

***SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN  
IN 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY MAHARASHTRA: A STUDY OF  
PANDITA RAMABAI***

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**Abstract**

In the history of socio cultural reform movement of India in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, important women have played a very prominent role in the empowerment of women. Pandita Ramabai was one such woman. 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.

Ramabai 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. She was examined by the highly qualified men of Calcutta who conferred upon her the title of 'Saraswati'-'The Goddess of Wisdom' and called her Pandita. Very few women in the History of India have received such distinction. Ramabai's reform career in Maharashtra was launched with the Arya Mahila Samaj, established by her on 1<sup>st</sup> 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. After visiting England and America, she returned to India and established a number of institutions for the emancipation of women.

The paper attempts to examine the massive contribution of Pandita Ramabai to the social reform movement not only in Maharashtra, but in India as well.

**Keywords**

Socio cultural reform movement, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, empowerment of women, Pioneer, women's education, reform work for widows. social and religious reform movement, Maharashtra. 'Saraswati'-'The Goddess of Wisdom', Pandita, Arya Mahila Samaj, promotion of education among women, emancipation of women, child marriage, Pandita Ramabai.

**Introduction**

In the history of socio cultural reform movement of India in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, important women have played a very prominent role in the empowerment of women. Pandita Ramabai was one such woman. 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.

**Early Life**

Ramabai's father Anant Shastri Dongre was a renowned pandit 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 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.

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 1<sup>st</sup> 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. 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.

### **Work of Pandita Ramabai**

On 11<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Kesari, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1889

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”*<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>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.<sup>5</sup>Ramabai in her writings and correspondence wrote about several heart rending stories of widows whom she rescued and cared for.

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<sup>2</sup> Clementina Butler, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, New York: The American Ramabai Association, 1922, p 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Pandita Ramabai’s Letter to Sister Geraldine dated December 6<sup>th</sup> 1889 in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.249

<sup>5</sup> Clementina Butler, op.cit, p.23

In November 1890, the Sadan was shifted to Pune.<sup>6</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup>, 1891 reveals her joy at Godubai's marriage to Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve.<sup>7</sup> 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 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> Pandita Ramabai's Letter to Sister Geraldine dated November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1890 in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.259

<sup>7</sup> Pandita Ramabai's Letter to Sister Geraldine dated March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1891 in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.261

<sup>8</sup> Rajas Dongre, 'Pandita Ramabai- A Life of Prayer', p. 18

<sup>9</sup> An Interlude by Sister Geraldine, 1894 in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.315

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> Then she invited the villagers to establish a weekly bazaar on this roadside.<sup>12</sup>

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

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<sup>10</sup> Pandita Ramabai, To the Friends of Mukti School and Mission, Reproduced from a pamphlet in the Archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1900

<sup>11</sup> Sister Geraldine's report of 1899, in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.357

<sup>12</sup> Rajas Dongre, op.cit,p.18

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.<sup>13</sup>

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 field work, 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Sister Geraldine's report of 1906, in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.375

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid



Judged by any standards—social, educational and economic—this is a remarkable achievement, 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.”<sup>17</sup>*

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. Shorati 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

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<sup>17</sup> Sister Geraldine, Some thoughts on Ramabai’s life and work, in A.B. Shah (ed) The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, p.375

### **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.*<sup>18</sup>

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>18</sup> The Times of India, April 7, 1922

**Bio**

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