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SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY INDIA: A STUDY OF PANDITA RAMABAI

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Abstract

In recent times there has been a great interest in the history of women and gender relations in India. The rise of subaltern history has led to a renewed awareness of women's role in history. Important women have played a very prominent role in the empowerment of women in India. Pandita Ramabai was one such woman. She was a pioneer in the field of women's education and reform work for widows. The life and work of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) is immensely important today for understanding the social and religious reform movement in India. The research motivation was to study the mammoth contribution of strong women who have been relegated to the footnotes of history. The objective of this research is to glean details of the contribution of Pandita Ramabai in this regard. Another objective is to examine the magnitude of her work in the socio-religious milieu in which she operated. The methodology, which I have used, is both primary and secondary. I have referred to the books by eminent scholars and I have visited the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission at Kedgaon and had the privilege to access the

works of Pandita Ramabai in the Archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission. The findings of this paper reveal what a pioneer Pandita Ramabai was in the arena of women's emancipation. The Research Outcome shows that Ramabai is a very important example of a woman's voice, speaking fervently on the ways in which she saw men as having silenced and subdued Indian women.

Keywords

Empowerment, Pioneer, Education, Widows

1. Introduction

In recent times there has been a great interest in the history of women and gender relations in India. The rise of subaltern history has led to a renewed awareness of women's role in history. There is now an exploration of women's texts during this period. Women's voices are very important as testimonies, which observe the issue of women's changing social circumstances and relations with men. One such voice was that of Pandita Ramabai. Pandita Ramabai was a pioneer in the field of women's education and reform work for widows. The life and work of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) is immensely important today for understanding the social and religious reform movement in Maharashtra and India. India was a patriarchal society in which men enjoyed superior status and women suffered from inferior status. All customs and traditions were heavily loaded against women with evils like child marriage, sati system, and problems of child widows, female infanticide and purdah system or the seclusion of women.

2. Review of Related Literature

In the present study research reviews are classified in two categories:

2.1 Literature in the form of Secondary Sources

There are a number of books, magazines, and journals, which throw light on the extraordinary life and career of Pandita Ramabai. Meera Kosambi, Rosalind O Hanlon and Patterson among a few have provided a wealth of information on the magnitude of the work of Pandita Ramabai in the difficult socio-cultural milieu in which she operated. These writers have studied the early life and career of Pandita Ramabai from the time she lost her parents in the

famine years to her journeys across England and USA and finally her return to India dealing with her subsequent social reform work.

2.2 Literature in the form of Primary Sources

The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai give a direct insight into the mind and sensibility of Pandita Ramabai. The Archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission at Kedgaon, Pune, at Maharashtra, India contain a number of writings, books and pamphlets of Pandita Ramabai such as 'Stri Dharma Niti', 'The High Caste Hindu Woman', and 'To the Friends of the Mukti Mission'. Pandita Ramabai's writings reveal a strong woman, an analytical mind, a questioning intellect regarding her doubts about Christianity including the concept of Trinity, and her child like faith in God.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Background of Pandita Ramabai

Ramabai's father Anant Shastri Dongre was a renowned Pundit or scholar who believed in the education of women. His determination to educate his wife, Laxmibai, Ramabai's mother led to his being tried before the religious assembly (dharmasabha) and to his self-exile. The whole family wandered across India. She lost her parents in the famine years of 1871 and 1878. After the death of her parents, Ramabai survived with her brother with whom she traveled from the South to North-West India, and then to Calcutta. This young woman only about twenty two could repeat eighteen thousand verses of the Bhagvat Purana, a holy book and was acquainted with the intricacies of Sanskrit learning. She was examined by the highly qualified men of Calcutta who conferred upon her the title of 'Saraswati' and called her Pandita.

3.2 Reform Career of Pandita Ramabai

The tragic death of her husband, her desire for medical education, and the requests from the leaders of the Prarthana Samaj persuaded her to leave Bengal for Maharashtra. Ramabai's reform career in Maharashtra was launched with the Arya Mahila Samaj, established by her on 1st June 1882 in Pune. The Arya Mahila Samaj worked for the promotion of education among women, the emancipation of women and delivering them from evil customs such as child marriage.

With an ambition to study medicine, Ramabai planned to travel to England. She therefore, decided to raise funds for her journey by publishing a book addressed to women in

Maharashtra. Ramabai wrote a book in Marathi, '*Stree Dharma Neeti*' from the sale proceeds of which she paid her own fare and that of her child. After almost three years in England, Ramabai with her little daughter left for America in February 1886.

3.3 Ramabai's Social and Educational Activities

From Britain she traveled to United States to attend the graduation of the first female Indian doctor, Anandibai Joshi. During this time she also translated textbooks and gave lectures throughout the United States and Canada. Ramabai stayed in the U.S. till November 1888, and addressed numerous meetings on the condition of women in India. Ramabai studied the educational system in Philadelphia and travelled widely in order to publicize her plan to open a home for high-caste Hindu widows in India. Her lectures in USA led to Ramabai associations being formed in all major American cities to raise funds for her causes. 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.

3.4 Work of Pandita Ramabai for Child Widows

On 11th March 1889 Ramabai opened at Chowpatty, in Mumbai, a widows' home called Sharada Sadan. All leading social reformers of the Bombay Presidency such as Ranade, Bhandarkar and Telang supported the Sharda Sadan and served on its Advisory Board. The '*Kesari*' commended Ramabai's achievement of collecting funds for the cause of Indian widows in a foreign land. However it was displeased because of her conversion and warned her keep her conduct straightforward if people were to have trust in her. (Kesari, 12th February 1889).

Sharda Sadan was founded with two pupils, one of whom was a widow called Godubai who was later called Anandibai and married to Dhondo Keshav Karve, founder of the Hindu Widows' Home and S.N.D.T. Women's University. In a period of three months, the number increased from two to twenty two. At the dedication of the school a high caste Hindu lady had chaired the session. A newspaper stated that this was the first time that an Indian lady had ever presided on such an important occasion. (Butler, 1922).

Pandita Ramabai wrote at the end of the first quarter,

"I can see a change in the impish natures of my girls. They seem to feel their responsibility. We have happy times in the evenings when all the girls come into my room and we sing together as best we can. You see, they do not allow women to sing. They think it is a bad

thing in a housewife. But we are getting unruly in this school of ours. We are going to turn the tide, and make it a good and honourable Caste.” (Butler, 1922)

Ramabai's life was characterized by much hectic activity. Hence in another of her letters she expressed her wish to have six pairs of hands and half a dozen heads like some of those whom she read in ancient epics, so that she might do more work and what she had left undone. (Shah, 1977). Ramabai went about rescuing the downtrodden and oppressed child widows in society. In her school they learnt what a decent life was. The following pathetic stories speak of how Ramabai's work emancipated sorrowful lives. A child widow was brought to the Sharda Sadan by her father. As a child, she had been taken to live with her mother- in- law who was cruel to her. Her body was often balanced through a ring suspended from the ceiling as a punishment for the death of her husband. Her father felt sorry for her and took her to the Pandita. She studied and passed Matriculation, went to college and studied up to B.A. Degree. (Butler, 1922). Ramabai in her writings and correspondence wrote about several heart rending stories of widows whom she rescued and cared for.

In November 1890, the Sadan was shifted to Pune. (Shah, 1977). Ramabai tried to build up her school in the new environment and endeavored to provide a better life to those under her care. A letter of March 20th, 1891 reveals her joy at Godubai's marriage to Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve. (Shah, 1977) The School was recognized. Ramabai remained unfazed in the midst of controversies. The number in Sharda Sadan was increasing day by day. There were at that time 350 inmates in Sharda Sadan. She opened it to women from all parts of India. She purchased property for her institution in Poona and though the orthodoxy was against her, she had their grudging respect.

In April 1894, examinations were held and 32 students out of 43 were promoted. The first kindergarten teacher was trained in the Sharada Sadan. By the autumn of 1894 she raised enough funds to buy a large portion of land amounting to several acres. Kedgaon, about forty miles south of Poona in Maharashtra was chosen for the development of a farm. Here a hundred acres of land close to the railway station, was obtained. The people in Kedgaon did their best to discourage her saying that the land was stony and unfit to build on and that she would get no water. (Dongre & Patterson, 1963) However Ramabai went ahead. She planted a portion of this property with thousands of orange, lime and mango saplings. A vegetable garden was made which supplied vegetables to her school. (Shah, 1977) In 1895, Ramabai's school became a High school.

Around this time, Ramabai learnt of the misery of the women in Mathura and Brindaban in North India. She decided to make an effort to rescue some of them. In 1896 there was a severe famine in the Central Provinces and in Gujarat. She launched a massive rescue operation for the famine victims especially the gullible women. Rescuing these widows and bringing them from central India, feeding and clothing them was an extremely expensive business. In the famine in India of 1897, Ramabai rescued 1350 girls.

Meanwhile the settlement at Kedgaon was then dedicated to God by the name of *Mukti* i.e. 'Salvation.' The girls were happy in their several occupations. All who could learn were taught the three Rs and the more intelligent ones went on to the Anglo-Vernacular standards. The less intelligent ones combined industrial with ordinary education. From the earliest beginnings of the Mukti its home industries have been one of its best features. All were taught to earn an honest living. Many were trained as pupil teachers and several were taught to help in nursing the many sick girls brought in from the famine districts. (Ramabai, 1900)

The Collector of the District, on visiting Kedgaon was astonished to find how strong Ramabai's influence for good was amongst the villagers. Besides providing them with work in needy times, she was their benefactress in several ways. The ground on the opposite side of the road was owned by a liquor dealer. Ramabai secured from the Collector a promise that no license would be granted to anyone to sell liquor in Kedgaon. She purchased the liquor-dealer's farm, containing seventeen acres. (Shah, 1977) Then she invited the villagers to establish a weekly bazaar on this roadside. (Dongre & Patterson, 1963)

Including the 100 girls of the Sharada Sadan she had altogether nearly 750 girls under training. She had only 16 paid teachers from outside in these Homes. 33 teachers, 10 matrons and 42 workers in different branches of industry were daily working for the girls. The Sharada Sadan had trained 70 teachers and workers in the past 11 years, and the Mukti School had trained nearly 80 girls to earn their own living in the past 3 years. 85 of the girls had found work in their own mother institutions and 65 of the girls were either married or earning their living as teachers and workers in different places. (Dongre & Patterson, 1963)

Ramabai's aim was to train all these girls to do some work or other. In 1900 over 200 of them had the intelligence to be good school teachers after they received a few years training. Thirty of the girls were trained as nurses. Some of the girls had mastered the trade of oil making. Others had learnt to do laundry work and some had learnt dairy work. About 50 had some

training in fieldwork, 40 girls had learnt to weave and more than 50 girls had learnt to sew well and make their own garments. Kedgaon was by no means a luxurious place. But they were well taken care of in terms of food and rest. (Dongre & Patterson, 1963)

Mrs. Bruere, who served the Mukti Mission in its early years, gave a speech in which she extolled Ramabai's achievement.

“Visitors come from all parts of India and from other countries to visit Ramabai work and when they see the extent of the work carried on, the multitude of women and the splendid organization, the great executive ability of that wonderful woman, who has her hand upon every part of the work, they are greatly amazed and they say that the half has not been told them. The buildings of Mukti are very fine. The school rooms were furnished with American desks, blackboards and maps which gave them a fine appearance. There was a thoroughly equipped kindergarten, a competent staff of teachers and the first class order.” (Shah, 1977)

There was the old Sharada Sadan High school in which there were 165 girls under the charge of Manorama. Then there was the Mukti School, comprising the primary and the grammar grades. The grades were all taught according to the government standard. There was the blind class, under the charge of Manorama. Then there was the large boy's school called the Sadanand Sadan and an orphanage. (Shah, 1977) Besides, there were the industries and a bakery where they made English bread and cake. The girls were also taught laundry work, cooking, sewing, and the use of the sewing machine. They learnt the art of weaving and there was a printing establishment as well.

Ramabai had from the beginning taught her girls to be broadminded, and benevolent. For instance in the famine of 1896–1898 they took in over 300 orphans and her girls were among the first to raise money for the orphans. Further at time of the Boxer Rebellion in China they raised a sum of money and gave it to the sufferers there.

In 1904 they had their first government inspection. It concluded that the management of the school was excellent. Beside the Mukti and Sharada Sadan, the campus at Kedgaon housed the Kripa Sadan (home for women), Priti Sadan (home for the aged and the infirm), Sadanand Sadan (home for boys) and Bartim Sadan (home for blind). Before she died on 5th April 1922, Ramabai had other accomplishments to her credit. Out of the money she earned from the sale of *‘The High Caste Hindu Woman’* she bought scientific models and instruments, published illustrated science text-books in Marathi, introduced the Braille system for the education of the

blind, trained teachers for kindergarten schools and completed a new translation of the Bible in simple Marathi from the original Hebrew and Greek. She was the first to introduce the kindergarten system of education and also the first to give a vocational bias to school education in India.

4. Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it is imperative that we revive the writings and lives of such women. They provide us with a woman's view and a woman's voice at a time when they were not heard. It is important that we look at such works and such activities of women for the reform of women as it provides us with a proper insight into the history of our country and region, which glorifies men as the only champions of reform. It examines a woman's perspective of the changes that took place in nineteenth century India. It is a commentary on the political, social and religious life of the time.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the mammoth contribution of strong women like Pandita Ramabai who have been relegated to the footnotes of history.
2. To glean details of the contribution of Pandita Ramabai in this regard.
3. To examine the magnitude of her work in the socio-religious milieu in which she operated.

6. Methodology

The methodology has been through field visit, Library Visits and meeting the officials and women associated with the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission at Kedgaon, Pune.

6.1. Secondary Sources

I have referred to the books by eminent scholars through visits to the Library of Smt Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani College, Ulhasnagar, Library of the University of Mumbai, Library of the Asiatic Society, Mumbai and the Library of the Union Biblical Seminary, Mumbai.

6.2. Primary Sources

I have visited the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission at Kedgaon and had the privilege to access the works of Pandita Ramabai in the Archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission

7. Analysis and Findings

- Judged by any standards—social, educational, and economic, Ramabai had remarkable achievements, especially when viewed against the background of the times in which Ramabai worked.
- One extract from an American Ramabai Association report sums up the enormity of Ramabai work:

“During the ten years of her work in the Sharada Sadan this one woman reformer, by her silent influence and by her object lessons to the educated young men, showing them the difference between an educated wife of twenty, and an ignorant wife of nine or twelve, has done more towards the recognition of the true brotherhood of man, and more for the advancement of women; has prevented more demoralizing child marriages and promoted more remarriages with despised widows than have the many so-called reformers –than has the Brahma Samaj during the entire period of its existence. While her brothers theorize, she practices.” (Shah,1977)

- Ramabai’s example inspired many other similar efforts in India. Mrs. Shewantibai Nikambe’s school which was started in Mumbai for high caste child wives, child widows and unmarried girls, Godubai’s Home for Hindu widows in Poona and Miss. Shorat Chakraborty’s orphanage in Allahabad all derived immense inspiration from Pandita Ramabai work.
- The Mukti mission still lives on and continues the legacy of Pandita Ramabai. The Indian Government in its drive for literacy provides wide opportunities for female education, like the provision of free education for the girl child up to the 12th standard. Everywhere women now take an active part in the affairs of the nation. To a great extent the initiative and influence of Ramabai helped to bring about the changes that have made India so great and progressive.

8. Conclusion

Pandita Ramabai was awarded the Kaiser-I-Hind medal by the Government of India for community service in 1921. In 1989 a postal stamp was released by the Government of India commemorating 100 years since the commencement of Ramabai's work. Ramabai's death on April 5, 1922 was a national loss. One of the leading newspapers of India, '*The Times of India*' published the following tribute in their newspaper:

The name of Pandita Ramabai ought to have a high place among the makers of modern India. She represented the awakening of Indian woman hood and she voiced with persuasiveness and courage the demand of her gender for a richer and fuller life than the prejudices of the past permitted. Pandita Ramabai's story is one to uplift everyone, whether he be Hindu or Christian who accounts the soul of man the most precious of all things. (The Times of India, 7th April, 1922.)

9. Scope of Future Research

The research has future scope to study how others responded to Ramabai's work. Mahatma Phule supported Pandita Ramabai in her struggle against the orthodoxy. He published a pamphlet called '*Satsar*' or '*Essence of Truth*', September 1885, which defended Ramabai against critics of her conversion. He lauded her efforts in the field of education and described her work as an attempt to reveal the cunning strategies through which Aryans had tormented women for thousands of years. (Phule, 1969). He defended Ramabai and accused the Brahmins of obstructing female education in the fear that it would make women pointing out that Brahmins had always invented all sorts of mischievous lies about women and stopped them from being educated for fear that this would make women insubordinate. (Phule, 1969). Remarriage carried something of a social stigma. The upper castes did not practice widow remarriages. Even in castes where there were no sanctions against widow remarriage, the people preferred to imitate the upper castes and not enforce widow remarriage. (Jambhekar, 1950) The prohibition of widow remarriage also distinguished Maratha families from ordinary agriculturalists. With the emergence of more organized social reform movements from the 1860's, it was considered primarily a Brahman problem, reflected in Pandita Ramabai's concern with the '*high-caste*' Hindu widow. Ramabai who was a thorn in the flesh of orthodoxy, who single-handedly established large schools, widow's homes, who never buckled under criticism and kept

responding with her literary and social service activities.(O Hanlon, 1994) Ramabai clearly identified the trends that were emerging which made social boundaries rigid. This is important because questions of gender and women had significance for politics and society for India in the nineteenth century. The issues she fought for are still relevant today. What she wrote in the nineteenth century holds true even today. Only the setting has changed, the situation remains the same. There are many barriers that make girls miss out on school education. These are poverty, early marriage, child marriage, culture and family circumstances. As a result, women have poor self-worth, lack in self-esteem and are governed by superstition and dogmatic religious beliefs which are transferred from generation to generation. (Pillai & Joy, 2017)

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