

Rukhmabai Raut

(1864 - 1955)

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Rukhmabai Raut was instrumental in transforming the status of women in colonial India. She was born on 22nd November 1864 to parents Janardan Pandurg and Jayantibai. At the age of two, she experienced the loss of her father. Her mother, belonging to the Sutar (carpenter) caste, was not bound by the conventional Brahmanical marriage norms (Sharma et al., 2021, p. 269), giving her the opportunity to remarry. Before her remarriage, Jayantibai transferred the property she had inherited from her late husband to Rukhmabai. (Sharma et al. 2021, 268).

Jayantibai married Dr. Sakharam Arjun Raut, a social worker and an eminent physician and professor of botany at the Grant Medical College in Bombay. He was a liberal reformist and believed strongly in women's education, which allowed young Rukhma to interact with great reformists of that time, especially people like Ramabai Ranade and Behramji Malbari. At eleven years, she was married to a nineteen-year-old cousin of her stepfather, Dadaji Bhikaji. After marriage, she informally pursued her studies and lived in her natal home with Bhikaji as a gharjamai, son-in-law living with the daughter's family (Thakur 2022). As she became an adolescent, Bhikaji wanted to consummate his marriage with her. However, Dr. Sakharam Arjun, being an eminent physician of reformist tendencies, did not permit early consummation (Chandra 2008, 16). This angered Bhikaji. He insisted that Rukhmabai join him in his uncle's house to begin marital life. With the support of her stepfather, Rukhmabai refused to go, turning their relationship bitter.

In the meantime, Rukhmabai continued education and completed her schooling. In 1885, Dadaji Bhikaji pleaded for "reinstitution of conjugal rights", leading to a legal battle between the Rukhmabai and Bhikaji. She wrote two letters to the editor of The Times of India under the pseudonym 'A Hindu Woman'. She strongly opposed child marriage, widowhood, illiteracy of women, patriarchy, and domestic violence, highlighting the plight of girls and women trapped in these issues of the society (Sharma et al. 2021, 270). The case was heard at the Bombay High Court in which Justice Robert Hill Phiney gave the judgement in her favour acknowledging that Rukhmabai was a child and she was married off in her infancy, which made her helpless, and thus the marriage could not be forced. This verdict brought criticisms from a large section of society who claimed it to be going against Hindu law, and thus, in 1886, the case came up for retrial. The case started a new debate on the Hindu law and traditions vs. English law in society. On 4th March 1887, Justice Farran ordered Rukhmabai to live with her husband or accept imprisonment for six months. Rukhmabai thought that this judgement was unfair. However, she said that it was better to live in jail for six months than with her husband. Several newspapers and leaders of that time blamed English education for influencing the minds of the Indian women, and they saw it as a threat to Hinduism (Chandra 1996, 2942).

Rukhmabai didn't give up the fight and appealed to Queen Victoria, in her own words: "This 50th year of our Queen's accession to the most renowned throne is the jubilee year in which every town and every village in her dominions is to show their loyalty in the best way it can... At such an unusual occasion will the mother listen to an earnest appeal from her millions of Indian daughters and grant them a few simple words of change into the book on Hindu law - that 'marriages performed before the respective ages of 20 in boys and 15 in girls shall not be considered legal in the eyes of the law if brought before the Court.' This jubilee year must leave some expression on us Hindu women..." (Daily Telegraph 1887). This noteworthy appeal led to the court's final order being overturned by Queen Victoria. Bhikaji was paid two thousand rupees for settlement, and the marriage was annulled. This case influenced the British Government to pass the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which increased the minimum age of marriage from ten to twelve for girls.





With the support of several people and activists like Edith Pechey, Shivajirao Holkar, Eva McLaren, Walter McLaren and Adelaide Manning, The Rukhmabai Defence Committee was established to help gather funds towards supporting her cause of continuing education (Chandra 1992, 189). After this, in 1889, Rukhmabai set sail to study medicine at the London School of Medicine for Women in England. She completed a five year degree course in medicine, and in 1894, received the Doctor of Medicine and obtained extra credentials from other educational centres in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Brussels. After returning to India in 1895, she began working as a Chief Medical Officer at the Women's Hospital in Surat. She treated the women at the hospital and continued to work towards women's emancipation from child marriage. In 1918, she worked at the Zenana State Hospital in Rajkot, where she established the Red Cross Society. In 1929, she retired and settled in Bombay in the Gamdevi area at a bungalow known as Raut's Bungalow. This bungalow won the Urban Heritage Award in 1993. It was built with a budget of 22,500 rupees, and was owned originally by Jayantibai Raut, who got married in its living room.



In 1929, Rukhmabai published a pamphlet, “Purdah—the Need for Its Abolition,” arguing that young widows were denied the chance to contribute actively to Indian society (Rappaport 2001, 599). Thus, she became one of the first few women to champion the cause of women’s rights and challenge the traditional norms of patriarchy. On 25 September 1955, she died of lung cancer at the age of ninety. The building behind her bungalow, which she donated, was converted into a school as per her wishes. Sharda Mandir High School still stands today as a symbol of change, the foundation laid by the efforts of the second practising female doctor in colonial India.

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