
**Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation
awakening in the light of Death Centenary**

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***Abstract:** One hundred years ago on April 5, 1922, a great Indian woman left this world and went to the next world. 2022 is her death centenary year. If we take the year of birth, her birth anniversary is half a century in this year. I feel the need to remember her in this article to pay tribute to her on her death centenary. She is none other than that great noble woman of India, who played a significant role in the establishment of social justice in the field of women's liberation movement, political movement, labor movement, various social and family movements of women, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. At that time women had opportunities for physical and intellectual development. Women could enjoy equal freedom as men in society and no restrictions were placed on women's activities. The orthodoxy of Hindu religion, patriarchal society, caste system, child marriage, marriage of upper class widows, etc. are gradually raising their heads in every social sector of the society. In such situations in the Indian social system women to improve the status of Hindu women Ramabai led the way to educate and free women from the shackles of Hindu orthodoxy and patriarchy. In view of this, Ramabai's efforts and her activities for the women's liberation movement have undoubtedly occupied a place in Indian history as a significant episode. She also led a relentless movement for women's education, women's liberation, against labor oppression. Her fight against social justice and unequal education was strong. This year (2022) marks her death centenary. In the light of centuries of history, I have tried to present the story of an extraordinary woman Pandita Ramabai Saraswati becoming extraordinary in this research paper.*

***Keywords:** Brahminism, Death Centenary, Hinduism, Manorama, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati.*

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The famous Indian female social reformer Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was born on 23 February 1858, the youngest daughter of Ananta Sastri Dongre, into a high-born Brahmin family in the middle of the 19th century in the forested Karkele region of Gangamul's near Karnataka state. Ramabai, daughter of Anant Sastri, was a social reformer, learned scholar and intellectual. But her 'path' (destination) in life was not easy. She had to lose her parents at a young age. She had to fight for herself and through various adversities of women's. Pandita Ramabai took an active role in the women's liberation movement in Indian society against various obstacles and resistance. The predominance of so-called Brahminism in India and the reformation of Hindu society turned Indian society into a male-only pasture through patriarchy. Against her, she followed the path of his father and showed women the way to human liberation. Ramabai's father Anant Sastri was an educated Brahmin. He was a free minded social reformer. Women's education was forbidden then. Ramabai's father, Anant Sastri, was under the fire of the Brahmin society for taking the initiative to educate his young bride. At this time, Anant Sastri decided to leave the village and stay in the forest. accepted and continued to live in exile in the Gunmal forest region of Maharashtra. And Ramabai was born there.

Objectives of the Article

The aim of this article is to acquaint we with the life, philosophy and work of Pandita Ramabai who was an exemplary women and social reformer of modern India. After studying this article, we would be able to:

- Know the life, work and philosophy of Pandita Ramabai.
- Understand Ramabai's contribution to feminist thought and action in India.
- Describe her missionary and educational activities for woman's emancipation etc.

Introduction

This article will explore the ideas of an exceptionally brilliant so salary former and champion of women's education in modern India. She can be considered a pioneer of feminist thought and praxis in the 19th century Indian context. Her work transcended the geographical and cultural boundaries and contributed to emancipation of women in general. However, history has conveniently omitted the contribution of an intellectually sharp women like Ramabai Saraswati. This is mainly because her ideas and actions were quite ground-breaking. She resolutely fought for social reforms to ameliorate the conditions of women, particularly high cast windows who were living under highly oppressive conditions. She stood firm as a sole representative of women fighting against confining and crippling patriarchal society as well as an exploitative Hindu religious order. She bravely converted to Christianity as a mark of rebelling and challenging the orthodoxy of Hinduism. Her contribution to the causes of women and feminist discourse is not only ideological, but also institutional in nature.¹

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's Life, Work and Philosophy

Born on 23 April, 1858 in deep forests of Gangamul near Karkal (western Ghats) Karnataka state, to a very progressive and liberal Brahmin family, Pandita Ramabai experienced a perpetually wandering childhood along with her family. Her father Anant Sastri Dongre was a non-conformist Brahmin who sought to challenge the rigid Hindu social order. He taught Sanskrit to his wife which was an unorthodox act. Ramabai too was raised in unconventional way which prevented her from early wifehood and motherhood which was generally forced on to girls in those times. She was fortunate to have received education and break from gender specific roles inflicted upon women then. Her broad-minded father also trained her in Sanskrit language and sacred texts of Hinduism. She had learnt eighteen thousand verses from the Bhagavata Purana by the age of twelve.² Her father earned merger by reciting verses from the Puranas and their family was on an extended pilgrimage throughout the Indian subcontinent. This ascetic wandering existence inflicted upon the family hardships and starvation which took the toll of their health during a famine. The life of poverty, pilgrimage and predicaments continued even after the death her parents as these excursions continued for Ramabai and her sibling.³

During these wanderings, she saw miserable living conditions of child widows belonging to upper castes in their cruellest details. This made her determined from within to fight for the causes and concern of women within the obsolete Hindu fold.⁴ These trying circumstances also made Ramabai question the rituals, sacred texts and the philosophical groundings of the religion which she was following. Her brother Srinivas and Ramabai finally reached Calcutta in 1878 which was also a brimming place of Indian renaissance and germane ground of social reform movements. Pandita Ramabai came in contact with members of Brahma Samaj and missionary activities of Christianity.⁵ Her exceptional command over Sanskrit and erudite knowledge of sacred Sanskrit texts earned her the title Pandita (Wise Person) and Sarasvati (The Goddess of Learning). She also lamented the violence of colonialism through her very first literary contribution written as a Sanskrit poem titled, 'Lamentation of a Divine language' which was submitted to a conference that took place in 1881 in Berlin.⁶

She rigorously toiled to expand her intellectual horizon and also lectured widely in public on the subject of emancipation of women in which she drew references from Hindu scriptures. In the meantime in 1880 she lost her brother prematurely due to cholera which left her forlorn. She completely lost faith in her ancestral religion and as a mark of rebellion she married Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi (hailing from Sylhet district of Assam) who was from a Shudra (lower) caste through at newly introduced system of civil registration of marriage. Her husband was highly supportive of her work, but also was sceptical of Ramabai's new found interest in Christianity through a Baptist Missionary Isaac Allen. Miss Hurford who taught her English, also introduced her to the bible in Marathi. Later, Ramabai also admitted that she was influenced by Nehemiah Gorch's work and was cerebrally convinced.⁷

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

Ramabai eye witnessed the life of high caste widows within the Hindu social order. Their conditions were deplorable, dehumanising and despicable. They were ostracised, not allowed to dress the way they wished, eat what they liked, were debarred from attending family functions or jubilations, considered inauspicious and were also prohibited from re-marriage. Ramabai always wanted to work for liberating these high caste Hindu widows from the clutches of sanctimonious religious order. She along with her husband envisioned to start a residential school for child widows.⁸ However cruelty of destiny dawned on Ramabai when she lost her husband within two years of marriage and was left alone with a six month old baby Manorama in her lap to look after.

But the brave heart Ramabai was not the one who could be shaken by the testing times and she continued to embark on a remarkable, unfathomable and unique journey as a social reformer-activist for the women within Hindu religious order. Subsequently, she decided to go to Poona (now Pune), her native place upon receiving repeated invitation from Justice Ranade who too was a Chittapavan Brahmin.⁹ After Arriving in Pune, she plunged herself into work for social reforms and emancipation of women. She came in contact with members of 'Prarthana Samaj', a theistic institution that was very similar to Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta. Her close contact with social reformers like Justice Ranade and his Wife Ramabai, resulted in her very first institutional contribution and feminist activism to the cause of liberating women was in the form of establishing 'Arya Mahila Samaj' in 1882. This organisation sought to provide education to women and save them from evil customs such as child marriage. The discourse on social reforms was dominated by male patriarchs/hegemony and Ramabai was the sole woman social reformer during this time who aimed to contribute to the andocentric reform agenda on women's issues.¹⁰ The Arya Mahila Samaj blossomed in other towns of Maharashtra such as Ahmednagar, Solapur, Thane, Mumbai, Pandharpur and Barshi. At the same time, it attracted a lot of resentment from the conservative Brahmins of the day. The very popular Kesari criticised this act by stating that it is the task of men and not of Pandita women to reform the society for they will have to be under the control of men for a long time to come. However, she was undeterred by all this and wrote a book in Marathi namely 'Stree-Dharma Niti' (Moral of Woman) in 1882 which was her first contribution to feminist thought and discourse.¹¹

Ramabai was also instrumental in setting up a shelter home for high-caste Hindu widows. She added one new discursive terrain to the feminist discourse by appealing to the Hunter Commission of 1882 to provide education and training to women to become teachers and inspectors of schools. She also appealed to the commission to provide training to women to become doctors or medical practitioners which was crucial for reaching out to women patients in a highly gender-segregated Indian society. This invited lot of criticism from the conservative and patriarchal upper caste Hindus. It is alleged that her appeal before the Hunter commission later resulted in the launching of the Dufferin scheme to send British women doctors and nurses to India.¹²

Though Brahmins of this period were beneficiary as well as initiators of social awakening process, the Brahmin women were subjected to orthodox constrictions. Ramabai solitarily worked for all such women with a reformist agenda in her mind. She was severely vilified and

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

eventually was alienated by the so-called reformers, activists and her own people of that period. She worked for dignity and equality of women as well as overall gender justice for women particularly in Indian society. She has been looked at from multiple ideological prisms and thus, has been deified as well demonised. Many identities of her are constructed using diverse narratives which results in camouflaging the kind of work she did.

Despite her genuine efforts Ramabai received ire and acrimony from the conservative community in Maharashtra and subsequently decided to leave her native place Pune in the late 19th century to explore and expand her intellectual horizons. This departure from the native land also was a departure from the religious affinity and connection with Hinduism in her life. She already had become aware of the ruptures in her faith of her ancestral religion.¹³ Finally, she converted to Christianity when she visited England for her higher studies. Ramabai's encounter with Christianity, her missionary and educational activities and her overall fight for gender justice will be discussed in the following sections. Undoubtedly Ramabai was a prolific Sanskrit scholar, a champion of women's rights and education, a brave convert who also fought against hegemonic and patriarchal Christian dogmas.

Ramabai Saraswati's Encounter with Christianity

The umbrage and agony that Ramabai received from the conservative Hindus for her efforts to emancipate widowed women in India strongly contributed to her decision to leave for England in 1883 to study medicine. She established contact with Sisters of the Community of St. Mary, the Virgin. The Sisters' convent at Wantage in England agreed to provide financial assistance and accommodation to Ramabai. In return, she taught Marathi to the sisters who were supposed to come to Maharashtra for their missionary activities. Her experiences of this voyage are documented in her own words in Marathi published as 'Englandcha Pravasa' (Voyage to England).¹⁴ It is also regarded as the first travelogue written in Marathi. Immediately after reaching England, Ramabai met Sir Bartle Frere, the former Governor of the Bombay Presidency. She earnestly appealed for help in her book written in Marathi 'The Cry of Indian Women'. This book contained details of Indian women's oppression through early marriage, marital harassment, desertion by the husband and widowhood. She also made an appeal on behalf of the Arya Mahila Samaj for a 'widow home' in India.¹⁵

Nonetheless destiny had some other plans for Ramabai and she had to abort her plans to pursue medical studies upon knowing her escalating hearing deficiency. The suicide of her only Indian woman companion, Anandibai Bhagat, eclipsed her ebullience and Ramabai slipped into depression for a while. In September 1883 Ramabai and her daughter Manorama, both were baptised as Mary Ramabai and Manorama Mary Medhavi by the Anglican Church at Wantage.¹⁶ Though this decision of conversion to Christianity apparently seemed abrupt, it was the result of her long drawn disillusionment with non-egalitarian and anti-women Hindu religion. She firmly believed that Hindu faith subjected women to an inferior position and treatment and deprived her of even salvation. The Christian aspects of love and forgiveness, of service and care for the downtrodden (fallen) convincingly drew her towards this religion and she moved away from her

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

oriental religion. She believed that Christianity has a space for rehabilitation of the fallen women as against dire punishment inflicted upon them in Hinduism.

As expected, her decision to convert to Christianity invited a lot of wrath and disparagement and was pigeonholed as betrayal and mercenary behaviour. Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule were the only voices of defence of her conversion back in India. Soon she decided to continue her studies by joining Cheltenham Women's College to study the natural sciences, mathematics and English. In Cheltenham, when she got an opportunity to teach the English men, the church officials and the Bishops of Lahore and Bombay furiously objected.¹⁷ This was her first head-on struggle with orthodoxy in Christianity. She continued to have prolonged frictions with the Anglican Bishops and Nuns. Especially scuffs with sister Geraldine who was her spiritual god mother and was also possessively fond of Manorama Mary (Ramabai's daughter). Using her theological grounds of dissent, she refused to accept the Anglican dogmas and miracles associated with the life of Christ such as the Immaculate Conception and Resurrection. She insisted on accepting the 'Sermon on the Mount' as her principal doctrine. She was a strong-headed lady who refused to travel without an escort. Her narcissism and obstinate behaviour appalled the Anglican establishment. She was also accused of arrogance and lack of faith resulting from a strong anti colonial attitude and racial and cultural prejudices. She continued to wear the Indian dress and remained a vegetarian. Geraldine deeply lamented that, 'one of India's daughters whom we hoped God was training to carry a ray of light back to that benighted land should be returning to that darkness without the light of Truth'. Miss Dorothea Beale, principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, who was also a moderate feminist and championed women's education in England, however supported Ramabai whole heartedly in her endeavours and adventures.¹⁸

The Anglican hierarchy tried to mould her into a disciplined convert and efficient instrument of evangelisation by imposing the practice of Purdah and prohibition on her public lectures.¹⁹ The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai effectively document this multi-dimensional struggle and also reveals how rapidly and amazingly she also acquired mastery over English language. At any given point in her life, Ramabai however refused to fit into a mould of a perfect missionary as her conversion to Christianity was for a very personal quest for inner peace. She was aware of the fact that the kind of realisation she envisioned was denied to widowed women. Ramabai stands tall as she proved that conversion to Christianity did not mean giving in to authority of the colonisers. Ramabai's life trajectory amazingly sketches her nationalistic feelings as she insisted that Indian converts should wear a crucifix which has inscriptions written in Sanskrit. This intellectually gifted and spiritually aware lady followed Jesus as her Guru till the last breath of her life. She transcends existing categories as she traversed multiple roles as a single mother, devote but questioning convert, committed social reformer and a staunch defender of women's education and rights.

Ramabai's sojourn in United States of America

Ramabai's four year stay in England ended in 1886 when she embarked on a journey to the United States of America after receiving an invitation from Dr. Rachel Bodley, dean of the

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

women's medical college of Pennsylvania. She went there to attend the graduation ceremony of Anandibai Joshi, a cousin of Ramabai. Anandibai Joshi is remembered as the first Indian woman to travel to the United States to become a doctor. Her short stay in the United States of America was travelled across the United States of America giving public lectures, meeting various Church groups and women welfare groups, and also publicising her concern for plight of Indian women and her plea to raise a home/ residential school for widows back in India. The American visit truly catapulted her to become an activist, educationist and a missionary. American enchantment with freedom and liberty attracted her attention. In December 1887, the American Ramabai Association was formed in Boston, and a subsidiary opened later in San Francisco. This Association promised financial support for a secular residential school for Hindu widows for a period of ten years. Ramabai also wrote her first book in English titled, 'The High-caste Hindu Woman' in 1887 to raise funds for these activities. This book is also considered practically an Indian feminist manifesto for it fiercely criticises the dehumanising conditions of Indian Women sanctified by orthodox scriptures and rituals. Ramabai also worked on a Marathi book titled 'United Stateschi Lokesthiti ani Pravavritta' (The People of United States).²⁰ The book was published in Bombay in December 1889 after her return to India. Ramabai tried to highlight the importance of social movements and civil society in changing the society for better. She urged the Indian audience about the importance of following the pattern of American society in overthrowing the colonial rule in India.

Ramabai's Institutional Activism

After returning from her sojourn in America, Ramabai was driven by activism and wanted to translate this in to an institutionalised act. In 1889 Sharda Sadan (Home) of the Goddess of Learning), a home for especially widows (and also for unmarried girls and day scholars) was set up in Chowpatty, Mumbai. Social reformers and stalwarts such as Ranade, Bhandarkar and Telang wholeheartedly agreed to be on the advisory board of the organisation. It was a unique and one of a kind organisation which sought to provide education and vocational training to women and made them economically self-reliant. The Kesari which had previously mocked at Ramabai now applauded her single handed efforts in generating financial resources for the cause of Indian widows on a foreign land. The first pupil of the Sharda Sadan was Godubai who was later named as Anandibai and was remarried to Dhondo Keshav Karve (founder of SNDT University), though Ramabai never apparently worked to promote widow remarriage. Financial difficulties faced by the Sadan forced it to be shifted to Pune. This also ensured direct access to orthodox Brahmin community.²¹

Ramabai's decision to move Sadan to Pune resulted in backlash from the orthodox, patriarchal Brahmin hegemony. Sadan was accused of forsaking its secular principles and allegedly pursuing Christian propaganda. The whole episode was widely criticised in public which resulted in previously mentioned renowned social reformers withdrawing their support from the Sharda Sadan, the local advisory committee of the Sadan resigned and many wards were removed from the Sadan by their guardians. Boston Ramabai Association couldn't undo the damage, but at least exculpated Ramabai. She was totally marginalised by the conservative and anti-reform

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

community of the day. Later in 1899 she shifted the Sadan to Khedgaon, a place near Pune and it was renamed as Ramabai Mukti Mission. It has to be noted here that this act of converting the Sharda Sadan into a Christian missionary organisation presumably defeated the original goal of Pandita Ramabai to work for ameliorating the conditions of high caste Hindu widows.²²

The newly constructed school was overtly a Christian evangelical missionary institution. During a famine, she intuitively came forward to rescue affected girls and women from western and central India. However, B.G. Tilak described this act as “widows caught in Ramabai’s net during the unique opportunity of the famine years”. By 1900 the strength of the Ramabai ‘Mukti Mission’ reached two thousand women. The Mukti Mission greatly contributed to emancipation of women in the form of providing education, vocational training in nursing. Tailoring, embroidery, weaving of cloth and carpets, operating a printing press, gardening etc. Ramabai used to write a newsletter namely ‘Mukti Prayer Bell’.²³ Nonetheless, Ramabai was purposively isolated by the Maharashtrian community and lived in oblivion for the rest of her life. She also prepared a Marathi translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek. She was awarded ‘Kaiser-E- Hind Gold Medal’ by the British government in 1919 for her distinguished service to the Indian education system. Manorama, her daughter, accepted the award on her behalf. Ramabai passed away at the frugal age of forty in 1922, one year after the death of her daughter. Pandita Ramabai was “the most controversial Indian woman of her times,” Prof. Uma Chakravarti wrote in ‘Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai’. Ramabai was “a woman who circumnavigated the globe in the 19th century, built community in foreign countries and overcame the visceral challenges of diet, dress and language,” said Shefali Chandra, associate professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis.²⁴ Ramabai’s critique of Hindu orthodoxy and patriarchy, her conversion to Christianity invited an exalted price for her, to the extent of intractable exclusion of her references from the records of History.

Ramabai Saraswati’s Contribution to Feminist Thought

Ramabai’s childhood experiences, her liberal and quite unorthodox upbringing, lived realities of the oppressed women around her and her own experience of everyday hardships greatly contributed to shaping her intellectual and ideological landscape. Though she was educated and trained in Sanskrit language and scriptures by her father, she was very aware of the disabling and discriminatory confines imposed on women in the patriarchal Indian society. She travelled extensively not only in India, but abroad as well. Her exposure to the asymmetrical gender relations, respect for liberty and equality in the western world crystallised her analysis of gender injustice within the insular Hindu social and religious order. Ramabai who was an erudite Sanskrit scholar, hailed as Pandita rebelled against her ancestral religion by marrying a person from a lower caste and also bravely converted to Christianity. The gender specific social evils found in Hinduism made her revolt against it. She is remembered as an indomitable crusader against evil social practices and activist who toiled to ameliorate the wretched circumstances of women.²⁵

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

Ramabai's focus was always on removing structural inequalities and circumstantial disabilities that women experienced. She firmly believed that the gender based segregation relegated women to domestic spaces as mere wives, sisters, mothers on the basis of their sexual, reproductive and home making roles. This deprived them of any opportunity of self-actualisation. The married women (Saubhagyavati) enjoyed the highest status within the highly patriarchal social structure of Hindu society.²⁶ Women who had no children or who had only daughters and widowed women were given inferior treatment and status in society. Indian high caste widows were a classic trope for whom she worked all her life. Widows in Indian society were subjected to dehumanising treatment and an inferior status which was sanctified by scriptures, rituals and sacred texts. Ramabai argued for rescuing these women from these appalling domestic conditions and situating them in the public sphere through education, vocational training and economic self-reliance.

Pandita Ramabai's critically acclaimed book *The High Caste Hindu Women*, is a very important point of reference to understand the despicable conditions of high caste widows in India. Vivid analysis and unforgiving critique of the crippling Hindu socio-religious order was Ramabai's biggest contribution to concretise the feminist theoretical debate in Indian context. She became the voice of the millions of marginalised women of India. Her ideas aided to understand the structural, emotional and intellectual marginalisation of women that was prevalent in India for a very long time. Equality between sexes was the only logical solution to remove gender injustice, according to Ramabai.²⁷

Ramabai's feminist discourse must not take seriously her work written in Marathi, namely *Stree Dharma Niti*. In this book, Ramabai suggests and supports a Sati- Savitri model of women and advises women how to be educated and a good wife, Meera Kosambi writes that though Ramabai was a feminist activist, her writing in '*Stree Dharma Niti*' surprisingly casts her as surrogate male reformer. Ramabai in *Stree Dharma Niti* suggested illiterate and stupid women to mould themselves into self-reliant, self-educated good wives and mothers.²⁸ In a way Ramabai sounded unapologetically condescending through her highly Sanskritised and sermonistic language of this book. Nonetheless, we see a swift shift in her feminist articulation when she wrote '*Cry of Indian Women*'. Her changed orientation was a result of her close association with early feminists such as Tarabai Shinde, Anandibai Joshi and Rakhmabai. Later, Ramabai became a staunch supporter of marriage by choice and late marriages, but never openly promoted remarriages.²⁹ Singular focus of Ramabai's endeavours was women's education for she resolutely believed that women's education can free them from the cage of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. Ramabai's '*Mukti Sadan*' is a living example of rejection of caste discrimination and gender discrimination. Her articulation of women's causes and concerns particularly Hindu widows, passionate pursuit to fight for women's education and institutional response to fight for women's socio-economic emancipation is etched forever in the history of feminist thought.

Evaluation

Pandita Ramabai can be hailed as a solitary and revolutionary woman social reformer in the league of male social reformers of her times. She practically laid the foundation of Indian

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

feminist movement. Her entire trajectory was filled with extreme challenges given the primordial social conditions and conservative circumstances in which she was working. Yet the choices that she made and chances that she experimented with reflect her radical departure from the dogmas and orthodoxy that plagued not only the Hindu religious order, but also Christianity to which she converted later. She primarily fought against the patriarchal and denigrating religious and social ideas and practices which subjected women to a subservient position and meted out unequal treatment. Ramabai remains obscured in History because of the controversies around her and unconventional path she chose to tread. However, it will be a great blunder for the contemporary society to not pay attention to the ideological and institutional contribution of an exceptional, intellectual, intuitive mind like Ramabai. The year 2022 is memorable in history. That idolatrous noble woman; Centenary year of the death of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, the beacon of women's liberation movement and the new joy of establishing social justice and ideals. We pay our respects to this multi-talented noble woman.

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Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: The Pioneer of Women's liberation awakening in the light of Death Centenary

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