



Pandita Ramabai: A Crusader of Women's Rights in Colonial India **Nikita Tiwari**

Research Scholar, Department of History, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

*Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was a crusader of women's rights who contributed in multifaceted domains such as education, health care, spirituality, and settlement regions. This article aimed to re-examine the overall conditions of women during colonial India. It is based upon primary sources that include her own written accounts, *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1887), in which she challenged the sacred texts of Manu that portray women as subordinate to men for living their lives. Even her own written autobiography, *The Testimony of Inexhaustible Treasure* (1883), depicted her implementation that worked for the welfare of women. Apart from that, annual reports of Sharda Sadan and Mukti Mission signify her true vision of women's empowerment on a broader scale. Ramabai emerged as an eminent figure who brought changes in a real sense, unlike male reformers who only wrote scriptural texts and never acknowledged the sufferings of women. Women's struggle and resistance merged with Ramabai's efforts to create a foundational base to fight for their autonomy against colonialism. The most crucial aspect that emerged from this is that Ramabai never thought of their personal interests; she courageously stood against social evils despite criticism faced from conservative sections of society. Being a widow, she understood the plights of other women and effortlessly worked to provide them with rehabilitative space in order to regain their autonomy in their own lives without any male domination. Her focus was based on long-term goals that she achieved through their global networks. This article argues that under these unfavourable conditions, Ramabai became a reformist, and her efforts were considered as radical and holistic, solely based on humanitarian concerns.*

Keywords: Ramabai, Women, Empowerment, Widows, Crusader

Introduction:

Pandita Ramabai, born on 23 April 1858, in the forest highlands of the Western Ghats, where she lived with their family, had parents who chose to live in seclusion and opposed orthodox Brahmanical society, which was clearly evident from the statement given in *Her Testimony* (1917):

“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 statement clearly depicts that Ramabai's revolutionary mind does not develop suddenly, but it is embedded in their familial belief. Her father, Anant Shastri, strongly

advocated that sacred learning is the right of all people; it can never become a ground of discrimination, which is why he teaches the Sanskrit language to his wife and daughter. Ramabai defied orthodox norms and travelled to Calcutta in 1878, where she recited and explained Sanskrit mantras publicly that impressed learned priests there; that's why pandits awarded them with honorific titles "Pandita" and "Sarasvati". In contemporary accounts, such as Helen Dyer's work "The Story of Her Life", she described the extraordinary achievement earned by Pandita Ramabai that, for the first time in history, women received titles from Brahmin scholars of Calcutta (Dyer 97). Her spirit of defiance was seen when she challenged Hindu scriptures such as Manu Laws, which set the ground for women's subordination that needed to be exposed in a detailed manner (Ramabai, *High-Caste Hindu Woman* 42).

Brief Overview of Pandita Ramabai:

Ramabai's radical steps defied the reformers' authority in supporting these kinds of texts, which diminish women's autonomy. Her own written text not only mobilised the Indian masses but it also extended to western and British audiences, as her famous text "The High-Caste Hindu Women", written in English, exposed the deep-rooted realities behind women's oppression to the British readers. Through these, she raised funds for opening their institutions, such as Sharda Sadan, which is a step towards educating widows to make them self-reliant. In this way, she used her own text to educate readers and as a fundraising tool for implementing their practical visions. Her established institutions represent a powerful vision towards women's empowerment, such as Sharda Sadan (Bombay) and Mukti Mission (Kedgoan). These spaces empowered widowed women and orphan children in order to gain their independence through education and training. Even her annual reports of Sharda Sadan (1889-90s) mentioned that:

"Our object is to rescue child widows from a life of misery and to give them education and industrial training, so that they may be fitted to earn an honorable livelihood." (Annual Report of the Sharada Sadan 3).

These lines clearly indicate Ramabai's vision of providing education, vocational training, and livelihood for women's survival, and that maintains their dignity. She turned her work into practical efforts to maintain lifelong women's autonomy. In her other work, "The Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure" (1883), Ramabai visited England and wrote this book, and also searched for a new spiritual foundation to her institutions. She found the bible more comfortable in respect of women, and later, with the arrival of missionaries, she thought this was an opportunity to make women educated, but the hidden agenda of the missionaries was not to educate but to convert which attracted a lot of criticism from Hindu reformers because they saw Ramabai's radical reforms as betrayal of her religion and cultural identity. In this way, Ramabai emerged as an eminent figure who criticised orthodox norms, worked for women's welfare, and attracted a lot of controversy with respect to communal identity. Later historians such as Meera Koshambi, Uma Chakravarti, and Geraldine Forbes described different perceptions on common ground that Ramabai was a crusader for women in the 19th century through her own written accounts, establishment, and visions. This article is based on primary and secondary sources that precisely represent Ramabai as a negotiator of colonial modernity and as one who resisted brahmanical patriarchy at the same time.

Ramabai's lived experiences themselves represented inter caste marriages, as she, being a brahmin, married Bipin Behari Madhavi, a shudra Bengali lawyer, which set the ground for social radicalism. After two years, her husband died, which is why she understands the pain of the widow who shaped her political voice. In the early 1880s, she established the first organisation, Arya Mahila Samaj, whose main focus was to oppose child marriage and to educate women. 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. Her speeches reflected her vision through a famous stance given in the National Social Conference (1880s):

“Unless women are educated and able to earn their livelihood, widow remarriage is but a mockery” (Proceedings of the National Social Conference 22).

For Ramabai, widow remarriage was not only a sympathetic or charitable issue, but it was recognised as a feminist one that needed to be raised on a broad platform. Her own text, *The High Caste Hindu Women*, reveals her vision of institutional development. Let's understand briefly that Sharda Sadan was established in 1889 with the support of Ramabai Association because Ramabai's speeches during her US tour mobilised many American women, and their goal became to fund child widows. The Annual Reports of Sharda 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. The conservatives' section criticised Sharda Sadan by labelling it as a deliberate attempt to attack their Hindu traditions, but the reality was that no doubt Ramabai found solace and peace in Christianity, but she was also against the forcible conversion. Nevertheless, Sadan influenced dozens of students worldwide, and in this way Ramabai emerged as the first woman institution builder that even male reformers often did not recognise.

To make women self-reliant, Ramabai established Mukti Mission in 1896, which was one of the years of the massive famine. At that time, her focus not only remained limited in providing education but also extended to make them bread earners for their family during unfavourable conditions. Mukti Mission was not an urban settlement, but it's a self-sustaining space that was mainly formed to protect widows and orphan children by housing them in isolated spaces and educating them in their vernacular and English

language. Moreover, they provided agricultural training so they can become skillful and laborious for their own survival. In 1900, statistical data revealed that the Mission housed 2000 women and children, and this was the early step in making women's survival. The Christian orientation of Mukti Mission created a platform for controversy; the point that emerges from this for Ramabai is that it's a new spiritual awakening for the women to live, learn, and sustain in harsh circumstances. Ramabai was not against Hinduism, as she was against the orthodox tradition that subordinated the position of women in a wide arena. She established a printing press in Mukti Mission, where widows and children were trained in book-binding, typewriting, and printing, the first time involving women. These trainings made them producers and consumers of knowledge that embodied Ramabai's belief in confining education to livelihood.

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 can not be subjugated.

In the 19th century, Widowhood was seen as a punishment for crimes that she did not commit. Ramabai publicly raised the horrific rituals that affected the women physically, mentally, and spiritually. The belief that women were nothing without their husbands meant that, with his death, all privileges and autonomy were taken away from women's lives. The concept of inequality is seen where brahmanical rituals completely try to control women's bodies according to their devastating traditions. Such descriptions, as described by Ramabai in her own writings, gathered funds from Western readers, but for Indian audiences, it came out to be in the form of radical exposure that shook the foundational base of women's bodies. 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.

Ramabai broke the food politics as the rigid caste system prevailed that did not allow interdining and intercaste marriages, she created a space where women from all castes started eating together, which destroyed societal taboos. She herself wrote in the *Reports of the Ramabai Association, Boston* (1889) that:

“The greatest strength these women can gain is the knowledge that they may call upon God themselves, without an intermediary” (*Report of the Ramabai Association* 6).

This statement reveals that devotional practices were not meant to attain salvation but to empower women for their rights and to free them from subordination. These changes provided women with spiritual independence to assert their autonomy in society. In 1905, the revivalist movement of Mukti provided more open ground where women started speaking in confidence, listened to each other's sufferings, and prayed for each other. Ramabai developed hybrid devotional practices by merging Indian culture and Western hymns to reach the masses worldwide. Nevertheless, Ramabai wanted to heal women physically and mentally, and at the same time also worked for their self-liberation. In this whole scenario, music proved to be a negotiating force between traditions and cultural boundaries to understand their true significance for future relevance. Apart from that, there were hidden domains of prostitute women who lived with shame and were labelled “fallen women”, Ramabai challenged these narratives and described them as not fallen because these women were rehabilitated daughters in Mukti Mission. The societal stereotype was that these women do not deserve rights. Ramabai was the first woman who stood for their autonomy through providing education and training to women. On her Britain Tour, Ramabai's work, contemporary accounts of Josephine Butler justified that prostitute women were not sinners but in reality they were victims that needed to be rescued and empowered in this harsh society. Ramabai believed that the emancipation of the nation comes only with the emancipation of deprived members of society. In this way, Ramabai trained these women and made them capable of earning a living with their skills in the printing press and workshops.

Conclusion:

To conclude, one can say that Pandita Ramabai was an intellectual, spiritual, feminist, and social reformer in the history of Indian reformism. She emerged as a crusader of women's rights and worked in every arena for the upliftment of women's position in society. Ramabai's opposition to patriarchy helped us to understand the hidden implications of

male domination on women's bodies. From writing to institutional building, Ramabai's efforts came a long way in attaining women's empowerment. As a woman, she understood the depth of suffering of widows, orphans, and child brides and fiercely stood against conservative sections of society. Her holistic approach was clearly seen in emphasizing the new spiritual ground that made women realize their community rights. During the 19th century, Ramabai's approach shifted from social reform to feminist encounters that set the foreground for revolution. This article describes primary sources strongly exemplifying the struggle for women's liberation, which led to solving a broad range of issues that male reformers generally ignored. It's noteworthy to understand that without any laws, rights, and amendments, Ramabai transformed the everyday activities of women and pushed them towards living a respectful life. Moreover, historians such as Uma Chakrabarti, Geraldine Forbes, and Meera Kosambi represented Ramabai's holistic approach that formed a global network of women leaders who solidified the base of women's empowerment that seems relevant for the formulation of future policies. For the first time, Ramabai formulated the concept of reproductive justice, where she worked effortlessly and publicly spoke about the physical and mental health of women. Overall, Pandita Ramabai should always be remembered as a purely feminist crusader who created a space where women lived with their dignity.

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