
Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: An Iconoclast

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century witnessed a number of reform movements in India centering round the cause of women and the name of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (April 23,1858- April 5, 1922) stands distinctively tall in this regard. She was an iconoclast, a social reformer, an enthusiastic traveller, a radical thinker, an activist, a founder of a number of institutions and a pioneer of women's liberation. As a traveller, she observed various facets of life and accumulated wide gamut of knowledge and experiences that later on assisted her to write extensively on married lives of the girls, their horrible widowhood and other adverse situations faced by them in the domain of tyrannical patriarchal practices. Her radical thoughts and her temperament as an ardent feminist find a faithful and powerful presentation in her books 'Stree Dharma Niti' (Morals for Women), (1882) and 'The High Caste Hindu Woman'(1888). In these two books, Pandita Ramabai, who herself became a widow at the age of only 24, wears the lens of a feminist to cogently depict the sorrowful life of the Hindu widows belonging to the families of high caste. This research paper thus is an attempt to bring to light the feminist approach of Pandita Ramabai in raising a voice of protest against the male-dominated society to establish the due identity, the status and the honour of women.

Introduction:

Pandita Ramabai, as estimated by A. B. Shah, a renowned scholar and a celebrated humanist, was “the greatest woman produced by modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all history.... the one to lay the foundations for a movement for women’s liberation in India.” She earned the reputation of being the first woman to be endowed with the titles ‘Pandita’ and ‘Saraswati’- conferred on her by the University of Calcutta for being the first woman scholar in Sanskrit. Evidence of this extraordinary lady is found in her autobiography ‘My Testimony’ and a number of biographies, the most influential being Nicol Macnicol’s ‘Pandita Ramabai’. Ramabai was very straightforward in using her words. She was very courageous regarding her persuasion and used to be prepared for her strong stand. The credit of injecting this courage into her character goes to her equally plucky parents- Pandit Anantshastri Dongre and Laxmibai Dongre which later on helped her to defy social injustice in general and the same shown to the womenfolk in a patriarchal society. Anantshastri was an august scholar who rebelled against the-then social norms by providing a platform to teach Sanskrit to his wife Laxmibai who in turn took the responsibility of teaching Ramabai and her sister. Anantshastri strongly believed in woman’s education and the education of his two daughters citing as many as 300 references to prove that no Shastras forbid women to learn Sanskrit. But the orthodox scholars who were against women learning Sanskrit were not satisfied and they expelled the family of Anantshastri from the society. Anantshastri then moved to Gangamul, a place in the wilderness of Andhra Pradesh, set up an Ashram and started living as a nomad, reciting and interpreting holy books. With this began the pilgrim life of Ramabai when she was a little baby. Ramabai closely observed this social injustice of denying women the right to learn by the ungrateful menfolk of the then society. Her mother started teaching her when she was 8 years old and continued to teach her until she was about 15. During these years her mother was successful in training Ramabai’s mind so that she might enable her carrying her education without taking help from others. Her mother also projected in front of her the character of Mirabai as a role model. In her autobiography, Ramabai’s feminism is evident in her assessment of Mirabai whom she describes as “a woman rejecting the worship of the husband and the enslavement it implies, choosing instead a higher symbol of the divine in which her passionate heart can find something more satisfying and enlarging.”

After losing both of her parents during the horrendous famines of 1874-1877, Ramabai, accompanied by her brother Srinivas, travelled to Calcutta and created a sensation by delivering lectures in Sanskrit to held the male ‘pundits’ spellbound. As she spoke spoke like an established scholar and an

incarnation of Goddess Saraswati, she was publicly esteemed with the titles of ‘Pandita’ and ‘Saraswati’. In this way, Ramabai Dongre came to be known as Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. Later on, convinced by Keshub Chandra Sen, a social reformer and a member of the Brahmo Samaj, Ramabai also studied the Vedas and the Upanishads to justify the titles conferred on her.

Ramabai married Bipin Behari Das, outside her caste (she was a Brahmin whereas Bipin was a ‘Kayastha’) on 13 November, 1880 and their daughter Monorama was born in 1881. Her conjugal happiness was ephemeral as her husband died of cholera on 4 February, 1882. At this point, she returned to her birthplace and decided to assign the rest of her life to the alleviation of the sufferings of women. She attended a number of social gatherings and spoke on the necessity of education for woman and their emancipation from the biased male-dominated society to enjoy their freedom and live a life of dignity. When Lord Ripon formed the Hunter Commission in 1882 to inquire about the education system in India, Ramabai cited testimonials of the horrifying picture of India’s education system by declaring, “In ninety-nine cases out of 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 try to ruin the character of a woman.” She planned to start a widow’s house in Pune but could not materialise it due to little public support. She earned an amount selling her first book ‘Stri Dharma Niti’(Morals for Women, 1882), went to England in 1883 to everyone’s surprise with an intention of studying medicine. There she converted to Christianity because she believed that the orthodoxy in Hinduism treated women as someone who were heinous, vicious, nefarious, unholy and eerie who could not get salvation. But as a logical lady she did not give credence to all that was prescribed by the ecclesiastics. She was a humble person with radical thoughts who was obedient to none other than God. After her stay in England, she proceeded to the United States and travelled various places giving lectures to collect money for setting up her dream widow’s home. She came back to India on 1st February, 1889 and founded Sharda Sadan on 11 March, 1889 in Bombay. It served as a home for widowed women as well as a home for education for women which bears true testimony to Ramabai’s clear sense of commitment to the cause of women. Later on its name was changed to Mukti Mission, a house of shelter and education for widows, orphans, the blind and the likes. During a fierce famine in 1896, Ramabai went to the rural areas of Maharashtra and came to the aid of thousands of child widows, abandoned children, parentless children and other impoverished women to bring them to Mukti Mission to provide shelter and education.

Objective of the study:

- (i) To study the condition of women in the 19th century.
- (ii) To study how Pandita Ramabai emerged as a social reformer and radical thinker from the cobweb of an orthodox society.
- (iii) To study how women can establish their identity and dignity through education in the oppressed familial and social environment.

Methodology:

In order to fulfil the above objectives, both descriptive and analytical methods are used in this paper. This is done on the basis of secondary data collected from various books, research journals, scholarly articles and web materials

Discussion and Findings:

Pandita Ramabai's staunch feminism is witnessed in her powerful participation in the 1889 Congress Session (the fifth of its kind) held in Bombay. Till that day, women hardly ever registered their attendance in Congress Sessions. But Ramabai's tireless effort and motivation for women empowerment resulted in the participation of nine women delegates excluding herself in the session. This was entirely unprecedented which was only possible for the courageous lady, Ramabai. During the proceedings of the session, Ramabai, with her bright eye and glowing face, rose to address the gathering. As there were no loud speakers, people- all male, could not hear her. Addressing them as brothers, Ramabai told them that she was not surprised at her voice failing to reach their ear because they had never tried to give their ear to the voice of a woman for centuries and they never provided the womenfolk the requisite strength and freedom to make their voice audible to them.

In the Congress Session of 1889, Ramabai also made a powerful speech rebelling against the male malpractice of cutting off the hair of women when they became widow. She went to the extent of calling the men hypocrites who shed crocodile's tears crying for freedom of expression and demanding the right of representation in British Parliament to voice the opinions of the Indians but when it came to their family, they never allowed the same freedom to their female counterparts. Ramabai shut the mouth of all the male delegates of the Session asking them why they compelled a woman to look ugly and subject to a painful life when her husband died. She demanded clarification regarding the biasness

prevailed in the patriarchal society where a widow had no right to live a lively life whereas a widower had the liberty and privilege to fulfil his desires of all sorts.

Ramabai could not tolerate social injustice right from her childhood. She raised her voice of protest against ‘Sati’ system. One a particular day, she attempted to save a little girl, aged only nine, who was about to put onto the pyre of her husband. In a powerful voice she drew attention of the girl’s mother to the injustice that a woman had to sacrifice everything and become a ‘sati’ after her husband’s death and asked her if a man ever became ‘sata’ after the death of his wife. On the girl’s mother’s reply that women lived in the man’s world where man was law-maker and women had to obey those laws without any protest, Ramabai countered saying that women must not tolerate such laws and asserted that when she grew up, she would fight against these laws. Accordingly, when Ramabai grew up, she kept her words and raised her voice against every kind of exploitation and marginalization encountered by women.

Ramabai’s high spirit as an iconoclast, a social reformer and a firm voice for women’s rightful place and dignity in the society is also found in her letter to the editor of the Bombay Guardian regarding the nature of the commitment the British Government really had to the cause of Indian women. In this long letter which was read out in the British Parliament, Ramabai criticised the treatment given to people, especially women in the government camps when plague broke out in Pune in 1897 in the following way:

“The shameful way in which women were made to submit to treatment by male doctors goes to prove that English authorities in general do not believe that Indian women are modest and need special considerations..... How would an English woman, poor though she may be, like to be exposed to the public gaze and roughly handled by male doctors? Is not the Indian woman quite as modest as the English woman? Does she not as a woman deserve better treatment at the hands of the Governor and the Plague Committee?”

Pandita Ramabai’s groundbreaking book is ‘The High-Caste Hindu Woman’ (1887). Consisted of seven chapters, the book beautifully describes the dark sides of the life of a high caste Hindu woman

pertaining to issues like forced marriage, underage marriage and child widows residing in the maltreatment of women. In chapter I entitled 'Prefatory Remarks' Ramabai says that if a foreign reader wants to accumulate knowledge of the life of a Hindu woman, he/she must know something of the religious ambience and social milieu of the Hindu nation because whatever is performed by Hindu women, they perform it religiously believing in one supreme spirit, characterised with omnipresence, holiness and formlessness. In Chapter II entitled 'Childhood', she talks about the birth of a son and a daughter in a Hindu family. Giving birth to a baby boy is considered as 'the most coveted of all blessings' through which a woman wins the favour of her husband. But if a daughter is born, the mother loses the favour not only of her husband but also of her relatives and the neighbours who even show their disgust under the adherence to cruel custom and prejudice without brooding over its psychological impact on both the mother and the child. In Chapter III entitled 'Married Life', Ramabai projects the miserable condition of woman after her marriage when she is belittled and overshadowed by her husband and his kins. The girl metaphorically comes behind the husband and consequently becomes invisible to the onlookers. She is then merged into the clan of her husband; she has to adopt the surname of her husband. She is known to others by the name named by her husband's family. In some regions, the husband's relatives try to erase her first name given to her by her parents. This puts her in a state of almost an impersonal being in which she is devoid of any merit or quality of her own. In Chapter IV entitled 'Women's Place in Religion and Society', Ramabai holds Manu, the law-giver, responsible for making women hateful creatures in the eyes of the world because it is his prescriptions that isolated a woman from accessing into the ambit of academics and holy books and relegated them to household activities. In Chapter V entitled 'Widowhood', Ramabai considers widowhood as the most humiliated and shrunken period in the life of a high caste Hindu woman because there was a social prejudice that widowhood is a form of punishment for a woman undergone for the sins committed by her in her previous birth. What is more painful is that the widow was considered inauspicious-- her hair was cut short or her head was shaved, she could not wear colourful garments or ornaments, she did not have the luxury of having meals more than once a day and she was not permitted to go outside. The widows having daughters had to face more pitiable situations in form of social abuse, indifference and hatred than those having sons. Worst of all was the condition of the child-widow and the childless young widow who were considered the greatest criminal by her society and community. In Chapter VI 'How the Condition of Women Tells upon Society', Ramabai asserts that in order to free themselves from their caged condition, women must be educated and self-reliant. She also prescribes the necessity of Native Woman Teachers to empower the countrywomen. In Chapter VII entitled 'The Appeal', Ramabai

concludes saying that Indian women were hungry and thirsty of knowledge and it is only the wings of education gifted by the gracious God that can provide them the requisite stamina to lift them up from their battered condition. She also appeals to all to join their hands supporting education for women.

Conclusion:

From the above presentation it can safely be said that Pandita Ramabai was an iconoclast and a great social reformer. She can be called an early feminist as she did a lot for the freedom of women from the age-old rules set up by the male dominated society. She was a learned woman having knowledge and fluency in many languages, as many as seven. She also a poet and a great scholar. This is evident from her translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek to Marathi, her mother tongue. After performing innumerable reform activities especially for women, Ramabai was suffering from septic bronchitis and her health started getting deteriorated around 1920. Sensing her impending end, she gave to her daughter Manorama the charge of Mukti Mission. When Manorama had an untimely death in 1921, Ramabai was shell-shocked and took her last breathe on April 5, 1922 to miss her 64th birthday only by eighteen days.

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