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## Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Nineteenth Century Pioneer of Women's Liberation, Social Justice and Social Reform

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### Abstract

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was a social reformer in the field of education and emancipation of women. She can be considered as a pioneer of feminist thought and praxis in the nineteenth century of Indian context. Her work transcended the geographical and cultural boundaries and contributed to emancipation of women. She confronted with many traditional Hindu rules and conservatism. She fought against patriarchal and exploitative Hindu society and challenged the orthodoxy of Hinduism. She became the pillar of women's educational rights and social reforms. She believed that women can be empowered and emancipated through the power of education. She set up Arya Mahila Samaj, for addressing child marriage, cruelty against women etc. She established Sarada Sadan, a school for widows for making widows self-dependent. She also set up Sarada Mukti Mission for women and girls who were victims of famine in 1897 self-dependent by giving industrial training. Although her contribution was neglected by history but had a deep impression in women emancipation. She died on 5th April, 1922

**Keywords:** Ramabai, Reformer, Contribution, Hinduism, Emancipation, Child Marriage

### Introduction:

Pandita Ramabai was one of the leading feminist voices of Indian social reform in the 19th century. She was vocal in her protest against conservative Hinduism, patriarchal mentality, second-class treatment of women, inferiority treatment, Brahminism, women's liberation movement in Indian society. She pioneered women's self-reliance and self-confidence, women's liberation movement and women's education. In her writings, she highlighted the various deprivations of women in education, family, health and tried to remedy them through various movements and programs despite social barriers. She was awarded the title of 'Pandita' for her extraordinary erudition in cultural languages. She founded two organizations named Sarada Sadan and Mukti Mission to alleviate the plight of women and empower them. She played an important role as a social reformer protesting against Hindu religious bigotry and discrimination against women. Conversion to Christianity, bereavement of family death, strong opposition from Hindu conservative society, etc. could not divert or suppress her from her goals of women's emancipation, women's freedom, women's empowerment, and women's self-reliance. Although her contribution is

not very bright in the pages of history, her achievement as a pioneer in the field of feminist movement and women's liberation is undeniable.

### **Early stage of Life:**

Ramabai Dange was born on 23 April 1958 in a Maratha Hindu Brahmin family near Karkal in Karnataka state. Father Ananta Shastri was a great scholar in Sanskrit, Philosophy, Antiquity etc. She acquired knowledge of Sanskrit language and Hindu scriptures from her father. She could recite 1800 verses of the Bhagavata Purana by heart at the age of 12. Her childhood was spent in extreme poverty, poverty and family turmoil. In 1870, when father Anant Shastri, mother Lakshmbai and sister died. As a result, starvation and suffering became more intense. In 1878, she moved to Calcutta along with her brother Srinivas, here she came in close proximity to Brahma Samaj members like Keshav Chandra Sen, Kalicharan Banerje, JC Bose, Suchari devi and many others. In 1878 Calcutta University awarded him the title of 'Pandita' (Wise Person) and 'Saraswati' (Goddess of Learning) in recognition of her proficiency in Sanskrit, interpretation and translation of Hindu scriptures and various Puranas. She worked hard to expand her intellectual horizon. She delivered lecture widely in different public places regarding emancipation of women referring from Hindu Scriptures. She tried to present the violence of colonialism through her first literary work written in Sanskrit Poem titled, 'Lamentation of a divine Language' which was latter resented in Berlin conference in 1881.

### **Family Life:**

In 1880, she lost her brother Srinivasa who died suddenly of cholera and she became lonely. Then on 13 November 1880 she got married with Srinivas's friend Bipin Bihari Das Medhabi, a Bengali lawyer belonged to lower caste. Husband Bipin was fully supportive of her wife's social reform work. In the next year, Ramabai gave birth to a girl child named Manorama. After less than two years of marriage, Ramabai lost her husband Bipin who died of Cholera on 4<sup>th</sup> april, 1882. After the death of husband Bipin, along with her daughter Manorama, she went back to her original residence Pune on the call of Judge Ranade. Despite immense hardship she tried of her best to educate her only daughter manorama. She did well. Manorama west to United States of America for higher studies after completing her graduation from Bombay University. Manorama came back India and also involved with mother's social reform work. Ramabai designated her daughter as the principal of Sarada Sadan and also gave charge the of Mukti Mission. Unfortunately, Manorama died in 1921 and Ramabai shocked mentally and broke down physically.

### **Social Reform and Arya Mahila Samaj:**

Rama Bai witnessed the miserable, indescribable, inhuman condition of the upper caste widows of the caste-based Hindu society. They were subjected to male servitude. They do not have the opportunity to have the least entertainment in life. They are regarded as symbols of 'impure', 'auspicious', 'evil' and remarriage was prohibited. All these practical observations left him mortified, and she admitted to reformation through a pang of conscience as a remedy. The cruel irony of fate could not restrain him. She was persistent in her goal. Shere-immersed himself fully in the welfare of women. She gained closeness to the reformers of the prayer society in Maharashtra like the Brahma Samaj of Calcutta. In June 1882. She started the work of social reform in Pune through the "Arya Women's Society". The purpose of this institution was to educate women, prevent social practices

like child marriage, cruel and inhumane treatment of widows. Being a widow, herself lends itself to her own life experiences or to portraying or highlighting issues of how women are discriminated against based on gender. Very quickly the activities of Arya Mahila Samaj spread to Ahmednagar, Solarpur, Thane, Mumbai, Pandarpur, Barshi and other places of Maharashtra. She had to be criticized in various Marathi newspapers (Kesari) for this social reform. Nevertheless, she continued her work. In 1882, she wrote a book in Marathi called 'Stri Dharmaniti' (Moral of women) in which issues related to women were discussed.

### **Hunter Commission and Dufferin Scheme:**

In 1882, the Hunter Commission was appointed by the Government of India to inquire into the general state of education in British India. She highlighted the discrimination in women's education to the commissioner. Ninety-nine percent of educated Indian men opposed women's education. According to them, women should be good at housework, servants, and fulfill the physical needs of their husbands. Women's problems were represented by 'Til' (small problem) as 'Taal' (big issue). She therefore appealed for the appointment of more trained teachers and female school inspectors for the education of women. In addition, there is a shyness or reluctance to tell a male doctor about women's physical problems, or a lack of empathy is observed among male doctors. Therefore. She spoke about the need for female doctors to treat women, Ramabai suggested the Hunter Commission and submitted a report to the British government, after which the British government arranged to send female doctors and female nurses to India through the Dufferin Plan. Pandita Ramabai with her life experience realised the importance of modern English Education and could be used for the emancipation of women. During her meeting with Sister Eleanor and Sister Gerald of the Anglican community in Poona, she discussed her plan to go to England. They assured her to provide all kinds of help including financial support. In return Ramabai had to agree with sisters on the condition that she would teach Maratha language to Christian missionaries and monks in Maharashtra.

### **UK and US Tour:**

Pandita Ramabai left for England in 1883 with her daughter Manorama with the dream of studying medicine in England and returning home to serve poor Indian women. She went to Britain and met the ex-governor of Bombay, Bartley Fr. She wrote another book in Marathi language 'The Cry of Indian Woman'. Through this book, she depicts how women are victims of child marriage, marital harassment, abandonment by husbands and various forms of torture and humiliation through widowhood and pleaded for the establishment of a widow home for widows in India, but she could not complete her medical studies due to hearing impairment. But while studying at Chetelham College in England, she got a good idea about the British education system. Here too she taught Christian missionaries in Maratha. During her stay she converted to Christianity.

In 1886, she went to America to attend the graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshi. She was impressed by America's open environment, freedom. She was fascinated by the education system for girls. During her stay in America, she delivered lectures in different parts of America and Canada. She visited various women institutes and studied the education system in America. Through her lectures she created awareness in American society about the condition of Indian women especially child widows. She

highlighted the plight of Indian women while giving speeches at various institutions in America. Ramabai founded the Association, first in Boston and later in San Francisco, to help in social service and social reform work. In 1887, she published the first English book called 'High Caste Hindu Woman'. This book is considered an Indian feminist manifesto. In this book, she highlighted the plight of Indian women, subordination, and injustice towards women. Ramabai tried to focus the importance of social movements and civil society in changing the society better. She also urged the Indian people to overthrow the colonial rule in India by following American society.

### **Social Reform through Institution:**

After returning from America, on 11th March 1889, she established an institution called 'Sarda sadan' (Home of the goddess of learning) at Chowpatti, Bombay, with the aim of promoting women's education. Along with institutional education for women, vocational education, nursing education is also provided here. Widowed women and unmarried girls are also included in this institution. Then leading social reformers like Gopal Krishna Bhandarkar, Mahadev Gobind Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, etc. joined the advisory committee of this institution. Within a few days, Ramabai's institutional activities were widely praised in the society and in various newspapers and magazines. Here, women and girls are made financially independent through education and training in various subjects, social and self-esteem is enhanced, personal skills and abilities are tested and helped to build the future. In 1900, that is, within a year, it produced 80 women who made themselves gainful either in the teaching profession or in nursing or nursing. These achievements were appreciated and admired by the various social reformers for her devotion to the reform of Indian society. Her contribution and societal need also admitted by one the leading conservative Maratha weekly, 'Kesari' in that time. The first widowed student of this institution was Gadubai Natu who married with veteran social reformer Dhande Keshav Karve and later came to be known as Anandibai Karve.

### **Women issues addressed at National level:**

Pandita Ramabai was associated with various social and political organizations, taking part social activities, delegated many conferences and seminar and discussions. She also attended fifth annual session of Indian National Congress held in Bombay, 1889. Attending the Third National Social Conference in 1889, she brought two resolutions on women and passed with majority. One of the resolutions was making the minimum marriageable age of girls 14 years and another is the right to property even after marriage. It was one of the remarkable achievements her social reform.

### **Mukti Mission:**

In 1897, another school was established in Khedagao, Pune for the famine victims, where the children were given technical training. These include nursing, tailoring, knitting, embroidery, textiles, furniture, printing, horticulture, mason, carpenter, farming, etc. Within a few days the number of members of this organization crossed more than 2000. Thus, Ramabai made women financially independent through various trainings according to their capabilities. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission is still active today, providing housing, education, vocational training to widows, orphans and those with sight impairments. In recognition of her outstanding work, the British Government awarded

him the title of 'Kaiser-e-Hind' in 1919. On the sudden death of her only daughter Manorama (1921), she became mentally broken and died on 5th April 1922.

### **Ramabai's Contribution:**

Social reformer Pandita Ramabai Saraswati tirelessly worked to promote education and emancipation of women during late 19th and 20th centuries. Ramabai's intellectual and ideological landscape was heavily influenced by her upbringing, experiences as a youngster, her liberal and sometimes unconventional upbringing, the oppressed women around her, and her personal struggles in daily life. She was well aware of the restrictive and biased conditions that women in India's patriarchal society faced. She took a lot of trips both inside and outside of India. Her understanding of gender injustice inside the exclusive Hindu social and religious system was crystallized by her exposure to the asymmetrical gender relations, respect for liberty, and equality in the western world. In addition, she bravely switched to Christianity and married someone from a lower caste, defying her family's beliefs. She rebelled against the gender-specific social injustices present in Hinduism.

Ramabai's primary concern was eliminating the systemic injustices and environmental impediments that women faced. She sincerely thought that women were confined to domestic settings as just spouses, sisters and mothers due to their roles in sexuality, reproduction, and homemaking as a result of gender-based segregation. They were thus denied the chance to achieve self-actualization. In Hindu society's intensely patriarchal social structure, married women (Saubhagyavati) held the highest position. In society, women without children, those with only daughters, and widows received less respect and standing. She spent her entire life working for the traditional stereotype of Indian high caste widows. Scriptures, rituals, and sacred texts sanctified widows from dehumanizing treatment and inferior rank in Indian society.

The highly regarded book 'The High Caste Hindu Women' by Pandita Ramabai is a crucial resource for comprehending the abhorrent circumstances faced by high caste widows in India. Ramabai's most significant contribution to the concretization of the feminist theoretical debate in the Indian setting was her sharp analysis and uncompromising condemnation of the oppressive Hindu socio-religious order. She became the voice of India's millions of marginalized women. Her theories contributed to our understanding of the long-standing structural, emotional and intellectual marginalization of women in India. Ramabai believed that the only rational way to address gender injustice was to achieve equality between the sexes. *Stree Dharma Niti*, Ramabai's Marathi work, must not be taken seriously by feminist discourse. In this book, Ramabai recommends and upholds a Sati Savitri model of ladies and encourages ladies how to be taught and a decent spouse. *Stree Dharma Niti* shockingly gives her a role as substitute male reformer. In *Stree Dharma Niti*, Ramabai advised illiterate and stupid women to become independent, self-educated mothers and wives.

### **Conclusion:**

It is undeniable that Pandita Ramabai was proficient in various languages including Sanskrit, Marathi, English, Hindu classical scholar, poet and writer. Finally, it can be said that Ramabai's role in contemporary social reform movement, women's liberation, women's education, women's awakening was outstanding. She was a brilliant pioneer of

the women's movement of the 19th century. Opposing the Hindu dogma, conservatism and gender discrimination of the time, she played a leading role in the development of women's education, women's standards and dignity, financial self-reliance and the development of women's goods, and her indomitable mentality is written in golden letters in the history of feminist development and development in India. She was the architect of the first Indian feminist movement. Despite facing social obstacles and adversities, growing criticism in reform work, her selfless contribution and efforts in establishing women's rights, increasing self-esteem of women, increasing self-reliance and empowering women, which inspired and paved the way for the subsequent women's movement, are still unsung.

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