

## DECODING THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN THE REFORMIST-NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IN INDIA THROUGH RAMABAI

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present paper is an objective study of the Reformist-Nationalist structures and agendas of the nineteenth century India which unfortunately was not honest enough towards the causes of women. Women in their scheme of things were secondary and subsidiary and women like Pandita Ramabai was keenly aware of the fact. Hence she came forward to give a clarion call to the conscience of the nation. Ramabai fought throughout her life for the rights and upliftment of child widows, destitute women, child orphan, and their education. She was the first feminist thinker and champion of women's right and education. She left her imprint in the arena of women issues with her ideologies and literary-critical works during the time when women education was almost non-existent. Education is power she knew and also that both the Shudras and women are denied this power making them helpless and hopeless lot, a mere scum of the earth. There were some other women reformers like Mataji Tapaswini, Begum Rokeya Shekawat Hossain, Sister Subbhalakshmi etc. who took the women causes and through their active participation in the creative and social arena tried their best for reformation in the age-old dictums for women given by patriarchy. But none of them was as vocal and as rebel as Pandita Ramabai whose very life stood as an example of denial of all that dehumanized women. The social history of the nineteenth and twentieth century's in India has dwelt at considerable length upon the socio-religious reform movements of the period. Descriptions and analysis of such movements have featured in all the standard text-books and form a part of historical learning from the social syllabi upwards. The centre of this reformist movement is admittedly the reforms relating to women's status. Yet the focus of almost all the writing on the nineteenth century is on men – men who spearheaded it and men who resisted it. Ramabai, who spent the better part of her life working for women in general but more specifically on the most powerless section within upper-caste society – the widow- gets only a passing reference in discussions on reform and no mention at all in any discussion on the making of modern India.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Women, Pandita Ramabai, Social Reformers, Reformist-Nationalist Movements.

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The nineteenth century is known as the century of social reforms in India that gave birth to a kind of 'renaissance'. It started particularly from Bengal and gradually spread to various parts of India. As a result the lower position of the high caste women in Indian society was brought to light and efforts were made by the reformers to change their position and status by passing social legislations and also by giving them education (Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 4, 16).

The social reformers who gave a new direction to the social processes of the time, by questioning the prevalent social customs like untouchability, farmer's exploitation, child

marriages, the caste system, women's subjugation, illiteracy, widow's remarriage, women's education were Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Gopal Hari Deshmukh Lokhitwadi, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade and Agarkar. They all belonged to the high caste Brahmin community but rebelled against the restrictions and evil practices propagated and sanctioned under the name of the Dharma Shastras (C.f., Shobha Shinde, *The Social Reform Movement*, 78).

Gopal Hari Deshmukh later known as Lokhitwadi was the first vociferous critic from Maharashtra who hit out at the 19<sup>th</sup> century customs and religious practices. While criticizing religious superstitions and beliefs his target was the Brahmin class who dominated the people through their hegemonic control over learning and knowledge. He also wrote about the status of women, child marriages, widow remarriage in a very constructive way. He believed that man and women should be treated equally in society.

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade was the spirit behind many organizations which were part of the social reform movement in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A contemporary of Lokmanya Tilak, he with Agarkar was at the centre of the debate between the "moderates" and the "extremists" about the priority of preference to be given to social change or political change. He established the Prarthna Samaj on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1867 to break out of the many evil practices which had entered religion and worship. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had already established the Brahma Samaj in Bengal in 1828. Ranade believed like other social reformers of the time that society could progress only with the liberation of women from the clutches of illiteracy and ignorance. He was in favour of widow remarriage and desperately worked to get his widowed sister Tara married again. He himself wanted to remain a celibate after the death of his first wife, but his father's coercive control over the family, compelled him to marry Ramabai, a girl of nine when he was 31 years old. He regarded this marriage as a social crime, and decided to make up for it by educating his wife, giving her lessons in English from an English lady and motivating her in her involvement in all his public work. He was the spirit behind the setting up of public meeting, debates, courts, female high schools to awaken public opinion and consciousness. With great courage and conviction he invited Pandita Ramabai to Bombay and arranged public gathering for her narration of Puranas. Ranade expressed and spoke against the caste system, poverty and the double standards adopted by men in a patriarchal society. He firmly believed that the British rulers could adopt legislation to remove the many aberrations in the Hindu Brahmanic practices. Dr Ambedkar emphasis that Ranade's emphasis on social reformation over political change was an important fundamental stance proved right by history (C.f., *The Social Reform Movement*, 83).

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar strongly condemned the social practices which had led to women's education, the removal of the custom of child marriages, caste discrimination and the unscientific tenets of the Dharmashastras. Agarkar gave importance to the family in his social agenda. He strongly felt that a society in which the institution of the family was a shambles would never progress. The status of women in the family would decide its strength. Education was the only instrument for women's empowerment. He criticized the restrictions and taboos imposed on women by the scriptures of the Dharmashastras and the tenets of Manu and Parashar. To support such unscientific and illogical religious scriptures was harmful for social development. He advocated breaking down of all physical and mental shackles which had enslaved women and kept her in bondage for centuries. Agarkar worked for a prevention of child marriages, widow remarriage, provision for divorce, women's education and equality between men and women (*The Social Reform Movement*, 83).

Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve was born on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1858, the social reformer, educationist and pioneer of women's education in India. To Karve, the task of women's emancipation that he had undertaken was a national mission. His cause of education was as important as the struggle for national independence. The journey of his long life began with the amelioration of the suffering of women around him leading to a global mission of harmony, unity and humanity. After completing his graduation at the age of 26, in 1884, Karve became a close witness to Pandita Rambai's work, for the rehabilitation of the Brahmin widows, through Sharda Sadan. He then took the important decision to marry a widow. When we discuss various women's issues today it would be extremely relevant to study the life and work of Maharshi Karve as a model of a man who tirelessly worked to realize his dream.

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar also took the support of Sanskrit texts for his campaign for widow remarriage. Durgaram Mehtaji in Gujarat, like Vidyasagar in Bengal felt that the denial of education to women was responsible for many of their problems. Behramji M. Malabari's crusade to end the sufferings of child widows and to raise the age of consent was noteworthy. D.K. Karve contributed to the field of women's education immensely. M.G. Raande, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, and Karsandas Mulji were among the notable persons who contributed to the betterment of women's status. But nobody started the crusade as vehemently as Pandita Ramabai.

Social reformers all over the country showed their deep concern over women's issues such as 'sati', child marriage, female infanticide, widowhood, 'purdah', polygamy, 'devdasi' and denial of education. When the upper caste Hindu widows in India especially Bengal immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, in order to stop the custom, referred to various Sanskrit texts to prove that this practice was not prescribed by the religious texts. While preparing the arguments in favour of regulation of 'sati', he also discussed the economic aspect of the question (*Women in India Society*, 1-2).

Revivalists such as Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekanand made efforts to improve the status of women by evoking the ancient Indian norms of purity and duty. Most of the Hindu social reformers sought credibility for their ideas and actions in the ancient Sanskrit texts. An analysis of the Sati tradition shows that women and the scriptures became interlocking grounds for the rearticulating of tradition, and women became emblematic of tradition. It was here that Ramabai penned her disillusionment about Scriptures.

Much historical writing in the nineteenth century has looked at what impelled social reform, why men were inspired to intervene in social processes, and how action on these was executed on various fronts. Since social reform was for many years synonymous with the widow reform movement, the issues of the 'status' of the widow has almost been overlooked in writing. This has produced a striking imbalance because we know very little of what women, especially widows, had to say on the subject of widowhood (Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, Bloomington, 159).

The discussion of women's writing on widowhood is striking in that men writing on widowhood rarely attacked male power in the home and in society. Their focus was usually on notions of 'tradition', 'customs', and 'superstitions', which are treated as abstractions, that had a certain autonomy and staying power, to perpetuate them. This way of presenting 'tradition' is also shared by some of the women writers. However, in the writing of women like Tarabai Shinde, Rakhmabai, and Pandita Ramabai, who make a critique of male power in varying degrees, 'traditions', and 'customs' are not mere abstractions but continue through the agency

of men and women. In Rakhmabai's writing the unequal manner in which Hindu social customs apply to men and women is specifically noted, suggesting a recognition that Hindu social customs are an articulation of patriarchal structures as they are not gender-neutral (c.f., *Rewriting History*, 286).

Jyotirao Phule's vision included all humanity beyond the barriers of caste, creed, religion or gender. His dream was of a utopian society with a universal brotherhood based on the principles of egalitarianism. In the days of nationalism, Jyotiba insisted that there could be no nation until every man and woman, shudra, ati-shudra had benefited education in developed free thinking. He made women and the lower castes aware of the bondages which enslaved them to the redundant and restrictive social customs and traditions which needed to be wiped out. Her wife Savitribai Phule regarded as the first modern woman poet in Marathi, also stands a history as an epitome of feminism in India. She faced all opposition and social ostracism and worked tirelessly to bring dignity to the life of women. Her acceptance of an illegitimate boy as her own son, her lighting of the funeral pyre of her husband, her challenging the masses who were mercilessly torturing a low caste boy for his love for a high caste woman are all instances of a fiery individualistic personality, who lived life on her own terms. She was devoted to her husband's cause and was an equal participant in his social reformation agenda (*The Social Reform Movement...*, 200).

Tarabai Shinde's *Stree-Purush Tulana* (1882) is a scathing attack on male dominated society and tradition, custom and religion. This long essay is duly recognized as the first feminist manifesto to draw attention to the double standards practiced by patriarchy. It exposes the hypocrisy and shame of the so-called guardians of the social order. It calls upon a humanistic attitude and love and understanding on the part of husbands towards their wives and mutuality in the relationship. Tarabai Shinde tells how women's voices have been silenced and how women have been forced into religious models of self-abnegation, denying the self. Her cry for equality went unheeded in a world *where reformers wanted to help women, not accord them equal status* (Italic Mine).

The contribution of various religious organizations was also noteworthy in the dispersal of female education. Brahma Samaj, Prarthna Samaj, Arya Samaj, Arya Mahila Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Mission all supported female education and established schools in various parts of India. Among the individual social reformers who worked hard for the spread of education among girls the names of Rama Ram Mohan Roy, Pandita Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen. D.K. Karve, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Mataji Tapaswini, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sister Subbhalakshmi etc. are remembered with gratitude. However, overall picture of Indian womanhood was very dark in spite of efforts of social reformers and colonial Government emancipation of women through social legislation and female education did not come out successful because of prevailing social beliefs and practices and whatever progress was noticed was limited to only a few higher class women.

Even then women's education had been a very slow and difficult process in India. It was partly due to the states' attitude and partly due to the indifference and hesitation of the people. At the same time, women's education had to face some difficulties which were inherent in the Indian social system itself, such as, the system of 'purdah' and child-marriage, lack of women teachers and girl's school and absence of a suitable curriculum for girls. In short, owing to a variety of reasons, the progress of women's education had been very slow in India (Nurullah Syed and Naik J.P., *A History of Education in India during the British period*, 176). This was the reason why Pandita Ramabai had to give her testimony before Hunter Commission on September 5,



1882. She was called upon to speak before the Hunter Commission, a British Governmental Agency to look into the educational system and desperate social conditions and treatment of women. She suggested that trained Lady Teachers and women inspectresses of schools be appointed. Further she also laid stress on women doctors. She opined that women should be admitted to medical colleges as in gender segregated Indian society the social condition of Indian women was such that only women could medically treat them. In her plan of female education, she preferred women's agency to male involvement. Her foremost concern was male involvement in the female schools established by the British government. She knew that Indian women are so timid that the mere presence of a male as teacher will make them uncomfortable.

When Dr. Hunter asked Ramabai "what is the best method of providing teachers for girls," Ramabai had a highly refined answer. She believed teachers themselves needed special training to teach native languages as well as English. Yet, above all else teachers must be of high moral character because "Mere learning is not enough; the conduct and morals of the students should be attempted to (*High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 17).

Pandita Ramabai was truly remarkable as a pioneer in women's education and rebel champion of women's rights. Her father supervised her education and allowed her to remain unmarried. While in Poona she gave evidence before the Hunter Commission and stressed the urgent need for women doctors and teachers. Determined to learn English and study medicine, Ramabai sought help from members of the Anglo Catholic community of St. Mary the Virgin whose mother's house was at Wantage in Oxfordshire, England. They were able to give some assistance while the balance of her expenses were met through the sale of *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women), her book urging women to take charge of their own lives. To finance this trip and popularize her cause Ramabai wrote the *High Caste Hindu Women* (1888). Ten thousand copies of this book were sold before Ramabai had left America. In 1887 Boston admirers set up a Ramabai Association to support her work in India. She travelled throughout the United States and Canada studying educational, philanthropic, and charitable institutions and lecturing to various groups. Ramabai designed a remedial curriculum. Literature selected for its emphasis on moral models was meant to engender a spirit of caring; classes in physiology and botany were included to teach students about their own bodies and the physical world, in which they lived. Industrial training included printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood cutting, weaving and needlework as well as training in farming and gardening. All these training part was to help women to be independent.

Ramabai's greatest legacy was her radical effort, the first in India, to educate child widows and impart them some skill so that they may earn their livelihood in respectable manners. Pandita Ramabai has been discussed as a social deviator from the gazes of both East and West. That is too with passing references. We find discussion about her and her works mostly in the books written by White people. Seldom has she been discussed in Indian context from a feminist point of view. Hence this research is a humble attempt to discover both her works and what she did as a social reformer especially in the field of education for the Indian women.

The present work discusses her not only as a feminist but rather Radical Feminist who challenged the religion, society, culture and socio-political thinkers of her time (19<sup>th</sup> century). It is she who drew the attention of West to the pitiful plight of Hindu Women especially Hindu child Widows. She is the first in so many ways e.g. she earned the highest title Pandita and Saraswati by the University of Calcutta in 1878, received the Kaiser-I-Hind Gold medal award by the British Government for community service in 1919, is the first to translate the Bible into the Marathi language in 1922. It is she who suggested first of all that Hindi should be the

National language. She invented Marathi Braille / Typeset, organized cottage industry, especially the making and wearing of Khadi. She was the first *woman* to organize widespread relief work for orphans and widows during famine. She is the first one to organize the kindergarten system of education.

Ramabai had all the elements required for a ‘great’ character: she was articulate, learned, confident and forceful – a woman who got considerable media attention when she first burst upon the public arena in the late 1870s. Men of the nineteenth century, both reformists and traditionalists who had been waxing eloquent on the ‘glorious’ position of women in ancient India, suddenly found an embodiment of such womanhood in the person of Ramabai. Welcomed and feted in Calcutta in 1878-79, Ramabai was soon honoured with the title of ‘Saraswati’ for her learning and eloquence, not just in any ‘vernacular’ but in Sanskrit (from which women had been traditionally excluded) – an apt title that was soon to become ironic. The goddess Saraswati is associated with learning but also with speech or voice. Unfortunately, as Ramabai was to discover, unless this voice or speech tied into what men wanted to hear and what they themselves were saying, it was regarded as dissonant. Ramabai’s critique of Brahmanical patriarchy and her decisive break with its oppressive structure through her conversion to Christianity were too much for those riding the high tide of history and for whom nationalism was synonymous with Hinduism. Ramabai became at best an embarrassment and at worst a betrayer (c.f., Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*. Prologue, 7).

Pandita Ramabai was a woman who rebelled and revolted against the patriarchal norms laid down in the name of religion and customs. She was against child marriages and advocated legislation for the Age of Consent strongly, as she felt that child marriages were a violation of the principle of informed choice on the basis of individual personality leading to congeniality and mutuality as the basis of the new affective household. In an amazing turn of argument she says: given that even animals have to freedom to establish a male-female relationship according to their own wishes, why should human beings not have that freedom? (*Rewriting History*, 391)

Pandita Ramabai had rejected a whole set of oppressive practices which she saw as integral to Hinduism and had thus rejected the culture of the dominant class of her time. Branding her a betrayer was intended to marginalize her as a person as well as suppress her critique of Hindu society (*Rewriting History*, 341). We can see that the theme of betrayal of a culture and of the country was a very effective and emotive way of marginalizing and individual and her points of view like Pandita Ramabai. No doubt that her voice was not heard while constructing the whole set of Indian Feminist writing.

Through her writings, publishing pamphlets, and lectures Ramabai continuously and strongly denounced the oppression of women legitimized by these ancient sacred scriptures totally based on patriarchal norms and told the people what should be accomplished so that women would be able to have more freedom and lead a respectable life.

Ramabai emphasized self confidence, self reliance, hard work and neatness for all women. The voice she has adopted is that of a teacher in conversation with women. She felt that women’s development was limited because she was confined to household duties. Women were to learn from the richer and wider experience of others. Her emphasis was on work and industry and she criticized Indian society for the people’s apathy and disinterest. They wasted their time, energy and money on trifles like tamasha, dramas and plays. This attitude of social criticism was a part of her temperament even at the young age of twenty five. She resorted to many examples from mythology to put up the some ideals before women. She was sarcastic about

women's tendency to gossip and idle their time in fruitless chatter. She was the first woman reformer to point out that the dominating attitude of men and their ways to prove their superiority created an inferiority complex in women who learnt to devalue themselves as a consequence. She called upon men to treat their wives with love and respect and help to preserve her dignity (*The Social Reform Movement*, 103).

The social reform movement as well as the nationalist movements emphasized the values of democracy or citizenship, mass or universal literacy, social mobility and denial of religious prescriptions in the determination of social roles. The emphasis on literacy and education is at the core of the transition in political power and an awakening national consciousness, and hence the emphasis on the education of women, as a part of the social policy. Schools and educational institutions were started for women, the Shudras and ati-shudras; much against the resistance and oppressions of the upper castes. The national movement was a movement from the private to the public sphere for the women of an awakened country. The participation of women in the movement was critical and provided a cohesive force and helped to project the nationalist movement as a social movement reflecting the aspirations of the whole country (*The Social Reform Movement...*, 187, 192).

This is what scholars of feminism have always taken up as the internalization of the oppression by women. Women so undermine themselves due to their own conditioning over centuries that they have lost their autonomy and freedom. They have paralyzed their own minds and continue to accept their own subjugation. Pandita Ramabai regarded women's dependence on men as a symptom of a barbaric condition (*The Social Reformer Movement...*, 206). A fiery example of an ideologue iconoclast, a fire brand, social reformer, a nationalist, activist, Christian covert, emancipated woman leader was Pandita Ramabai, whose scholarship and activism give her one of the highest ranking among Indian Feminists. "*In Rewriting History*", Uma Chakravarti has appreciated Ramabai's spiritual quest and strongly defended that choice in terms of her critique of Hindu socio-religious practices (376).

This dauntless courage and missionary zeal is exemplary for all women and an important aspect on the building up of Indian feminisms. Hers was a lone woman's voice which refused to be silenced even in the face of social ostracism and public condemnation as a traitor. In a radical stand Ramabai regarded the price of colonial exploitation as being paid more by women than men. She accused the colonial rulers of not interfering in women's issues on religious grounds and safe guarding their own interests. In another revolutionary reformation she gave a new definition of loyalty to the nation and patriotism in terms of the worship of mothers rather than the queen. Her crusade for nationalism is seen in her advocacy of Hindi as the one language to be used for the unity of the country. This issue was later to be taken up by Mahatma Gandhi to make Hindi the national language of India. Ramabai condemned in very strong terms the patriarchal ideology and oppressive practices which regarded widowhood as punishment for crimes committed by women in the previous birth. She was highly critical of the concept of "Pati-Parmeshwar". She condemned the social reformers for their narrow vision and the singular dimension of their agenda. Her eloquent rhetoric called upon American donors to hear the cry of thousands of helpless widows who were daily being crushed at the unholy altar in inhuman customs. She stressed on self-confidence, self reliance, hard work and neatness in women. She was sarcastic about women's tendency to gossip and idle their time in fruitless chatter. She was the first woman reformer who pointed out that male domination in a patriarchal society created an inferiority complex in a woman, who consequently learnt to devalue herself (Shobha P. Shinde, *The Social Reformer Movement...*, 203, 204).

Under these circumstances Pandita Ramabai dared to dream about women's freedom through the weapon of Education and to be self sufficient, whereas the male reformers and nationalists were engaged for the freedom of India. But women in their scheme were a marginal entity, to obey and help and not to question, to be strong but not independent.

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