



## From Obscurity to Prominence: Tracing the Eminence of Giribale and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati

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### Abstract

Women's writings have historically functioned as powerful instruments for articulating experiences of exclusion, inequality, education, social reform, and human dignity. Consequently, many women who wrote, questioned, reflected, and participated in intellectual life remained inadequately recognised within established literary histories. The recovery and study of such writings is therefore essential not merely for expanding the literary canon but also for understanding the social realities and aspirations of women in different historical contexts.

Their writings frequently emerged from the intersection of personal experience and social consciousness. Through essays, autobiographical narratives, poetry, fiction, letters, educational writings, and reformist literature, women articulated concerns that were closely associated with their everyday lives—access to education, child marriage, widowhood, social restrictions, economic dependence, dignity, and the right to participate in public and intellectual life. These transformed personal experiences into broader social questions and created an important space for dialogue on the status and future of women. The works of Giribale and Pandita Ramabai illuminate the conditions confronting women and foreground the necessity of education, social awareness, self-respect, and greater opportunities for women who remained socially and intellectually deprived.

This article attempts to trace the movement of these women's voices from obscurity to prominence, examining their literary and intellectual significance within the broader history of women's writings. This article uncover the literary tastes of Saraswathi Bai Rajawade and Pandita Rama Bai - two women writers of South Canara.

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### Introduction

Women's writing occupies a significant place in the intellectual and cultural history of India. For centuries, women's experiences were frequently represented through predominantly male literary and social narratives. Within this wider intellectual landscape, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati occupies a prominent place in the history of Indian women's reform and writing. Her writings and public interventions addressed women's education, social inequality, and the difficult circumstances faced by women, particularly those deprived of educational and social opportunities. Her intellectual work connected the question of women's advancement with the transformative potential of education and knowledge.

The study of Giribale alongside Pandita Ramabai provides an opportunity to examine women's literary expression from another perspective. Rather than viewing women merely as subjects of reform, women's writings enable us to understand them as active producers of knowledge, literature, social criticism, and cultural memory. Their writings can therefore be read as important historical documents that reveal both the constraints imposed upon women and their efforts to negotiate, question, and transcend

those constraints. Through such an examination, women's writings can be understood not simply as literary productions but as significant interventions in the social and intellectual history of India.

Women's writing has been slow to come into its own for several reasons. There were not enough women writers and not enough access to education to make their writing possible. Their work has been dismissed as concerned with a limited world of experience as they were confined to domestic life. However, their writing has relevance and validity for more reasons than one. It questions values and structures hitherto considered axiomatic. It also questioned other patriarchal constructs like marriage and family. The development of women-authored novels is in itself a testimony to

### **Women and Educational Exclusion**

Extract from the Report of the Council of Education, Bengal for the year 1848-49 states that the Hindus keep their females so secluded that it was challenging for them to ascertain the character of the impressions conveyed to them. As they had no education and are brought into a state of ignorance, this must lead to demoralization.

The progress of female education in 19th century India was slow for several reasons. Indigenous schools for girls had ceased to function. Even though missionaries opened girl's schools, the high caste Hindus did not allow their daughters to attend as they feared attempts at conversion. In India, the British government's encouragement of female education was minimal. There was a shortage of women teachers and opposition to the idea of men teaching girls. In 1883 two Bengali Brahmo women became the first Indian Women College graduates; they had attended a college within Calcutta.

Even though we observe the creation of women's associations and their growth from local to national levels, a vast majority of these women came from families in which the men participated actively in social, religious or political associations. Children of Debrandanath Tagore (leader of the third Brahmo faction - the Adhi Brahmo Samaj) were also involved in efforts to improve the status of women. Among his daughters was Swarnakumari Devi, who married Congress leader Janakinath Ghoshal and combined reformist and revivalist consciousness elements. She formed a women's association, the Ladies Theosophical Society which existed in Calcutta from 1882 to 1886. It was open to women of all religions and intended to propagate the ideals of India's ancient civilisation. In 1886 she formed another women's association, the Sakhi Samiti.

Swarnakumari Devi was a prolific writer. Her novel 'An Unfinished Song' offers many insights into the attitudes of Brahmos. The novel heroine eventually marries an England-returned doctor supportive of women's rights. She justified public life for women based on the beneficial influence of human values in politics. While the novel's heroine was outwardly westernized, her dedication to the motherland suggested the traditional ideal of female religious devotion. Swarnakumari Devi combined both Western and traditional elements in her life. For example, her home had an English-style living room, and she entertained often but withdrew from society when her husband died and wore the traditional white sari of a Hindu widow. Very few women were approached by the early Brahmo women's associations and

social opposition to reformist ideas concerning women continued to be high.

### **Mapping the Gender Gap in Education: South Canara**

During the colonial rule, the position of women did not improve for a long time, because of their rigid belief in the early stages, of non-interference in religious rights and practices in the matter of inheritance. South Canara Gazette 1938 states that elementary education was free in the Municipal Elementary schools. But education was not compulsory. Medical examination was also done free of cost. A girl's school was opened in the Milagres church compound on 24th May 1857 by a school committee without the Bishop's prior permission, so he ordered it to be closed on the threat of ex-communication. It was reopened only in 1859 when some newly arrived brothers and nuns from Europe were ready to take charge of it.

South Canara Mission Society established Kannada schools at Jeppoo, Bolar, Kudroli, Mercara Hill and Bokkapatana. A girl's school was established in 1900 in the Bazar of Karkal, another taluka of South Canara, by Rev. Fischer. Girl's education fulfilled a desire to uplift the female sex, a commendable effort then. Comparatively, there had been considerable improvement in the strength and average of boys and girls attendance in higher classes. All municipal schools were accessible to the scheduled castes. There was even a case where one of the members of the teaching staff belonged to the scheduled caste. In the interest of efficiency, the strength of the teaching staff was increased from 27 to 28.

### **GIRIBALE - A Literary Voice in the Public Sphere**

Saraswatibai Rajawade, popularly known by her pen name, 'Giribale', was born and brought up in Dakshina Kannada in the mire of abject poverty. It is interesting to note that Saraswatibai Rajawade struggled with her life and her conditions when India was also working to become a free nation. Rajawade's life is nothing short of a spectacle in both the best and the worst. Born into miserable poverty, her life took strange twists and turns. From mother to her husband who was 37 years older, she was flogged mercilessly by one and all. Despite this horror of a childhood and her repulsive youthful years, Rajawade's resilience to fight her circumstances and gradually discover herself speaks enormously of her inner strength.

The family had moved from Maharashtra to a new home in Udupi in Karnataka, where Saraswati Bai lived. Though her mother tongue was Marathi, this young girl with only two years of formal schooling picked up enough Kannada to begin writing in it. The other side of the story is grimmer. As stated earlier, her family was relatively poor and Saraswati Bai was married off when she was fifteen to a man of fifty-one. She passed her school-leaving examination when she was twenty-five, ten years after her first writings had appeared in print.

But it is probably the intensity of these experiences that gave rise to the clear but angry voice of protest so evident in her earlier writings, where, the critic Vijaya Dabbe writes, "We find strong logic, bold attitudes and glimpses of radicalism." Her first story, "Nanna Ajnana" (My Ajnana), appeared in 1929. Since then she has written seventy-two short stories, 54 essays, 7 plays, 24 poems, 100 devotional songs, 3 novels, hundreds of health columns. Also, she put together the women's section for the magazine Kathavali and was the

editor of the journal Suprabhatha. She was a musician, could play the veena, a raconteur, acted in plays and had a brief stint in films.

Among the better-known of her stories are "Badavara Kannira Kate" (The Story of a Poor Man's Tears), "Kulavadhu" (A Bride from a Decent Family), and "Kali." She also translated stories from Marathi, Hindi and Tamil into Kannada. For some time, she edited a magazine called Suprabhatha (An Auspicious Morning) and was a regular columnist for Kathavali (a series of short stories) and Nisarga (Nature). She wrote on a broad range of themes; there were articles on health, inter-caste marriage, and the problems women faced in the different walks of life, as well as on aesthetics, language, and literature. It is possible that the several pen names she wrote under- Giribale, Vishaka, Vinapani, and so on- were a strategic move to deflect criticism and attack.

Rajawade's narratives have a savage intensity quite unusual for the genre. It was an organic expression that came from the depth of her personality. As her social consciousness was sharp she believed that literature should never become a 'Voice from high heavens' but must be a 'reflection of everyday life'.

Her compositions construct her identity as a modern woman writer who desires to reform the condition of women. Rajawade was influenced by Manjeshwara Govinda Pai, a literary stalwart in Kannada, whom she regarded as Gurudeva. Rajawade was amazed by his belief in the divine and his strong faith in the power of prayer. Due to her respect towards him, the publication of women's journal Suprabhatha, which saw the dawn of many new women's voices in literature, was stopped. He had repeatedly advised Rajawade against the idea of continuing the journal and compelled her to wind it up a year after its inception. His reasons highlight the customary gender implications of the age. His words portend a distrust of involvement of women in the print media. Thus, her creativity was forcibly curtailed.

Rajawade transcended all obstacles that came her way, and kept her antaranga, the essence of her being unsullied. Unfortunately, a unique writer who could have been the forerunner of feminist writings in the Kannada literary world, quietly disappeared into her own self.

### **Pandita Ramabai Sarasvathi**

She occupies a distinctive place in the intellectual and social history of nineteenth-century India. Ramabai's childhood, though one of hardship, has a storybook quality to it. She was born at Mala near Karkala in South Canara on 23 April, 1858. Ramabai – may be translated "Delight – giver" was the name her father gave, who determined that this little girl should have a chance for an education untrammelled by Hindu customs and restrictions. Perhaps it was because she grew up a wanderer, never tied down by the conventional demands of a social group, that she was able later in life to achieve more than other women in her time. After a brief initial period when her father Anant Shastri Dongre, had the patronage of the Mysore royal court, the small family wandered through different parts of India as readers of the Puranas in temples and other places. (The Puranas are collections of tales of ancient times). Dongre, a renowned scholar and teacher, believed in women's education and took many risks to teach his wife Lakshmibai to read. There was no sanction, he said, in the scriptures against women reading anything except the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Lakshmibai, in turn, took care of the education of her two daughters. "My pilgrim life began when I was a little baby." Ramabai writes in her autobiography. "When I was about eight years old, my mother began to teach me and continued to do so until I was about fifteen. During these years she succeeded in training my mind so that I might be able to carry on my education with very little aid from others." If we are to judge by the incisive grasp Ramabai had of ideas and situations or by her refusal to sacrifice her freedom of thought or expression at any price, this mother-teacher's achievement was no ordinary one. Ramabai's sketches of this period portray a close, supportive, almost idyllic family unit.

Ramabai lost her parents and her elder sister during the terrible famines of 1874-1877. She travelled with her brother to Calcutta, where she caused a sensation by giving lectures in Sanskrit and arguing with the shastris, or theologians. She was publicly honoured with the title Pandita. It was in Calcutta that she met Keshub Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj reformer, who convinced her that women could read the Vedas, and she soon began to study the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Ramabai's personal life was marked by one disaster after another. Soon after her brother died in 1880, she married his friend Bipin Bihari Medhavi, a graduate of Calcutta University. Their daughter, Manorama (Heart's Joy), was born in 1881. But Medhavi died of cholera early in 1882. Ramabai decided to devote her life to the uplifting of women and returned to her homeland, Maharashtra. She formed a society of ladies known as the Arya Mahila Samaj, whose object was to promote education among native women and discourage child marriage. She was welcomed by the social reformers, who organized several meetings at which she spoke of the need for women's education and their right to freedom and a life of dignity. But as she was to point out bitterly, later on, she was disappointed by the "talking-much-but-do-nothingness" of these educated orators.

There is no shortage of documentary evidence about this unusual woman, who was a legend in her lifetime. Her autobiography, "A Testimony", 1907, has been the primary source for half a dozen biographies. Ramabai was one of the few nineteenth-century women who were able to support themselves with their writing. (She also founded and supported a series of homes for widows).

Her well-known works include *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals For Women, 1882), a seminal work in Marathi, emphasising self-confidence, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship. It's sale paid for her passage to England. In "The High Caste Hindu women" (1887), she exposes the place and position of women in traditional upper caste India. The first edition of ten thousand copies of this book was sold out before she left for the United States in 1889. 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' numbers the unfortunate in her country as approximately twenty-three million widows, ten thousand under four years of age and fifty-one thousand between five and nine years old.

It is often asked why the number of widows is so large, to which question there are conclusion answers. First, young girls and even infants are often given in marriage to old men, who soon die, leaving the young bride's widows forever. Second, as an unmarried girl is a disgrace to the entire family, the poorest father will pay whatever sum he can to almost any man who will marry his child. Therefore in some parts of India, men have made it a trade to go from town to town, marry the young girls offered to them and collect the fees for

their support. Quin-quennial period report of Mysore gives as many as 180,947 child wives against 8173 boy husbands. An editor of the native paper commented on this report: "One cannot help but feel horrified at the sight of these figures." Her 'People of the United States (1889)' is a living example of how traditional Indian society treats women. She was a writer who not only explored Indian women's issues but also presented to the global audience in England and America in the 19th century.

Ramabai went on to the United States to attend the convocation of her cousin Anandibai Joshi who received her degree in medicine in 1886 and became the first Indian woman physician. Until 1889, she travelled all over the United States, raising money for the home she planned to start. Her visit was widely covered in the American press.

On 11th March 1889, Ramabai opened her Sharda Sadan (the home of wisdom) in Chowpatty, an area of Mumbai, a home for widows. She launched her mission to improve the lives and opportunities of Indian women. She desired to break the bondage of injustice and oppression against the women of India.

Ramabai was one of the few early voices of women in India. She was a participant-observer who wrote about women's questions with a piercing gaze. Her writings expose the nature and experiences of oppressive patriarchal practices, particularly in the context of widowhood and other distresses in woman's life.

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