



RADICAL FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF PANDITA RAMABAI

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Abstract: Literature essentially brings up the entire body of writings that engage with particular themes, ideas or social realities. It possesses the ability to sway the thoughts and sentiments of people and functions as a significant medium of mass communication. The Indian literature has played a creditable role in generating awareness and awakening consciousness amid women. Many eminent scholars have contributed writings in diverse styles to give vent to their feeling of anguish and disquiet about the overbearing conditions faced by Indian women due to Patriarchy and rigid gender norms entrenched in Brahmanical Hinduism but the emphasis of this paper is on one such literary stalwart Pandita Ramabai. An outstanding scholar of Sanskrit and fearless advocate of women rights, she gave voice to women when they were largely unheard and marginalized. The paper attempts to gauge the ideas and concerns articulated by Ramabai through her writings and the analyse the assessment of literati regarding her intellectual contributions.

Keywords: Feminist, Radical, Social Reformer, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Gender equality

I. INTRODUCTION

Pandita Ramabai was a multidimensional figure who penned her thoughts from the standpoint of a social reformer, a feminist and an institution builder. A deeper understanding of her thought necessitates a peep into the social context and personal background that shaped this remarkable women activist. Ramabai emerged in 19th century when Indian society was undergoing intense churning and transformation. The social reform movement was at its height but it was largely directed by males. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G Ranade, Keshab Chandra Sen, Jyotiba Phule were actively championing the cause of women but their efforts were framed primarily from male perspective. The reforms they proposed for women tended to be fragmented and limited rather than being a coordinated and sustained programme for comprehensive change. Broadly speaking, the idea of emboldening women to be self-sustaining and independent rational entities was seldom broached. Instead the reforms were confined to mitigation of the worst injustices within traditional patriarchal societal framework which affirmed inferior position of woman vis a vis man. In such a scenario, the intervention of Ramabai assumed great significance. She was the solitary women activist in colonial India who was first to underscore that denial of knowledge and opportunities for growth to women debilitated them and lay at root of their subordination. The theoretical framework under which she operated offered a line of thinking fundamentally different from other reformers of her time. She adopted an insider's perspective speaking or writing from her own lived experiences as women. Having personally encountered the social realities of female subjugation, she raised a powerful voice of dissent.

The revolutionary streak in Pandita Ramabai's character had its genesis in her personal background. She was born at a time when women in India were regarded as a little more than dependents, denied autonomy and basic rights. They were neither permitted to pursue education nor allowed to move freely in public places. The socially sanctioned roles available to women were confined to those of wife and mother restricting their lives to domestic sphere. Girls were married off at a very young age resulting in large number of child widows who were made to live a harsh and austere life. The condition of widows was particularly deplorable and they were viewed as inauspicious and subjected to social inclusion within the family and community.

Ramabai, however, was fortunate to be born in a liberal and non-conformist Brahmin Chitpavan family. Her upbringing was unconventional and outside the rigid gender norms imposed by Brahmanical Patriarchy in those times. Her father Anant Shastri was a strong advocate of women education and unlike most Brahmins of his era boldly imparted the knowledge of Sanskrit to his wife and daughter. This act deeply offended the religious sensibilities of the orthodox community and led to his ostracization from society. Another significant step taken by her father was his decision not to marry her at an early age thereby allowing Ramabai the freedom to pursue intellectual growth.

The legacy of her father had a decisive influence on her intellectual orientation and future choices equipping her to enter the male centric public sphere with confidence and ease. Ramabai was an exceptional woman who mastered the Sanskrit language at a time when its study was reserved exclusively for Brahmin men only and explicitly forbidden for women. She was a rare upper caste woman who transgressed entrenched social boundaries, crossed caste lines to marry a Shudra and refused to submit to the

prescribed constraints of widowhood by choosing to remain visible and active in public view. She was also an uncommon Hindu woman who converted to Christianity, a decision which may be read as a response to oppressive treatment extended to widows within Hindu society.

II. FEMINIST STREAK IN THOUGHT OF PANDITA RAMABAI

Ramabai asserted that women should not be treated merely as an object of political or social policies but recognized as a subject with agency. Patriarchy constituted the central reference point of her political engagement. She directly challenged the male dominance in reform movement and argued for women's autonomy. Practices of seclusion and systemic discrimination of women were critically interrogated by her and through her writings she offered radical responses to the injustices of contemporary society. By confronting society, religion and patriarchal order, she embarked on a path where no Hindu women of her time had the audacity to tread. Uma Chakravarti observes, "*Ramabai's search for personal fulfilment as well as her struggle to understand and conceptualize women's oppression from her own position as a woman was vastly different from motivations and the world view of men around her*"

Ramabai's position within reform movement was particularly formidable as the movement itself was largely a male enterprise embedded within rigid patriarchal structure that left no room for radical gender egalitarian transformation. The very presence of women in public sphere attracted intense hostility. Thinkers like Vishwanath Narayan Mandalik, Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar and Bal Gangadhar Tilak vehemently criticized women's public participation and branded reformist support for women and non-Brahmins as 'un-national.' The most severe condemnation came from Bal Gangadhar Tilak who through his weekly newspaper Kesari launched a sustained attack on Pandita Ramabai accusing her of being driven by excessive personal ambitions. Criticizing what he perceived as her imprudence in entering an exclusively male domain, Tilak asserted "*In real life, it is the task of men to eradicate the evil customs prevalent in our society. Women cannot interfere with them for many years to come even if they are 'Panditas' and have reached the ultimate stage of reform... Our women will have to submit to male control for long time*"

Despite such harsh criticism, Ramabai's reformist zeal remained undiminished. On the contrary it was sharpened by her personal sufferings. She consistently challenged the prevailing ethos of her times through her writings and lived her life as a radical reformer in both spirit and practice.

III. RADICAL WRITINGS OF PANDITA RAMABAI

Ramabai's literary interventions reflected her defiance of entrenched social hierarchies. Her first literary work was a Sanskrit poem titled '*Lamentation of Divine Language*' an ode celebrating the richness of ancient Hindu culture. Significantly her choice to compose the poem in Sanskrit itself constituted an act of rebellion against the Brahmanical order that prohibited the women from accessing this divine language. In 1882, she published her first Marathi prose work *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women) which marked a decisive shift in the discourse on women's emancipation. The book was addressed primarily to upper caste Hindu women and sought to awaken their moral, intellectual and social consciousness. However, contrary to conventional prescriptive texts on women's conduct, Ramabai's work was not a manual of submission but a powerful critique of the social and religious structures that perpetuated women's subordination.

In *Stri Dharma Niti*, Ramabai foregrounded education as the primary instrument of women empowerment. She argued that ignorance deliberately imposed on women through denial of education lay at the root of their oppression. By emphasizing on rational thinking, self-respect and moral autonomy, she challenged the patriarchal belief that women were inherently dependent and intellectually inferior. The text questioned the traditional notions of *stri dharma* that confined women to obedience and self-sacrifice and instead redefined women's duties in terms of self-development and social responsibility.

Ramabai also critically examined the institution of marriage and the condition of widows exposing the injustices embedded in Hindu social practices. She condemned child marriage and the harsh restrictions imposed on widows arguing that these practices stripped women of dignity and agency. Through a combination of moral reasoning and social critique, she asserted that women must be recognized as rational beings capable of independent judgement rather than passive bearers of tradition.

In this work, Ramabai offered a sustained critique of the social position of women and categorically asserted that a woman was more than merely a wife or a daughter. She emphasized the need of women to cultivate their individuality and self-worth. While acknowledging the social role of wife and mother, Ramabai urged women to recognize their intrinsic worth and actively work towards improving their own condition.

She emphasized on the importance of education for woman and describes it as an 'indestructible wealth' that alone could bring true enrichment and empowerment. Ramabai argued that women must strive to emerge from the darkness of ignorance and encouraged them to pursue wide range of disciplines including History, Dharmashastras, Physics, Geography, Political economy, Morals, Medicine and Arithmetic. Such an expansive vision of women's education was radical for its time and directly challenged prevailing assumptions about women's intellectual limitations.

In *Stri Dharma Niti*, Ramabai positioned herself as a resolute opponent of child marriage identifying it as a major cause of unhappiness and the breakdown of marital relationships. She drew attention to physical and intellectual consequences of early marriage noting the adverse effects on women's health and the quality of offspring as well as the long term damage to women's bodies. Going a step further, she made a bold and unconventional proposal that young men and women should be allowed to choose their own spouses when they reach the marriageable age of about twenty. This assertion marked a departure from dominant social norms and underscored her commitment to personal choice and autonomy in intimate relationships. Besides this, Ramabai

also pointed towards the need of man and woman to support each other as complementary elements of God's creation especially as regards to domestic life. Throughout the book, Ramabai focuses on improving the generally inferior position of women.

What made *Stri Dharma Niti* particularly radical was Ramabai's insistence that women themselves must become agents of reform. Unlike male reformers who spoke on behalf women, Ramabai directly addressed women as conscious subjects capable of transforming their own lives. In doing so, she articulated an early feminist consciousness that challenged both religious orthodoxy and male dominance within reform movement. The text thus represents a significant departure from reformist paternalism and stands as one of the earliest indigenous feminist intervention in colonial India.

In 1883, Ramabai authored *The Cry of Indian Women* with the explicit purpose of drawing attention to deeply distressing condition of women in India and ensuring that their voices of suffering reached the ears of British authorities. Presenting a stark portrayal of female condition in India, Ramabai held that to be born as a female in India was considered a consequence of sin and their condition was no better than animal in hell. The birth of female child was commonly perceived as a source of misfortune and burden for the family.

Ramabai highlighted the systematic neglect of girl's education noting that even educated men deliberately consigned their daughters to ignorance in a cruel way out of fear of social ostracism. Early marriage was widely used as a means of disposing daughters thereby depriving them of childhood and autonomy. Once married, girls were compelled to endure the cruelty of their in-laws and remain confined to domestic labour. Denied the freedom to choose their life partners, both men and women experienced dissatisfaction within their marriage often leading men to abandon their wives and enter into subsequent marriages leaving the first wives in pitiable condition.

The plight of women became even more tragic in case of widowhood. If a woman's husband died prematurely her suffering only intensified as she was subjected to social exclusion, economic deprivation and emotional hardship. Through this powerful indictment of prevailing social practices, Ramabai appealed to the British Government to intervene by providing support for establishment of homes and institutions for destitute women thereby offering them shelter, dignity and the possibility of rehabilitation.

In her book *The High Caste Hindu Women* written in 1887, Ramabai broke the long silence surrounding the trauma and suffering endured by the upper caste Hindu women. She critically examined the treatment meted out to Hindu women throughout various stages of their lives. From her early childhood, a girl was made acutely conscious of her inferior status vis a vis her brothers and was subjected to neglect and contempt. Although the birth of girls was considered necessary for the continuation of family lineage, it was nevertheless believed that their number should not exceed that of boys. Constant humiliation and discrimination rendered many girls sullen, withdrawn and emotionally stunted.

The custom of child marriage abruptly curtailed childhood as the marriages was solemnized without the consent of either party frequently resulting in unhappy and dysfunctional marital relationships. After marriage a women occupied a dependent and subservient position within the household, a status sanctified and enforced by religious injunctions. Widowhood however marked the most tragic phase of women's life virtually extinguishing any possibility of dignity or fulfilment and becoming the most dreaded condition of high caste Hindu women. Ramabai forcefully exposed the rigid dogmatism associated with the laws of Manu and the manipulative interpretation of Vedas by male religious authorities to legitimize women's oppression. She sharply criticized Hindu religious laws and customs for institutionalizing gender inequality and denying women autonomy, dignity and humane living conditions. Ramabai concluded her account by pointing out that the chief needs of High Caste Hindu women were Self-reliance, Education and Native Women Teachers. For fulfilling these needs her emancipatory suggestions were that the state of complete dependence of women on men from birth to end of lives as advocated by Manu must be done away with. Houses should be opened for young high caste child widows where they can take shelter and may have entire freedom of action. In order to make an honourable and independent living they can be trained as teachers, governesses, nurses and housekeepers. These houses should be managed by influential Hindu ladies and libraries containing best books in History, Science, Religion, Art be established for benefit of inmates of these houses and women in vicinity. Ramabai sought to awaken women who had long remained imprisoned in ignorance through her writings. As Meera Kosambi observes this work may be regarded as an '*unofficial Indian Feminist Manifesto*'

In her final work *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure* written in 1907, Ramabai offered a scathing critique of discrimination against women embedded within Hindu religious philosophy. She wrote, "*while reading Dharma Shastras I found contradictory statements about almost everything but there were two things on which almost all those books, the Dharma shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and modern poets, the popular preachers of modern day and orthodox high caste Hindu men were agreed that women of high and low caste as a class were bad, very bad worse than demons, as unholy as untruth and that they could not get Moksha as men. The only hope of getting this much desired liberation from Karma and its results that is countless millions of births and deaths and untold suffering was the worship of their husbands. The husband is said to be the women's God; there is no other God for her. This God may be worst sinner and great criminal; still he is her God and she must worship him. She can have no hope of getting admission into Swarga, the abode of Gods without his pleasure.*"

Through her writings, Ramabai not only awakened the Indian women but also appealed passionately to Americans and Britishers to support the cause of women upliftment in India. She became the first public figure from India to seek financial assistance from West for establishing social institutions in homeland. The support enabled her to establish Sharada Sadan and Mukti Mission thereby transforming the concept of women's residential education into a practical reality. The Sri Lankan scholar and feminist

Kumari Jayawardena in her influential work *The White Women's Other Burden* highlights the extraordinary force of Ramabai's reformist vision. She affirms: "Ramabai was also strong in her advocacy of women's rights long before such ideas were generally acceptable in either West or India and she was ahead of her times in her challenge to patriarchy. By focussing mainly on condition of child widows Ramabai was choosing an area of action that hit out against Hinduism, Brahmin oppression and male domination. To her the condition of Hindu widows was not merely a social evil to be reformed, it was a symptom of a disease to be eradicated."

IV.CONCLUSION

Ramabai's distinctiveness lies equally in her thought and action. Her emphasis on self-reliance directly challenged the patriarchal order which insisted on women's dependence on men and their confinement within domestic sphere. She systematically worked to create awareness among women regarding self-improvement and empowerment. Thus, Ramabai asserted the presence of woman within Indian reformist movement independent of male patronage, articulated the global dimensions of Hindu women's oppression through her writings and laid a crucial foundation for women's emancipation and eventual equality in India.

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