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Rethinking Pandita Ramabai: Gender, Caste, and Colonial Modernity

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Abstract
One of the most significant reformers of nineteenth century India, Pandita Ramabai, was a pioneering feminist thinker and an advocate for women's rights and education. In an era when women were systematically denied education, Ramabai intervened in debates surrounding women's rights through her writings and institutional initiatives. Though she is primarily read as a reformer, contemporary scholarship examines her through the intersecting lens of gender – caste, situating her within a broader feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspective. This study is an attempt to re-examine her life and work by drawing upon feminist theory, archival reinterpretations and postcolonial analysis to explore the ways in which her activism destabilized entrenched patriarchal norms.
Keywords: *Christianity, Colonial modernity, Hinduism, Mukti Sadan, Patriarchy, Widowhood, Gender, Caste.*

Introduction

Women in the Vedic period were able to cultivate both physical and intellectual capacities and like men, exercised a measure of independence - though always within socially imposed boundaries. Historically, this autonomy was progressively undermined as patriarchal ideology became institutionalized. Even though male reformers advocated rights and framed discourses on women's rights, women also began to claim agency within these debates. Pandita Ramabai emerges as one of the earliest and most consequential voices in this trajectory and her work demands scholarly attention.

Pandita Ramabai's father, Pandit Ananta Shastri Dongre was a devout Brahmin as well as a respected Sanskrit scholar who held remarkably progressive views on women's education. Believing that women should have the same access to sacred knowledge as men, he taught his wife and children Sanskrit so that they could read Hindu scriptures directly. His rejection of orthodox restrictions also extended to social customs: he opposed the culturally sanctioned custom of child marriage and ref
used to arrange Ramabai's marriage when she was nine years old. Ramabai was raised in a family that embraced unusually progressive values for the time. This formative environment played a crucial role in shaping her worldview and contributed significantly to her emergence as one of India's most influential advocates for women's rights. Born on April 23, 1858, in her father's ashram on the forested slopes of the Western Ghats near Karkal in present-day Karnataka, she was the youngest daughter of Pandit Ananta Shastri Dongre.

Ramabai's father, Ananta Shastri Dongre, eventually adopted the life of a pilgrim after losing his possessions through acts of charity, taking up the vocation of *puranika*—a reciter of the Puranas who travelled on foot, reading aloud at temples and public gatherings. Ramabai, only six months old when this itinerant life began, grew up accompanying her parents on their extensive journeys across India. Despite the instability of constant travel, her parents ensured that her education never suffered; she

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proved to be an exceptionally diligent learner. By the age of twelve, she had already mastered the original Sanskrit verses of the eighteen-thousand-verse *Bhagavata Purana*, a remarkable accomplishment for any scholar, let alone a young girl of her time.

The great famine in western India (1874–76) brought devastating loss: Ramabai's parents and older sister died, leaving her and her brother to wander nearly 3,200 kilometres across the subcontinent in search of sustenance and shelter. These arduous travels, marked by intense physical suffering and spiritual seeking, exposed her to the grim realities endured by upper-caste widows and orphaned children. This early confrontation with social injustice shaped her lifelong commitment to improving the conditions of Indian women, particularly widows.

When Ramabai and her brother finally reached Calcutta in 1878, her extraordinary command of Sanskrit astonished local scholars. She was bestowed the full name Pandita Ramabai Dongre. Pandita was conferred the title 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati' by leading Sanskrit scholars in Calcutta for her mastery of the Shastras. She soon became a familiar presence in Calcutta's intellectual circles and engaged with members of the Brahmo Samaj, travelling across North India to deliver lectures on women's issues.

Brahmanical Patriarchy

Uma Chakravarti's concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy" is crucial for understanding Ramabai's intellectual project. According to Chakravarti, caste hierarchy and gender subordination are mutually reinforcing systems sustained through ritual purity, control of women's sexuality, and monopolization of knowledge (Chakravarti 34). Ramabai's mastery of Sanskrit—the domain historically restricted to upper-caste men—constituted a direct challenge to these epistemic restrictions. Her critique of scriptural misogyny, articulated from within the Brahmanical knowledge system, destabilized the authority of traditional interpreters.

After her brother's death from cholera in 1880, Ramabai defied caste norms by marrying Babu Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a Shudra from Assam and her brother's close friend. This surname came from her marriage to Babu Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, however she rarely used 'Medhavi' as part of her formal name. Kosambi argues that Ramabai's marriage challenged orthodox caste norms. The marriage itself was a bold transgression against Brahmanical rules, but tragedy struck again: her husband died two months before their first anniversary, leaving her a young widow with an infant daughter, Manorama.

Widows in nineteenth-century Hindu society were subjected to severe restrictions. They were required to wear plain white garments, permitted only a single meal a day, and excluded from family celebrations or festive occasions. Their presence at auspicious events was considered inauspicious, and even an accidental encounter with a widow at dawn was believed to forebode misfortune, prompting travellers to delay their departure. Such practices reveal the profound social isolation and symbolic stigma imposed on widowed women.

The constraints imposed by widowhood, however, did not silence Ramabai's reformist impulse. Although she observed certain customary expectations, she transformed her personal grief into a sustained commitment to improving the lives of Indian women, particularly the many young widows who faced severe social restrictions. At a time when nationalist thinkers idealized a "glorious" Hindu

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past, Ramabai offered a sharply different perspective. She argued that such a past could not be celebrated uncritically, for much of it had been built on the subordination and suffering of women.

Feminist Historiography and Gendered Agency

Ramabai refused to allow tradition to silence her. Rather than submit to the oppressive expectations surrounding widowhood, she channelled her experiences into advocacy for other women in similar circumstances. As one of the earliest high-caste Hindu widows to publicly challenge the injustices inflicted on women, she became a pioneering voice against gendered oppression. Her pivotal text *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) exposed the cruelty embedded in patriarchal family structures. The book documents the psychological, physical and social impact of child marriage and widowhood, an insight to the suffering of upper caste women. Historian Geraldine Forbes notes that the text offered "a rare female-authored counter-narrative to the glorification of Hindu domesticity." Ramabai's book was a challenge against the romanticised narrative of life led by Hindu women.

Her writings *Stri Dharma Niti* and *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* offer powerful critiques of the brutal realities of widowhood, especially among upper-caste women who were often married as children and widowed in adolescence. Confronted with these injustices, Ramabai emerged as one of the earliest and most forceful advocates for widows' rights in India. She dedicated her life to challenging the degrading customs and discriminatory legal structures that governed widowhood. Through her sustained activism, she laid the foundation for broader movements for women's emancipation, opposing entrenched practices such as child marriage and the prohibition of widow remarriage.

In 1881, Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune - one of the earliest women-led organizations dedicated to promoting female education and challenging practices such as child marriage. In 1881, Similar associations were soon established in Ahmednagar, Solapur, Thane, Mumbai, Pandharpur, and Barshi, marking the spread of her reformist vision across western India.

A highly accomplished Sanskrit scholar, writer, and social activist, Ramabai was deeply familiar with the Vedas and other sacred texts. This intimate knowledge, however, also made her acutely aware of the patriarchal attitudes embedded within them. Disturbed by scriptural narratives that portrayed women across caste lines as inherently impure or morally inferior, she began to question the religious justifications used to restrict women's autonomy. Texts that prescribed a woman's absolute devotion to her husband, even when he was morally corrupt, and denied her the possibility of attaining spiritual liberation (*moksha*) independently, revealed to her the extent of gendered oppression endorsed by tradition.

Rejecting such interpretations, Ramabai spoke out forcefully against the patriarchal structures of antiquity. Through her writings, pamphlets, and public lectures, she argued that these inherited norms had long served to legitimise women's subordination. Her reform efforts sought not only to expose these injustices but also to articulate a vision in which women could claim equal rights, dignity and participation in public life.

These early experiences of intellectual freedom and anti-patriarchal values profoundly shaped Ramabai's later commitments to women's emancipation. She consistently challenged entrenched patriarchal structures with exceptional clarity and resolve. Although this biographical detail is widely known, its implications have only recently been theorised. According to Meera Kosambi (2016)

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Ramabai's early education and Sanskrit training provided her with an "insider's authority to critique scriptural misogyny from within the tradition" thereby allowing her feminist critique to emerge from within the epistemic structures of Brahminical knowledge. Kosambi places strong emphasis on Ramabai's textual contributions. Kosambi characterises the book as a foundational feminist ethnography of Indian women documenting women's domestic lives from within the Hindu society and making a public critique of it.

Engagement with the Hunter Commission

In 1882, Ramabai appeared before the Hunter Commission, a British committee appointed to evaluate the state of education in India and to examine the social conditions affecting women. In her testimony, she advocated the appointment of educated women as teachers, school inspectors and emphasised the necessity of women's participation in the medical profession. She argued that Indian women faced unique social and cultural constraints that made it essential for them to be treated by female doctors and admitted to medical schools.

Her testimony, delivered in Marathi, so impressed the Chairman of the Commission that he had it translated into English for wider circulation. The clarity and force of her arguments influenced official thinking on women's medical education, contributing to the initiatives later undertaken by Lady Dufferin under the patronage of Queen Victoria. The resulting "Women's Medical Movement" played a significant role in establishing women's hospitals and promoting the training of female doctors in India.

Colonial Modernity

Earlier historians often described her testimony as collaboration with the colonial administration, suggesting that she used British institutions because Indian society offered her few platforms to speak. However, postcolonial scholars provide a far more nuanced interpretation**.** Antoinette Burton (2021) argues that Ramabai instrumentalised the colonial public sphere strategically using it as a platform unavailable within indigenous patriarchal structures. Her interactions with British commissions, missionary societies, and transnational women's organizations demonstrate how colonial modernity offered opportunities to her, however she did not embrace colonialism uncritically, she made strategic use of colonial institutions for upliftment of women while rejecting their cultural superiority. Ramabai's refusal to endorse British rule and not depend on colonial authority for legitimacy was a feminist use of colonial modernity to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies that indigenous institutions refused to reform. Her interventions helped inspire the establishment of women's hospitals and training programs for female doctors, shaping what later became the Dufferin Fund. As Burton's work suggests, Ramabai's involvement can be understood as feminist negotiation within the structures of colonial modernity.

In 1883, Pandita Ramabai and her daughter Manorama travelled to England with the intention of pursuing medical training so that Ramabai could eventually return to India and serve disadvantaged women. She remained in the United Kingdom for more than a year and a half. Her ambition to enter the medical profession, however, was curtailed when she was informed that a suspected hearing impairment made her ineligible for admission to medical school.

During her stay in England from 1883-1886, Ramabai received considerable support from the

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Anglican community of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage, whose members assisted her both financially and linguistically. The sisters recognized her extraordinary linguistic ability and arranged for her to receive formal instruction in Hebrew**.** The Anglican community including trained educators and missionaries taught her Biblical languages. Ramabai studied Hebrew (Old Testament Language), Greek (New Testament Language), English (Advanced) and Higher Literature and Theology. After returning to India, Ramabai continued studying Hebrew independently, using dictionaries, commentaries, and correspondence with scholars. Her knowledge allowed her to translate the Bible directly from Hebrew into Marathi.

Ramabai translated the Bible into Marathi after twelve years of painstaking work. Until that time, religious texts whether it was Hindu or Christian were mediated through male priests, missionaries or scholars. Since the version was available in Marathi, it enabled ordinary women, children and people of lower caste to access the sacred texts directly. She asserted her intellectual autonomy by challenging the epistemic authority and engaging with the scripture directly. The radical act of translating the Bible into Marathi was an act of democratising access to sacred knowledge. These translations were neither an act of contribution to literary works nor an expression of religious devotion but pedagogical resistance and political intervention into a domain monopolised by men, a feminist challenge to Brahminical authority. Ramabai's translation of the Bible into Marathi exemplifies what Tharu and Niranjana describe as a "counter-hegemonic textual practice" that disrupts established regimes of interpretation (Tharu and Niranjana 341)

She continued her studies in subjects such as higher mathematics and English literature and later accepted an appointment as Professor of Sanskrit at Cheltenham Ladies' College, an exceptional achievement for an Indian woman of her time. Ramabai had been exploring questions of faith for several years, a journey influenced partly by her encounters with diverse religious ideas during her travels and her marriage in Assam.

Her engagement with Christianity deepened considerably during her stay in England, ultimately leading both her and her daughter to convert and undergo baptism. For Ramabai, this transition was not the result of coercion or missionary pressure, but rather the outgrowth of a sustained intellectual and spiritual curiosity—a desire to seek moral clarity, ethical grounding, and a sense of belonging that she felt was circumscribed within the boundaries of orthodox Hinduism. Her conversion may also be understood as a deliberate and strategic engagement with the opportunities generated by colonial modernity. By entering Christian institutional spaces, she gained access to forms of education, support networks, and material resources that were structurally unavailable to Indian women within Brahmanical social frameworks. In this sense, the decision reflected both a personal quest for meaning and a pragmatic recognition of the new avenues for agency opened through transnational religious and reformist networks.

Pandita Ramabai was among the few reformers of her time who refused to compromise her principles. Her lifelong critique of heteronormative gender roles—whether embedded in Hindu orthodoxy or reinforced by Christian missionary culture—reflects her strong individualist stance and commitment to women's autonomy. Around the same period, Anandibai Joshi, a distant relative, became one of the first Indian women to earn a medical degree abroad when she graduated from the Women's Medical

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College of Pennsylvania in 1886. Inspired in part by these expanding international networks of educated Indian women, Ramabai travelled to the United States, where she gained considerable visibility as an emerging global feminist voice.

During her stay in America (from May 1887 to November 1888), she impressed audiences with her intellectual acuity, resilience, and powerful speeches on the condition of Indian women. Her travels also brought her into contact with influential allies, including the renowned American reformer Frances Willard, whose support would later help Ramabai expand her educational and philanthropic initiatives in India. Ramabai interacted with several leading women reformers, including Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, and Rachel Bodley, and established professional connections with other prominent figures in the American women's movement. She delivered numerous lectures across the country, addressing church groups, women's organizations, and reform societies about the condition of Indian women and the urgent need for educational reform.

In 1887, with the encouragement of Frances Willard, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the active support of Rachel Bodley, Ramabai produced one of the earliest feminist treatises by an Indian woman: The High-Caste Hindu Woman. Written in the United States, the text offered a powerful critique of gender norms in upper-caste Hindu households, exposing the injustices of child marriage, enforced widowhood, polygamy, and the systematic denial of women's education (Ramabai, 1887). The book deeply resonated with American women's groups, many of whom were moved by her analysis and became sympathetic to her cause.

Institution Building: Sharada Sadan and Mukti Mission

Their support resulted in the formation of the American Ramabai Association, which pledged to help her establish an institution in India for high-caste widows—one that would provide education, vocational training, and the possibility of economic independence. Importantly, Ramabai insisted that students at her institution would enjoy full religious freedom, a principle she upheld throughout her life.

Upon her return to India on February 1, 1889, and with substantial assistance from the American Ramabai Association, she founded Sharada Sadan in Bombay within six weeks. Its primary mission was to house and educate child widows from upper-caste families so that they might secure dignified livelihoods. The American Ramabai Association later raised funds to establish a larger residential school, drawing inspiration from Friedrich Fröbel's revolutionary kindergarten model.

Seeking a more expansive setting for her work, Ramabai purchased land in Kedgaon, approximately forty miles from Poona, where she established Mukti Sadan, or the "House of Salvation," which evolved into the now well-known Ramabai Mukti Mission. This institution became a central site of her educational, social, and spiritual reform activities.

Conclusion

Pandita Ramabai's life does not fit neatly into a single narrative of reform, faith, or political awakening. Instead, it unfolds as a steady, often difficult confrontation with multiple forms of patriarchal power—rooted in religion, social custom, colonial structures, and knowledge itself. Whether through her challenge to Hindu scriptural orthodoxy, her carefully negotiated engagement with colonial institutions, her international feminist connections, or her daring translation of the Bible

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into Marathi, Ramabai consistently worked to unsettle the systems that confined women's lives and limited their access to learning.

Through both her writings and the institutions she built, Ramabai articulated a form of feminist consciousness that was grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory. The questions she raised about gender, caste, religion, and freedom continue to resonate in present-day debates on women's rights and social justice. Today, she stands as a central figure in Indian feminist historiography—not only for what she achieved in her own time, but for the critical legacy she left behind. Her life remains a powerful reminder that social transformation is rarely sudden or simple, but is shaped through courage, struggle, and persistent resistance to injustice.

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