

Reading Pandita Ramabai through the Lines of Meera Kosambi's *Pandita Ramabai: Life and Landmark Writings* - A Review

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Abstract: Kosambi's life narrative on Pandita Ramabai, titled, *Pandita Ramabai Life and Landmark Writings* gained her much critical acclaim though posthumously. Kosambi's is a unique record of the life trajectory of Ramabai. Locating Pandita Ramabai within her liminal social milieu and discursive networks as encountered in the various phases of her life, Kosambi traces her diverse ideological routes reading along the lines of Ramabai's reformative writings. Kosambi here traces the reformative trajectory of Ramabai, positioning her within the women hostile socio-cultural and ideological scope of 19 century India, as a high caste Hindu woman and her successive travels abroad, preachings, critical writings and her religious conversion. Some of Ramabai's writings are retrieved, translated, and included in the work like 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' and 'Voyage to England' along with Kosambi's analyses in the book.

Key Words: Life Writings, Feminism, Women and Reformation, Religion and dogma in 19th century India.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Meera Kosambi, the acclaimed sociologist, academician and historian is highly famed for her life sketches on the major women social reformers of 19 and 20 century Maharashtra. Her interest in gender-issues, which sprang in her by the later part of her career, took her to an exploration of the lives of the Maharashtrian women social reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Kashibai Kanitkar and Prema Kantak. Kosambi's diverse contributions span across the areas of feminism, social history, Marathi fiction by women authors, gender, culture, Marathi theatre, cinema and much more.

Kosambi begins her endeavour with a reference to the publishing of Ramabai's 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' in the United States in 1887. Dr. Rachel Bodley in her introduction to the account stated, 'the silence of a thousand years is broken'. 'The High Caste Hindu Woman', which Kosambi exults as an 'unofficial Indian Feminist manifesto', has indeed broken the thousand years long silence of trauma and turmoil the upper caste Hindu women had been living through. Exposing the feigning dogmatism of Manu and the treacherous manipulating of the Vedas by the spiritual fathers of religion and custom; misreading and misrepresenting it with its demeaning stance on womanhood, Ramabai expresses her contempt for the Hindu religious laws. Written in a time of having been ruled under Queen Victoria, the most powerful woman ruler of the British empire, Ramabai's account seems to be a desperate plea towards the British authority to rescue her hapless sisters from her own countrymen. Failing to find any hope for resurrection from the religious clutches of her own people (the religious men of her time), Ramabai urges the British authorities and the white women to incarnate as saviours for her Indian sisters. Ramabai's account seems to be an explicit document on the double oppression women underwent during the colonial era. Ramabai ends her account with a note suggesting some emancipatory methods for the high caste women and child widows which may help them live their lives independently and with dignity. Her suggestions for setting up houses for widows with amenities like libraries where they can learn, teach, and could be taught crafts, art, religion and literature, are reformative in a time when women holding or even touching a pen or book was prohibited by customary laws. Today, more than a century later too, the condition of women in this country not seemed to have made much progress. Female infanticide, child marriage, female genital mutilation, witch hunt, dowry deaths and honour killings still haunt us every day with the added worries of the modern weapons like acid attacks and the well flourished rape culture from which even an infant is not spared.

As Kosambi notes Ramabai's tireless voice for the women of her clan never interested the conservatism of her homeland though the West hailed it to celebrate. Quoting from Adhav's *Pandita Ramabai* (1970), Kosambi writes; "she was a unique and extraordinary person, and Maharashtrian society, having yet to produce an individual of her stature engaged in gender-related reform on such a vast and variegated scale, still remains unwilling to remember her and unable to forget". (287)

2. REVIEW:

Meera Kosambi states her onset as a retrieval of the 'real' Ramabai; her significant texts, her multiple ideological evolutions, and her feminism, striving within the intersecting and conflicting structures of patriarchy, religion, nationalism, and internationalism developing her own eclectic idiom. Kosambi disavows the binary perceptions of either positioning the Pandita as an unwavering feminist or as a proselytised Christian as faltering in identifying the

ideological evolution of Pandita Ramabai. Kosambi holds the vantage point that Ramabai was “the site for a series of overlapping encounters – primarily that between Hinduism and Christianity, rationalism and dogma, individuality and Church hierarchy, surrounded by the larger confrontation between Indianness and western culture, feminism and patriarchy in its multiple guises” (4). Kosambi also attempts to document the most neglected period in Ramabai’s life; 1883-1888, which Kosambi identifies as a glaring void in most of her Indian biographies. Kosambi also finds Ramabai’s proselytisation as the main reason behind the absence of Ramabai in most of the official and historical documents on reformation. Attempting to fill the gap, Meera Kosambi traces and documents ‘Pandita’ in eight chapters, following her from birth through her paths until it ends in ‘Mukti’.

Ramabai, was born on 23 April 1858 in the surroundings of Gangamul, near river Tunga in South Karnataka as the fourth child of the learned Lakshmibai and Anantshashtri Dongre. With the chapter ‘Early Life’, Kosambi begins four decades prior to Ramabai’s birth; with the student years of her father. Kosambi finds the genealogy of Ramabai’s reformatory spur in the educationist father of Ramabai, Anantshashtri Dongre. Anantsashtri started his initiative first by educating his first wife and later, post her death, extending to his second wife, whom he received as a little nine-year-old girl. Shashtri’s move to educate women shocked the religiosity of the community as uncustomary and shocking and could only be received with furore and ostracising. However, as Ramabai documents, the learned Shashtri scholastically outdid the communal angst validating his stance on women’s education with supporting Sanskrit slokas and verses from the religious texts. It’s worth noticing that Shashtri however maintained the Vedas as reserved from the reach of women and Shudras; although Ramabai could access it later in her life. Ramabai’s reading of the Vedas exposed to her that many a verse from the Vedas had been dangerously misread, misrepresented, and wrongly exercised as the legitimate customary norms of the Hindus. As is evident from ‘The High Caste Hindu Woman’, Ramabai holds the priestly translators of the Vedas and the misogynistic spiritual fathers of the customs, with special emphasis on Manu as the root, responsible for the manipulations and the subsequent oppression of women. Exposing the dogma of the Brahmanical Hinduist ideologies, the superstitious beliefs, and the misogynistic upholding of Manu smriti-which appears to discard, demean, and chain womanhood to subservience - Ramabai unveiled the traumatic lives of her fellow high caste Hindu sisters in ‘The High Caste Hindu Woman’. Ramabai’s constant struggles to emancipate her high caste sisters found success with the setting up of Sharada Sadan in Mumbai and Mukti Mission in Pune.

A second reformatory move that Ramabai seemed to have honoured in her father was his stance on his daughters’ wedded lives. Though he decided not to marry off Ramabai at an early age, the position was taken only after the tragic end of the early marriage of his elder daughter Krishnabai. ‘The High Caste Hindu Woman’ narrates this incident, though veiled, protecting the identity of the family. Krishnabai’s misery saved Ramabai from an early marriage and opened the possibilities for her ideological transcendence without being chained into wifehood and motherhood at an early age. Nonetheless, the widowed Anant Shastri’s own re-marriage to the nine-year-old Amba, later Lakshmibai, found its way in ‘The High Caste Hindu Women’s critique on child marriage. In the section ‘Married Life’ she discusses the incident carefully veiling the identities of her parents. Ramabai here lashes out at the inhumaneness of the customary child marriage by critiquing the disdain of Amba’s father who gave the nine-year-old to a forty-four-year-old man in marriage, whom he had met that morning, and sending her miles away. Though, having been brought up outside the rigid gender codes of Brahmanical communities saved Ramabai from its repressive customary practices innate within the extended families, the disturbing scenes of the atrocities towards women, child wives, child widows and expecting women that she witnessed while in her travels, translated into her a strong resolution to champion their empowerment.

Ramabai’s strong dissent with the customary practices and religiosity of the upper caste Hindus is also evident in her account of her family’s stoop from immense wealth to sheer poverty. A plenitude of travels and pilgrimages with rites and rituals marked the childhood of young Ramabai which she documents in ‘Englandcha Pravasi’. The family ruined much of its wealth and health by these pilgrimages and rituals which had found harsh criticism in Ramabai’s later writings. Her writings lash out at the gullible orthodoxy of these rituals and rites. Ramabai’s education enabled her to join her brother Shrinivas in earning a living for the family, preaching as a puranic. The family had by then stooped into sheer poverty thanks to the ritual observances and regular gifts to holy men. As manual labor was forbidden for Brahmins, the poor family could only manage to survive on a diet of leaves washed down from trees. The hapless family’s decision for a jala-samadhi was averted by Shrinivas’s decision to abandon custom and do menial labour. The famine of 1874 eventually ended the scholastic lives of Shastri and Lakshmibai. Living outside the settled community, Shrinivas could not find much help in fulfilling the last rites of his parents. Ramabai had to assume the role of the fourth pallbearer for Lakshmibai which was religiously unexpected and unacceptable. As Kosambi notes, imprints of these shattering experiences can be seen reflecting in the later philosophical writings of Ramabai.

These early experiences coupled with her unique upbringing outside the rigid gender codes of Brahminism, educated and trained equally as her brother, equipped young Ramabai enter the male specific public sphere with ease. Her mastery over the Sanskrit language and mythological texts conferred on her the title of ‘Pandita’ and ‘Saraswati’. In Calcutta, Brahmo Samaj inducted her into its reform circle to champion the cause of women’s education for which she lectured widely within the Bengal Presidency. Ramabai’s fame soon crossed boundaries as the gist of one of her

lectures at Banaras reached Dr.W.W.Hunter, the chairman of Hunter Commission of Education in 1882. Despite her unique scholasticism, Ramabai's strong inclination towards and belief in the customary norms as 'the legitimate standards' can be seen surfacing in her emphasis on the need for women's knowledge of dharma and niti as exemplified in her first Marathi book 'Stri Dharma Niti'. An explicit androcentrism, prevailing even in its advocacy for women's education, can be traced as she writes:

Among the people of this country, the persons of male sex do engage in some work or other everyday.... that leaves the female sex! When one talks to men, they say plainly, what one can say about you [women]?...What is the reason for such disgrace? It is that the female sex is lazy...the left side is woman and the right side man. When both sides of the body function in unison, one enjoy happiness and well-being...if the woman sits still without doing anything, the man alone will not be able to do any work well in domestic life...men require woman's assistance...man have to do many tasks which could be managed by women if they were educated and sensible...[men] have many other important tasks which they...cannot [perform] for lack of time. They spend the time at their disposal only in earning a living. (43)

The strong Brahmanical patriarchy that Ramabai carried till her early twenties is also evident in her congratulatory letter to Anasuyabai praising her learning in Sanskrit. A first dent in Ramabai's orthodox Hindu beliefs was prompted by the Bengali reformer Keshab Chandra Sen as he advised her to read the Vedas which she had unto then believed was forbidden to women. Later, the disturbing scenes of the atrocities towards women including child wives and widows that she witnessed several times while in her travels, developed a shift in the ideological trajectory of Ramabai. Those experiences transformed into her a strong resolution to champion the empowerment of women which reflected itself in the powerful 'The High Caste Hindu Woman'.

A shift from her Brahmanical orthodoxy first took its explicit form with her marriage to the non-Brahmin Bengali lawyer, Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, who she refers to as a 'Shudra'. The intercaste and interregional marriage ostracised the couple from Bipin's community. Ramabai's valence for Hindu culture and Sanskrit which persisted in her early years can also be seen surfacing in her 'Lamentation of the Divine Language': an ode epitomising the 'glorious ancient Hindu culture' and the nationalistic icon of Mother India crushed under the colonial rule; an adoration which she eventually othered in her later years. Her interest in Christianity first began with her meeting with a missionary, Mr. Allen, though it was not so happily accepted by Medhavi. Not much later, having been widowed by the death of Medhavi in less than two years of their marriage, Ramabai, with her baby Manorama, joined Prarthana Samaj with the mission of women's education under justice Ranade.

Kosambi's agenda in *Life and Landmark Writings* seems to be to revoke the explicit absence of Ramabai's presence in the Maharashtrian psyche. The analyses of the male obituaries on Ramabai that Kosambi performs in the last chapter seem to be an exposing of the patriarchal self of the male reformers who hail themselves as the tireless reformers striving for the betterment of women. Kosambi argues that it was not Ramabai's proselytisation, but her feminism that made the Indian psyche 'other' her. Kosambi makes it clear that her agenda is to reclaim the feminism of Ramabai of 19th century India- a period, that held no discourse for the 'female' for her to seek support of. Burton writes:

Kosambi is interested...in understanding Ramabai's feminism and the possibilities her writings offers for a glimpse into "gendered subalternity" - not to mention Ramabai's "incessant activity" as a scholar, reformer, anti-colonial critic, Christian convert, and translator herself (of the Bible into Marathi). Significantly, Kosambi is repeatedly concerned with fixing a place for Ramabai in the Maharashtrian psyche (1606).

Ramabai's reliance on the Christian sisters might have been her way of ensuring a support system and aid for achieving her ultimate motto of saving her sisters from the religious atrocities in their homeland; educating and empowering them – her way of seeking a support system which her own land or religion failed to provide. Her lone fight against the strong patriarchal networks of 20th century and the eventual success of Mukti Mission went unacknowledged in the history of Maharashtra, having been tactically carpeted under her proselytisation; a tactics of holding herself responsible for her absence.

3. CONCLUSION:

An acknowledging of a single woman who nailed the presence of women power in the early centuries without the backdrop of a male support system- unlike her counterparts Ramabai Ranade or Anandibhai Joshee - is understandably beyond the comprehension of a patriarchally megalomaniac social psyche. The celebration of Ramabai Ranade and Anandibhai Joshi as strong women reformers who worked as directed by their husbands, and the abandoning of Ramabai in the name of conversion stems from the misogyny of the 'male reformers' championing the cause for women. The abandoning of Ramabai in the name of proselytisation is to be seen as the politicised agenda of the dominant patriarchal ideology for, arguably, the reformative zest of Ramabai posed itself as an unsurpassable threat to the very foundation of patriarchy.

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