

# A Tribute to the Woman of the Millennium : Pandita Ramabai

*Rosemin Akhtara*

## Abstract

Pandita Ramabai is a prominent social figure who makes her remarkable contributions towards the empowerment of women especially in the field of education. She belongs to a high cast Brahmin family and was the pioneer of the women emancipation. She was an advocate for the rights and welfare of the widowed women and the child brides of India. Ramabai was opposed to the then orthodox Hindu social norms. This paper is an attempt to focus on her struggle and reformations for women emancipation.

**Key Words:** Women Empowerment, Social Reformation, Child Widow, Tribute, Millennium

## Introduction:

“It is not strange, my countrymen, that my voice is small, for you have never given a woman the chance to make her voice strong”

*Pandita Ramabai*

Ramabai Sarasvati is a 19<sup>th</sup> century prominent social figure who plays a significant role in reforming the position of women in the then Indian Hindu society by vehemently criticising the caste system and raising question against gender discrimination which actually points out the limitations of the then nationalist society in India. Ramabai devoted her entire life for the upliftment of women’s social position. Her writings and radical views are just like the weapons to champion the rights of women. She belongs to a high caste Brahmin family and was the pioneer of the women emancipation. Ramabai was a prominent advocate for the rights and welfare of the widowed women and the child brides of India. She got her name ‘Ramabai’ where the term ‘Rama’ means ‘Bright’<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the term ‘Ramabai’ can be translated as “delight giver”. This paper is an attempt to present her contributions as a social reformer to honor her life by dealing with her passion which comes from the ways of the art of her life. The Government of India honored her as, “The Women of the Millennium”.

## Aims and Objectives

This paper is an attempt to present the life of Pandita Ramabai as a struggling woman for women emancipation and to explore the struggle of Pandita Ramabai as a widow in the Hindu orthodox society. This paper will also analyse the contributions of Pandita Ramabai as a social reformer.

## Analysis

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu orthodox society the position of women was not up to the right. Ramabai travelled for years in various parts of India. She got the opportunity of seeing the sufferings of Hindu women and child bride which compelled her to raise voice for women emancipation through their upliftment in the form of women education and attainment of women rights. She was requested to deliver a lecture on pardah on duties as it was mentioned in the *shastras*. But to deliver her worthwhile speech, she needs a deep study of the *Dharma Shastras* where she found totally a different picture. In the words of Ramabai, “While reading the *dharma shastras* I came to know many things which I never know before. There were contradictory statements about almost everything. What one book said was most righteous, the other book declared as being unrighteous.”<sup>2</sup> Ramabai found two things which are common to the *Dharma Shastras*, *the Purans* as other epics and orthodox high caste society that women whether they belong to high caste or low caste were worse than demon.<sup>3</sup> They can attain *moksha* or liberation only by the worship of their husbands. Moreover, they will also have the privilege to go to heaven only as the slave of their husbands.<sup>4</sup> In that period women were totally deprived of their social as well as religious life as they don’t have any right to study the Vedas and the Vedanta which are the only keys to the attainment of the knowledge of Brahma and without which liberation becomes impossible for a woman. All these so called social norms not only applicable to high caste women but also to the *shudras*. One question arose in her mind that for what reason she was not allowed to study the Vedas and the Vedanta. But, by criticising all these social norms she began to read the Upanisads and then the Vedas and the Vedanta. Ramabai expressed her thoughts and views against the orthodox Brahmin society in the form her works like- *The Wrongs Of Indian Womanhood*, *The High Caste Hindu Women*, *Pandita Ramabai’s American Encounter*, *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words: Selected Works, A Testimony*, *Pandita Ramabai’s America: Conditions of Life in the United states* etc. Ramabai was very studious by nature as she was fond of studying the Dharma Shastras, the Mahabharata and the books of Hindu Law. At the age of 20 she becomes a Sanskrit scholar as she could quote 18,000 Sanskrit verses. She acquired a reputation as a Sanskrit scholar. In 1878 Calcutta University honored her the title of ‘Pandita’ and the highest title of ‘Sarasvati’ Ramabai was totally influenced by the ideals of her father Ananta Shastri Dongre as he emphasized on women education. In the words of Ramabai, “My father appeared before the guru, the head priest, and the assembly of Pandits and gave his reasons for teaching his wife. He quoted ancient

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authorities, and succeeded in convincing the guru and chief Pandits that it was not wrong for women and Shudras to learn Sanskrit Puranic literature. So they did not put him out of caste, nor was he molested by anyone after this. He became known as an orthodox reformer.”<sup>5</sup> Ananta Shastri was very liberal for womanhood, so he lifted womanhood out of depression.<sup>6</sup> He tried to convince the chief Pandits that it is unjust that because of religious pursuit and social norms the women and the Shudras are not allowed to learn Puranic literature. His wife, Laxmibai, Ramabai’s mother was only 9 years old and impressed him in a firm manner that he makes his determination for child education. Her father believes that religious pursuit should not be a barrier for the development of women’s condition which was actually happened in the societies of that period. Ramabai acquired her unique knowledge from her mother as in that period there was not a single school for girls as well as for women.

Though Ramabai belongs to a high caste she married to Bipin Bihari Madhavi who was a Shudra by caste. Her marriage is a great example of her reformations against caste system. In other words, it is a direct protest against Indian Hindu caste system. But, orthodox Hindu society vehemently criticise her marriage. She becomes a discomfort figure for her contemporary figures because of her critique and question about gender discrimination. Ramabai came into touch with Mr. Allen, a Baptist Missionary during the period when she stayed in the Silchar district of Assam with her husband. She lost her husband just after the two years of togetherness. Then she came to Poona with her daughter where she got the help from the members of the Parthana Samaj. Gradually she acquired the skill of speaking and writing English as a result she became interested in studying The New Testament where she deeply influenced by Jesus’s treatment with the Samaritan women and she realised that she can transform and uplift the downtrodden women of India by following the ideals of Christianity. In 1883 she converted to Christianity and became “Mary Rama” for which she had to face the criticism of her contemporary social reformers.

Being a widow herself Ramabai could realise the horrible conditions of the widows of India and she set her mind to do something for them. She came into contact with some of the social reformers who influenced her to do something for the empowerment of women especially in the field of education. In Poone and Bombay Ramabai founded centres for widows and orphans and gives emphasis for their basic education. Ramabai became a scholar as well as an educationist at the early age. In 1874, when she was 16 years old, her family died, she was the sixth child and she lost her mother, father and sisters of famine.

Being an activist for the rights of women, in 1882 Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune which mainly gives emphasis on women’s education and repression of child marriage. It was the first Indian feminist organization. Arya Mahila Samaj aims at the protection of women and discouragement of child marriage. In the same year, Ramabai get involved with the Government of India’s Commission on Education. She rased her voice not only for the reformations of women and children in India but also in Britain as well. To the commission

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she brings to light the need of female teacher training program and inspectress of school as well. She also raised her voice in support of the need and importance of lady doctors in India as she was able to realise the problems of native women who felt very discomfort to deal with mail doctors. Therefore, she insisted on the medical education of women in India. Queen Victoria was fully influenced by her reformations for the women empowerment. So far as the question of the treatment of women is concerned there Ramabai finds a vivid distinction between the ideology of the orthodox Hindu society and that of Christianity. In the words of Ramabai, “Here, I for the first time in my life I came to know that something should be done to reclaim the so called fallen women, and that Christians, whom Hindus considered outcastes and cruel, were kind to these unfortunate women , degraded in the eyes of society. I had never heard or seen anything of the kind done for this class of women by the Hindus in my own country. I had not heard anyone speaking kindly of them, nor seen any one making any effort to turn them from the evil path they had chosen in their folly. The Hindu Shastras don’t deal kindly with these women. The law of the Hindu commands that the king shall cause the fallen women to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town. They are considered the greatest sinner, and not worthy of compassion.”<sup>7</sup>

She gets the opportunity to travel to England in 1883 and the reason she wanted to go England with her daughter is because she felt the needs to become a doctor so that she can help the other women. But, unfortunately she could not become a doctor because of famine which she had gone through and lost her hearings.

In America, Ramabai wrote the book *The High Cast Hindu women* which was vehemently criticized by the Brahmanical patriarchy in Maharastra. But this work becomes the keystone of her social reformations as she collects around thirty thousand through this book and used this amount to build a residential school for Hindu widows. Ramabai, in her book *Pandita Ramabai’s American Encounter* gives emphasis on the status of women in American society.

In 1886 Ramabai went to America where she was very impressed by the steps taken by the American women for the fellow -beings. Therefore, in the words of Ramabai, “I am deeply impressed by and interested in the work of Western Women, who seem to have one common aim; namely, the good of their fellow beings. It is my dream someday to tell my countrywomen, in their own languages, this wonderful story, in the hope of that the recital may awaken in their hearts a desire to do likewise.”<sup>8</sup>

Ramabai established a home for Hindu widows especially for child widows, which is apart from high caste Hindu homes, where she trained the child widows in order to prepare them to face the challenges of their life and live their lives independently. In 1889, Ramabai established a home of learning for widows which was named as “Sarada Sadan” which was the first organization to provide a formal school education along with vocational learning. It is a home for high caste widows. In Sarada Sadan Ramabai when she observed the changes

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of the approach of her girls, the child widows towards life, she said, “ I can see a change in the impish nature of my girls come in to my room and we sing together as best we can. We have no love songs to sing, no comic bites to say; but we sing hymn and feel quite contented. You see they do not allow women to sing :they think it is a bad thing in a house wife. But we are getting unruly in this school of ours. We are going to turn the side and make it a good and honorable taste.”<sup>9</sup> In order to extend the work of ‘Sarada Sadan’ Ramabai introduced another organization called “The Mukti Mission”. The main task of ‘The Mukti Mission’ is to provide housing, education, vocational training and medical services for the widows, orphans and the blind.

Ramabai, after receiving the scholarship to study in England she became educated from St.Mary’s Home in Wantage and Cheltenham Ladies College where she converted to Christianity after studying the Bible. She is the first woman Bible translator in India. She translated the Bible to the Marathi language from the original Hebrew and Greek which was published soon after her death.

*Stree Dharma Niti* and *The High Caste Hindu Women* these two works deal with the questions of caste system and gender in Hindu society. These two books also presented the various stages of Ramabai’s life and her ideology. Ramabai in his work *High Caste Hindu women* deals with the treatment of Hindu widows by the community, by the social norms and so on and so forth. It discusses the questions like how women can uplift their position in society? How the Hindu widows, more precisely, the child widows can uplift their position in the orthodox Hindu society. In 1896 a severe famine covered the villages of Maharashtra and in that dangerous situation Ramabai rescued many outcast children, orphans, child widows and other women and gave them a new life in Sarada Sadan and Mukti Mission.

In 1989, for the appreciations of her work The Indian Government gives approval for the issuance of a stamp of Pandita Ramabai. In 1919, Ramabai was awarded by the “Kaiser -I-Hind” medal for her great contributions and reformations to the orthodox Hindu society. After her death ‘The Times of India’ honored her as the makers of modern India.

### **Conclusion**

The struggle of Pandita Ramabai as a widow and her contributions to the lives of the widows and the child widows are very remarkable. She was the pioneer in the movement of the education of the child widow of India. She was the first courageous soul who raised her voice for the women education as well as for the empowerment of child widow as she can realise their horrible situations under the social norms of Hindu orthodox society. But one question may arise that in the phases of Indian history why we are not able to know much about Pandita Ramabai besides her selfless reformations and struggles. Here, from one standpoint it can be admitted that since in that period the positions of women mainly the widows were diminished by the social norms as a result of which they were deprived from

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their positions as well as rights. In that situation the raising voice of Pandita Ramabai became uncomfortable for her contemporaries as being a widow she was struggling her best for the women emancipation.

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