

RAMABAI'S RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIETY: REVISITING THE LEGACY OF THE PANDITA WHO REDEFINED WOMANHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Being the maiden feminist and activist in the cause to advantage women throughout the life, Ramabai was an ideal of extreme individualism and daring to the women of her years. She was born in a high caste Hindu woman who converted into Christianity. Hinduism denial was a significant factor and she was against the marginalization of the women. This had taken her all the miseries she had gone through in her life and she became a spokesperson for the other women in those times. An independent woman discovered and questioned her religion in the attempt of creating a utopian community. Her womanhood was put in a middle ground between a Brahmin widow in the Hindu society, and later a Christian convert and this prevailed not only in herself but also on her immediate society. Ramabai emphasized on the different obstacles such as caste, religion, patriarchy and (inter)nationalism, where women were socially oppressed. The experience that Ramabai has had in her life can attest the nature of work she had been doing throughout her life. She was at a double disadvantageous position both as a widow and a widow who dared to challenge the social norms of the Indian community in the spiritual path as a way to enlighten herself through radicalness. This article revisits the conundrums in her life and the continuum of the turbulent times she lived in and until now, which is more than a century after her death. This article reinstates the relevance of the underlying themes of her controversial life and the undying spirit of feminism that can still shape the strands of feminism and universalism.

KEY WORDS: Womanhood, Contesting Religion, Questioning Patriarchy, Emancipation, Widowhood

INTRODUCTION

After reading the life of Ramabai, one can understand that her writings and her life experiences have much relevance today as well. Even after two centuries, women are still struggling to find a space in the public sphere as it is still very male-dominated. The fearlessness with which she questioned the fundamental structures of religion was an indication of the rationality she possessed. Her focus on the path towards self-reliance for the widows was much ahead of its time. The widows out casted from society were able to reinvent the meaning of their lives only through education and work. The self-dependence idea appears to be underlying in her chosen goal for the women, especially the widows. Her commitment towards the women's issue by exploring new avenues for the different kinds of women makes her one of the exceptional reformers of her time. Her reform initiative made her life and work exceptional in carving out the niches of religious conversion and political maneuver in her times but is still very relevant in the contemporary times. She transformed the notion of womanhood, which the male reformers had imagined and constructed. Her notion of feminism cannot be fenced into a category but can be seen as a continuum between the various facets of feminism. Many women experience the numerous

junctures of tension, protest, dilemmas that her life depicts until date in the public and private domain.

Women's emancipation around the time when patriarchal notions of society were deeply embedded in the lives of Indian culture, Pandita Ramabai emerged as the radical voice of change and embodiment of freedom. She travelled around India as well as different parts of the world championing her ideas of self-reliance for women and commenting on the texts and practices, which hindered women's freedom. She stands as an exceptional example because of the path breaking choices she took when women's participation in public affairs were rarely witnessed, especially by a single woman or a mother. Her contemporaries highly ridiculed her decision to convert to Christianity and breaking the confines of the rules and traditions of a high caste Hindu woman. Her omission from most of the academic texts is a reflection of the denounced behavior of the society towards her fearless challenges to patriarchy and religion. Maharashtra's Hindu culture and the British imperialism entangled her everyday existence. The British officials who presented social reform as the pivotal hijacked the reformist discourse. The colonial state used gender for demeaning the condition of the colonized and providing a model for rediscovery. They used it as a mark for moral superiority over the backwardness of their subjects. The liberal

men who were enveloped by the patriarchal ideology addressed the gender inequalities. Ramabai not just disrupted the notion of femininity, which the men had carved out and aspired but challenged how gender question was posed or looked at. During the nineteenth century, British colonialism gave rise to the number of reform movements, and the main idea was to civilize the so-called backward people. The manner, method, and means were much debatable among the circle of the reformers, but majority stressed on the education of women. Several speculations and fear erupted among the male reformers about the public-private erasure in the lives of women due to this initiative. They wanted to reform the society only up to the limit where women would not break the confinement of their domestic sphere. Ramabai challenged these notion not only through her life choices but also by inspiring the women around her to contest the rigidities.

Pandita Ramabai's early life was remarkable because it defied many of the social conventions governing nineteenth-century Hindu society. Born as Rama Dongre on 23 April 1858 into a Chitpavan Brahmin family, she benefited from the progressive outlook of her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, a Sanskrit scholar who challenged orthodox restrictions on women's education. At a time when girls were typically married in childhood and denied access to formal learning, he educated his wife and daughters in Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures. Despite facing opposition and the threat of excommunication from fellow caste members, he justified his actions through scriptural interpretation and continued to promote women's education. The family led a nomadic life, travelling across India as Pauranikas, reciting sacred texts at temples and surviving on donations. This unconventional upbringing distanced Ramabai from rigid caste affiliations and exposed her to diverse social realities. Tragedy struck when both her parents died of starvation during a famine, leaving sixteen-year-old Ramabai and her brother Srinivas to travel across the country reciting Sanskrit scriptures. These experiences deepened her intellectual development while also fostering an awareness of social inequalities and the precarious position of women in Indian society.

A major turning point came in 1878 when Ramabai and her brother arrived in Calcutta, where her extraordinary command of Sanskrit attracted widespread attention. Following a public examination by leading Sanskrit scholars, she was awarded the titles "Pandita" and "Saraswati" in recognition of her scholarship (Kosambi, 1998). During her stay in Bengal, she became involved in social and educational reform movements and developed close ties with the Brahmo Samaj, whose monotheistic beliefs and commitment to women's upliftment strongly influenced her. Through lectures and public engagements, she highlighted the exclusion of women and

lower castes from religious knowledge and argued that education was essential for their liberation. The death of her brother in 1880 and her growing disillusionment with orthodox Hinduism further shaped her outlook. Defying caste conventions, she married Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a Shudra lawyer, under the Civil Marriage Act. However, his death in 1882 left her a widow at the age of twenty-two with an infant daughter, Manorama. Although she maintained certain traditional practices associated with widowhood, she refused to conform to prevailing expectations and dedicated herself to public service and women's emancipation. Her intellectual achievements and reformist vision soon earned recognition among social reformers in Maharashtra and beyond, marking the beginning of her influential public career (Kosambi, 1998; Chakravarti, 1998).

THE ARYA MAHILA SAMAJ

After her early experiences in Bengal, Ramabai returned to western India, her ancestral region, at a time when debates on social reform were intensifying, particularly around questions of gender and women's agency. Women were largely positioned as objects of reform rather than active participants, yet Ramabai sought to reposition them as subjects of change. In Pune in 1882, reformers associated with the Prarthana Samaj, including M. G. Ranade and G. G. Bhandarkar, extended support to her initiatives. This collaboration contributed to the establishment of the Arya Mahila Samaj on 1 July 1882, which aimed to expand women's participation in public life and promote education through public lectures directed at an emerging urban middle-class audience. However, its orientation also reflected an elite framework, primarily engaging upper-caste women and shaping reform within a socially limited constituency.

Through her extensive travels across India, Ramabai critically examined the ways in which women were constrained by religious customs, social traditions, and caste-based norms. She identified child marriage, polygamy, and restrictions on women's public participation as key forms of oppression, and consistently emphasized female education as a means of emancipation. Importantly, she argued that such inequalities were not limited to upper-caste women but affected women across caste groups. As part of her outreach strategy, she required male attendees at her lectures to be accompanied by at least one female family member, thereby creating indirect access for women to her ideas. She also presented a memorandum before the Hunter Commission in September 1882 advocating for women's education and professional training, particularly for teachers and doctors, arguing that women patients required female medical practitioners due to social and cultural barriers (Kosambi, 1998).

Ramabai's interventions generated significant debate within reformist circles and gradually led to her social isolation, as her critique extended beyond conservative orthodoxy to include elite liberalism and Brahmanical reform traditions (Omvedt, 2008). Although she continued her efforts toward establishing institutions such as a widows' home, her growing disillusionment with Hindu reform movements coincided with increasing engagement with alternative religious ideas. Influenced by Christian missionary work, translations of Christian texts, and accounts of charitable service, she became intellectually drawn to Christianity, particularly its emphasis on compassion, equality, and redemption (Ramabai, 1907). This period marked a shift in her intellectual and spiritual trajectory, shaped by both personal experiences and her search for a more inclusive moral and social framework.

FROM CONVERSION TO CONTESTATION THE PATH OF CHRISTIANITY

The rise of Christianity in nineteenth-century India must be understood within the broader context of colonial restructuring after the East India Company lost its trade monopoly, allowing increased missionary activity and the circulation of Christian literature in vernacular languages. Mission schools, western-style education, and urban missionary presence contributed to a complex social landscape in which responses varied: some upper-caste Indians converted to Christianity, while others pursued Hindu reform and revival. Positioned within this transitional milieu, Ramabai developed a distinctive perspective shaped by her marginal location and exposure to multiple intellectual traditions. During her early years in Calcutta, she was not directly influenced by Christianity, although she observed the adoption of Western lifestyles among Indian elites. Her advocacy before the Hunter Commission for women's medical education further strengthened her interest in pursuing studies in England, and she initially declared her intention to retain her religion while seeking educational opportunities abroad.

Ramabai's engagement with reformist ideas and her critique of gender inequality in Hindu society gradually intensified during this period. She authored *Stree Dharma Niti* in Marathi, where she emphasized moral self-cultivation and the ethical responsibilities of women beyond their roles as wives and mothers. Her understanding of religion centered on conscience and rational reflection rather than ritual orthodoxy, distinguishing her position from both rigid Hindu and institutional Christian frameworks. With the support of the Sisters of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, she travelled to England in 1883 to pursue medical training; however, her plans were disrupted due to her hearing impairment and personal loss, particularly the death of her companion Anandibai Bhagat. Experiencing increasing isolation, she found

emotional and intellectual support among Christian communities, which reinforced her attraction to ideas of compassion, equality, and universal salvation. Consequently, she was baptized in 1883 along with her daughter and adopted the name Mary Rama (Ramabai, 1907; Kosambi, 1998).

Although Ramabai converted to Christianity, her relationship with the Church remained complex and contested. She consistently asserted her right to conscience and refused to accept rigid ecclesiastical authority, rejecting attempts to define her solely as an instrument of evangelization. Her intellectual independence often brought her into conflict with Church officials, particularly when she challenged gendered and racial hierarchies within Christian institutions. Even while engaging with Christian networks, she selectively accepted doctrines and continued certain cultural practices, refusing full assimilation into Anglican orthodoxy. These tensions intensified her critique of both Hindu and Christian patriarchal structures, as she recognized discrimination in Christianity as being rooted in race rather than caste (Kosambi, 1992; Kosambi, 2016). Ultimately, feeling constrained by both Brahmanical reformers and missionary authority, she turned toward the United States, where she encountered greater religious pluralism and support for her humanitarian vision.

In the United States, Ramabai emerged as an influential public intellectual and reform advocate, addressing women's organizations and raising funds for social welfare initiatives in India. She described America as a space of relative religious freedom and expanded civic participation for women, which deeply shaped her understanding of gender equality and public life (Ramabai, 2000; Bitar, 2017). During this period, she wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, exposing systemic oppression of Indian women and critiquing scriptural justifications for gender inequality. Her efforts led to the establishment of the American Ramabai Association and the creation of the Mukti Sadan (Widows' Home) in Kedgaon, supported by transnational networks of reformers and activists (Adhya, 2024). Despite criticism of her association with Christian missionaries, Ramabai remained committed to her humanitarian mission, leveraging global support to advance women's education and welfare in India. Her life reflects a continuous negotiation between religious identity, social reform, and transnational activism, ultimately grounded in her commitment to women's autonomy and self-reliance.

THE ABODES OF EMANCIPATION

Ramabai's hopes turned into a reality when finally a widow home was opened, a symbol of liberation. The Sharda Sadan was established in the year 1889, offering secular education and training of vocations. The thought and objectives of self-reliance among the women, which was not experienced

by many women until then. Sharda Sadan was inaugurated in March 1889 in Bombay with the help of the Ramabai Association of America, which decided to be 'secular' without any religious teaching of any manner, and gradually it was seen that the number of inmates rose in the first three years. It provided a space for self-discovery, and emancipation for the widows who were considered as social outcasts and expected to lead a life of solitude and restrictions. Ramabai strived towards giving a new meaning to their lives where the widows could live as teachers, nurses, or workers and provide shelter for the female community for all castes. She was vocal about the condition of women due to their marginalization, and she focused on the humiliation of child widows. She was the early proponent of demanding the same privilege for women who she thought had the agency of deciding the course and choices in their lives. Her reconceptualization of womanhood and widowhood was much ahead of its times. It was a semi public sphere where women were imparted with education and skills to cultivate economic self-reliance which was unheard in the upper caste society. She was against child marriage as the child is too small to make her own decision and, in turn, falls prey to the domination and abuse of men in the family. Soon, the men in the managing board were an obstruction in her plans because of their decision making on the subject of which girls could be admitted. By putting the Christian egalitarianism exercise on the ground, Ramabai ensured that the spaces are reconfigured as well as the female body is reconceptualised by the society. Christianity was the way of informing the operation of the institution and the reform program of the institution (Shetty 2012: 37). A year after in 1891, Sharda Sadan was moved to Poona in order to reduce the expenses and provide access to the women who were deprived of such freedom in the heartland of Maharashtra, but it led to controversies about the conversion of the Brahmana widows in the institution. The controversy arose over when it was revealed that some girls were sent to Christian missionary as they had expressed their desire for embracing Christianity after joining Ramabai in her private prayers. Ramabai's visible engagement in Bible reading and prayer within her institutional space was frequently read as an explicit performance of Christian identity. However, she consistently opposed coercive conversion practices and articulated a strong commitment to women's moral and religious agency, asserting their right to make independent decisions regarding faith. The conversion created a hysterical atmosphere in the conservative society, which feared the autonomy of the women in rejecting the moral structure of Brahmanism. Hearing this many guardian withdrew their ward from the Sadan and an inquiry was instituted by the Ramabai Association of Boston which cleared the charges of direct proselytization (Kosambi 1992: WS65). This left the Sadan with a few residents and was isolated from the Hindu society.

The agency and assertion of choice were unthinkable by the male reformers of that time, who, under the pretext of social reform, hardly took any step towards the upliftment of the women.

Moreover, the abandonment of principles of the Hindu social system by the widows along with Ramabai's Christian identity had exacerbated the suspicion over the activities in Sharda Sadan. Still, this did not stop the widows from taking refuge in the Sadan, where some of the elite women brought widowed girls to the home without taking permission from their husbands. In between all this, Ramabai's thoughts are essential as she professes religious freedom for all. She believed in the higher value of Christianity and wished to proselytize but did not approve of intolerance and sectarianism (Chakravarti 2007: 27). She believed that ones' beliefs should lead them to the 'truth.' Her position was of neutrality in Sharda Sadan in matters of religion along with liberty, 'the right to exercise choice in matters of faith'.

THE LAST PHASE

Following the backlash from the upper caste intelligentsia in Bombay and Poona, she tried moving away towards spreading her reach to other areas. In 1896, she became determined towards missionary activities and was inspired to obtain 'spiritual children' through conversion. She travelled over Brindaban and other holy places to rescue widows who took shelter in temples and were exploited by the priests. The famine of 1897 was very decisive in the manner where she rescued as many girls as possible and brought them to Mukti Mission in Poona, from where they were shifted to Kedgaon in an institution she decided to stay on for the rest of her life. Mukti Mission was a Christian missionary establishment that opened after the completion of ten years of sponsorship of Ramabai Association of Boston in Kedgaon due to the plague at Poona. While some women were engaged in cooking, gardening and farming, some in weaving, dairy farming, along with running a printing press. Mukti Sadan disregarded the caste discrimination as well as gender discrimination and conditioned the women to the concepts of subsistence and profitable production (Omvedt 2008). Apart from Shakti Sadan, Mukti Sadan another rescue home known as Kripa Sadan was opened which welcomed old women and blind as well. Her confrontation with the colonial state was witnessed during the plague epidemic, where she critical of the gender dimensions of plague measures undertaken by the colonial government. The speculation of Ramabai being 'denationalised' was rather false as she took an anti-government stand especially on women's issues. Ramabai's life however continued to pose challenges to the rigidity of Brahmanical patriarchy. She went on to expand the scope of her work to include sexually abused- in her words 'fallen' women with the opening of the Kripa Sadan, and for

famine-affected women, the Mukti Sadan, later Mukti Mission. By 1900, over three hundred girls had been rescued from the famine-affected areas and housed in the Mukti Sadan. In her work during the famine years, her primary concern was also the fact that many young women were being enticed by pimps, who made use of their orphaned and/or vulnerable position to lure them away. The other concern was harassment of young women and girls by government officials. Just like every other phenomenon, the famine was also complicated by caste and gender prejudices, due to which women who had once lived in a camp could not be taken back into the household. Girls, who had socialized with lower caste people in the camps for famine relief that were the order of the day, were practically abandoned. With a consistent eye on how such situations would affect women, she was also deeply moved by the manipulations of caste. However, during this time too, she did not receive any support from the Anglican Church, including Sister Geraldine, when she complained about the lackadaisical approach by the colonial state in handling an abduction case of a young girl during the epidemic. She was also furious at the colonial state for the complicity in enforcing brahmanic regulation in the Rakhmabai case too. Ramabai converted out of a personal spiritual quest with the full knowledge that the kind of fulfilment she sought was denied and had always been denied to women within the fold, especially widows. Her rejection of the dominant religious codes of her time did not distance her from a vision of the uplift of those women who were either caught in the vortex of religion, tradition and their duties as women, and who were, in a sense, outside the fold. She was therefore attacking the notion that being Christianized was tantamount to being subdued to the rule of the colonizer.

The alienation, which she suffered from all walks of her life, led her to find her faith. She became inclined towards a gospel-based Christianity and an 'intellectual' rather than an emotional relationship with Christ. She learned Greek and Hebrew to probe a Marathi translation to the Bible, which was printed in the press at Mukti. The press published various writings all around the theme of Mukti. Before she passed away in 1922, she again suffered a profound loss when her daughter Manorama passed away just a few before she died. Her abode was open to women who were stripped off their dignity and respect. All through her life she was an isolated and controversial figure who stood by her choices and critiqued the material world.

CONCLUSION

Ramabai's life experience, as well as the writings, are reflections of strength, courage, and determination. Through her critical gaze, she could challenge not only the high caste Hindu caste system in which she was born but the doctrines of Christianity after her baptism. The lectures and writings,

which created a stir in the society, were an eye opening to many women who were deprived of the leadership during the national movement. Her ability to develop a camaraderie with the women of different countries such as the U.K., U.S. A, Australia led to the opening of the widow home which could give hopes to so many women in renewing their lives. She made efforts to transform the image of women by establishing the public spheres to be accessible to women. The domestication of women justified by the traditional Hindu texts, had been vilified by Ramabai through her writings, which highlighted harm caused to the women. She was one of the earliest proponents of gender equality, as well as social equality. Ramabai enumerated the invisibility of the work done by women, which led to increased subjugation by men. She knew that institutionalizing educational spaces would help the women to come out of the claws of poverty. Her purpose was that the personal liberty and religious freedom that she practiced all through her life would be a reality for all the women in the society. She remained a feminist and activist all her life. She took anti colonial stance and was against colonialism which was depleting the resources of the country and exploiting the masses.

Thus, the key points drawn from the discussion reflects to the stress on women's education in breaking the shackles of patriarchy and find a way of living their lives in their terms and conditions. Ramabai challenged the literary texts, which defined the rules of conducting oneself at various stages of the life of a woman (childhood, marital life, and widowhood) through the decisions she took at every juncture of her life. Ramabai's relationship to religion is critical. The flickering relationship between Ramabai and the authorities, the religious and the colonial are essential for understanding the constant dedication towards social reform. The idea of true religion that Ramabai developed was founded on some principles, which include courage, forgiveness, and mind control, not stealing purity, sense control, intelligence, knowledge, truth and lack of anger. The ethical behavior or the morality of life must, therefore, be founded upon some principles and not upon the strictly fixed concept of doctrinaire religion as it is there in Hinduism, or in Christianity. The question is whether Christianity was the only available path for her in discovering and venturing out new avenues for the women.

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