

Pandita Ramabai - An Early Nationalist in Karnataka

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Abstract:

Pandita Ramabai was a social reformer and activist in India. She was born as Brahmin Hindu and being well learned in the languages and Hindu texts was conferred the title "Pandita" by the distinguished educators of Calcutta University in 1878. However she became disillusioned later, by the deception practiced by priests, superstition and plight of women depicted in the Hindu texts. It was at this point in time that Ramabai resolved to spend her life attempting to better the status of women in India. She later converted to Christianity, and served widows and helpless women of India.

Keywords: Social Reformer, Women, Arya Mahila Saba, Philosopher

Introduction:

Pandita Ramabai (23 April 1858 – 5 April 1922) was a social reformer and activist in India. She was born as Brahmin Hindu and being well learned in the languages and Hindu texts was conferred the title "Pandita" by the distinguished educators of Calcutta University in 1878. However she became disillusioned later, by the deception practiced by priests, superstition and plight of women depicted in the Hindu texts. It was at this point in time that Ramabai resolved to spend her life attempting to better the status of women in India. She later converted to Christianity, and served widows and helpless women of India.

She started Arya Mahila Samaj, which is Sanskrit for "Noble Women's Society." The society purposed to work for the deliverance of Indian women from the oppression of child marriage. Bursting with zeal for her cause, Ramabai labored for both their spiritual and physical betterment. In a lecture given in June 1882, she pronounced, "Men look on us women as chattels: we make every effort to deliver ourselves from this situation. But some will say that this is a rebellion against man, and that to do this is sin. To leave men's evil acts unreduced and remain unmoved before them is a great sin." In an address to Lord Ripon's Education Commission, she declared with fervor, "In ninety-nine cases out of a 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."

Ramabai was also a poet and scholar. In order to learn more about the education of women and receive training for her lifelong battle to help unshackle the women in India, she visited most parts of India, and even went to Britain (1883) and the United States of America (1886–88). During this time she also translated textbooks and gave lectures throughout the United States and Canada. Somehow she also found time to write and get published one of her most important books, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. This was also the first book that she wrote in English. Ramabai dedicated this book to Dr. Anandibai

Joshi, the first Indian woman to earn a medical degree through training in Western medicine, who died in February 1887, less than six months after returning to India from America. *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, which, according to her beliefs, "showed" the darkest aspects of the life of Hindu women,¹ including child brides and child widows, sought to expose the oppression of women in Hindu-dominated British India.

Early life

Ramabai was born into an intellectual Hindu Marathi-speaking Chitpavan Brahmin family at Karnataka (Karkala Taluk, Mangalore District). Her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, who stayed at a place in western ghats called Gangamoola, (Mala village, Karkala, Karnataka) was not a Sanskrit scholar and believed that women should have education and supported women learning Sanskrit from his study of the Hindu texts. Against the prevailing traditional Hindu social structure, he taught Puranas and Sanskrit shlokas to Ramabai as well as his second wife, Ramambai's mother Laxmibai and how to read and write Sanskrit as well as how to interpret vedic texts. By the age of twelve, she had memorized 18,000 verses from the Puranas. Besides Sanskrit, Ramabai learned the Marathi, Kanarese, Hindustani, and Bengali languages. Her father faced hardships as he was against the tradition and he advocated education for young girls. When her father, mother and sister died during 1874–76; she and her brother traveled all over India, eventually ending up in Calcutta, Bengal. Their travel included 2,000 miles by foot! Ramabai's knowledge of Sanskrit surprised the intellectual elite of Kolkata. She was awarded the title of Pandita by Calcutta University, as well as the title of Sarasvati in recognition of her interpretations of various Sanskrit works. The theistic reformer Keshab Chandra Sen gave her a copy of the Vedas, the most sacred of all Hindu literature, and encouraged her to read them. She did so with trepidation, since even her radically-minded father had never favored his daughter learning the Vedas.

After her brother's death in 1880, even though it was considered inappropriate for a Hindu to marry into a lower caste, she married, on 13 November 1880, Babu Bipin Behari Medhavi, a Bengali lawyer at Bankipore. Since neither of them believed in Hinduism or Christianity by then, they were married with the civil marriage rites. Six months after the birth of their daughter Manorama, Babu died in 1882, and Pandita was once again left with just one family member, her daughter, Ramabai received a scholarship to study in Britain. During her time there she converted to Christianity. She developed a more clear vision at this time for what would become her future ministry in India. She dreamed of founding schools in India that combined education and industry. She also realized the need for Kindergarten school in India, so she intently studied the kindergarten systems in America. When she returned to India, she started homes for the destitute and Christian churches. Ramabai combined her new Christian ideals with her old Indian culture and used this mix to promote change in India. She also lectured across America for three years on the plight of women and child widows in India; and when the Ramabai Foundation was formed in America to collect funds for her projects in India, more than \$30,000 was collected. More than 10,000 copies of her book, *High Caste Hindu Women* were sold in America, the profits from which were used to give shelter to destitute women in India.

She wrote a book about her travels to the United States "Status of Society of United States and a travelogue" and it has been published in English translation as Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter. The book is a traveler's account of the people and culture of the United States. It contains a pointed comparison of the status of women in the U.S.A. and India, and suggests that India should follow the path of reform, but is not without criticisms of American society, particularly its race problem. The work

was almost immediately acclaimed as one of the greatest books of the time and was soon used as a textbook at the University of Bombay.

In addition to her writing, Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Sabha in 1881, in Pune. She studied and discussed issues which surround Indian women, especially Hindu traditions. She spoke against the practice of child marriage and the resulting terrible constraints on the lives of child widows. Later on, she traveled extensively to see for herself the plight of many young women and widows condemned to life as temple prostitutes in Northern India.

In 1889, Ramabai established the Mukti Mission in Pune, as a refuge and a Gospel witness for young widows deserted and abused by their families; she also established Krupa Sadan, a home for "fallen" women, who had been cast out of society due to their moral failures. Ramabai also started SHARDA SADAN,² which also provided housing, education, vocational training and medical services for many needy groups including widows, orphans and the blind. In Sanskrit and most Indian languages MUKTI means liberation. In her spotless widow's white, Ramabai most often arose before 4:00 A.M. and worked until half past eight at night. By 1900 there were 1,500 residents and over a hundred cattle in the Mukti mission and she was also involved in establishing a Church at Mukti. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission is still active today, providing housing, education, vocational training, and medical services, for many needy groups including widows, orphans, and the blind.

Family life

As Pandita Ramabai involved herself in social service, there was little family life for her. Her childhood was full of hardships, she lost her parents early and her husband expired within two years of marriage. She had also to educate her only daughter Manorama bai. She did this well: Manorama completed her BA at Bombay University, went to America for higher studies, returned to India and worked as Principal of Sharada Sadan, Mumbai. With her help, Pandita Ramabai established Christian High school at Gulbarga (now in Karnataka),³ a backward district of south India, during 1912, and her daughter was Principal of the school. In spite of the relentless criticism, Ramabai remained focused on her goal of helping widows. In 1920 Ramabai's body began to flag and she designated her daughter as the one who would take over the ministry of Mukti Mission. But Manorama's untimely death was a shock to Ramabai. Nine months later, Ramabai, who had been suffering from septic bronchitis, went to be with her Lord and her daughter. She died on April 5, 1922, a few weeks before her 64th birthday. Her contribution to social reform, community service and Christianity in India is much appreciated.

Pandita Ramabai's Campaign in India

Sharada Sadan In India Pandita Ramabai established Sharada Sadan (Home of Wisdom), a school for widows, in Mumbai. This was to be a non-sectarian school where, however, all the caste rules of Brahmins were meticulously observed. It attracted some high-caste Hindu widows, but generally the Hindu community remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives. Ramabai tried to prevent criticism by forming an Executive Committee composed of reformers who were known as staunch Hindus. This plan did not work and less than one year later Mumbai newspapers carried articles critical of Ramabai and her school.

When financial problems forced her to move the school to Pune, the newspaper Kesari charged her with converting widows to Christianity. Ramabai's admitted crime was allowing widows to attend her personal prayer meetings. By 1893 twenty-five girls were withdrawn.⁴ But there was no dearth of

widows in need of shelter and before long Ramabai had other students. By 1900 the Sharada Sadan had trained eighty women who were able to earn their own living through teaching or nursing.

Mukti School

Ramabai's second school, Mukti, was established thirty miles outside of Pune at Kedgaon following the famine that began in 1897. She began taking women and children who were victims of famine into Sharada Sadan where she fed and clothed them, and enrolled them in her school. Attempting to control the plague, the government placed restrictions on the movement of people; in Pune the city magistrate placed a limit on the number of inmates in Sharada Sadan. Since she could not keep famine victims in Pune, Ramabai took her charges to Kedgaon where she had purchased 100 acres of land. By 1900 this venture had grown into a major institution housing 2,000 women and children attending school and involved in industrial training and production.⁵ Financing for Mukti came from an American committee which willingly approved all her schemes. Ramabai designed a remedial curriculum. Literature which was selected for its emphasis on moral models would bring about a spirit of caring; classes in physiology and botany were included to teach students about their own bodies and the physical world in which they lived. Industrial training was included in printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood-cutting, weaving and needlework, as well as training in farming and gardening. All students were required to join unions or societies such as the Temperance Union or the Christian Endeavor Society in an effort to break down caste barriers and develop new loyalties based on interest. As members of these societies, the children learned simple parliamentary rules and were encouraged to take charge of their own affairs.

Philosophy of Pandita Ramabai

Ramabai urged the inmates of her home to become Christians and developed a unique educational program to suit their needs. Her own version of Christianity was one comprised of assorted doctrines, and she combined ideas and she combined ideas she had learned from the sisters at Wantage, and from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Indian Christian friends. Ramabai saw caste as the great flaw in Hindu society. It led to false valuing of the intellect and condemnation of physical work. Caste associations promoted narrow self-interest and prevented the development of a democratic spirit.

The educational work of Ramabai was commendable and had greatly impressed her contemporaries. However, her connection with Christianity subdued the impact of her contribution to women's education. Her work angered a lot of prominent men in western India as she was an acknowledged Christian as was the ruling power and hatred of the latter was growing daily. Ramabai believed the intensity of their anger was related to the fact that many of her pupils came from the higher castes. She argued that these men would have remained unconcerned if her work were confined to low-caste women. In 1919, the king of England bestowed on her the Kaiser-i-Hind award, one of the highest awards that an Indian could boast of during the colonial regime. Ramabai is celebrated as a national icon of women's development movement in India. Ramabai's greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows and the pupils she left behind to carry on her work.

Awards and honors

"Pandit" and "Saraswati" at Bengal (before going to Britain), recognizing her skills in Sanskrit. *Kaisar-i-Hind* medal for community service in 1919, awarded by the British Government.⁶ She is

honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on April 5. On 26 October 1989, in recognition of her contribution to the advancement of Indian women, the Government of India issued a commemorative stamp.

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