

Pandita Ramabai: A Radical Feminist Reformer in a Patriarchal society

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Abstract

India in the nineteenth century under the influence of British colonialism witnessed a number of socio-religious reform movements. Among such movements women's education gained a lot of prominence. But the fact remained that Indian society was largely patriarchal and the male reformers supported women's education but only limited to the domestic sphere. Pandita Ramabai on the other hand as a female, educated, social reformer, had a totally different take on women's education and addressed women's issues in her own unique way. She reframed and formulated widowhood and womanhood in a way no male reformer would have thought of. She talked to equal rights of women in a male dominated society, a thought which was much ahead of her time.

Keywords: *Widowhood, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Child marriage, Education*

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, women faced a lot of atrocities in the form of child marriage, widowhood and other humiliating religious practices. Widows were economically vulnerable as they did not have any property rights and had to solely depend on the male kin for their sustenance. They were socially ostracised and lacked any form of dignity. Widowhood was not a choice but a practice that was forced upon them. Widows were considered slaves or household labour who worked in the house in return for food and shelter. Situations were even worse for child widows. Brahmanical patriarchy considered widows to be a woman sexually and socially dead but physically alive. (Chakravarti 1993) They were debarred from the male gaze and forced to follow the humiliating practice of shaving off their hair. Widows were disfigured by such practices so that they remain unattractive. Manusmriti is the main text that established orthodox Brahmanism and suggested ways of controlling women. Women were directed to treat their husbands as Gods and to serve them throughout their lives. Brahmanism introduced a hierarchical structure in society based on caste and the patriarchal controls over women were directed according to caste. So, the high caste women faced the worst kind of

repression. British colonialism gave opportunity for the women to resist against societal norms through education and opening new avenues to explore. Some of the women among others who sought to raise their voice against the patriarchal society were Tarabai Shinde, Rakhmabai and Pandita Ramabai.

Pandita Ramabai's reformist agenda and her critique of the Brahmanical system and society has not gained much prominence in mainstream history as compared to male reformist such as Rammohan Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. 'Brahmanic patriarchy' was a concept that was used by historian Uma Chakraborty to define the society that India had during the colonial period. Men felt that women need not be independent, rather they should be controlled by men and restricted by rituals and practices. Ramabai strongly opposed Brahmanical patriarchy and later in her life converted to Christianity. Being a high caste Hindu widow during her time such as act was considered anti national. During the 19th century widows led secluded lives within the confines of the home shackled to various religious practices. Ramabai openly challenged the Brahmanical patriarchal system, as she was well versed in Sanskrit texts, a public speaker having a significantly prominent public life. She also dared to renounce her own religion and accepted a religion which was stamped as the religion of the oppressors, the British Imperialism. Even though she was a widow, she enjoyed making public appearances which was against the conventions and customs during that time. All these acts made her a menace to the Hindu nationalist during her time.

Childhood and Early Education

Ramabai was born to a Brahmin family, her father Anant Shastri Dongre was an orthodox Maharashtrian Brahmin Pandit but at the same time he believed in imparting knowledge to the women of the society and refused to accept customs and practices such as marrying off girls at a young age. Living in a forest hermit school and being brought up in such an unconventional environment helped Ramabai to gain a strong personality and reject the gender specific norms set up by the society. (Chakravarty 2013) Her mother Lakshmibai was a Sanskrit scholar who had great organisational skills. Throughout the day she took care of the ashram and at night she devoted herself reading Puranic literature. Ramabai received her Sanskrit and Puranic training both from her father and mother. Even though her education remained confined to the traditional Hindu texts she always had an independent and critical mind. When she started having deeper insights into the Brahmanic texts she was stunned to find that those texts depicted women as the lowly section of the society. Later on, in her life she gained national as well an international recognition as a learned Sanskrit scholar. It's really fascinating to imagine that a person who never received any formal education in any school or college could gain such feats.

Religion and Feminism

While reading about Pandita Ramabai one can clearly identify how religion and feminism both played a significant role in her life. Ramabai's feminism can be traced to her exposure to a number of America's first wave feminists with whom she closely interacted, they were Dr. Rachel Bodley, Dr. Emma Brainard Ryder etc. During her stay in America she witnessed the movement by American women demanding suffrage. Ramabai felt that this was a historic event which liberated women as they stepped into public sphere. She grew up in a Brahmanical Hindu society, later she got closely associated with the Anglican Church, all these influences and experiences shaped her life and works. She questioned the manner in which traditional religion was interpreted or practiced in the society. She had to fight political battles on the grounds of her religious choices at every point of her life. On the one hand she refused to follow the caste practices on the other hand she was never a devout Christian. She led her life according to her own religiosity. It seemed that her act of conversion to Christianity was an act of liberation from the conservative practices of her birth religion. Likewise, during this time many women of Mukti Mission who converted to Christianity felt it was act of gendered protest where questioned the marginalised status that was granted to them by the society.

Ramabai's arrival to Kolkata

After the death of her parents she travelled all over India mainly for pilgrimage and ultimately reached Calcutta (now Kolkata) where she made a public appearance for the very first time. During her travels she got the opportunity to closely observe Hindu religion and all its practices and ceremonies. As she had in-depth knowledge of the religious sacred texts, she started questioning the practices that proliferated during that time and insisted that the Hindus have misinterpreted the Vedas. Kolkata opened up totally new avenue for Ramabai. Kolkata was considered the nerve centre of the 19th century Indian Renaissance. With the introduction of Western education and English language India slowly started moving towards the age of reason and liberal thoughts shunning superstitions and religious prejudices. When Ramabai shifted to Kolkata she became introduced to the books on Hindu law, western ideas and philosophies. Ramabai was accepted wholeheartedly and was honoured with the titles of Pandita and Saraswati. Maharaja Jotindra Mohan Tagore organised an event to honour her with the title of Pandita. To the reformers she was an epitome of knowledge, often compared to Gargi and Maitreyi – the two most significant and learned female characters of the Vedic age. When she came in contact with the leaders of Brahma Samaj, she got motivated to give public lectures where she talked of women's oppression in the name of religious custom and stated ways of their liberation using her knowledge of ancient Sanskrit texts. In associating closely with Brahmo Samaj and Keshab Chandra Sen she felt that the Samaj resonated her

ideas and beliefs. (Kosambi 1988) Just like her the Brahmos tried to free themselves of the conflicting rituals of orthodox Hinduism while giving due respect to the actual Hindu texts like the Vedas and Upanishads. The Samaj also tried to liberate women from the evil practice of child marriage. As she continued to intensely study the Dharma Shastras she came across a number of discrepancies, and she started questioning the Hindu scriptures. Pandita got an opportunity to interact with the most esteemed reformers like Dwarkanath Ganguli who worked effortlessly for the liberation of women and Sasipada Ganguli, who was steadfast in educating women and opened a number of educational institutions for girls and widow's home. She realised that according to the Hindu texts' women has been allotted a lower status as compared to men. They were even denied Moksha or salvation. She pointed out the Upanishads mentions women having equal space along with men while discussing about religion and philosophy but the Brahmins prohibited such texts for women and misinterpreted the religious texts to establish control and domination over them. Women were allocated a passive role of producing male successors. Ramabai defied the orthodoxy and traditions of Brahmanism and chose to marry Bipin Bihari Madhavi, who was a shudra. But her marriage lasted only for two years as her husband died shortly after. But she refused to accept the secluded life of widowhood as prescribed by the orthodox Hindu scriptures. Instead she decided to dedicate her life for the upliftment of women and worked relentlessly to achieve her goal. In Kolkata Ramabai had an atmosphere of freedom and free flow of ideas from all over the world but Pune had another thing in store for her. In Pune she had to endure a highly orthodox society where she was critiqued for having a mind of her own.

Encounter with the orthodox society of Maharashtra

Around 1882 Ramabai went back to Maharashtra and started working with moderate reformers like Ranade and Bhandarkar. But Maharashtra had a much more conservative society as compared to Kolkata. A female social reformer was looked upon with a lot of suspicion. Whenever she tried to speak in a public gathering the men started shouting and bullying her and drowning her voice. In a number of occasions, she not allowed to complete her speech. One of the most prominent reformers of Western India was M.G Ranade. Other reformers included Bhau Mahajan, Krishnashastry Chiplunkar etc. who were striving to bring about social reform in Maharashtra in areas of caste and gender. The socioeconomic norms that were imposed upon the widows were mainly directed towards depriving them. The kind lifestyle the widows were supposed to lead meant that they had low entitlement. They were the burden of the family. With the dawn of the British rule, social practices such as Sati and Child Marriage were vehemently criticised and laws were passed to put an end to such practices. The upper-class male reformers supported the British in this as women from their class faced the worst form of oppression. But they were definitely not thinking in terms of gender equality as they

upheld the superiority of men in society. To them women should always restrict themselves to household chores, performing the duty of a perfect wife and mother and working tirelessly for the betterment to the male counterparts. They were not really inclined in allowing girls to attend Christian missionary schools as it might lead to intermingling of castes. The male reformers, however liberal they might project themselves actually supported and never desired to disrupt the gender assigned role that was established in the society. The social reform movements that were organised mostly engaged in 'recasting women' rather than demolishing the patriarchal or Brahmanical structures. Knowledge of English language became yet another tool of superiority and masculine authority. The husbands became the teachers, thus reinforcing the patriarchal structure. (Chandra 2009)

Arya Mahila Samaj

Ramabai's acquaintance with prominent personalities like Justice Ranade and wife helped her conduct various social activities and also establish Arya Mahila Samaj an organisation mainly involved in carrying out activities for the betterment of women. She started setting up different branches of the Arya Mahila Samaj, where she narrated the Puranas to a more liberal audience and discussed various issues that plagued women during that time. Ramabai felt the urgency to have women teachers and doctors with whom other women would feel comfortable and discuss their problems freely. She ventilated her concern before the Hunter Commission on Education in 1882 and underlined the importance of women education. The agenda which was closet to her heart was setting up of widow's home, for the high caste Hindus who had to face the worst kind of oppression. The orthodox reformers severely criticised her for her public engagement. They strongly believed that women should never engage themselves in freeing the society of the perceived ills. Men were responsible for the safety of women and reform practices wherever needed. (Omvedt 2000) Ramabai as a widow, in the orthodox patriarchal society of Poona was often looked upon and faced public scrutiny. She was often heckled by aggressive men when she made public appearances.

Arya Mahila Samaj was the first women's organisation in Maharashtra. The organisation had an egalitarian composition as no one was discriminated on the ground of caste or class. This particular organisation was distinctive as it talked about women's issues which were addressed by women themselves. Women started to have a voice. They for the first time they openly talked about the problems they faced. Ramabai outlined the basic thrust areas of the Arya Mahila Samaj, which included prohibition of child marriage, inhibiting men from having more than one wife, campaigning for female education and helping women in distress. At the meeting of the Arya Mahila Sabha, she urged women to free themselves from the shackles of religious customs which were demeaning.

The Hunter Commission

During her stay in Pune, Ramabai's most valued contribution was her address to the Hunter Commission on Women's Education. She emphasised that in order to educate girls, women of the society should be first trained in their own language along with English. The women trainers or educators should be higher salaries compared to men. Definitely this proposal proved that Ramabai's thought process was way beyond her time. She insisted on having women teachers. She felt that women were more capable than men in teaching younger children with love and care. Another problem of Indian education system that she pointed out, was dearth of opportunity for women in the field of medicine. Women always felt shy or uncomfortable in discussing their health issues to male doctors, and thus their diseases remained undiagnosed. So, women should study medicine so as to help their fellow beings. (Chakravarty 2013) Ramabai gave her address in Marathi which was later translated to English by Hunter and distributed throughout India and England. The orthodox Indian society reacted sharply but her public fame could be felt far beyond the Indian boundaries. Her address to the Hunter Commission was not welcomed by conservatives like Tilak. They felt that such public speeches by women contaminated the society.

Interaction with the Western World

Women were almost treated as slaves, born to serve their husbands. In a society dominated by male reformers Ramabai felt desolate. She was frantically trying to find solace in a religion which could accommodate her social agenda and help her attain spiritual fulfilment. At this point she started to incline towards Christianity. Christianity promised egalitarianism and Ramabai felt that this would help her to go beyond the high caste widows and offer help to people in general irrespective of their caste and gender identity. Very soon Ramabai realised that in order to get medical education she would have to travel abroad. She started writing published a number of books namely *Stri Dharma Niti* and *High Caste Hindu Women*, in order to raise funds. These books emphasised more on women's need for self-cultivation as they performed the role of wife and mother. She also stressed upon the hardships faced by High Caste Hindu widow's especially enforced widowhood and child widow. In *Stri Dharma Niti* she guided women on how to nurture them for marriage, become an ideal companion to their husband and raise brave and responsible sons who would dedicate themselves in the ongoing freedom struggle. It might seem that Ramabai endorsed the picture of an ideal wife, but it also needs to be said that she believed in late marriage and freedom of women to choose one's partner. *Stri Dharma Niti* gained wide acclaim and was accepted by the Education Department as a text book for the schools set up for girls. So, it can be said that the book was in confirmation to the prevailing societal culture and values. In the *High Caste Hindu Women*-

Ramabai cited the Manu Dharma Shashtra and revealed how the Brahmanic texts authorised and inflicted oppressive customs on high caste women. The book ended with Ramabai making an appeal to the Americans to come forward and help the Indian women in distress for the sake of humanity. (White 2022) Later on in her life when she visited England and America she wrote Cry of Indian Women. The book had details of the kind of oppression women faced due to child marriage and widowhood. This book also dealt largely with gender equality. As during this time, she was exposed to the progressive ideas of the West.

Ramabai's conversion to Christianity

When Ramabai reached England, she was moved by the rescue operations carried out by Sisters of the Community of St Mary the Virgin in London in order to help distressed women. She started believing that Christ could be the spiritual saviour who would enlighten the oppressed women in India. She thus converted to Christianity, breaking completely from the religious traditions of her ancestors. Such an act was not readily accepted by her countrymen. They blamed her as whimsical and traitor. The only person who justified her stand was Jyotiba Phule. He insisted that Ramabai was a learned woman who had seen for herself the atrocities inflicted on Hindu women in Indian society and thus had to distance herself from Brahmanic Hinduism. In England she studied natural sciences, mathematics and English and in return gave her services as a Sanskrit teacher.

After spending four years studying in England, Ramabai travelled to USA. She got acquainted with feminists from Philadelphia and Boston. Here she shared her dream of setting up a shelter for the downgraded high caste Hindu widows in India. Her plans made widespread appeal among the Americans, which ultimately led to the setting up of Ramabai Association of Boston which would provide monetary support for setting up training centres for women and printing text books for them. In America Ramabai was deeply influenced by reformists such as Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who spoke out for women's rights and fought for their political rights. She felt that women in India must understand the importance of education in order to fight for their rights. Ramabai was convinced that the American model of Liberal democracy was ideal as it provided equal opportunities to all sections of the society, socially, politically and economically.

Address at Indian National Congress

Another pathbreaking incident in the life of Pandita Ramabai was her address at the Fifth Annual Indian National Congress in 1889. Bardlaugh invited her to address the Congress and she also took the initiative to gather few other women delegates to accompany her. The patriarchal Indian society believed that politics was not meant for women. But Ramabai was

resolute and unswerving while addressing the Congress. She spoke for women's rights. Like women should also be given the right to speech. She demanded that women should have right to choose the kind of lifestyle they wished to have after being a widow, since men never followed any religious norms after the death of their wives. (Jha 2020) Widowhood with all its evil practices should not enforced upon any women. Ramabai was convinced that if women are given an opportunity, many of them would gladly join their husbands in the fight for freedom. She mesmerised the audience with her insightful thoughts and her views gained recognition. Very soon Ramabai gained widespread national recognition and was invited for lectures in Chennai and the Central Provinces where she spoke out loud for gender equality. Even though society was largely hostile to her liberal thoughts, she relentlessly fought for the rights of women.

Sharada Sadan

Ramabai's dream was setting up a home for learning for the homeless widows. With the financial support of the Ramabai Association of America she was able to set up Saharada Sadan in Bombay in March 1889, an initiative which was so close to her heart. An institution which was one of a kind during that time. Ramabai can be regarded as a forerunner among the social reformers of Maharashtra who could convince the Western world and gather foreign funds for a cause that was very much indigenous. Ramabai had converted to Christianity and many doubted that foreign funding meant that the residents of Sharada Sadan would be converted to Christianity. She was fiercely criticised by Tilak for setting up an institution where women would live away from control of the male member of the family. It was obvious that even though widows were mostly neglected and unwanted in the families, men were not willing to loose control over them. Society doubted and critiqued Ramabai, but the fact remains that Sharada Sadan had paved the way for women's emancipation. Ramabai decided that Sharada Sadan would be secular and no religious teachings would be encouraged. The Sadan introduced its inmates with renewed ways of life. Ramabai insisted that widow remarriage could not possibly be the only recourse for widows. They should also have the opportunity to take up professions like teachers or nurses or workers. At Mukti Sadan in Kadgoan girls were taught weaving, dairy farming, cooking, gardening, running a printing a press etc. so that they could become self-sufficient. Ramabai's mission was to integrate widows into society where they were considered miserable and cursed. At Sharada Sadan she was able to boost the self esteem of the girls who lived there. The widows faced a lot of suffering and ostracism in their families and slowly they started to share their experiences with each other. The women who were previously victims now learnt to help and take care of each other through new ways of life. Sharada Sadan which was initially started for the widows became home for a lot of other women. She encouraged teaching Botany and studying the Universe with hands on practical

classes. She felt that such teaching methods would be much more comprehensive and the knowledge gained would never be forgotten. (White 2022)

Due to bubonic plague epidemic in Western India Ramabai shifted from Pune to Kadegaon and established Mukti Mission in 1889 on a farm in Kedgaon. Unlike Sharada Sadan this was a Christian organisation. This mission was called Mukti as it focused on the emancipation of young girls who were victims of child marriage and widowhood, it was their safe space. By 1907 Mukti had broadened its horizons. It had a school right from Kindergarten to High school, a hospital, a printing press etc. It also had training departments to develop income generating skills among its residents. For those with students with disabilities a deaf and dumb school was also introduced. In Kedgaon Ramabai gave shelter to women who struggled to survive during the famine that wrecked the Western and Central India. Many of these women did not belong to the upper castes.

Conclusion

Pandita Ramabai was a radical feminist social reformer. Unlike women of her times she was well read and spent most of her life travelling independently without the support or guidance of any male partner. She was a prolific writer who never received any formal education but could gather funds by selling her books. She was a deeply religious person and right from her childhood she got an opportunity to study religious texts which were prohibited for women. With her profound knowledge of Sanskrit texts, she could make a critique of the socio religious practices that were followed only to suppress women and establish a patriarchal society. Ramabai can also be called an educationalist. Throughout her life she strived for introducing women education and women's rights. She travelled unassisted to the Western world and convinced the foreigners to donate for an Indian cause. She felt that the education in the right form should give the power of reason. She established institutions to improve the deplorable conditions of women and make them self-dependent and self-reliant. She introduced radical models of learning and empowerment in Sharada Sadan and Mukti Mission. In a male dominated public space she could successfully carve out a space for herself. In a society where the male reformers felt that it was their duty to emancipate the distressed women, Ramabai took upon herself to rescue women from the life of widowhood through her own personal experience. Even though she was criticised and branded as anti-national for her conversion to Christianity but it could not deter her from her path of social reform. The life and works of Ramabai can be regarded as the first wave of feminism in Western India. Being a woman of high caste herself, she fought tirelessly against patriarchy and worked for women's education and wanted them to have a self-confident public life. Studying her life, we get a glimpse of what it was to be a feminist during the colonial period.

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