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## **India's Oft-Forgotten Feminist Icon Fatima Sheikh: Pioneers of Modern Women's Education in Indian Subcontinent**

**Abdullah<sup>1</sup>**

**<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar**  
**Department of History**  
Vidyasagar University  
Rangamati, Midnapore, West Bengal, India  
Email Id: [abdullahhistory1993@gmail.com](mailto:abdullahhistory1993@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *An almost forgotten name in the history of Indian women's education is Fatima Sheikh. Savitri Bai Phule stands out as the pioneer of Modern Indian women's education, another identity of hers is that she is the wife of social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. Few know the woman who made Savitribai's mission possible, she was Fatima Sheikh. She is also known as the first Muslim woman teacher in the Indian subcontinent. She was also a social reformer, who fought throughout her life to overcome the caste system and provide education to women and children of the desirable sections of the society. Fatima Sheikh is not discussed in history. Historians of India have never been given her due, neither have they been included in any syllabus nor have any books been published about her. Although the discussion of the history of Indian women's modern education is incomplete without Fatima Sheikh. Therefore, despite the paucity of data, the main purpose of the present article is to briefly discuss the life and work of India's first trained Muslim teacher, Fatima Sheikh.*

**Keywords:** *Backward people, Fatima Sheikh, Social Reformer, Women education etc.*

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### **Introduction**

Fatima Sheikh had a dream to educate the backward people of the society and bring them forward in the society and brighten their future. For this great work, she had to face many obstacles from the then influential people of the society, but Fatima Sheikh was persistent in her work. She fought for the education of women throughout her life. She has done many social developmental works along with education. She did not bow down to patriarchal society. There is hardly any information about the life and activities of Fatima Sheikh in the pages of history.

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Mainstream historians have been largely indifferent to her— in discussions of Indian education and social reform, they have referred to Rammohan Roy; Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar; Swami Dayananda; Swami Vivekananda; Mahadevgobinda Ranade etc. On the other hand, in the history of modern education in Muslim society cannot be discussed without Begum Rokeya or Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, but a few years ago, the name of Fatima Sheikh was far from being found in textbooks, even the name of Savitribai was not found. After decades of oblivion, Dalit and Bahujan activists started writing about Savitri Bai Phule and her pictures started appearing on banners and posters of the BAMCEF (BAMCEF stand for The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation<sup>1</sup>), an organisation started by Kanshiram<sup>2</sup>. As a result, currently Savitri Phule<sup>3</sup> is discussed as one of the leaders of education and social reform, but the same process eluded Fatima Sheikh. Her contribution as an educationist and social reformer is no less than that of Phule. Rather, she must have faced greater obstacles. As her deeds are not recorded, we can only guess how difficult it must have been for a Muslim woman to work for the education of girls, which was considered irreligious at that time, especially in the Hindu-dominated Pune. Some say that both Hindu and Muslim communities opposed her for what she had done. Savitribai was fighting against the orthodoxy of Brahmanism. She was a woman from the Hindu society, who fought against the unpleasant customs of her society. Opening the doors of her school to Dalits was simultaneously challenged by the patriarchy and caste system. Fatima Sheikh's case was a little different. Islam does not prohibit the education for girls. Thus, being part of the anti-caste project initiated by Phule made her more revolutionary, she did not fight for her community alone, but Fatima was alone in that case, her efforts to popularize the modern education of Muslim girls were not liked by the Muslim clerics. We know about some of these things because Savitribai mentioned Fatima Sheikh's contribution while writing to her husband, but about Fatima Sheikh not much material is available. Nowadays she is hardly mentioned in mainstream history books. Fatima Sheikh, however, is so unknown that even her date of birth is disputed. However, from all available information, it can be said that Fatima Sikh was born on 9 January 1831<sup>4</sup> in Pune (then known as Poona) the then Bombay Presidency. Fatima lived in Pune with her brother Usman Sheikh who helped her sister a lot in her studies. Fatima Sheikh's parents and even her husband's name are not known.

Educating especially Hindu women and lower castes was considered a sin during those times. At that time, women and lower caste people were subjected to various types of unjust oppression in the society, child marriage was also practiced. Even Savitri Bai could not save herself from the clutches of child marriage. She was married to Jyotirao Phule in just 9 years, at

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that time she was illiterate. Jyotirao Phule taught her to read and write at home. Later Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule came forward to free the society from all these traps. Also, they felt that the only way to break the chains of patriarchy was through women's education. For that they started efforts to bring women and lower class people into the field of education, but the conservative society could not accept their work, they were subjected to various kinds of oppression. Ultimately the pressure of the society forces the young Phule couple to leave their home even in destitute condition. Then in 1848, they built the first girls' school of Modern India. So far history has been written in all history texts, but after being expelled from the society, where did they get a school house? Who helped them that day? 175 years ago, the ostracized Phule couple in whose home and with whose help and support the seeds of women's education were sown? They are Fatima Sheikh and her brother Usman Sheikh. Even when their family members, caste brethren, and their larger community did not stand up for their beliefs, it was Fatima Sheikh who offered them her home. Most of those events have been cleverly veiled or simply lost. Upon hearing the news of Phule couple's expulsion from their home, Fatima and Usman offered to take shelter in their own home, the Phule couple had lived with Fatima and her brother Usman Shaikh at their house in Mominpura in Ganj Peth between 1841- 1847 after they were ostracized by the Mali community.<sup>5</sup> Fatima Sheikh and Savitri train them together at a training college<sup>6</sup> run by Cynthia Farrar, an American missionary<sup>7</sup>. At the instigation of Fatima Sheikh, Savitri broke all the barriers of caste and religion and started living in that house. The school, established in 1848 in the backyard of Fatima and Usman, was called 'Indigenous Library'.<sup>8</sup> It was India's first indigenously founded school where girls were educated. It was here that Fatima Sheikh and the Phule couple started the work of educating the deprived and poor women of the society. Fatima Sheikh was the first Muslim teacher in modern India who not only ran a school but also trained herself to teach students. Not only teaching, Fatima Sheikh used to write names of students from door to door to enroll women and Dalit children in school and encouraged them to study. Fatima Sheikh was brilliant and efficient from the beginning. Despite oppositions from her community, she received her primary education from her brother, but it didn't end there, young Fatima dreamed of imparting the education she had acquired to the girls of a larger section of her community. At that time Shudras were not given the right to education. In such a difficult situation, Fatima Sheikh visited their homes and explained the importance of education to the girls and encouraged them to take up education. She did not exclude any child on the basis of religion or caste; she gave equal education to all children. Out of school hours, Fatima and Savitri used to spend days in poor Dalit and Muslim neighborhoods of Pune,

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preaching the need for girls' education. Fatima used to spend hours counseling the parents who did not wish to send their girls to schools. They taught the people the importance of education, but the upper castes of the society harassed them. In this work, Fatima Sheikh also faced many difficulties, the people of the society opposed her a lot, but she persisted in her goal of 'equal education in the society' and fulfilled this goal. Throughout her life she was involved in the struggle for education and equality. Even when they spread education in the society people threw stones and cow dung, in addition to verbal abuse. So it is said that they used to carry an extra cloth with them but still they tried to educate women, children of deprived classes and dalits. Fatima Sheikh is considered as the greatest helper and teacher of Savitribai Phule Mission. Their efforts got recognized by the provide opportunities to those born in the lower caste, got recognised as the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truthseekers' Society) movement. Fatima took part in the founding of two schools in Mumbai (Then Bombay) in 1851<sup>9</sup> with her own efforts. She taught at all the five schools the Phules opened, and they taught together until 1856<sup>10</sup>, when Savitribai fell ill and moved back to her mother's house.<sup>11</sup>

Marginalized people, deprived of almost all the basic rights of life including education for thousands of years, initially had great fear and doubt, but with the tireless efforts of Savitri and Fatima, girls of Mang, Mahar, Matang, Mali, Malik etc. caste started coming to their schools. The school was quickly becoming popular due to the loving behavior and innovative teaching of Savitri and Fatima. In 1852, the total number of female students in the three schools of them was more than 150, which was quite a large number in the context of that era. Fatima Sheikh became the main leader of Phule couple's activities related to women's education in the following decades. Without her contribution, the entire project of girls' schools would not have taken shape and yet Indian history has largely marginalized Fatima Sheikh. Moreover, another woman joined them, Sagunabai, who later took the education movement further.

In the history of women's education, as a colleague of Savitri Phule who helped her with all her might, the name of Fatima Sheikh is forgotten today, although currently the name of Savitribai Phule is widely discussed in history textbooks, but for some unknown reason, Fatima's name did not appear in the textbook. Although an ardent social worker, Fatima remained a silent and dedicated warrior throughout her life, she did not write a single sentence about her life and great work anywhere. As a result, historical information about Fatima Sheikh is not available from any other contemporary sources other than the personal correspondence of Savitribai and Jyotirao and the official documents of her teaching. So even though the birthday is known, we still do not know anything about the end of her life or the year of her death. Unfortunately, many

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details of Fatima Sheikh's life and pioneering work have been lost. Unlike Phule, who left a literary treasure in the form of personal diaries, notes, letters, poems and books, no surviving records of Fatima Sheikh exist today. However, although the details of Fatima Sheikh's life may not be as well known, it is undeniable that she was a pioneering figure who became dedicated to the education of women at a time when regressive attitudes towards women and lower castes pervaded the society. In this she testified her courage.

Several reasons can be presented for this oblivion of Fatima Sheikh. Firstly: Fatima Sheikh did not write any details about her life and work which is why we know very little about her, but many such writings are found in the case of the Phule couple. Second, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule fit well into the narrative of anti-caste social movements in Maharashtra. Their writings and works are associated with the Dalit-Bahujan movement. In contrast, the Dalit-Bahujan movement largely ignored Fatima Sheikh's contribution for unknown reasons. The Dalit movement readily accepted non-Dalit 'backward class' icons like Savitribai Jyotirao, Shahuji Maharaj, Narayan Guru, Basavanna and others, but failed to acknowledge the likes of Fatima Sheikh. Research is needed to find out whether this is due to the communalism of the anti-caste movement or some other reason. Thirdly, the people of the society from which Fatima Sheikh emerged also ignored her contribution. A Muslim woman, fighting for a colorless society and modern education for girls probably does not fit the dominant Muslim narrative. Fatima Sheikh and Savitribai established the country's first school for the modern education of girls in 1848, while after thirty years Sir Syed Ahmed Khan founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875. Syed Ahmad Khan of Aligarh was widely discussed/ criticized for many years as the architect of the progress of Muslim society in modern India, but perhaps because of women, three decades before Syed Ahmed, Fatima Sheikh, one of the first Muslim women teachers in modern India, has to be forgotten? Fatima is also neglected by her own community.

Unfortunately, there are very few studies on the life and works of Fatima Sheikh. However, in recent times some state governments and the central government have made some efforts to acknowledge her role. In 2014, a brief profile of Fatima Sheikh was included in the school Urdu textbook of Bal Bharti Maharashtra State Bureau along with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Zakir Hussain and Abul Kalam Azad, but the Maratha community objected to the inclusion of them. Some state governments have included her reference in their history or political science syllabus. Recently, the forgotten contribution of Fatima Sheikh to women's education has been included in school texts in Andhra Pradesh. On the occasion of Fatima Sheikh's birthday in the month of January this year, a bust sculpture of Fatima Sheikh was unveiled in the premises of

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Zila Parishad Urdu High School in the town of Yemmiganur in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. As India's first Muslim woman teacher and feminist icon, Google Doodle pays tribute to the memory and work of Fatimah Sikh on her 191st birthday on 9 January 2022.<sup>12</sup> Recently, when Fatima Sheikh is in the news and her birthday is being celebrated, people from 'Dalit-Bahujan' organizations in Maharashtra and many other places have objected to it. Even after so many years, the study of the life and work of Fatima Sheikh has recently started; there is hope that in the future she will get full respect for her contribution. It is hoped that one day the name of India's first Muslim teacher Fatima Sheikh will appear in the country's history text.

The path to becoming the first Muslim teacher in the Indian subcontinent was certainly not easy for Fatima Sheikh. Although not much is known about her life, it is incredible how difficult it must have been for a Muslim woman to grow up successfully educated in a place like Pune in the 19th century era of superstition and untouchability, and to encourage the education of Dalit girls from the lower classes of the society. Fatima Sheikh without whom the mission of Savitribai Phule was incomplete and is considered to be the most important role in educating Muslim, Dalit and backward class women and children. Fatima Sheikh along with Savitri who broke all the stereotypes, evil practices of the society, religious orthodoxy and revolutionized education for girls, for that the society believes that women have rights. Fatima Sheikh lit the torch of education to eradicate ignorance. There is no mention of any male figures in her life except for her brother, which may indicate her rebellion against the patriarchy and orthodoxy of the 19th century.

Fatima Sheikh's life is also of great significance as she probably led the first joint struggle of Dalits and Muslims. In this matter 'Dalit History Month' an internet archive on 'Dalit History' writes about Fatima Sheikh and Savitri Bai- "Their friendship lives today in the form of the work they have done in creating both foundation will and actual structures for uplifting of the marginalized. Relationships between Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis and Bahujans have a long history of struggle against Brahminical oppression that is often erased or misrepresented by today's political agendas. It remains undeniable that the association of Savitribai, Jyotirao, Fatima and the Dalits, Adivasis and Bahujan they worked with, represents a line of solidarity continuing into the contemporary call for 'Unity of The Oppressed'. A call that seeks to merge the struggles of SC/ST/OBC and Religious Minorities."<sup>13</sup> The unity amongst the oppressed groups has always directed the struggle of liberation, as was later seen in movements like Chalo Thiruvananthapuram, and Dalit Asmita Yatra. Fatima's life was an early precursor for the larger struggle to come.

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## Conclusion

At the end of the discussion it can be said that Fatema Sheikh has not got the recognition she deserves but it can be said that she is among the unsung heroes of the country. If Savitri Phule is recognized as the first head mistress in modern India, the first woman assistant teacher is definitely Fatima Sheikh. However, there is still endless scope for research into her life and work, and hopefully we will learn more about her in the future.

## Notes & References

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