



PANDITA RAMABAI'S CONTRIBUTION FOR WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's status as a solitary women leader of the movement for women's emancipation in nineteenth century Maharashtra and her contribution to that cause were eclipsed the storm over her conversion to Christianity and her consequent neglect by contemporary mainstream Hindu society. The essay attempts to assess Ramabai's role within the framework of her own social context.

Keywords: Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Indian social reformer, Mukti Mission.

Introduction: **Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati** (Marathi: पंडिता रमाबाई सरस्वती; 23 April 1858 – 5 April 1922) was an Indian social reformer and Christian missionary. She was the first woman to be awarded the titles of Pandita as a Sanskrit scholar and Saraswati after being examined by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. She was one of the ten women delegates of the Indian National Congress session of 1889. During her stay in England in early 1880s she converted to Christianity. She then toured extensively in the United States to collect funds for destitute Indian women. With the funds raised, she started Sharada Sadan (Home for Learning) for child widows. In the late 1890s, Ramabai founded Mukti Mission, a Christian charity at Kedgaon village, forty miles east of the city of Pune. The mission was later named Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission.

Ramabai was born to Ananta Shastri, a liberal Brahmin Pandit, in 1858. As a child, Ramabai lived the life of a Brahmin pilgrim and travelled the Indian subcontinent with her parents and two older siblings. Her father had withdrawn to a forest area to run a residential school for Brahmin boys and to teach Sanskrit to his young wife. This was especially remarkable considering the fact that in those times women were denied even the basic right to get literate. Her unconventional upbringing facilitated the rejection of a rigid gender-specific role unlike other girls who were forced into wifehood and motherhood at an early age, denied education and made to restrict their lives within the private domain of a joint family. After the death of her parents and sister in the mid 1870s, Ramabai along with her brother travelled throughout India until they reached Calcutta (now Kolkata). A formal invitation was given to her to lecture in that city before a few learned Pandits. Ramabai's remarkable scholarship and especially her in-depth knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures created a great impact on the audience. They called a public assembly in the Town Hall of Calcutta and conferred upon her the highest title possible in India for a woman, that of 'Saraswati', meaning 'Goddess of Wisdom'. In Calcutta, Keshab Chandra Sen, the supporter of Brahmo Samaj, suggested to Ramabai that she read the Vedas and Upanishads. This was the beginning of a new phase in her life, a period in which she grappled with several contradictions in her life that later fructified into liberal feminism. In her personal life, Ramabai ignored caste restrictions and married a man of *shudra varna* (lower caste), Bepin Bihari Medhavi, an active member of the Brahmo Samaj. However, after 19 months of a happily married life, her husband died leaving her with a little daughter, Manorama. Ramabai decided to return to her native land Poona to embark upon the journey of learning from the social reformers of that time. She was readily welcomed by the leaders there.

Objective of the study:

- (i) To study the condition of women in the 19th century.
- (ii) To study how Pandita Ramabai emerged as a social reformer and radical thinker from the cobweb of an orthodox society.
- (iii) To study how women can establish their identity and dignity through education in the oppressed familial and social environment.



Methodology: In order to fulfill the above objectives, both descriptive and analytical methods are used in this paper. This is done on the basis of secondary data collected from various books, research journals, scholarly articles and web materials.

Aspects of Feminist Thoughts of Ramabai : The roots of feminist consciousness in Ramabai may be traced to her superior perceptive intellectual faculties on the one hand and her felt experiences of the real plight of the high caste women in India, on the other. Undoubtedly, her liberal and awakened parents ensured that she 'managed to escape a rigid gender-specific role, unlike her peers who were locked into wifehood and motherhood at an early age, confined to the domestic sphere, subjected to the pressures of the extended family, and denied education or even literacy' (Kosambi 2000: 5). Yet, she was well aware of the numerous disabilities and discriminations being faced by women in the face of patriarchal privileges of men. Crucially, her exposure to the less rigid and asymmetrical gender relations in the western societies further sharpened her perception of gender discriminations in India. Her conversion to Christianity was probably led by the impulse of a revolt against the inscrutable gender-specific social evils of Hinduism. Combined together, these aspects of her life made Ramabai an indomitable activist-theorist bent upon highlighting and ameliorating the pathetic conditions of the women in the Indian society (Chakravarty 1998: 7). Essentially, the thrust of the feminist ideas of Ramabai was to discern and eradicate the structural inequalities and circumstantial disabilities of women. As such, a predicament was most authoritatively symbolised by none other than the high caste Hindu widows, who turned out to be the test case for feminism of Ramabai. She, therefore, argued for rescuing them from their insignificant status within the domestic sphere and restore them their public sphere through empowerment techniques such as education, training and skill development. Strategically, she called for a frank exchange of opinions on the issues of women's plight in order to arouse public opinion on such issues on the one hand, and to bring the reality in the face of the social reformers, on the other. The theoretical base of her feminism lied in providing an objective critique of the Hindu social and religious order to unravel its overtly patriarchal nature leading to multifarious disabilities and all round marginalisation of the women. To her, the logical conclusion of such a perceptible analysis of the gendered nature of the Hindu society and religion could be to evolve concrete policies and programmes for emancipating the women and ensuring the equality of status for them (Kosambi 1998: 47).

Institutional Pursuits For Women's Emancipation: Pandita Ramabai's distinction as the pioneer of feminism in India is equally substantiated by her institutional pursuits for the emancipation of women. Even before she could fully articulate her views on the status of women in India, she had set up the Arya Mahila Samaj in 1882 in Pune to mobilise and unite women to seek social reforms. But with a veiled opposition to this by people like Tilak as well as her own voyage to foreign countries did not allow this organisation to become the epicentre of women's movement. However, the zeal of Ramabai for women's emancipation not only remained intact during her overseas stays, she looked for arranging logistical support to make such an enterprise more effective and autonomous.⁴ Resultantly, the initiatives such as The Ramabai Association of Boston produced handsome financial support for the schemes of Ramabai to be launched in India. Immediately after her return to India, she set up the Sharada Sadan (Home of Learning) to provide shelter to the widows of high caste Hindus at Mumbai. However, in order to gain more direct access to the orthodox Brahman families when she shifted the Sadan to Pune, she came under severe attack of the conservative elements of the Hindu society like Tilak, for motive of covert proselytisation. Consequently, high caste Hindu widows started distancing themselves from the Sadan, forcing Ramabai to increasingly alienate her from the Hindu society and exposing her bonds with Christianity.⁵ This led her to open a new Christian body, the Mukti Sadan, to house the victims of the Gujarat famine of 1896. With the native support dwindling progressively, now she depended almost exclusively on the overseas donations to run her Sadans which were eventually amalgamated into an overtly missionary body called the Christian Mukti Missions. Quite evidently, this created an unbridgeable gap between Ramabai and the high caste Hindu community of Bombay Presidency. Significantly, the institutional intervention of Pandita Ramabai in ameliorating the conditions of women demonstrated the perceived duality of her activities. The Christian Mukti Mission (later renamed as 'Ramabai Mukti Mission' and subsequently 'Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission'), no doubt turned out to be the women bastion, where numerous activities of women's empowerment were carried out. Moreover, the structures and ambience of the Mission were so autonomous and inspiring to women that it was sometimes called as 'a female Kingdom'. However, the unreasonable conversion of the Sharada Sadan into a Christian missionary organisation



presumably defeated the primary purpose of Ramabai to provide for an emancipatory home for the high caste Hindu widows as they were the most marginalised women in the country.

Education for Women: Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (1858-1922) was a pioneering Indian social reformer and scholar who relentlessly struggled for the education and emancipation of women, particularly child widows. Her efforts challenged the rigid patriarchal norms of 19th-century India, which largely denied women the right to education and a dignified life.

Key Aspects of Her Struggle

- **Challenging Orthodoxy from a Young Age:** Born into a progressive Brahmin family, Ramabai learned Sanskrit from her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, an act that led to their social ostracism because the study of sacred texts was forbidden for women. Her parents' death during the Great Famine of 1877 forced her to travel across India with her brother, where she witnessed first-hand the miserable conditions of high-caste child widows, solidifying her resolve to fight for their cause.
- **Earning Scholarly Recognition**
 - : In 1878, her exceptional command of Sanskrit earned her the titles of "Pandita" (scholar) and "Saraswati" (goddess of learning) from the University of Calcutta, a groundbreaking achievement for a woman at that time
 - . She used this platform to deliver public lectures across India, advocating for women's rights and education.
- **Advocacy and Policy Influence:** In 1882, Ramabai provided evidence before the British-appointed Hunter Commission on Education. She recommended that women be appointed as school inspectors and admitted to medical colleges, arguing that women doctors were essential to treat women given the prevailing social customs. Her testimony created a sensation and contributed to the establishment of the Women's Medical Movement (Lady Dufferin Fund).
- **Establishing Educational Institutions:**
 - **Arya Mahila Samaj (1882):** Founded in Pune, this society aimed to promote women's education and campaign against practices like child marriage.
 - **Sharada Sadan (1889):** After studying in England and the United States, she returned to India and established this "Home of Learning" in Mumbai (later moved to Pune) for high-caste Hindu widows. It provided not only academic education but also vocational training (such as printing, carpentry, and gardening) to help women achieve economic independence.
 - **Mukti Mission (1896):** During a severe famine, she expanded her work by establishing the Mukti Mission at Kedgaon, a large refuge that sheltered thousands of famine-affected women and orphans. The mission provided comprehensive care, including housing, healthcare, and education.
- **Literary Contributions:** Her influential book, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), offered a sharp critique of the oppression faced by women in Hindu society, particularly child brides and widows, and served as an early feminist manifesto in India.

Pandita Ramabai's unwavering dedication and institutional activism laid the foundation for the women's rights movement in India, ensuring education became a pathway to liberation and self-reliance for generations of women.

Awards and honors: "Pandita" and "Sarasvati" at Bengal (before going to Britain), recognising her skills in Sanskrit.

- Kaisar-i-Hind Medal for community service in 1919, awarded by the British Colonial Government of India.
- She is remembered in the Church of England with a commemoration on 30 April.
- On 26 October 1989, in recognition of her contribution to the advancement of Indian women, the Government of India issued a commemorative stamp.



Conclusion: The views and actions of Pandita Ramabai may truly be attributed with laying the foundations of the feminist movement in India. Showing the colours of a true revolutionary from her childhood, Ramabai's entire life represented an unending pilgrimage of a visionary for the cause of women's emancipation. However, the circumstantial upheavals of life forced her to tread such paths which would not have been her preferred course, given the contemporary circumstances in which she rose to prominence. For instance, though Ramabai's initial and favourite objective was to expose the structural inequalities and functional marginalisation of the high caste Hindu widows, this cause was absolutely lost, probably due to her infatuation with Christian missionary activities in the later part of her life. Nonetheless, her sincere effort in making women aware of their socio-political role in contemporary society paid-off in due course. For instance, what she sought to accomplish with the formation of the Christian Mukti Mission at a time when there was hardly an effective voice against the well-entrenched patriarchy, was carried forward in independent India with the creation of 'All Women Police Station' or 'Self-Employed Women's Association' (SEWA). Given the hegemonic influence of primordial social values opposed to gender-equality, Ramabai's radical departure from the conventional thinking may not have gained prominence; nonetheless, her pursuits remain most critical in the articulation of a feminist perspective in the nationalist discourse. In this sense, she remains the precursor of new wave of thinking in post-colonial India championing gender-sensitive issues and concerns.

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