

M.G. Ranade: The Visionary Who Shaped Social Change

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Abstract

18th century, Indian society was deeply afflicted and entrenched with social injustices that had taken root under the guise of socio-religious customs. The introduction of English education and Western liberal ideals sparked a transformation among those who had access to them, fostering a new intellectual awakening. Mahadev Govind Ranade, a prominent social reformer of 19th century Western India, embraced this scientific and progressive outlook, gaining a profound awareness of the societal challenges surrounding him. Ranade used the motto "Humanize, Equalize, and Spiritualize," this reflected his commitment to create a just and equitable society. Through his writings, discussion and activism, he inspired people to rethink and reshape their socio-cultural perspectives. As a decisive force in the social reform movement, Ranade provided a strong philosophical foundation for societal transformation. Ranade initiated the establishment of the Prarthana Samaj, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, and the Vaktruttvottejak Sabha; these organizations were dedicated to social and religious reforms. Ranade believed in achieving independence through constitutional means and played a key role in the formation of the Indian National Congress.

Mahadev Govind Ranade was a multifaceted figure who left a lasting impact on Indian society, serving as a social reformer, a political activist, a scholar, and an advocate for social and economic progress. This paper seeks to illuminate the ideological framework he established, which reinforced the reformist endeavours of his time.

Key Words Reform, Western Scientific Education, social organizations, Social evils

Introduction

Maharashtra in the 19th Century had the appearance of a society standing at the crossroads of transformation. Western education, press, industrialisation, intellectual changes brought about several alterations to the society. The first half of the 19th Century saw the appearance of the Postal Service in 1837, there was also the spread of the press and small changes began to appear in terms of education because of the initiatives of the missionaries. The latter half saw bigger and more intense events like the emergence of full-blown western education and the establishment of Universities in 1857, the commencement of railways in 1853, these in many ways altered the destiny of the sub-continent. Thus, as communication was enhanced, so was the spread of ideas, this directly led to the change in society and the way it perceived itself. Native leaders contributed to bringing about remarkable changes in the western India, Bombay and Poona to be precise.

Western Liberal Thought

Western education which was a result of British colonialism policy which began to stir the minds of the younger generations. These policies got the students face to face with western language and liberal ideas; all of this would eventually lead to an intellectual renaissance which had previously taken place in Bengal. The introduction of English education and exposure to Western ideas led to an intellectual awakening among the educated Indian elite. This led to a critical examination of traditional social norms and a growing desire for social and political reforms. Many leaders appeared, those who were educated and had a chance to understand the difference between rudimentary and orthodox social practices, that which made these leaders realise that the Indian society was stunted due to these backward thoughts and clutches which were keeping the society stuck in the past. Thus, embracing the western ideas of liberalism, education and letting go of discriminating and exploiting social practises seemed to be a better option.

Whether it was Lokmanya Tilak, M G Ranade, G K Gokhale, R G Bhandarkar, G G Agarkar, Dadoba Tarkhadkar, Lokhitwadi, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and a host of others, all of them championed the cause of education in general and particularly for women and marginalized communities, they fought for the end of the dowry system, the practice of Sati, they advocated widow remarriage and also fought against caste discrimination. Many organizations like the Prarthana Samaj, the Satyashodhak Samaj, Paramahansa Mandali etc, to uplift the lower castes and women and bring about societal change.

A Social Reformer Par Excellence

As a result of several socio-cultural traditions, Indian society was affected by many evil norms. A few learned men realized this pathetic state of affairs. They became inspired by western scientific education, humanism and other liberal ideals. They came forward to work towards the reformation of the society. Bombay and Poona were the main centres for this social change, slowly it spread to other parts.

One of the foremost philosophical thinker and social reformer was Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, his work was spread in the fields of law, economics, and history. He condemned child marriage, forcible disfigurement of widows and prohibition of remarriage in the higher castes. He also stated that neither do the Grahya Sutras or the Puranas provide validation for child marriage, polygamy and denial of widow remarriage. In many ways Ranade was a visionary leader and a catalyst for change. The emergence of social reform movements aimed at addressing regressive practices such as Sati, child marriage, and caste discrimination, often with British legislative support.

The British introduced new administrative structures, a uniform legal system, and a centralized bureaucracy. They also introduced English education and modern ideas like liberty, equality, and human rights, which influenced a modern intellectual class.

Mahadev Govind Ranade established the Vakratvottjak Sabha in 1875 with the vision of delivering diverse lectures to the public. During the latter half of the 19th century, newspapers were still in their nascent stages, making live lectures the most effective medium for disseminating knowledge. The Sabha covered a wide range of subjects, including culture, society, science, health, literature, finance, law, education, youth affairs, and history, fostering intellectual engagement across disciplines. Ranade also edited a [Bombay](#) Anglo-Marathi daily paper—The [Induprakash](#), founded on his ideology of social and religious reform.

The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha was founded in 1870 by M.G. Ranade, G.V. Joshi, S.H. Chiplunkar, and their associates, the Sabha emerged as a significant sociopolitical organization during the British Raj. It functioned as an intermediary between the government and the Indian populace, striving to promote awareness of peasants' legal rights. The Sabha played a pivotal role in advancing social reform, championing political equality, and advocating for the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Womens' Education And Emancipation

Justice Ranade was an important figure who promoted women's education, who was pro-active toward the uplift of the status of women, their rights and education.

Along with Vaman Abaji Modak, Shankar Pandurang Pandit and Dr. R.G. Bhandarkar, Justice Ranade established the Maharashtra Girls Education Society in 1885. They believed that a society cannot progress unless women are educated. They first set up a High School for Native Girls at the Walwekar Wada, Dane Aali in Poona, surprisingly on the first day itself 18 girls enrolled and within a week it increased to 45. Tatyasaheb Patwardhan Dhundiraj Chintaman the ruler of the princely state of Sangli offered his land on Laxmi Road on a lease for 99 years; the foundation stone was laid down by Sir James Fergusson. The Huzurpaga High School started under this education society. Over time the society spread, and a number of schools came up under it.

Ranade's mission to humanize and equalize Indian society was deeply centered on advocating for women's rights. He actively opposed the purdah system and played a foundational role in the Social Conference movement, remaining committed to its cause until his passing. His reformist efforts

targeted pressing social injustices such as child marriage, the practice of tonsuring widows, excessive expenditures on weddings and other ceremonies, and caste-based restrictions on overseas travel.

A fierce proponent of widow remarriage and female education, Ranade took action early in life. In 1861, while still in his teenage years, he co-founded the Widow Marriage Association, promoting marriage opportunities for Hindu widows and assisting the colonial government's legal initiative to legitimize such unions. In the Panch-Houd Mission Case, he chose to undergo prayaschitta (ritual penance) rather than adamantly defending his views.

Ranade believed in the importance of educating women and promoting their social upliftment, which was a significant departure from the prevailing societal norms.

Ramabai Ranade

His wife, Ramabai Ranade, was a significant partner in this endeavor, and their combined efforts were crucial in advancing women's education in Maharashtra. Ramabai defied societal conventions by pursuing education despite prevailing taboos against women's learning. Married at the age of 11 to Mahadev Govind Ranade, a staunch advocate of progressive social and political reforms, she embarked on an extraordinary journey of intellectual and social empowerment. Despite initial resistance, Mahadev Ranade championed her education, nurturing her proficiency in Marathi, Hindi, and Bengali.

Inspired by Justice Ranade's ideals, Ramabai became a key figure in the women's social reform movement. She founded the Hindu Ladies Social Club in Mumbai and later led Seva Sadan in Pune, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to social welfare. She also established the Huzurpaga school for girls, advocating for women's education and empowerment.

Her activism extended beyond education, as she challenged British policies, pushed for compulsory primary education for women, and mobilized marginalized women in Bombay province. Following her husband's demise, Ramabai devoted herself to social and political causes, particularly through Seva Sadan, an institution she nurtured with dedication. She represented Indian women at the World War II Conference and championed the rights of Indian laborers abroad. Her enduring legacy was honored with a special postage stamp on her birth centenary, cementing her place in India's history as a pioneering reformer.

Jurist And The Advocate For Constitutionalism

Mahadev Govind Ranade was a distinguished jurist and an unwavering proponent of constitutionalism in colonial India. His profound legal expertise and commitment to reform established him as a key architect in shaping India's early judicial and political landscape. After earning his L.L.B., he began his career as a subordinate judge in Poona and later ascended to the Bombay High Court, becoming one of the first Indian judges to serve in this esteemed institution.

Ranade underscored the vital role of legal frameworks in upholding justice and effective governance, asserting that constitutional mechanisms could be utilized to safeguard the rights and freedoms of Indians. His active involvement in institutions such as the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the Indian National Congress demonstrated his steadfast dedication to democratic ideals and institutional development.

The Pioneer Of Indian Economics

Ranade viewed India's excessive reliance on agriculture as a major impediment to its progress, advocating for a shift toward industry and commerce as the foundation of economic advancement. In an address to the students of Deccan College, he emphasized, "Every nation which desires economical advance has to take care that its urban population bear an increasing ratio to its rural masses with every advance it seeks to make." He introduced the concept of retrograde movement, observing that between 1871 and 1891, the percentage of laborers engaged in agriculture increased from 56% to 66%, while those involved in manufacturing and trade declined from 30% to 21%. Ranade was critical of laissez-faire economics in the colonial Indian context and strongly advocated

for state intervention to foster industrialization and economic self-sufficiency. He also condemned the wealth drain from India to Britain and played a pivotal role in establishing the Industrial Association of Western India.

In his paper *M.G. Ranade and the Indian System of Political Economy*, Robert Gallagher highlights Ranade's perspective on ruralization in modern India, describing it as a form of *rustication*—a decline in power, intelligence, and self-sufficiency, marking a distinctly retrograde movement. Gallagher notes that artisans, including spinners, weavers, dyers, oilsmen, paper-makers, and workers in silk, sugar, and metal industries, struggled to compete with Western industrial dominance. Many abandoned urban centers for rural areas, becoming part of a vulnerable population unable to withstand economic hardships such as scarcity and famine.

Gallagher argues that Ranade played a pivotal role in revitalizing an independent school of Indian Political Economy, which endured into the 20th century. A fundamental metric of this school was the growth of population density, viewed as a principal indicator of economic well-being.

Ranade also issued strong warnings to the British about India's declining economy, particularly highlighting the economic downturn in Bombay districts between 1871 and 1891. He advocated for government intervention, proposing state-backed credit provisions for agriculture and manufacturing at lower interest rates. However, British authorities dismissed his recommendations.

During this period, Indian intellectuals grappled with a profound dilemma—whether to acknowledge British contributions such as a modern education system, railway networks, and enhanced trade, or to protest against the colonial exploitation that funnelled economic benefits to Britain rather than India.

Historian And Interpreter Of India's Past

Mahadev Govind Ranade, in his speech at the Indian Social Conference in Lucknow in 1900, emphasized the significance of historical narratives from Mohammedan philosophers and travelers who visited India before and after the conquest. He acknowledged the lack of a strong historical instinct among Indians, making foreign historians' accounts indispensable. These testimonies, he argued, were particularly valuable as they were recorded before the Mohammedan rule had reshaped India's socio-political landscape.

Beyond his contributions as a historian, Ranade was also a distinguished judge, demonstrating his versatility across disciplines. His academic pursuits extended to Elphinstone College, where he served as an instructor of history, fueling his deep interest in Maratha history. This passion culminated in his seminal work, *Rise of Maratha Power*, published in 1900; this is a seminal work that traces the emergence of the Maratha Empire in India, with a particular focus on Shivaji's leadership. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the political, social, and cultural forces that shaped the Maratha expansion, including their conflicts with the Mughal Empire and the British East India Company. It also explores the pivotal role of the Peshwas and the profound influence of Maharashtra's saints in shaping the region's historical trajectory.

Conclusion

In the annals of history, certain figures shine through with remarkable clarity—Ranade was one such luminary. **Aroon Tikekar**, an esteemed author and journalist, eloquently captured the essence of his multifaceted contributions, describing him as "... a distinguished university student, eminent judge, brilliant 'nationalist' historian and economist, educative journalist, enlightened religious and social reformer, exemplary moral preacher, builder of institutions, maker of great men, friend, philosopher and guide of the young generation of his time...".

Tikekar later authored *Ranade: Prabodhan Purush* (Ranade: The Renaissance Man), a comprehensive work that serves as an essential resource for those keen to explore Justice Ranade's enduring impact on India's intellectual and social landscape. Ranade's ideology was unique in its seamless fusion of Indian sensibilities with Western liberal thought. He firmly rejected any form of militancy, instead

advocating reform through reasoned persuasion and dialogue, fostering progressive change with a balanced and pragmatic approach.

Ranade's legacy profoundly shaped a generation of reformers, most notably Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who later emerged as one of India's leading moderate voices. Gokhale's commitment to reasoned activism and constructive dialogue reflected the essence of Ranade's teachings, ensuring that his mentor's vision for a just and equitable India endured.

Despite his serious and scholarly disposition, Mahadev Govind Ranade was celebrated for his warmth, humor, and remarkable ability to win over critics through intellect, logic, and kindness. His gift for persuasion lay in his balanced approach—employing logic and empathy to challenge opposition without fostering animosity.

Mahadev Govind Ranade's passing on January 16, 1901, signified the close of an era, yet his principles continue to resonate within India's social and political landscape. His life exemplifies the transformative power of dialogue, rational thought, and inclusive reform in tackling societal challenges.

Through his unwavering commitment to justice, pioneering economic insights, and tireless advocacy for reform, Ranade remains a beacon of progress—demonstrating that true advancement is not merely rooted in bold ideas but in the courage to engage, adapt, and evolve.

His debates with Bal Gangadhar Tilak transcend historical significance, serving as a blueprint for democratic discourse—illustrating how divergent approaches can ultimately converge toward a shared vision of national transformation.

While Ranade championed reform through reason and negotiation, and Tilak sought immediate change through revolutionary action, both were united by a singular aspiration—the liberation and upliftment of India.
