



## 4. Challenging Patriarchy : Some Lost Women`s Voices from History

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### Abstract

*The social reform debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century reveal a preoccupation with questions affecting women. Gender relations emerged as a powerful means to consolidate the social hierarchies and class and caste divisions of the time. There were many reformulations taking place at the time. Pandit Vidyasagar`s efforts in Bengal for widow remarriage inspired the social reformers like Phule, Gokhale, Agarkar, and Ranade to work to ameliorate the condition of the child widows. Tarabai Shinde`s ``Stree Purush Tulana`` is a scathing attack on the patriarchal structures and the religious texts that kept women subjugated in darkness. Rakhamabai rebelled against the social and religious norms imposed on child brides. Her questioning of religious sanctions, the law, and patriarchal practices forced the British government to pass the Bill of the Age of Consent. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati is one of the early voices of women in colonial India who dared to question, to argue, rebel and vociferously oppose the age-old traditional and religious beliefs which kept women caged in a constricted existence. The present paper highlights the contributions of several notable 19th-century Indian women who boldly confronted the patriarchal norms of their time.*

**Keywords :** Patriarchy, history, gender, social reform, Maharashtra, critique, oppression, women`s emancipation, Age of Consent, conversion, visibility.

### Introduction

The social reform debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> C reveal a preoccupation with questions affecting women. All major questions of the reform of Hindu society were concerned with women--sati, female infanticide, child marriage, the remarriage of widows, the seclusion and education of women, prostitution, bride price and dowry. Lata Mani and others have argued that ``women actually



appeared in this public discussion more as a symbol of the moral health of traditional society. (Hanlon, 1994 p4.) Gender relations emerged as a powerful means to consolidate the social hierarchies and class and caste divisions of the time. Gender also became a key element in the construction of colonial hegemony in the days when Brahmanic religious values and religious texts were diffused throughout old Hindu society right from the upper castes, to farmers, artisans and the lower castes. It was a time when caste hierarchies became more rigid and stratified.

There was an emergence of a political and social movement led by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C which challenged these caste-class hegemonies in the context of colonial modernism introduced in Maharashtra. The mass mobilization led by Phule also brought in the issues of gender through his pioneering efforts for women`s education and the rehabilitation of widows. This period in Indian history, is known as the Renaissance in Maharashtra in the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> C.

There was a battle between traditional patriarchy and the new process of Western influences, education and caste and class formations. There were many reformulations taking place at the time. Uma Chakravarty writes : ``In such a transformatory situation the necessary reconstitution of patriarchies and modes of authority itself acquired an uneven character, conflict between the traditional authority structures and patriarchies with the emerging modified structures with its own attendant patriarchy.`` ( Chakravarti , 1998, P 200)

Just as social reform in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> C was synonymous with the abolishment of Sati, in Maharashtra it stood for reforms to change the living conditions of widows through education and rehabilitation. Pandit Vidyasagar`s efforts in Bengal for widow remarriage inspired the social reformers like Phule, Gokhale, Agarkar and Ranade to work to ameliorate the condition of the child widows. Women who had themselves experienced widowhood, and who were educated, described the lack of dignity and personhood of the widows and her dependence on others who had the power to humiliate her.

The high caste widows were victims of verbal lashings, denial of food and their basic needs, the drudgery of labour and even physical assaults. Widows were regarded as a burden and a liability by the family. Her sexuality was to be curbed by strict ascetic modes, fasting, so that her natural sexual impulses would die a natural death. Many young widows were sexually exploited by men from their own families and left pregnant; to die or abandon their young ones.



The control of patriarchy was completely enforced by the widow's forced tonsure, a sign of both castration and defeminisation according to Uma Chakravatri. The trauma of the enforced tonsure was a ritual or mania indulged in by men leading to severe cases of depression among the victims and sometimes even to death.

Tarabai Shinde's name comes to the forefront when we look at the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Maharashtra. Tarabai Shinde's father belonged to the Satyashodhak Samaj established by Jyotiba Phule and was deeply influenced by the reformist movement. Tarabai was the only daughter in a family of five and her father helped her learn English and Sanskrit. She was the first person to make a scathing attack on male power, social customs and the oppression of women in the name of religion, prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> C in her hard-hitting essay. "Shree Purush Tulana" written in 1882 which was translated into English by Rosalind Ohanfon in 1994 titled "A Comparison Between Men and Women." This is a fifty-two-page essay in Marathi which was a vociferous critique of patriarchal double standards and the impositions on women in the name of religion, tradition and customs. Tarabai clearly states her objectives in writing the book In the introduction she writes :

"I place this little book before you so you might have some pity for women who are widows. I am doing it out of the hope that you might stop treating all women as if they had committed a crime and making their lives a hell for it.... I've written this small book to defend the honour of all my sister country women."

Tarabai questions Stridharma as laid down by the scriptures: "What does Stridharma really mean ? It means always following orders from your husband and doing everything he wants. He can kick you and swear at you, keep his whores, get drunk, gamble with dice, steal, commit murder, be treacherous..... He can do all this, but when he comes home, Stridharma means women are meant to think. " oh, he's our little Lord Krishna and then smile at him and offer their devotion, stand ready at his service as if he was Paramatma himself "(p 79)

Tarabai is ironical and satirically gives a fresh definition of pativrata. She questions the Shastras "if the husband is really to be like a God to the wife, then shouldn't he behave like one. ?"(p 80).According to Tarabai the stories of bravery and courage propagated by the Shastras are a mirage. She attacks the so-called social reformers of the time who referred to the names of Sita, Savitri, when they wished to provide examples of powerful women. She was eloquent in her

attempt to hammer some sense into men. She writes : ``Starting from your childhood you collect all rights in your own hands and womankind you just push in a dark corner far from the real world, shut up in purdah, frightened, sat on, dominated as if she was a female slave (p 86-87).

Tarabai realizes the limitations imposed on women`s development due to her constricted existence. The lack of education and learning has severely hampered women`s growth. Tarabai questions the double standards practiced by a male-dominated society. A widow has to hide her face, shave off her hair, her beauty vanishes and she is forced to follow an ascetic life. She vociferously questions ``so why don`t you hide your faces when your wives have died, shave off your beards and moustaches and and go off to live in the wilderness for the rest of your life. Oh no, not you, One wife dies and you just get another on the tenth day itself ?`` (p 88)

Tarabai writes that the fear of widowhood makes a wife take the utmost care of her husband. She watches over him less out of devotion and more out of fear. She is ready to accept anything which is handed out to her day and night out of this dread of widowhood. She asks with deep pain. ``Do women have any voice, do they have a bit of power over their own lives?`` (p 94). She denounces men in these words “You clever fools, you faithless, you betrayers of friends and traitors to kings.”At the end of the essay she forgets her earlier vitriolic attacks and calls upon both men and women to be more humane and build a happy domestic life based on mutuality (p 124).

Uma Chakravati writes about Tarabai`s essay “Tarabai Shinde`s critique was one of the most important pieces of writing on gender in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, indeed a unique one, that dismantled male discourse on women and widowhood and provided an alternative” (Chakravarty, 1998 p 252) For a woman, to write so fearlessly in a society governed by patriarchal ideologies and use such strong invectives against men was a revolutionary event.

Tarabai`s use of mythology, her readings of the contemporary writers, the images, the rhetoric all add value to the essay. Her writing is influenced by her learning, erudition and her deep understanding of the Indian women`s situation in society. Even Mahatma Jyotiba Phule appreciated Tarabai Shinde`s essay in his pamphlet `` Satsar. “Stree Pursh Tulana” written in 1882 is regarded as the first feminist manifesto written by an Indian woman to draw attention to patriarchal values, the double standards of men, the loss of women`s access to power and an exclusive masculine sphere of life.



An example of a rebellion against the norms and traditions of a male dominated society at the time was that of Dr. Rakhamabai. Rakhamabai was married at the age of eleven to Dadaji, a man much older than her. Rakhamabai refused to live with Dadaji stating that she had not given her personal consent to this marriage which was arranged before her puberty. In 1884, Dadaji moved the courts filing a suit against Rakhamabai for conjugal rights to be restored. Rakhamabai was adamant and was ready even to face imprisonment if the court so ordered. The newspapers covered the case from every angle. Rakhamabai refused to bow to social pressures on the grounds of incompatibility and unworthiness of her husband. The court ordered Rakhamabai to return to her husband or face imprisonment for six months. She did not appeal against the judgment. A public furore arose with a signature campaign by many women and the court dropped the sentence of imprisonment. An out-of-court settlement was finally reached with Rakhamabai firmly standing for her own independence and individuality.

Rakhamabai published two letters in *The Times of India* in May and September 1885. Rakhamabai's first letter shows the deep sense of betrayal at the lack of moral courage and the apathy of society to the problems of child marriages and forced widowhood. She regarded her own child marriage as an obstacle to her education and mental cultivation. She writes about the oppressive ways in which Indian women were kept subjugated in the households, the physical violence and the suffocating social customs.

Rakhamabai boldly makes a case against child marriages and appealed to the government to act against infant and child marriages. She acted as she put it on behalf of "all her suffering sisters." She believed that women too aspired to mental and physical freedom and education. Rakhamabai questioned. "Do you think we are satisfied with the life of drudgery we live and that we have no taste for the aspirations for a higher life (quoted in Chakravarty, 1998, p 253)"

In the second letter on widowhood published in *The Times of India* on 19<sup>th</sup> Sept 1885, she wrote about the degradation of widowhood with sarcasm and irony. According to Rakhamabai, men share in the construction and perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies and women are its subject. She called upon the government to intervene through legislation to end the miseries of the Indian widows. Rakhamabai went on to become the first practicing woman medical doctor in India. This case led to the opening of the debate on the Bill for the Age of Consent which was passed in 1891



which raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for girls married or unmarried from ten to twelve years and its violation was subject to criminal prosecution as rape

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, the firebrand Sanskrit scholar, ideologue, social reformer, nationalist, activist, and Christian convert was the most untypical widow who worked all her life to provide an alternate meaning to the miserable lives of widows by giving destitute women institutional support. She is one of the few early voices of women in colonial India who dared to question, to argue, rebel, and vociferously oppose the age old traditional beliefs about women at the time. Pandita Ramabai remains the most visible woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> C Maharashtra who earned the adulation and respect of the most important social reformer of the time, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. Her motto was to ensure self-reliance, respect and dignity for women and she outrightly opposed the Dharmashastras which relegated women to the position of slaves. She endeavored to create female reform, female consciousness and actively worked for women`s emancipation, freedom and education.

Pandita Ramabai was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1858 in Gangamul in Karnataka in a high caste Hindu Brahmin family. Her father Anant Shashtri Dongre was a Sanskrit scholar in the last days of the Peshwa rule in Pune. During Ramabai's childhood, the family took up a pilgrimage all over the holy sites of the country. Her father narrated from the Puranas, the traditional texts which combined religion, mythology and philosophy. Ramabai was taught Sanskrit by her mother and father in her formative years and she helped her father in his teachings and worship. Ramabai remained unmarried beyond the expected age of a brahmin girl. In the course of their many travels, famine struck in Madras and both her parents and elder sister fell victims to starvation in 1878. As a young woman of sixteen, she travelled North with her brother Srinivas and reached Calcutta.

The arrival in Calcutta was a milestone in her life. Ramabai and her brother had the opportunity to interact with scholars and reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen, Kalicharan Banerjee J.C. Bose, Sucharu Devi and others. This was the period of Renaissance in Bengal, a historical juncture when the Brahma Samaj was working for many reforms. She was immediately recognized as a learned woman, and honoured with the highest titles of ``Pandita`` and ``Saraswati`` which means a learned person and a goddess of learning. Ramabai caught public attention as an embodiment of Indian womanhood and was asked to give public lectures on women`s emancipation, female education and also women`s right to study the Vedas. Ramabai became



deeply conscious of the caste divides and the class hierarchies existing in Brahmanic society. She says that her eyes were gradually opened and there was a growing awareness of the hopeless condition of women. A spirited young woman, sheltered for many years from oppressive ideologies by her father in his quest for salvation, she became alienated from the shastras.

In 1880 after the sudden death of her brother Srinivas ,she decided to marry at the age of 22, Bipen Bihari Das Medhavi, a social reformer, a lawyer and an outcaste. The next year Ramabai gave birth to a daughter Manorama. After less than two years of marriage, her husband Bipin died from cholera on 4<sup>th</sup> Feb 1882.

Widowhood placed Ramabai in a precarious position, and the public gaze kept a strict surveillance on her. The moderate reformers of the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay invited Ramabai and so Ramabai returned to Maharashtra on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1882. Immediately she set up her first organization for women called Arya Mahila Samaj on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1882, whose aim was to lead to women`s emancipation, changing stifling customs like child marriages, and the harsh treatment of widows. By the end of June 1882 she published her first book in Marathi ``Stree Dharam Neeti`` to take up the cause of women. In the introduction to the book, Pandita Ramabai states. In the year 1882, the then government of India had appointed a commission, The Hunter Education Commission that was to look into education in India. Ramabai gave evidence before the Commission suggesting that the teachers be trained for their jobs and more women should be appointed by schools. She strongly argued for the need of general as well as medical education for women. She insisted on the appointment of female teachers and doctors to educate and treat girls and she pointed out that females would find it very difficult to explain their problems to male teachers and doctors. Pandita Ramabai with her life experiences realized the importance of modern English education. The then Anglican community helped her to travel to England to study medicine, supporting all her expenses, in exchange for teaching Indian languages to the missionary nuns of the community. During her stay in England, she converted to Christianity. It was her severe and incurable deafness that prevented her from fulfilling her dream to become a doctor.

In 1886, she travelled to the United States of America and was fascinated by the educational opportunities, for girls and the freedom that women enjoyed there. During her stay, she gave lectures in different parts of America, visited many women`s institutes, and studied the



education system in America. She underwent training in basic education and kindergarten education there.

On her return to India, Ramabai established an institution named Sharda Sadan in Mumbai on 11 March, 1889. It opened for widows, also unmarried girls and day scholars not only school education, but also vocational training, teacher training and nursing. She based her project on the idea she has described in her book. ``Shree Dharma Niti`` about achieving economic self-reliance for women, empowering them to build their self esteem, developing their personal skills and abilities and giving them the possibility to plan their future life with new perspectives. By 1900 the Sharada Sadan had trained eighty women who earned their own living through teaching and nursing. The social reformers of the time appreciated and admired Ramabai`s devotion to the reform of Indian society.

Pandita Ramabai was an active member of India`s social and political life, taking part, with a delegation of four women, in the fifth annual session of the Indian National Congress, held in Mumbai in December 1889. She also participated in the Third National Social Conference and put forward two resolutions relating to marriage and another of the tonsuring of the head of widows. She drew attention to the injustice meted out to the widow by depriving her of property if she married again. It was Ramabai`s remarkable achievement that both the resolutions were passed by a large majority. When she later shifted to Kedgaon, in 1897, she established another school Mukti Sadan, where more than 2000 boys, girls, women attended school along with industrial training. Here the girls did all the work like farming, dairy farming, weaving, sowing, running a printing press and gardening. There was a controversy at the time in Sharda Sadan, Mumbai that she was converting inmates to Christianity. Ramabai wrote:

“I had from the beginning intended in all sincerity to give my girls full religious freedom. I would not prevent them from reading the sacred books of their own religion, so too, I did not mean to prevent them from reading the Bible, if they wished to do so, fully understanding what they were doing” (Letters and Correspondence, p 248-269)

The credit for opening the first school for the blind in India goes to Manorama, Pandita Ramabai`s daughter. This was also located at Kedgaon. The blind women were taught to read and write the Braille script, also knitting, weaving baskets and making cane chairs to make them self-





reliant. In 1905, Ramabai took up the task of translating the Bible into Marathi, a mission that continued till the end of her life.

On 19<sup>th</sup> December 1919, the British government rewarded Pandita Ramabai's contribution for social reform and education by bestowing on her the gold medal "Kaiser-e-Hind."

Pandita Ramabai's autobiography "A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure" written in March 1907 (14 Years before her death) is an autobiographical reflection of a person whose life extends over different and distant cultural spaces, times and practices. There is no chronology or history here. It is about her life which was dictated, impacted, channelized and moulded by familial, cultural, social and political events including, her own conversion from a high caste Hindu to a Christian. The book opens with the lines. ".....Jesus..... said ..... go home to thy friends and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you....."

The book is Pandita Ramabai's spiritual odyssey to a discovery of self; right from her parents, her upbringing, the wanderings, the poverty, the famine, the deaths and doubts. It was while in Calcutta, that her disenchantment with the Hindu religion begins. "The woman has no right to study the Vedas and the Vedanta, and without knowing them, no one can know the Brahma. Without knowing Brahma no one can get liberation, therefore no woman as woman can get liberation, that is moksha."

Her fascination with the Christian religion was mainly because it did away with all manmade barriers of discrimination and exclusion as opposed to the rigid and crippling caste system and gender biases professed by Hindu religion.

Ramabai is definitely aware of being the "site" on which ideologies of caste, class, nation, all coloured by dictates of patriarchy, fight themselves out. From this marginalized space, she constructs her growing feminist consciousness along with her thrust on specific areas of social reforms and also for her choice and practice of religion as she faced social ostracism, stigma and was treated as an outcaste by the traditional society of the time.

While in England she refused to bow to the pressures of the Anglican Church authorities over the differences about her diet, her appearance, her way of life and devotion to India. This forced Pandita Ramabai to plan a visit to America, the land of hope, freedom and free enterprise.



The occasion was to attend the medical graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshi, the first qualified woman doctor of India in 1886. Unfortunately, Anandibai Joshi died a tragic death, due to the harsh cold weather conditions and starvation as she was a vegetarian. Ramabai stayed in America for two years, traveling, giving lectures, writing, attending meetings and raising funds for her prospective Widows Home. In one such meeting, she shared the stage with Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It was then that she wrote her best known book ``The High Caste Hindu Woman`` as one of the steps to raise money for her widow's home in India.

``The High Caste Hindu Woman`` was published in 1887 with chapters on childhood, married life, women`s place in religion and society, widowhood etc. In the first chapter she writes : ``In western and southern India fathers very seldom wish to have daughters for they are thought to be the property of somebody else. Besides a daughter is not supposed to be of any use to the parents in their old age. Woman of the poor as well as the richest families is subject to this trial. Many are the sad and heartrending stories heard from the lips of unhappy women who have lost their husband`s favour by bringing forth daughters only, or by having no children at all (p 98)`` Scattered throughout her book are found descriptions of the low status of women in both the philosophy and practice of Hinduism. ``In childhood, a girl is made conscious of her inferior status vis-à-vis her brothers and always feels despised..... subjected to humiliation most girls become sullen, morbid and dull`` (p11). She says that the custom of child marriage puts an early stop to childhood and the married life begins and the child bride becomes the lowest member in her father-in-law`s house to occupy the humblest position in the family. ``Breaking the young wife`s spirit is an essential part of the discipline of the new abode`` (p 23). A married woman has a dependent and subservient place within the family as stipulated by religion. Widowhood virtually ends a woman`s livable life and being. ``The worst and most dreaded period of a high caste woman`s life.`` Throughout India, widowhood is regarded as the punishment for a horrible crime or crimes committed by the woman in her former existence on earth`` (p36). Ramabai saw a clear causal connection between the condition of women in India and the state of the nation. She wrote : ``After many years of careful observation and thought, I have come to the conclusion that that chief needs of high-caste Hindu women are first, self reliance, second, education, and third, native women teachers`` (High Caste Hindu Woman, 48-51).



Pandita Ramabai mentions the famous Rakhmabai case, and praises the education which has enlightened Rakhmabai : ``Our only wonder is that a defenseless woman like Rakhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty nine million men, and the three hundred sixty million gods of the Hindus and all those having conspired to gather to crush her into nothingness (p 35)``

In the last chapter ``The Appeal`` Pandita Ramabai fervently appeals to the Americans to contribute generously for a period of ten years for the cause of the emancipation of the widows in India. ``Thousands of child widows are annually dying without a ray of hope to cheer their hearts and other thousands are daily being crushed under a fearful weight of sin and shame, with no one to prevent their ruin, by providing for them a better way ..... let the cry of Indian daughters, feeble though it be reach your ears and stir your hearts (P 53 )``

Pandita Ramabai`s book was widely sold and it resulted in the formation of the American Ramabai Association to provide funds for the Widows Home in India called Sharda Sadan, inaugurated in Bombay on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1889, in the presence of Kashibai Kanitkar a leading social activist of the time. Pandita Ramabai died on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1922 bringing to an end a controversial life at the age of sixty-two. She would always remain a pioneer of the women`s movement in India. Dnyanoday a newspaper carried an editorial on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1922 : ``There are no words to describe the contribution of Pandita Ramabai her dauntless courage and her social reformer`s integrity(Meera Kosambi, 2010, p 138). Pandita Ramabai faced social and political opposition at the time not only because of her conversion from Hinduism to Christianity but also because she was a woman who questioned and rebelled against the patriarchal norms practiced by society. To conclude, initiatives taken by these ‘forgotten Voices’ as discussed in the paper in the form of their resistance to patriarchy and their advocacy for education, and self-sufficiency played an important role in shaping future women`s rights movements in India.



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