

# Savitribai Phule: An Inspiration Sketched Through Graphic Narrative

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**Abstract-** In the present research paper titled *Savitribai Phule: An Inspiration Sketched through Graphic Narrative*, the researcher tries to bring forward the values of education, equality and liberty through the life and works of Savitribai Phule. A modernist, who is rightly called the Flame of revolution and education (*Kranti Jyoti and Jananajyoti*), a social reformer of 19th century India, a teacher, leader, thinker, writer and humanist. She is an innovation whose entire life is an inspiration for millions of people. She is a torch bearer who opened the path for women education and empowerment, going against the orthodox patriarchal traditions of those times. Walking hand in hand with her husband, the revered Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Savitribai dedicated her entire life for philanthropy. Efforts to foster more literature on Savitribai Phule's life and works needs to be encouraged. This graphic narrative is a part of such an initiative. The literary genre of Graphic novel uses illustrations and texts in a comic strip format to tell a story. The story of Savitribai Phule has been beautifully narrated through this contemporary literary medium along with upgrading the reader's critical skills.

**Indexed Terms-** Education, Graphic Novel, Equality, Social reform movement, Patua art.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Alan Moore who is perhaps the most acclaimed writer in the graphic story medium defined graphic novel as, "an expensive comic book" (Vicky). Scott McCloud in his "Understanding Comics" defined it as, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewers." (Vicky). In simple words, graphic novel

is a story told through text and illustrations in a comic strip format. A graphic novel has a peculiar vocabulary consisting of gutter, layout, panel, sound representation, speech balloon and thought balloon and is read with the use of these (Penguin). Graphic novel is not a comic book, as it significantly varies in content and form (NPTEL-NOC). *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Night Returns* are some examples of the renowned graphic novels (NPTEL-NOC). In Indian context, the audience has been exposed to a range of visual stimuli like the *Amar Chitra katha*, the *Chanda mama series*, the colorful posters which made it easy to transition into graphic narratives like Orijit Sen's *River of Strikes*, *Delhi Calm*, *Corridor*, *Kari*, *Hyderabad- A Graphic Novel*, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* and so on (NPTEL-NOC). The graphic novel on the life and works of Savitribai Phule titled *Savitribai Phule: An Inspiration Sketched through Graphic Narrative* (Leah) is a part of the "People and Ideas" initiative of Azim Premji University. It is a platform which is providing confluence of history, education, culture, egalitarian ideas, creative artistic illustrations and tons of inspiration. The 24 pages narrative is a handy and lucid way of exposing the young and the old to the life and works of Savitribai Phule.

- Portrayal of life and works of Savitribai Phule through the graphic narrative

The graphic narrative *Savitribai Phule: An Inspiration Sketched through Graphic Narrative* (Leah) built with the stunning illustration with the help of Patua paintings, the famous art of West Bengal belonging to the Kalighat school of paintings, is a creative medium of bringing forward history. The narrative has abundant use of colors. There are two panels on each sheet with no open panels, and a uniform gutter running between the panels throughout the novel. The speech and thought balloons appear when the characters express themselves. There are many caption boxes which speak directly to the reader and convey necessary information for the reader to understand the narrative. Close-ups are used to emphasize upon a particular character. No use of bleed and sound effect is observed in this graphic narrative. The color of skin of the characters are shown in different shades to provide representation of the diversity of population which exists in Indian society. The sarees worn by Savitribai with covered head and the turban which Jotirao Phule wore demarcate the characters being of Savitribai and Jotirao respectively. The fish shaped eyes of the characters, the silver-colored jewelry and the bold borders are the typical of Patua paintings used in the graphic narrative. The narration of the life and works of Savitribai became involving for the reader. Converting a text into illustrations with the help of folk paintings is an attempt to best utilize the visual memory of the reader and educating about the milestones in Indian history.

The socio-political situation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra was undergoing

devastating changes under the rule of Peshwa Bajirao II's rule coupled with the regressive caste system and the degraded standard of women in particular. The British government, though reluctant to introduce any changes in the social setup, took upon gradually with Governor General Ripon writing to the secretary of State Gladstone in 1882 about the changes, education, industry, railway and communication were bringing. Amidst this era of social reform movements, Savitribai was born on January 3, 1831 in Naigoan, Satara district in the house of Khanduji Newase. It can be appropriately said that Savitribai breadth the air of reformation ever since her birth. She was a brave and curious child, who was married to Jotirao Phule at the age of 9, according to the tradition of those times. After the wedding Savitribai moved to Pune and the transformation which came in her life in companionship of Jotirao Phule, along with the reformation she brought with her work is praiseworthy.

Savitribai's husband and the champion of human rights- Jotirao Phule was educated at a missionary school and his education made him comprehend that the principle of equality was missing in the society. He was influenced by the ideas of Thomas Paine as stated below which sparked fire within him to create a society that functions on the values of equality for all.

*I believe in equality of man...  
Endeavoring to make our fellow  
creatures happy... (Leah)*

In order to impart this value, he understood that education was the only tool for upliftment of the marginalized, hence he started educating Savitribai and sent her to a teacher training institute setting the anecdote true that

change begins with the household. Savitribai enthusiastically participated in the efforts taken by her husband and was a quick learner. Further in 1848, Jotirao Phule opened a school for girls in Bhidewada in Pune where Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh, another activist, taught. The school was an egalitarian place where the teachers did not discriminate amongst the students. Savitribai had to face harsh opposition from society at large who confirmed with the prevalent regressive ideas when she went to the school to teach girls. The couple did not yield to the opposition and continued to work for the noble cause. In 1852, the Education Department felicitated Jotirao and Savitribai for their extraordinary work in the field of girl's education.

They went on to open more schools and hostels for students who lived outside Pune. The writings of many of Savitribai's students show that Savitribai was a kind and selfless woman who was devoted to the betterment of humanity. The efforts of the duo did not limit to education. They started a shelter for exploited women. As the scope of the work increased the couple came across the complexity of the issues which grappled the society. The sensible minds went ahead of all the challenges leaving plethora of work. As their work continued and their understanding improved, they understood the need of adult literacy and they went on to open adult literacy center in their house itself. Once, Savitribai came to know about the threat villagers gave to kill a couple who had fallen in love with each other, breaking the barrier of caste, a lady tells her to stay away from the matter. Savitribai tells her,

*The injustice meted out in society is my business. It is also your business. If you*

*and I remain silent spectators, society will never change. (Leah)*

Jotirao Phule started the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers Society) in 1873 for the upliftment of Shudras and teach them human rights and liberate them from the hegemonic caste hierarchy. Satya Shodhak marriages was one significant modern achievement. There can be an argument that Savitribai was a mere shadow to her husband and did as he directed. But it is not true at all. She was a compassionate lady who had a heart and a brain which saw the harsh realities of the society around her. She understood the need to bring about reformation and had an independent personality. Savitribai wrote in a letter to Jotirao about the famine which broke in 1877 in Maharashtra and her willingness to actively help the victims. Jotirao supported her and the Phules started the Victoria Balashram in Dhankawadi. There are many instances where Savitribai proved how much she was ahead of her time. When Jotirao died, Savitribai herself carried the titve (the earthen pot fire) during the funeral. She also lit Jotirao's pyre. She took the responsibility of Satya Shodhak Samaj on herself and efficiently continued to walk on the path shown by Mahatma Jotirao Phule. As a mother, Savitribai made her son a capable man, who kept his parents as a source of inspiration dedicated his life in service of the society. The year 1897, brought with it a deadly plague. Savitribai threw herself in service of the victims again. While taking a child affected with plague, Savitribai contracted the plague. She passed away on March 10, 1897. Her death marked a huge loss to the community. She left behind a legacy. The generations which followed must try to walk on the path carved out by Jotirao and Savitribai Phule. The 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to derive

values of modernity, human rights, philanthropy, empathy, justice, equality, liberty, kindness, selfless devotion, companionship and community living from the Phules. The graphic narrative has covered the journey of Savitribai in a colorful way. It is the need of the hour to teach the principles lead down by Savitribai to children.

Inspiration drawn from Savitribai Phule's life as portrayed in the graphic novel

The entire lifespan of Savitribai was full of challenges and she went forward leaving a mark on each situation with her selfless devotion and kindness. Her life is a template for feminism. The efforts for gender equality, women education and empowerment which she took, the companionship and respect which the Phules had towards each other in their marriage, the empathy and commitment for the upliftment of the marginalized, Innovative spirit and motivation to keep working are things Savitribai stood for. She is definitely a milestone and an inspiration for all.

#### CONCLUSION

In the present research paper, the researcher has sketched the inspirational life and works of Savitribai Phule by studying the graphic novel titled *Savitribai Phule: An Inspiration Sketched through Graphic Narrative* (Leah). The researcher found that the publication of a graphic novel which is free for distribution and printing by anybody is in larger public interest. The genre of a graphic novel not only educates but also entertains. The colorful illustrations are eye catchy and a person with average knowledge of the language can also understand the narration. Graphic novels are

increasingly being used as a tool for teaching in classrooms. Internationally the genre is getting explored and many players are coming in. India too has a rise in number of publications in graphic medium, though a need to optimally utilize it still remains. Graphic novel tells a serious story and a lot of hard work goes into it. The narrative based on the life of a personality like Savitribai Phule who needs to be studied in depth and at large scales, contributes in taking the effort one step ahead. The spread of this booklet amongst all age groups will benefit the society at large.

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