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## Contesting Religious Rhetoric and Reform: Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* and the Widow's Question in Nineteenth-Century India

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### Abstract:

The widow's question became a prominent part of the women's question and remained crucial to the reform movement all through the nineteenth century. From being an omitted social and historical category, widows became subjects of larger debates of feminism, modernity, and tradition. The colonial encounter, however, triggered off a spurt of writings regarding the experiences of the suffering widows and forced the elite Indian male to rush into damage control by taking charge of the situation and defying colonial representation regarding Indian civilization and masculinity. Apart from the male reformers, women reformers like Pandita Ramabai, in particular, contributed towards the upliftment of widows to a large extent. The present paper is an attempt to foreground the efforts of Pandita Ramabai towards challenging socio-religious rhetoric through her work *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. In this regard, her views and work with respect to the upliftment of widows, in particular, will be the prime area of investigation.

**Keywords:** Nineteenth century India, women's reform, patriarchy, religion, widowhood, female sexuality, masculinity.

Bravo, children of Hindus!  
Are your hearts made of stone? . . .  
You mangle the scriptures to kill girls. . . .  
They have no compassion and no religion,  
They cannot distinguish between deeds and misdeeds,  
They chew up girls, citing the scripture.

— Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (379)

Widows have been one of the most pitiable sections of the entire Hindu society. Socially ostracised and religiously subdued with prescriptive codes, they have remained the most deprived individuals in terms of the right to live. Forced to live a life of self-effacement and self-sacrifice, they had been pushed into oblivion until they caught the attention of the nineteenth-century reformers. The widow's question became a prominent part of the women's question and remained crucial to the reform movement all through the century. From being

an omitted social and historic category, they became subjects of larger debates of feminism, modernity, and tradition. The colonial encounter, however, triggered off a spurt of writings regarding the experiences of the suffering widows and forced the elite Indian male to rush into damage control by taking charge of the situation and defying colonial representation regarding Indian civilization and masculinity.

Apart from the male reformers, women reformers like Pandita Ramabai in particular, contributed towards the upliftment of widows to a large extent. Her strong critique of Brahmanical patriarchy and her breaking away from the norms of caste and religion seemed intolerably outrageous to a society where even men rarely displayed such courage to challenge socio-religious orthodoxy. Through her words and actions, this unusual woman became a “legend” in her own lifetime (Tharu and Lalita 243). Her actions were taken note of, her achievements celebrated and critiqued in public arena. As Uma Chakravarti aptly observes: “Ramabai had all the elements required for a ‘great’ character: she was articulate, learned, confident and forceful...Men of the nineteenth century, both reformists, and traditionalists who had been waxing eloquence on the glorious position of women in ancient India, suddenly found an embodiment of such womanhood in the person of Ramabai” (xii). Though pleased with her eloquence and knowledge, Ramabai's opposition to scriptural and Brahminical structures soon turned her admirers against her. However, despite all hardships, Ramabai decided to dedicate her life to the upliftment of women. Her most significant work *The High Caste Hindu Woman* appeared in 1888. Two years later she founded the Sharada Sadan, a home for widows. Ramabai directed all her energies in educating widowed women and relieving them from the burden of religious conventions and the religious rhetoric of oppression.

The present paper is an attempt to foreground the efforts of Pandita Ramabai towards challenging socio-religious idiom through her work *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. In this regard, her views and work with respect to the upliftment of widows, in particular, will be the prime area of investigation. Within this ambit of the nineteenth-century widow's question, the present paper will firstly discuss the pioneering efforts of male reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in trying to reduce the suffering of the widows in India. The paper will explore their reformatory efforts in fighting for widow remarriage and the abolition of Sati. Secondly, pivoting round Ramabai's writings and her efforts towards upliftment of widows, the present research will discuss the various reactions she invited from various sections of the society. This discussion would include the reaction of contemporary male reformers, revivalists and nationalists, the role of the British government and its concern regarding widow remarriage and Sati, and the reaction of the masses to such reforms. Last, but most importantly, the study will investigate the ways in which the reformatory rhetoric of benevolence served as a means to remodel the identity of the Indian masculinity and femininity after its inconsistencies were exposed and challenged by women's writings and activism as practiced by Ramabai.

At the time of British advent in India, the plight of Indian women in general and widows, in particular, was deplorable. When seen through the eyes of the colonizers, the treatment meted out to women seemed rather monstrous. Women were reeling under the

oppression of orthodox religious customs and patriarchal dictates. They were forced into marriage at a tender age and laden with the responsibility of household and motherhood. Some unfortunate ones who lost their husbands were either forced to perform Sati or compelled to live a life worse than death. However, amidst the general apathy towards the plight of women, the spread of education among Indian men of the upper class and caste was giving rise to a new awakening and awareness. This new class of educated Indians had begun realising the need to change and improve upon the imperial representation regarding Indian civilisation as well as of Indian men.

### **Harbingers of Reform**

During the nineteenth century, the first steps with regards to women's reform were taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahma Samaj and a pioneer of social reform in Bengal. His ideology was a synthesis of the ideals of enlightenment and the philosophy of the Upanishads. His aim was to purge Hinduism of its corrupt practices, especially, from the practice of Sati and of discrimination against widows. The instances of Sati during the early nineteenth century were sustained not only in the name of tradition but were also supported with the help of scriptures. In the words of the lawgiver Vishnoo, “Mrite bhurturi brunmucguryum tudunwarohunum va”. The verse literally translates as: “after the death of her husband a woman shall become an ascetic, or ascend the funeral pile” (Roy 2). While many other verses of such nature were interpreted by a majority as asceticism being the best recourse for a widow other than performing Sati, reformers like Rammohan Roy interpreted it in a way that gave widows the right to choose between asceticism and a life of their choice. Despite vehement backlash from the orthodox quarters, it was Roy's persistent efforts that lead to the legal abolition of Sati. In addition to the male reformers, efforts of some British officers too played a significant role in improving the condition of women and in changing the socio-cultural landscape of the country in the latter half of the century. British Governor-generals like Lord William Bentinck, displayed immense moral courage to enact the law prohibiting Sati in 1829 within British domains.

The campaign of widow remarriage was not an easy battle. The Indian Law Commission set up in 1837 seriously considered the matter and concluded that infanticide could be curbed only if widow remarriage was legalized. Although, the commission also raised concerns that if on the one hand, such a law was socially desirable, passing it would involve going against Hindu scriptures and laws of inheritance, on the other. The law was thus seen as infeasible until Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took up the issue in the 1850s. A well-read Bengali Brahman, Vidyasagar worked towards introducing the practice of widow remarriages among the high caste Hindu society. Practices such as child marriage and polygamy (like among the highborn or Kulin Brahmins of Bengal) were prevalent customs during the nineteenth century. As a result, elderly men – sometimes even those on deathbed — married teenaged or prepubescent girls. These marriages often sealed the fate of these girls to a life of suffering as they were subsequently widowed. This plight of women inspired Vidyasagar to propose and push the Widow Remarriage Act.

Following the efforts of Vidyasagar, reformers like Lokahitavadi, Vishnushastri Pandit, M.G. Ranade, K.T. Telang, and Moroba Kanhoba Vijaykar established the Society for Promotion of Remarriage in December, 1865. The Society did some valuable work for more than two decades. In collaboration with the Gujarati reformers of Bombay, the Society opened more branches in other towns in Western India. Some of the staunchest champions of this movement set examples for the rest of the society. Vishnushastri Pandit, for instance, married a widow in 1874 in Mumbai. Similarly, R.G. Bhandarkar's widowed daughter was remarried in 1891 and D.K. Karve remarried a widow in 1883 in Pune (Kosambi 100-101). But as most reformers, they too faced excommunication by the orthodox Hindu faction. As part of their retaliation, the conformists also excommunicated the remarried couple, their families and also those who openly attended or supported such events. One such instance of excommunication took place in Mumbai where Moraba Kanhoba married a 21-year old widow with a child in 1870. The incident was followed by their excommunication. But unfortunately, the couple was found dead in the well behind their house shortly before their first wedding anniversary. Despite evidence indicating murder, the court dismissed the case as one of suicide (Malshe and Apte qtd. in Kosambi 100-101).

A major reason for the lack of enthusiasm was that widow remarriage did not seem to be a profitable contract. Not only did such alliances invite hostility from conservative sections of the society, but were also proved to be a monetary loss. In the face of large dowry gains from marriage with a virgin, the idea of marrying a widow seemed unattractive to the Hindu men. As a result, reformers like Vidyasagar tried giving monetary incentives to young men so as to persuade them to marry widows. According to Dasgupta and Mukherjee, this led Vidyasagar to spend about fifteen hundred rupees for each marriage, making his expenditure rise to eighty-five thousand rupees in getting sixty widows married over the period 1856 to 1868. Other eminent individuals such as the Maharaja of Bardhaman also decided to provide cash prizes and job offers to men who married widows (Dasgupta and Mukherjee 3).

Apart from reluctance on the part of the grooms, the widows and their parents also did not seem to display ample keenness in endorsing the idea of remarriage. The reason behind this reluctance was a legal loophole in the newly formed law. While the Widow Remarriage Act gave permission to remarry, it did not require the marriage to be registered. Registration of marriages formed an essential part of the legal marriage laws. Registered marriages were governed by the Civil Marriage Law which recognized monogamous alliance. On the contrary, the Hindu Personal Law allowed polygamy. This implied that any man marrying a widow under the provisions of the Hindu Personal Code was legally permitted to engage in polygamy. In the absence of a legal deterrent to polygamy, the Widow Remarriage Act was open to abuse. Dasgupta and Mukherjee observe that as a consequence of this legal ambiguity, many opportunist individuals married widows without registering their marriage and subsequently not only indulged in polygamy but also deserted and ill-treated the widows they had married. This certainly dissuaded parents to remarry their widowed daughter despite the availability of a large number of potential suitors. Thus the Act was apparently a

failure as it was ineffectual to "implement feasible welfare gains from remarriage due to the presence of informational asymmetries" (4).

Ironically, while the efforts of male reformers and the British government were directed towards women, women themselves hardly had a voice of their own. The nineteenth century scarcely came across educated women and especially those who had the courage to present their case. Ramabai had witnessed and experienced every aspect of the life of a high caste Hindu woman — from childhood through married life to widowhood. Her experience and scholarship thus motivated her to write *The High Caste Hindu Woman* in 1888. Her work expressed her extreme disillusionment with Hinduism and her determination to expose the conditions to which the Indian women were condemned. It may be observed that the “glorious Aryan woman did not exist for Ramabai precisely because of her knowledge of Sanskrit. In fact she uses the term ‘golden age’ scornfully, associating it with a period in which a man could “take a woman [from] wherever she may be found and drag her to his house (p.62)” (Chakravarti 68). Ramabai’s understanding of the scriptures and her extraordinary life were decisive factors in her writings. Her life was subject to public surveillance of the society that was not habitual of seeing women perform non-traditional roles. Instead of following traditions set for widows, Ramabai stepped into a public career with an aim to serve the oppressed women in India. Her preferences made her the most controversial woman of her times and her writing added to the debate.

### **Religious Rhetoric and the Widow's Question**

Ramabai was a widow with an agenda to fight the oppression of Brahmanic widowhood. In her book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai describes widowhood as the “worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman's life” (69). Unfortunately, a majority of young women had to bear the brunt of widowhood during the nineteenth century and child marriage was a major cause behind their plight. According to Tanika Sarkar, child marriage was widespread in every section of the society and had subsequently “produced a very large range of child widows” of whom some were “widowed at 3 or 4” and “almost all of them had been widowed by 10” (Sarkar 2011: 99). Ramabai also noted that according to the census of 1881 there were thirty thousand six hundred and twenty-six widows of all ages and castes. Among these were six hundred and sixty-nine thousand, one hundred widows under nineteen years of age. This large number of widows resulted from child marriages which according to Ramabai was just the beginning of an oppressive life for these women. The power structure of patriarchy driven domesticity kept women in a submissive and subjugated position. It was the oppression of patriarchal power structures that secluded women from the public sphere and promoted the perpetuation of verbal and physical abuse within the domestic realm. This violence and oppression only became worse once a woman was widowed.

Despite the legally prohibited practice of Sati, many young widows were forced to perform Sati in the name of tradition and a woman's duty towards her husband. More often than not, scriptures were used as an enforcing agent. The Manusmriti, in particular, was preferred text to assert scriptural authority. Ramabai had experienced the authority these scriptural injunctions commanded and thus often mentions its verses in her writings. These

verses clearly indicated the requirements of the ideal normative female conduct of the times. A married woman was supposed to live a life of subservience and subordination. She was to conduct herself in a manner that made her a perpetually serving machine. This subservience to the patriarchal order was also indicative of the sexual constraints imposed on women.

According to Uma Chakravarti, “Marriage and codes of legitimate sexuality of men and women, but particularly women, were major elements in the organisation of gender relations, especially of the upper castes. Elaborate rules were devised in this connection relating to prohibited and desirable factors in settling marriage alliances” (18). She further states that it was to maintain patriarchal hold on the society and contain the sexuality of women that pre-pubertal marriages were preferred. This practice ensured legitimate reproduction and the girl became the sexual property of her husband. In this way, female sexuality was legitimately harnessed and the chances of women going astray were reduced (18-19). Stating a similar observation, Ramabai mentions that not only was a married woman supposed to be a subservient being by the scriptures, the wife was also declared as the “martial property” of her husband, and was classed with “cows, mares, female camels, slave-girls, buffalo-cows, she-goats and ewes” in the Manusmriti (60). According to Pamela T. Washington, Ramabai reinforces the idea of women's oppression by creating analogies of women and animals. Drawing instances from scriptures and popular literature, she compares a young girl to a colt and after marriage, to a yoked, or controlled animal (292).

While the injunctions of the Manusmriti were a torment in the lives of married women, their suffering seemed insignificant in comparison to the life of suffering it condemned the widows too. According to the Manusmriti, a wife is a man's “ardhangini — the half-body of her husband. book-writers meant that a husband lived on in his wife even after his death; thereby the marriage tie remained in place, and any subsequent relationship between the widow and a man could only be adulterous” (Sarkar 2011). As a result of these prescriptions, while a widow's body was deprived materially, her spirit was drained by the bitter comments of the world and her sexuality was suppressed in every possible way. It is not surprising then that many widows chose to be burnt on the pyre along with their deceased husband in order to escape such a living hell. The “momentary agony of suffocation in the flames” is nothing compared to life as a widow. Women gladly consent and voluntarily offer themselves to please the gods and satisfy the androcentric norms of the society (Ramabai 75).

According to Ramabai, it is very difficult to ascertain the motives of those who invented the custom of Sati. But one fact that seems apparent is that self-immolation of widows on their deceased husband's pyre was evidently a custom invented by the priesthood after the code of Manu was compiled. Manu is considered as the greatest authority next to the Vedas. But nowhere in the Manusmriti does Sati find sanction. It was the priests who succeeded Manu who felt the necessity of producing some text which would overcome the fears of widows as well as silence the critic who might disapprove its performance. In order to substantiate their claim, the priests quoted a verse in the Rig-Veda which according to their own rendering read as the following: Om! Let these women, not to be widowed, good wives, adorned with collyrium, holding clarified butter, consign themselves to the fire! Immortal,

not childless, not husbandless, will be adorned with gems, let them pass into the fire whose original element is water (qtd. in Ramabai 74).

The authority of the Vedic verse was certainly greater than that of Manu or of any other law giver and therefore it could not be disobeyed. To further strengthen the validity of the practice more recent Smritis such as the one written by Vishnu, were often quoted in this regard. It states that a woman “after the death of her husband should either lead a virtuous life or ascend the funeral pile of her husband” (Ramabai 74). According to Gail Omvedt, Pandita Ramabai was “the first to proclaim, with great clarity, backed by her personal refusal to remain a Hindu, that the Sanskritic core of Hinduism was irrevocably and essentially anti-woman” (26). Ramabai was of the strong belief that an impartial reading of the Manusmriti would give the reader a fair idea of the misogyny inherent in the text. In her opinion, there was no other sacred book in Sanskrit literature that exhibited such leaves of detestable sentiment about women. According to Ramabai, “only two things on which all those books, the Dharma Shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and the modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day and orthodox high-caste men, were agreed: that women of high and low caste as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth, and the could not get Moksha as men [could]” (qtd. in Omvedt 26). It is pertinent to mention at this juncture that Ramabai or other Indian reformers were not the only ones to question the misinterpretation, manipulation, and misreading of scriptures. British historians such as Max Muller also mention that a study of the Rig Veda clearly shows that Sati was not sanctioned during the earliest period of Indian history. Muller noted that according to the “hymns of the Rig Veda and the Vedic ceremonial contained in the Grihya-sutras, the wife accompanies the corpse of her husband to the funeral pile, but she is there addressed with a verse taken from the Rig-Veda, and ordered to leave her husband and to return to the world of the living” (Muller qtd. in Ramabai 79).

Thus to reiterate, there is no doubt that Sati was a doctored sacrifice that was meant to exercise control over female sexuality. In order to make it more luring, this meritorious sacrifice came with its rewards. A woman who performed Sati was assured of getting into heaven. She also became an agent of salvation for her husband and to his family to the seventh generation. Even if his family was sinful, it was sure to attain the bliss of heaven and prosperity while on Earth. But the biggest motivation still was that women chose momentary agony of suffocation in the flames over a life of miseries and degradation (Ramabai 75-76). Thus the act was supposed to be voluntary in most cases. While some died for the love for their husbands, others chose Sati to obtain great renown. Still others chose it to get rid of miseries which they knew would fall to their lot as widows (Ramabai 77).

### **Scriptures and the Suppression of Unbridled Sexuality**

It may be observed here that the harsh treatment meted out to women in general, and widows, in particular, finds its bearing in the age old patriarchal anxieties regarding female sexuality. As a consequence, from the very beginning of their lives, women were brought up and trained to lead a life of subservience and curtailed expression of sexuality. As a means of distracting women from exploring their identity and intellectual potential, they were

compelled to become slaves of their own petty interests and to be passionate about ornaments and self-adornment since childhood. Adherence to such passions was naturalised for them as an inherent quality. This facilitated the induction of women into the institution of marriage and their role as wives and mothers.

Contrary to a life of self-adoration lived by a married woman, a widow was put through the severest trials. No sooner did a woman's husband die than she was deprived of ornaments, rich garments, and other accessories. Among the Brahmans of the Deccan, in particular, the head of the widow was shaved regularly every fortnight (Ramabai 82). These widows in most cases were girls of fourteen or fifteen years of age. They were cruelly deprived of everything they liked. Confined to the darkest corners of the household, these young widows were forced to wear coarse garments and eat only one meal during the day. They were supposed to stay away from family feasts and auspicious occasions. Widows were not only called inauspicious but were called names that were used for harlots and were addressed "in abusive language at every opportunity" (Ramabai 83). To sum up, the life of a widow was rendered intolerable in every possible manner.

There was also a clear conceptual distinction between a married woman and a widow. While the former was a sexually active woman and a reproducer (preferably of sons), the latter was a sexually-inactive non-reproducer. But in both cases, the *strimaryada* or the *stridharma* (the code of conduct for a woman) was to be preserved by a true *pativrata*. Violation of the strict sexual code was regarded as an offense "not merely because of the problem of ensuring legitimate reproduction, but also because it represented 'excessive' sexual energy which gender codes considered deeply reprehensible in the case of women" (Chakravarti 22). Widows, particularly, were looked upon with suspicion and feared that they might bring disgrace upon the family. Ramabai observes that the purpose of disfiguring widows by shaving their heads, by prohibiting them from wearing ornament and rich garments is to render them less attractive to men to discipline their youthful desires (84). According to Meera Kosambi, the "ultimate disfigurement served the dual purpose of rendering the unprotected widow unattractive to the male gaze, and of killing her pride in her appearance as a deterrent to her natural desires..." (94). At this juncture it would be interesting to mention Tanika Sarkar's observation regarding the laws of Manu and the situation of widows. According to Sarkar: The laws of Manu placed her in a risky liminality: Manu recommended that the woman be dependent, non-autonomous, all her life. The very law prohibiting widow remarriage made her a being at the margins, without a guardian, inhabiting quite literally a no-man's land, especially if she did not have a son to be her guardian in old age. So, more than her sexuality, her possible autonomy made her dangerous to the domestic order. (102)

It is this potential danger to the domestic order that led to prescriptions of the severest kind for widows. As a result, women were burdened with the discourses of honour and chastity. While there were no restrictions imposed on men, women whether unmarried, married or widowed were supposed to guard the honour of their family. Any misconduct on the part of men was either ignored or hushed up. But if a woman — especially a young widow — was found indulging in an illicit affair, she was surely punished for her

transgression. All these measures to curb the sexuality of women and of widows, in particular, bore an inherent duality and contradiction. As Tanika Sarkar observes that widowhood norms also expressed “a constitutive contradiction within Hindu domesticity. These norms outlawed desire for and of the widow, yet simultaneously made her a focus of desire, necessarily extra-marital, that might otherwise be directed at prostitutes (104)”.

It is hardly surprising then that the widows became an easy target of sexual exploitation by the members of their own family. Ironically, while on the one hand, women were to be protected by men, on the other, they were to be protected from men. A widow thus enjoyed no social advantage. Her own parents and relatives were reluctant to take care of her or sympathize with her. Customs and religious beliefs seemed stronger than parental love or the slightest display of humanity. Contrary to rules meant for women that restrict them in every aspect of their lives and as much as ask them to give up their lives on the pyre of their dead husband, the rules for men were meant to meet their needs. Regretting this lopsidedness of the scriptures Ramabai states that she had never read any sacred book without meeting hateful sentiments about women. Although there are occasional instances of praise and kind words for women, they seem to be “a heartless mockery” of women “after having charged them, as a class, with crime and evil deeds” (56). It was this disillusionment with religion that led to Ramabai’s conversion to Christianity.

Ramabai’s conversion came as a harsh blow to orthodox Hindu patriarchs. Due to her fearless views, she had been a suspect in the eyes of orthodoxy and her conversion added to this suspicion. With the help of the missionaries, Ramabai established Sharada Sadan for destitute women and widows in 1889. The aims and objectives of the institution were propagated through circulars and it was made clear that the home was meant to provide educational facilities and moral instructions for widows of the upper-classes. Eminent reformers of the times like Ranade, Bhandarkar and Telang agreed to be part of the advisory board of the institution. Praising the courage and efforts of Ramabai, Jotiba Phule in a pamphlet wrote that it was due to the efforts of Pandita Ramabai that “there was a beginning of education for girls and many great learned Arya Brahmans began to educate their helpless ignorant women to redress the errors of their rishi ancestors, but there may be many negative results of our critical writing about the tyrannical statements of the merciless Aryan book-writers on women. Mainly this: fearing that when the cruel wickedness of the Aryan books come to the attention of the daughters and bhat-brahmans they will make mincemeat of all the legends of the temples and gods and mockingly reject them, and that besides, in most Brahman families a continual quarrel between mothers-in-law and daughters-in law will arise and cause numerous tensions...” (qtd. in Omvedt 25).

In the light of these developments, it was not unexpected that the revivalist and orthodox sections of the society accused Ramabai of propagating Christianity in the name of education. Condemning the criticism, Pandita Ramabai observed that until Hindus come forward to take charge of the institution, the Christians would continue to help her. Nationalist revivalists, such as Tilak, openly expressed their concerns regarding Ramabai’s activities. In *Kesari*, Tilak voiced his suspicion and sought clarification of news that appeared in *Christian Weekly of New York* on 21st December, 1889. The *Weekly* reported

that two of the seven widows at Sharada Sadan were inclined to Christianity and regularly attended prayers along with Pandita Ramabai. As a reply to Tilak's demand, Miss Hamlin, on behalf of the management, published that "the teachers and the managers of the institution would act in such a way as not to interfere with the caste, religion or customs" (qtd. in Bhagwat and Pradhan). Preservation of indigenous culture was one of the prime agendas of nationalist revivalists and therefore any proselytizing carried out by missionaries was strongly condemned. Tilak fiercely objected the proselytizing activities of Pandita Ramabai. As a result of the nationalist fever that crept into the reform movement, the society was polarized between supporters and opponents of Ramabai. The tone of the reforms' debate and the polarization was based not so much on the broader idea of the propriety of Ramabai's reformist endeavors but on whether an individual of another religion — which was the religion of the colonizer — had the right to legislate reform in the Hindu way of life — that wanted freedom from colonization. Warning the advisory board of Sharada Sadan against deceiving the society Tilak observed: Such advisors would be guilty of deceiving society. The Christian ladies, trying to infiltrate in our society under the cloak of women's education and their supporters, however learned, would be regarded by us as enemies of the people of Hinduism and also of the cause of women's education (qtd. in Bhagwat and Pradhan, n.p.).

According to Bhagwat and Pradhan, Tilak's arguments were due to the conversion of ten students to Christianity in 1895. As a result of strong protests, Bhandarkar, Ranade and Bhat resigned from the advisory board on 13th August 1893 stating that management of the institute had departed from the original plan of action that was meant to govern the working of the institute. According to Uma Chakravarti, "Ranade's feelings for the Hindu widow was never in doubt but his inability to stand up to conservative pressure, even in pursuance of his own stated position was so poor, that his own colleagues and fellow reformers were disappointed in him" (Chakravarti 72-73). In reply to the resignations Ramabai wrote: My Hindu brethren thought I was Christianizing the girls...They wanted me to shut my room when I was reading the Bible and praying. I said, No; I have the same freedom to practice Christianity which these girls have to practice their religion...The Hindu friends were much offended at it and wanted to pull our school down and raise another school on its ruins; but I am glad to say that the foundations of this school have not been set on the sand, but on the Eternal Rock; it stands there to this day, and it will stand forever and ever (qtd. in Manoramabai, 117).

As a frenzied reaction to Ramabai's conversion and her work at Sharada Sadan, Hindu nationalists resonated with the age old Hindu fear of the beginning of loss of control over women. Alleging that her efforts threatened national/Hindu identity was a mere garb to hide actual patriarchal fears of Hindu orthodoxy. While the nationalist elite eulogized the image of women as goddesses and mother and quoted examples of contemporary women who adhered to models of national feminine identity, non-conformist women who did not assimilate such images were seen as a threat to the entire national social order. According to Ramabai, a majority of the society that professed women to be the mothers of the nation and the carriers of tradition and culture, were not foresighted enough to realize that women have been rendered helpless because they had been deprived of the opportunity to observe the

world and be educated. Questioning the intent of the nationalists who wanted to create ideal women and subsequently ideal mothers, Ramabai argued whether “imprisoned mothers be expected to bring forth children better than themselves, for as the tree and soil are, so shall the fruit be” (96). She continues her argument and reiterates that the complete submission of women to patriarchy driven socio-religious institutions has converted them into “slavery-loving creatures”. As a result, women have got used to a dependent living. It is this attitude that they eventually pass to their sons and this, in turn, creates a nation of dependent people.

### **Caste, Class and Widow Remarriage**

There is no denial of the fact that any change in the socio-religious topography of the society cannot be sustained for long without popular will and support. Recognizing the complexity of implementation of reforms for widows and widow remarriage in particular, Ramabai was aware that such a reform will not be acceptable to the high-caste Hindus who have conventional beliefs regarding the conduct of women in general and widows, in particular. Commenting on the efforts of the male reformers Ramabai observed: There is a class of reformers who think that they will meet all the wants of widows by establishing the remarriage system. This system should certainly be introduced for the benefit of the infant widows who wish to marry on coming of age; but at the same time, it should be remembered that this alone is incapable and insufficient to meet their wants (90 -91). She also realized that a wide lacuna existed between praxis and theory that could not be bridged in a short span of time. Moreover, a great amount of moral courage was required to translate words into action. Unfortunately, the reformers who professed opposition to approved orthodox customs were unable to deliver accordingly. Criticizing the hypocrisy of the social reformers Ramabai observes: I have known men of great learning and high reputation who took oaths to the effect that if they were to become widowers and wished to marry again they would marry widows. But no sooner had their first wives died than they forgot all about the oaths and married pretty little maidens (91). Despite fifty years of the campaign advocating upliftment of widows, no substantial change was visible in their socio-economic condition. Frightened by the society’s threats of excommunication many reformers stepped down from their ideological plane and conformed to normative societal customs. There were instances when the reformers were found wanting in being able to deliver what they expected from people. Ranade, a champion of widow remarriage, for instance, was forced to marry a virgin after the death of his wife in 1873. Similarly, his contemporary Gopal Hari Deshmukh ‘Lokahitawadi’ had to undergo prayaschitta for having personally attended a widow’s marriage. The reformer, Keshab Chandra, is also known to have got his daughter married into the royal family of Cooch-Bihar before she attained the proper age (Sen 9-10).

In this light, it may be stated that the patriarchal outlook that opposed the idea of widow remarriage also intertwined with the issues of social hierarchy of caste and the privileges and status associated with it. It is pertinent to note here that for centuries, patriarchal and religious hegemony within the Indian society was maintained through the hierarchical structure of castes which was based on a descending order of social authority. This authority and power was culturally created by generation and organisation of fear among the masses regarding a fall in their social prestige if they disregard the normative of the social

system. Simultaneously, it was the high-ranking section of the social hierarchy that set the normative for the rest to follow. The fear of transgression then helped, as in the case of India, the Brahman elite culture to become mass culture and thus maintain its social hegemony. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, caste acted as a “normative system prescribed for each group in society, according to its rank, certain codes of conduct or jati-dharma, which every individual had to perform in real life. This performance was believed to be the chief determinant of the quality of ‘body spiritual’, which determined a person’s ritual as well as social rank and therefore, took precedence over both the ‘body individual’ and ‘body social’. Any deviation from such codes would lead to the fall from the ascribed rank, or loss of caste, which implied the denial of interaction with the local community and sometimes even of essential social services” (151).

In the case of practicing widow-remarriage, the fear of excommunication and the pressures of social hierarchy generated two parallel discourses that simultaneously discouraged and encouraged the practice of widow-remarriage. The first social trend developed among the socially lower section of the society. As is well-known, widow-remarriage had always been strictly forbidden among the higher castes as well as most of the middle ranking castes. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the castes that permitted this custom also began to share the values of their social superiors. Bandyopadhyay notes that as the “Sudra jatis became socially mobile, gained access to elite culture, and became claimants to higher ritual status, they too began to conform to the patriarchal norms of the upper-caste elite families. Even the women of these castes were so deeply socialized into this essentially elite (or upper-caste) and male worldview that they too accepted without any question this patriarchal standard of morality” (152). Consequently, even when there were instances of widow-remarriage, the families of such couples were regarded of a lower rank than the rest of the members of the same caste. By the twentieth century, the practice of widow-remarriage was completely discontinued as a practice among castes that permitted it in the last century except for some of the castes that constituted the lowest ranks in the social hierarchy.

Despite the strains of following Brahminical socio-cultural normative, there was a section of the society that was eager in adopting the new reform. This second social trend was seen among the educated bhadralok that displayed immense enthusiasm in endorsing the idea of widow-remarriage. As the bhadralok expanded across caste boundaries due to the spread of education, a large number of people began imbibing the reform ideology. Widow-remarriage that was previously seemed completely unacceptable was now being seen as a signifier of one's entrance into the new status group of bhadralok. Thus women's reform and the practice of widow remarriage, in particular, not only carried with it a reformatory agenda but also functioned as a class signifier.

### **Defending Patriarchy and the Male Self: The Ruler-Ruled Nexus**

The association of the reformatory agenda with class also drew the attention of intellectuals like Ramabai to its association with power. As a consequence, she disapproved of the intentions of the reformers as insincere. She was also critical about the nexus between the patriarchal high-caste elites and the colonial rulers. In *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, she

stated that “under the so-called Christian British rule, the woman is in no better condition than of old” (62) and that British rule with Hindu men had “conspired together to crush her [the Hindu woman] into nothingness” (67) and by displaying such complacency British rule was “fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India” (67). Grewal notes that Ramabai argued against the partisan behaviour of the British, stating that “I care more for the worship of the mother than for the worship of the queen. I see no point in worshipping the queen while ill-treating our mothers” (qtd. in Grewal 213-14).

In addition to the scriptural dominance within the society, the British advent had only made things worse. The British government’s support to the Indian elite was influenced by their vested economic and political interests in India. When the British began their rule in India, they soon realised that the importance of conciliate the upper castes. Though only a section of these classes had held offices under the old regime, they had considerable influence over public opinion. Therefore, despite maintaining a stance of neutrality, the British made efforts to ensure the satisfaction of high Brahmans and influential jagirdars and inamdars (landlords). The British allowed a part of the old nobility flourish in order to moderate the impact of the colonial takeover and pacify those who were anxious about their new status. In a bid to establish control over the subjects, they also avoided ruffling the sentiments of politically important groups like the Brahmans. As a result of this arrangement, the British displayed reluctance in interfering excessively in the socio-religious matters of the people.

According to Inderpal Grewal, contrary to Tarabai Shinde and many male reformers of the times, Ramabai held the British government responsible for the condition of Hindu women (213). Ramabai believed that the British were ready to sacrifice the concerns of the Indian women as they did not wish to upset the high caste/class Indian men. She exposed the implicit motives of the British and declared that the alliance between indigenous and colonial patriarchies “achieved at the sacrifice of the rights and comfort of over one hundred million women” ensured the success of the colonial enterprise (68). She further stated that England was not ready to interfere because if it served “God by protecting a helpless woman against the powers and principalities of ancient institutions, Mammon would surely be displeased and British profit and rule in India might be endangered thereby” (67-68).

Consequently, assisted by the British laws a man could now “bring suit against her in the courts of justice to claim his “marital property” if she be unwilling to submit to him by any other means” (Ramabai 62). While scriptures numbered women among property items, according to provisions in the British law a husband could legally claim the possession of his wife in case she refused to stay with him. The famous Rakhmabai case serves as an apt example in this regard. According to Ramabai, while in olden times restrictions and compulsions were enforced by the community by giving the husband absolute power over his wife, under the British rule women were in no better condition. As for the woman, she could do nothing but submit to her husband's will and the court's judgement without uttering a word of protest. Ramabai opposed this false timidity that women were forced to exhibit.

Ramabai's critique of the British also brought to the fore the Brahminical view that had crept into the legal system. It was an administrative challenge for the British to govern a country that constituted people with a multitude of localized and unique socio-religious customs and family practices. In order to overcome difficulties in handling this situation, it was important to put in place a centralised judicial system that could be applied uniformly to all without any dispute. Recourse to Brahminical texts as a standard to determine socio-cultural normative was thus seen as an apt answer by the British. In case of a conflict between customary laws followed by a section of the population and the dominant Hindu laws, it was the latter that was preferred and the one that prevailed. To sum up, adherence to the Brahminical Hindu law was a way out for the British administration to formulate a less complicated, overarching legal code for the entire nation.

In addition to compliance with the Brahminical laws, the British appointed Brahmins to formulate a legal code that relied on Hindu texts. They were also appointed as advisers in courts whenever the need arose. The legal system thus put in place was recognised by the British and it was in accordance with this system that cases were presided in the Indian courts. It would not be incorrect to observe that as most Indian judges in the British-Indian courts were Brahmins, the legal proceedings were greatly influenced by Brahminical thought. Decisions especially in matters concerning the private sphere were not only considered on the basis of legal texts but also determined by religious texts, family traditions, and social circumstances. As observed earlier, the British too supported the intervention of orthodox Hindu laws as it gave them ease and convenience to rule the masses. It was easier for them to deal with everyday conflicts as well as legal tussles by referring to religious texts as compared to undertaking a first-hand investigation in every matter. In deciding matters concerning widow-remarriage and the succession rights of widows, the British followed the same trajectory of action.

Hypocrisy not only on the part of the British but also on part of the male reformers made evident the true motive behind reform. As Amiya P. Sen rightly observes, "the Hindus were quick to realize that 'reform' was not just about altering beliefs or practices, but invariably touched upon deeper questions of self-identity" (3). The identity of the indigenous male that stood jeopardized due to rise of the strong British masculine identity could get a new lease of life only if the former changed its image from being merciless to apparently benign towards women. The widow's question, in particular, was an apt answer in this matter. Interestingly though, while the solution seemed good, the Indian male reformers were in an ideological fix. On the one hand was the desire to compete with the normative British masculinity and re-assert the identity of the Indian male, and on the other hand, was the patriarchal instinct of not letting go of control over women.

Reform, therefore, embraced the larger domains of social and gender hierarchy than merely the specific realms of reform, widow remarriage, and women's education. Chandra Mohanty aptly notes, "ideologies of womanhood are created as much by the realm of the sexual as by the realms of race, class, and nation" (qtd. in Ray 2). In the case of social reforms too, the idea to let go of patriarchal control over women's sexuality was difficult to adhere. Moreover, the professed reform of the comprador Indian bourgeoisie seemed to be

an explicit replication of the Victorian companionate domesticity. One of the most overt ironies of the reform movement of the nineteenth century, therefore, has been the denial of its orthodox and patriarchal nature. The educated Indian men wanted women to be learned only to an extent that made them efficient managers of household budgets but never develop their rationality and make them intelligent argumentative intellectuals. Women like Ramabai who dared to go beyond this normative identity of the new Indian women remained caught in the political crossfire between liberal reformers and orthodox nationalists and more often than not were labelled as anti-national and anti-tradition.

The notion of patriarchal control over women, as we have discussed earlier, operated as an all-encompassing socio-cultural dominance. The nationalists as well as the reformers not only accepted but internalized this dominance. Thus the language in which they phrased their reform clearly revealed their concern to maintain patriarchal control over female sexuality. There is no doubt that the reformers were sympathetic towards the plight of widows, but at the same time, they also expressed their concerns regarding the falling standards of public morality and the increasing cases of adultery and foeticide. In such circumstances, where everyone held the unsatiated sexual appetite of women responsible for these social developments, the reformers could not remain unaffected. Widows, in particular, were the target of such allegations. It was believed that unable to lead a life of seclusion, they indulged in illicit relationships and thus brought dishonour to themselves as well as their families. It was thus necessary to find a socially legitimate solution to channelize this uncontrolled sexuality towards. Removal of prohibition on widow-remarriage was seen as an apt answer to this problem. It would not be incorrect to comment that reform for women and particularly widows, was thus meant to ensure the continuation of patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires as well as for the maintenance of social discipline.

According to Bandyopadhyay, the “growing sexual anarchy in society was attributed only to the inability of the widows to restrain their libido which, as even the more progressive *Tattvabodhini Patrika* apprehended, would affect other women in society and thus would completely destroy the family structure.” No doubt papers like *Tattvabodhini Patrika* pleaded for widow-remarriage in a language of concern, but they also “argued in a sexist language that widow-remarriage was all the more necessary, as the libidinal urge of women was eight times greater than that of men” (162). These views in print were a reflection of the concern that educated class felt regarding falling standards of public morality and believed that if this problem was left unattended, it would lead to social disorder. It was because of the patriarchal dominance in the reform discourse that the laws meant to help women remained ineffective for several decades. Moreover, the revivalist propagation of widow celibacy as an honourable practice and the gradual spread of this belief in all strata of society further dampened the cause. The caste/class elite portrayed the practice as a symbol of respectability thus appropriating the socially mobile populace into adopting their practices.

At this juncture, it must also be understood that in a patriarchy dominated social milieu that captured the imagination of the masses, it was not Ramabai's lack of nationalism or regard towards her culture, but her stand against men who were the cause of women's oppression that generated hostility against her. Her understanding and realization of the

inherent gender bias within Hindu scriptures further aggravated her repulsion towards patriarchal institutions and its supporters. It seemed impossible for women like her to accommodate themselves in the new models of Indian womanhood and appreciate the reformed Hinduism. Ramabai firmly believed that “Hindu men are weak it is because their mothers were kept weak and sickly; what is more important is that because women have had years of submission behind them they have been converted into slavery-loving creatures” (Chakravarti 72). She states that women “are glad to lean upon any one and be altogether dependent, and thus it has come to pass that their sons as a race, desire to depend on some other nation and not upon themselves (98).”

Thus Ramabai not only questioned the sanctity associated with the scriptures and contested the ideals of female virtue defined by male-authored scriptures, but also urged others to explore them objectively. Her critique compelled her readers to realise the ways in which a woman's sexuality was nullified and quashed through overt as well as covert means legitimised in the name of religion and tradition. In all this, what was most striking was that the women and especially the widows were supposed to behave as if their renunciation was voluntary. According to Tanika Sarkar, as a result of this apparent free-willed torture, what emerged was a very paradoxical stance on womanhood and widowhood where, “on the one hand an authoritative order that claimed perfect hegemony by grounding itself in the will of the subaltern — by being interpellated within her self-understanding; on the other hand, coercion and a penal regime” (Sarkar 2011: 101) was the order of the day. Whatever may be the case, women were not allowed the right over their body. Whether married, unmarried or widowed, rich or poor, of high caste or low, women were “doomed to a suspect existence” (Sarkar 2011: 101).

According to Mazumdar, the social reformers of the nineteenth century, in their efforts to improve the condition of high-caste Hindu widows, “fell back on the ancient scriptures, arguing convincingly that women did enjoy far higher status in the Vedic period, which had permitted them free access to education, ritual sacraments, divorce under special circumstances, and remarriage. What they did not highlight was the basis of these freedoms or the cause of their disappearance in the post-Vedic period” (271). Reform, therefore, never sought transformation but was rather a new avatar of old patriarchal strategies of control and hegemony. It is also pertinent to note that while the Indian bourgeoisie was a hub of reformers, it also had revivalists and chauvinists in large numbers who condemned all reformatory efforts. The rise in nationalistic fervour and cultural revivalism gave tough resistance to reformatory endeavours. Reforms were condemned in the name of surrender to colonial ideologies and the loss of authentic Indian identity. Not only did the nationalist revivalist see reform with contempt, they also suspected the efforts of the missionaries towards women welfare.

Thus Ramabai's critiques posed a challenge not only to the political and cultural project of Indian nationalism that was being carried out under the guise of reforms for women but to the foundations of patriarchy itself. It was her conviction that each individual had the power of performing the miracle of transformation and work towards the elevation of humanity at large, and women, in particular. Ramabai's opposition came because she

believed that efforts towards social change could bring some possibilities for women. She asserted that she “will not ask what is revolutionary or reformist, only what is good for women” (qtd. in Grewal 213-14).

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