

Pandita Ramabai: A Beacon of Women's Emancipation

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Abstract: *Pandita Ramabai (1858 - 1922) emerges as a prominent figure in Indian history, renowned for her scholarly pursuits, social activism and relentless advocacy for women's rights. She lived and worked in an era when women's education was almost nonexistent in India. She was a scholar, had profound knowledge about Vedas and Upanishads. The titles of 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati' were conferred on her in recognition of her intellectual attainments. This article explores her remarkable life and her pivotal role in advancing the cause of women's emancipation in India. Through an analysis of historical records, primary sources, and biographical accounts, an attempt has been made to examine Ramabai's contributions to women's education, her efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, and her establishment of organisations aimed at empowering women. By contextualising her work within the socio - political landscape of late 19th and early 20th century India, light has been shed on the enduring impact of her legacy and the lessons it holds for contemporary struggles for gender equality.*

Keywords: Pandita Ramabai, women's emancipation, social reform, women's education, Anya Mahila Samaj, Mukti Mission, gender equality

1. Introduction

Pandita Ramabai (1858 - 1922) was a great Indian scholar, social reformer and activist who fought for the cause of emancipation of women in India. She was born into a progressive and intellectual Hindu Brahmin family. Her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, was a great Sanskrit scholar. He was a devout Brahmin but believed in women's education. It was indeed exceptional in those days. He believed that women should be allowed to learn shastras. He was also against child marriage and refused to arrange Ramabai's marriage at a tender age of nine. On reading Dharmashastras, Ramabai came to know about the severe and illogical restrictions imposed on women, and started writing a critique of Brahminical patriarchy. She kept herself away from patriarchy as she learnt Sanskrit, studied Upanishads and travelled across India and abroad. The titles of 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati' were conferred on her by the scholars of Calcutta in recognition of her astonishing intellectual attainments. She came in contact with Brahmo Samaj and got to know about the social reforms pioneered by them. She dared to have an intercaste marriage in those days when such acts were considered as sin. Ramabai chose to marry Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi, a lawyer from a lower caste Bengali family. She gave birth to a daughter at the age of twenty three and her daughter's name was Manorama. But unfortunately she lost her husband and became a widow when Manorama was just a few months old. Pandita Ramabai was a courageous woman and her thinking was much ahead of her time. She managed to go to England for higher studies on scholarship. There she came in contact with Christian missionaries and got attracted to Christianity. She decided to convert to Christianity along with her very young daughter. On her return to India, she was actively engaged in social work, particularly for the rehabilitation of Hindu widows of upper caste who had a miserable plight due to inhumane attitudes of society towards them. In this effort, she received financial assistance from Christian missionaries who were interested in conversion of Indians to Christianity. But soon she became the target of criticism from both Hindu Brahmins and Christian

missionaries. Brahmins were enraged as she was engaged in rehabilitation of Brahmin widows which was absolutely against the then societal norms of Hindu society. Christians were angry because in her way of social work, the aim of conversion was relegated to the background. Her reply to fellow Christians is a testimony to her courage and determination. She wrote, "I am, it is true, a member of the Church of Christ, but I am not bound to accept every word that falls down from the lips of priest or bishops. . . . I have just with great efforts freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke."

Pandita Ramabai also had an opportunity to visit the United States of America which helped her to make a comparative study between Indian and American women. In 1881 she founded Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune. It was the very first feminist organisation to work for the promotion of women education and emancipation of women in India. She undertook an in - depth study of the problems of women, particularly those arising from their enslavement by orthodox Hindu traditions. She focused on the plight of women who were forced to marry young to older men and became widows at very tender age. They were consigned to horrible conditions of living. In 1889, Ramabai established her Mukti Mission near Pune as a refuge for young widows who were ill treated by their families. This Mukti Mission is still active in the field of social welfare and provides shelter, education, vocational training and medical services for the needy people like widows, orphans and the blinds, etc. In 1882 she made a plea before the Hunter Commission for facilities to train women to become teachers and doctors and to serve other women. Impressed by her views and ability to communicate, the chairman of Hunter Commission translated her views from Marathi to English. Ramabai's efforts saw the lights of the day. Women's hospital and training of female physicians began in India. In 1919, She was conferred the Kaisar e Hind award for her social reform activities. It was one of the highest awards that an Indian could receive during the British Raj. In 1989 Government of India issued a commemorative stamp in her honour.

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Pandita Ramabai's important writings include: *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) and *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1888). She was the first woman translator in the world who translated the Bible from its original Hebrew language to Marathi language. She also introduced the Kindergarten system of education in India. Ramabai faced innumerable challenges through out her life but she never bowed down to challenges and worked till her last breath. She is regarded as the first Indian feminist rebel who fought against patriarchy in Indian society. Meera Kosambi writes, "the the distinction of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati lies as much in her status as a solitary woman leader of the women's cause whose equal in stature is yet to emerge in Maharashtra." Ramabai also tried systematically to create an awareness among women towards self-improvement. Since centuries women remained confined to the four walls of home. They were not allowed to come in the public domain and that made them remain subjugated. Women's participation in political life was another of Ramabai's objectives, and in this she was well advance of her times and of contemporary leaders. At the time of second National Congress at Bombay in 1889, Bradlaugh had suggested to Pandita Ramabai and other leading women that women delegates should be inducted from the beginning so that Women's participation would be automatically ensured when the Congress developed into India's Parliament in the future. Govind Ranade and others did not encourage Women's participation, but Ramabai, through great efforts, collected seven or eight women delegates.

Uma Chakravarty writes, "she reconceptualised widowhood and womanhood in such a way that no male reformer could even think of."

Pandita Ramabai was a beacon of women emancipation. She practised what she preached. Through out her life she fought many odds but never bowed down. Her contributions in educating and empowering women will inspire millions of women throughout the world.

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