

# PANDITA RAMABAI SARASWATI'S SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN MODERN INDIA – A STUDY

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**Abstract:** Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati was an Indian social reformer, a pioneer in the education and emancipation of women in India. She was the first woman to be accorded the titles of Pandita as a Sanskrit scholar and Sarasvati after being examined by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. She was one of the 10 women delegates of the Congress session of 1889. In India Pandita Ramabai established Sharada Sadan (Home of Wisdom), a school for widows, in Mumbai. This was to be a non – sectarian school where, however, all the caste rules of Brahmins were meticulously observed. In the late 1890s, she founded Mukti Mission at Kedgaon village, forty miles east of the city of Pune. The mission was later named Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission. In 1920, Ramabai's health began deteriorating. Breathed her last on 5th April 1922, almost a fortnight ahead of her 64th birthday.

**Keywords:** Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Indian social reformer, Mukti Mission.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati was an Indian social reformer, a pioneer in the education and emancipation of women in India. She was the first woman to be accorded the titles of Pandita as a Sanskrit scholar and Sarasvati after being examined by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. She was one of the 10 women delegates of the Congress session of 1889. In the late 1890s, she founded Mukti Mission at Kedgaon village, forty miles east of the city of Pune. The mission was later named Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission.

### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati was born as Rama Dongre on 23 April 1858 in a Marathi speaking Brahmin family. Her father, Anant Shastri Dongre, a Sanskrit scholar, taught her Sanskrit at home. Orphaned at the age of 16 during the Great Famine of 1876–78, Dongre and her brother Srinivas travelled over India reciting Sanskrit scriptures. Ramabai's fame as a lecturer reached Calcutta, where the pandits invited her to speak. In 1878, Calcutta University, conferred on her the titles of Pandita and Sarasvati in recognition of her knowledge of various Sanskrit works. The theistic reformer Keshab Chandra Sen gave her a copy of the Vedas, the most sacred of all Hindu literature, and encouraged her to read them. After the death of Srinivas in 1880, Ramabai married Bipin Behari Medhavi, a Bengali lawyer, in a civil ceremony. The groom was a Bengali Kayastha, and so the marriage was inter-caste and inter-regional and therefore considered inappropriate for that age. They were married in a civil ceremony on 13 November 1880. The couple had a daughter whom they named Manorama. After Medhvi's death in 1882, Ramabai, who was only 23, moved to Pune and founded an organization to promote women's education.

## **FAMILY LIFE OF PANDITA RAMABAI**

As Pandita Ramabai involved herself in social service, there was little family life for her. Her childhood was full of hardships, she lost her parents early and her husband died within two years of marriage. She had also to educate her only daughter, Manorama Bai. She did this well: Manorama completed her BA at Bombay University; went to the US for higher studies; returned to India, and worked as Principal of Sharada Sadan, Mumbai. With her help, Pandita Ramabai established Christian High school at Gulbarga (now in Karnataka), a backward district of south India, during 1912, and her daughter was Principal of the school. In 1920 Ramabai's body began to flag and she designated her daughter as the one who would take over the ministry of Mukti Mission. However, Manorama died in 1921. Her death was a shock to Ramabai. Nine months later, Ramabai, who had been suffering from septic bronchitis, died on 5 April 1922, a few weeks before her 64th birthday.

## **HER JOURNEY OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

After Medhavi's death (1882), Ramabai moved to Pune where she founded Arya Mahila Samaj (Arya Women's Society). The purpose of the society was to promote the cause of women's education and deliverance from the oppression of child marriage. When in 1882 a commission was appointed by Government of India to look into education, Ramabai gave evidence before it. In an address to Lord Ripon's Education Commission, she declared with fervor, "In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the educated men of this country are opposed to female education and the proper position of women. If they observe the slightest fault, they magnify the grain of mustard-seed into a mountain, and try to ruin the character of a woman." She suggested that teachers be trained and women school inspectors be appointed. Further, she said that as the situation in India was that women's conditions were such that women could only medically treat them, Indian women should be admitted to medical colleges. Ramabai's evidence created a great sensation and reached Queen Victoria. It bore fruit later in starting of the Women's Medical Movement by Lord Dufferin.

Ramabai went to Britain in 1883 to start medical training. During her stay she converted to Christianity. From Britain she travelled to the United States in 1886 to attend the graduation of the first female Indian doctor, Anandibai Joshi, staying for two years. During this time, she also translated textbooks and gave lectures throughout the United States and Canada. She had also published one of her most important books, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. This was also the first book that she wrote in English. Ramabai dedicated this book to Dr. Joshi, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*-to be specific a Brahmin woman which showed the darkest aspects of the life of Hindu women, including child brides and child widows, sought to expose the oppression of women in Hindu-dominated British India. In 1896, during a severe famine Ramabai toured the villages of Maharashtra with a caravan of bullock carts and rescued thousands of outcast children, child widows, orphans, and other destitute women and brought them to the shelter of Mukti and Sharada Sadan. A learned woman knowing seven languages, she also translated the Bible into her mother tongue-Marathi-from the original Hebrew and Greek.

By 1900 there were 1,500 residents and over a hundred cattle in the Mukti mission and she was also involved in establishing a Church at Mukti. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission is still active today, providing housing, education, vocational training, etc. for many needy groups including widows, orphans, and the blind.

## **2. PANDITA RAMABAI'S CAMPAIGN INDIA**

### **SHARADA SADAN**

In India Pandita Ramabai established Sharada Sadan (Home of Wisdom), a school for widows, in Mumbai. This was to be a non – sectarian school where, however, all the caste rules of Brahmins were meticulously observed.

It attracted some high-caste Hindu widows, but generally the Hindu community remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives.

Ramabai tried to prevent criticism by formatting an Executive committee composed of reforms who were known as staunch Hindus. This plan did not work and less than one year later Mumbai newspapers carried articles critical of Ramabai and her school.

When financial problems forced her to move the school to pune, the newspaper Kesari changed her with converting widows to Christianity. Ramabai's admitted crime was allowing widows to attend her personal prayer meetings, by 1893 Twenty-Five girls were withdrawn. But there was no death of widows in need of shelter and before long Ramabai had other students. By 1900 the sharada sadan had trained eighty women who were able to earn their own living through Teaching or Nursing.

### **MUKTI SCHOOL**

Ramabai's second school, Mukti, was established thirty miles outside of pune at Kedgaon following the famine that began in 1897. She began taking women and children who were victims of famine into sharada sadan where she fed and clothed them, and enrolled them in her school.

Attempting to control the plague, the government placed restrictions on the movement of people, in pune the city magistrate placed a limit on the number of inmates in sharada sadan. Since she could not keep famine victims in pune, Ramabai took her changes to Kedgaon where she had purchased 100 acres of land.

By 1900 this venture had grown into a major institution housing 2000 women and children attending school and involved in industrial training and production. Financing for Mukti came from an American committee which willingly approved all her schemes.

Ramabai designed a remedial curriculum. Literature which was selected for its emphasis on moral models would bring about 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 was included in printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood - cutting, weaving and needlework, as well as training in fanning and gardening. All students were required to join union or societies such as the temperance union or the Christian endeavour society in an effort to break down caste barriers and develop new loyalties based on interest. As members of these societies, the children learned simple parliamentary rules and were encouraged to take charge of their own affairs.

### **PHILOSOPHY OF PANDITA RAMABAI**

Ramabai urged the inmates of her home to become Christians and developed a unique educational program to suit their needs. Her own version of Christianity was one comprised of assorted doctrines, and she combined ideas and she combined ideas she had learned from the sisters at Wantage, and from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Indian Christian friends.

Ramabai saw caste as the great flaw in Hindu society. It led to false valuing of the intellect and condemnation of physical work. Caste associations promoted narrow self - interest and prevented the development of a democratic spirit.

The educational work of Ramabai was commendable and had greatly impressed her contemporaries. However, her connection with Christianity subdued the impact of her contribution to women's education. Her work angered a lot of prominent men in western India as she was an acknowledged Christians as was the ruling power and hatred of the letter was growing daily.

Ramabai believed the intensity of their anger was related to the fact that many of her pupils came from the higher castes. She argued that these men would have remained unconcerned if her work were confined to low - caste women.

In 1919, the king of England bestowed on her the Kaiser-I - Hind award, one of the highest awards that an Indian could boast of during the idoneal regime. Ramabai is celebrated as a national icon of women's development movement in India. Ramabai's greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows and the pupils she left behind to carry on her work.

### **RAMABAI CIRCLES AND ISSUES**

Swami Vivekananda mentions about Ramabai in his letters. "I am astonished to hear the scandals the Ramabai circles are indulging in about me. Don't you see, Mrs. Bull, that however a man may conduct himself, there will always be persons who invent the blackest lies about him? At Chicago I had such things every day against me. And these women are invariably the very Christian of Christians!"

### AWARDS AND HONORS

"Pandit" and "Sarasvati" at Bengal (before going to Britain), recognizing her skills in Sanskrit.

Kaiser – I -Hind Medal for community service in 1919, awarded by the British Colonial Government of India.

She is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on 5 April, and a commemoration day in the liturgical calendar of the Church of England on 30 April.

On 26 October 1989, in recognition of her contribution to the advancement of Indian women, the Government of India issued a commemorative stamp.

A road in Mumbai is also named in her honour. The road connecting Hughes Road to Nana Chowk, in the vicinity of the Gamdevi locality is known as Pandita Ramabai Marg.

### 3. CONCLUSION

A learned woman fluent in seven languages, Ramabai was also a poet and a scholar. She translated the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek, to her mother tongue, Marathi. In 1920, Ramabai's health began deteriorating. She passed on her daughter Manorama the mantle to take over the ministry of Mukti Mission. In a sad twist of fate, Manorama died in 1921. Her death came as a rude shock to Ramabai. After barely nine months, Ramabai, who was already suffering from septic bronchitis; breathed her last on 5th April 1922, almost a fortnight ahead of her 64th birthday.

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