



## Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule: The Champions of English Education

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### ABSTRACT

Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai championed English education as a crucial tool for empowering marginalised communities, specifically Dalits and women, to break free from caste-based oppression. Savitribai personified the English language as “Mother English”, a nurturing and liberating force that arrived to end the “darkness” of the Peshwa rule and the restrictive laws of Manu. Phule believed that while traditional education was often barred to the lower castes, English education provided a “golden chance” to gain scientific knowledge and social equality. She famously wrote that without knowledge, a person is “animal-like” and that education is the path to gaining true humanity and dignity. She viewed English as a means for economic independence and social equality, urging her followers to learn the language to challenge traditional hierarchies. Phule equated knowledge with wealth, asserting that learning English allows marginalised groups to break chains of caste.

### Introduction:

In Savitribai Phule’s last book of poetry, *Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1892), she returned to these many critiques and diagnoses of power in a poetic form that served as an elegy for her husband who had died a year before the book’s publication. In this work, the poem narrates the history of sequential oppression faced by women, Shudras, and Dalits. Savitribai Phule wrote 11 quatrains on the subject of “The English” or “anglai” in the collection of poems *Kavya Phule* (1854), presenting English education as a vital tool for social liberation and dismantling caste-based oppression and praising the English



language as a powerful tool for empowerment and social liberation for marginalised communities. The verses urge marginalised groups to gain knowledge, gain independence, and break free from traditional restrictive social structures. She positions this section after engaging other epochs in Indian history—from the Aryan invasion to the Brahmanical suppression of Buddhism to the Peshwa period. One of the powerful tools for showing supremacy is language. For instance, in ancient India, Sanskrit was the language of knowledge, and its learning was restricted to a handful of people. The Shudras were not allowed to take education, and consequently, they lost their social and economic status in society. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule aptly describes the root cause of the plight of the Shudras in his book titled ‘*Shetkaryacha Asud*’ (The Cultivator’s Whipcord). He says, “for want of education, interest was lost; for want of intellect, morality was lost; for want of morality, dynamism was lost; for want of dynamism, wealth was lost; for want of wealth the Shudras were degraded (demoralized); want of education (being uneducated) has caused all these disasters!”<sup>1</sup> Following her treatment of the time of the English, she concludes with the era of “Jyotirao”, which she argues was made possible by the advent of British rule. Here is her subsection of verses on the “English”.

### **The English**

Even though non- Shudras were employed for English work  
Shudras and women were not treated like Shudras.

English rule arose in this land of India

To improve things for the people in the region of Maharashtra || 1 ||

They wrote history shaped by the truth (satye).

And that’s how we understand Jyotiba’s historical work.

Just as surpassing English is pleasing and honest,

In this way Jyotiba’s story energizes us. || 2 ||

As humans are beings eligible for education:

The English declare such noble sentiments.

Therefore, we must study [to open our] eyes.

Let women, Shudras, and everyone else learn to read. || 3 ||

Observe the thunderous drumming of the English language!

Thus, we feel awestruck by their rule.



They give opportunities to the uneducated to learn.  
Thievery, murder, robbery and crime, is prohibited. || 4 ||

The priests (bhāṭa) of the schools of the Lord Jesus Christ  
Appeal to the Shudra children with education.  
Some say, “Oh how the Christians lead them like sheep!”  
This disparagement is vacuous; such talk is empty. || 5 ||

Thus, Shudras have been deprived “age after age.”  
Without an iota of happiness, always enduring misery,  
They are made voiceless just like an animal.  
This is their condition and no one feels ashamed. || 6 ||

Such people learn nothing about birth and death.  
Therefore, they don't [even know] that their suffering is like that of an animal.  
They have no awareness, and they have no knowledge.  
Humans in this condition can never be happy. || 7 ||

One says, “See the extent of my farm and my well.  
See my crop and how nice my sorghum is! “Mother English”  
I have a fair and lovely wife and a sweet daughter.”  
Such an egotistical man is not a worthy person. || 8 ||

One who acts in such sub- human (pasavī) and very vile ways  
Is always jealous of the happiness of other people  
He is fixated by greed for wealth and the wives of others.  
The truth is that he is not civilized but instead he is like a beast. || 9 ||

Such a person has no ethics (dharma) or morality (ṁtī)  
He has a mean demeanour like a brute.  
His life goes to waste.  
This is how the Shudra becomes a zero- man (sunya maṇus). || 10 ||



See here: it was the English year twenty- seven.

Twenty- seven: a year that people speak of with fondness,

An era of progress (sudharan), one of good fortune:

In Pune Jyotiba was born in his own home (svagrhi). || 11 || <sup>3</sup>

**The First Quatrain:** The first quatrain highlights the social changes that took place during British rule in India, especially in Maharashtra. Before this period, Indian society was deeply divided by the caste system. The upper castes enjoyed education, respect, and power, while Shudras and women were denied opportunities and treated unfairly. They were kept away from schools, knowledge, and social equality. The poet says that when English rule came to India, some changes began to appear. English education opened doors for people who had been oppressed for centuries. Although many jobs connected with English administration were still mainly given to non-Shudras or upper castes, the situation of Shudras and women slowly started improving. Under the influence of modern ideas such as equality, justice, and education, society began to question old customs and discrimination. The line “Shudras and women were not treated like Shudras” means that English education and new laws helped reduce some of the cruel treatment faced by lower castes and women. They started receiving opportunities that had earlier been denied to them. Reformers like Jyotirao Phule believed that English education could free oppressed people from ignorance and social slavery. The poet also suggests that British rule, despite being foreign rule, brought certain reforms in Maharashtra. Schools were opened, education spread, and discussions about human rights and equality became stronger. The quatrain does not blindly praise colonial rule, but it emphasises that English education became a powerful instrument for social awakening among the marginalised sections of society. Overall, the first quatrain celebrates the beginning of social reform, education, and dignity for Shudras and women.

**The Second Quatrain:** In the second quatrain the poet says that true history should be based on satya (truth), not on lies, prejudice, or the glorification of only powerful groups. Earlier, history was often written from the perspective of upper castes and rulers, while the struggles of poor people, women, and lower castes were ignored. Jyotirao Phule challenged this false version of history. He studied society carefully and exposed injustice through his writings and social work. He believed that truth must be spoken openly, even if it hurts those in power. According to him, real history should include the suffering and struggles of oppressed communities. The quatrain says that by understanding truth, we can truly appreciate Jyotiba’s historical contribution. He was not only a social reformer but also a thinker who awakened people’s minds. He encouraged education for girls and lower castes, fought against untouchability, and criticised blind traditions. His work helped people understand their rights and dignity.



English education represented progress, rational thinking, and freedom from ignorance. Jyotirao used these modern ideas to fight social inequality. The poet admires his honesty, courage, and dedication to truth.

Finally, the quatrain says that Jyotirao's story "energises us". This means his life continues to inspire people even today. His struggle against injustice gives strength and motivation to work for equality, education, and human rights. The poet wants readers to remember Jyotirao as a symbol of truth, social justice, and empowerment. Together, these quatrains show how English education and modern ideas helped challenge caste oppression and gender inequality in Maharashtra. They praise the role of truth and education in social reform and honour the contribution of Jyotirao Phule in uplifting Shudras and women. The poem presents education as a weapon against ignorance and injustice and encourages people to continue the fight for equality and human dignity.

These first and second quatrains strongly express the importance of education, equality, social reform, and the positive changes brought through modern learning and just governance. The poet praises education as a tool of liberation and presents it as a right that belongs to every human being, regardless of caste or gender.

**The Third Quatrain:** In the third quatrain, the poet says, "As humans are beings eligible for education." This line emphasises that education is a natural right of all human beings. The poet rejects the old caste-based belief that only upper-caste people deserved knowledge while women and Shudras were denied learning. By saying that all humans are "eligible" for education, the poet promotes the idea of equality and human dignity. The next line, "The English declare such noble sentiments," praises the British system of education because it introduced ideas of equal learning opportunities. During that period in Indian society, many lower-caste communities and women were deliberately kept away from schools and knowledge. The poet admires the English for encouraging education for everyone and for challenging the rigid social restrictions imposed by traditional caste systems. The line "Therefore, we must study [to open our] eyes" uses education as a symbol of awakening and enlightenment. Here, "opening our eyes" means becoming aware of truth, justice, rights, and self-respect. Ignorance had kept oppressed people trapped in poverty, superstition, and social discrimination. The poet believes that education can remove darkness from society and help people think independently. The final line, "Let women, Shudras, and everyone else learn to read," is a powerful appeal for universal education. The poet especially mentions women and Shudras because they were the most deprived sections of society. This line reflects a revolutionary



social vision where education becomes a means of empowerment and equality for all people, not just privileged classes.

**The Fourth Quatrain:** The fourth quatrain continues this praise of change and progress. The line “Observe the thunderous drumming of the English language!” creates a strong image of power and influence. The “thunderous drumming” symbolises the rapid spread and impact of the English language and modern education across society. It suggests that this new system is making a loud and unavoidable change in people’s lives. The poet feels amazed by this transformation, which is shown in the line “Thus, we feel awestruck by their rule.” The poet is expressing admiration for the reforms and order introduced through British governance, especially in the areas of law and education. The next line, “They give opportunities to the uneducated to learn”, highlights one of the most important themes of the poem — social inclusion through education. Earlier, education was reserved only for certain castes and classes, but now even poor and marginalised people are getting the chance to study. This opportunity represents hope, freedom, and social mobility. The final line, “Thievery, murder, robbery, and crime are prohibited,” praises the establishment of law and order. The poet suggests that education and fair governance can reduce crime and create a disciplined, civilised society. Knowledge and justice are presented as forces that improve human behaviour and promote peace. Overall, these third and fourth quatrains celebrate education as a revolutionary force that can destroy ignorance, caste discrimination, and inequality. The poet strongly supports the education of women and oppressed communities and views modern learning as the path toward social justice, awareness, and human progress.

**The Fifth and Sixth Quatrains:** The fifth and sixth quatrains strongly criticise the social oppression and inequality faced by the Shudras in Indian society. The poet speaks in a bold and reformative tone, showing how education, dignity, and human rights were denied to the lower castes for centuries. At the same time, the poet appreciates the role of Christian missionaries and schools that tried to educate the oppressed people when traditional society refused to do so. In the fifth quatrain, the poet says that the priests and teachers connected with the schools of Lord Jesus Christ invited Shudra children to receive education. During the time when this poem was written, many lower-caste children were not allowed to study in traditional Hindu schools because of caste discrimination. Education was treated as the privilege of the upper castes, while the Shudras were deliberately kept ignorant so that they would remain weak and dependent. Christian missionaries, however, opened schools for poor and lower-caste children and encouraged them to learn. The poet sees this as a positive and humane act because education gives knowledge, confidence, and freedom. The poet then mentions that some people criticised the Christians by saying that they were “leading them like sheep”. This means that orthodox people accused



missionaries of misleading or controlling the Shudras. The comparison with sheep suggests blind following. However, the poet rejects this criticism completely. He says that such accusations are “vacuous”, meaning empty and meaningless. According to the poet, the real issue is not religion but education and human upliftment. If someone gives knowledge and opportunities to the oppressed, criticising them without reason is foolish. The poet exposes the hypocrisy of those who denied education to the Shudras for generations and then complained when others tried to help them. Thus, the first quatrain praises education as a tool of liberation and condemns narrow-minded social prejudice.

The sixth quatrain becomes more emotional and painful. The poet says that the Shudras have been deprived “age after age”. This line highlights the long history of suffering and exploitation. Their oppression is not temporary but has continued for centuries. They were denied not only education but also respect, happiness, freedom, and social equality. The phrase “without an iota of happiness” shows that their lives were full of misery and hardship. They constantly suffered because society treated them as inferior human beings. The poet further says that they were made “voiceless just like an animal”. This is a very powerful and shocking comparison. Animals cannot speak for their rights or protest against injustice, and similarly, the Shudras were denied the right to express themselves, question authority, or demand justice. Society silenced them through fear, discrimination, and humiliation. The line reveals the inhuman treatment they received under the caste system. The poet feels deep sorrow that human beings were reduced to such helpless conditions. Finally, the poet says, “This is their condition, and no one feels ashamed.” Here the poet attacks society’s lack of humanity and moral responsibility. Even after seeing such suffering, the privileged classes feel no guilt or shame. They continue to accept inequality as normal. This line carries anger, disappointment, and a call for social awakening. The poet wants society to realise the cruelty of caste discrimination and to work towards justice, equality, and compassion.

Overall, these fifth and sixth quatrains are a strong protest against caste oppression and ignorance. They emphasise that education is the path to freedom and dignity. The poet condemns those who denied basic human rights to the Shudras and praises every effort made to educate and uplift them. The tone of the poem is both critical and compassionate, urging society to abandon discrimination and recognise the equality of all human beings.

**The Seventh and Eighths Quatrains:** The seventh and eighth quatrains from the poem “Mother English” carry a deep social and philosophical message. The poet criticises ignorance, selfishness, and narrow thinking among people who lack education and awareness. At the same time, the poet explains how true knowledge helps human beings understand life in a meaningful way. Mother English empowers



and nurtures the downtrodden people socially and economically. Alison Barret says, “English is a way of accessing socio-economic advancement. English, in this country, means a language of power, and if you don’t give them English, they cannot access power structures and effect changes in socio-economic policies.”<sup>2</sup>

In the seventh quatrain, the poet talks about people who live without education, awareness, or wisdom. According to the poet, such people do not understand the deeper truths of life, especially the meaning of birth and death. Human life is not just about surviving physically; it is also about understanding existence, suffering, morality, and purpose. But ignorant people fail to think beyond daily struggles. The poet compares their suffering to that of animals. Animals experience pain and hardship, but they do not possess the intellectual or spiritual awareness to question or improve their condition. Similarly, people without knowledge continue to suffer blindly because they do not understand the reasons behind their oppression or misery. This comparison is not meant to insult them but to show how ignorance keeps human beings trapped at a basic level of existence. The line “They have no awareness, and they have no knowledge” highlights the importance of education. Knowledge gives people the power to think critically, recognise injustice, and seek progress. Without awareness, people become victims of social exploitation, poverty, superstition, and oppression. They accept suffering as their fate instead of trying to change their condition. The last line, “Humans in this condition can never be happy,” conveys the poet’s main message. True happiness does not come only from material comfort. It comes from wisdom, self-respect, understanding, and freedom of thought. A person who lacks awareness can never experience real fulfilment because ignorance keeps the mind imprisoned. Thus, the poet strongly argues that education and enlightenment are necessary for human dignity and happiness.

In the eighth quatrain, the poet criticises people who are proud only of their material possessions and personal achievements. The speaker boasts about his large farm, his well, his crops, and even his beautiful family. These things symbolise wealth, status, and worldly success. However, the poet believes that a person who constantly praises himself and takes pride only in external possessions lacks true greatness. The man’s attitude reflects selfishness and ego. He measures his worth only through property, beauty, and family pride. He does not think about society, humanity, or the struggles of others. The poet suggests that such pride is shallow because material things are temporary and cannot define a person’s true character. The mention of “sorghum” (a crop) represents agricultural prosperity. The speaker is obsessed with showing off his success and wants others to admire him. But the poet disapproves of this narrow-minded attitude. A truly worthy person is humble, wise, compassionate, and socially aware—not arrogant about wealth or appearance. The final line, “Such an egotistical man is not a worthy person,” is



the moral conclusion of the stanza. The poet teaches that human value should not be judged by possessions or pride. Real worth lies in knowledge, humility, kindness, and service to others. A selfish and arrogant person may appear successful outwardly, but spiritually and morally he remains incomplete.

Together, these seventh and eighth quatrains emphasise the poet's belief that ignorance and ego are major obstacles to true human development. The first quatrain attacks lack of awareness and education, while the second attacks selfish pride and materialism. Through these ideas, the poet promotes knowledge, humility, social consciousness, and moral values as the foundation of a meaningful and happy life.

**The Ninth and Tenth Quatrains:** The ninth and tenth quatrains present a strong moral and social criticism of a person who lives without humanity, ethics, or compassion. The poet describes how selfishness, greed, jealousy, and immoral behaviour destroy a person's true human nature and reduce him to the level of a beast. At the same time, the poet also points toward the tragic condition of the oppressed Shudra community, whose humanity and dignity were damaged by social injustice and ignorance.

In the ninth quatrain, the poet says that a person who behaves in "sub-human" or "pasavi" ways acts like an animal rather than a civilised human being. The word "pasavi" means brutal, cruel, or beast-like. Such a person is always jealous of the happiness and success of others. Instead of feeling joy when others prosper, he burns with envy and hatred. Jealousy here is shown as a destructive emotion that poisons the mind and prevents a person from becoming noble or kind-hearted. The poet suggests that true humanity lies in empathy, brotherhood, and mutual happiness, but this wicked person lacks all these qualities. The poet further explains that this man is obsessed with greed for wealth and even desires the wives of others. This shows the depth of his moral corruption. He is not satisfied with what he has and constantly wishes to possess what belongs to others. Greed and lust become symbols of uncontrolled desire. According to the poet, civilisation is not judged by outer appearance, caste, or social status, but by inner values and moral conduct. Therefore, even if society may call such a man "civilised", in reality he is no different from a beast. The final line powerfully declares that the truth is that he is not civilised at all. The poet attacks hypocrisy in society, where people pretend to be cultured while their actions remain cruel and selfish.

**The Tenth Quatrain:** The tenth quatrain continues the moral criticism, such that "dharma" means ethics and "no niti" means morality. Dharma 'Here' does not simply mean religion; it refers to living truthfully, honestly, and responsibly. 'Niti' means ethical behaviour and wisdom in dealing with others. A person without these values becomes spiritually empty. The poet says that his behaviour is "mean" and



“brutish”, again comparing him to an uncivilised creature. His Life is wasted because he fails to achieve the real purpose of human existence which is to develop goodness, wisdom, and compassion. The last line is especially important and deeply symbolic: “This is how the Shudra becomes a zero-man (sunya manus).” The phrase “zero-man” suggests a person whose identity, dignity, and self-worth have been reduced to nothing. The poet is not blaming the Shudra community itself; rather, he is criticising the social system that kept the Shudras away from education, morality, self-respect, and human development. Due to oppression, ignorance, and exploitation, society turned them into powerless individuals who were denied recognition as complete human beings. The poet's tone is therefore both critical and sympathetic. He wants people to understand that without education, ethics, and self-awareness, A human being loses his true value.

These ninth and tenth quatrains reflect the reformist ideas associated with social thinkers like Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, who believed that ignorance, caste oppression, and lack of education destroy human dignity. The poet emphasises that true civilisation is based not on caste or wealth but on morality, humanity, equality, and respect for others. Through powerful language and sharp criticism, the quatrains encourage readers to reject jealousy, greed, and cruelty and instead embrace ethical and humane values.

**The Eleventh Quatrain:** The final eleventh quatrain speaks about the birth of Jyotirao Phule and presents it as a moment of great historical and social importance. The poet uses simple language, but the meaning behind the lines is deep and symbolic. The stanza celebrates not only the birth of a person but also the arrival of a new age of social reform, justice, and enlightenment in Indian society. The opening line, “See here: it was the English year twenty-seven,” refers to the year 1827 according to the English calendar. This was the birth year of Jyotirao Phule. By specifically mentioning the “English year”, the poet connects the event with modern history and recorded time, giving it historical authenticity. The line also prepares the reader to understand that something remarkable happened in that particular year. The next line, “Twenty-seven: a year that people speak of with fondness,” suggests that the year became memorable and respected because of the birth of Jyotirao Phule. People remember the year lovingly because Phule later became one of the greatest social reformers in India. He fought against caste discrimination, untouchability, inequality, and the oppression of women and lower castes.

Therefore, the poet implies that this year is precious in history because it brought hope and change for suffering people. The line “An era of progress (sudharan), one of good fortune” is highly significant. The word “sudharan” means reform, improvement, or progress. The poet believes that



Jyotirao Phule's birth marked the beginning of a new era of social awakening and transformation. Before Phule, society was deeply divided by caste hierarchy, superstition, and injustice. Education was denied to Shudras, Dalits, and women. Through his efforts, schools were opened for girls and lower-caste children, and social equality began to be discussed openly.

Thus, the poet calls his birth "good fortune" because society was blessed with a leader who would challenge injustice and inspire progress. The final line, "In Pune, Jyotirao was born in his own home (svagri)," gives a direct and personal description of his birth. Pune was an important cultural and social centre in Maharashtra, but it was also dominated by orthodox caste traditions. By stating that Jyotirao was born there, the poet indirectly suggests that a revolutionary reformer emerged from the very society that strongly practised discrimination. The word "svagri" means "in his own home", emphasising the simplicity and naturalness of his birth. Though born in an ordinary home, Jyotirao grew into an extraordinary personality who transformed society.

Overall, this final quatrain is a tribute to the birth of Jyotirao Phule and the beginning of a reformist movement in India. The poet presents his birth as a turning point in history, symbolising hope, progress, equality, and social justice. The stanza creates a feeling of admiration and gratitude toward Jyotirao Phule, whose life became dedicated to uplifting the oppressed and educating the neglected sections of society.

**Conclusion:** Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule encouraged Shudras and Atishudras to learn English for questioning the Brahmanical hegemony and the teachings imposed upon marginalised communities by Brahmins. The Phule couple hoped that English as a language and a culture could undo the restrictions of birth equalise the playing field for those not high-born and create new opportunities for women, Dalits, and Shudras in the spinning wheel of life. Jyotirao Phule provocatively names the mental anguish he hopes English education will eradicate as the 'Manu mindset' that Savitribai Phule captured in her poems which are composed to promote English. Savitribai Phule's gendered imagination of English as a mother, protector, educator, and source of new life is a theme Jyotirao Phule adopts as well. They also considered English education a tool to empower the Shudras and become culturally conscious. They believed that exposure to an international language like English can help in abolishing the caste system. The promotion of the English language will enable social mobility and ensure economic freedom for people belonging to marginalised communities. Thus, it is important to understand the role of Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule in promoting the English language.



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