



A study of pandita ramabai women's movement in Maharashtra

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Abstract

Poona was the center of Maratha Brahmanism as well as the site of social reform activity and controversy from the 1860s onwards. Questions of "womanhood" and especially of widow remarriage had been in the forefront of public discussion when Pandita Ramabai arrived in 1882. A society for the promotion of widow remarriage had been established there in 1866 and several prominent reformers, including M. G. Ranade, tried to put reformist ideas into practice by educating their child wives. If some reformers welcomed her, however, the challenges she posed to late-nineteenth-century Hindu tradition, as a woman and as a widow who dared to read the sacred texts, were predictably unpopular among conservative Hindus.

Keywords: Maratha Brahmanism, hindu tradition, woman

Introduction

Pandita Ramabai's Contribution to Women's Cause Meera Kosambi Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's status as a solitary women leader of the movement for women's emancipation in nineteenth century Maharashtra and her contribution to that cause were eclipsed by the 'storm over her conversion to Christianity and her consequent neglect by contemporary mainstream Hindu society. This essay attempts to assess Ramabai's role within the framework of her own social context. In the history of socio cultural reform movement of India in the 19th and 20th 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 1st 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.

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prominent reformers, including M. G. Ranade, tried to put reformist ideas into practice by educating their child wives. If some reformers welcomed her, however, the challenges she posed to late-nineteenth-century Hindu tradition, as a woman and as a widow who dared to read the sacred texts, were predictably unpopular among conservative Hindus. As the *Times of India* put it, "[S]he had before her marriage suffered much persecution on account of her advanced views about female emancipation, while the mere fact of her remaining unmarried was calculated to shock the orthodox." To be sure, it was because of their "unused" sexuality that widows had to be marked off culturally and physically; they also had to be "shut off from the male gaze and to shut themselves off from their own sexuality." And yet it was not these facts alone that made Ramabai such "a startling and uncomfortable figure." As Rosalind O'Hanlon has noted, "[H]er very public condemnations of the consequences of 'respectable' domestic life for Hindu women caused fury most of all because they hit precisely against nationalist attempts to identify home as a sacrosanct domain for Hinduism's innermost spiritual values." Ramabai's reform convictions grew out of a deep personal commitment to improving the condition of Indian women. Her concerns about Indian women's "uplift" were shared by a growing number of late nineteenth-century Indian social reformers, some of whom were women—though few of these were as plain-speaking about either the problems confronting Hindu widows or the urgent need for institutional reform to ameliorate their situations. Tarabai Shinde, the Maratha Brahman woman whose pamphlet, *A Comparison between Men and Women*, offered a blistering critique of gender relations in colonial India, was one among several women in western India contemporary with Ramabai who engaged with Hindu tradition in public before Rukhmabai's trial exploded onto the Indian newspaper scene in the mid-eighties and after. Shinde's exposition had been prompted by the case of Vijaylakshmi, the widowed daughter of a Gujerati Brahman family, who was sentenced to hang for killing her newborn, illegitimate baby daughter. Ramabai's public pro-

nouncements were motivated by the less sensational but equally moving instances of Indian women's suffering that she had observed in her wanderings throughout the Indian subcontinent. She told the sisters at Wantage that while traveling with her brother she had had "a good opportunity of seeing the sufferings of Hindu women" and was "much touched by their sorrows. [T]his made us think of how much it was possible to improve the condition of women and raise them out of their degradation.

We were able to do nothing directly to help them but in towns and villages we often addressed large audiences of people, and urged upon them the education of women and children. In order to be able to converse with the different races we were obliged to learn Hindi (as it is a general language in India) and Bengalee." After her husband's death, she spoke at various gatherings and meetings, giving publicity to the cause of female education throughout India. Together with likeminded men and women in Poona, Ramabai also helped to found the Arya Mahila Samaj, or Aryan Women's Society, which was committed to Indian women's education and social reform. Ramabai was by no means alone in her concerns about widows. D. K. Karve, who was eleven years old when the first widow remarriage was publicly celebrated in Bombay in 1869, was considered by many to be the father of widow rehabilitation in western India. His widows' home project in Poona, which attracted attention in the closing years of the nineteenth century, did much to prepare Indian women for work, reform, and travel to worlds outside India as well. In part because Ramabai was received as such a phenomenon on the Maharashtrian scene, it is worth pausing to remark on her accomplishments up to this point: in the midst of an impoverished and difficult childhood, she had become a Sanskrit scholar as a result of training by her mother, and was versed in a number of indigenous languages, with a smattering of English as well. By the age of twenty she was recognized by the tides "Pandita," meaning eminent scholar-teacher, and "Saraswati," a reference to the Hindu goddess of learning, and had commanded the attention of local and presidencywide reformers in western India.

By the time she was asked to testify for the Government of India's Commission on Education in 1882 (referred to also as the Hunter Commission), Pandita Ramabai had gained considerable renown for her views on the need for reforms for women and children, not just in India but in Britain as well. She told the commission that India's women needed female teacher training and inspectresses of schools—the personnel and the bureaucratic structure, in other words, necessary to guarantee both the permanence of women's educational reform and the government's sustained commitment to it. And no doubt to the chagrin of some Indian male reformers, she told the commission that 99 percent of the male population in India was opposed to female education. Ramabai also spoke to the issue of "lady doctors" in India, advancing what was to become a central claim in English reformers' arguments about the need for female medical aid to Indian women: namely those native women refused to be attended by male doctors and hence required the services of trained female physicians. According to Ramabai's testimony, this want of female doctors was the cause "of hundreds of thousands of women dying premature deaths," and she called on the government to make provision specifically for the medical education of Indian women. Her concern for health conditions among Indian women undoubtedly prompted her own desire to

become a doctor. In her travels throughout India she had been repeatedly moved by the sufferings of Hindu women; her goal, as she put it, was "to fit myself for a life of usefulness, in order to benefit my countrywomen." Like several of her Indian women contemporaries, it was the quest for a medical education that brought Pandita Ramabai to England in the first place, since before the mid-1880s there were no facilities for would-be women doctors to study in India, except in Madras. She knew the work of the sisters of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin (CSMV) in Poona, whose efforts on behalf of Indian women had greatly impressed her, and arrangements were made from Poona for her to stay at Wantage.

According to several sources, Ramabai wanted assistance but was wary of accepting charity. Consequently, she undertook to write a book, *Stree Dharma-Neeti*, published in 1883, and used the proceeds from its sale to finance her passage to England. Ramabai's determination to be self-supporting led Sister Geraldine of Wantage to characterize her as willful and proud, but it is clear from Ramabai's own testimonials that self-sufficiency was the only condition under which she was prepared to accept the generosity of communities like Saint Mary's and Cheltenham. Characteristically, when she decided to make a trip to the United States in 1886, she wrote what remains her most famous book in the West, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, in order to underwrite the cost of her own expenses. Ten thousand copies of the book sold out before Ramabai left America in 1888, bringing her a profit of Rs. 25,000. What's more, she came to Britain on the understanding that she would teach Marathi to the sisters at Wantage in exchange for being taught English, with her room and board provided. The implication of Sister Geraldine's reading of Ramabai is something I shall return to, but it is worth remarking that her insistence upon financing herself enabled her to become "one of the few nineteenth-century women who were able to support themselves with their writing"—either in India or outside it.⁶³ Ramabai traveled to England in the spring of 1883 with her daughter and a female companion, Anandibai Bhagat, who came to England to do a course in teacher training. Ramabai was baptized with the name "Mary Rama" in the autumn of 1883 at Wantage, with Sister Geraldine of the CSMV acting as her spiritual guide and mother.

This event evidently surprised the missionary community back in Poona, to whom Ramabai had made it clear that she did not intend to convert. Historians interested in Ramabai's life and in social reform for and by women in India more generally continue to speculate as to why she ended up embracing baptism. The sisters at Wantage believed that her conversion was prompted by the suicide of Anandibai in the fall of 1883, but it seems at least equally likely that her decision was motivated by her admiration for the work that the sisters at Wantage did for working-class and "fallen" women. Of concern to us here is not determining with absolute certainty why she converted—which we cannot in any event ever know—but rather what kinds of narratives were produced to explain her conversion, by whom, and for what ends. The sisters, for their part, were undoubtedly anxious to represent Ramabai's embrace of Christianity as legitimate and sincere, in addition to having been prompted by the need for emotional support in the wake of her friend's death. Her conversion certainly caused a sensation in India, and later provoked severe criticism of her by certain Indian reformers; as Meera Kosambi has noted, B. G. Tilak "started to openly accuse her of nationwide

missionary designs." Once she had established her own institutions, like the widows' home in Bombay (1889), Ramabai found herself trying continually to balance the competing claims of religious and secular education for Indian women, at odds with both the missionary and the Hindu communities in India—so much so that she came to refer to herself as a "Christian outcast." Shortly after her conversion (that is, by January of 1884), Ramabai was in residence at Cheltenham Ladies' College, under the care and guidance of its head, Dorothea Beale. Over thirty years later, looking back on Ramabai's time at the college, Sister Geraldine (1843-1918) explained that she sent Ramabai to Cheltenham because "I would say that intellectually I was not equipped for such work as instructing" her and because, although Sister Geraldine had spent time in India, "my work had almost wholly been in a European and Eurasian high school, and so I had had no experience in native work." There is no evidence in the correspondence to suggest that the CSMV sisters sent Ramabai to Cheltenham for any other reason except that they wished her to pursue her education. It was not theological differences, in other words, which prompted Sister Geraldine to send Ramabai to Cheltenham; these developed after Ramabai left for Cheltenham. Even in their most disputatious moments, Pandita Ramabai and Sister Geraldine kept up a vigorous correspondence that was virtually uninterrupted for several years.⁷¹ Their letters, as well as those between Ramabai and Beale, Beale and Sister Geraldine, and each of the women with Anglican clergymen, provide firsthand evidence of how thoroughly grounded the rhetoric of social relations was in the language of colonial theology, as well as how imperial power relations invariably intruded on personal—even and especially "sisterly"—relationships at the imperial center.

Overlooked No More: Pandita Ramabai, Indian Scholar, Feminist and Educator

Ramabai traveled around India in the 19th century to give lectures on women's emancipation and established one of the country's first women's shelters and schools. Her most important published work, "The High Caste Hindu Woman," was written in English in the United States in 1887, when she was 29. It focused on the plight of Hindu widows — she called widowhood "the worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman's life." Brahmin customs prohibited widows from remarrying. Considered cursed, they were required to shave their heads, wear drab, coarse clothes and subsist on meager food. Widows were also subject to physical and sexual abuse. The common practice of child marriage meant that some widows were still girls when they were doomed to a lifetime on the margins.

Conclusion

Readers were moved by Ramabai's account of life in India, and women's groups formed the American Ramabai Association, with dozens of chapters to support Ramabai financially in her mission. "Here was a woman who circumnavigated the globe in the 19th century, built community in foreign countries and overcame the visceral challenges of diet, dress and language," said Shefali Chandra, associate professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis. Ramabai wrote wry, thoughtful accounts of her travels that were well received in India. She described how an American host had been horrified to see her barefoot in the house, how Europeans had avoided her

small party of Indians on a ship, and how she had stood out when she pulled woolen sweaters over her Indian clothing to stay warm.

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