as a teacher. Anticipating this violence, Savitribai carried an extra sari to change into after the abuse. This seemingly simple act reveals much about her historical significance: she did not retreat, nor did she suffer silently. Instead, she planned, endured and continued. Her daily walk to school was not merely a commute; it was a repeated, visible assertion of purpose and identity.

[1] Savitribai Phule and Jyotirao Phule established the first school for girls at **Bhide Wada, Pune, in 1848**. Multiple historical accounts record that Savitribai faced daily verbal abuse and physical harassment, including the throwing of stones, mud, and cow dung, while walking to school. These acts were aimed at enforcing caste and gender boundaries that restricted women's access to public space and education. See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*.

Born in 1831 into a marginalized Mali community and married as a child to Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai began life without access to literacy or formal education.[2] Yet within a few decades, she emerged as a pioneering educator, a published poet and a public intellectual whose influence reshaped debates on caste, gender and knowledge in western India. While historical narratives often frame her transformation as the result of Jyotirao Phule's reformist vision, such readings risk minimizing Savitribai's own agency. This paper contends that Savitribai's journey from illiterate child bride to authoritative teacher and poet was not accidental or derivative but the outcome of a conscious and sustained project of self-authorship.

Drawing on Indian feminist historiography and Dalit feminist thought, this study frames Savitribai Phule's life and work as an authored self produced through deliberate acts of self-authorship. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege argue that Dalit women's writings and actions must be read as theoretical interventions rather than mere autobiographical testimony, foregrounding agency under conditions of caste patriarchy (Rege). Similarly, Gopal Guru emphasizes the epistemic authority of the marginalized subject who speaks from lived experience. While Stephen Greenblatt's notion of self-authorship helps conceptualize identity formation within power structures, this paper privileges Indian feminist frameworks to read Savitribai's writing and action as conscious strategies of self-authorship within colonial, caste-based society. Through writing poetry, composing letters, delivering speeches, maintaining institutional records and performing courageous public acts, Savitribai created a new social role for herself: that of a woman who speaks, teaches, records and leads. In doing so, she expanded the very meaning of authorship in nineteenth-century India, where women and Dalits were systematically excluded from intellectual authority.

This paper examines four interrelated domains of Savitribai's self-authorship. First, it analyzes her poetry, especially *Kavya Phule*, to show how she claims literary authority and positions herself as both witness to oppression and guide toward liberation. Second, it turns to her letters and educational writings to explore how she negotiates intimacy, partnership and independent voice while theorizing education as public, transformative labor. Third, it reads her embodied actions: teaching, institution-building and relief work as performative texts that reinforce and extend her written authority. Finally, it considers her legacy and archival presence, arguing that Savitribai displayed a clear awareness of history and posterity. Together, these sections demonstrate that Savitribai Phule's life constitutes a powerful example of authorship as resistance and identity as deliberate creation.

The Poetic Voice

Savitribai Phule's entry into the public sphere as a poet marked a decisive moment in her self-authorship. As Uma Chakravarti notes, women's access to authorship in nineteenth-century India was tightly regulated by caste and gender norms; Savitribai's poetic intervention therefore constitutes an act of epistemic disobedience. The publication of *Kavya Phule* in 1854 was itself a radical act.[3] At a time

[2] Savitribai Phule was born on **3 January 1831** in **Naigaon village, Satara district (present-day Maharashtra)**, into the Mali caste, classified as Shudra within the Brahmanical hierarchy. She was married at approximately nine years of age to Jyotirao Phule. After marriage, Jyotirao taught her to read and write. She later received formal teacher training at an institution run by **American missionary Cynthia Farrar in Ahmednagar**, making her one of the earliest formally trained women teachers in India.

[3] *Kavya Phule* was published in **1854** and is widely regarded as one of the earliest poetry collections authored by an Indian woman in Marathi. The poems address education, caste oppression, gender injustice, and moral awakening. English translations of Savitribai's poems vary; quotations in this paper follow commonly cited translations found in Braj Ranjan Mani (ed.), *Selected Writings of Savitribai Phule*.

when women's literacy was rare and Dalits were systematically denied access to education, Savitribai's appearance as a published poet challenged entrenched assumptions about who could speak, write and instruct. Poetry became her first sustained medium for claiming intellectual and moral authority.

Kavya Phule is written in simple, direct Marathi, a deliberate choice that signals both accessibility and resistance. By rejecting elite Sanskritized registers, Savitribai aligns herself with the oppressed communities she addresses. Her language is didactic but never abstract; it speaks to lived realities of ignorance, suffering and awakening. In the poem often translated as "Go, Get Education," Savitribai exhorts the oppressed to break free from the chains of ignorance:

"Go, get education / Be self-reliant, be industrious / Work, gather wisdom and riches."

Here, Savitribai positions herself as a guide, urging readers toward self-transformation. The imperative tone is significant: she does not plead or merely lament injustice but commands action. This authoritative voice is striking given her social location. Through poetry, Savitribai creates herself as one who knows and therefore one who can direct others.

Another recurring theme in her poetry is awakening. Ignorance is depicted as darkness, while education becomes light, a metaphor deeply rooted in bhakti traditions and reformist discourse. In poems criticizing Brahmanical orthodoxy, Savitribai exposes how religion is used to sustain hierarchy. Yet her critique is not nihilistic; it is constructive. Knowledge, she insists, is the means through which the oppressed can reclaim dignity.

Importantly, Savitribai's poetic "I" is both personal and collective. She speaks as one who has suffered exclusion, but she also speaks *for* others. This dual positioning allows her to move from marginal witness to moral leader. Poetry thus becomes a practice of agentive self-making, enabling Savitribai to imagine and inhabit an identity unavailable through traditional roles of wifehood or domesticity.

Moreover, by publishing poetry, Savitribai enters the literary public sphere and leaves a textual trace that resists erasure. Her poems circulate beyond the classroom, granting her a public platform that traditional gender roles denied. This transition from private experience to public articulation marks the first stage of her transformation into an authoritative social reformer and prepares the ground for her educational and institutional work.

Epistolary Identity and Educational Authorship

If poetry allowed Savitribai Phule to claim a public voice, her letters reveal the ongoing negotiation of identity within intimate and institutional relationships. Joan Scott's insistence that experience must be read as historically produced rather than self-evident is useful here, as Savitribai's epistolary voice transforms lived suffering into reflective political consciousness (Scott). Her correspondence with Jyotirao Phule is particularly revealing. Far from portraying herself as a silent companion, Savitribai emerges in these letters as a reflective thinker, a moral critic and an equal partner in reform.

In one well-known letter written during a period of separation, Savitribai recounts the abuse she faces while teaching and reflects on the larger purpose of their work.[4] Rather than seeking sympathy, she frames suffering as meaningful labor. This rhetorical move transforms personal hardship into ethical commitment. Writing becomes a space where she affirms her resolve and authors her own courage.

[4] Savitribai Phule's letters to Jyotirao Phule were written in Marathi and survive only in partial form. These letters were later compiled and published in edited collections of Phule writings. They are significant for revealing Savitribai's independent ethical reasoning, emotional resilience, and political consciousness, particularly her reflections on teaching amid hostility and social resistance.

The letters also demonstrate how Savitribai balances partnership with autonomy. While she often acknowledges Jyotirao's guidance, she articulates her own judgments and convictions. This dialogic authorship resists the erasure of her individuality within the Phule partnership. Through epistolary writing, Savitribai fashions herself as a co-thinker rather than a mere executor of another's vision.

Beyond private letters, Savitribai's educational writings: reports, speeches and records, constitute another crucial form of authorship. These texts document the daily functioning of schools, the number of students enrolled and the challenges faced. In doing so, they transform teaching from a supposedly natural feminine duty into public, intellectual labor worthy of documentation and analysis.

Savitribai's speeches to students and communities further reveal her pedagogical philosophy. Education, for her, is not rote learning but consciousness-raising. She consistently links literacy to self-respect and social equality. By articulating these ideas in public forums, she positions herself as a theorist of education, not merely a practitioner. Her role in training other women teachers is particularly significant. In mentoring and preparing them, Savitribai extends her authorship beyond texts to people. She effectively authors a movement, multiplying her influence and ensuring continuity. Teaching thus becomes a form of reproductive authorship, generating new agents of change.

Through letters and educational writings, Savitribai Phule consolidates her identity as an intellectual worker. These texts bridge the personal and the public, revealing a self that is reflective, strategic and committed to transformation. They also underscore her awareness that writing creates record and record creates history.

Embodied Authorship and Performative Identity

Savitribai Phule's self-authorship cannot be understood through texts alone. Dalit feminist scholarship insists that action itself functions as theory, especially where access to print culture is restricted (Rege). Savitribai's embodied practices therefore operate as performative texts that claim authority through visibility and ethical risk. Her body, actions and presence in public space functioned as powerful forms of embodied authorship. Each day she walked to school through hostile crowds, her body became a site of resistance. These repeated acts were performative assertions of identity: she was a teacher, regardless of social sanction.

The establishment of multiple schools for girls, Dalits and Shudras further demonstrates how Savitribai authored institutions. Founding and sustaining these spaces required administrative skill, endurance and vision. These acts inscribed her authority onto the urban and social landscape of Pune.

Her work during the plague epidemic of 1897 offers another striking example of embodied authorship.[5] At great personal risk, Savitribai cared for the sick and dying, eventually succumbing to the disease herself. This final act expanded the meaning of education to include compassion, service and ethical responsibility. It reinforced the moral authority she had long claimed in her writings.

Crucially, Savitribai did not treat action and writing as separate realms. Her embodied courage validated her words, while her words framed her actions as historically meaningful. She understood that public presence creates memory. By acting visibly and consistently, she ensured that her life itself became a text that could be read, remembered and emulated.

[5] During the **bubonic plague epidemic of 1897** in Pune, Savitribai Phule actively participated in relief work, personally transporting infected individuals to hospitals and care centers. She contracted the disease while assisting a sick child and died on **10 March 1897**. Her death is widely regarded as the final act of her lifelong commitment to service, education, and social reform.

Legacy and the Archive of Self

Savitribai Phule's concern with documentation suggests a clear awareness of posterity. Feminist historiographers such as Tanika Sarkar remind us that archives are sites of power; Savitribai's efforts to document her work represent an attempt to inscribe her into a historical record that systematically excluded women and Dalits. Through poems, letters, reports and institutional records, she curated an archive of self. Yet this archive is incomplete, shaped by neglect and loss. Much of her work survives only in fragments, raising questions about whose histories are preserved.

Despite these gaps, Savitribai successfully positioned herself within history. She did not write as a marginal footnote but as a central actor in social reform. Her self-authorship created a template for agentive womanhood, one grounded in knowledge, courage and public engagement.

Her legacy endures in contemporary feminist and Dalit movements that claim her as an intellectual ancestor. This afterlife confirms the success of her self-authorship: she continues to speak, guide and inspire long after her death.

Conclusion

Savitribai Phule's life and work compel us to rethink the very categories through which agency, authorship and resistance are conventionally understood in colonial and patriarchal contexts. This paper has argued that Savitribai did not simply emerge as a reformer through historical accident or spousal influence, but rather *authored herself* into public existence through a sustained, conscious process of self-authorship. Across poetry, letters, pedagogical practices, institutional labor and embodied courage, she constructed an identity that challenged the epistemic foundations of caste and gender hierarchies in nineteenth-century India.

Her poetry in *Kavya Phule* demonstrates that authorship for Savitribai was not an aesthetic pursuit detached from social realities, but a moral and political intervention. Writing in accessible Marathi, she transformed poetry into a pedagogical tool and positioned herself as both witness to oppression and guide toward liberation. This poetic voice enabled her to claim authority in a sphere from which women (particularly those from marginalized castes) were systematically excluded. In doing so, she expanded the scope of Marathi literary culture and redefined who could speak with intellectual legitimacy.

Similarly, her letters and educational writings reveal a deeply reflective self who understood writing as a means of consolidating experience into knowledge. Through epistolary exchange, Savitribai negotiated intimacy, partnership and autonomy, refusing to dissolve her identity within the larger reformist narrative dominated by male figures. Her reports, speeches and teacher-training efforts further demonstrate how she transformed education from a private, feminized duty into a form of public intellectual labor. Teaching, in her hands, became an act of theory-making, one that linked literacy to dignity, consciousness and social equality.

Perhaps most strikingly, Savitribai's embodied actions functioned as a form of authorship that reinforced and extended her written work. Her daily walks to school through hostile crowds, the founding of multiple educational institutions and her final act of service during the plague epidemic were not incidental episodes but integral components of her self-authorship. These acts inscribed her authority onto public space and collective memory, demonstrating that resistance need not always be articulated through text alone. In contexts where marginalized subjects are denied access to formal authorship, the body itself becomes a site of meaning-making.

Savitribai's awareness of posterity further underscores the deliberateness of her self-creation. Through documentation, record-keeping and publication, she sought to secure a place for herself and for the communities she served, within history. The partial preservation of her archive reminds us that historical memory is uneven and shaped by power. Yet the survival of her poems, letters and institutional legacy attests to the success of her project: she ensured that her life would remain readable, interpretable and generative for future struggles.

In foregrounding Indian feminist and Dalit feminist frameworks, this study has situated Savitribai Phule not merely as a social reformer but as a theorist of agency whose life constitutes a form of knowledge production. Her example reveals that authorship is not limited to texts but includes actions, institutions and ethical presence. Savitribai's self-authorship transformed exclusion into authority and marginality into epistemic power. In doing so, she offers a powerful model for understanding how oppressed subjects can intervene in history, not by awaiting recognition, but by creating it. Her life thus stands as a testament to the possibilities of deliberate self-authorship under conditions of systemic oppression.

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