



DOI: [10.5947/2454-9827.2022.00009.37](https://doi.org/10.5947/2454-9827.2022.00009.37)

THE INFLUENTIAL FEMALE SOCIAL WORKERS OF VIDHARBHA

***DR. ANJALI ANDREW**

**Dept. of History Hislop College, Civil lines, Nagpur-440001 (M.S.)*

ABSTARCT

Each movement undertaken for the welfare of women, small or big has in its own way contributed to the present status of women. In the economically weak region 'Vidarbha' of central India, various female social workers started movements during the pre-independent period which had a profound effect in the socio-economic conditions of womenfolk's, specially the poor and the disadvantaged. Social works like Yashodabai Joshi, Pramilatai Dani, Anusuyabai Kale, Sushilabai Gadgil who themselves belonged to the privileged class, fought against the social discrimination of women and initiated the foundation of many organisations for their dignity, self-respect and prestige. The path taken by these women and their commitment for equality of women in the male dominated society and fight against cast system had a long reaching rippling effect on the social development of Vidarbha region of central India.

KEYWORDS: Social Works, Yashodabai Joshi, Pramilatai Dani, Anusuyabai Kale, Sushilabai Gadgil

INTRODUCTION

In a country like India, rich in diversity and culture, there are multiple dimensions to the various movements undertaken for the welfare of women. Each movement, small or big has in its own way contributed to the present status of women. As stated by Srivastava (2020) that these are the results of small acts of freedom our

foremothers engaged in, to get us where we stand today. Any act of women movement, at any level and in any historical analysis has to be viewed with its cultural contexts.

Vidarbha division located along the north region of Deccan plateau and is present forms the east region of Maharashtra state. This region in the late 19th and early 20th century was quite backward the living condition of farmer (the main occupation) was poor compared to other regions of the country. While the maharashtrian effect in prominent, it had a good mixture of gond, tribals and chattisgarhi influence at local level.

Yashodabai Joshi is a name that stands out among Vidarbha's female social workers. She was the first woman in Vidarbha to speak up on women's advancement and freedom. In 1892, she founded the 'Vanita' institution, which took on the task of educating the women of Vidarbha.

Although Yashodabai was born into a Chitpavan Brahmin household she began to question the caste structure at a young age. When ever asked for the Bhakris (millet-based rotis) from her maid's house, the maid would answer "My dear Balutai, Brahmins must not eat anything made by the lower castes". She would be perplexed as to why caste constraints persisted. Not that she had any chance to express herself, for the house was governed by her widowed grandmother who decided everything for her. She had a short fuse and a ferocious demeanour, as well as a face to match. Because the palanquin carrier did not open the door quickly enough, the grandmother was claimed to have kicked open and broken down the door of the palanquin that had been ordered to bring her to her parents' residence. Expounding her experience during those times, Yashodabai later said, "We, the women, were like birds in a cage, although our cage was a little wider, with the kitchen, dining room, prayer room, rear platform, and backyard... We had no knowledge of the world beyond..."(Joshi, 2003)

When Yashodabai was in her sixth year, a group of ladies came to examine her and brought with them a marriage proposal. As she states in her memoirs, they had come to see her because a rumour had circulated that she was deaf and lame. They must have been satisfied, for when Yashodabai heard that her mother-in-law was monitoring her while her grandmother encouraged her to play phugdi, she screamed and cried. That is how her marriage to Moropant Desai came about. Yashodabai was sent every day to her husband's uncle's house in the same town, which represented her post-marriage family, until she was ten years old. She also noticed how vulnerable women were here. After the husband had left the house, the women gathered to converse and play games. On one such occasion, the uncle arrived earlier than expected and severely chastised his wife for her indiscretions, leaving her limping for the next few days".

Such events left a lasting impression on Yashodabai, for one of the first things she did when she gained power was to found the Vanita Samaj, which eventually became a branch of the All-India Women's Conference. She swore, along with her husband, that she would never marry off her girls while they were still young, and that

they would both want their daughters to have a good education before marrying. Her husband was named the Chairman of the committee charged with touring India and explaining the requirements of the Age of Consent Act in 1928. When he called the audience for questions following his address in Madras, a well-known and educated figure in the town stepped up and stated, "According to our scriptures, if a girl's marriage is postponed over her eighth birthday, her father will be damned. Isn't it your purpose, therefore, that we all end up in hell as a result of this Act?" Moropant Joshi, known to his family and close friends as Annasaheb, responded: "There is a simple solution to this. If you want to avoid going to hell as per your scriptures, marry off your daughters before they reach the age of eight, and then can you go to your government's prison." The audience erupted in laughter and applause.

Yashodabai herself began to be educated by her husband only when she was 18 years old. Annasaheb took time off from his demanding work as a lawyer to educate his young wife. This newfound literacy prompted her to attend meetings of the newly created All India National Congress and to advocate for women's education and the remarriage of young widows. Annasaheb and Yashodabai maintained an open house policy, welcoming everybody regardless of caste or social background. Furthermore, after returning from overseas, Annasaheb refused to do the Prayaschitta rite, which was a purifying ceremony for crossing the seas.

They were therefore excommunicated from the community and were not allowed to eat in the homes of orthodox Brahmins. Further, they had to import priests from Benares to preside at their functions because no local priests were ready to enter their house. According to Yashodabai, custom had such a strong hold that even the tiniest deviation would result in a barrage of censure. People laughed at her when she started wearing shoes and a shawl over her shoulders, since it was very difficult for even the most powerful and well-known individuals to defy tradition. She uses the example of Lokmanya Tilak, a prominent freedom warrior and politician, who came to invite them to his son's thread ceremony and stated, "I dearly desire that you should dine with us, but you have not done the Prayaschitta, so I shall not be able to seat you in the same row with us." Annasaheb was given a separate table at the feast. Tilak's compulsions were understandable, but Yashodabai thinks she would have admired him more if he had exhibited courage in this case, as he had in many others.

Yashodabai acknowledges her own limits as well. She educated her girls, sent her eldest daughter overseas to study medicine, and always allowed them to express themselves freely when it came to their weddings. In fact, when the Raja of Sangli proposed to one of her daughters, the daughter stated unequivocally that she would not marry him simply because he was a Raja; there had to be something special about him for her to accept to the marriage. When a proposal for another daughter arrived from a family known for its dowry hunger, she told the person who presented the proposition to her parents even before he met her parents that she had to be valued in

terms other than money. Anyone who came to Yashodabai and her husband with a proposal was told that there would be no dowry paid and that their daughter's opinion would be taken into consideration.

However, in her memoirs, she wishes to tell things plainly and without embellishment, and she does not spare herself. She accepted this fact that she preferred proposals from inside her caste when it came to accepting them, although she might not have objected if one of her daughters had chosen to marry outside her caste. Yashodabai might have avoided mentioning it, but then she wanted to inform the people to understand the social limitations prevailing during that period.

She and her spouse entertain a variety of fascinating guests. Once they invited a young Sanyasi with a white turban and saffron robes to stay. Everyone called him "Swami" because he donned saffron clothing. Yashodabai's child used to wake up crying every night. The young sanyasi urged her to place the infant in his cloth cradle one evening, and the child slept soundly that night. He repeated this every night of his stay, and the child developed a calm demeanour. This young sanyasi was Swami Vivekananda. Once, they had a South African named "Singh." He was regarded as a member of the extreme revolutionary group. After a short stay, he vanished, only to reappear again as Sant Nihal Singh, an American journalist and militant rebel who travelled to the United States and eventually lived in Dehradun. He never mentioned his previous visit with them. However, during a four-day visit to them in 1937, they discovered him studying intently at a framed piece of embroidery in Annasaheb's study that "Singh" had embroidered and handed to Annasaheb 36 years before.

Yashodabai lived long enough to witness India's independence, despite her reservations about the country's politics. However, the story she tells in her autograph is not only about her family and the ladies and men of her period, but also about a nation preparing for independence and her own family's participation in the nation's politics (Joshi, 2003).

The name of Pramilita Dani stands out among the revolutionary women of Vidarbha. Born in 1919 in a family of social workers of Marathwada region, she studied law and after marriage, became quite interested in the region's social activities. She was a member of the Matruseva Sangh, Sarswati Mandir, Daftari Trust, and a number of other social groups in Nagpur. She aided the Matruseva Sangh and Sarswati Mandir in a variety of ways. The orphanages of these charitable social institutions were administered by her. She not only educated the orphan children, but she also helped them find a husband, a job, and a way to support themselves thus helping them to be self-independent from the stigma of being parentless. She toiled for the oppressed and untouchables and the Maharashtra government awarded her the title of 'Dalit Mitra' for her efforts (Landge, 1960).

With the introduction of western education and the establishment of schools for girls, social transformation began in Vidarbha around the mid-nineteenth century. Women began to actively participate in national activities as a result of these changes.

Sushilabai Gadgil an eminent and influential figure of Vidarbha, was born on 19th May 1911 at Pune. Sushilabai drew inspiration from her mother-in-law and Dattatray Gadgil, her spouse. Laxmibai Gadgil, her mother-in-law, was also a renowned social worker in Nagpur; she was the one who founded Bhagini Mandal in 1920. This organisation was founded with the sole purpose of achieving all-round progress for poor and marginalised and low caste women and children of Nagpur region. This was accomplished by establishing a library and a reading room for women; conducting classes for technical and arts education; arranging lectures, debates, and discussions; and organising exhibitions, gatherings, and meetings; propagating literacy and education; establishing a library and school for children, celebrating national holidays and operating a technical school. The Bhagini Mandal has a long history of involvement in the field of female education. In 1933, the Reading Room and Library was established. This library now has about 6,000 books in Marathi, Hindi, and English. In 1939, a Bal Mandir was built in Nagpur, making it the first of its kind in the city, which was later applauded and acknowledged by the government (Kothekar & Andhare, 2007). She also got involved in Indian politics by becoming a member of the Indian National Congress. She was a skilled orator in Marathi and used her talks to raise public awareness. She organised various rallies in the city of Nagpur in support of women's rights.

Sarswatibai Tikekar, alias Mai Tikekar, was another Vidarbha woman who actively participated in the Revolutionary National Movement. She was born in Kolhapur and married Ganpatrao Tikekar, a freedom fighter and Gandhiji disciple, when she was 14 years old. Mai Tikekar wore Khadi all her life and was a staunch supporter of her husband Ganpatrao, who founded the Khadi Bhandar in Nagpur, which was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi on 23rd February 1935 (Pathak, 2003). Gandhiji, Sardar Patel, Vinoba Bhave, and Sarojini Naidu were among her frequent visits. She rallied to open local temples for the scheduled caste alongside Kasturba Gandhi and Mahatma Gandhi. She opposed the introduction and consumption of foreign textiles and alcoholic beverages. She was caught for this on February 2, 1932, and sentenced to three months in prison. Mr. Ganpatrao Tikekar died in 1935, but Mai continued to labour for the welfare of the poor and down trodden women till her death in Nagpur on May 14, 1996.

Anusuyabai Kale, a Vidarbha native, was another significant figure in India's freedom struggle. She was born in Belgaon on October 24, 1896 after schooling from Hujur Paga High School, Pune she completed her college education from Fergusson College, Pune and Baroda College, Baroda. She married Purushottam Balkrishna Kale of Nasik, they settled in Nagpur. She joined the Bhagini Mandal as a social worker in 1922 and began teaching at the Adviasi School for Girls. The Brahmins excluded them from their society because they sat and ate together with the lower caste folks.

She served in the legislative assembly in 1927-28 and was a member of the Vihtale Commission and the International Labour Organization. Anusuyabai joined the independence movement and participated in the non-

cooperation campaign, resigning from her position as a member of the Legislative Assembly. She was arrested on November 10th, 1931, and sentenced to four months of regress. She then returned to Congress to continue her social work. She was elected to the Lok Sabha from Nagpur in 1957 with 46.8% of the vote, but she died in 1958. (Kini, 1976). Her achievements were immortalised in poetry by a slew of poets. Shantabai Gadre was one of these poets. She used to go to Anusuyabai's meetings in Chitanvis Park, and she penned a poem in her honour. Below are a few sentences from her poetry (translated from Marathi) (Pathak, 2003).

(Anusuyabai, the determinant freedom fighter

Challenged the authorities

During the picketing movement

Today, her name will be written in golden words

She has struck like a lightning

And went to prison with pride and esteem

She is the blessed one.)

The path taken by these women and their commitment for equality of women in the male dominated society and fight against cast system had a long reaching rippling effect on the social development of Vidarbha region of central India.

REFERENCES

1. Joshi. Y. (translated by V.V. Bhide) (2003) A Marathi Saga: The Story of Sir Moropant and Lady Yashodabai Joshi, Roli, New Delhi.
2. Kini, N.G.S. (1976) The City Voter of India, Abhinav Pub. Pune.
3. Kothekar, S. and Andhare, B. R. (2007) Nagpur Nagri Trishatabdi Itihas Granth 1702-2002 (Marathi) Ed. Govt. press, Nagpur.
4. Landge, D.G. (1960) Vidarbha Sanshodhan Mandal, Granthmala (Marathi) 15 Sanshodhanagil, Vidarbha Sahitik Mandir, Nagpur.
5. Pathak, D. (2003) Bhartiya Swatantryacha Ladhayta Vidarbhiya Mahilache Yogdan (Marathi) Shree Mangesh Prakashan, Nagpur.
6. Srivastava, S. 2020. A Brief History of Pre-independence Feminism in India and its Legacy. <https://sociolegalliterary.in/>. accessed on 15th December 2021.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF THE AUTHOR(S)

Dr. Anjali R. Andrew is the head of the department of History of Hislop College, Nagpur (Maharashtra state) the pioneer and oldest college of central India. She holds a double Master's degree, in History and Hindi from RTM Nagpur University. She also holds the M. Phil degree in History. She has an experience of more than 30 years of teaching in UG and 4 years at PG level. She completed her Ph.D. in the year 2009. She has organised various conferences and workshops at state and national levels for students and teachers.

Address-

Dr. Anjali R. Andrew,
Dept. of History,
Hislop College,
Civil lines,
Nagpur-440001
(Maharashtra State)