

Pandita Ramabai Saraswathi: Making of a Social Entrepreneur



Kumar Irvathur Udaya, Rajalakshmi N.K.,
University Collage Mangalore

A B S T R A C T

After the ingress of imperialism through colonization, Indian society underwent transition. Transition to modernity though opened up new avenues for the middle class women by enabling them to opt for English education and selective participation in the public sphere, there was hardly any escape from the broader patriarchal and caste dominated social design. An exploration into the social history of the 19th century India unfolds the intricate designs within the nation's social fabric. The process of modernization opened new opportunities to the educated Indian men especially drawn from the dominant castes. These opportunities were in the form of ascribed status created at the bottom of the pyramids of power structure. Changing positions of men in the process of modernization called for realignment in the role of women within the family and society. These new roles for women necessitated the acquisition of certain skills, which was readily provided to them through English education. This also opened up a little space for women, which was not available to them in the system that prevailed till then. Pandita Ramabai Saraswathi was able to appropriate this little space that was opened for women. She had an in depth knowledge of the Hindu Religion, the gap between the practice and its philosophy, as reflected by the condition of women in the Indian society. Ramabai stands apart from many of her contemporaries, in a number of ways. This is the reason why, we choose to consider her a social entrepreneur of the period in which she lived. Accordingly, the term social entrepreneur is used to signify the leadership taken by Ramabai, the courage she has shown to accept the challenge, the manner in which she organized her whole project, and addressed the social problems confronted by women of her caste. Therefore, it was thought necessary to contextualize the situation within which Ramabai was driven towards the achievement of a social goal. The term social entrepreneur is of recent origin but the spirit of social enterprise is not new. It is not

easy to frame a definition that would encompass the varied entrepreneurial ventures undertaken to achieve a social goal all over the world. It has to be understood as a particular concept constructed within a particular context. Even though the concept of social entrepreneur is mostly in circulation in the capitalist economy, it embodies features that are quite distinct from the reformers and business entrepreneurs. The paper attempts to make a contextualized space-time study of Ramabai as a social entrepreneur.

KEW WORDS: *colonization, reform, women's emancipation, empowerment women's education, social entrepreneurship*

A Prelude

In the 19th century, the social position of women in the strategic caste system suited well to support and sustain hierarchical and patriarchal system in India. The British imperial powers pointed out the degraded position of women in the Indian society as a mark of underdevelopment.¹ With the colonization of Indian sub-continent, the hierarchical caste based society, which was insulated against transformation, was introduced to the process of modernization. The process of modernization that mediated through colonization project is also viewed as an effort to tune the Indian social system to imperial engine of growth at the global level.² The concept of modernity, nation, and history were put into circulation in India by the colonial powers to engage the Indian middle class in the dialogue of progress and development. The Indian elite Brahmin intelligentsia, which occupied the strategic position in Indian society, began to respond to such intelligent moves. The western educated Indian men, who wanted to get rid of the inferior status of underdevelopment and raise to the higher level, were keen on educating their women. The Indian men, who were able to become part of the bureaucracy through the newly acquired education, firmly believed that education would transform the lives of women. The reform measures in this direction initiated by intellectuals like Rajaram

¹ Kumkum Sanghari and Sudesh Vaid (Ed) *Re Casting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kali For Women New Delhi 1999. Also see Geraldine Forbes *Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India*. New York : Cambridge University Press 2000 pp 28-31

² Berberoughe, Bech. *Class, State and Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications 1992, also see Anupam Sen. *Sate, Industrialization, and Class Formation in India: A Neo-Marxist Perspective on Colonialism, Underdevelopment and Development* London :Routledge 1982

Mohun Roy, Pandit Vidyasagar, Dayananada Saraswathi and others is, no doubt, were important. But it may be noted that the reform measures taken up by these reformers fell within the traditional boundaries.³

Indoctrination of the idea of '*reformed women*' to the emerging middle class, further expedited with the introduction of new schools at the behest of missionaries and conversion to Christianity. The natives believed that English education would open up new opportunities and felt that it is not wrong to use or exploit opportunities that came on their way. However, embracing Christianity to achieve material gains was not acceptable.⁴ Traditional Indian men were afraid that girls who attend missionary schools may fall a victim to the Christian mode of life and may get converted.⁵ To avoid such situations, the natives also started schools to impart modern education to prevent girls from attending the schools run by Christian Missionaries.⁶ The English education and training for women equipped them with new skills to function effectively in the private domain of house keeping, taking care of the husband and children, and liaison with the changing society. The newly started education and reformation both by the colonial powers and the Indians, focussed on educating women from the upper castes in varying degrees.

One can observe that the modernization agenda pursued by the colonialists and the nationalists, invariably failed to address the fundamental issues responsible for the subordinate position of women in the Indian society. However, this can not be a sufficient reason to discount the efforts made and steps taken by the reformists to improve the status of women in India.⁷ The initial reform agenda to address the problems of

³ Uma Chakravathi, *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past* pp 27-87, Partha Chatterji, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* pp 233-253 "Re Casting Women: Essays in Colonial History" Kumkum Sanghari and Sudesh Vaid (Ed) New Delhi :Kali For Women, 1999.

⁴ The benefits that followed the colonial rule were accepted but moving away from the tradition was not tolerated.

⁵ People got converted to Christianity for various reasons. Poor people were able to get the basic necessities of life. Moreover, it was also the feeling of liberation, which otherwise was not possible especially for people who were at the lower strata in the caste system. There were conversions from the higher castes, who got converted for reasons other than poverty.

⁶ Geraldine Forbes *Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.pp 41-46

⁷ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India*. New York :Cambridge University Press, 2000.pp31

women in Indian society served as a reference point for all future generation of leaders of the nationalist and women's movement. Nationalist leaders like M.K.Gandhi could organize the Indian Nationalist Movement to include women, partly due to the awareness created by the reform movement. Intense pace of the movement opened up new space for women and won them their due place in the struggle for Indian independence. But at the same time there were barriers which came in the way of their economic self sufficiency or independence. These barriers were to be removed if women wanted to make further advancement. However, within the nationalist struggle it could not be addressed, because the priority of the struggle was to gain political independence. Women's issue within the nationalist movement, therefore, had to be postponed till India gained independence. Real change in the life of women had to emerge from a strategy quite different from the ones mentioned above. Apart from the already discussed women's movement, there were a few women leaders, who adopted a unique strategy to improve the condition of women in the society. Such strategies, in fact, were instrumental in changing the life of women in India to a great extent. For reasons unknown, such contributions have remained oblivious from the purview of public debates and discussions. The idea of excluding contributions made by Ramabai in the nationalist history could be owed to the point that she doesn't form a part of the nationalist discourse that would include the contributions of Swami Vivekananda, Rajaram Mohun Roy, Aurobindo Ghosh, and the like. It is also true that Ramabai can not be a part of the Nationalist History, as she pursued her own agenda for improving women's position in India, without postponing it till India achieved independence. Moreover, she did not hesitate to accept the support of the sympathisers of her cause from Britain and United States of America. It is desirable to trace this history to understand the domain of social entrepreneurship⁸ of women. In this context, Pandita Ramabai and her contribution to the socio economic condition of women deserves greater attention.⁹

⁸ A Social Entrepreneur is a person who recognizes a social problem and uses entrepreneurial principles to organize, create and manage a venture/project to address the social problem and bring in a social change.

⁹ Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India.1850-1920* England: Ash gate, 2005. pp 19-55

Though the conceptual jargons like *empowerment* and *emancipation*¹⁰ were not in use during the time of Pandita Ramabai, her contributions to change the life of helpless Indian women, undoubtedly carry the overtones of these concepts. The rich experience based on the material conditions of her life fashioned her thinking as a social entrepreneur, who brought changes in the life of the marginalised. The paper attempts to discuss the role of Ramabai in addressing the socioeconomic problems that deterred women from achieving economic independence and social advancement.

I

Anantha Shastry Dongre, Ramabai's father, a renowned Sanskrit scholar, tread a path different from other scholars of the time by educating his second wife Laxmibai.¹¹ He strongly protested the established practice of keeping women away from Sanskrit education. Having in depth knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures, Anantha Shastry Dongre was critical of irrational rituals practiced in the name of religion. The opposition from orthodox Pundits to educate women in Sanskrit was put down logically by Anantha Shastry Dongre in a debate organized at Shiroor Mutt in Udupi. Though he won the debate, the people in his native village were very hostile to him. Therefore, he left his native village and moved to Ganga Moola,¹² which is located within the thick forests on the Western Ghats. Anantha Shastry had sufficient wealth gifted by the Maharaja of Mysore and Peshwa kings of Pune. In his new *ashrama* in *Ganga Moola* Anantha Shastry Dongre had a relatively better atmosphere to exercise his views. He invited students who were keen on pursuing their studies. Ramabai was taught Sanskrit and religious texts by her mother Laxmibai Bai. She was made to experience the need for and value of knowledge, self respect, dignity and hard work and she maintained them throughout her life. But Ramabai's parents did not like their children to come in contact with the outside world. Her parents wanted the children to be strictly religious and

¹⁰ Udaya Kumar M.A. *Measuring Empowerment of Women in Socioeconomic Development* in "Development and Empowerment Rural Women in India" Ed. Jaya Arunachalam and U. Kalpagum, Jaipur:Rawath Pulications, 2006. pp 145-167

¹¹ Anantha Shastry after the death of his first wife Yamuna Bai married Lakshmi Bai in 1840 on his way back from Nepal to his native place near Pyitaan. At the time of marriage Lakshmi Bai was eight years old.

¹² The birth place of Rama Bai in Ganga Moola is now on Mangalore – Kudremkuh highway, about 75 KM from Mangalore in Karnataka in Southern Part of India.

adhere to their old faith and not to opt for any kind of secular education. But Ramabai realized that the kind of training and education given by her parents and virtues alone wouldn't offer her a decent life.¹³ Despite being a scholar and a good human being her father suffered a lot and Ramabai was a witness to all their suffering. Being an ardent believer in noble virtues enshrined in the ancient Hindu scriptures, Anantha Shastry invested all his wealth in educating people, offering gifts to Brahmins and learned puraniks. Anantha Shastry firmly believed that good deeds performed by a Brahmin as prescribed by the sacred texts would take care of the Brahmin. But his experiences showed that he was proved too philosophical and far removed from reality.¹⁴ Being a mute spectator watching her parents dying out of hunger and illness was a traumatic experience for Ramabai at the age of sixteen.¹⁵ Travelling through various provinces of India, Anantha Shastry Dongre's family developed the art of living, gained wider understanding of the society and good knowledge of the social dynamics of the country. The pilgrimage taught Ramabai to develop the art of understanding the Indian society, Hindu Religion, and the craft of making a living. But in the process Ramabai lost her parents and also her elder sister Krishnabai. Ramabai and her brother Srinivasa were greatly attached to one another. When they lost their parents and also the sister, their bondage grew stronger. Srinivasa was a healthy, strong young man but was impractical like his father. He was a great devotee of lord Hanuman. He did *tapasya* to get his lords' *darshan* and by the time he realized that it was a futile exercise, he had lost his health and also the little wealth he possessed.¹⁶

¹³ Meera Kosambi Ed. *Pandita Ramabai in Her Own Words*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. p297

¹⁴ The four canonical principles of Hindu way of life are to be pursued in a coordinated way, persuasion of mere *moksha* without coordinating it to *dharmā*, *artha* and *kama* is disastrous. For details see Antony J Parel *Gandhi's Quest for Philosophy and Quest for Harmony*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006. pp vii-xi

¹⁵ Anantha Shastry died at the age of 78 in the year 1874 near Tirupathy in Andhra Pradesh and his wife Lakshmi Bai died near Raichur in Karnataka at the age of 47. In her biographical description, which was printed in *Subodh Patrika*, Ramabai writes that she intended to publish a book giving a detailed description of her experiences and travels through out India. Perhaps this did not get published. See Padmini Sen Guptha, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: He Life and Work*. New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970. page 56

¹⁶ Rama Bai makes a special mention of this incident on a number of occasions where her brother Srinivasa found the various methods adopted by the priests in holy places to cheat

Though Ramabai was a great scholar, her scholarship gained recognition only after she went to Calcutta, one of the important centres of learning and reform in India. In Calcutta she had the opportunity to interact with scholars and reformers like Keshab Chandur Sen, Kalicharan Bannerji, Nyayarathna Panditha Maheshchandra, J.C. Bose his wife Abala Bose, Sucharu Devi,¹⁷ who married Maharaja of Mayur Bhanj, Sunity Devi,¹⁸ and a number of other scholars. Ramabai through her intellect, scholarship, and balanced approach drew the attention of the elite. She was conferred the title 'Pandita Saraswathi' by the scholarly community of Calcutta. Ramabai and Srinivasa visited Sylhet in Assam and from there they went to Dhakka where Srinivasa fell sick and later passed away on 8th May 1880. Ramabai was deeply hurt and upset by his demise. This even made her question the Hindu belief in the existence of God. After her brother's demise she thought of getting married. Though a number of Brahmin intellectuals proposed to marry her, she did not show interest in them.¹⁹ Ultimately she was guided by her progressive ideas and ruled by her intellect and chose to marry Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi, a close friend of her brother Srinivasa and a learned advocate from Shudra caste. Unfortunately her married life was too short. She lost her husband after eighteen months of her marriage. Ramabai left Calcutta with her infant daughter Manorama and reached Pune. Krishnabai's miserable failure of married life, Ramabai's own life experiences, and the superficial ritualistic practices of religion that never addressed the problems of everyday life appears to have played a major role in fashioning her personality and inculcated confidence to be guided by reason.

II

In India, widows were considered inauspicious and were also seen as sinners. The position of high caste widows was worse than the rest.

people. Of course, Srinivasa also firmly believed that if one performed penance (thapasya) God will appear before him. While in Dwaraka he performed thapasya with total dedication putting his health and little wealth to test, and found that it was not true.

¹⁷ She was a revered figure in Calcutta and a leader of Women's movement.

¹⁸ One of the intellectuals and who married the Maharaja of Cooch Behar

¹⁹ Shripad Babaji Thakur, a Bombay based barrister and ICS officer, holding a high position in the then government was one of them who was interested to marry Rama Bai. He came to meet Ramabai when she was in Sylhet. Padmini Sen Gupta, *Pandita Rama Bai Saraswathi: Her Life and Work*. New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970. page 72

Ramabai saw to it that being a widow she wouldn't fall a prey to the oppressive practices of her religion. Widowed Ramabai arrived in Pune on 30th April 1882 and the intellectual progressive Maharashtrian Brahmins were delighted to accept Ramabai. On her arrival in Pune there were many options before Rama Bai. Some of those options would have absorbed her within the reformist mould, which she abstained from choosing. Her liberal mind was able to gauge the problems involved in opting for the patriarchal reformist groups. She was very rational and pragmatic in addressing the issues of women empowerment through her reformative activities and the strategies involved in them. As a consequence she lost the good will and respect of the elite Brahmins and received criticisms for being progressive. Ramabai, without reacting much to the criticisms, continued her mission. She founded Arya Mahila Samaj on 01-06-1882 in Pune, to raise the consciousness of women, to change their mental and material conditions of life. *Kesari*, the news paper run by Bala Gangadhar Tilak, came down heavily on Ramabai for her audacity to intervene in the life style of men, under the pretext of eradicating the evil practices affecting the life of women. She wanted to address the issues concerning women more seriously, which many of the social reformers of her period could not pursue. Herself being a widow and having known the condition of widows and destitute women from the upper caste, Ramabai thought of taking up their cause. By this time Ramabai felt the place of modern education and how she could grow because of it. She was not ready to miss any opportunity that could have been of help to women. Accordingly, she appeared before the Hunter Commission on Education in September 1882 and sought better facilities for women's education.²⁰ She strongly argued for the need for 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 or doctors. But the traditional, patriarchal, male chauvinistic Indians feared the English education for Indian women, for the reason that it would damage the social fabric of India.

Having engaged in a social dialogue with the women through her Arya Mahila Samaj, Ramabai could take a closer look at the life of

²⁰ Padmini Sen Gupta, *Pandita Rama Bai Saraswathi: Her Life and Work*, Asia Publishing House New Delhi 1970 pp 94-95. Also see Meera Kosambi Ed. *Pandita Rama Bai in Her Own Words*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. p8

widows. She was shrewd enough to gauge the impact of reform process carried out by the elite male in Maharashtra on improving the condition of women's life. She found such reforms operating as an effective agency but lacking the strength and vigour to be a transformative agency.²¹ Knowing the calibre and vigour needed to bring in the structural change in the already existing patriarchal system, Ramabai distanced herself from it and explored alternative reformist measures that would grant women the agency to change the structures that exploited them or suppressed them. Her contact with the Christian missionary has to be understood in this context. Though she knew the spiritual depth of Hindu traditions and practices she was not blindly grounded in it. Series of discussions, letters and correspondence of Ramabai, makes it clear that her decision to go in the Christian way had a definite purpose and was guided by intellect. Initially, she had reservations about Christianity as a religion. Her decision to get converted to Christianity came only after she got convincing answers to her questions by one of the converted Chitpavan Brahmin (Neelakanta Shastry) Fr. Nehemia Gore.²²

Progress of imperialism through colonization created a new space for Indians. Modern education was one such space. In the traditional space the position of Indians was ascribed. But in the new space, the position had to be acquired through specific skills and qualities. Modern education enabled people to move up in the social ladder. Indian men wanted their women to get modern education for a different reason. But Pandita Ramabai with her life experiences realised the powerful place of modern English education. For Ramabai, it was the new space that could be used as a launching pad for women's emancipation. On her visit to Wantage sisters in Poona, she discussed her plan to go to England. Once she decided to go to England for her studies, she realised the need for resources to support her. She wrote her first book titled *Stri Dharma Neethi* and raised sufficient funds to go to England. Her stay in Cheltenham College helped her to understand the education system in England and the works of Christian Missionaries. She was both a student and a teacher there. She gave lessons in Sanskrit at

²¹ Amartya, Sen. *Development as Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. pp189-204

²² Pandita Nilakantha Shastry, who stayed in Banaras got converted to Christianity after a lot of self introspection. He was baptized on 14th March 1848 and took the name Nehemiah. Later joined Society of St. John the Evangelist (S.S.J.E.) mission in Bombay, see Padmini Sen Guptha, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: Her Life and Work*. New Delhi :Asia Publishing House, 1970. pp 112-116.

Cheltenham College. She taught Marati at Wantage to the sisters who would be sent to India. She had hard times to face in England especially when she lost her friend, Anandibai Bhagath, who accompanied her to England.

Ramabai had clear-cut ideas and plans of her own and did not yield to the plans prepared by the Missionaries. She was discouraged from going to the United States of America to attend the Graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshi. She was even threatened of withdrawal of support if she pursued her plans of visiting the USA. But she was very firm in her decision to visit the USA. She honoured the invitation of Dr. Rachel Badley, the Dean of Medical College of Pennsylvania, to attend the graduation of Anandi Bai Joshi. In America, Ramabai was impressed by the liberal atmosphere, and the freedom that the women enjoyed there. She was fascinated by the education opportunities for girls. Immediately she thought of having such facilities back home in India for girls. She says,

*"I am deeply impressed by and interested in the works of western women, who seem to have one common aim, namely, the good of their fellow beings. It is my dream some day to tell my country women, in their own language, this wonderful story, in the hope that the recital may awaken in their hearts a desire to do likewise."*²³

Her idea of education for girls in India symbolically expressed 'training of hand with that of the head.'²⁴ She knew the importance of proper exposure in the form of good education from the early stage of life for girls. This appears to be the reason why she underwent training in basic education and Kindergarten education in America. She translated a good number of Kindergarten school books to Marati. Preparation of study material for Indian students required resources and then she decided to write a book titled *High Caste Hindu Woman* to generate necessary resources.

Ramabai travelled around the USA and appealed to people to contribute to her work to uplift women in India. Ramabai was able to get good support from the U.S citizens for her cause. She was very critical of

²³ Pandita Rama Bai *The Widows Friend*, An Australian Edition of the *High Caste Hindu Women* by Pandita Rama Bai with a sequel by her daughter Manorama Bai 2nd Edition (George Robertson & Co. Proprietary Limited ., Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane 1903) as quoted in Padmini Sen Gupta, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: He Life and Work* . New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970. pp 157

²⁴ Ibid p157

religious codes that denied freedom for women to express their views, and get education of their choice. She asserted to get women the freedom of choice and expression by creating democratic space that provided women the opportunity to participate in public life. However, these major contributions of Ramabai, escaped public debate and consequently a due place in the making of modern India.

Some of the leaders from the nationalist school of thought were unhappy with Ramabai's open talk about the poor and inhuman condition of women in India. It was alleged that she painted a very ugly picture of India.²⁵ Swami Vivekananda is said to have been very unhappy over Ramabai's speeches that delivered the poor status of women in India. But Ramabai was stating the ground realities that affected the life of women in India. The practice of child marriage, self-immolation of widows, restricting women to the household chores, dowry deaths, social seclusion of widows, was all a reality²⁶.

She was aware of the fact that there was no point in living in the past glory of India where the position of women was believed to have been better. Ramabai believed in the '*India of Women*' that she saw and experienced during her pilgrimage. This *India of Women* was different from the *India* of male reformers and also the *Glorious India* that was said to have been in existence before the arrival of the *Moslem Invaders*. Before bringing any reform to the existing set up it was necessary to deconstruct

²⁵ Swami Vivekananda visited the USA and delivered lectures which gave a splendid picture of India, but the picture of Indian women that Rama Bai gave was different. It is said that Vivekananda was very unhappy about it. Moreover, Rabindra Nath Tagore writes about occasions where men shouted down Rama Bai without allowing her to express her views after her return to India from the US. See Padmini Sen Guptha, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: Her Life and Work*, New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1970. pp 163 and 205-206. It is stated that leaders like B.G. Tilak were critical of Rama Bai for not conforming to the religious tradition to which she was born. The criticism was much severe for her conversion to Christianity and for motivating other Hindu Women for conversion. For a detailed study see, Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India 185-1920* England: Ashgate Publishing House, 200. pp 35-36, Meera Kosambi Ed. *Pandita Rama Bai in Her Own Words* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Uma Chakravathy *Rewriting History: Pandita Rama Bai, Her Life and Times* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Padmini Sen Guptha, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: Her Life and Work*. New Delhi :Asia Publishing House, 1970.

²⁶ *Account of the Life of Hindu Women: Notes of Conversations with Rama Bai*. Cheltenham College Magazine 1885 pp 138-146. Also see Padmini Sen Guptha, *Pandita Rama Bai Sarswathi: Her Life and Work*, New Delhi :Asia Publishing House 1970

the mythical India that was the construct of the patriarchal male. Ramabai decided to demythify India, as she was sure that either the male reformers or the colonial masters were not interested in this. The reformist agenda of the patriarchal Indian men suffered from the inherent defects to bring in any structural changes. The main project of the colonial power was to tune the socioeconomic system of India to the imperial powers at the global level. Any transformation or reformation was only incidental to their main project. This is obvious in the position taken by the British on certain critical occasions. The British feared to go against the sentiments of the majority in India.²⁷ This was evident in the judgement delivered in Rukhmabai and Phulmani cases.²⁸

On her return to India from England, Ramabai swung into action. 'Sharada Sadan' the home for the high caste widows, and orphan women was opened in a rented building in Bombay on 11th March 1889. The institution was open to boarders and day scholars. Child widow Godubai, the first inmate of the Sadan, when grew up married Bharatha Rathna

²⁷ Meera Kosambi, "Women's Emancipation and Equality: Pandita Ramabai's contribution to Women's cause" *Economic and Political Weekly* October 1988 WS pp 38-49

²⁸ Rukhmabai, married Dadaji Bhikaji at the age of eleven, stayed with her father and continued her studies. Dadaji's demand for Rukhmabai's stay with him was refused by her. The court first agreed to her decision to stay with the father and continue her studies. When Dadaji appealed to the court it ordered Rukhmabai either to go her husband's house or to the jail. The decision was welcomed by traditionalists like B.G. Tilak. But Pandita Ramabai was furious about this judgment. Queen Victoria issued a royal decree dissolving the marriage and saved Rukhmabai from sentence. Rukhmabai studied medicine in England and on her returned to India headed Hindu Hospital Poona. See *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai (Ed.)* A.B. Shah Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture Bombay 1977 pp175-78. Also see, Tanika Sarkar "Rhetoric Age of Consent, Resisting Colonial Reason and Death of a Child Wife" *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. WS 28 No. 36 1993

Geraldine Forbes *Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp 69-70. Phulmani was a child wife who died of sexual injuries in 1891. Her death led to the passage of the second Consent Bill (the first one in 1860), which raised the age of consent from the existing ten to twelve years. In this case too B.G.Tilak and other traditionalists opposed the bill and termed it as interference in the life of Hindus and Hindu Traditions. For detailed information see, Taisha Abraham (Ed) *Women and Politics of Violence* New Delhi: Hari Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2002. and also Catharine A. MacKinnon "Sex equality under the Constitution of India: Problems, prospects, and personal." *International Journal of Constitutional Law*.2006; Vol.4: No 2, -202 and Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India 185-1920* England: Ashgate Publishing House, 2005. pp 270-271

Maharshi Dr. Dhondo Keshava Karve, the great social reformer and champion of the cause of rejuvenation of widows. Inmates of the school were taught in English, Gujarati, Marati and Sanskrit. Pandita Ramabai's efforts to improve the condition of Indian women were well appreciated by the local people. The American supporters of the project had already approved Rao Bahadur, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Dr. Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Bahadur Gopal Hari Deshmukh as trustees and advisors on the board.²⁹ It was assured that the religious freedom of all those who were admitted to Sharada Sadan would not be infringed or affected (or freedom of religion would not be compromised for any facilities provided to them). More and more girls found a ray of hope in Sharada Sadan, as it offered them a life of freedom and choices. It renewed the faith of those helpless women for a better and meaningful life.³⁰ Ramabai was not only adored but also was taken as a role model by the inmates of Sharada Sadan. They were deeply moved by her sympathetic attitude and the democratic space provided for them. Some of the girls who used to attend Ramabai's Bible Prayer in the evening were impressed and got converted to Christianity.

In the light of mounting criticism to the works of the institution and the increasing economic burden, Ramabai thought it better to shift Sharada Sadan to Pune (in November 1890). The news of conversion of girls in Sharada Sadan spread in the town and Ramabai's opponents came down heavily on her. Some of the trustees of Sharada Sadan resigned from the board. But Ramabai did not deter from her mission and went ahead with her plans. With the increase in opposition to her missionary work, she began to grow more close to Christianity. Her search for solace in *Jesus* was further reinforced by her reading of Rev Haslam's *From Death unto*

²⁹ It is stated that apart from the above Krshinaaji Laxman Noolakara, Kasheenatha Thryambaka Telanga, and Rao were made members of the advisory board.

³⁰ Padma Anagol in her work gives some interesting details about the number of girls who opted for the life that Rama Bai offered to the girls. At the end of 1900, Pandita Rama Bai had 2000 pupils in four of her institutions and with the exception of a few were converts to Christianity. She also spread her work outside Maharastra after 1900 by opening branches in Doddaballapur and Gulbarga now in Karnataka. In any one year in the 1890's Soonder Powar's school had 200 female converts. Franscina Sorbaji like wise noted with pride that over 400 students had completed their education in the Victoria High School. Shewanthi Bai Nikambe had 120 girls in the Princess High School, all of who were high caste Hindu girls. Padma Anagol. *The Emergence of Feminism in India 1850-1920*. England :Ashgate Publishing House 2005, p 21

Life. Meanwhile people like Balagangadhar Tilak criticised her severely for disrupting Hindu religion through the conversion of the helpless.

Ramabai visited Brindavan, Delhi and Agra to study the condition of widows. To her surprise the condition of women was much worse than what she thought. In the name of religion, customs and tradition widows were exploited. Helpless women had no other option but to suffer silently. They were ready to do anything to escape the suffering. As Ramabai's arrival brought new hope in life, it was natural for those women to develop a liking for her. With the increase in the number of girls embracing Christianity, the Hindu organisations developed a serious dislike for her. Efforts were made to address some of the problems that Hindu women confronted. As a result *Home and the Widow Remarriage Association* was started on 31st December 1893.

From Pune Ramabai shifted her establishment to a nearby place called Khedgaon in 1897. She could get sufficient land in which she built her institutions and also provided place for other productive activities. Ramabai's work was initially aimed at improving the condition of upper caste Hindu widows. The stiff opposition to conversion, made her expand her activities. She indoctrinated the principle of service in her life. Thousands of people turned helpless and homeless due to the famine in Central provinces in 1896. Ramabai toured the famine hit places and started rescuing women from starvation and destitution. Rescued women were brought to Khedgaon in Pune. Mukti Sadan (Home for Salvation) was opened to provide shelter to them. Sexual abuse and exploitation of women gained momentum with the developing urbanisation. The helpless and homeless women who were pushed into flesh trade were rescued and Kripa Sadan provided shelter to them. Perhaps this kind of rescue mission was first of its kind in the region. Ramabai's vision and inexhaustible energy to serve the cause of women brought a ray of hope in the life of helpless women in India. In the new found home women were given education and training to lead an independent life of dignity and self respect. Efforts to empower women through income generating activities like teaching, nursing, tailoring embroidery, laundering, weaving of clothes and carpets, gardening and operating the printing press were taken up.

III

Sustenance and support of a strategic caste system and hierarchical patriarchal system that prevailed in India, was at an enormous social cost. Women of higher caste had to bear a considerable part of this social burden of the patriarchy within their caste. After the ingress of imperialism through colonization, Indian society underwent transition. Transition to modernity though opened up new avenues for the middle class women by enabling them to opt for English education and selective participation in the public sphere, there was hardly any escape from the broader patriarchal and caste dominated social design. An exploration into the social history of the 19th century India unfolds the intricate designs within the nation's social fabric. The process of modernization opened up new opportunities to the educated Indian men, especially, to those drawn from the dominant castes. These opportunities were in the form of ascribed status created at the bottom of the pyramids of power structure.³¹ Changing positions of men in the process of modernization called for realignment in the role of women within the family and society.³² These new roles for women necessitated the acquisition of certain skills, which was readily provided to them through English education. This also opened up a little space for women, which was not available to them in the system that prevailed till then. Ramabai was able to appropriate this little space that was opened for women. She had an in depth knowledge of the Hindu Religion, the gap between the practice and its philosophy, as reflected by the condition of women in the Indian society. The term social entrepreneur³³ is of recent origin but the spirit of social enterprise is not new.

What is social Entrepreneurship (SE)? Where exactly we can place them in the development design of an economy is one of the major questions that have to be addressed. SE in the contemporary context is stated as a '*process and practice*' of integrating economic and social value creation, which has a long heritage and global presence. The initiatives of

³¹ From *Speeches of Lord Macaulay with his minute on Indian Education* selected with an introduction a notes by G.M. Young , Oxford University press , 1935.

³² See Shankar Ghosh *Political Ideas and Movements in India*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1975. pp21-24

³³Gregory Dees J. *The Meaning of Social Entrepreneurship*. Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University Fuqua School of Business USA 2001; Also see, Charles Leadbeater *The Rise of Social Entrepreneur* Demos United Kingdom 1997 pp53-66

Ashoka Foundation in US, Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, Manchester Crafts Guild in UK, and SEWA, Lijjath, WWF in India, are all contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon of Social Enterprises that finds its historical precedents in the values of Victorian Liberalism. The concept of social entrepreneurship is poorly defined and its boundaries to other fields of study remain fuzzy and overlapping. Attempts to locate and define the concept of 'social entrepreneurship' are driven by the recent developments in the area of social entrepreneurship in the developed world like US, Europe, and Australia. It is apparent from the works on social entrepreneurship that there is absence of clear theoretical boundary within which the term could be located. One can not deny the fact that knowledge on social entrepreneurship can only be enhanced by the use of a variety of theoretical tools and a combination of different research methods around 'Social' and 'Entrepreneurship.' The concept of entrepreneurship is rooted in the social and political spheres of the society. Originally the spirit of entrepreneurship referred to the product of social resistance (protestant ethic) to the predominant and exploitative forces prevalent in Europe, which lead to social revolution. The spirit of protestant ethic is also the spirit underlying crux of entrepreneurship. The protest against the 'the social norms and customs' that Pandit Ramabai showed falls very well within the spirit of entrepreneurship. The condition and the context in which the concept of entrepreneurship emerged may be discussed in the following paragraph.

Weber in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* observed that a theological doctrine of calling produced intense anxiety amongst the Calvinists. In order to reduce this anxiety and reassure them that they were, in fact, to be numbered among the elect, attempted to behave as though they had indeed been called. This meant first and foremost of ordering their daily life through hard work, thrift, and clean living including their economic pursuits, so as to preclude any idleness or frivolity. Weber interpreted this breaking away from the beaten track as protest, and individuals who did so as entrepreneurs or 'adventurous individuals'.³⁴ Together with rationalization process in other spheres of society, entrepreneurship among people has actually led to capital accumulation.

Subsequently, David McClelland, based on Weber's thesis, attempted to identify the variable responsible for making people tread a new path or

³⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992).

to become entrepreneurs. After a rigorous research, McClelland attributed entrepreneurial achievements to a psychological factor, identified as 'need for achievement'.³⁵ Thus, according to McClelland, 'need for achievement' was identified as instrumental in making people entrepreneurial. Everett Hagen interprets entrepreneurship in terms of personality traits of a group. She explains that whenever there is a fall or withdrawing of social status of a group, the group attempts to recapture the withdrawn status.³⁶ This drive of a group to fall back to its original position in the status is said to be the cause of entrepreneurship. However, we notice a fundamental difference between McClelland and Hagen. McClelland attributes 'the spirit of achievement' at the individual level, and Hagen identifies 'the innovative spirit' at the group level on which the entrepreneurial spirit depends. However, the arguments of both Hagen and McClelland, are in conformity with what Weber has already theorized about entrepreneurship.³⁷

Entrepreneurial element came to be considered as a key element in economic development when Schumpeter established a relationship between the entrepreneur and economic development. Schumpeter considered entrepreneur as an innovator, who introduces something new in to the economy so as to break new grounds in an otherwise stationary economy. This innovation is said to be the result of creativity in the entrepreneurial personality. Apart from these interpretations of entrepreneurship, we have other theories that have attempted to advance psychological, anthropological and cultural explanations of entrepreneurship.³⁸ It is to be remembered that all these theories have evolved at different stages of economic growth in different parts of the world. A social entrepreneurship is a process of creating value by combining resources in new ways. Such value creation is intended

³⁵ David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Bombay: Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd. 1961) 1-9.

³⁶ Everett Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change: How Economic Growth Begins* (New York: Feffer Simons Inc., 1962) 3-20.

³⁷ Schumpeter J.A. "The Fundamental Phenomenon of Economic Development," Ed. Peter Kilby *Entrepreneurship and Economic Development* (New York: The Free Press, 1971) 43-71.

³⁸ Suresh Balakrishnan, K. Gopakumar and Ravindra N. Kanungo, "Entrepreneurship Development: Concept and Context," Ravindra N. Kanungo Ed. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation: Models for Development* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998) 19-39.

primarily to bring in a change in the society. In this process of value creation results in satisfaction of social needs.³⁹

Pandita Ramabai rose to the position of an extraordinary personality, through her protest to the spirit of Hinduism which reduced philosophy of life to mere rituals. She refused to endorse the scholastic handouts by Pundits and Puraniks that could not live up to her own scrutiny and scholarship. Her enormous courage emerged from her self confidence. Her first major virtue was her unquestionable faith in God, which people felt was Hindu in the pre-conversion period and Jesus in the post conversion period. The second great virtue was her experimental outlook to test the knowledge acquired in the light of her own life experiences. Unlike many scholars and nationalist leaders, she never waited for an auspicious day for improving the condition of women in India. It was a now or never decision. During Ramabai's time the changes in the life of women would have hardly been brought by the state without the active participation of natives like Ramabai. The position that Ramabai took needed a lot of strategic thinking, courage, vision, boldness and belief in oneself. Ramabai appealed to the former Governor of Bombay presidency, Sir Bartle Frere and sought his support to set up a destitute home for the women in India.⁴⁰ Undoubtedly she was able to think much ahead of her time. The following exploration into the pioneering works that she administered supports the claim that she was one of the first social entrepreneurs of India.

As discussed in the earlier sections, she was down to earth in her approach; she never took recourse to history to convince herself on the position of women in India. She reconciled with realities and sought to action. When she decided to do something to improve the condition of women, she started Arya Mahila Samaj. In line with the spirit of the Weberian *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, Ramabai selected a creative and courageous path of destructives and the barriers that stopped women from marching ahead. Throughout her life's journey we find the notion of creative destruction.

From the writings and life experiences of Ramabai, one can certainly state that she gave more practical, down to earth explanation to the condition of Indian women. One can infer that the insatiable hunger for

³⁹ Mair, J., and Seelos, C. 'Social Entrepreneurship: Creating New Business Models to Serve the Poor,' *Business Horizons*, 48.3, (2005)May-June, pp. 241-6

⁴⁰ Meera Kosambi Ed. *Pandita Rama Bai in Her Own Words*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. p9

knowledge and the commitment to the cause of improving the living conditions of high caste Hindu women was the driving force behind Ramabai's deeds. She had her foot strongly grounded in the Indian tradition, with her mind reacting to the practical ends of the poor and the needy. By all counts she was never looking back or being buried in the glorious (spiritual Vedic) past which most of the Indian men dwelt in. The Orientalist view of India as spiritual as against the rational and modern West doesn't seem to apply to Ramabai's dealing with Indian women. She seems to be very rational. She visibly broke this binary sensation and worked for the development of women from the humanist standpoint. This approach of Ramabai defeats the West's view of treating India as spiritual and at the same time it defeats the idea that India is not rational and scientific in its approach. She felt that there was a need for (a) self reliance for women (b) education for women and (c) more women teachers to educate women. She could get support across the country, though natives did not stand by her to fight for a right cause.

Her experiences in life built courage and confidence to live up to her ideas, despite all odds like losing her near ones. Travelling in the UK and the USA and exposure to modern type of education, institutional functioning, democratic and liberal atmosphere in such circumstances, inculcated the spirit of enterprise in Ramabai. Throughout her life Ramabai explored public space more than the private space. Perhaps this was instrumental in exploring new ideas to introduce the 'High Caste Hindu Women' to this space. In fact, it was only the high caste Hindu women, who were deprived of their opportunity to explore public space in the name of 'purity', 'chastity' 'honour' and 'dignity'. Empowerment in the real sense of the term is exposure to a larger public domain with confidence. It is apparent from the life and works of Ramabai that what we define as empowerment in contemporary situation was practiced by her much earlier. She had her action plan and she gathered sufficient resources required to transform her plans into concrete actions or projects. It is reflected in her parting words to her admirers in the USA

"Christ came to give different gifts to different people. Some he made prophets, some he made preachers and some he made teachers. Since I have become a Christian I have thought he has given me the gift of being a sweeper. I want to sweep away some of the old difficulties that

be before the missionaries in their efforts to reach our Hindu widows".⁴¹

One of the significant contributions of Pandita Ramabai was that she was instrumental in making her ardent critics also to think of improving the condition of women in India. People did disagree with the means she chose to improve the condition of women. But hardly there is disagreement about the ends she wanted to achieve. Ramabai addressed a huge gathering of social council in Bombay on 29th December 1889. She appealed to the men gathered there not to force women to shave off their heads on the death of their husbands. She insisted that men, who complain of the British Government robbing their freedom of speech, should not deny the same to womenfolk in their families. She moved a resolution in a meeting demanding freedom for widows to lead a decent and dignified life according to their wish after the death of their husband. A number of prominent Congress members were present at the meeting.

The questions raised by Ramabai were taken up seriously by the Indian political leaders. Dr. Bhandarkar, who was the then Vice Chancellor of Bombay University and had just resigned from the trusteeship of Sharada Sadan Advisory Board, drew attention of the INC at its 5th session of Indian National Conference in 1889.⁴²

"The misery of our widows has been the subject of frequent remark. I will not detain you long with full exposition of it. I will only make a general observation that that society which, allows men to marry number of times even up to the age of sixty, while it sternly forbids even girls of seven or eight to have another husband after one is dead; which gives liberty to a man of fifty or sixty to marry a girl of eleven or twelve, which has no word of condemnation for man who marries another wife within fifteen days of the death of first, is a society which sets very little value upon the life of the female human being and places women on the same level as cattle, and is thus in an unsound condition, disqualifying it for a successful competition with societies with a more healthy constitution. Often times the marriage of a girl under certain circumstances proves her death warrant."⁴³

⁴¹ Padmini Sen Guptha *Pandita Rama Bai Saraswathi: Her Life and Work*. New Delhi :Asia Publishing House, 1970. page 179

⁴² Padmini Sen Gupta, p230

⁴³ Pandita Rama Bai Saraswathi; Pioneer in the Movement for Education of the Child Widow of India, Chairman Executive Committee- American Rama Bai Association (Flemming H Revell Company London and Edinburgh New York Chicago 1922pp 48-49,

Mr. Justice Ranade also testified against the inhuman treatment meted out by the widows in India, especially the upper caste widows. Maharashtra was a place of rapid industrialization and also the home of many right wing Hindu religious activities. Ramabai chose to be a Christian to improve the condition of women. It is a paradox that the daughter of a Hindu scholar like Anantha Shastry Dongre went on to become the most revolutionary reformist, by getting converted to Christian faith to improve the status of the Hindu women in India. It is very disturbing to note that contributions of this social entrepreneur have been ignored by both the Christian missionaries and other social groups. Christian missionaries colour her achievements with religious reverence; other social groups are struck with Ramabai's conversion as a major issue, leaving much brighter side of entrepreneurial venture in the horizons of women empowerment. Undoubtedly she stands out as the most important social entrepreneur of the 19th century, whose contribution in this regard needs to be revisited in the light of recent debates on development, empowerment, gender and social entrepreneurship.

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