



PANDITA RAMABAI: A CHAMPION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS**Dr. Ashraful Islam Laskar****Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science,
Krishnagar, Govt. College, Nadia, W.B.****ABSTRACT**

Pandita Ramabai, originally named Rama Dongre, was an extraordinary figure in modern Indian history. A Sanskrit scholar, social reformer, and activist, she dedicated her life to the emancipation of women and is recognized as one of India's earliest feminists. Her journey was marked by personal tragedy, a relentless pursuit of knowledge, and a fierce commitment to challenging societal norms. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to focus on the contribution of Pandita Ramabai to women cause.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Women Emancipation, Social Stereotypes, Social Reform etc.**INTRODUCTION**

Pandita Ramabai, originally named Rama Dongre, was an extraordinary figure in modern Indian history. A Sanskrit scholar, social reformer, and activist, she dedicated her life to the emancipation of women and is recognized as one of India's earliest feminists. Her journey was marked by personal tragedy, a relentless pursuit of knowledge, and a fierce commitment to challenging societal norms.

Early Life and Education

Born on April 23, 1858, in the Canara district of Karnataka, Ramabai came from a Marathi-speaking Brahmin family. Her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, was a progressive Sanskrit scholar who faced social ostracism for daring to teach his wife, Laxmibai, the sacred language. This progressive environment shaped Ramabai's early life, and she learned Sanskrit from both her parents.¹

In 1874, a devastating famine took the lives of her parents, leaving Ramabai and her brother, Srinivas, to fend for themselves. Together, they travelled across India, reciting Puranas for a livelihood.

Recognition and Personal Milestones

Their travels eventually led them to Calcutta in 1878, where Ramabai's profound knowledge of Sanskrit earned her the prestigious titles of 'Pandita' (wise person) and 'Saraswati' (Goddess of knowledge) from Calcutta University. Tragedy struck again in 1880 with the death of her brother. Following his death, Ramabai defied social conventions by marrying Bipin Bihari Medhavi, a lower-caste man. They had a daughter, Manorama, but their marriage was short-lived, as Bipin Bihari passed away just two years later.

In 1882, Ramabai moved to Pune, where she founded the Arya Mahila Samaj, considered India's first feminist organization. The first outcome of her relentless efforts towards women's welfare was the foundation of *Arya Mahila Samaj* at. It was the very first organisation devoted to providing education to women and encouraging their participation in public activities. She believed that the best remedy for women's emancipation is the introduction of women's education.² In 1882, she was called upon a speak

before the Hunter Commission, a British Governmental Agency to look into the educational system and desperate social condition 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. Impressed by her views and ability to communicate, the Chairman of Hunter Commission translated her views from Marathi to English which had greatly influenced the thinking of Queen Victoria that ultimately led to the starting of Women's Medical Movement by lady Dufferin resulting in subsequently establishing women's hospitals and medical training of the female-physicians in India.³

GLOBAL ADVOCACY AND MISSIONARY WORK

Ramabai's influence soon extended beyond India's borders. In 1883, she travelled to England, where she converted to Christianity and was baptized as Mary Rama. While in England, she taught Marathi and began developing her own unique perspective on faith and social work.

From 1886 to 1889, she was in the United States, where she attended the graduation of her cousin, Anandibai Joshi, one of India's first female doctors. During this time, she penned her most famous work, "The High Caste Hindu Woman," a powerful critique of the miserable conditions faced by women in India. Her admirers in Boston formed the American Ramabai Association to support her work.⁴

RETURN TO INDIA AND HUMANITARIAN MISSIONS

Upon returning to India in 1889, Ramabai wasted no time establishing institutions to help women. She founded Sharada Sadan in Mumbai, a "Home for Learning" dedicated to providing shelter, education, and vocational training to high-caste Hindu widows. In 1896, she established the Mukti Mission in Kedgaon to support widows, abandoned wives, unmarried women, and famine victims.

Her tireless work was recognized in 1919 when she was awarded the Kaiser-E-Hind Gold Medal for her immense contributions to social reform.

A final personal tragedy occurred in 1921 with the death of her daughter, Manorama. Pandita Ramabai passed away soon after, on April 5, 1922.

Key Works and Feminist Thought

Through her writings, Ramabai gave a voice to the voiceless. Her works include:

- *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882): A book outlining morals for women.

The most sustained concern in Ramabai's writing was clearly focused on women. Her first book *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) disappoints many feminists searching for a radical stance in all her works. But what we find is a clear development of her understanding the women's questions and critiquing her position in Indian society. The *Stri Dharma Niti* is clearly a product of the 19th century construction of the English-speaking middle class who were obviously working in the avenues like the bureaucracy, judicial and legal services, teaching and journalism. The book is undoubtedly stamped with the marks of the new patriarchal codes of 'schooling' women to enable them to better administer the conjugal household. Thus, "The *Stri Dharma Niti*" (1882) is an outcome of the construction of a family relationship and the marks of the new patriarchal codes of "schooling" women to become better and dutiful wives. She wants women to understand "their essence" and work to improve their own condition. She emphasizes here the importance of education in the cultivation of personality.⁵

➤ *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887): A searing indictment of the injustices faced

Indian women. In this work, she describes three phases of a woman's life:

- a) Childhood: A time when tradition denies a girl her physical and mental development.
- b) Marriage: An institution where a woman is denied equality and her spirit is crushed.
- c) Widowhood: A state where a woman's life becomes "worse than death."

To combat these issues, she advocated for three key strategies: self-reliance, education, and the training of native women teachers.

The High Caste Hindu Woman (1888) published in America was a fundraising effort to start her project of educating the women in India. Dedicated to her mother, "the light and guide of my life," the content of the book was intended to eradicate misconceptions about Hindu women and explain their true needs. Ramabai believed "by the Divine Spirit, that revelation will stir the hearts of those who read the story to deeds of rescue and relief. To combat these issues, she advocated for three key strategies: self-reliance, education, and the training of native women teachers.⁶

LEGACY AND CRITICISMS

Despite her immense contributions, Ramabai faced criticism for her conversion to Christianity and her perceived attack on sacred Hindu texts. Prominent figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Swami Vivekananda were among her critics. However, she also had strong supporters, including Jyotiba Phule, Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Keshav Chandra Sen.

Pandita Ramabai's legacy lies in her unwavering dedication to improving the lives of women, particularly widows, orphans, and single mothers. Through organizations like the Arya Mahila Samaj, Sharada Sadan, and the Mukti Mission, she not only raised awareness but also created tangible, lasting institutions that empowered women to become self-reliant and educated. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission continues to operate today, providing vital support to women and children in India. It offers a range of services including shelter, education, vocational training, and medical care, particularly for widows, orphans, and others vulnerable individual.

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² Hindustan Times, Feb, 16, 2021.

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⁵Abhilasa & Singh. R (2020). The radical responses of Pandita Ramabai: Challenging the spirit of her time through her writings. *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, Vol.8, No.5*.

⁶Ibid, Pp-21-22