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A study pandita ramabai's contribution to women's cause

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Abstract

Pivotal woman is Pandita Ramabai, a woman whose remarkable critique of society has been erased from the mainstream history of India, as has been the case with so many other prominent women leaders of their times. As feminists, what we must remember is that Ramabai's erasure from history is not a case of history left out or forgotten, it is a deliberate attempt to actively suppress the accounts of women who have raised their voice against Brahmanical patriarchy and caste dominance. This makes the cause of remembering her work and life even more significant.

Pandita Ramabai was born on 23rd April in the forest of Ganamal in Maharashtra to Lakshmi bai and a High caste Hindu Brahmin named Anant Shastri, who was a social reformer and was interested in educating girls. He was very learned in Sanskrit and he would read the Puranas in temples for livelihood. He was abandoned from the society for teaching his wife Sanskrit. The village Brahmins shunned him and he decided to leave the village and built a home in the forest. Soon Ramabai was born.

Keywords: pandita ramabai, teaching, livelihood

Introduction

There have been many prominent social reformers in Maharashtra who have played a significant role in making the country more progressive and egalitarian. One such prominent and pivotal woman is Pandita Ramabai, a woman whose remarkable critique of society has been erased from the mainstream history of India, as has been the case with so many other prominent women leaders of their times. As feminists, what we must remember is that Ramabai's erasure from history is not a case of history left out or forgotten, it is a deliberate attempt to actively suppress the accounts of women who have raised their voice against Brahmanical patriarchy and caste dominance. This makes the cause of remembering her work and life even more significant.

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He was abandoned from the society for teaching his wife Sanskrit. The village Brahmins shunned him and he decided to leave the village and built a home in the forest. Soon Ramabai was born. She was the youngest of the three surviving children. While she was still young the family started moving from forest to forest and town to town. Wherever he could her father would give lectures on the need for female education. Born at the forest home, she grew up in a family that embarked on several continuous journeys to holy places across India, managing to survive by reciting sacred stories and practising severities that the Hindu religion commands, in order to gain religious merit and thus a living. Ramabai's parents passed away in the year 1877 due to famine. Her sister too died during the same time. With only a brother left, she continued travelling all over India with him and

reached Calcutta in 1878. Ramabai had impeccable command over the Sanskrit vernacular by then. Her exceptional knowledge of Sanskrit texts astonished the scholars and she was awarded with the highest titles of Pandita and Sarasvati, which means 'A wise person' and 'goddess of learning/wisdom' respectively. Ramabai's brother passed away after they moved to Calcutta, following which she got married to Bipen Behan Das Medhavi who was a Shudra by caste, a lawyer and a teacher by profession. Both of them studied the western philosophy and ideas together. They had a daughter out of their wedlock. Unfortunately her husband died the following year, after which she returned to Pune.

Educational and Missionary Activities

The twin axes of Ramabai's career, educational and missionary, had quite distinct origins. A crusading zeal for women's education was an inheritance from her father. Having received a rigorous traditional education from her parents and having been trained in public speaking through the recitation of sacred stories, Ramabai was equipped for this career as few other women of her generation were. It was a relatively easy transition to writing books and lecturing to women on reform issues. A progressive reviewer of Ramabai's *Stree Dharma Neeti* found it "commendable that the task of championing the women's cause and of speaking or writing on their behalf, which used to fall to the lot of men so far, has now been undertaken by one belonging to the female sex herself" [22]. Importantly, Ramabai's idea of education was comprehensive in scope. It was informed from the outset by her conviction of women's need for social awareness and self-improvement, which she propagated through the *Arya Mahila Samaj*. "Self-reliance" was her password for progress which ran through the *Stree Dharma Neeti* and formed part of the

programme outlined at the end of The High-caste Hindu Woman and translated into the organisation of the Sharada Sadan and the Mukti Mission

Interface with Christianity and the Church

Although Christianity formed a backdrop for Ramabai's life, her encounter with the Anglicans also involved a series of contestations – religious, racial and cultural. Coming from a Hindu tradition of theological debates, she was selective in accepting some elements of her new religious doctrine. The independent-minded Ramabai also resisted the perceived high-handedness of the Church in imposing on her its dogma and discipline, and criticised the racial and cultural arrogance of the Anglican missionaries in India, who remained ignorant of the culture of the very people they attempted to win over. It was perhaps the truth of this allegation which enhanced Ramabai's value as a potential missionary for the Anglicans. The Rev. Canon William Butler of Wantage wrote to Miss Beale: "I think that Mary Ramabai's knowledge of Indian ways, etc. will give her a power of influence which no English woman can have", adding condescendingly, "All that she needs is an English development of her Indian brains".

Work of Pandita Ramabai

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. 1 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.

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.

Conclusion

Pandita Ramabai was a truly remarkable woman who pioneered women's education and rebelliously championed for women's rights and empowerment. She combined ideas she had learned

from the sisters and friends of different ethnicity and race at Wantage. Ramabai saw caste as a great flaw in Hindu society. It not only saw physical work and labour as denouncing, but it also led to false ideas of valuing intellect and merit. She also believed that caste associations promoted narrow self-interest and prevented the development of a democratic spirit in the real sense. Ramabai's work in the educational sector was commendable and greatly impressed her contemporaries, despite her connection to Christianity that irked many prominent personalities in western India. She was of the opinion that all these men were angry at her because her students were from upper caste communities. Had they been from other lower caste communities, they would not have bothered at all, is what she believed. There have been many books and scholarly works on the life of Pandita Ramabai by writers and scholars from the east and the west both. Some of the prominent ones being the works of Meera Kosambi and Uma Chakravarti. Feminist scholarship remains in debt to the philosophy and work of Pandita Ramabai. Her vision continues to drive the feminist movement and scholarship even today, as it also continues to impact the lives of many women and young girls. She remains one of the most prominent women leader of Maharashtra and India.

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