

Pandita Ramabai

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Abstract

Ramabai Dongre (1858-1922), later known as Pandita Ramabai Sarawasti, is the subject matter of the present article which focuses on the life and work of this remarkable social reformer, educator, speaker and advocate for the causes of women, renowned for prodigious learning. Considering the period of intense transformation worldwide, the study begins by outlining and discussing the interconnected history, i.e., the intense political and economic relationship, cultural flows, and circulation of ideas, between India and Britain from the establishment of t

he East India Company in 1600 to the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. However, as per sources are concern, I am heavily dependent upon *The High Caste Hindu Woman* which was written by herself in 1888.

Introduction

Status of woman is a topic now drawing the attention of one and all in the Indian Society. When a traditional society is taking the shape of modern Socierty and its basic philosophy and life style are undergoing drastic changes. Recently Historians like Uma Chakarvarti,¹ Kum Kumsangari² , Kum Kum Roy, Mary Jone, Aloka Parasher³, Surekha

¹Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Delhi, Kali for Women, 1998.

² Kum kum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti ,*From Myths to Markets: Essayas on Gender*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study,1999;Uma Chakravarti, *Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a new Understanding of Gender Relations in Early India* , Social Scientist , 16(8), August, 1988.

³Aloka Parasher, *Women in Nationalist Historiography: The Case of Altekar* , in, Leela Kasturi and Bvina Majumdar (ed.), *Women in Indian Nationalism*, Vikas Publishing House, 1994.

ananadiker⁴, Kumari Jayawardena⁵, Malathi de Alwiss⁶, Vijaya Ramaswamy⁷, Janaki Nair,⁸ Rosalind O' Hanlon⁹are doing some pioneer work on women.

Pandita Ramabai

Uma Chakarvarti,¹⁰Anna Paula Lauande Bitar¹¹, have done very significant work on Pandita RamabaiSarasvati.Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati¹² herself written a very good book *The High Caste Hindu Women*. According toUma Chakarvarti andAnna Paula Lauande Bitar,Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati tirelessly worked to promote education and emancipation of women during late 19th and 20th centuries. She was born on April 23, 1858 in a Marathi speaking Brahmin family, Rama Dongre was the daughter of Anant Shastri Dongre, Sanskrit scholar and roving reciter of Hindu epics and religious books. Her parents died during the Great Famine of 1876-78 when she was 16.¹³ She and her brother, Srinivas, continued the family tradition of reciting religious texts.Rama Dongre joined the reformist body Brahma Samaj which opposed the deeply entrenched caste system. Her brother passed away in June 1880. During the same year, she married Bipin Behari Medhvi, a Bengali lawyer. In deciding to marry Medhvi, who belonged to the socially ostracised lower caste she did not allow considerations of her own high caste to

⁴Surekha Panandikaer, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, in, *Women Pioneers in India;s Renaissance* (ed.), Sushila Nayar & Kamla Mankkar, National Book Trust, Delhi, 2002.

⁵Kumari Jayawardena&Malathi de Alwiss, *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, Kali for Women, 1996.

⁶Kumari Jayawardena &Malathi de Alwiss, *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, Kali for Women, 1996.

⁷Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India*, Indian Economic and Social History Review, January-March, 1989; Vijaya Ramaswamy,*Divinity and Deviance*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994;Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked : Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study,1997.

⁸Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*, Kali for Women, Delhi.

⁹Rosalind O' Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relationship in Colonial India*, OUP, Delhi, 1994.

¹⁰Uma Chakarvarti,Rewriting History: *The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Delhi, Kali for Women, 1998.

¹¹Anna Paula Lauande Bitar, *Pandita Ramabai: A Quest for Improvement*, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, 2017.

¹²Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati. *The High Caste Hindu Women*, (Ed.),Clementina Bulter, Fleming Company, America.

¹³Uma Chakarvarti,Rewriting History: *The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*,p.10.

come in the way. The couple's only child, Manorama, was born in 1881. Less than a year later, her husband died of cholera.¹⁴

Gradually, she became famous as a lecturer of Sanskrit texts. She visited Calcutta on an invitation from the Pandits or religious scholars to speak. In 1878, the Calcutta University conferred on her the titles of Pandita and Sarasvati, acknowledging her knowledge of Sanskrit works. After her husband's death, Ramabai, who was 23, moved to Pune and founded Arya Mahila Samaj to promote the education of women and their deliverance from the oppression of child marriage. In 1882, when the then Government of India appointed a committee to examine the education sector, Ramabai suggested that teachers be trained, women school inspectors be appointed and Indian women be admitted to medical colleges. In 1883, during a visit to England, she was baptised in Wantage, England. Ramabai went to Europe to pursue a medical degree, which could not be completed due to her battle against deafness. She travelled to the United States in 1886 to attend the graduation of her relative and India's first female Indian doctor, Anandibai Joshi. She stayed back for two years, translated textbooks and delivered lectures across the U.S. and Canada. She published her first book in English, titled *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. While giving presentations in the U.S. to seek support for her work in India, Ramabai met Frances Willard in 1887 who later invited her to address the convention of women's organisation. During the year that followed, she returned to India as a national lecturer for the organisation. After her husband, Bipin Behari Medhvi's death, Ramabai educated her daughter, Manorama, on her own. Manorama completed BA at the Bombay University, pursued higher studies in the U.S., returned to India and became the Principal of Sharada Sadan, Mumbai. With her help, Pandita Ramabai established a school in Gulbarga (now in Karnataka) in 1912 and her daughter was the Principal of the school. In an address to Lord Ripon's Education Commission, she said, "In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the educated men of this country are opposed to female education and the proper position of women. If they observe the slightest fault, they magnify the grain of mustard-seed into a mountain, and

¹⁴Anna Paula Lauande Bitar, *Pandita Ramabai: A Quest for Improvement*, pp.1-10.

try to ruin the character of a woman.” This led Lord Dufferin to start the Women’s Medical Movement.

The High Caste Hindu Woman and Ramabai Vision

In her book titled *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, published in 1887, Ramabai highlighted social evils of the time such as child marriage, the plight of child widows and the oppression of women in British India. She blasted on superstition on India . She says that ‘ We went to sacred places to worship different gods and to bathe in sacred rivers and tanks, to free ourselves from sin and the curse which brought poverty on us. We prostrated ourselves before the stone and metal images of the gods, and prayed to them day and night, the burden of our prayer being that the gods would be pleased to give us wealth, learning and renown. But nothing came of this futile effort, the stone images remained as hard as ever and never answered our prayers. We knew the Vedanta, and knew also that we worshipped, not images, but some gods whom they represented. Still, all our learning and superior knowledge was of no avail. We went to the astrologers with money and other presents to know from them the minds of the gods concerning us. In this way we spent our precious time, strength, and wealth in vain. When no money was left in hand, we began to sell the valuable things belonging to us. Jewelleries, costly garments, silver ware, and even the cooking vessels of brass and copper, were sold at the last and the money spent in giving alms to Brahmans, till nothing but a few silver and copper coins were left in our possession. We bought coarse rice with them, and ate very sparingly; but it did not last long. At last the day came when we had finished eating the last grain of rice, and nothing but death by starvation remained for our portion. Oh, the sorrow, the helplessness, and the disgrace of the situation!’¹⁵Ramabai writes ‘ I must have walked more than fifteen thousand miles. Somehow we were keeping body and soul together. We visited many holy places and followed all rituals. But we never begged or accepted cooked food as dan or offerings. We recited and read religious scriptures but God did not help, nor motivated people to help. That destroyed my faith in God.’¹⁶

¹⁵Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶Surekha Panandikaer, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, in, *Women Pioneers in India; s Renaissance* (ed.), Sushila Nayar & Kamla Mankkar, National Book Trust, Delhi, 2002.P.40.

There is a story of Child widow narrated by Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati. Clementine Butler pointed out her vision in her book that's narrates' ‘ " A child widow of thirteen was brought to the school by her father. She was betrothed when just emerging from babyhood, and taken to live with her mother-in-law. She never knew a child's happiness, and, when her husband died, the treatment she received became cruel in the extreme. Constantly taunted with having killed her husband by some sin committed in a former existence, starved, beaten, her body often balanced through a ring suspended from the ceiling, she became prematurely old. When her father could bear the sight no longer, and took her to Ramabai, the light had gone out of her large dark eyes, her head and shoulders were bowed as under a great burden. Ramabai's heart ached for the poor child, and she took her in. They played with her, sang to her little songs, tried to make her forget her misery, and succeeded. Soon strength returned to her limbs, the light to her eyes, and her whole expression changed as she felt the joy of being a free and happy child. She proves to be an intelligent and diligent pupil.”¹⁷ Take another story a Child Widow, she says ‘" The story of Gangabai is equally sad. She was a widow at fifteen, an ignorant child who could neither read nor write. She was defrauded by her brother-in-law of all her jewels and the movable property of her husband, to which she was entitled by the laws of that Presidency. Her fine linen was replaced by the coarse garment which was to be henceforth the badge of shame. Her head was shaven, and every possible indignity was heaped upon her. She was forced to beg for work and food, or starve. Work she could not get. Filth instead of food was thrown into her little basket. Mocking, taunting words were the only answers to her piteous appeals. Three times she resolved to put an end to her miserable existence, but the fear of another incarnation into womanhood re- strained her. She heard of Ramabai's school and came to it, notwithstanding the curses of her people, who threatened her with excommunication, loss of caste and religion, and with all the plagues they could invoke. She came and was

¹⁷Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, pp.22.23.

happy, praying night and morning that, when born again, it might be among the birds, and not a woman."¹⁸

Life Stories of Sharada Sadan

The stories of some of the students in the Sharada Sadan are absorbing. Many have appeared in the Annual Reports of the Association. Manorama made a trip to the United States in 1890, and spoke at the Annual Meeting of the Association, giving the following incidents. " I would like to tell of the lives of some of our girls who have afterwards proved to be most useful helpers. One was married when she was five years old to a man of forty-five and she became a widow when she was six. Then she lived with her husband's brother who kept a country inn in Central India. As the child grew up she had to do much of the work of the house. When not more than ten she was obliged, besides all the other work, to go to a well about a quarter of a mile from the house a number of times a day to bring water in the copper jars. She carried one on her head, one on her hip and one in her hand. Then she had to wait on the guests who came to the inn, and sometimes when she had gone to bed at eleven she would have to get up because guests had come. She must get warm water for them to wash their feet, and make them comfortable. Her life was perfect misery. She tried to run away, but she did not know the country, and all she could do was to run a little way and sit down on the roadside and cry until people found her and took her home to be beaten cruelly. At last somebody took pity on her and she was brought to our school. She remained about seven years and got an education sufficient to make her

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Self supporting. She has been married to a native Christian man and is very happy. She and her husband are trying to do all they can for their people. Her own idea is to help little widows. Then T., a fine scholar, came from South India. She knows many languages, two of the dialects of the places where she lived, and she had to learn Marathi. Then she studies Sanskrit and English, and now takes Latin. She was married

¹⁸Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, p.24.

when only eight, but says that the only time she remembers seeing her husband was at the marriage. She intends to open a school for widows. Y. was married when quite young and lived in an orthodox Hindu family. Her brother brought his wife to our school, but would not bring Y. because she was a widow. One of her duties was to go every morning to get water from a well. About the same time a man living next door started for business. In India it is considered unlucky for a widow to cross one's path, the work of the whole day is undone by it. So the man complained and said he would not allow it. One incident which she told of her life is a bit amusing. A widow is supposed to fast regularly once a week, and once a month she fasts so strictly that she is not allowed even to drink a drop of water. When the time comes for her to take her first meal she is allowed only to eat bread made of a certain kind of flour. Y. had been fasting this way and when it was time for her to eat she asked her sister-in-law for some of the flour. The answer was that there was no flour of the kind in the house. Y. begged for she was very hungry but the sister-in-law after making a feint of searching said there was no flour. According to Hindu philosophy a man must not speak what is not true, but there are five cases in which he may tell a lie. One of these is that he may say what is not true to a woman. The next day Y. found a large sack of this particular flour and could not understand why her sister-in-law should have said this, but supposed it was a matter of religion and therefore all right. Later she came to our school and is so much touched by the kind way in which she is treated that she says she cannot understand why you are so kind to a widow." J. is the girl who wants to learn everything. Her head had been shaven and she had been disfigure-urged in many ways so that she looked miserable. When I saw her again after my absence of some months I did not know her. She had long beautiful hair and was a very pretty girl, and so happy that I did not recognize her. One day somebody said to her, " J. are you not tired? " " No, I no tired, I praising God." That is what keeps her happy."¹⁹

¹⁹Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* ,pp.68-69.

Death

In 1896, during a severe famine, Ramabai toured the villages of Maharashtra with a caravan of bullock carts rescuing thousands of children, child widows, orphans and destitute women and brought them to the shelter of Mukti and Sharada Sadan. By 1900, there were 1,500 residents and over a hundred cattle in the Mukti mission. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission is still active today, providing housing, education, vocational training to widows, orphans and those with sight impairments. However, By 1920, Ramabai sensed a growing physical weakness and designated her daughter to supervise the activities of Mukti Mission. Manorama, however, died in 1921. The development came as a severe shock to Ramabai who was herself suffering from septic bronchitis. Nine months later, she passed away on April 5, 1922, a few weeks before her 64th birthday.

Conclusion

In fact, Society did not understand Ramabai and her thought. The Society also did not pay much respect for her missionary zeal for making women independent and liberal in their thinking. Many historians says that she was much ahead form her times as Muhammad -bin Tuglauq was. Patriarchal society tried to finish her but she had fought bravely the hegemonic structure of the patriarchal society. Her Sharda Sadan was very powerful society. This was like Satya Sodhak Samaj of Jyotibarao Phule that played very important role in the society. Pandita Rambai was the true liberator for the woman of world womanhood.

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