Q) Examine Pandita Ramabai’s critique of caste and gender in Hindu society.

Ans: The nineteenth century India was set against the background of modernization infused by the British colonial rule,provided an ideal setting for social change. The new intelligentsia imbibed with the progressive ideas of the west, took up the challenge of reforming the hitherto Indian society , deeply rooted in traditional discriminatory practices and beliefs. However, this wave of modernization had very limited access to position of the females tied with the prevalent social norms. But it was Pandita Ramabai(1858-1922) a great philosopher of her time who devised her independent path of freeing women from decades of bondages to self-esteem. She was an eminent social reformer and a scholar but also perhaps as one of the feminists in the modern Indian history who struggled for the emancipation of Indian women. Her critique of patriarchy and demand for civil rights and gender justice reflects her political thought.

***Critique of caste and gender in Hindu society:***

The traditional Hindu society in 18th-19th century India was a caste ridden and male dominated society. The status of women was generally inferior to that of men and women had no independent status of their own. The duty of ameliorating the condition of women till the mid 19th century was on the shoulders of the newly awakened male reformers. Pandita Ramabai intelligibly utilized the British system of education through her bold and rigorous efforts to improve the lives of the oppressed Indian women. She was born in a Brahmin family to a Sanskrit scholar named Anant Shastri Dongre.Her father taught both his wife and Ramabai due to which her family was excluded from the society. After her parents death in 1877,Ramabai moved with her brother to Poona where she founded the ’Arya Mahila Sabha’ in 1881. The objective of this institution was to promote education among native women and discouragement of child marriage. This may be considered as the first feminist organization for India. However,Ramabai , entered the feminist discourse of those times through her first Marathi book,’’Stri Dharma-Niti’’ (Morals for Women),published in 1882.

Ramabai’s role as a spokesperson for the glory of the Vedic age created dilemmas. The more she read and reflected on her experiences,the more she was exposed to the subtle patriarchal structure of society.It was during these young days that Ramabai’s political thoughts started getting firmly grounded and expressed. She connected the teachings of the ancient literature with the inferior status of women in society. The caste system that was prevalent in the society during those times did not have any impact on the progressive thinking of Ramabai.She firmly believed that in ancient times people were assigned to the four castes according to their work and merit and not on the basis of their birth. It was much later that caste system became identified with birth and turned discriminatory. These caste- based differences along with gender -based differences deeply affected the Indian women.

She understood that the patriarchal ideology of the society placed women within the domestic sphere as a wife/mother and housewife according to her sexual,reproductive and home making roles.In this caste-ridden ,patriarchal society, the highest status for a woman was that of a saubhagyavati and a mother of sons. A woman only with daughters or one without children had a lower status and lived under the fear of being deserted by her husband. A widow had the lowest status,especially a child widow or one without children.Ramabai’s study of Upanishads, Manusmriti and the Vedas made her realize how the caste system, the Hindu shastras,society and social customs helped patriarchy to not only thrive but to grow larger. She thought that the low account of women’s nature and character depicted in Manusmriti was, to a larger extent responsible for their seclusion and suppression. She realized that all sacred books in Sanskrit literature shared hateful sentiments about women. Child marriage,polygamy and enforced widowhood were the great social evils in India which were responsible for the pathetic condition of Indian women and it needed to be changed.

Ramabai’s most popular book,’’The High Caste Hindu Women’’ originally published in 1887 ,contained a critical account of miseries that were faced by girls and women of a high-caste Hindu joint family system.Through this book,Ramabai tried to become the voice of these millions of women. Imparting education to women was considered to be the best remedy of the problems.Her hope was that women’s education would lead to the rejection of Brahmanism and realize the deception of sacred literature. In 1919,the British government awarded her the Kaiser-e-Hind Gold Medal for her distinguished service to the Indian education system.

Pandita Ramabai was a truly remarkable woman who pioneered women’s education and rebelliously championed for women’s rights and empowerment.She combined ideas she had learned from the sisters and friends of different ethnicity and race at Wantage,a town in England. All her writings reveal her liking for all non-imperialistic western world in general and for United States in particular. For her, America was a nation of progress,equality , opportunity and of citizen’s rights – a liberal country that suited to be followed by a colonial country like India to gain political freedom and social reform. Ramabai saw caste as a great flow in Hindu society. It not only saw physical work and labour as denouncing, but it also led to false ideas of valuing intellect and merit. She also believed that caste associations promoted narrow self-interest and prevented the development of a democratic spirit in the real sense.

***Conclusion:***

Ramabai’s views reveals that by integrating widows into mainstream, she was re-conceptualizing widowhood and womanhood in a way that no male reformers could ever think of.Her remarkable critique against Brahmanical patriarchy and caste dominance was prominent. Feminist scholarship remains in debt to the philosophy and work of Pandita Ramabai. Her vision continues to drive the feminist movement and scholarship even today,as it also continues to impact the lives of many women and young girls. She remains one of the most prominent woman leader of Maharashtra and India.