



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
IJH 2020; 2(1): 68-70
Received: 12-11-2019
Accepted: 22-12-2019

Dr. Amita Esther David
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Isabella Thoburn College,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India

Pandita Ramabai: Re-modelling the high-caste Hindu woman in the 19th century

Dr. Amita Esther David

Abstract

India has been home to many traditions and cultures. Some traditions did not favor the Indian woman and left her weak and helpless, for example, the practice of Sati and child marriage. The Indian women were always shielded by their fathers and husbands from exposure to society and were expected to stay indoors, procreate and take care of the family and its needs. However, with the advent of British rule and the coming of missionaries, both men and women were exposed to western thought. The Christian missionaries were among the first to point out against sati and child marriage. As the thinking evolved some social reformers like Pandit Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohun Roy Justice Ranade and others, spoke out against these practices. There were a few pioneering and brave Indian women, who fought fearlessly against some of the social evils that prevailed in society during the 19th century. This paper attempts to elucidate the life and works of one such social reformer, Pandita Ramabai. She was an emancipated and educated Brahmin lady, who accepted Christianity and stood against all odds to defend her rights and broke down social barriers that engulfed Indian society during the 19th century.

Keywords: Brahmin, widow, female education

Introduction

Ramabai was born in the sylvan setting of a "forest home" in Gangamula in the Western Ghats of Mysore, in April 1858, to Anant Shastri, an orthodox Brahmin scholar and his second wife. Though their ancestors had emigrated from Maharashtra to Karnataka, her father lived as a Sanskrit student in pre-colonial Poona and decided to teach Sanskrit to women. He was a radical and did not believe in the idea that Sanskrit being a sacred language should not be taught to women and to those of the lower castes (Ramabai, 1907 11)^[3]. He defended his decision to do so in a Brahmin assembly and taught his wife Sanskrit, and, withdrew to a secluded forest site to run a residential school for Brahmin boys. When Ramabai was a baby, the family began a pilgrimage of the entire sub-continent, which lasted sixteen years. The family comprising three Sanskrit-educated children, managed a meagre living by reciting stories from the sacred Puranas. This gave Ramabai an early experience in public speaking. The family's ritual austerities and constant travels coupled with the great famine of 1877 claimed the lives of her parents and the elder sister.

Despite the hardships, she continued the sojourn with her brother, surviving without food for days, until the duo reached Calcutta in 1878. A panel of Sanskrit experts who conferred on her the titles of "Pandita" and "Saraswati" publicly examined the twenty-year old Ramabai (Kosambi, 1889, 17)^[2]. The Brahmo Samaj used her abilities to popularize women's education through public lectures, and later on the Prathana Samaj of Bombay undertook the same (Kosambi, 17).

While in Calcutta, she made her first acquaintance with Christian scriptures. Kechub Chander Sen, founder of the Brhmo Sect of reformed Hindus had given her a little book of precepts from all religions, most of which were from the New Testament (Dyer, 1900, 34)^[1]. At the age of twenty-four, Ramabai lost her brother and also her husband Medhavi, a Bengali non-Brahmin lawyer, shortly after the birth of their daughter Manorama. Within a few months of the death of her husband, at Poona, she resumed her former occupation as lecturer on the education of women (Dyer, 25). Left alone in the world with a baby, Ramabai on the invitation of the Bombay Presidency's social reformers came to Poona in 1882, which later served as a base for all her activities. She wrote 'Stri Dharma Niti' or 'Moral for Women' (1882) in Marathi, which envisioned the 'New Woman'. Her involvement with a woman's club called the Arya Mahila Samaj with its branches all over the Presidency was met with

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Amita Esther David
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Isabella Thoburn College,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh,
India

male hostility. On September 5th, 1882. testified before the Hunter Ramabai Commission Education, on women's general and medical education. After this, she decided to study medicine (Ramabai, 1996, Ch 1)^[4].

The Anglican Community of St. Mary, the Virgin at Poona, supported her in this quest by arranging for her stay at their return for the headquarters at Wantage, England. In accommodation, education and living expenses, Ramabai taught the Wantage sisters selected to work in India, the Indian English languages. After a year in Wantage, she received the appointment of Professor of Sanskrit in Cheltenham Ladies' College (Dyer, 35). In April 1883, she sailed with Manorama but was refused admission into the medical college because of defective hearing. Contrary to her earlier claim of not converting to Christianity, in September 1883, Ramabai received baptism into the Anglican Church as Mary Rama along with Manorama as Manorama Mary (Ramabai, 1883, 3)^[5]. This act of hers was received with mixed feelings in India. Her interaction with the Anglican establishment and sister Geraldine, resulted in her opting for non-denominational Christianity.² Perhaps this was because the Anglican denomination, which comprised the Church of England, was integrated with the power of the monarchy. She admired the United States where no religious denomination was integrated with political power.

Ramabai along with her daughter, Manorama sailed from England to Philadelphia in February 1886, to attend the annual commencement of the Women's Medical College at Philadelphia. Though she intended to stay for only three months, she stayed for three years. During this time she travelled extensively, lecturing on the need to educate the Indian women, especially the widows. She advocated that high-caste Hindu girls should be instructed before marriage in Sanskrit and the vernacular (Dyer, 31)

While in Philadelphia, in June 1887, she published 'The High - Caste Hindu Woman', (Dyer, 37) which received international acclaim and sold about 10,000 copies in the first year. In December 1887, she established the Ramabai Association in Boston, with Rev. Dr. E. E. Hale as president and Frances Willard as one of the Vice-Presidents (Kosambi, 23). The Association pledged financial support for her proposed secular school, catering to the educational needs of high caste widows in India for ten years. So great was the impact of Ramabai that by October 1888, the association had a subsidiary at San Francisco with sixty-three circles. Two years later the circles increased to seventy-five with the membership being reduced from one dollar to twenty-five cents to accommodate Sunday-School children and others of small means. Both the US and Britain found themselves locked in a competition for 'enlightened' social leadership in India (Kosambi 23).

Ramabai returned to India in late 1888 and on March 1st, 1889 her residential school for high-caste widows the 'Sharada Sadan' (Home of Learning), was opened in Bombay. Offering education and vocational training, this school was the first of its kind in the country. In 1890, the school moved to Poona and Ramabai was charged with violation of religious neutrality. This caused a rift within the city's Hindu social reformers, who resigned from the schools advisory board. Though Ramabai was exonerated by the enquiry conducted by the association, social boycott resulted in many girls being withdrawn from the Sharada Sadan. But the school continued to function and by 1894, it

had a kindergarten and primary school and boasted about The Dean Bodley Memorial Room library along with dormitories, kitchen and dining room. As the Ramabai Association had achieved its original purpose, it was dissolved and reconstituted as the American Ramabai Association, when Ramabai was present in Boston in 1898 (Kosambi 29).

During the terrible famine years in the late 1890's, Ramabai rescued over 300 women and girls from western and central India and housed them in temporary huts at Kedgaon, a village 40 miles south-east of Poona. She bought a 100 acre farm and soon this establishment was called the Mukti (Salvation) Mission. The American Ramabai Association supported it. The girls and women of Mukti Mission apart from learning the women's chores", also received training in carpentry, basket-making, weaving saris and carpets, managing a printing press and running an oil press.

On the national stage, Ramabai participated in December 1889, as one of the only eight women delegates at the annual meeting of the newly formed Indian National Congress and the meeting of the social reform body the National Social Conference, in Bombay. She even allied effectively but briefly with the moderate nationalist during the plague epidemic of the late 1890s. She openly voiced her protests against the governments' stringent measures implemented high-handedly by British soldiers.

She was among the first to suggest the 'cohesive potential of Hindi' as a national language and to introduce the idea that, the Hindi language should be the national language and Devnagri, the national script. Ramabai vociferously voiced her resentment of colonial rule and began her movement for cultural and political nationalism. Ramabai's social activities during the early 1880s coincided with the activities of B.G. Tilak and G.G. Agarkar. She received tremendous support from social reformers like G.H. Deshmukh, Justice M.G. Ranade, R.G. Bhandarkar and Justice K.T. Telang, all of whom were on the advisory board of the Sharada Sadan. G.G. Agarkar supported her cause.

She travelled the length and breadth of the United States, addressing large audiences, gaining information and forming circles of support and assistance, in order to bring about a change in the lives of women, especially widows. Eminent personalities like Justice Ranade and others were skeptical about her work since she had converted to Christianity but she continued her campaign for the education of women and uplift of widows. Normally, the new converts to Christianity tended to follow western style of living. The Hindu community looked upon this trend with disdain as it had led many in debt and difficulty, because their meager incomes could not afford them the same lifestyle. She advocated the maintenance of Indian habit in all customs of food and dress (Dyer, 41). She followed a strict vegetarian diet and advocated Indian culture in daily living. She passed away in 1922 after serving Indian womanhood for many long and arduous years.

References

1. Dyer Helen S, Pandita Ramabai. The Story of her Life, Flemming H. Revell Company, New York, 1900.
2. Kosambi Meera. (Translator and editor), Returning the American Gaze; Pandita Ramabai's The People of the United States, (1889), 1st Pub, 2003.
3. Ramabai Pandita. A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure, Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission, 11th Ed.,

- (1907), 1992.
4. Ramabai Pandita. United States Lokasthiti ani Pravasavritta, (The Peoples of the United States) (1889) Represent Bombay Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1996.
 5. Ramabai (Pandita), Englandcha Pravas. (Voyage to Edited by D.G. Vaidya. Reprint: Bombay Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 2nd Ed., 1883, 1988.