



Research Paper

Contribution of Pandita Ramabai in Women's Education and Emancipation

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Abstract

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (1858–1922) was a social reformer, a pioneer in the field of education and emancipation of women; who confronted every rule, tradition that restricted the life of an upper-caste Hindu woman in 19th century India. She became a living legend during her life time with her courage, intellect and hard work. She became a pillar of women's educational rights and social reforms. She believed that only through the power of education can women be empowered and emancipated. Breaking the glass ceiling in a male-dominated world, Ramabai contested patriarchy in her educational and social activities, thereby becoming a champion of the women's cause in her time. In this article an attempt has been made to focus on the life and contribution of Pandita Ramabai for the emancipation of Indian women.

Keywords:- Ramabai, social reforms, empowerment, women's education, emancipation.

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I. Introduction

During Nineteenth century, many reform movements were started in India when reformers took up the cause of women. At this time, when most of the women reform movements were dominated by men, Pandita Ramabai (1858- 1922) was distinctively eminent social reformer of the time as she pioneered early feminism in India and struggled throughout her life for emancipation of Indian women. With her exceptionally learned background, she became a pillar of women's educational rights and social reform in the Indian society. Pandita Ramabai is one of the few early voices of women in colonial India. Her motto was to ensure self-reliance for women. In order to empower women, she endeavored to create female reform consciousness. Through her writings in Marathi as well as English, she has always dealt with the issues related to women's education and self-reliance. Pandita Ramabai was known for her activities towards women's emancipation, freedom and education.

II. Early Life

Pandita Ramabai was born on 23rd April 1858 in Gangamul near Karkal, Karnataka, in a High caste Hindu Brahmin family. During Ramabai's childhood, the family took up a pilgrimage all over the important holy sites of the country. Here they performed as puranikas, public narrators of the Sanskrit Puranas, the traditional texts which combined mythology and philosophy, which continued until deaths of Ramabai's father Anant Shastri, mother Laxmibai and elder sister in 1870s. Ramabai and her elder brother Shrinivas continued the same life of poverty, hardships and ritual observances until they reached Calcutta in 1878. The pilgrimage taught Ramabai to develop the art of understanding the Indian society and Hindu Religion.

In Calcutta she had the opportunity to interact with scholars and reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen, Kalicharan Bannerji, J.C. Bose, Sucharu Devi, and a number of other scholars, who praised Ramabai's knowledge of the Sanskrit language and texts. She was immediately recognized as a learned woman, and honored with the highest titles of 'Pandita' and 'Sarasvati', which means 'A wise person' and 'goddess of learning/wisdom' respectively. During her period in Bengal Presidency, Ramabai asked to give public lectures for women on women's education and her main sources were the Hindu texts and mythology. She was also introduced to the Brahmo Samaj which was concerned with the issue of women's education.

In 1880, after sudden death of her brother Shrinivas, Ramabai decided to accept Shrinivas's friend marriage proposal and the couple got married on 13th June 1880. Her husband, Babu Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi,

a Bengal lawyer, belonged to a different caste. The next year, Ramabai gave birth to a daughter, Manorama. After less than two years of marriage, her husband Bipin died from cholera on 4th February 1882.

After her husband's death Ramabai reached Poona in April 1882. Ramabai's arrival in Poona marked the beginning of her reformist activities and her active participation to the social field of her times, especially regarding her work for the improvement of women's condition.

III. Social Life and Work

Pandita's actual reform career started with the setting up of the first organization for women in Maharashtra, called Arya Mahila Samaj (Arya Women's Society) on 1st June 1882 in Poona, whose aim was to lead women's emancipation, discussing and changing some customs like child marriage, cruel treatment of widows, etc. By the end of June 1882 she published her first book (in Marathi), 'Stree Dharm Neeti' (Morals for Women). The book sold very well and it is believed that she wrote and published this work in order to earn some money; she probably used the money to pay for her travel expenses for her journey to England the following year.

She wanted to address the issues concerning women more seriously, which many of the social reformers of her period could not pursue. Herself being a widow and having known the condition of widows and helpless women from the upper caste, Ramabai thought of taking up their cause. By this time Ramabai felt the place of modern education and how she could grow because of it. She was not ready to miss any opportunity that could have been of help to women.

In the year 1882, the government of India had appointed a commission (The Hunter Education Commission) that was to look into education in India and Ramabai gave evidence before the commission suggesting that the teachers should be trained for their jobs and more women should be appointed by schools. She strongly argued for the need for general as well as medical education for women. She insisted on the appointment of female teachers and doctors to educate and treat girls and she pointed out that females would find it very difficult to explain their problems to male teachers or doctors. Impressed by her views and ability to communicate, Sir Hunter, the Chairman of Commission, translated her views from Marathi to English and publicized her suggestions for women's medical education and the need for women doctors, which had greatly influenced the thinking of Queen Victoria. According to Dr. Kosambi, 'the diffusion of Ramabai's testimony together with Dr. Hunter's personal activity on the topic may have given the impulse for the creation of the Dufferin Fund to provide medical help to Indian women.'

Pandita Ramabai with her life experiences realised the powerful place of modern English education. For Ramabai, it was the new space that could be used for women's emancipation. During her meeting with Sister Eleanor and Sister Geraldine of the Anglican Community in Poona, she discussed her plan to go to England. They helped the young widow to travel to England to study medicine, supporting all the expenses, in exchange for teaching Indian languages to the missionary nuns of the Community.

Soon afterwards in 1883, Pandita Ramabai along with her daughter Manorama sailed for England with the intention to study medicine wishing to be a physician so that she could be able to return India as a doctor and serve the needy women. Her stay in Cheltenham College helped her to understand the education system in England and the works of Christian Missionaries. She was both a student as well as a teacher there. She gave lessons in Sanskrit at Cheltenham College. She taught Marathi at Wantage to the sisters who would be sent to India. During her stay in England, she converted to Christianity. The conversion received strong and negative reactions in Maharashtra. The only supportive voice among the strong criticism of her people was the one of Jotirao Phule, who in his essay 'Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya', congratulated Ramabai on her conversion, citing her as an example of freedom against the oppressive practices and norms inflicted to women by Hinduism.

Ramabai's staying in England was marked by depression, a consequence of her failure to enter the medical college because of her severe and incurable deafness, the result of the difficult living conditions and hardships of her early years, and the shocking suicide of Anandibai Bhagat, her Indian friend.

In 1886, she travelled to the United States from UK, to attend the graduation ceremony of her cousin and first female Indian doctor, Anandibai Joshi. In America, Ramabai was impressed by the liberal atmosphere, and the freedom that the women enjoyed there. She was fascinated by the education opportunities for girls. She says, "I am deeply impressed by and interested in the works of western women, who seem to have one common aim, namely, the good of their fellow beings. It is my dream someday to tell my country women, in their own language, this wonderful story, in the hope that the recital may awaken in their hearts a desire to do likewise."

During her stay there, she gave lectures in different parts of America. She visited various women's institutes and studied the education system in America. Through her lectures, she created awareness in American society about the condition of Indian women, especially of child-widows. This awareness led to the establishment of an institution called 'Ramabai Association' to help Pandita Ramabai in her social work. The institution gave an assurance of financial support for her work among women in India.

The main aim of the Ramabai Association was to run a school for the high caste child widows and young widows in India. One of the objectives of the Association's constitution was to have secular school education. Leading social reformers like Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Mahadeo Govind Ranade and Gopal Hari Deshmukh were on the advisory committee of the Ramabai Association.

Her idea of education for girls in India symbolically expressed 'training of hand with that of the head.' She knew the importance of proper exposure in the form of good education from the early stage of life for girls. This appears to be the reason why she underwent training in basic education and Kindergarten education in America. She translated a good number of Kindergarten school books to Marathi. To finance the trip and popularize her cause Ramabai wrote a book titled 'High Caste Hindu Woman' (1887) to generate necessary resources. In this book she analysed the various philosophical supports and explanations given by Hinduism in order to keep the low status of Indian women in the society.

On returning to India, Pandita Ramabai established an institution named 'Sharda Sadan' in Mumbai on 11 March 1889. It gained a lot of publicity and recognition in the local newspapers of Mumbai and Pune. This institution was the first one of this kind in India because it was opened for widows, also unmarried girls and day scholars, not only offering them a regular school education but also vocational training like teacher education and nursing. She based her project on the idea that she had previously described in her book 'Stree Dharma Neeti', about achieving economic self-reliance for women, empowering them to build their self-esteem, developing their personal skills and abilities, giving them the possibility to plan their future life with new perspectives. By 1900 the Sharda Sadan had trained eighty women who were able to earn their own living through teaching or nursing.

The social reformers appreciated and admired Ramabai's devotion to the reform of Indian society. Among the various reviews of the time about the opening of her residential school the one published in the extremely conservative Marathi weekly of Pune the 'Kesari' is particularly interesting because it expressed a proud appreciation for such a talented woman like Ramabai, saying that 'today our society has a great need for women like Pandita Ramabai ... it is to her credit that she has not given up her national pride together with her religion.'

The first two pupils of the Sadan were the child widow Godubai Natu and the unmarried girl Sharada Gadre, as Ramabai had received the permission to accept non-widow students too, until a full number of widows could be enrolled. Godubai accepted the proposal of marriage by veteran social worker D.K. Karve and four years after the opening of the Sadan, they got married in Pune and she changed her first name to Anandibai Karve.

Pandita Ramabai was an active member of India's social and political life, taking part, with a delegation of four women, to the fifth annual session of the Indian National Congress, held in Mumbai in December 1889. She also participated to the Third National Social Conference. Ramabai spoke on two resolutions, first relating to marriage and another concerning the head of the widow which she criticised. She brought to notice the injustice meted out to the widow by depriving her of property if she married again. Both were passed by a large majority and the request that members of the conference pledge themselves not to allow marriage until the girl had completed her 14 years was also supported by a large majority. It was Ramabai's remarkable achievement.

In 1897 she established another school 'Mukti Sadan' at Kedgaon near Poona where more than 2000 people among boys, girls and women, were attending school as well as getting industrial training. Most of them were victims of a terrible famine, which spread in the Gujarat region and in the Central India in 1896. In 1902, when plague hit Pune, Ramabai was forced to shift the Sharda Sadan from Pune to Kedgaon and incorporated with Mukti Sadan.

The credit for opening the first school for the blind in India goes to Manorama, Pandita Ramabai's daughter. This school was also located in Kedgaon. By teaching blind women to read and to write Braille script, Pandita Ramabai and Manorama, in a way, offered them vision. The blind women were taught to knit sweaters, make cane chairs and weave baskets. Thus, the blind women were made financially self-reliant. Soon after settling in Kedgaon in 1905, Ramabai took up the task of translating the Bible into Marathi. She continued with this mission till the last day of her life.

In December 1919 the British Government rewarded the important work of social reform and education implemented by Pandita Ramabai with the 'Kaiser-e-Hind' gold medal. Ramabai could not attend herself the ceremony in Mumbai because of her poor health conditions; her daughter Manorama collected the award on her behalf.

IV. Conclusion

Pandita Ramabai was a brilliant Sanskrit scholar, writer, great social activist, the first feminist thinker and champion of women's rights and education. She was one of the remarkable figures in the history of India. Ramabai holds a very unique place amongst the social reformers who worked for the social awakening of the

society in Maharashtra towards the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Her Arya Mahila Samaj was the first organisation for women's emancipation and Sharda Sadan was first organisation to help widow. Her book 'The High Caste Hindu Women' was the first Indian feminist manifesto.

As Uma Chakravarti says, 'she reconceptualised widowhood and womanhood in such a way that no male reformer could even think of.' Thus her idea made her far ahead of her times and extremely influenced subsequent political thinking in India. She was a pioneer in so many fields and a strong-willed reformer with a modern vision.

Her vision continues to drive the feminist movement and scholarship even today, as it also continues to impact the lives of many women and young girls. She remains one of the most prominent women leaders of Maharashtra and India.

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