Q) Evaluate Pandita Ramabai’s contribution towards women’s emancipation.

Ans: Pandita Ramabai(1858-1922) 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. Pandita Ramabai was amongst the few female leaders of the movement for women’s emancipation. She advocated for women’s education and shed light on the plight of child brides and child widows. She founded Arya Mahila Sabha, which is known as the first feminist organisation in India. She set up Mukti Mission for young widows, and Krupa Sadan and Sharda Sadan for destitute women.

‘Emancipation’ refers to liberation from oppression or bondage of any kind. When used in case of women, it can also be taken to mean escape from narrow gender roles into which women get typecast and which perpetuate gender-based inequalities. The period of 19th and 20th centuries is often referred to as one of social, sexual, economic, political and legal emancipation of women in not only India but also the West.

About this time,Pandita Ramabai came in close contact with the Brahmo Samaj leaders and other eminent persons who inspired her to give public lectures on the emancipation of women. She drew her arguments from the ancient Sanskrit texts. The following are the measures and steps taken up by Ramabai for the emancipation of women in India.

***1)Arya Mahila Samaj:***

On a special invitation to Maharashtra,she went to Pune. Friendship with leading personalities,such as Justice Ranade and his wife Ramabai,led to collaboration in social activities.She established the Arya Mahila Samaj on 1st June,1882 at Pune,on the foundations of an earlier women’s group. The Samaj ,aimed at the general uplift of women. Its branches were also set up in other major towns of Maharashtra. Ramabai also collaborated closely with the leaders of the Prarthana Samaj, the theistic religious movement modelled on the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal.

About this time, Ramabai was invited to testify before the Hunter Commission on Education, and pleaded for women’s educational programme. She pleaded especially for the need of training women doctors since they alone could treat women patients in the segregated society of India.

***2)Education for women****:*

While giving evidence before Hunter’s Education Commission at Pune in 1882, Ramabai clarified her position as “ the child of a man who had to suffer a great deal on account of advocating Female Education,and who was compelled to discuss the subject,as well as to carry out her own views amidst great opposition.” She therefore considered it as a duty till the end of her life to fight for this cause and to advocate the proper position of women in Indian society. Her suggestions included the need for female teachers of respectable families and the need for female inspectresses for girl’s schools.She also made a plea for training women as medical doctors.This led to the formation of the National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India by the British government.

***3)Sharada Sadan:***

On 11th March 1889 Ramabai opened at Chowpatty, in Mumbai, a widows’ home called Sharada Sadan. The aim of the Sadan was to take care of the child-widow belonging to upper caste and to educate them so that they could become self sufficient.All leading social reformers of the Bombay Presidency such as Ranade, Bhandarkar and Telang supported the Sharda Sadan and served on its Advisory Board. The ‘Kesari‟ commended Ramabai’s achievement of collecting funds for the cause of Indian widows in a foreign land. However it was displeased because of her conversion and warned her keep her conduct straightforward if people were to have trust in her. Sharda Sadan was founded with two pupils, one of whom was a widow called Godubai who was later called Anandibai and married to Dhondo Keshav Karve, founder of the Hindu Widows’ Home and S.N.D.T. Women’s University. In a period of three months, the number increased from two to twenty two. At the dedication of the school a high caste Hindu lady had chaired the session. A newspaper stated that this was the first time that an Indian lady had ever presided on such an important occasion.

In November 1890, the Sadan was shifted to Pune. 6 Ramabai tried to build up her school in the new environment and endeavored to provide a better life to those under her care. The number in Sharda Sadan was increasing day by day. There were at that time 350 inmates in Sharda Sadan. She opened it to women from all parts of India.

***4)Mukti mission***:

She purchased a land at Kedgaon, which is about 40 miles south of Poona. She named the property Mukti Sadan - The House of Salvation. The aim of Mukti Mission has been to provide the service to the needy and destitute women and children irrespective of caste. The house became a refuge to the young-widows who were being abused by their families. But when plague hit Pune in 1902, Ramabai was forced to shift the Sarada Sadan from Pune to Kedgaon and incorporated with Mukti Sadan. The aim of the Mukti Sadan was to make the women self-sufficient. Though in Mukti Sadan each girl was given a freedom to practice their own religious rites, but by 1893, half of the childwidows in the Sarada Sadan had attended a daily prayers organized by Ramabai with her Christian followers which generated mistrust, suspicion, uproar among the Hindu Brahmins as well as social reformers. They withdrew twenty five girls from the Sadan. They became sceptic about her mission and demanding its closure. The bold Ramabai ultimately tackled this challenge with the help of her American supporters.

***5) Social reforms and women issues:***

Women’s emancipation formed one of the major thrusts of social reform,and included issues such as child-marriage,the plight of widows and education for women. These issues arose mainly because of the patriarchal system which measured the woman’s usefulness only in terms of her sexual and reproductive functions. Women had to play a subservient role as the forces of orthodoxy defended the patriarchal system. These issues were taken up by the reformers and ultimately the British government introduced policies of opening schools for both boys and girls.Legislation,especially the laws to abolish the practice of sati(1829), to legalise remarriage of upper caste widows(1856),and to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls to thirteen and boys to seventeen(1891).

***6) Emancipation and Equality:***

All the social reformers of whatever convictions had focused on injustice to women. Ramabai was the first to emphasize that the denial of the rights to knowledge to women . Pandita Ramabai’s perspective was unusual and refreshing. She presented the theme that a society which oppresses women can never progress. She elaborates the argument that men prevent women from acquiring knowledge at all costs. Otherwise the women would put a stop to the unrestricted behaviour of men and they would lose their freedom and superior position.In order to promote their objective,the men prepared Dharmashastras which propounded that women had no right to the study of the shastras. They should live with their husbands like servants.

In reality,according to Pandita Ramabai, God has created men and women to be different so that they should co-operate and complement each other.

Conclusion:

Ramabai’s motto,self-reliance for women was in direct contradiction to the patriarchal system which insisted on women’s dependence on men in all things. She established institutions which provided shelter and food for homeless widows and other women so that they were not dependent on families which maltreated them. She provided practical and emotional support,education,vocational training and means of economic self-reliance for women. Thus, Ramabai for her contribution for the women’s cause of India has been awarded Kaiser-e-Hind award in 1919 by the British Govt.