“Tell them, that great reforms have again and again been wrought by instrumentalities that the world despised. Tell them to help me educate the high-caste child widows; for I solemnly believe that this hated and despised class of women, educated and enlightened, are by God's grace, to redeem India!”

Pandita Ramabai
Nationalist aspirations of the time were clearly engaged in balancing the need for social transformation with the effects such change was bound to have on prevalent social structures. At the same time, the colonial state was also weaving a parallel mechanism, which used gender as an index of progress and point to the status of women in India as a mark of backward values. It was an exercise directed at asserting their moral superiority over their subjects. More importantly, it was directed at creating a model of gender relations - as also happened in the case of other social divisions like caste - favourable to the ideologies, which were part of the colonial state. As Vidyut Bhagwat has pointed out, "[T]he colonialist articulation of gender was part of a larger project taken up by the colonizers to recover and set up the traditions as required by the colonial interest in line with their Victorian mindset. It was matched by an equally-determined process of rediscovering tradition on the part of the new middle classes."

We have seen earlier, there were significant differences within the leaders prominent on the socio-political scene of the time. However, when tested on the litmus of gender and caste as categories of historical analysis, their basic ideological unity is only obvious. In this chapter, we shall look at two quarters whence a discomfort with the reigning paradigm of nationalism was expressed, with a scathing critique of the predominantly Brahmin tone of contemporary political discourse.

A thorn in the side of nationalism: Pandita Ramabai and the question of gender

Recent feminist historiography has successfully demonstrated the position that needs to be accorded to women like Ramabai in Indian history. Such scholarship has analysed the circumstances in which she and women like her lived and worked, and the odds that they came up against in the highly asymmetrical gender relations of the time. It is not simply a matter of giving these precursors of modern feminism their due; it is rather a question of revealing the reasons of their erasure from history in the first place. Such an exercise is important because it makes obvious the limits of nineteenth century nationalisms in the Indian context. Ramabai's relationship with

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her contemporaries was complex and was based on her position as a widow and as a convert to Christianity, and, later in her life, on the fact that she began to propagate her newfound religion most energetically. While she was initially accepted within the reform fold on account of her work with women, she later became a source of discomfort due to her critique of her contemporaries and of prevalent gender relations, which they failed to address. We have seen earlier the nature of the internally cohesive — and at the same time also critical — discourse on tradition and history before the turn of the century in Maharashtra. Ramabai’s work, on the other hand comes across as an outstanding critique of this trend, and raises questions about the role of gender within contemporary notions of history and nationalism.

Seeking out a god for women: A life sketch.

Ramabai was the youngest daughter of Anantshastri and Lakshmiba Dongre, a Chitpavan Brahman family of high standing. They were wandering puraniks — who recited the Puranic verses, and popularised the stories of the gods and goddesses — who sustained themselves on the offerings of devout people who listened to their Puranic discourses. She was initiated into a life of religious discipline at a very early age. Throughout the course of their wanderings, her mother taught her to read and write and she became very well versed in Sanskrit and in the classical religious texts in the Sanskrit language. Her parents were a great influence on her life — her father due to his belief that women ought not to be left behind in religious pursuits and that therefore they could be taught the sacred texts, and her mother because she was an equal sharer of Ramabai’s education as her father. Anantshastri had in fact run into rough weather with local pandits on account of having trained his wife in reading and writing Sanskrit. ² Their wandering life was lived in complete and strict observance of religious codes and rigorous study of the classical texts. It was a difficult life, and they adhered strictly to the rules laid down for the bhikshuks and gave away even whatever little they received in the course of their wanderings, as offerings to other

² He was summoned by the local high priests of the Madhva Vaishnava sect, and asked to explain himself on the matter of allowing his wife access to sacred texts. Ramabai has recounted that “[H]is extensive studies in the Hindu sacred literature enabled him to quote chapter and verse of each sacred book, which gives authority to teach women and Shudras.” As quoted in Antoinette Burton, At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1998, p. 77.
Brahmans as their religious duty. According to the rules of an ascetic life, they did not keep any possessions and took only strictly what they needed.³ It was these hardships of a frugal and wandering existence that took its toll on the family. In the massive and prolonged famine that gripped the Madras Presidency, while they were passing through the forest near Tirupati, her father was taken ill due to starvation. In a letter written to express gratitude to those who had helped her in her work during the famine years later, she recounted the trauma of those early experiences with the hardships of life in a famine-ridden area. She describes her father’s illness, and consequent death in 1874. Soon after, her mother too was taken ill due to starvation, and the children – Ramabai’s older brother and sister – took care of her and constantly battled with the need to either beg or work for food – which was forbidden by caste rules and tried to save the parents. The mother too died soon after in the same year, and the children had to perform the last rites on their own. Ramabai, then only sixteen, travelled with her brother and sister further on, but her sister too died in 1875.⁴ Shrinivas, her brother, and she continued travelling as they had always done, “still visiting sacred places, bathing in rivers, and worshipping the gods and goddesses, in order to get our desire.”⁵ They continued to adhere to caste rules, but they had both begun to doubt the validity of the codes they had been taught to follow and of the quest their parents had led them to. Their overall faith in their religion had also withered. In A Testimony... she describes how the times were so trying for their faith in the only praxis of religion that they had known, and says that their “faith had grown cold”. They travelled far into the north, continuing a life of wandering hardship, and thence went far eastward. They reached Calcutta in 1878. This year marks a kind of turning point in Ramabai’s life, since it was here that she really came into contact with the mainstream of the reform movement in Bengal, and absorbed the influence with the wonder of a novice. So far they had both lived a life cut off from

³ See A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure, 1907, in Meera Kosambi, Pandita Ramabai through her Own Words: Selected Works. Oxford University Press. New Delhi 2000, p ... This text is a very moving account of her life, moving to the reader also because it is written in a remarkably dry, unsentimental manner, without glorifying suffering. It is one of the few accounts Ramabai has left of her life, and it gives a very good idea of the circumstances of a puranik’s trying life, and of the social fabric in which Ramabai had to negotiate matters of faith and of gender.

⁴ Anantshastri Dongre had been particularly insistent that Ramabai be allowed to pursue her study of classical texts and not be married at an early age because he had seen the workings of child marriage after he had given her older sister in marriage to a young man with no family, and who Anantshastri hoped would join in the family’s religious and spiritual quest. Check testimonies – Ramabai, page number.

⁵ As quoted in Antoinette Burton, p. 78.
secular influences and from the political turmoil so typical of that time. She was received in Calcutta as a Pandita and her fame as an unusually gifted and erudite woman spread far. She was invited to speak to women in purdah “on the duties of women according to the Shastras”, and it was here that she made her first contact with the Brahmo Samajists and with Christianity. On one occasion as she recalled later, she and Shrinivas visited Keshab Chandra Sen, whose family – including the women – gave her a very warm welcome. Sen gave her a “copy of one of the Vedas”, and asked her if she had read it, and she replied that she had not, since women were specifically forbidden to read the Vedas. He encouraged her to study it. She says,

“[N]ew thoughts were awakening in my heart. I questioned myself, why I should not study the Vedas and the Vedanta. Soon I persuaded myself in the belief that it was not wrong for a woman to read the Vedas. So I began first to read the Upanishads, then the Vedanta, and the Vedas. I became more dissatisfied with myself.”

In her recollections, there is an interesting and amusing account of her first encounter with missionary activity. She describes how at a gathering organised by missionaries, she and her brother were taken aback at seeing Bengalis sharing tea with them. She communicates how she had little idea about what exactly was happening there.

“We looked upon the proceedings of the assembly with curiosity, but did not understand what they were about. After a little while one of them opened a book and read something out of it and then knelt down before their chairs and said something with closed eyes. We were told that was the way they prayed to God. We did not see any image to which they paid homage but it seemed as though they were paying homage to the chairs before which they knelt. Such was the crude idea of Christian worship that impressed itself upon my mind.”

On being given a copy of the Bible, she recalls, “I thought it quite a waste of time to read that Book, but I have not parted with it since.” At the same time, she was reflecting also on the status of women and the lower castes within the Hindu fold. In *A Testimony*... she describes how by now she had become increasingly aware that

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6 Burton, p. 79.
8 Ibid, p. 304.
10 Ibid, p. 304.
women and the lower castes had always been excluded from access to religious tests. She says,

"These are the two things that the Shastras and others are agreed upon. I had a vague idea of these doctrines of the Hindu religion from my childhood, but while studying the Dharma Shastras, they presented themselves to my mind with greater force. My eyes were being gradually opened; I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned. I became quite dissatisfied with myself. I wanted something more than the Shastras could give me, but I did not know what it was that I wanted."

This realisation was crucial to the rest of her career. Meanwhile she did continue to lecture and to study rigorously all that she had learnt, and included the new influences to an ever-expanding intellectual horizon. In 1880, Shrinivas also died, and she was left truly alone. In *A Testimony*...she has said, "having lost all faith in the religion of my ancestors, I married a Bengali gentleman of the Shudra caste [Bipin Behari Das Medhavi]." By this time, she had begun being increasingly receptive to the influences of Christianity. While she lived in Silchar, Assam, with her husband, she was in touch with a Baptist missionary, Isaac Allen. She was greatly influenced by his account of Christianity and considered conversion.

"Having lost all faith in my former religion, and with my heart hungering after something better, I eagerly learnt everything which I could about the Christian religion, and declared my intention to become a Christian, if I were perfectly satisfied with this new religion. My husband, who had studied in a Mission School, was pretty well acquainted with the Bible, but he did not like to be called a Christian. Much less did he like the idea of his wife being publicly baptized and joining the despised Christian community. He was very angry and said he would tell Mr Allen not to come to our house any more. I do not know just what would have happened had he lived much longer."

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11 Ibid, p. 304.
12 Ibid, p. 305. She says so specifically in order to explain that if she were to follow prescribed religious codes, then marrying a man of a lower caste, especially a Shudra would be absolutely forbidden. Compared to the conventions of her time, she also married late – she was nearly twenty – and she defends her father’s insistence that this be so by saying that he had already witnessed the ill-effects of child-marriage in the case of her sister.
13 Of one of the discussions with Allen, she says, "He explained the first chapter of the Book of Genesis to me. The story of the creation of the world was so unlike all the stories which I read in the Puranas and the Shastras that I became greatly interested in it. It struck me as being a true story, but I could not give any reason for thinking so or believing it." Ibid, p. 305.
14 Ibid, p. 305.
On the death of her husband within two years of marriage, she and her daughter Manorama came to Poona. Here she became involved with the Prarthana Samaj, and came into contact with reformers of the time including Ranade.\(^{15}\) She arrived on the scene at the height of the debate on social reform, where gender was a central question, with women as objects of reform, rather than the subjects and the negotiators. As we have mentioned earlier, gender was becoming central to the reform debate partly also because it was held up even by the colonial state as a mark of their moral superiority over their subjects and their backwardness. The response to a figure like Ramabai — now a widow, very well versed with the sacred texts — was complex. While on the one hand, she was received as a woman of achievement, when the question of women’s education was hotly debated, conservative sections felt heavily threatened. By the time she arrived, her commitment to the women of India had become strong, particularly because her travels had given her a panoramic view of the relationship between custom, tradition, religion and the position of women as inscribed within this triad. This compounded the kind of fear and hatred that the conservatives felt for a woman like her — and which they freely expressed in the public meetings where she spoke, by simply shouting her down aggressively — and demonstrated to her yet again the impossibility of being allowed any progressive space by the dominant Brahmanical patriarchy.\(^{16}\) She founded the Arya Mahila Samaj, an organisation dedicated to the cause of women’s education and their general uplift within social reform. She appeared before the Hunter Commission in 1882, and strongly stated the case for education for women and the need for women educators and teachers. She also pointed out the need for women doctors who could treat women who otherwise would not seek treatment from male doctors. Right from that time, she had her sights set firmly on a home for widows, which, however, did not gain desired support from her contemporaries. Her situation is remarkable in the sense that within the reform circles in Poona, she was a lonely figure. Her break from tradition was obvious — her late marriage to a man of the Shudra caste, her erudition

\(^{15}\) The Prarthana Samaj had been started in Maharashtra on the encouragement of Keshab Chandra Sen and the impetus of the Brahmo Samaj.

\(^{16}\) Criticism from women was described in the *Reminiscences* of Ramabai Ranade’s, Ranade’s wife, as follows: “We cannot tolerate such sacrilege. What an accursed thing. Her father had turned her into a devotee and wedded her to the heavenly bridegroom Shri Dwarkanath. And yet this wretch married a Bengali baboo and polluted herself. And did she at least build a home after that? No fear. She brought utter ruin on everyone connected with her and is now out to pollute the whole world.” Ramabai Ranade, *Reminiscences*, p 82, as quoted in Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, p. 313.
in the classical Sanskrit texts from which women within the Hindu fold were kept away, and then her status as a widow, because of which she was under ever greater surveillance – were all factors which made her a threatening figure. While conservatives naturally never had any difficulty in maligning her and opposing her and slandering her publicly – and this included Brahmin women – her contact with the Brahmanical reformers was ambiguous. As Uma Chakravarti has pointed out, "[T]he sense of social isolation was compounded by the absence of religious moorings. Her peculiar location as a woman without any close kin in a world of male reformers ‘intellectually’ engaged in transforming Brahmanical Hinduism without addressing central questions, all well established in professions and surrounded, in the main, by docile and loving women, needs to be borne in mind. Ramabai’s search for personal fulfilment as well as her struggle to understand, and conceptualise women’s oppression from her own position as a woman were vastly different from the motivations and worldview of the men around her." 17 Her sense of urgency regarding religious fulfilment and her will to commit herself to the cause of women, widows in particular, came together at this time in a coherent impulse. Her own experiences as a woman and a widow had demonstrated to her clearly the need for a radical change, which is why her conversion and her commitment to working for Indian women need to be seen together, and not as isolated dimensions of her life. 18 Her earlier contact with missionaries had left a strong imprint on her mind, and in her quest for religious fulfilment, in the course of which neither the bhakti tradition nor the Brahmo ideal had seemed entirely satisfactory to her, she came into renewed contact with missionaries. One Miss Hurford who taught her English, also introduced her to the bible in Marathi. Somewhat later, she also was influenced by Nehemiah Goreh’s work, and she admitted that she was intellectually convinced. 19

It was during this early phase of considerable disappointment with the public figures’ lack of interest in doing anything concrete and practical for the women who were so heavily discussed, that she decided to take specific steps in the direction of

17 Chakravarti, p. 312.
18 "Also, Ramabai was a product of nineteenth century social forces, a widow who had a social agenda on widowhood. Her need and search was thus for a solution that could simultaneously accommodate her social agenda as well as her personal quest for religious fulfilment." Chakravarti, p. 314.
19 In this connection, Father Goreh is an interesting figure. He was a high caste Brahmin who converted to Christianity, out of conviction because he found “personal fulfilment in Christ rather than in Christianity as it was institutionalised.” Chakravarti, p. 315.
creating an infrastructure for young widows. She decided that she would first equip herself with training in medicine. At the time there were no institutions to train women in medicine. She therefore decided that she would go to England to acquire the skill. In Poona, she had been in touch with the sisters of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin (CSMV) who had their headquarters in Wantage, where the sisters made arrangements for her to stay. In order to raise the money required for her to arrange her trip and her stay there — and she was against receiving charity — she wrote the famous Stri Dharma Niti (1882). This book is broadly about “morals for women”, but it stresses on the question of women’s independence and, in addressing itself to women, it advises them to be attentive to their self-cultivation. While it reads surprisingly like it were close to the reformist tone so typical of the time, it is a tone that does not last in any of her later work. In 1883 she left for England with her daughter Manorama, and Anandibai Bhagat, who accompanied her to do a course in teacher training, where she arranged that she would earn her stay by giving lessons in Marathi. It is the work of the sisters at Wantage that showed her Christianity in action, and resolved the dilemma finally. It was the Christian aspect of service and care for the downtrodden that finally drew her, apart from the actual work that the sisters at Wantage were doing for poor, abandoned, ‘fallen’ women. At this stage, she was not looking for any rational or philosophical satisfaction from Christianity; it was the grassroots work, for which she only saw violent opposition in the religion of her ancestors. She recalls in her account of the Kripa Sadan, a similar home for ‘fallen’ women that she set up on her arrival,

“[A]s a Hindu, I was totally a stranger to the conditions and needs of the so-called ‘fallen’ women in this country. The Hindu women of the higher castes and upper ranks are kept in ignorance of the conditions of their less favoured sisters. The caste system and the Hindu Shastras, society and social customs, all unite in despising and condemning these women who have fallen because

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20 According to Antoinette Burton however, there was one in Madras. Burton, p. 83.
21 Vidyut Bhagwat has pointed out that the nature of her arguments in this book was really because she had not yet made a complete break with the reformist circle and in spite of her critique of the Hindu tradition and the position of women within it, ideologically, she was operating within the same circle. Besides, such a tone was important because she was writing the book after all to earn her fare to England. Vidyut Bhagwat, Pandita Ramabai’s Stri-Dharma Niti and Tarabai Shinde’s Stri-Purus Tulana: The Inner unity of the Texts in Anne Feldhaus, (ed.), Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society, State University of New York Press, Albany. 1998, pp. 192-214, p 203.
22 Burton, p. 84.
they were deceived by fallen men. Yet men are allowed to go without any punishment for their sins.”

For her, Christ became the symbol for the possibility of improving the lot of women in India, and on account of the nature of worship as described by Christ, she converted to Christianity in the same year, (September 1883), with Sister Geraldine, who later compiled Ramabai’s correspondences, as her spiritual mother. There was an immediate welter of reactions from the press in India, and even the reform circles reacted negatively. This reaction was to become much worse once she started work ‘in the field’, so to speak. The print media criticised her heavily; a typical response was as follows: “Pandita Ramabai was in the first instance a Hindu, then she became a Brahmo, now she has become a Christian. This shows and proves she is of unstable mind. We should not be surprised if she becomes a Muslim soon. She has only to meet a Muslim Kazi who will convince her that his religion will give her peace and salvation.”

All the earlier approval, however limited, became redundant and she no longer represented the greatness of Indian women, but became a voice of threatening critique. Jotirao Phule was the only voice of defence of her conversion.

From Wantage, she went to the Cheltenham Ladies’ College, and began her long association with Dorothea Beale, the principal of the college at the time. She found herself in the position of a rebel once again, and refused to be moulded for purposes envisioned by the church for her as a missionary. In Cheltenham too, she had joined as a student on the understanding that she would give lectures in Marathi, and when the opportunity arose for her to give lectures to both English men and women, there was categorical opposition from the Bishops of Lahore and Bombay. They argued that Ramabai’s potential for missionary activity in India was immense, and that it should not be sacrificed, since a native woman teaching outside the restricted church community of women, would be totally scandalous back home. By then, the contest for the shaping of Ramabai’s spiritual life was becoming tense, with Sister Geraldine and Dorothea Beale trying to deal with a situation in which Ramabai was responding to her increased exposure with greater spontaneous questioning of

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23 "Short History of the Kripa Sadan, or Home of Mercy", in Pandita Ramabai through her own words, edited and compiled by Meera Kosambi, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 278.

24 Indu Prakash, 19th November, 1883, as quoted in Chakravarti, p. 319.
institutionalised Christianity. Burton has pointed out the intentions behind this contest for the direction her faith was supposed to take: “Eager to mould Ramabai into the most efficient instrument of evangelisation possible, the Anglican hierarchy invoked the practices of purdah as they understood them as justification for secluding Ramabai from the public eye in England. Contamination of Ramabai by public exposure to mixed audiences would, it was believed, endanger her special access to Indian women – access not afforded to either male or female British missionaries, nor even to male Indian converts. The prohibitions placed on her lecturing in public may well have been intended to discipline a wilful convert, but they were also part of a set of strategies designed to maximise evangelical success. Furthermore, by dictating the terms of her experience in England, the Bishops were intending to shape the methods of her future work in India.” Her conflict with the church as a difficult-to-control convert continued late into her career, and became quite acrimonious, given the disappointment of the members of the Anglican Church at Ramabai refusing to fit into the mould of the perfect missionary. Recounting some of these facts here demonstrates the problematic attitude of the Anglican Church and the nature of her faith, which she would not allow to be dictated by anybody, not even those in authority in her new religion. More importantly, it also goes to show that the category of ‘the-coloniser-and-his-religion’ was not as simple as the widespread nationalist perception would have it. Ramabai converted out of a personal spiritual quest with the full knowledge that the kind of fulfilment she sought was denied – and had always been denied – to women within the fold, especially widows. Her rejection of the dominant religious codes of her time did not distance her from a vision of the uplift of those women who were either caught in the vortex of religion, tradition and their duties as women, and who were, in a sense, outside the fold. She thus challenged the idea, that conversion to Christianity meant giving in to the authority of the coloniser.

25 Cf. Antoinette Burton for details about the problems between Dorothea Beale and Sister Geraldine over the way they were tied to obeying their superiors in the church who only thought that Ramabai could be used for missionary purposes, while her conversion was a totally different matter for her.
26 Burton, p. 91.
27 She did not change her lifestyle to follow the image of a Christian, and continued with many of her daily practices, which were looked upon by people of the church as caste prejudice. See Chakravarti, pp 323-324.
28 For a discussion of Ramabai’s faith within a broader question of conversion, see Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 118-152.
Her journey to America was markedly different from her experiences in England, which really explain why she might have wanted to seek out different spheres to continue her work. As it was, by then she had had to abandon her study of medicine on account of her increasing deafness. She left England with a lot of resistance on the part of the Anglican Church, who wanted to keep her daughter back. Finally, it was because “[T]he Anglican missionaries were not sympathetic to Ramabai’s attempts to integrate in her life and her work a commitment to her own people and culture with a deep faith in Christ.”

In her own accounts of her experiences in America, we find a kind of relief at newfound freedom. In her travel account about her stay in America, United Stateschi Lokasthiti aani Pravasvritta, she makes the observation that the difference between England and America was the relationship between religion and politics, pointing out to greater freedom in religious matters that she experienced in America. She also points out that the monarchy and the Anglican Church were integral parts of a whole, and that the Church dictated a great deal. In criticism of the relationship between politics and religion in the specific colonial context, she says,

“[T]his practice of extracting forced obeisance, in a progressive country like England, is very strange indeed. It is even said that the bishops and other clergymen of the Church of England who go to our country to perform ecclesiastical duties for the Government are paid fat salaries from the Treasury of India....”

pointing out also that the monarch invariably had to belong to a particular branch of the church. She astutely points out that in this matter, the situation in the United States was more egalitarian, since unlike in England, the state did not extract taxes for the funding of any state-sanctioned branch of the church, and that everything came from donations and the goodness of committed people. She also remarks that the denomination of the church you belonged to did not seem to matter overmuch. Some of this restraint that she experiences in America might also be explained by the fact that Indo-American missionary contact depended heavily on the colonial

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29 Chakravarti, p. 325.
presence, and was a relatively recent phenomenon. In England she was very aware of being a colonial subject, and the situation in America was a welcome change. She went apparently to attend the convocation of Dr Anandibai Joshi, who was also a distant cousin, and the first woman from Maharashtra to become a doctor of medicine. But it was with the larger purpose of raising money for her future work in India. She undertook a rigorous routine of lecturing, meeting new people, addressing gatherings, writing about her experiences and travelling, which she did extensively from coast to coast. She did not merely stick to the company of the missionaries, but exchanged ideas with people from various social movements, and kept track of political happenings. Her writings on her stay in the United States, which lasted for two years, are a very engrossing account of the social milieu, the position of women, which Ramabai found to be more equal than in her home country, and the nature of work, social organisation, the responsibilities of the government, the values of egalitarianism and the her perception that even black people were treated with respect.

In her description of the position of women, she gives a very well informed account of the achievements that the women of America ad made in various fields including education, health, law, and the sciences. She even gives precise statistics regarding these developments, and clearly draws inspiration from the women’s movement in the United States. A striking feature of some of these descriptions is that she links women’s education with gainful employment, something that till that time had not even occurred to all those who were hotly debating women’s uplift in India. It is not entirely a positive picture she paints, and there are many astute observations on matters relating to women –

“In 1789, the male Senators of Massachusetts made a new law allowing women to give general education in the state-run public schools – whether to

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32 In the Introduction to the above mentioned book, Kosambi has described the situation thus: “While Anglo-American religious interests coincided in India, where most westerners were complicit in the Orientalist, Christianising project in some way, the experience of an Indian visiting the two countries was often agreeably different, more so in the USA than in England. For Ramabai, the persistent religious friction with some Anglicans in England, with their vested interests in her proposed missionary career in India, was replaced by American tolerance of her non-denominational Christianity; it allowed her to force an instant and effective bond with her audiences.” P. 20.

33 For a moving account of Dr Anandibai Joshi’s short life – ironically, she died soon after her arrival in India, of tuberculosis, which the local vaidya refused to treat because he found it intolerable that a woman should have dared to study medicine and gone abroad for the purpose - see S. J. Joshi, Anandi Gopal, Translated and abridged by Asha Damle, Stree, Calcutta, 1992.
test women’s ability to teach in schools, or to get the job done at low salaries, it is difficult to ascertain.\textsuperscript{34}

In her descriptions, she recognises the value of women’s entry into the public space, to which she attributes the general sensitisation to women and matters relating to them. In this regard, her description of the world of the print media and women’s entry into it, and their journey towards specialised publication for women is worth reading, even as a primer for modern day feminism.\textsuperscript{35} In the course of making appeals for funds to help widows in India, she wrote \textit{The High Caste Hindu Woman} (1888) in order to make the condition of women in India more widely known. This book helped to raise the basic fund for the widows’ home that she was to set up on her arrival. She was also able to pay back the sisters at Wantage. Following this the American Ramabai Association was set up to continue raising funds for the home in future.\textsuperscript{36} The Sharada Sadan, as she called it, was opened in Bombay in March 1889. She continued to participate in every opportunity to speak on the question of the rights of women, a matter that still had not been quite formulated in this manner. In her work with widows in the Sharada Sadan, she organised everything around the principle that they had to be readied for society again, which would have to accept her as a useful social being, rather than as an outcaste and domestic drudge. Which is why, unlike the noise about widow-marriage – a commitment that many could not stick to – her methods of dealing with the question of widows in society were different, and she did not see remarriage as the only option of legitimising a widow’s existence. The Sadan therefore taught women a lot of skills according to inclination, and by the end of the century she had rehabilitated many young women as teachers in educational institutions, and many had even been married again.\textsuperscript{37} In the course of the next decade, she weathered some real and fabricated storms regarding her work. As it was, a widows’ home where they were to be educated, and headed by a Christian \textit{woman}, were too threatening for the conservative set-up in Poona where the Sadan had moved from Bombay. Since the Ramabai Association wanted to operate in tandem with the existing social codes, men were put in on the managing board, which included several Brahmin men reformers. Rumours about the conversion of widows

\textsuperscript{34} Pandita Ramabai, \textit{United Stateschi...}, in Kosambi, p. 209.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{36} Chakravarti, pp 325-6.
\textsuperscript{37} See “To the Friends of Mukti Mission and School", April 1900, pamphlet reproduced in Kosambi, pp 261-277.
in the Sadan made waves, because it was unacceptable that these social outcastes, which now included women from the lower castes should reject Brahmanical patriarchy as unacceptable and actually dare to exercise independent choice. The attack from conservative quarters was absolutely vitriolic. In an editorial in the Kesari, Tilak stated the case:

“We all know that Pandita Ramabai is a learned woman, but we had never imagined, that her intelligence would be so good at finding escape routes from the law. She has gone to great efforts to achieve all that she has, but if all her erudition is used to convert young widows in Hindustan, then it must be said to be a great misfortune for Maharashtra. The fact that she converted ought to have been considered a mark of her impatience and fluidity of mind. But what has recently come to light shows how this priestess is destroying the religion of her fellow Indians with the help of foreigners. (Emphasis added). It this had been come upon in political activity, then such a person would be considered a traitor and penalised for it – it has not happened in her case because the sense of religiosity of the Hindus is magnanimous. For this though, we do not believe that she can be absolved of the blame of cheating the nation.”

This whole controversy made it obvious, that the real on-the-ground question of the lives of women daily weighed down by the deadweight of tradition and caste and religious codes was in some way dodged by Hindu society. For the reformers, a home like the Sadan took care of a place for such women to go, so that they did not have to bother about having to do anything in concrete terms. However, even for them, an open acknowledgement of the “the widows’ abandonment of the ancestral faith” was unpalatable, “since this was tantamount to a critique of Brahmanical patriarchal tradition within which they had comfortably accommodated their own agenda of reform.”

Ramabai’s life however continued to pose challenges to the rigidity of Brahmanical patriarchy. She went on to expand the scope of her work to include sexually abused – in her words ‘fallen’ – women with the opening of the Kripa Sadan, and for famine affected women, the Mukti Sadan, later Mukti Mission. By 1900, over three hundred girls had been rescued from the famine affected areas and housed in the Mukti Sadan. In her work during the famine years, her major concern was also the fact that many young women were being enticed by pimps, who made use of their orphaned and/or vulnerable position to lure them away. Her concern was also over

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38 Kesari, 29th August, 1893.
the harassment of young women and girls by government officials. Just as every other phenomenon, the famine was also complicated by caste and gender prejudices, due to which women who had once lived in a camp could not be taken back into the household, and girls who had socialised with lower caste people in the camps for famine relief that were the order of the day, were practically abandoned. With a consistent eye on the manner in which such situations would affect women, she was also deeply moved by the manipulations of caste. In the pamphlet about the Mukti school and mission, she writes,

"They will not allow kind Christian people to rescue the starving widows and orphans - because their ministers and other grand people have brought their influence to bear on them for the defence of the Hindu religion. They are saying that the orphans taken by the Christian missionaries will be Christianised, and so they will not be allowed to be taken out of the states. But many of us know that these poor children are not cared for. Many are actually dying by neglect. Young widows are being enticed by wicked people and sold to sin, and the infirm people cannot do anything to save their own lives. It were a noble thing for the Hindu religion to have so many thousands of martyrs, if only they were willing martyrs, but these poor defenceless thousands are sacrificed on the unholy altar of caste prejudice by sheer force brought to bear upon them by both, the British and native States. The Government's policy of non-interference with religious customs is a noble and admirable one, but in such cases as these forced deaths of thousands, it is to say the least, inhuman. What difference is there between allowing people to burn their widows alive, or to sacrifice their children to Kali, and to force women and children and weak people back into the states where they will surely die or be sold to sin to die a dog's death later on?"^40

We see quite clearly her anger against a system of oppression finely defined by its rules of segregation and purity and pollution. She is also very critical of the methods employed by the colonial state on many matters, which can only be read as complicity between its various enforcers and those who stand in protection of their own caste and class privileges. In discussing the Kripa Sadan in a pamphlet, she expresses her criticism of the reformers:

"But what about the modern reformers, you may ask, for you [would] have heard of the great National Social Conference which yearly passes dozens of resolutions in favour of social reform. Our most advanced social reformers have never been heard talking about the necessity of establishing rescue homes and reclaiming the fallen women. I have seen many of them in Poona, Bombay and other great cities living within a stone's throw of streets full of the houses

^40 "To the Friends of Mukti Mission and School", April 1900, pamphlet reproduced in Kosambi, pp. 261-277, p. 270.
of ill fame. But I have never heard any of them taking steps to towards rescuing and reforming the poor prisoners of the devil in these houses."\textsuperscript{41}

In such arguments she repeatedly draws the parallel between the rules for the lower castes and for women, be it on the matter of segregation or disallowing access to classical religious texts, or even to basic literacy. She argues that the role of both these categories is envisioned by Hindu religion in terms of the service they render to those who religion tells them is their superior.

"The non-Christian people of this country are shocked to hear of the conversion of many of the girls to Christ. It is natural for them not to wish their people to go into another faith, but I do not see the reasonableness of their wish when they are doing nothing to enlighten and save those people. Women and low-caste people are utterly neglected by the high-caste Hindus. These neglected people have no knowledge of their religion and practically there is no religion for them. The low-caste people have to serve the high-caste people, that is said to be their religion. To serve their husbands is the women's religion."\textsuperscript{42}

Her work during the famine of 1897 marked a change of direction, and made the rift with the reformers quite final. She achieved the Herculean task of rescuing and bringing back to Kedgaon where she had a plot of land, hundreds of girls from the famine-affected areas. In a sense, this last phase is looked upon as a period of isolation for her - with the unabated criticism of her wish to proselytise, there were ever-greater financial constraints, and threats to weaken her institution with withdrawal of civic amenities. She was resourceful and managed to find funding from fresh sources. She was also highly critical of the measures taken by the colonial state in dealing with the plague epidemic of the time, when the hazards for young girls in the segregation camps set up by the colonial government were very high.\textsuperscript{43} It became increasingly clear that within the mainstream of reform and conservative politics of Maharashtra, possibilities for a radical interrogation of gender relations were limited. Towards the end, Ramabai had moved to a more devotional form of Christianity as against the fervently rational position that she earlier had. The break between her and reformists had happened partly also because the reformists were unable to defend their liberal values in the face of conservative vitriol, in the presence of which they often went back on their gains. Typically, she also refused to fit in the

\textsuperscript{41} "A short History of the Kripa Sadan, or Home of Mercy", pamphlet reproduced in Kosambi, p. 289
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{43} Chakravarti, p. 338-9.
agenda of the missionary project, and also brought on the wrath of the colonial state with her criticism of their policies. In that sense, hers was the complex set of circumstances that defied all manner of categorical definition, be it either of mainstream nationalism, of the linear activity of the missionary, of the woman/widow within and outside the fold of Hindu patriarchy, and for our purposes, she can be looked upon as a symbol of the possibilities and limits of a gendered critique of history, religion and tradition.

The High Caste Hindu Woman: Breaking the Silence of a Thousand Years

Rachel Bodley began her Introduction to Ramabai’s *The High Caste Hindu Woman* with the wonder of an American woman introducing her Indian ‘sister’. She said,

"[T]he silence of a thousand years has been broken, and the reader of this unpretending little volume catches the first utterances of the unfamiliar voice. Throbbing with woe, they are revealed in the following pages to intelligent, educated, happy American women."

This text is a cogent statement of Ramabai’s views of Hindu-Brahmanical patriarchy, and it systematically dismantles the manipulations of this order demonstrating just how its codes are structured to guarantee the circumscription of women. Structurally, it explains the situation of women within the Hindu fold according to the various stages of her life and her maturity through the institutions of the family and religion. The first three stages, childhood, married life, followed by an analysis of the circumstance of widowhood, together with an examination of the woman’s place in religion and society. The next section is entitled “How the Condition of Women Tells on Society”, followed by an appeal for assistance for setting up a widows’ home as we know she eventually did.

A primary assumption in this book is the all-pervasiveness of religion in India, that it directs the structure of the social fabric, and that it is the central axis according to which all activities in day to day living are defined. Any social or ritual practice

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44 Rachel Bodley, Introduction to *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 1888, Inter India Publications, New Delhi, 1984, pp. i-xxiv, p. i. Rachel Bodley was the Dean of the Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia.
old enough to have lost a memory of its origins, is considered a religious prescription, and is observed strictly. Ramabai introduces the basic tenets of the Hindu religion, and their connection to daily observance of religious rules. She points out that the nature of such a connection is tenuous at times; that is, a person is liable to be reprimanded for doing something forbidden by tradition but sanctioned by religion. This in her opinion is a dominant feature of Indian society in its practice of caste observances, which do not have the sanction of canonical religious texts. She explains the origins of caste on these grounds and that caste originated as a division of labour, and that it later became an article of the Hindu faith. Along the way the origins were forgotten, and birth became the sole marker of caste membership and assumed the ‘formidable proportions’ found in contemporary Indian society. Caste hierarchies emerged, closely guarded by rules of purity-pollution against the intermingling of castes, the transgression of which was punishable.

“Although ‘caste’ is an outgrowth of social order, it has now become the first great article of the Hindu creed all over India. Thoughtful men like Buddha, Nanak, Chaitanya and others rebelled against this tyrannical custom, and proclaimed the gospel of social equality of all men, but ‘caste’ proved too strong for them. Their disciples at the present day are as much subject to caste as are any other orthodox Hindus. Even the Mahomedans have not escaped this tyrant; they too are divided into several castes, and are as strict as the Hindus in their observances.”

While there are doctrinal differences in the arguments presented in the various canonical religious texts, there is a complete agreement in them about the role of women and their duties in the only three stages into which their lives are divided. They are childhood, youth/married life, and old age/widowhood.

In the chapter on childhood for which she refers extensively to Manu, she recounts what have now become well known facets of contemporary patriarchal Hindu society and its preference for male children as a fulfilment of the householder’s religious and moral duty, the permission given by Manu to marry again if a man’s wife ceaselessly bears female offspring, the pressures mothers to be are subjected to over the issue, the treatment of the mothers who have borne daughters

45 “In ancient times persons were assigned to each of the four castes according to their individual capacity and merit, independent of the accident of birth.” Pandita Ramabai, The High Caste Hindu Woman, 1888, Inter India Publications, New Delhi, 1984, p. 7.
46 Ibid, p. 10.
47 For all the textual sources in Sanskrit, she has used Max Mueller’s Sacred Books of the East. Ibid, p. 11.
and no sons, and the lack of warmth for the girl child who has no brothers. She traces the roots of misogyny to early socialisation of male children in a family where the first lesson is to treat the sister as a lesser mortal. Childhood years are for a woman a shrunken universe, living within a misogynistic set-up, she is taught to share in household work, never exposed to a life of the mind beyond a few simple prayers. Ramabai points out that the question of caste in marriage is at the bottom of this kind of anxiety on account that the wedding ceremony is among the most expensive in the Hindu roster of rituals. In dollar terms, Ramabai pegs it at an average of $200, an expense to be borne by the girl’s father. She describes all the typically unpleasant difficulties of the Hindu alliance. She gives a horrifying account of female infanticide, which gets invariably overlooked by law, despite adequate legislation.

The woman’s childhood passes like a fleeting memory and before she knows it, she has crossed the threshold into adulthood through the system of child marriage. Manu reappears in Ramabai’s narrative, to be quoted as saying how it is a great virtue to give off one’s daughter early in marriage, and how a man may marry a little girl no matter what his age. There is no question of choice for the girl, though there have been marriages practised in more ancient times, in which the man and woman consented to live together as lovers, without ceremony, in which the woman was old enough to take a decision and she looks upon the loss of this practice as regrettable. 48

In this section she fleshes out the problems faced by women/girls who are not married by a certain age, the class and caste barriers in finding alliances, how the rituals of marriage are the only sacrament open to the woman, her life afterwards in a joint family where she has to walk the tightrope between household work, her husband’s needs and those of her family, soon to be burdened with children. 49

In her treatment of the role of women as prescribed in the scriptures, again she systematically takes apart Manu’s treatment of women. She has quoted extensively those passages, which are not so typical of ancient India as of patriarchy as a universal given, across history and geography. 50 Ramabai attributes the seclusion of

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49 Part of the blame for the reprehensible practice of early marriage she puts on “[T]he lawless behaviour of the Mahomedan intruders form the twelfth century A. D.” Ibid, p 31.
50 It has all the ideas one is familiar with through the intervention of feminist scholarship in literature and history, which has coherently critiqued the content of the treatment of women in history as sexual beings who need to be guarded, as irrational, apolitical, weak and avaricious beings who need to be
women to these descriptions of Manu and the influence they have had over the centuries.

"Those who diligently and impartially read Sanscrit literature in the original, cannot fail to recognise the law-giver Manu as one of those hundreds who have done their best to make woman a hateful being in the world's eye. To employ her in housekeeping and kindred occupations is thought to be the only means of keeping her out of mischief, the blessed enjoyment of literary culture being denied to her. She is forbidden to read the sacred scriptures, she has no right to pronounce a single syllable out of them. To appease her uncultivated, low kind of desire by giving her ornaments to adore her person, and by giving her dainty food together with an occasional bow which costs nothing, are the highest honors to which a Hindu woman is entitled. She, the loving mother of the nation, the devoted wife, the tender sister and affectionate daughter is never fit for independence, and is "as impure a falsehood itself". She is never to be trusted; matters of importance are never to be committed to her."\(^1\)

She further adds that she has not read a "single sacred book in Sanscrit literature without meeting this kind of hateful sentiment about women."\(^2\) She also upbraids popular literature, which routinely echoes similar sentiments. She discusses the case of Rakhmabai in her analysis of the duties of the wife under both secular and religious law, and the rights the man is given as natural over her person and her freedom. She argues that the colonial state with its elaborate judiciary has not been able to dent these practices, and that the man's rights are intact, even under colonial governance. Her remarkably astute analysis of the collusion between the patriarchal state and male dominated Hindu society is very striking in its clarity on where the power nexus lay in its hold over women's freedom. Discussing the outcome of the Rakhmabai case, in which Rakhmabai was commanded to go and live with the man, as well as pay the cost of the entire dispute, she says:

"[T]aught by the experience of the past, we are not at all surprised at this decision of the Bombay court. Our only wonder is that a defenceless woman like Rakhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty nine million men and the three hundred and thirty million gods of the Hindus, all these having conspired together to crush her to nothingness. We cannot blame the English government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India.(...)Should England serve God by protecting a helpless woman against the powers and reined in with various social codes woven around them like charms. This chapter in The High Caste... is a scathing indictment of the famous lawgiver, and could well function as a feminist primer in the South Asian context. Ibid, pp. 50-68.

\(^1\) Ibid, pp. 55-56.
\(^2\) Ibid, p. 56.
After this indictment of the colonial state follows a sharp description of the situation of widowhood, which she describes as a state that strikes dread. This chapter delineates the duties of a widow after her husband’s death as recommended by Manu, and the brutal seclusion and dependence that results from such recommendations. Ramabai argues that before such interpretations of religious codes, re-marriage was a prevalent practice. The practice of sati was institutionalised as a sanction of religion, when it was not recommended even by Manu. She conjectures that it might be that the priestly class took hold of a particular verse from the *Rigved* and put its skewed interpretation into formal practice. Of course the deliverance – albeit a partial deliverance – from this practice has not made a difference to the living hell of a widow’s existence. Gendered socialisation within the household since childhood, which has trained most women to comply and not question male authority reaches fruition in such a state, and the widow retreats further back into the margins of the domestic set up. She describes the demonisation of widows and of their sexuality and the attempt to curb it with practices like tonsure and starving.  

In describing the precise nature of a widow’s existence, Ramabai raises the question of solutions. In a very interesting analysis of the current controversy over widow marriage, she points out to the viability of the option. In the upper caste crust that she is making the focus of her descriptions and arguments, she sees no possibility for an acceptance of this practice over the years. She feels that the solution has to be found elsewhere, since caste society had every method of pressurising, excommunicating, and once married to a widow, of letting a man live in hell by social seclusion.

The effects, only very obvious, according to her, tell on the physical and emotional well being of the women and of those in their care. She outlines three very concrete needs:

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53 Ibid, p. 67-68.
54 Ramabai’s reference to sexuality are always very subtle, but also very direct in the sense that even though she describes the same as ‘beauty’ – for instance as in the case of tonsure of widows
55 She gives the instance of a man who upon marrying a widow was persecuted long and hard enough for him to finally commit suicide. Ibid, p.92-3.
"After many years of careful observation and thought, I have come to the conclusion that the chief needs of the high-caste Hindu woman are:- 1st, Self-Reliance; 2nd, Education; 3rd, Native Women Teachers."\(^{56}\)

She categorically states the manner in which class differences have created a complete divide between women, such that lower caste women have the opportunity to develop a degree of self-reliance by having to share in the domestic economy. To women who are the subject of her discussion in this book, this question does not arise, and in their case a minimal self-reliance is what she considers a preliminary step. In the face of prevalent prejudice among the higher castes, that they shall be the cause of the death of their husbands if they should hold a pen in their hands, the percentage of literate – let alone ‘educated’ – women is insignificant. Clearly a flaw of the school system, she points out that for the wholesome development of women’s lives, access to education would be fundamental. She clearly states the need for qualified women teachers in India, so that the female population should not have to depend upon missionary networks who are practically the only women in the field.

She makes the final appeal of the book in favour of institutions for child widows, which could guarantee their freedom, well-being, self-reliance and economic independence. She gives statistics from the census of 1881, for the number of widows under the age of 19, and the hurdles faced by such women in the face of lack of state assistance when they choose to go to school.\(^{57}\) She draws out a detailed proposal in which she outlines the structure and aims of such school. After pointing out that it is the lack of space to stick by caste rules that deters many a young woman from seeking education outside the home on her own steam, and proposing therefore that the institutions should make the space for women to observe caste and religious rules if they so wish. The main aim, however, would be to train young women to master skills which would be economically productive.

"In order to help them make an honourable living, they should be taught in these houses to be teachers, governesses, nurses and housekeepers, and should become skilled in other forms of hand-work, according to their taste and capacity."\(^{58}\)

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\(^{56}\) Ibid, p.100.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid, p.109.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid, p.114.
In the appeal she resolves that she is going to make a beginning in that direction and seek help to start such an institution. She is aware that no help shall be forthcoming from home, where there is such widespread social opposition to women's education, and so:

"...I invite all good women and men of the United States to give me their help liberally in whatever way they may be able for a period of about ten years; it is my solemn belief that it is the most sacred duty of those who dwell in this highly-favoured land to bestow freely talents of whatever kind they may possess to help forward this educational movement." 59

Many of the ideas in this text have subsequently percolated into feminist scholarship on pre-modern as well as modern ancient Indian history and sociology. Yet a retelling of what went into the text was essential for a taste of the theoretical grasp that Ramabai had over the question of gender oppression in her times. This text, written to raise funds for a widows' home and addressed to a largely non-Indian audience challenges the typical association that nationalists of her time were making with patriotism and religion. In the previous year, 1887, the Ramabai Association was formed in Boston in a large public meeting. 60 It is to the many men and a great many prominent women who had taken up Ramabai's work in India as a serious cause to support, that Ramabai speaks to in this text. 61 The kind of critique present in this book was a sore spot for her contemporaries who used it as an issue to challenge her commitment to her country. It was written after her conversion, and by then she had earned a reputation for being of 'fluid' mind, someone who would do anything for her salvation, almost as though it were an undesirable thing in a woman. Here she is evoking the imagery of a suffering Indian womanhood, without reserve, to win assistance for a project, which was very real to her and to the many women who saw and later benefited by its fruition. It addresses the role of tradition and history in

59 Ibid, p.117.
60 See Kumari Jayawardena, The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, pp.53-62 for an interesting account of the fund raising efforts for the Ramabai Association by philanthropists, women activists educators and public figures. Raising funds for Ramabai's home for widows and orphans was an important part of American efforts at assisting public initiatives in India, what Jayawardena calls an "early example of 'global sisterhood'."
61 Many prominent women from American public life were involved in the affairs of the Association. Frances E. Willard, (1839-98), author of Women in the Pulpit, which argued for women's ordination was a vice-president. Jayawardena, p. 56.
creating unequal class relation even among women. Her view of women in the progression of history does argue, for instance, that it was after the Mughal influx that certain social practices gained currency, but this text is important also because it does not tackle the question of history and tradition in a way that even remotely suggests that there was a pure form of religion, which guaranteed women respect and freedom in society. Her position is radically different from that of her contemporaries – men – even as she looks at classical texts to demonstrate the uses they have been put to in the legitimisation of caste and gender division by the priestly class. We have seen in the previous chapter how conservative and reform discourses sought to look into tradition with a view to maintaining its integral status quos, while all the time holding it up to scrutiny as an unassailable facet of Hindu patriarchal life. In Ramabai’s eyes, the only colour that the classical texts that she refers to reflect, is that of patriarchal oppression and misogyny. Her analysis does not stop there, but goes on to link caste and gender oppression as aspects of the same continuum, as integral aspects of Hindu society. She recognises the common ground shared by lower caste peoples and women as communities subjugated by Brahmanical Hindu patriarchy. In that almost literal sense, therefore, there is no looking back, and there is no golden past.
History from Below: Phule's View

Over two decades before Ranade and Tilak were to make use of historical icons to define the components of Maharashtrian identity and politics, there already existed a radical interpretation of the history of Maharashtra that was born out of the need to create consciousness about the nature of caste hierarchies and the position of Brahmans within it. Together with contemporary socio-religious concerns, this stream was wedded also to giving the lower castes a sense of cohesion, a shared sense of purpose, and an agenda for struggle. This stream, best remembered by history as represented by Jotirao Phule, proposed a subversive model of the history of Maharashtra in its stringent critique of caste, and also sought to build a strong social base on the basis of the new values of western education, gender equality and rationality in religion. Lower caste movements in Maharashtra from the mid-nineteenth century registered dissent in and against a predominantly Brahmanised public space. In this section, after briefly highlighting the issues that shaped a new interpretation of history, we shall turn to specific instances from Phule's work to see just how he stood history on its head.

The path for a common agenda: Early influences, and Phule's analysis of caste.

Towards the middle of the century, missionary propaganda had made its presence felt. There was an entire network of missionary schools, which strictly followed the ethic that they had to make education accessible to everyone irrespective of all social differences. These schools had to exist in much opposition to prevalent social practices, and ingrained in their students the entire discourse of social equality, and the students in turn were always witnesses to hostility towards Brahmanical practices. Missionary polemic outside educational institutions also stressed the issue of a universal religion, which was equally accessible to all and did not discriminate. In the midst of these, there were also the early attempts at the education of girls, and specifically also lower caste girls, in which American missions were on the forefront. Phule and some of his contemporaries and friends who supported him in all his activities – some of who were also Brahmans – were shaped by these early influences. There were also the years of growing up into the world of enlightenment
philosophers, and it is known that Phule was introduced to Paine by some Brahman friends in Pune in a bid to “persuade the young students of the necessity of all castes uniting to win back control of their own political affairs, and had used Paine’s arguments to urge their case. Following this, Phule described how he made a closer study of Paine’s books for himself, and realised their potential for a radicalism of a different kind”.62 These factors helped shape a sharp criticism of arbitrary and unjustified social divisions from a rationalist viewpoint, and even though it had been subtly influenced by missionary polemic, it did not adhere to any religious paradigm. because, for Phule and his friends, there were facets of Christianity – just as there were in Hinduism – which did not stand to rational scrutiny, and had to be taken on faith. These concerns reflect themselves in his writings in an unusual form of eclecticism. There are many instances of historical comparisons with European history, for example when he compared the movement for religious reform in Maharashtra with that in Germany in the time of Martin Luther. As we have seen I Chapter II, a discussion of Ranade’s interpretation of the bhakti movement, draws the same comparison, with the difference that Ranade’s interpretation, while raising the same points, concludes that it was a movement which finally helped combine diverse social classes for the common purpose of a ‘Maharashtra dharma’, whereas Phule interprets the same in caste terms, arguing that in fact the sant-kavis contributed in creating an ethic for faith among the lower castes, separate from Brahmin.63 Reinterpreting history ‘from below’, as it were, Phule was shaped by these early influences that shaped his radical critique of caste.

A great deal of the early work done by Phule was in the area of education, and he was very actively involved in the activities of the schools he opened.64 However, there is a great difference between contemporary – largely reformers’ – initiatives on the issue of formal education, and Phule’s motivation behind taking up

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63 See Chapter III in O’Hanlon.

64 Upon his visit to the American Mission School for girl students, he was impressed, and noted also that, “no indigenous schools for girls existed at the time. I, therefore, was induced, about the year 1851, to establish such a school, and in which I and my wife worked together for many years. (…). A year after the institution of female schools, I also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Two more schools for these classes were subsequently added.” In “Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission”, in *Jotirao Phule Samagra Vangmay*, edited by Y. D. Phadke, *Collected Works of Jotiba Phule*, Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya ani Sanskriti Mandal, 1991, p. 233.
the mantle of educator. While the initial impetus might have been just what he says—that there were no “indigenous schools”—his broader and more lasting concerns with education were tied with his perspective on the nature of the caste system, and on the roots of caste oppression. He saw caste as a system which one group of people—namely, the Brahmans—had created to perpetuate the hold of their power, and to see that the other sections were tied down by all the rules lain down by them. In fact, in this early stage, there were differences between Phule and those on the committee that he had set up to look after the affairs of the schools. In that early phase, the committee held that the general backwardness of contemporary society was attributive to the lack of educational opportunities for the lower classes, at that time, they did not quite stress upon upper caste domination as the primary cause for both. At this time, Phule put his finger on what he considered a root of both the circumstances, namely the machination of the Brahmans. This debate on just how much blame to accord to the Brahman community created a rift between him and his colleagues. He noted about them later,

“[T]heir main contention was that in the first place, no education should be provided for the children of the Shudras. Should it be absolutely necessary to so provide it for them, then they should be initiated into the training of the mere elementary reading and writing. I, on the other hand, was of the view that we should provide such useful education for them as would enable them to shape their own lives and careers.”

This was not a mere difference of opinion, it was a position that Phule adhered to consistently, and which became a benchmark of his ideological contribution to the lower caste movement in contemporary Maharashtra. After this, he quit the responsibilities of being on the committee that he had set up with his colleagues, and began teaching at a Scottish mission school for girl boarders. It is during this phase that his own past experiences of caste, of being a member of the mali community, and his analysis of the differences on the issue of what actually was responsible for the backwardness of contemporary society, came together as a coherent thesis on the caste system, and the tasks before the lower castes if they were going to recognise the system for what it was and oppose it. He first articulated the sense of this argument in his play, \textit{Tritiya Ratna}, written in 1855— but published only in 1979— in which he

plots the story around the exploitation of a lower caste, non-literate peasant couple, who are duped by a Brahman priest, who tells them that they have to perform ceremonies and give feasts – which they cannot afford – in order to avert any danger to their unborn child. The couple spends all they have for the ceremonies and feasts, in which they are not allowed to participate, not even to have lunch at the feasts for which they spend a fortune. They meet a missionary who exposes the swindle, and the narrator helps situate the event in a broader historical perspective, upon which the couple resolves to recognise their ignorance and take the help of Phule’s schools. While there is the input of the Christian missionary in the play, Phule on the whole did not seek sanction of religious authority, and we might see that Christian and radical influences were carefully negotiated in his work. Also, rather than looking for reform within broad structures, and endorsing caste mobility within the varna system, Phule’s was a view of caste “from below” as it were, and stood in complete rejection of the system. His position needs to be seen against the background of the debate on caste mobility – in which certain caste groups seeking mobility would be granted kshatriya status, depending upon their political power – and the selective resistance by the Brahmans. Along with this clearly were attached all the social indices of purity and pollution and increased control over women. Phule stood in categorical rejection of these claims to ritual rights with the sacred thread with the argument that it did not necessarily mean an escape from the negative manipulations of the caste system, and that in spite of the sacred thread kunbis would still be a part of the same machinery. He never used the term ‘Maratha’ in his formulation about a common lower caste agenda against caste oppression and the hegemony of the Brahmans. While the idea of kshatriya status was often used to mobilise people in the rural areas, Phule was very conscious of this being a very deliberate strategy for political recruitment. In his scheme, the term did not have the varna connotations that were attributed to it since the famous episode of Shivaji’s induction into the kshatriya fold. For him this meant the fragmentation of a community, which in fact had much in common as the toiling and labouring masses equally at the receiving end of the oppressive treatment levelled out at them by the Brahmans. Thus he was very critical of the division of this community into Maratha/kunbi/Mahar-Mang etc.

66 O’Hanlon, p 122-124, and Y. D. Phadke, Samagra.... pp. This play was submitted to the Dakshina prize fund, but rejected outright, and to which Phule responded by saying that even this institution was totally governed by Brahmanical attitudes.
Given the prevalent political strategy of mobilising rural populations by trying to reinforce the idea of a kshatriya/Maratha identity, Phule had to envision newer methods of effectively communicating this notion of a shared social position within an oppressive system that was perpetuated by Brahmans in order to maintain their hegemonic position. This concept of the “community of the oppressed” had to be communicated with the aid of a coherent historical perspective and with an alternative sense of shared culture and history. Rosalind O’Hanlon has explained his method as exemplified by his play:

“In place of the traditional social order, Phule did not merely envisage a collection of social atoms. He attempted to use traditional social categories in a new way. The lower caste man or woman who perceived the contradictions in their situation were not thereby isolated. Precisely this process of individual enlightenment served to integrate them into a new collective – that of the oppressed. Throughout the play, Phule summarised the community that he felt suffered a common aggression at the hands of Brahmans as ‘Malkunbi’ and ‘Mang-Mahar’, and in varna terms as Shudra-ati-Shudra. One of the aims of the play was to convince his audience that the heterogeneous collection of social groups that fell within these terms did, in fact, share common interests and a common social position. This was to be done by the ideological construction of a social grouping that would be both socially credible and attractive. The latter was particularly important, so that elite non-Brahman castes might not feel that they were losing by their association with traditionally low castes. This new social construct was to be the community of the oppressed itself, with its explanations of social evils in terms of the exploitation of all by one group, and its atmosphere of hope and striving for change.”

In order to bring his target audience to identify with this formulation, and to enable them to envisage a common purpose, his first strategy was a popular but ideological reinterpretation of religious mythology, which in his opinion constituted the backbone of the machinations of Hindu orthodoxy, which were manifest in the caste system. O’Hanlon explains: “He felt that these hierarchies derived their strength from their roots in the most important Hindu religious accounts of the origins of Indian society and its proper divisions, and in the prescriptions which this literature contained for the social life of the pious Hindu.” He was also aware that the strength of their influence came from the fact that they were well integrated into popular imaginations, customs, and oral traditions. The alternative that he devised was founded in this awareness – thus it was both a reinterpretation of religious

67 O’Hanlon, p. 131.
mythology as well as a radical vision of history. Phule’s use of history needs to be understood in terms of this popularising of a lower caste perspective on the roots of caste oppression, the need to give the community itself a cultural and ideological paradigm and view to call its own, and to contest contemporary visions of history that were being engineered for political mobilisation. We shall closely examine some of his work to see how Phule built a system of historical interpretation both for popular understanding as well as to give it a strong base in a wider historical debate – we shall outline his use of mythology to show the origins of caste dominations and also look at his view of ancient history and of the idea of the origin of Indian society in which he gives his ‘community of the oppressed’ a space which they never had before. The most representative texts would be his renowned work Slavery, and other documents like his deposition before the education commission. We shall also look at his unusual position on gender, because it is connected with his critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy as a feature related to caste as well as to gender oppression.

Tracing Caste to its Origins: Building Lower-Caste History

_Gulamgiri (Slavery)_ was published in June 1873. Because of his indictment of the Brahman community many contemporary newspapers refused to give it publicity. This book is a critical statement of his view of the beginnings and the nature of the caste structure. It is very interestingly dedicated to

>“the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thraldom.”

The introduction to this book is in English, and is followed with an appeal to the colonial government to take note of the power of the Brahmans in the administrative set up of the state, and to take adequate steps to check this monopoly. It needs to be noted that in his view as well as in the view of other lower caste leaders, the colonial state holds the possibility of guaranteeing certain basic rights, for in spite of its

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69 Phule, _Slavery_, p xxviii. In fact, this theme of slavery in America and the struggle for the emancipation of the black population in the United States is a recurring comparative theme throughout this work.
differential treatment of people due to the space it gave to religious law, it still had a judicial system that was ostensibly built on certain principles of egalitarianism. This in his opinion meant that the colonial state could be appealed to as a higher and more secular law to intervene in the question of perpetual physical, emotional and economic subjugation of the lower castes. The Marathi introduction to the book states the origin of caste oppression since ancient times, drawing out the argument about original inhabitants who were driven into hiding and subservience by invaders and comparing the condition of the lower caste people in India as being very similar to the slaves in the United States. The main body of the text is almost like a Socratic dialogue with one Dhondiba, who poses questions and doubts, which Phule as himself, answers. Of the sixteen chapters of the book, the first six are a reinterpretation of the incarnations of Vishnu, with which he argues that the religious mythology of these incarnations is in reality a highly distorted and doctored account of the usurpation of power from the original inhabitants of the subcontinent by the marauding ancestors of contemporary Brahmans. He draws out this analysis into pointing out the remnants of this ancient order in society during his time. He turns to more recent historical events to point out how Brahmanism survived through the various phases of dissent and revived itself even after Buddhism. The concluding chapters outline in detail the processes, by which the Brahmans had been able to maintain and strengthen their position of power even through the structures of the colonial state. He points to the importance of the administrative and professional positions that were entirely monopolised by the Brahmans under colonial rule precisely due to their position of power even before the establishment of colonial rule. At the same time, he also tries to build a system of identification of forces which put up a resistance to the repression unleashed by the invaders – he proposes the model of resistance in King Bali, also on the basis of examples from popular oral traditions.

The first step in this near Socratic dialogue is to deconstruct the myth of the origin of the Hindus – that they had originated from the various parts of Brahma’s body – from a rationalist point of view, debunking it as unscientific. Jotirao explains to Dhondiba that the history of the origins of various peoples is in fact very different:

70 O’Hanlon mentions that this Dhondiba might well have been one Dhondiram Namdev Kumbhar, a friend of Phule’s and a member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, known for writing on these issues.
“Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmans were not the aborigines of India. At some remote period of antiquity, probably more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin Race descended upon the plains of Hindoostan from regions lying beyond the Indus, the Hindoo Koosh, and other adjoining tracts. According to Dr. Pritchard, the Ethnologist, they were an offshoot of the Great Indo-European race, from whom the Persians, the Medes, and other Iranian nations in Asia and the principal nations in Europe like-wise are descended. The affinity existing between the Zend, the Persian and the Sanscric languages, as also between all the European languages, unmistakably points to a common source of origin. It appears also more than probable that the original cradle of this race being an arid, sandy and mountainous region, and one ill calculated to afford them sustenance, which their growing wants required, they branched off into colonies, East and West. The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of the people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favoured land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of Western nations, no doubt, attracted the Aryans, who came to India, not as simple emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors.”

Judging from the references to the original population of the land that was suppressed by the invaders – and these indigenous people are referred to derogatorily as Shudra, Mahar – there had been a bitter battle in which these so called Shudras had held the fort and bravely stood their ground against the pillage and carnage that the Aryans brought in their wake. He takes apart the widely known myth of Parashuram, the Brahman warrior, arguing that it is in fact a distortion of the a real history which spoke of mindless carnage and an attempt at wiping out the indigenous population.

“Under such leaders as Brahma Purshram and others, the Brahmins waged very protracted wars against the original inhabitants. They eventually succeeded in establishing their supremacy and subjugating the aborigines to their entire control. (...). The cruelties which the European settlers practised on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world, had certainly their parallel in India on the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines.”

It became imperative for the invader-settlers to devise methods to perpetuate their power, and they therefore came upon the mechanism of giving currency to a great body allegedly religious mythology and to the institution of caste. As they settled on the banks of the Ganga and spread thence to the entire subcontinent they saw that they meticulously enforced their equally stringent caste codes and rules. In Phule’s view, they progressed on this firm foundation, making space for themselves in all social and

71 Phule, p. xxx.
72 In this context, Phule interprets the word Mahar to mean maha-ari, meaning ‘the great foe’, and the word Rakshas, which otherwise meant ‘demon’, to mean ‘protector of the land’. Ibid, p. xxx-i.
73 Ibid, p. xxxi.
administrative structures. There was also their long-standing tradition of fiercely guarded literacy and controlled access to shrewdly fabricated religious texts, which only trickled down in the form of religious mythology. A further fragmentation of the conquered people was achieved by senseless social divisions, marked out by religious codes and enforced by rules of purity and pollution.

"The Bhats were naturally apprehensive of the growing numbers of the depressed and downtrodden people. They knew that keeping them disunited alone ensured their (the Bhats') continued mastery over them. It was the only way of keeping them as abject slaves indefinitely, and only thus would they be able to indulge in a life of gross indulgence and luxury ensured by the 'sweat of the Shudras' brows. To that end in view, the Bhats invented the pernicious fiction of the caste-system, compiled (learned) treatises to serve their own self-interest and indoctrinated the pliable minds of the Shudras (masses) accordingly. Some of the Shudras put up a gallant fight against this blatant injustice. They were segregated into a separate category (class). In order to wreak vengeance on them (for their temerity) the Bhats persuaded those who we term today as Malis (gardeners), Kunbis (tillers, peasants) etc., to stigmatise them as untouchables."

This interpretation of the fine division of castes was a conscious strategy employed by Phule, in which he was drawing upon the martial and agrarian traditions of Maharashtra. While mythology had it that there were actually no kshatriyas left after the battles with Parashuram, the claim to kshatriya status was encouraged among the landed elite since Shivaji, and at the same time for the wider rural circles on the lower rungs of the caste ladder, the term enclosed "the twin symbols of the warrior and tiller of the soil". At a juncture when upward caste mobility was an aim among the landed elite, this was a strategy aimed at, firstly, popularising the idea that selectively granted mobility still meant being part of the same system, and secondly, it sought to appropriate the varna connotations of the term kshatriya to demonstrate that the connection to both martial and agrarian traditions was the cornerstone of a kshatriya identity. For him this term was connected with the term kshetra, meaning region, and therefore kshatriyas were the original inhabitants. With this, Phule sought also to contend with the wave of Sanskritisation, "suggesting a permanent and irreconcilable hostility between Brahmans and all other lower castes in society." Later this strategy led to a great deal of debate and the race to appropriate the term Maratha as well for

74 Ibid, p. L.
75 O'Hanlon, p. 138.
76 Ibid, p. 139.
the entire range of castes associated with the Maratha-kunbi complex – since the term Maratha was not yet the preserve of any particular caste grouping.

A part of slavery is devoted to the description of the manner in which power was wrested from the hands of the original inhabitants – to demonstrate this Phule reinterpreted the popular myth of the incarnations of Vishnu as various ways in which invasion happened. For instance, the first incarnation, the fish, is said to have emerged out of the water to protect the earth, but Phule’s interpretation stresses that it was in fact fabricated to distort the fact that the marauders came through the Arabian sea, landed on the western coast, and killed Chieftain Shankasur and usurped his kingdom. Upon resistance from the inhabitants, they were defeated and hid in the mountains to be followed by Aryans coming from Iran in large boats – which sailed like tortoises and thus brought them the name ‘kaccha’.77 Thus consecutive incarnations are interpreted as the consecutive subjugation of various kshatriyas/kshetriyas. The fifth incarnation, Waman, a Brahman who is supposed to have vanquished King Bali, a daitya, was in fact a Brahman a marauder who made use of Bali’s famed generosity, and claimed his kingdom from him.78

In discussing these myths, Phule also wove in local deities worshipped by the lower castes to demonstrate how they were in fact historical players in the story of the subjugation of the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. As we have seen earlier, the idea of the Aryan was, by the end of the nineteenth century, representative of a golden age of the Indo European civilisation. It also represented the days of glory also of a Hindu civilisation, with its high learning and other markers of a supposedly happy and well-developed civilisation. The common explanation given for a decline in its glories was then attributed to the Aryans intermingling with the less civilised and tribal population of these regions. This racialised discourse was an integral part of the elite discourse in contemporary historical and political debates. An ‘Aryan theory of race’ was in fact the backbone of the understanding about caste. Gail Omvedt says, “up until the 1930s at least it seems to have functioned as a new ‘grammar’ into which the old varna system was translated. That is Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were held almost as a matter of definition to be descendents of invading Aryans, Shudras

77 Phule, Slavery, pp. 5-6.
and Untouchables of the native conquered inhabitants." As we have seen, Tilak and Ranade were to use the concept as a model for political use, while all the negative attributes of Hindu social practices were attributed to the intermingling with the Dravidian masses. The same knowledge produced by Orientalists scholars was used by Phule to counter its appropriation by the upper caste political elite, to show that modern social divisions had their root in pre-colonial times, and that in fact the modern Brahmans were descendents of marauding invaders. The real golden age in Phule’s narration is the age before the Aryan invasion, the time of the rule of King Bali.

"The most important values of this society were those of the warrior and the peaceful landholder and cultivator. These values represented all that was best in nineteenth-century society. Their representatives were the Shudras and ati-Shudras, who united in their history the martial and the agricultural pursuits." In that context, it was a feat of immense historical significance to turn the idea of the Aryan inside out, and shake out of this Pandora’s box all the social inequities of a past which was being insufficiently covered by mythology fabricated to hide the history of oppression.

At the same time as Phule dismantles elite notions of history by making use of religious myths in popular imagination, he also reinterprets history to make it accessible to his target audience. In this respect, Shivaji had already become an important icon for public identification, and a figure, which many social sections sought to use in order to gain access to the historical attachment attendant upon him among the rural populations. Phule’s interpretation of Shivaji played upon the twin identifications of warrior and tiller among the lower castes to point to Shivaji’s humble origins in his ‘Ballad of the Raja Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosale’, published in 1869. This ballad celebrates Shivaji’s achievements, and also points out that it is necessary to recognise that Shivaji was in fact a Shudra hero, a protector of the common man, not, as alleged by the Brahmin chroniclers, a protector of the cow and of the Brahman. Phule says in the introduction to the ballad that it was written for ‘the Kunbis, malis, mahars, and mangs – all of them kshatriyas – who were condemned to

80 O’Hanlon, p 149.
the lowest and meanest levels of society by the Aryan Brahmins.\footnote{Collected works of Jotirao Phule, edited by P. G. Patil, p 76.} For this reason, he says, that he has avoided the Sanskrit idiom. He clears the space for Shivaji in the annals of other non-Brahman rulers, ridding Shivaji also of the responsibility of protecting emblems of conventional Hindu religion.

Phule shares Ramabai’s vision of the close link between caste and gender oppression. At the same time, however, he was aware of the class and caste differences among women, which put women of different social sections at relatively varied disadvantages. Women of Brahmin households were exposed to the tyranny of men within the household, whereas their lower caste counterparts were doubly weighed down by the men of their own social section as well by those of the higher castes.\footnote{Cf., Shetakaryaacha Asud, In Y. D Phadke.} Later, Phule did begin to recognise the specific oppression along gender lines and was willing to locate it as specifically gendered oppression, rather than subsuming it under caste oppression. Phule was among the very few who publicly defended Ramabai’s right to conversion. In an issue of Satsar, there is a dialogue, which takes up the issue of conversion and the critique offered by the Brahmin community that this would entail a lack of patriotism. The figure giving all the answers inverts the question to state that such criticism came only because tradition had dictated the division of labour even in patriotic duties: Brahmins were meant to sit in airy temples or at home, idly chatting, on a full stomach, whereas the lower castes, who were actually in the line of fire had always been commanded to be ‘patriotic’ on an empty stomach, facing adversities. It was this status quo which actually made the Brahmin community question people’s right to reject caste hierarchy and seek their escape to freedom from caste oppression.\footnote{Phule, Satsar-I, In Y. D. Phadke, p. 360.} He was also the only one to react to the welter of reactions to Tarabai Shinde’s Stri Purush Tulana.\footnote{Cf., RosalindO’Hanlon, Introduction to A Comparison Between Women and Men by Tarabai Shinde, Oxford University Press, 1994, and Vidyut Bhagwat, “Pandita Ramabai’s Sri-Dharma Niti and Tarabai Shinde’s Stri-Purus Tulana: The Inner unity of the Texts” in Anne Feldhaus, (ed.), Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, pp. 192-214.} This recognition was a statement of the belief that the agenda of fighting caste oppression had to give equal space to gender oppression, since lower caste family structures were not necessarily free of them. Phule’s treatment of the question of gender is a rare and conscious genus of
sensitivity – one instance that comes to mind is how he addresses his audiences, there is no assumption that they are male, and he addressed men and women. 85

If we take an overview of Phule’s historical vision, it makes clearer how historiography is not merely about facts; it is as much about the politics of its appropriation. As Romila Thapar has pointed out, Phule is possibly the first to use the theory of the so-called Aryan invasion. His highly innovative inversion of Orientalist knowledge in which he sets out clearly, that if there was a golden past, then it was before the Aryans/Brahmans came and wreaked havoc with an essentially harmonious and prosperous social fabric, easily puts in relief the differences with the view that Tilak and Ranade had of the meaning of Aryan. Phule’s use of orientalists’ theories, his incorporation of local deities, and his rescuing of icons like Shivaji for a statement on the shared history oppression of the non-Brahmans were essential to creating a space outside of varna-related concepts. It would be interesting to compare the differences between such notions of history and those that emerged later with nationalists like Tilak and Ranade. Apart from the most obvious differences, it would also be interesting to look at the dynamics of political mobilisation based on popular ideas of history – if only to point out why, when paradigms like Phule’s were available, there is always the risk of mobilising political forces into Sanskritisation, and in support of conservative agenda.

85 G. P Deshpande’s Introduction mentions how Omvedt has pointed out that Phule never even used the unqualified Marathi word for person (manus), but always addressed ‘sarva ekandar stree-purush’. Deshpande, p. 15.