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Pandita Ramabai–The Forgotten Heroine of India

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Abstract

Pandita Ramabai, the first feminist thinker and champion of women's right and education was one of the remarkable figures produced by the nineteenth century in the history of India. Ramabai left her mark in the arena of women issue with her ideologies and work during this time when women education was almost non-existent. Being a radical reformer she always denounced the existing institutions throughout her life which is evident from her inter-caste marriage as well as her refusal to accept conventional widowed life. She became a living legend during her life time with her courage, intellect and hard work. Her contribution was enough to win her a place in the history of India. In this article "PANDITA RAMABAI–THE FORGOTTEN HEROINE OF INDIA" an attempt has been made to focus on the life and contribution of Pandita Ramabai particularly for the cause of Indian women.

Different literary and historical researches argued that women enjoyed a respectable position during the Vedic period (B.C 4000-1000). Women had the opportunities to develop their physical and intellectual faculties. They enjoyed to a great extent freedom along with men and their activities were not circumscribed to many restrictions.

But as centuries rolled, the situation went on adversely for women. Although men were the first to take up the cause of Indian women, the women too did not lag behind. Among the early reformers the name of Pandita Ramabai deserves special mention.

At the mid part of the nineteenth century (1858) a fairly girl was born in the deep forest of Gangamul near Karkal, Karnataka state, who subsequently by her sharp intellect, charismatic leadership, restless effort swept away the history of India by her multi-dimensional personality. That fairly girl was none but Pandita Ramabai Dongre Saraswati Medhavi – the brilliant Sanskrit scholar, writer, great social activist the first feminist thinker and champions of women's right and education of India. She was one of the remarkable figures produced by the nineteenth century in the history of India and who has been a legendary figure even in her life time (1858–1922).

Pandita Ramabai was fortunate enough as she was born in such a family where liberal views were nurtured at least with regard to women's education and child marriage was also discouraged. Such upbringing quite naturally had great impact on her thinking throughout her life that leads her to appear as the foremost champion of women's rights in India. Pandita Ramabai Dongre Medhavi Mary–her full name, was the youngest daughter of Pandit Ananta Shastri Dongre, was born on April 23rd, 1858 in her father's ashram, 4000 feet above sea level on the forest slopes of the western ghats, near Karkal, Karnataka state. Her father was a renowned Sanskrit scholar who though outwardly an

orthodox Brahmin believed in Women's education. He opined that women should be allowed to learn the holy ancient language of Sanskrit so that they could have free access to Hindu religious scriptures. Her father not only taught his wife and later his children but also he was against child marriage and refused to arrange Ramabai's marriage at the ripe age of nine, the act of which has been ostracized by the society¹.

When Ramabai was a baby of six months old Ramabai's father adopted pilgrim's life as he has lost all his property because of his generosity and choose the vocation of puranikas reading puranas in temples or some other convenient places, travelling all over India on foot. During this wondering life her parents took special care of her education. She also did not frustrate them and proved to be excellent student of her parents. By the age of twelve she learnt eighteen thousands verses of Bhagvata Purana in their original Sanskrit verse.

Unfortunately when the great famine of western India in 1874–76 took away the lives of her parents and elder sister, Ramabai and her brother wandered one place to another (covering 3200 Kms) experiencing extreme physical hardship and hunger performing holy rituals to get God's favour, but disappointed at last². It was during their tour in all over India she got the opportunity to see the lives of child widows belonging to upper caste in its cruel details that ultimately it pushed her to dedicate her whole life for the cause of this unfortunale child widows. By 1878, she and her brother reached Calcutta where she had astonished the Sanskrit scholar by her extra ordinary knowledge of Sanskrit as well as by her knowledge of ancient religious scriptures. The scholars were so impressed by her mastery over the ancient religious scriptures that they bestowed her title Pandita (wise person) and Saraswati (The Goddess of learning). Soon she became a popular personality and joined the Calcutta intelligientia. While in Calcutta she came into contact with Brahmosamaj. She soon joined the Brahmosamaj and started to deliver lecture on women issue across North India. But unfortunately when her brother died of cholera in 1880, she trespassed another social norm by marrying a person belonging to sudra community Babu Bipin Behari Das Medhavi who was from the Sylhet district of Assam³ and a good friend of her brother. But tragedies continued to hunt Ramabai—when she and her husband was about to start a small school for Child-widows, her husband died just two months before the celebration of their marriage anniversary leaving Ramabai alone with six months baby Monorama in her lap. How can the faulty customs of Hindu society with its patriarchal biasness bind such a courageous lady like Pandita Ramabai who was much ahead of her time and was born to reform the aged old unjustified customs of Hindu society? Thus despite submitting herself to conventional widowed life she determined her mission – to dedicate her whole life for the cause of bettring the life of Indian women particularly those who are widowed young. Ramabai was the first feminist who raised her voice against the inhuman treatment of Hindu widows belonging to upper caste of the society. In her books 'Stri Dharma Niti' and "The High Caste Hindu Women", she depicted the darkest side of the life of the Hindu widow most of whom are mere child to the high caste family and the treatment they receive in the family as well as in the society.

She wrote, "The widow must wear a single coarse of garment white, red or brown. She must eat only one meal during the twenty four hours of a day. She must never take part in family feasts and jubilees with others. She must not show herself to people on auspicious occasions. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. A man will postpone his journey if his path happens to be crossed by a widow."⁴

These terrible plights of widowed directly force her to appear as the chief architect of women's rights in India and she through out her life continued her battle against the humiliating and unjustified rules that it inflicted upon widowed women and tried utmost to revive their status. In

order to free the Indian society from the shackles of age-old faulty customs and traditions such as child-marriage and prohibition of widowed re-marriage she laid the foundations of women's liberation of India. In 1881 she established the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune – the very first feminist organization to work for the promotion of female education of girls and for the discouragement of child marriage. Later she established the same type of organization in Ahmednagar, Solapur, Thane, Mumbai, Pandharpur and Barshi. Being a learned Sanskrit scholar, Pandita Ramabai had full knowledge of ancient Indian religious scriptures. She became greatly disillusioned with these religious scriptures as they have given a very low status to women she totally refused these claims as has been written in these sacred epics, the Puranas that –

“Women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons. And that they could not get Moksha as men. The only of their getting this much desired liberation from Karma and its results that is, countless millions of births and deaths and untold sufferings, was the worship of their husbands. The husband is said to be the woman's GOD; there is no other GOD for her. This God may be worst sinner and a great criminal; still HE IS HER GOD, and she must worship him”.⁵ She through her writings, publishing pamphlets, lectures strongly denounced the oppression of women legitimized by these ancient sacred scriptures totally based on patriarchal norms and told the people what should be accomplished so that women would be able to have more freedom and lead a respectable life.

In 1882, she was called upon to speak before the Hunter Commission, a British Governmental Agency to look into the educational system and desperate social condition and treatment of women. She suggested that trained Lady Teachers and women inspectors of schools be appointed. Further she also laid stress on women doctors. She opined that women should be admitted to medical colleges as in gender segregated Indian society the social condition of Indian women was such that only women could medically treat them. Impressed by her views and ability to communicate, the Chairman of Hunter Commission translated her views from Marathi to English which had greatly influenced the thinking of Queen Victoria that ultimately led to the starting of Women's Medical Movement by Lady Dufferin resulting in subsequently establishing women's hospitals and medical training of the female-physicians in India. Soon afterwards in 1883, Pandita Ramabai along with her daughter Monorama 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. In England she stayed for a year and half. Unfortunately her dream to be a doctor could not be materialized because of her alleged defective hearing. In England she was assisted by the Anglican Community of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage. The sisters not only gave her material support but also helped her in improving her English language. She was made the professor of Sanskrit in the Cheltenham Female College and she also studied higher mathematics, English literature etc. In England she was also attracted to Christianity the seed of which has been sown long ago while she was living with her husband in Silchar, Assam, shortly after her marriage. Ultimately in England she embraced Christianity along with her daughter and baptized. The search for an alternative religion ultimately pushed her towards Christianity Meera Kosambi wrote “Possibly there was a hidden dimension to her conversion, born out of personal loneliness and social isolation, never belonging to a kin group or caste Community. Ramabai perhaps saw the community of sisters as supportive social structure she had missed all her life.”⁶

“Her feminism was freely reconciled with the new faith” wrote Sonia Hazard and She came to realize that Christ could truly transform and uplift the downtrodden women of India. Having already lost her faith in patriarchal reading of Hindu scriptures, she found the Bible was a radical instrument

of change. She expressed that Christ had entrusted her a great job—the job of a sweeper to sweep away the aged old ill practices against women.”

However, Pandita Ramabai belonged to this rare group of person who never compromised her ideology for anything. The independence of her character is visited from the fact that she throughout her life carried a simultaneous battle against the Hindu and Christian masculinist social norms. In 1886, she got a golden opportunity to go to America when the dean of the Women’s Medical Colleges of Pennsylvania invited her to attend the graduation ceremony of one of her distant relatives Anandibai Joshi. Soon she became a celebrity there an international feminist figure. The Americans were greatly moved by her mental and physical endurance had shown (from May 1887 to November 1888) her stay in America. There she started networking with influential people and developed relationship with many women’s organizations and made everlasting friendship with various feminist leaders like Frances Willard, Susan B. Anthony, Harlet Tubman and Rachel Bodley. She occasionally had to speak at several American organizations. There in 1887, with the help of Willard and her Women’s Christian Temperance Union along with the active support of Bodley she published her wide circulated book ‘The High Caste Hindu Women’—the first Indian feminist manifesto. Through this book she made an attack on the gender norms in upper caste Hindu families manifesting through denial of women’s education and widow re-marriage, child-marriage and polygamy.⁷

Several women’s groups were greatly moved by her stories and sympathized with her cause. Soon the American Ramabai Association was formed to give her financial assistance to materialize her vision to start a home in India where the widows from the high caste families could receive education and become self-sufficient – the home where religious liberty was to be given to the inmates of her school. On February 1, 1889 she came back to India and with the generous help from the American Ramabai Association in America in less than six weeks a school was opened in Bombay named the Sharada Sadan. The aim of the Sadan was to take care of the child-widow belonging to upper caste and to educate them so that they could become self sufficient. This residential school was modeled on the radical kindergarten system pioneered by Friedrich Froebel with the help of the money raised by ‘Ramabai Mukti Mission Foundation in America’. She purchased a land at Kedgaon, which is about 40 miles south of Poona. She named the property Mukti Sadan - The House of Salvation. The aim of Mukti Mission has been to provide the service to the needy and destitute women and children irrespective of caste. The house became a refuge to the young-widows who were being abused by their families. But when plague hit Pune in 1902, Ramabai was forced to shift the Sarada Sadan from Pune to Kedgaon and incorporated with Mukti Sadan. The aim of the Mukti Sadan was to make the women self-sufficient. Though in Mukti Sadan each girl was given a freedom to practice their own religious rites, but by 1893, half of the child-widows in the Sarada Sadan were being attended a daily prayers organized by Ramabai with her Christian followers which generated mistrust, suspicion, uproar among the Hindu Brahmins as well as social reformers. They withdrew twenty five girls from the Sadan. They became sceptic about her mission and demanding its closure. The bold Ramabai ultimately tackled this challenge with the help of her American supporters.

She was the first to introduce the kindergarten system of education in India and also the pioneer to a vocational bias to give school education in India. The curriculum of Ramabai was also unique—literature based on ethical values was supposed to instill in pupil the attributes of compassion and sensitivity as well as morality. Physiology and biology was incorporated in the system to inculcate adequate knowledge about the bodily anatomy and the natural world around us.⁸

Ramabai was the first woman translator in the world who translated the Bible from its original Hebrew language to Marathi language. She devoted twelve years of her life to this translation and she completed this final drafts only hours before she died in April 1922 at the age of 64. Her dear daughter Monorama died few months ago. Ramabai's mission was complete. Mukti was firmly established and would be run by her trusted followers. The Maratha Bible would be printed on Mukti Presses and the messages of Christ would be carried on to every hook and corner of India by the Mukti girls.

Ramabai for her contribution for the women's cause of India has been awarded Kaiser-e-Hind award in 1919 by the British Govt. – one of the highest awards an Indian could receive during the period of the British Raj. The Government of India recognized her contribution by issuing a commemorative stamp on her. In the words of A.B. Shah, an author, 'Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was the greatest woman produced by modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all history. Meera Kosombi one of the noted writer wrote,' 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'.⁹

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