

A Politically Incorrect Reformer

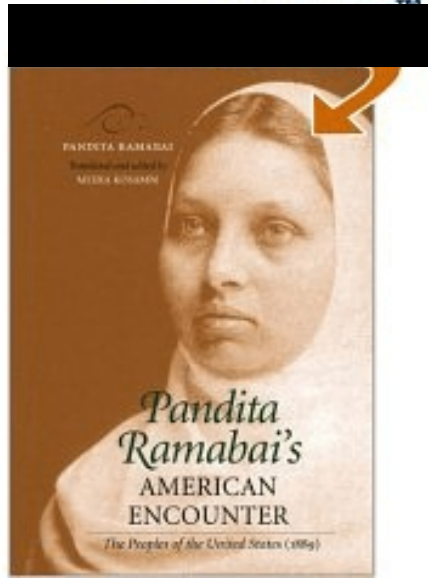
How Pandita Ramabai Changed The Future of Women in India

—by Rajkumar Boaz Johnson

Some of the greatest saints in the world are little known outside of their own area of influence. Probably most reading this story have never heard of Pandita Ramabai who was born in India in 1858. Nevertheless, when she died in 1922, government officials honored as one of the greatest women who had ever lived and served the poor women and widows of India. And all this, despite the fact that Pandita turned from the Hindu religion and turned to the Christian religion when she was still young.

Born in 1858, the daughter of a Maratha Chitpavan Brahman, a member of the purest of the highest caste. People of this caste, at that time in Indian history never associated with people of any other caste. They considered themselves to be the purest of pure priestly caste. Any association with people from other castes would make them unclean.

There was just one problem. Women, even those who came from the highest caste, were regarded as being much lower than men of the lowest castes. As Ramabai wrote in her autobiography, *My Testimony*, “Women of high and low caste, as a class, were [considered] bad, very bad, worse than demons.”



Pandita Ramabai

A woman’s sole hope of release from the cycle of Karma and Samsara—that is, countless millions of births and deaths, and untold suffering—was to worship her husband. “The husband is said to be the woman’s god,” Ramabai wrote that according to the Hindu religion, “...and if she pleases him in all things, she will have the privilege of going to Svarga, heaven, as his slave.”

Most Indian women of the time just submitted to what society required them to be. Ramabai however, contrary to the norm, set about the task of studying the Hindu texts. Her father, a rebel of sorts, had initiated her into the study of Sanskrit, the language of Hindu priests. She became a diligent student of the language, and later studied the Hindu texts in great detail. Her scholarship was so impressive that the Sanskrit scholars of Calcutta University conferred on her the titles of Saraswati and Pandit.

In the Hindu texts, she found no hope for women. This led her to the study of ideologies beyond/outside of Hinduism. In the course of her search, she came across a Bengali translation of the Gospel of Luke in her library. “I do not know how it came there,” she would later write, “but I picked it up and began to read it with great interest.”

The stories of Jesus’s dealings with women in particular caught Ramabai’s attention. Throughout the text, whenever women encountered Jesus, he elevated their status. He offered them spiritual salvation as well as emotional and social salvation. Of course, this was a great contrast to the place of women in Hindu texts.

Ramabai started reading the rest of the Bible. In Genesis, she came to realize that men and women were created equal in the image of God. The reading of the Bible gave her a complete new understanding of the place of women in society.

Ramabai’s solution to the problem of racial and caste discrimination in her life was bold, yet simple. She married a man from the lowest caste—the Shudra, or untouchable caste. This was an unthinkable act with immense ramifications. Ramabai was

a woman, but at least she was a woman who belonged to the highest caste. When she married a man from the lowest caste, her stature in society plunged to the lowest level. She was now a “lowest caste woman” in the eyes of Hindu society. She was well aware of the fact that in Hindu society, “they are looked upon as being very like the lower species of animals, such as pigs; their very shadow and the sound of their voices are defiling.”

Ramabai’s husband died of cholera in the second year of their marriage, leaving her a widow at twenty-three, with an infant daughter, Manorama, to raise alone. Hindu society would have interpreted her husband’s death as a curse. The life of a widow in the India of her time was very hard. Most widows had to disassociate themselves from society, lest their curse descend on people with whom they associated. Most widows just lived lonesome lives on the banks of rivers like the holy Ganges, hoping for some sort of reprieve in their next life. Ramabai, again contrary to the norm, decided to engage deeply in the study of the Bible and confront society.

In 1883, at 25 years of age, she traveled to England, to visit the Sisters of Wantage, an Anglican order that was involved in the emancipation of prostitutes from slavery and cruel urban gangs. Ramabai found that the work of the Sisters of Wantage was bathed in the teaching of Jesus. The work of the sisters had a deep impact on Ramabai, as she thought about the complex issues women faced in India. This work among the orphans, widows, and prostitutes became the model of Ramabai’s work and words in India.

“I had never heard or seen anything of the kind done for this class of women by the Hindus in my own country,” Ramabai wrote. “The law of the Hindus commands that the king shall cause the fallen women to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town. They are considered the greatest sinners, and not worthy of compassion.”

When she asked one of the head sisters why they were ministering to prostitutes, and “fallen” women, she read Ramabai

the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

“She spoke of the infinite love of Christ for sinners,” Ramabai wrote. “He did not despise them but came to save them. I had never read or heard anything like this in the religious books of the Hindus; I realized, after reading the fourth chapter of St. John’s Gospel, that Christ was truly the divine Savior he claimed to be, and no one but he could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India.”

The Mukti Mission

She returned to India with a deep desire to have the gospel of Christ transform society. Yet, she found that the challenges were complex and difficult. First, there was the horrible practice of female infanticide. Girls were a great liability among all the castes. Parents had to pay huge sums of money in dowry to get their daughters married. Female infanticide was a very common practice.

A second challenge was the practice of davi dasis (or prostitute-priestesses). This was an alternative for parents to female infanticide. Girls were sent to certain temples as soon as they had their first period. These dasis became the property of the temple priestly hierarchy, and became prostitutes. It was a form of spiritual-sexual slavery.

A third challenge Ramabai faced was the forced marriage of girls to men who were as much as thirty or forty years older. They would become the third or fourth wife of a rich, high caste man. Supposedly, this was a more humane alternative to female infanticide or temple prostitution.

The fourth challenge that Ramabai faced was the practice of sati. This was the practice of the widow being forced to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband.

These young women began to transform their culture. In the early twentieth century, as a result of Ramabai’s work, there was a huge spiritual awakening in western India. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians began experiencing the transforming power of God.

During these years of this great awakening in India, in addition to an incredibly busy life, Ramabai (who spoke seven languages) translated the Bible, from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into Marathi, her native language; wrote a number of theological works; and composed profound devotional songs. Much of this material has continued to transform the lives of succeeding generations of Indians.

An example for today

We would be remiss to think that the issues Pandita Ramabai dealt with were peculiar to her time and her geographical confine. They are very much the issues we face in today's world. They just take on a different garb. We would do well to learn from the wisdom of Pandita Ramabai as we seek to address the challenges of our time: challenges like gender identity, the place of women in society, racial and class discrimination, human trafficking and slavery, child prostitution, abortion and female infanticide, and religious extremism.

How do we address the issues? Ramabai is a great model for us. She was courageous enough to let Christ confront and transform a very dangerous and complex culture. She sought to understand the issues from a biblical perspective. When she saw the vision, she did not hesitate to take action. She overcame much opposition. She trained leaders who were able to carry on the work long after her death in 1922 at 64 years of age. Indeed, the work of the Mukti Mission continues throughout different parts of India. This is a great testimony to an enduring awakening. We would do well to learn the lessons that Ramabai teaches us and apply them today.

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The above was taken from a book written about 1900; however, Pandita Ramabai lived till 1922. Below is more information about Pandita's later years.

This section was written Friday, 30 June, 1905, - Mukti, India

Pandita Ramabai established a compound for widows and orphan girls during severe famine in her area near Pune (Poona) just south of Bombay, and called it Mukti (Salvation). By 1901 she had 2,000 girls and women and from January 1905 she began teaching about the need for revival. Soon over 500 people met twice daily to pray for revival, mostly women and girls. Thirty of her ladies ministered in teams in the villages. They met daily to pray for the endowment of the Holy Spirit. On Thursday 29 June the Spirit moved strongly on many of the girls. On Friday, 30 June, while Ramabai taught from John 8, the Holy Spirit fell on them all suddenly with great power. Everyone there began to weep and pray aloud, crying out to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. Revival spread through their mission, and into many surrounding areas. Regular school activities gave way to confession, repentance, and great joy with much praise and dancing. Many spoke in tongues (including English!), and were filled with zeal for evangelism and social care.

PENTECOST IN MUKTI, INDIA

(Taken from a Pentecostal publication in India, "A Cloud of Witnesses.")

"Mukti," which means Salvation, is a community comprising a high school and schools of lower grades, a Bible institute, an industrial school, in whose various departments useful trades are taught, a printing office employing 30 men, and a hospital. About 1,400 girl students are enrolled (inclusive of 300 rescued women in the Krupa Sadan) and there is a separate

institution for boys. The great majority of the girls have been admitted to “Mukti” in times of famine during the past ten years, and when they entered they were simply raw heathen. Those from the Central Provinces spoke Hindi as little children, and those from Gujerat spoke Gujerati before they came to Kedgaon; but the acquired language of all the people of this community is Marathi. Considerably more than 800 of the girls are Christians in the saving sense of that word.

Both Pandita Ramabai and a co-worker named Miss Abrams were deeply impressed by the truth contained in the reports which came from Los Angeles concerning Pentecost, and believing that God was willing to send like Pentecostal blessings to Mukti, which up to that time had not been received after the manner described in Acts 2, they exhorted all the Christian boys and girls to begin to tarry for the promised baptism of the Holy Ghost. In taking this step, Pandita Ramabai fully acknowledged all that God had bestowed through His Spirit in the past; but she discerned there was the deeper fullness of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost accompanied with the gift of tongues which had not yet been received. Before Christmas 1906, the seekers assembled in the Church daily at 6 o'clock in the morning for a time of waiting on God.

About this time a band of 20 girls were sent to the station of K---- attended by two English Missionaries, and before much preaching had been done, J----, a native girl, began to speak in a new tongue and magnify God. Within a few days every member of the party, including the two lady missionaries, received the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Ghost and all were speaking in new tongues. The immediate result was more power in preaching Christ crucified. The attention of the people was arrested in a new way as the Lord took hold of rough men, and the people were spell-bound.

The joyful news of Pentecost at K---- stirred the seekers at Mukti with fresh zeal. A worker from Mukti visited the band at K----, and in a few days she herself returned full of joy and the

Holy Ghost. As might be expected, the presence of a living witness to the power of Pentecost put desperation of purpose into the hearts of the seekers, some of whom spent whole nights in prayer.

A girl named Z---- had awful conflicts with the devil. A few friends, believing Z---- to be in some degree under Satan's power, prayed earnestly for her deliverance. Later that night there was a meeting in the Church, and after the meeting to the glad surprise of those present, Z---- began to pray intelligently in English. One of the sentences uttered was, “Jesus' Blood makes clean.” Prayer had been answered and the devil's power broken, and a clear witness given to the Pentecostal baptism. Later, God gave this girl the gift of song which has been described as so sweet, that the notes are like the music of the flute. When singing in this new tongue, she immediately translates the words into Marathi. A line which has been recalled is: “Jesus is over all; He is on the throne.”

Mukti is the glad scene of a continuous Pentecost, as day after day seekers come into fullness of blessing. A dialect of Kanarese is one of the various languages of Southern India which God has bestowed. Another new tongue is an ancient form of Sanskrit understood by Ramabai, [Sanskrit is the sacred language of the Brahmans, the priestly class of India].

Several girls have received the gift of interpretation of tongues. some are for days and even weeks dumb as regarding their own language, except when God gives them a message, and then ability to deliver the message is given. The light minded and frivolous are sternly rebuked by these prophetesses who plead with others to tarry in dead earnest for Pentecost. The substance of a message was as follows:

“The second coming of Jesus is near at hand. God is getting His people ready. Seek, and prepare to meet your Lord. If you do not stir yourselves up to seek the Lord now and receive His blessing, you will be left behind when Jesus comes and then you must suffer a great deal.”

Some have received the gift of healing. Two little girls are among the number who exercise this gift, and when led by the Spirit, they visit the Hospital and in answer to their prayers the sick are healed. And as in the days of the apostles unbelievers were healed by the laying on of hands, so today a Hindu woman has been healed of sickness.

As in other countries so in Mukti, the girls and women are pressing on to greater things and are believing for the restoration to the Church of all the lost gifts of the Spirit. Those baptized have been filled with a new and burning desire for lost souls and have learned what it is to pray in the Holy Ghost and to travail in birth for souls. Their joy is unbounded and the very faces of some have been so transfigured with Heaven's own light that it is pleasant to see them.

The above addressed by: Max Wood
FROM THE BIBLE SCHOOL IN MUKTI, INDIA

It was noised one day, that some of the girls in the praying band were praying in different tongues. I had heard of the gift of tongues having been given to God's children in other parts of the country, so was not surprised to hear our girls praying in new tongues. I did not go very near these girls, lest I should hinder them by taking too much notice of them, but quietly sat down and praised God.

One Sunday, as I was coming out of the church, after the morning service, I saw some girls standing near the door of a workers' room. They seemed greatly excited, and wondering, I soon found out the cause. A girl was praying aloud, and praising God in the English language. She did not know the language. Some of us gathered around her in the room, and joined her mentally in prayer. She was unconscious of what was going on, and was speaking to the Lord Jesus fluently in English. Before, I had heard her and some other girls uttering only a few syllables. Some repeated certain words. Some spoke one or more sentences, and some were simply groaning as if under a great agony of heart

and mind, and carrying a great burden for souls.

.....with stammering lips and another tongue
He will speak to this people — Isaiah 28:11

The gift of prophecy was also given to many of the praying girls, so that they could give God's message in very clear language, taught by the Holy Spirit. Both believers and unbelievers were moved alike by these messages. A deep spiritual work began in our midst.

They who have received the gift of tongues are not using them for delivering messages from the Scriptures, except those who have received the gift of interpretation. They pray and praise God, and sometimes sing hymns in unknown tongues.

From another source: by Mukti Prayer Bell

In Pandita Ramabasi's School at Mukti, Kedagon, India, God is working in power among the girls again. God is pouring out upon them such a spirit of prayer again. It is like the mighty roaring of the sea when they begin. The workers are looking for a great outpouring of His Spirit again upon Mukti. He has also been blessedly working among the Christian and Missionary Alliance people in Bombay.

Brother Max Wood Moorhead of Bombay, India, writes: "God is working mightily through the Bombay Presidency and there are witnesses now at Bombay, Khamgaon, Okola, Amraoki, Dholka, Dharangson. Rhesqaon, Nasrapur, Pandharpur and Dhond. Praise God! Many natives are entering in, and how blessedly God uses these ignorant, lowly Indians as channels of blessing to their own people. A native boy of 19 was filled with the Holy Spirit in January and has been wonderfully healed of consumption and is instrumental in winning souls to Jesus, even his own heathen mother and a heathen lad, an old friend. He has also been a messenger of power to missionaries from the homeland. At Dolka, a station of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, where five missionaries have received Pentecost, six

orphan lads are magnifying God in new tongues.”

“The Christians have seen their God.”

In one of the more recent accounts of revivals in Secunderabad, India, it is said the Holy Spirit came on them suddenly in the church prayer-meeting; the prayer of contrition was like the roar of a cataract. The heathen outside came running from every direction, looking in at every window, and watched the novel proceeding. As the Christians breaking through to God and coming out under the fiery baptism, lifted their rapt and ecstatic faces, the heathen went home to their villages, reporting with awe, “The Christians have seen their God!”

God Heals In India

From the second year of “The Revival” in Khassia Hills, India, a missionary writes it is spreading in such a wonderful way like a great prairie fire. Nothing is able to withstand it. It bursts out into a flame in the most unexpected places. Following is an account of the healing of a poor heathen woman of a most loathsome skin disease, because of which the heathen had thrust her from the village to die in the jungle. While on the roadside she stood listening to the preaching of the Gospel and suddenly exclaimed, “God has given me medicine. He will heal me with this medicine,” and began rubbing her poor body with her hands when she exclaimed, “I am well!” It was so. The heathen around saw and were filled with awe.

This Gospel means a crucified life. We must take up our cross daily and follow Christ. The cause of so many losing the anointing of the Spirit is that they neglect to mortify and crucify self. He wants our eyes, our ears, and all our members kept unto Himself, that we might live after the Spirit and not after the flesh. He is looking for people today that will die to the fleshly life. How can our eyes revel in the things of this world and our ears listen to worldly music if they are consecrated to the master’s use. People say this is fanaticism, but it is the teaching of the precious word of God. We must measure up to it. He wants us to have our

ears closed to the world and open to heaven.

And from another source:

HEAVENLY VISITATIONS IN INDIA, DHOLKA. Gujerat

No pen can fully describe what God is doing here, and we are only in the midst of things, not at the end of this wave of power. Praise God! Yet, I can no longer keep from you the blessed tidings.

Last week the Lord sent Miss Gardner and me from Bombay to this place, having said to us in tongues before leaving. “Ask for great things.....Ask in the heavens above or in the depth below.” We found the missionaries here a prepared people earnestly desiring the full Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Some of them had definitely prayed long for it. Brother Schoonmaker was already fully in the Baptism and has been greatly used by God.

The second day, everyone in one accord began to tarry before the Lord, the missionaries deciding by the will of God in them, to lay aside all the work that could be laid aside, and God has graciously enabled the busy workers to attend all the meetings since. We have tarried each day from 3 P. M. until about midnight, with an intermission for dinner.

The first day, the Lord worked mightily and baptized one sister, accompanying the Baptism with a new tongue. She was filled with joy and praise and has progressed on by leaps and bounds ever since.

Friday was a day of testing. The meeting seemed full of the love of God, but the power seemed much less than the day before. The Lord sent Miss Gardner & me out into a field during the intermission to find out what was the matter. We humbled ourselves before God and begged Him to reveal the cause of failure. I began to speak in a tongue and she to interpret, and He said, “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to over there,’ and it will move. Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

He also gave other verses about faith. Oh, the blessed faithful God! Let no one say tongues are of no use. We accepted the reproof from our great Master and sought faith. It was given and the power came back.

On Saturday and Sunday, the mighty work went on. He baptized a sister and gave her a new tongue. He anointed another, gave several of us another new tongue, and gave Miss Gardner the interpretation of each of the messages. Oh, praise God with me. By this time, He had put the Holy Spirit as oil on the whole company of those who were waiting, and all mouths were filled with praise and prayer.

Monday was the most marvelous and glorious day of my whole life so far. At the beginning of the meeting, Jesus talked with me like this: “What do you think I am going to do?”

“I don’t know. Lord.”

“What do you believe for?”

“I think you will baptize someone.”

“Do you not believe I will do more?”

“I hope so.”

“Will you believe I will do greater things today than any day before?”

“Yes, Lord, I will believe.”

He spoke also to Miss Gardner in the same way, telling her He would do mighty things before midnight. I said, “Lord, let me see fire on all these heads, do let me. Lord.” Then I began to speak in a tongue. I soon became aware that I was praying for a brother. Then [with my spiritual eyes] I saw a great shower of blood fall all over him. Then the prayer went to another brother, and a reservoir of oil was poured over him. Next it was for a sister, and as she lay on the floor, her body was covered in flaming fire. Another deluged in a flood of water from above, another stamped all over visibly with seals. Before another there appeared a great heart that kept enlarging, then a white door in the top of the heart, and both settled lightly down on her breast. Another seemed gradually enveloped in a cloud.

The following from another source:

Jesus Was Her Guru

— by Keith J. White

If you don’t know the inner strength of an Indian woman with a divine call, you haven’t met Pandita Ramabai.

Pandita Ramabai was just five feet tall, with short black hair and small bones. Yet wherever she went the presence of this Brahman Indian woman—characterized by her grey-green eyes, shapely lips, and light complexion—seemed to cast a spell over all whom she met. She was adored as a goddess when she arrived in Calcutta at age 20. Years later, when she addressed the 2000 delegates of the National Social Congress in Bombay in 1889 (the first woman to do so), she took the assembly by storm.

As she was preparing to speak on two resolutions for gender reform, her audience took some time to settle down. She remained silent and still—until you could have heard a pin drop—and then began with the remarkable words: “It is not strange, my countrymen, that my voice is small, for you have never given a woman the chance to make her voice strong!” From that moment on, she carried her enraptured listeners in the palm of her hand, and the resolutions were passed by a huge majority.

And so it was throughout much of India and then America: Audiences were moved to laughter and tears before responding with resounding applause and standing ovations. She knew many of the sacred texts of the Hindu religion by heart and had an ear for the varied cadences of the written and spoken word. But she also knew from 20 years of wandering the hard realities of everyday life for Indian women. It was a brave person who ventured to contradict this combination of academic brilliance and personal experience. She was a born leader, held in awe by the rich and famous and trusted by the poor and oppressed.

The renowned Indian social reformer D. K. Karve wrote, “Pandita Ramabai was one of the greatest daughters of India.” As an outstanding linguist, author, educational pioneer, social

reformer, and Bible translator, she attracted the praise of scholars, politicians, and theologians. As a strong patriot, she was the first to advocate Hindi as the national language of India and the first woman to promote allegiance to the motherland rather than to the British crown.

But her conversion to Christianity and her staunch rebuttal of Westerners' romanticizing of "Hinduism" as a new world religion drew ever-increasing opposition. Like Jesus, Ramabai found herself "outside the city" of contemporary discourses and paradigms. With the British Raj fully established and the missionary movement still operating in a Western mindset, there was little place for a woman who quietly but firmly insisted on her own cultural and personal identity and refused to accept the gate-keeping of Western denominational Christianity. Until recently this extraordinary woman had been virtually erased from history.

Perhaps this was inevitable. Ramabai was a pioneer who—way ahead of her time—challenged traditional values and stereotypes in both East and West. From the moment she first encountered Jesus, she was unwaveringly determined to follow Jesus as her guru and to take the Bible as her guide. And she did so with an indomitable spirit inherited in part from her distinguished father, but also honed by years of suffering and trial.

Hungry prodigy

Pandita Ramabai Dongre Medhavi (her full married name) was born on April 23, 1858, in her father's ashram (a religious community where devotees stayed to learn more of the Hindu faith) 4,000 feet above sea level on the forest slopes of the Western Ghats near Karkal. Her father was a renowned Brahman scholar whose search for and devotion to the One True God was a lifelong commitment. He was orthodox in his beliefs and practice, with one significant exception: He was convinced (against considerable institutional and peer pressure) that women

should be allowed to learn the holy ancient language of Sanskrit and thereby have access to the Hindu scriptures.

Although he successfully argued his case from the scriptures, it seems likely that he was never fully accepted as one of the community of bhaktas (devotional Hindus) from this point on. When his ashram ran out of money due to his generosity, he became a wandering mendicant who, along with his family, survived by reciting the Puranas (sacred Hindu texts) at pilgrimage sites all over the subcontinent.

Ramabai was therefore on the move from an early age. Her mother taught her in the open air, and lessons lasted for three hours at a stretch. It was not long before Ramabai knew 18,000 verses of the Bhagavata Purana by heart. She also learned astronomy, botany, and physiology.

During the great famine from 1874-76, Ramabai helplessly watched her parents and sister starve to death. She and her older brother continued to wander throughout India, experiencing extreme physical hardship and hunger before finally reaching Calcutta in 1878. There her exceptional knowledge of Sanskrit texts so astonished scholars that they immediately awarded her two titles: Pandita (a wise person) and Saraswati (goddess of learning). But she had become disillusioned with ancient texts that forbade women to learn what her father had taught her, and saddened and angered by the oppression of women legitimated by a patriarchal reading of these sacred texts. She deplored the belief that "women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth," as she wrote later, and that women, like people of lower castes, could not obtain mukti (ultimate liberation or salvation) unless by their merit they were reincarnated as Brahman men. Ramabai began to champion women's rights and education and soon became renowned in India as a lecturer.

Seeking and Finding

When her brother died, Ramabai shocked all who knew her by marrying someone of a lower caste. Bapu Bipin Behari Das Medhavi was a lawyer and teacher, and together they studied Western ideas and philosophy. After considering for a time the views of the reformist group Brahma Samaj, which sought to integrate the teachings and insights of different religions, Ramabai began to read a Bengali Gospel of Luke given to her husband by a Baptist missionary while they were living in Assam.

This was the beginning of a lengthy and tortuous process of conversion. Later she wrote, “Having lost all faith in my former religion, and with my heart hungering after something better, I eagerly learned everything I could about the Christian religion, and declared my intention to become a Christian.”

Her decision met with predictable opposition both from her husband and also from many of the Indian reformers who had seen her as a champion of the Hindu/Indian cause. There was little precedent for a woman remaining culturally and socially Indian while at the same time embracing Christianity. One of the people who helped her greatly during this time of struggle was the Brahman convert and Anglican priest Nehemiah Goreh. She wrote: “Father Goreh preached to me from India. His humble sweet voice has pierced my heart. I think no one would have had the power of turning my heart from the Brahman religion but Father Goreh.”

After less than 18 months of marriage, Ramabai’s husband died of cholera, leaving her a widow at 23 years of age with an infant daughter, Manorama. At that time in India, widows were effectively isolated from the public world for the rest of their lives, confined to the women’s quarters of households and forced to devote themselves to menial tasks. But Ramabai refused to accept this status. After some hesitation and concern about compromising her personal liberty, she responded to an invitation from social reformers to lecture in Pune.

There her fame as a brilliant scholar and social activist continued to grow, and she devoted herself to alleviating the oppression of women and girls, especially child widows. She was tireless in speaking, testified before the Education Commission (where her eloquence even brought her to the attention of Victoria, Queen of England), started women’s reform organizations in Bombay and Pune, and published her first book, *Stree Dharma-Niti* (Morals for Women).

This book, coupled with her radical reforming zeal and the news about her move towards the Christian faith, provoked deep-seated resentment and lasting criticism from the orthodox and male reform sections of Maharashtrian (western Indian) society. With her charismatic personality, she was challenging patriarchal authority and norms.

Jesus—Without the Dogma

Contemplating the study of medicine in England, Ramabai accepted an invitation in 1883 to stay at the Community of the Sisters of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage, where she improved her English while teaching Sanskrit in return. She was greatly affected by her visit to the establishment for “fallen women” that the Sisters of Wantage helped run, as well as by the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to which the Sisters pointed as justification for their ministry. “I realized,” she later wrote, “after reading the fourth chapter of St. John’s Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Savior he claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden women of India. ... Thus my heart was drawn to the religion of Christ.”

She and her daughter Manorama were baptized in Wantage. But her stay in England became one long struggle to establish her own spiritual and personal identity in the face of relentless pressures to conform to Anglican (specifically Anglo-Catholic) teaching, and she was at times anxious and depressed. This did not prevent her, however, from engaging in substantive doctrinal discussion and debate with some of the leading Anglican and

Baptist theologians of the time. From September 1883 until February 1886, she attended Cheltenham Ladies' College where she found a sympathetic teacher and friend in the principal, Dorothy Beale.

Beale made a genuine attempt to step into Ramabai's shoes and to see the unique challenges of being both "Hindu" (i.e., culturally Indian) and "Christian." Ramabai in turn shared with Beale her struggles to reconcile biblical teaching with the church's creeds and dogma, her shock at the multiplicity of Christian denominations, and her reluctance to be identified with a particular one.

Admiring the honesty and spiritual depth which drove this Indian convert to arrive at her own conclusions, Beale was not threatened by the way Ramabai articulated her guiding principles: "I believe in Christ ... But at the same time I shall not bind myself to believe in and accept everything that is taught by the church; before I accept it I must be convinced that it is according to Christ's teaching."

American Idol

In 1883, Ramabai was invited to Philadelphia to attend the graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshee, India's first female doctor. She became an instant sensation in North America and made several lasting friendships with notable figures such as Frances Willard (one of the leaders of the Women's Movement), and Rachel Bodley (Dean of the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia). She was soon convinced that her life's work in India should be to transform the situation of India's high caste women, especially child widows, by establishing an all-women's residential school modeled on the radical kindergarten system pioneered by Friedrich Froebel.

Encouraged by Rachel Bodley, she published her first English book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, a work that increased her fame and brought invitations from far and near. As she traveled throughout the United States on speaking tours,

supporters collected funds and set up a Ramabai Association to assist the formation of her proposed school. Meanwhile, she also prepared curriculum materials for six grades, read widely, collected huge amounts of resource information, and compiled her own observations about America for a book that was published (in the Marathi language) soon after her return to India. On her departure, Ramabai left behind a significant band of enthusiastic admirers, especially among the Women's Movement and the National Women's Temperance Union.

Soon after her return to India, Ramabai established her first residential school, the Sharada Sadan (House of Learning), in Bombay. In 1890 the school moved to Pune, the place where she had always intended it should be. But she encountered increasingly fierce criticism from both Christian and Hindu communities when she sought to run her school in an open and tolerant way, making Hindu and Christian texts freely available side by side. Though she was by this time a widely respected and influential figure—it was during this period that she made her famous address to the Indian National Social Conference, the forerunner of the National Congress Party—opposition continued to mount. Finally, after some of her students converted to Christianity and were baptized, there was a massive withdrawal of local support.

A model community

Eventually, through a combination of circumstances, Ramabai bought some land and set up a residential community in a village called Khedgaon on the railway line 40 miles away. She named the community "Mukti," an Indian word that means Salvation. For several years, Mukti's newsletter sported the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia on its cover, inscribed with the motto "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout the Land unto all the inhabitants here," from Leviticus 25:10. It was symbolic of Ramabai's own personal lifelong quest for mukti-freedom, rest, salvation-which she ultimately found in Christ.

Whereas the Sharada Sadan in Pune, as in Bombay, was intended for the daughters of Brahman families, Mukti was open to all women in need. Soon the place was filled to overflowing with starving child-widows, orphans, victims of famines in central India, and other needy women. At times the Mukti Mission provided for as many as 2000. In addition to housing so many women, it had a kindergarten for young children, schools, a hospital, a refuge for “fallen women,” 64 cloth-weaving looms, five printing presses, tailoring and handicrafts, a flourmill, an oil press, a laundry, a farm, orchards, and wells. Ramabai managed to set up this establishment and to sustain and run it with the help of an efficient administrative staff. Among her assistants was her daughter Manorama, who joined her after returning from college in America, and who Ramabai hoped would be her eventual successor.

The intention of Mukti was that women should be accepted, nurtured, loved, trained, and equipped to take their place in Indian society whether as parents, teachers, nurses, or Bible women. It was a place of empowerment and transformation—a model Christian community following the teaching of Jesus and the life of the early Christians.

Although Ramabai never lost her desire to draw from and celebrate the best of India’s native cultures, including its music, dress, literature, and traditions, Mukti was an openly Christian establishment, as evidenced by the publication of Ramabai’s life-story, *My Testimony*, and many other tracts and Christian booklets.

From 1905 to 1907 a “Holy Spirit” revival broke out—an event similar to revivals that were occurring in Wales, the Khasi Hills of northeast India, and Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

From Christianity to Christ

Despite the heavy responsibilities involved in setting up Sharada Sadan and then Mukti, Ramabai never deviated from her commitment to follow Jesus as her guru, and her writings and

correspondence show how her bhakti (devotional) Hindu upbringing prepared her for a life of devotion to her Lord. She studied the Bible with great care, her prayer life was regular and disciplined, and she read many Christian biographies. She was deeply influenced by the book *From Death unto Life* written by the Anglican minister Rev. William Haslam, through whose very honest testimony Ramabai came to see the distinction between formal religion (whether Hindu or Christian) and the personal relationship of faith between a devotee and her guru.

She wrote of this discovery, “Although I was quite contented with my newly-found religion, so far as I understood it, still I was laboring under great intellectual difficulties, and my heart longed for something better ... I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me; but I had not found Christ, Who is the Life of the religion and ‘the Light of every man that cometh into the world.’”

For Ramabai a living faith meant a seamless interweaving of life and beliefs. She chose as her mentors in the Christian faith a few such people. Perhaps the closest to her was the Marathi poet Narayan Tilak, who had spent his life seeking to follow Christ without sacrificing his Marathi roots and culture. His poetry contained profound Indian theology, and she printed some of his songs and hymns for use in worship at Mukti.

Tilak also helped her a little with what became her magnum opus: the translation of the whole Bible from Hebrew and Greek into contemporary Marathi. It was in some ways a natural undertaking for such a brilliant scholar and linguist. She had benefitted from the way her parents had given her access to the sacred Hindu texts by means of Sanskrit, and now she was offering the people of Maharashtra the opportunity to read the Bible in their own language.

But it was more than this. She had come to the conclusion that the key to India’s transformation was Christian women going from village to village sharing their lives and the Bible with their

fellow country-women. Because she believed that the Bible was a radical instrument of change, she was willing to devote the last 12 years of her life to this Marathi translation.

She completed the revision of the final drafts only hours before she died in April 1922. Her daughter Manorama had died a few months before, and Ramabai knew her mission was complete. Mukti was soundly established and would be run by those whom she knew and trusted. The Marathi Bible would be printed on Mukti presses. And former “Mukti girls” would take the message of freedom in Christ to every part of Maharashtra.

Forgotten saint

Mukti survives to the present day and is one of Ramabai’s lasting legacies. It is a testimony to Ramabai’s understanding as an Indian reformer of what it meant to “be one in Christ Jesus” regardless of social status, ethnicity, or gender. Ramabai intended that others would learn from this working model and develop her insights and methods. As Christians worldwide explore new ways of being “church,” Mukti stands as an example of an ecclesial [church] community comprising the least and the lowest of India, focusing not on itself, but on God’s calling to be an agent of change in the nation.

Yet Mukti’s founder has been relegated to the margins of history. A wooden cross marks her grave amid scrubby farmland not far from a railway line. She is only hazily known, if at all, in her motherland, and almost completely unknown in the wider world. It could be argued that this marginalization is exactly what Ramabai wanted. From her father and from the Sisters at St. Mary’s, she had learned the virtues of the “hidden life,” and she was determined to be a servant, an enabler, and a sweeper, so that in all things Jesus might be pre-eminent and glorified. Had her wishes been respected, Mukti would not even be known today as Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission: She did not want her name in the title.

But until she is “rediscovered,” India and the rest of the world will be deprived of an inspiring and challenging example of Christian faith in action. Her friend and biographer Professor Nicol MacNicol concluded, “Pandita Ramabai stands at the head of a new way for India, flinging wide to her the gates of hope.” That way is still in place, and the doors remain open.

Keith J. White, the writer/author, of the above passage, is a visiting lecturer at Spurgeon’s College, London, and the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary, and the leader of an interdenominational Christian community caring for children in need.

In history everyone who reached out to do a great work was rejected by their own generation. So also Pandita Ramabai. What did some of her enemies say about her? The most obvious is that she, raised as a Brahman Hindu, rejected the Brahminical patriarchy and converted to Christianity, and the premise that Christianity was associated with Colonialism and therefore Ramabai was looked upon as a traitor. Of course this is a narrow view that ignores the very many things that Pandita did to bless the suffering Hindu women.

Following is a partial chronological outline of Pandita Ramabai's service to the Indian people

November 1890 — Sharada Sadan, “Home of Learning”, opened in Bombay with two pupils. The school was for high caste Hindu widows, with the principle of observing complete religious freedom.

The school moved to Pune. — 1891

26 child widows and 13 non-widows in the school. 1895

Ramabai purchased a farm on deserted land near Pune. 1896-97

300 girls rescued from Madhya Pradesh famine and taken to a farm as plague had broken out in Pune. Temporary sheds were put up hastily to accommodate them, and the place was called “Mukti Sadan”, Home of Salvation. — September 14, 1898

Opening of first permanent stone building. — March 20, 1899

Laying of Rescue Home foundation stone. — September 20, 1899

Laying of church foundation stone. — 1900-01

Hundreds of girls and women rescued from Gujerat famine. Almost 2,000 residents now. — 1902

Separate home established for boys near the girl's home. — 1903

Printing press established, fully operated by women. 1904

Ramabai started translation of Bible into Marathi - 1912

Property purchased in Supa-Baramati. — 1913

Mukti commences Junior College level classes. — ?

First edition of the New Testament in Marathi published. — 1919

Government recognition granted up to matriculation level to Mukti School. Ramabai awarded Kaiser-Hind medal for community service. — April 5, 1922

Ramabai's death. — July 1922

Trustees changed the Mission name to Ramabai Mukti Mission. — 1924

Ramabai's translation of the complete Bible printed at the Mukti Printing Press. — 1949

Krishnabai Memorial Hospital opened. — 1956

The Flower Family cottage system was started with mixed age groups of girls. Until now girls and women had been grouped according to age and lived in separate compounds. — 1966

First Conference for representatives of Mukti's six overseas Councils held. — 1966

Manoramabai Memorial Girls High School opened (in memory of Ramabai's daughter). — July 1970

Name changed to Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission. 1989

A postal stamp was released by the Government of India commemorating 100 years since the commencement of Ramabai's work. — 1999

Pandita Ramabai listed as one of the top 20 humanitarians of the 20th century by The Australian newspaper. — 2000

Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission received the Mahatma Gandhi Award for Social Justice. — June 2005

Another picture:



Pandita Ramabai

FREE copies of this booklet are available from:
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Some of the greatest saints in the world are little known outside of their own area of influence. Probably most reading this story have never heard of Pandita Ramabai who was born in India in 1858. Nevertheless, when she died in 1922, government officials honored as one of the greatest women who had ever lived and served the poor women and widows of India. And all this, despite the fact that Pandita turned from the Hindu religion and turned to the Christian religion when she was still young.