

PANDITA RAMABAI SARASVATI
A TESTIMONY OF OUR INEXHAUSTIBLE TREASURE
A BRIEF ANALYSIS

ARUNAVA ROY

English Honours, Kalyani University
Pursuing M.A 3rd Semester [Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata]
Email- subhoavo@gmail.com



ARUNAVA ROY

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ABSTRACT

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, an advocate of woman education, embodiment of woman emancipation triggers a vehement storm towards the then patriarchal hegemony prevalent in the Madras Brahminical society. 'Rama' means 'light'. She challenges society through her immense potentialities and radical capabilities facing extreme hurdles and hindrances. For her scholastic adherence, she was entitled as 'Pandita' — "the mistress of wisdom" and 'Sarasvati' — "the Goddess of wisdom". She challenges the rigid rules, conventional orthodoxies and anti-woman strictures of Hindu Religiosity. She voices the unheard, illiterate and oppressed women of the male-biased society. Her clarion call for woman liberation, struggle for self-identity, enormous scholastic personality, erudite nature and visionary zeal make her the "Woman of the millennium".

Keywords: Scholar, Prohibition, Starvation, Religiosity, Scepticism, Humanity, Redemption, Salvation, Liberty of conscience

"A Life totally committed to God has nothing to fear, nothing to loss, nothing to regret."

An Honourable Heritage

Her father Anant Padmanabha Dongre (titled shastri), a Chitpavan Brahmin was an excellent Sanskrit scholar and reformer. He started to educate her mother as his first pupil. After the completion of all house-hold chores, she, mother Laksmibai continued the regular study of the sacred puranic literature (taught by shastri) and her gifted mind responded readily. The Brahman pundits living in Mangalore District went against him for doing such unconventional course i.e. teaching his wife the sacred language of God. They all reported such misdeeds to the head priest of the sect asking a rigorous step against him or be ostracised. He was summoned to Krishnapura and Udipi, the chief seat of the *Madhva Vaishnava sect*. Shastri who had enormous study in the Hindu sacred literature quoted ancient authorities and succeeded in convincing the guru and chief pandits that it was not wrong for women and Shudras to learn Sanskrit Puranic Literature. He was a wealthy priest having rice and coconut fields. Shastri chose a place in a dense forest on the top of a peak of the Western Ghats, on the Borders of Mysore state only to avoid the hubbub of the world. That place happened to be a sacred pilgrimage where many Visitors started to visit. Anant Shastri believed/ thought that it was his duty to entertain them at his expense, as hospitality was a part of his religion. He did not like to be extravagant, but his incessant generosity

compelled him to leave the house—a vagabond pilgrim (when Ramabai was about six months old). Some people honoured him, and some despised him for his whimsicality.

A Unique Education

Her mother began to teach her (when she was about 8 years old) in such a way to be self-dependent. Her parents were so much strictly religious and adhere to the old faith that learning any other language except Sanskrit was out of the question. Secular education was looked upon as leading people to worldliness which would prevent them achieving Moksha (Nirvana) from the everlasting trouble of reincarnation, in millions and millions of animal species and undergoing the pains of suffering countless millions of diseases and deaths. Learning English language and to come in contact with the MLENNCHCHAS (Non-Hindu) were strictly prohibited. So, she had to learn *Sanskrit grammar and dictionaries*, written in verse form. Her father read puranas traveling from one sacred place to another. The reading of the puranas served a double purpose—first and foremost was that of getting rid of sin, and of earning merit in order to obtain Moksha. The other purpose was to earn an honest living, without begging. The puranikas, popular and public preachers of religion read in a loud voice with intonation—the puranas in some prominent place only to attract the passer-by. They explained the stories vividly in such an exaggerated way that easily attracted the heart of the religious persons. The persons who prostrate before the puranika and worship him and the book, offering flowers, fruits, sweetmeats, garments, money and other things brought a great deal of merit ‘*Punya*’. In order to achieve highest merit, the offerer very often tried to be as generous as he could. A flower, or even a petal of a flower or a leaf of any good sacred tree, is acceptable to the Gods. Here Ramabai criticizes the puranikas who earned their livelihood hypnotising the offers in the name of God day after day. *They took the chance of people’s enormous mystic fear and faith in religion.*

Famine, Death, and Doubts

When her faith became too feeble to read the Puranas, they faced the economic crises as they could not do anything except the read of puranas. Her parents had some money in hand. Ramabai proposed if that money had been used in the purpose of their secular education that would open a vast vista for them. Her parents had *unbounded faith in sacred books* which declared that worshipping Gods, chanting in honour of God, fasting and the performance of penance, giving alms to Brahmans one would surely attain the Gods and Goddesses. They all followed that but went in vain. Here Ramabai criticizes the futility of showy, ostentatious, hollow rites and rituals associated with religion. To achieve the God’s grace one has to surrender his/ her own self to the lotus feet of Almighty. Ramabai described the horrific situation of great famine (1876-1878) that struck the Madras presidency. ‘Nothing but starvations was before us’—scarcity of food and water. Her parents and sister, all died of starvations. Her brother Srinivasa and she herself survived and wandered about visiting sacred places. They continued the worshipping of Gods and the reading of religious scriptures but they lost hope in the attainment of God. Here we find her underlying scathing attack to religiosity. They wandered all-over India visiting many temples, bathing in many rivers, fasting and performing austerity, worshipping Gods, trees, animals, Brahmans. They had walked more than four thousand miles on foot, eating some food offered by kind people and sometimes in empty stomach. They arrived in Calcutta in 1878.

Introduction to Christianity

While staying in Calcutta once she and her brother, Srinivasa were invited to attend a Christian gathering. They did not have any kind of idea about Christianity. She observed that some Indian people (like Rev. K.M.Banerji and Kali Charan Banerji) dressed like English men and women ate bread, biscuits, and drank tea with the English people leaving her shocked to partake the refreshment. Kali Yuga, the age of quarrels, darkness and irreligion had fully established its reign in Calcutta—thought Ramabai. After sometime one of them opened a book, read something out of it and knelt down before their chairs and later she came to know that was the crude idea of Christian worship. The kind Christians gave her a copy of Holy Bible in Sanskrit. She tried to read the book but the language and the religious theory were so different from the Sanskrit literature of the Hindus that she could not understand and thought that it was nothing but the waste of time.

Calcutta-Deeper Hindu studies and Scepticism (Negativism)

While staying in Calcutta, some learned pandits requested her to lecture to the **Purdah women** on the duties of women according to the Shastras. While reading the Dharma shastras, she came to know many unknown things. She became confused what one book said was most righteous, the other book declared as being un-righteous. All the sacred epics agreed that woman of high and low caste could not get MOKSHA as men [did]. The only way to get much-desired Moksha from countless millions of births and deaths and untold suffering, was the worship of their husbands—Messiah to her. This God may be the worst sinner and a great criminal; but she has to worship him otherwise she will not have the privilege of going to svarga as his slave. The woman is allowed to go into higher existence performing such get religious acts as will obtain for her the merit by which she will be reincarnated as a high caste man. After that acquiring knowledge about true Brahma studying Vedas and Vedanta he will be amalgamated with God. But such extraordinary way to attain Moksha for a woman lies in the utter abandonment of her will to that of her husband. As the woman has no right to study the Vedas and Vedanta. So, there is no way to get liberation i.e. Moksha. Here Ramabai criticizes the puranic scriptures for such patriarchal connotation taking the women as mere commodities, puppet like effigy having no self, emotion, passion and self assertion. She being the spokespersons of women raises a question what a man can do why woman cannot? Similarly as shudras have no right to perform religious acts, to study Vedas and Vedanta there is no way of Liberations. They have the only opportunity of hearing the Vedas repeatedly from the pious tongue of Brahman. If any Shudra dares to study Vedas, he will have to face terrible punishment. Her only hope of getting liberation is in his serving the three high castes (Brahman, Vaishya, and Kshatriya) as their life long slave. After earning enough merit in the course of millions of years he will be re-incarnated as a Brahman then acquiring knowledge about Brahma he will be amalgamated.

As the low caste people are looked upon as lower species of animals, so there is no way of liberation. They have no place in the abode of Gods; if they can earn merit through millions of reincarnations then they may be born among the higher caste. They should be contended to live in a much degraded condition sewing the high caste people, eating the leftovers of their food in dirty earthen vessels, wearing filthy rags and clothes thrown away from the high caste dead bodies. They may earn merit coming in contact with the shadow of a Brahman and have a few drops of water from his hand or wet clothes and feel the air which has passed over the sacred persons of Brahman. The low caste people are never allowed to enter the temples. So they worship shapeless, stones, broken pots, setting them up under trees and on road sides. Brahmans fearing the loss of their caste do not land their secret fit where the degraded people reside. Ramabai became frustrated reading such discriminating Dharma Shastras. One day Srinivasa and she were invited by Keshab Chandra Sen to his house. There he gave Ramabai a copy of one of the Vedas to study it. When Ramabai asked about the woman's right to and Vedanta, he the Hindu philosopher and social reformer gave a faint smile advising her to study the books that enkindled her rationality. Meanwhile her brother died.

Volatile Marriage Life

Having lost all faith in the traditional religion, she married a Bengali gentleman of the shudras caste **Bipin Behari Das Madhavi**. Within two years of marriage her husband died of cholera leaving one baby girls, Manorama Bai in her arms. While staying at Silchar, Assam with her husband, she started to read Gospel in Bengali language. The Baptist missionary, Mr, Allen explain her 1st chapter of the book of Genesis. Her husband, who had studied in a Mission school, was pretty well acquainted with the Bible, but he did not like to be called Christian. But Ramabai found interest in such new religion that was better than the orthodox Hindu religion.

Widowhood and Poona

After her husband's death, she left Silchar and came to Poona. The members of the Prarthana Samaj like Messrs Ranade, Modak, Kelkar and Dr. Bhandarkar treated her with great kindness. Miss Hrford, missionary of High Church taught her New Testament in Marathi. At this time she started to learn English language. Rev. Father Goreh used to explain her difference between the Hindu and Christian religions.

Religion of Christ

In 1883 landing upon England she met the kind sisters of Wantage. Sister Geraldine who became her spiritual mother began to teach her both secular and religious subjects. She was also greatly indebted to Miss Belae, the late lady principle of Cheltenham Ladies College. The mother superior took her to one of the branches of the sisters' Home in London where she met several of the women who had once been in there Rescue Home. The love of Christ and compassion from suffering humanity changed their life and the fallen women whom Hindus considered out-caste (and degraded in the eyes of society) devoted their life for the service of the sick and infirm. What Ramabai wants to say here is that whom Hindu shastras thrown away as degraded women and greatest sinners without making any effort to turn them from the evil path they had chosen in their folly, Christians had done that with their *compassions and love of Christ*.

After reading 4th chapter of St. John's Gospel she came to know that Jesus was truly divine saviours and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of Indian and of every land. Being influenced by Christianity, she was baptized in the Church of England on the later part of 1883 (Pandita Mary Ramabai). After her baptism and conformation, she plunged into the extensive study regarding the Christian doctrine. During her stay in England and America she met the most prominent sects, the high church, the Low Church, the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Friends, Unitarian, and Universalist, Roman Catholics, Jews, spiritualists, Theosophists, Mormons and Christian, scientists and the followers of Occult religion. Now Ramabai came to the world of spiritual upliftment and her heart longed for something better which she had not found. She had found the Christian religion but she had not found Christ, who is the life of the religion and *'the light of everyman the cometh into the world'*.

Finding Christ

Ramabai had given much of her time to the study of other books about the Bible, but had not studied the Bible itself as she should have done. Returning home from America, she started to read the Bible regularly. She was dissatisfied with her spiritual condition. Taking a book called 'from Death unto life' from Bombay Guardian Mission Press, she read the book with great interest and came to know that a lady, a member of his church advised the Clergyman of that church that he was not converted, and had not experience re-generation and salvation in Christ. Ramabai understood intellectually that she needed Christ. This indicated her urge from spiritual attainment. She was happy enough to think that she had found a religion which gave its privileges equally, to men and women; there was no distinction of caste, colour or sex made in it. This reflected the *liberal perspective of Christianity*.

She had failed to understand that we are of *'God in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption'*. She had failed to see the need of pleasing her implied faith in Christ and His atonement in order to become a child of God by being born again of the Holy Spirit, and justified by faith in the son of God. Her thoughts were vague on that point and she realised that she was not prepared to meet God. The spirit of adoption had not been received and then was nothing to witness that she was a child of God. What was to be done?—*unconditional surrender to the Saviour*, asked Him to be merciful, and to become the follower of Righteousness and Redemption leads to salvation. The feeling which she had felt after surrender to God is ineffable. She thanked God for saving her from the hand of *perpetual damnation*, showed her the sinfulness of sin, the awful danger she was in, and offered her the loving-kindness with which He 'So loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son'. *Jesus is the propitiation for not only ours but also for the sins of the whole world*.

Christianity is not biased of gender inequality. Then she tells us about the spiritual enlightenment. Entering into the abode of spirituality, her mental eyes were opened by the Jesus's luminous lustre. It was just like that she 'Sat in the region and shadow of death, light had sprung up'. The writer wants to assert the journey from darkness to the world of light, from the hellish sin to the deliverance of God, from physicality to spirituality, from corporeal to transcendentalism—a trance like stage. Christ the God-figure had saved the men from the eternal damnation, sufferings and death. How merciful, benevolent, the Ocean of kindness the God is!—who had devoted his life only to save the creation from the deadly clutches of sin. In Hindu religion one must have

merit to earn present or future happiness, the pleasure of Svarga, or face the utterly inconceivable loss of Moksha. But there was no hope of Moksha for women and the Shudras and the other low caste people (Brahminical Prejudiced ideology). The ruling Brahmans had said that they could gain Svarga by serving the husband and the Brahman. But in Christianity the incredible God declares in Bible that Christ did not reserve the great salvation for a particular caste or sex. No caste, no sex, no work and no man were to be depended upon to get salvation, the everlasting life, but God gave it freely to anyone and everyone who believed on His son. Like Hinduism, one must not have to wait for millions of times to be amalgamated into nothingness— Shunyo i.e. Brahma.

Telling Others

'For the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my Song; He also is become my salvation'

Ramabai had learnt many religious scriptures and performed many rites and rituals commanded by Brahmans only to attain the Supremo. But all had gone in vain. So, she welcomed the people whose hungry souls are seeking after ambrosia, to Christianity. She asked the people not to lose time through pride or because of any other difficulty. She said—'the caste may put you out, your near and dear ones will perhaps reject you and persecute you, you may very likely lose your temporal greatness, and riches; but never mind, the great salvation which you will get in Christ by believing on Him....'. All the earthly pleasure and comfort is incomparable with the JOY OF SALVATION. Is it worthy to bear the unbearable pain in the fiery deluge of hell after the death only not getting the salvation from the Ocean of Mercy—the Christ? Is it called profit by gaining the whole world instead of losing the soul? So she urged the people to make haste and get reconcile with God to save from the wrath of God as the great day of judgement is fast coming on us. God is love and waiting for his devotee's unconditional surrender. Then the God will be your friend, philosopher and guide. He will be your Polestar. If you are deviated from your right track, He will definitely instruct you the right like a father-figure.

Then she thought about some faith-missions to be established in this country only to spread love and kindness among men. At the end of the 1896, when the great famine struck this country, she stretched out her helping hand, trusting upon **Him** for both temporal and spiritual blessing.

"It is better to trust in the Lord, than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord, than to put confidence in princes"

She had established **Mukti Mission** and spared one thousand five hundred people from hunger and famine. There they are not rich, nor great, but happy—have no banking account, no income from any earthly source, but depending on our Father God; nothing to fear from anybody, nothing to lose, nothing to regret.

The Lord is our Inexhaustible Treasure

He is the controller of the universe, indweller of everything, the saviour of the devotees, the ocean of mercy, the creator of the creation, God of the poorest, precious possession of the dispossessed. We the mere devotees are failed to express our gratitude, our verbosity is failed to hail You.

Bombay—Foundation of Mukti Mission

Ramabai went to Philadelphia and then to San Francisco where she responded to the kind invitation sent by some good friends, who took a deep interest in the well-being of the women of India. Some faithful and true friends of America promised her to help in her social work for the well-being of down-trodden women. When she left San Francisco, her religious belief was so vague/ faded that she was not certain whether she would go to heaven or hell after her death. She thanked Almighty for saving her life from the terrible earth-quack that made a havoc disaster in San Francisco after her leaving. Returning India she would daily read Bible aloud and pray to the God in the name of Christ that would definitely lead the country women to the way of Christ's love and ultimately to the way of Salvation. Initially there were only two pupils admitted in the school established by Ramabai. After 10 years many boys and girls admitted in the school receiving religious Institutions retaining their perfect Liberty of Conscience. Ramabai thanked God for letting her several hundred of her sisters, the children. Reading the word of God and feeling the warmth of Christ's love many people converted their religion and

plunged into the ocean of mercy. Then there came a huge wave in the aspect of religiosity—the many pupils adopted Christianity disrobing the traditional glorious Hinduism. **He is a prayer-hearing and prayer answering God.** He kept his promise given to devotee and even also fulfilled that kind of unearthly desire which the devotee could not cherish.

Glorious New Hope:--

Hallelujah, Amen.

The most precious truth which she had learnt was the second coming of the Lord Christ. The God was coming very soon and He would come certainly and would not tarry (stay longer). But the missionaries connected with some denominations did not believe in at all. They believe that Christ would come at the last day of judgements. She had studied and continued to study the Book of revelation with greatest interest and spiritual profit. The word of God is crystal clear but other good books written by Godly men and women were quite helpful in increasing the desire for study. But nothing was found helpful for reading Bible itself (Treasury of scripture knowledge).

Un-expected visit from the Governor:

One day while Ramabai was busy in her afternoon work, her fellow-workers and the Collection of Poona told her that His Excellency the Governor of Bombay had come to visit Mukti Mission. She was taken by surprise as the Governor would ever come to such an out-of-the-way place and visit an Unpretentious Institution which had not earned popularity by great achievement. Simple and natural but dignified and grand Governor was well acquainted with what was going on there. After inspecting the Mission, he bade good bye and went away. When the Governor visited, they had not made any preparations to receive him; everyone was engaged in their respective activities; some were just looking into the air and doing nothing and thinking about nothing in particular. After his departure, she pondered over the Christ's surprise visit to the earth and what would be that kind of feeling who would receive Him? A tide of joy and spiritual blessing would be splashed upon the devotees. But how would we receive Him—the Blessed saviour?

'The prince of the world cometh, and hath nothing in me?'

Loving Invitation—

Restrain yourself from surfeiting and drunkenness. Take care of your life. The day comes upon you unaware. Surrender to God. Stay Blessed. Purge yourself from the uncountable sin you have done. Ramabai said that if she wrote about all that the Lord had done for her it would be difficult for her and the book would be too large for a person to read. In a word, **Lord is the Ocean of Mercy, the Lord of the poorest, the saviour of devotees** and His boundless kind and Mercy and Love towards human is immeasurable. We the mundane creatures are steeped in sin and are sitting in the verge of catastrophic destruction—terrible darkness is waiting to engulf our soul. **Pray to God. May the Father of Light** send the glittering light and purified life.

Illumine what is dark and elevate what is low-YOU, the Creator of the Creation. HE who has purged us from our sin (disobedience to God) in His own blood is the Blessed Redeemer who will definitely save the souls from the perpetual damnation and offer salvation/ deliverance on the way to liberation. What we have to do?—unconditional surrender to the “KING of all Kings”— God.

Conclusion

Such a legendary social reformer and literary precursor, Ramabai was the first woman who translated Bible into Madras dialect. She tried to renovate the down-trodden condition of women. She established the *Arya Mahila Samaj* whose aim was to protect the women and to discourage child-marriage; she established the *Sarda Sadan* in Bombay, a liberal home for the high-caste widows. She also established *Mukti-Sadan* in Pune. She started off special school for visually handicapped. She was the first Indian woman to be awarded “Kaiser-i-Hind” medal for her community service. For her overwhelming contribution for the upliftment of Indian women, the government of India issued a commemorative stamp of Pandita Ramabai in 1989. The literary precursor,

polymath, eminent Sanskrit scholar, epitome of women empowerment, spirited social renovator; the leading pioneer to abject the religious orthodoxies—Ramabai is anointed as one of the **“makers of Modern India”**.

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