

**Pandita Ramabai:
Raconteur of Feminism in Colonial India**

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Introduction

Pandita Ramabai is one of the few early voices of women in colonial India. Through her writings in Marathi as well as English, she has always dealt with the issues related to women's education and self-reliance. Her well known works include *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women), (1882); *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887); *The Peoples of the United States* (1889). Commenting on Ramabai's relevance as a feminist activist Antoinette Burton writes that "Ramabai was one of the few Indian women whom Anglo American Feminists met personally on their own soil." The present paper intends to elaborate Ramabai's contribution to the women's cause and establish her as a raconteur of feminism in colonial India.

Feminism

The history feminist thought is quite long and elaborate. It had been through several arguments and debates. India could not be an exception to this. It has travelled across a variety of perspectives like culture, politics, economics, literature, etc. All the feminist thinkers and activist had tried to concentrate on the women's rights and their freedom. In fact, the status of women has developed through the thoughts and movements of the feminists from the nook and corner of the world.

Concerns of Feminism

At the starting point of the revolution, the feminists and suffragettes were delinquent by the patriarchal society to adulterate the minds of women and for longing for the idea of liberation from their undeveloped state. The nineteenth century women are talking about their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and future. To get freedom and self-identity, women started a revolutionary effort all over the world and termed by analysts and critics as feminism.

Varieties of Feminism

Feminism has several cultural, geo-specific varieties. It is not a concrete and uniform single line idea. It keeps on changing from country to country as well as culture and time. It includes women's various questions ranging from behavioural patterns to self-identity. Feminist writings include the way women live, speak, educate, as well as enjoy intellectual freedom and self-esteem.

Rise of Feminism in India

Early or developmental phase of Indian feminism also witnessed many changes and contradictions. In India, since the ancient time women were prohibited from enjoying the social and economic rights. The nineteenth century is known for the growing consciousness among women. In Indian context feminism is correlated to nationalist movement. In colonial period Indian women writers used their writings to articulate their urge for recognition as social entity in the existing social order.

Development of Feminism in Maharashtra

Poona of *Dakkhan* was a centre of Indian education and culture during the 19th century. It also has contributed significantly to both Indian Renaissance as well as National Movement. The feminist movement also was well rooted up there quite ahead of any other part of the country. 19th Marathi women writers put forth their socio-politico-cultural acknowledgement in their works, such as; In *Kavya Phule* and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* by Savitribai Phule. Essays of Mukta Salve (1855), *A Comparison between Women and Men* (1882) by Tarabai Shinde, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) by Pandita Ramabai etc. All they had tried to present the picture of contemporary Indian scenario.

Pandita Ramabai

Pandita Ramabai is one of the few early voices of women in India. She was born in 23 April 1858 as Rama Dongre in Brahmin family. She known for her activities towards women's emancipations, freedom and education. Being a scholar in Sanskrit she was awarded the titles of Pandita by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. Meera Kosambi has aptly pointed out the significance of the life and works of Ramabai as "international iconization as the emancipator of the highly troped oppressed Indian womanhood".

Stri Dharma Niti (Morals for Women)

Stri Dharma Niti (Morals for Women) is Ramabai's seminal work in Marathi. In it she has criticized to both Brahman men (for mistreating their women) and Brahman women (for slothful habits that lost the respect of their men). It exhibits eight folds of feminism through a teacher performing eight roles such as Base, Education, Limits, Dharma, Heterogeneity, Brides, Household, and Children's education. It also emphasizes self-confidence, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship. Appropriate age of marriage for women is also one of the concerns of the book. Ramabai further lays stress on women's career and role in being the earners. It stands to be the first attempt to sensitize women in nineteenth century Maharashtra. Commenting on the nature of true religion Ramabai believes that "Courage, forgiveness, control over the mind, abstaining from stealing, purity, control

over the senses, intellect, knowledge, truth and absence of anger are the ten characteristics of true religion” (Kosambi, 53).

According to Uma Chakravarti, “What is significant in Ramabai’s construction of conjugality in *Stri Dharma Niti* is that perhaps for the last time in her works she evokes both conjugality and the traditional mythological female iconic figures like Sita, Anusaya, Arundhari, Damayanti who left their stamp upon ‘Bharatvarsha’. (Chakravarti)

The High Caste Hindu Woman (1887)

The book is a presentation of Indian society to the international / Anglo phone readers especially to the Americans. In it she exposes the place and position of women in traditional upper-caste India. Dr. Rachel Bodley in her preface to the book wrote that “the silence of a thousand years is broken, and the reader of this unpretending little volume catches the first utterances of the unfamiliar voice”. Though the book is an emotional and critical work still it succeeds in maintaining both, Indian national pride and a profound sympathy for the Hindu culture that she would never lose. The book is basically a collection of her speeches while she was in London. It is divided into seven chapters. Here her primary focus is on various issues like childhood of high caste Hindu women, child marriage, the statues of women on the basis of religion etc. It also criticises the religious activities that subjugated women. It is with this book Ramabai raises her voice against the social evils of the sati system in the then India. The essence of Ramabai’s argument is “the chief needs of high-caste Hindu women are first, self-reliance; second, education; and third, native women teachers”.

Kosambi writes, “Those who have done their best to keep women in the state of complete dependence and ignorance, vehemently deny that this has anything to do with the present degradation of the Hindu nation” (Kosambi, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*).

Limitations of the Book

The book is dedicated to two women, Laxmibai, her mother and Anandibai, first Indian doctor. Hence, it is evident that Ramabai stressed on education as the only solution to end women’s exploitation. In addition to it she had stressed upon their self-reliance and native women teachers that could communicate in local languages. However, C. N. Ramchandran finds it difficult to generalize in case of all Indian women of the time as he writes, “Pundita Rama Bai’s monograph *The High Caste Hindu Woman* concerns itself only with the condition of upper caste Hindu women and their religious as well as social enslavement”.

The People of the United States

Ramabai had been to United States and she was not an ordinary woman who could interest herself with the nature and landscape only. Her canvas was wider enough to note the difference between the people and the two cultures. Based on her experiences Ramabai envisages her account of American people to the educated Indians. This book brings out the reversing of the switch over from India to US. It presents a living example for the traditional Indian society in treating women.

Antoinette Burton in her review writes that, “[A] rare and remarkable insight into an Indian woman's take on American culture in the 19th century, refracted through her own experiences with British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and Christian culture on no less than three continents.... a fabulous resource for undergraduate teaching.” (Burton, Introduction)

Thus, the book captures the comprehensive character of the text, which is a part travelogue, part sociological study, part of emancipation of women and part of American culture.

Conclusion

The close reading, textual analysis and interpretation of Ramabai's writings reveals that Ramabai was pioneer of the women's writing in English in India. She was also an early writer to be translated into English. She was a writer who not only explored Indian women's issues but also presented to the global audience in England and America in the 19th century. She was in true sense a raconteur of feminism in colonial India. Ramabai's writings stand to represent the existing social status of Indian women. Her feminist ideology stands as the manifesto of Indian feminism. Indian feminist thinkers derived some pivotal notions from her writing.

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