



Pandita Ramabai's Contribution on Women Empowerment

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Abstract

In present time's women empowerment and their equality is the burning issue in India but it started from many years ago. Pandita Ramabai was one such women, who was the pioneer of women's education and development of widows. She believed that education can break all the barriers of women's struggle. She devoted her life in social and religious reform in India. The objective of this research is to review the social condition of women in colonial India and tried to establish the contribution of Ramabai in this regard. Being a widow, she realized the difficulties of other women and tried to work for their rehabilitation without any male support. The research is based on primary as well as secondary data. The conclusion of the research showed that Ramabai belong to high caste Hindu Brahmin family but her total thinking was based on emancipation of woman without any caste discrimination.

Keywords: Pandita, Women, Emancipation, Caste, Education.

Introduction

In the Nineteenth century although many reform movements took place in India but the roles of women were very limited. The rise of subaltern history has led to a renewed awareness of women's role in history. There is now an exploration of women's texts during this period. Women's voices are very important as testimonies, which observe the issue of women's changing social circumstances and relations with men. (Wesley, Samuel International Journal of Social Science, 2017). At that time most of the reform movements specially women's movement lead by men, Pandita Ramabai who herself belonged to high caste Hindu Brahmin family, actively participated in various movements and protested for women's emancipation in Indian society. In this circumstances Ramabai's efforts and her movement for women's liberation had earned a significant place in India. Ramabai's dedication on women's empowerment, women's education and equality were highly appreciated in contemporary period. The idea of women empowerment she established reform consciousness. Her ultimate motto was to self-dependent for women.

Research Objectives

- i). To study the Ramabai's contribution in women education
- ii). To examine the significance of her contributions in particular social and religious society.

Review of Literature

Primary Source

Ramabai's own writings 'The High Caste Hindu Women' where she criticized the holy book Manu, because womens were living their lives under the banner of men. Her other

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writings 'Stir Dharma Niti', 'To the Friends of Mukti Mission' where she explained the different aspect of woman emancipation and felt doubts about Christianity.

Secondary Source

There are a number of books, journals which shows the extraordinary character of Ramabai against the orthodox society. Merrra Kosombi, Helen Dyer, Patterson gave the information of social and cultural aspect of the society and they also gave the information of family life and the struggle she faced from childhood.

Early Life of Ramabai

"My father, though a very orthodox Hindu... was yet a reformer in his own way. He could not see why women and people of the Shudra caste should not learn to read and write the Sanskrit language" (Ramabai, Her Testimony 14). This kind of thinking in her soul developed from her childhood. She was influenced by the father, Anant Shastri Dongre, who was a Brahmin of Karnataka and scholar of the Paswa Shastri of Pune. His father was a pandit in Sanskrit Shastras and tried to teach his wife Sanskrit Shlokas. Pandita Ramabai was born on 23 April 1858, in the forest of the Western Ghats. In 1876 Ramabai, her father and mother Laxmibai and two siblings traveled for pilgrimage around various parts of India. But in the same year she lost her parents and sister. Ramabai and her brother Srinivas lived in extreme poverty but they never stopped their study. Ramabai travelled to Calcutta in 1878. A remarkable change occurred in her life. She joined Bramha Samaj and raised voice with the help of Sanskrit scriptures for emancipation of women. In 1878, Calcutta University

recognized her as the 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati'. After the death of his brother Srinibas, Ramabai married Bipin Bihari Medhabi, a Bengali lawyer. He was a Bengali Kayasths that it was the opposite system of in those days. After two years of marriage her husband died, leaving with her only one daughter name Manorama Bai. She had also educated her only daughter, Manorama completed her M.A from Bombay University and went to U.S for higher study. With the help of some relatives she moved to Pune.

Social Activities

On 1st June 1882 she established Arya Mahila Samaj, this institution basically worked for the development of women education and also work for the relieved from the evil custom like child marriage. Arya Mahila Samaj basically worked for the upgradation of women's condition, tried to improve women education and opposed child marriage. "The Proceedings of the National Social Conference and The Indian Spectator depicted Ramabai's clear message of giving more importance to education over legislation for the true emancipation of the nation. Ramabai's own written accounts, such as *The High Caste Hindu Women*, mentioned widowhood as a social death that was burdened with humiliated rituals like shaving heads and the denial of ornaments. This book became famous in America, which led to the formation of the Ramabai Association in Boston to provide funding to schools that opened for widows. During this time, the newspapers such as *The Indian Spectator* praised her courageous efforts, but the conservative section of society accused her of diminishing Hinduism. Most male reformers worked for women's emancipation, such as Vidyasagar's efforts in implementing the *Widow Remarriage Act(1856)*, which legalised widow remarriages, but these acts were limited to a certain extent, as social stigma was the main cause of women's oppression. Ramabai understood that law was not enough for the welfare of widows; they also needed to be educated and liberated from orthodox norms." (Tiwari, 2025, p.158).

Ramabai always wanted to study medical education for that reason she travelled to England. For collection of funds, she published a book in Marathi named 'Stir Dharma Niti'. After three years almost Ramabai decided to travel to US with her daughter. During this period she gave lectures about the suffering of the Indian women, translated book. This time she wrote her most important book *The High Caste Hindu Women* in English.

After return back to India On 11th March 1889 Ramabai opened widows home called 'Sharada Sadan' at Chowpatty., in Mumbai." All the leading social reformers were associated with the home, with Justice Ranade and Sir Ramachandra Bhandarkar among the trustees. Godubai Natu was the first widow enter the home, who was later called Anandibai. "The annual report of Sharada Sadan exemplified her determined vision that this institution provided secular education and vocational training. Women not only received knowledge about science, mathematics and history but also were trained in craft and artistic work to liberate them from the patriarchal system. The most striking aspect that emerged about Sharda Sadan was that it became a missionary conversion ground." (Tiwari2025, p.158) In 1891 the home was shifted to Pune for reason of economy and in order to have direct access to the orthodox Brahmin community." I can see a change in the impish natures of my girls. They seem to feel their responsibility. We have happy times in the evenings when all the girls come into my room and we sing together as best we

can. You see, they do not allow women to sing. They think it is a bad thing in a housewife. But we are getting unruly in this school of ours. We are going to turn the tide, and make it a good and honourable Caste." (Butler, 1922)

Ramabai's another institutional establishment was Mukti Mission (Kedgaon), established in the year 1896., in these year massive famine was occurred. This time she not only confined her work in the education of the women but also she tried to economic stability. These Mission mainly worked for the widows and orphan by providing them education in English language. These Mission also gave agricultural training for the children and so they become skillful for their future life. Statistical data gave that in the early phase of Mukti mission 2000 housed for the women and children. This Mission build the platform of women awakening to fight against men society, live and sustain against present circumstances. In Mukti Mission she established a press for women and children for book-binding, typewriting and printing. These kind of teaching made the students knowledge about daily-life.

"Historical interpretations, such as Meera Koshambi, acknowledged that Ramabai's conversion was seen as a form of liberation and the only source for resistance and reform. Moreover, Ramabai openly described the female body as a site of exploitation under a patriarchal setup; she broke social stigma and talked about the serious implications of child marriage and widowhood on the women's body. Her feminist concern was clearly seen as she advocated for maternal health care to protect the body's autonomy. Apart from that, in *The High Caste Hindu Women*, she portrayed social evils such as polygamy, where upper caste Hindu men marry child brides, and in most cases, they die after giving birth to their child because of premature childbearing capability. She claimed reproductive justice for women because she was the first woman who understood the suffering of pregnant women who became victims of forced pregnancies, marital rape, and chronic illness. In this way, women's health became a prime concern for fulfilling their reform agenda. Ramabai's efforts spread awareness about women's rights over their own body, first over anyone's control, and cannot be subjugated." (Tiwari, 2025, pg. 156)

"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". (Tiwari, 2022, pg.151)

"In historical viewpoints, Ramabai was depicted as a crusader for women's education and as a critic of patriarchy. Above all that, she emerged as a defender of devotional and cultural form because in his institutions, such as Mukti Mission, Ramabai mobilised women through music and collective worship. These practices were not only religious but also helped women in healing from their past traumas and

strengthened their emotions for survival. In this, women vent out their pain in the form of popular voices and songs that were denied by society. This became clearly evident from the Annual Reports of Mukti Mission (1897-1905), where many girls and women rehabilitated in these settlements needed spiritual and psychological care. At that time, music played an important role in making them feel togetherness in this crucial period. Another historian, Helen Dyer's work, *The Story of Her Life* (1900), exemplifies the reality that women used to sing songs in Marathi and English in which they expressed their struggle and resistance that built a sense of community. In this way, songs emerged as therapeutic ways to cure women's mental health and also made them feel safe in the Mukti surroundings. Moreover, devotional practices also persisted there in Mukti Mission, where women were trained specifically to read the bible aloud to empower them in their righteous vision. It paved the way for women becoming religious leaders, which in reality broke the stereotypes and authorities of male-dominated traditions that were acknowledged in the annual reports. Dyer mentioned the contribution of Ramabai's daughter Manorama, who received an education in a wide-ranging domain that includes English, Marathi, and Christian theology and pursued training in the United States. These instances revealed that Ramabai focused on intergenerational feminism; her daughter helped her in institutional development and also worked for the welfare of widows and fallen women. In this, they outlived the feminist concerns over the centuries for continuous integration."(Tiwari, 2025, pg.159)

Findings

- Ramabai's achievements was highly appreciated because worked for the women specially widow women and children, was the opposite walk of the time.
- Ramabai inspired other contemporary female workers who also tried to uplift the situation of the women. Some of the examples of other associations are Gadubai's Home for Hindu Widows in Pune.
- The Mukti Mission also another example of Ramabai's evolutionary work. She not only established different female organisation but also spread influence others. The Indian Government gave a remarkable decision i.e. free education up to 12th standard girl child.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pandita Ramabai was as a feminist of women's rights and worked for the women till the death 5th April, 1922. The Government awarded Kaiser-I-Hind medal. During 19th century her approach gave dual idea as social reformer and also rise voice against patriarchy.

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