



**Lesson: Pandita Ramabai : A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible
Treasure**

Paper: Women's Writing in the 19th and 20th Centuries (ii)

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PANDITA RAMABAI: AN INTRODUCTION

"In our country there are women (or at least one) like Pandita Ramabai, and they possess freedom and education like her."¹

Kashibai Kanitkar's pride and admiration for Pandita Ramabai is unambiguously expressed in the above statement from her review of Ramabai's *The Peoples of the United States*. Kashibai herself was the first major woman writer in Marathi and her approbation of Ramabai as an exemplary personality, who embodied the potential of the Indian woman, speaks volumes about the contemporary attitude towards the latter. However any such attempt to locate Pandita Ramabai vis-a-vis the socio-cultural and political conditions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century India is a fraught enterprise; despite Kashibai's eulogy, Ramabai's contemporaries were largely silent about her achievements, acknowledging her efforts only grudgingly.

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF PANDITA RAMABAI

Pandita Ramabai was born on 23rd April 1858 at her father's Anant Shastri Dongre's ashram. Dongre an enlightened Chitpavan Brahmin intellectual who, while orthodox, yet envisioned the ideal of marriage with a Sanskrit educated woman. The idea was considered preposterous and highly romantic but Dongre was keen to teach his companion the sacred language himself. While his first wife did not concur with his plans, on her passing away, Dongre remarried and his second wife, Lakshimibai was able to master the language. However the successful experiment led to much censure and criticism. In an attempt to defend himself, Dongre quoted passages from the sacred texts to an assembly of learned *shastris* and reiterated that there were no sanctions in the scriptures against the education of women. However, soon after he withdrew with his family to the forest of Gangamul. Here in the mountains he set up an ashram and committed his life to the cause of devotion and education. This was the happiest phase of the Dongre family and Ramabai, the youngest of the six children, was born here.

By now a firm advocate of women's education, Anant Shastri Dongre, took another concrete step in this direction after the unhappy child marriage of his elder daughter Krishnabai. He refused to push Ramabai in the same abyss, and did not give her away as a child-bride. The mother, Lakshimibai, was entrusted with the education of the two daughters and interestingly Mirabai, a sixteenth-century Vaishnav poet-saint,

¹ Kosambi, Meera. trans. and ed. *Feminist Vision or 'Treason Against Men'?: Kashibai Kanitkar and the Engendering of Marathi Literature*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011.pg.69

was held up as a model to the two of them. Mirabai had denounced conventions and bravely faced social ostracism in her quest for her devotion. Further, another anomaly in this curriculum for the girls was that they were to be taught Sanskrit. This idyllic childhood which fostered a spirit of empowerment and gender equality was, however, soon to fall apart.

Anant Shastri Dongre was no longer able to sustain his wife and children, and they soon embarked on a permanent pilgrimage. They visited many sacred places, and managed with whatever they got by reciting the Puranas in public. Ramabai became a Puranika herself at the age of fifteen and thus also learnt the skill of speaking before large audiences.

Through all these trials and tribulations the Dongres firmly held on to their spiritual quest and never compromised on their religious practices like giving alms from their already meagre income. The education of the girls also continued under the guidance of their mother through all these wanderings across the subcontinent; in fact Ramabai even gained fluency in other languages like Kanada and Hindi.

In 1874 Ramabai's parents succumbed to the severe famine in Madras Presidency, and later in 1875 her elder sister Krishnabai died of cholera. For the next two years Ramabai and her brother Srinivas Shastri continued with their peregrinations and remained true to the religious commitment of the Dongre family.

In the year 1878 the siblings reached Calcutta, where Ramabai's lectures in Sanskrit, her erudition and her convincing victory over the *shastris* garnered much curiosity in the intellectual circles of the day. After a public examination, Ramabai was honoured with the title of the 'Pandita' and later was also looked upon as Saraswati incarnate. Her interaction with Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj reformer, must also be mentioned here as it was he who, going a step beyond her father, convinced her that women could read the Vedas and the Upanishads as well.

This ushered in a new phase in Ramabai's life and career and her disillusionment with Hindu religious practices, which she had confronted in the days of privation during the famine, now became more pronounced. She joined the Brahmo Samaj which was a monotheistic sect that advocated social reforms in nineteenth-century Bengal and was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore in 1828. Instead of the Puranic recitations that she was famous for, Ramabai now became a popular speaker on the emancipation of women who corroborated her arguments with quotations from the ancient Hindu texts.

This phase of popularity lasted for two years, and came to an abrupt end with the passing away of her brother from cholera in 1880. Shunning the invitation of the social reformers in Maharashtra who were inclined to bring her back and even fund her work, Ramabai embarked upon matrimony and domesticity. However in consonance with the former trajectory of her life, even this event was a contravention of social rules for she chose to marry Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a non-Brahmin. The inter-caste marriage was much condemned and the couple was widely maligned. Ramabai along with Das, a practising Brahmo lawyer, now left for Kachar, Assam. They soon had a daughter, Manorama, and Ramabai continued to work for the cause of women and critically examine the Hindu tradition. However the premature death of Das in 1882, due to cholera, plunged the mother and the daughter in the throes of uncertainty.

As always, Ramabai courageously overcame the personal tragedy, avowing her commitment to the cause of women in India. She now decided to return 'home' i.e. Maharashtra and was welcomed by her progressive countrymen who immediately co-opted her in the Prathana Samaj under the tutelage of Justice M.G.Ranade. She was certainly in a privileged position because of her erudition and her reputation. Many public meetings were organised for Ramabai where she spoke of the need for women's education and advocated the cause of their freedom and equality.

By now, Ramabai had decided to address three primary areas of concern—women's education, child marriage and the condition of the widows in the country. The Pandita was thus the first woman to "storm the citadel of male-dominated reform endeavours" (10)². The foray into this sphere was not an easy one for it was resisted even by the women of the upper castes, who were subjected to the most strictures. The very identity of these women was conjoined with that of the 'house' that they belonged to and they were strictly confined to the 'inner' realm of the house. This seclusion was advocated on the grounds that the women embodied the 'honour' of the household. In addition, the patriarchal order was also unambiguous in its plans to channelize the benefits of any of these uplifting measures for women, towards its own advantage. Thus educating women according to them could ensure a companionate alliance for young men enlightened by the liberal education of Britain. Moreover, it would also augur well for the future generations, who could reap the benefits of an educated mother, and consequently, contribute to the larger cause of the nation as such. Thus, a woman could

² Kosambi, Meera. trans. and ed. *Feminist Vision or 'Treason Against Men?': Kashibai Kanitkar and the Engendering of Marathi Literature*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011.

never be thought of as an individual but always as an appendage to her husband. Under these circumstances, widowhood was surely the worst fate that could befall a woman.

Pandita Ramabai began her reform movement in Maharashtra with the establishment of the Arya Mahila Samaj on the 1st of June 1882 in Pune. This society aimed to mobilize women for the reforms that would impact their lives most deeply. Ramabai planned to start a widows' home which met with little support. However, to understand the challenges that she faced, one has to delve deeper into the socio-political developments in nineteenth century Maharashtra. While liberal reformers like Justice M.G. Ranade and Professor R.G.Bhandarkar and later G.G.Agarkar strove to establish social change through legislation, others like Justice K.T.Telang and B.G.Tilak prioritised political concerns over social issues. *Kesari*, the Marathi newspaper and the *Mahratta*, its English counterpart, became organs of the upper-caste and male dominated social reform circles. Not surprisingly, Ramabai's fervent plea before the Hunter Commission in 1882 for better provisions for women's education and training, including medical education and care, was severely criticised by the *Kesari*. It was also in the same year that her Marathi work *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women) was published.

Pandita Ramabai was one of the few nineteenth-century women who were able to support themselves with their writing. With the proceeds of the sale of the copies of *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women) in 1882 she paid for her passage to England. For *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, 1888 ten thousand copies were sold in the very first edition.

At around the same time, Ramabai felt that in order to realise her emancipatory ideas she needed the help and cooperation of European volunteers in India who were also striving towards the same end. This brought her in contact with the Wantage Sisters, active members of the Anglican community in Pune.

In 1883, amid much speculation in the press, Pandita Ramabai travelled to England with ambitions to study medicine with the proceeds from the sale of her work *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women). She planned to support herself, her daughter and another female companion by training the Sisters of the Community of St.Mary the Virgin at Wantage in Marathi, which they could in turn use on their mission to India. Ramabai's zeal to redress the situation at home can be seen in her letter to the former Governor of Bombay presidency, Sir Bartle Frere, entitled *The Cry of Indian Women*. She hoped that it would circulate widely, thereby raising funds for a proposed 'home' for the female victims in India.

In a still controversial event, Ramabai converted to Christianity by the end of September 1883 and was baptised into the Anglican Church as Mary Rama under her

spiritual guide Sister Geraldine. Although she had been critical of Hindu orthodoxy, Ramabai's conversion created a sensation. Back in India, many of her supporters saw this move as an act of 'betrayal' which could not be redeemed at any cost. With this unexpected event came the confirmation of her incurable deafness which put an end to her dreams of becoming a physician. Soon she was enrolled in the Cheltenham Ladies' College, where she was to learn various disciplines like English and mathematics while supporting herself in part by teaching Sanskrit. Here Miss Dorothea Beale, the founder-principal of the College gave much support to Ramabai and mentored her spiritually after her conversion. Their correspondence is of much significance insofar as it reveals the evolution of the Pandita once she embraced the new religion, which also happened to be the religion of the colonial rulers of her motherland. Furthermore, it was also at the same time that Ramabai understood the significance of supplementing formal education with avenues for industry and employment.

In 1886, Ramabai travelled to the United States of America at the invitation of the Dean of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. At the same institution she attended the graduation of Anandibai Joshee, India's first woman doctor. The press in India also covered the same event and categorically denounced Ramabai even as it eulogised Anandibai for her strict conformity to tradition even in those distant shores. This marks the beginning of the often tumultuous relations that the Indian political and social reform societies had with Pandita Ramabai.

In the active world of the late nineteenth century American feminism Ramabai was soon catapulted into the limelight as a zealous advocate of the cause of Indian women. During the three years of her stay there Ramabai closely studied the educational system in America and conceived the idea of 'home' for the high-caste Hindu widows in India. In 1887 she wrote *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* as a fund-raising tract. Ten thousand copies of the same were sold in the very first edition itself. Ramabai travelled widely across the United States lecturing on the condition of women and child widows in India. The Ramabai Association of Boston formed in the year 1887 and later the Ramabai "circles" also pledged financial support for the 'home'. It was also during these years that she took extensive notes which were later compiled and published in Marathi as *The Peoples of the United States* in 1889. In this work Ramabai spoke about the liberating democratic nature of American society as opposed to the stifling orthodoxy of Britain.

Pandita Ramabai finally reached India in 1889 and almost within a month she opened the Sharada Sadan, a widows' home. The setting up of Sharada Sadan was greatly applauded and met with enthusiastic approval from both the conservative nationalists and social reformers. Even the *Kesari*, which had been the first to point out

any 'lapses' now commended the nationalistic fervour of Ramabai as she had successfully garnered resources in distant lands to alleviate the plight of her sisters at home. Interestingly, Ramabai's conversion to the new faith was now overlooked and she was reclaimed as a worthy compatriot.

However in 1890 Ramabai's shifting of the Sadan to Pune due to financial constraints proved fateful and led to an ugly fall out with all her supporters. This episode set the tone for the complicated relationship that she would share with mainstream Hindu society in the years to come. Pune was the bastion of conservative Marathi Brahmin culture and the Sadan now came under scrutiny for its approach to the traditional way of life prescribed for widows and most importantly, over allegations of proselytization. The controversy got wide coverage in the press and the immediate aftermath of this was that the girls were withdrawn from the institution by their wary guardians. Ramabai lost the patronage at home and had to clarify her position to the international supporters as well.

Conservative society now not only reduced Ramabai to an 'outcast', it threatened the very continuation of her project. While the missionaries criticized the religious neutrality of the school, conservative Hindu families refused to send their daughters to one like Ramabai, who supposedly was a great advocate of her religion and posed the 'threat' of conversion to their gullible daughters.

As a result, Ramabai began to focus on lower caste victims and not the women of the upper castes, as she had done at the beginning of the mission. In 1896, following the severe famine in the Central Provinces and Gujarat, Ramabai rescued hundreds of victims and offered them shelter in Kedgaon, near Pune on land that she had recently bought. Here she opened the Mukti Sadan, later expanded into Mukti Mission. Significantly, this institution was a Christian one from its very inception. Simultaneously, Ramabai also set up the Kripa Sadan, a rescue home for the sexually abused women.

Mukti Mission was rechristened as the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission in 1969. It is still functional and has been the ray of hope in the lives of many women by educating them and training them in vocations which has ensured them financial independence.

Alienated and viewed with suspicion by the mainstream, Ramabai now got support and encouragement only from Christian denominations which had previously been critical of her non-proselytization. The Mukti Mission flourished under her able administration and developed into an exemplary 'female' microcosm which not only empowered the residents with knowledge through the school that had been set up, but also trained them in various vocations such as teaching, nursing, tailoring etc. The

inmates were thereby inspired to become self-reliant and strive for financial independence. Ramabai thus envisaged a completely new concept of the 'home'- one which was liberating and without any of the repressive mechanisms which characterises the patriarchal household. Moreover, this was also a 'female' space free of male intrusion which fostered the spirit of sisterhood.

The publications of the Mission, such as the newsletter called the Mukti Prayer Bell and the Annual Reports are significant sources for the gradual evolution of the Pandita into a staunch proselytizer. Constant alienation and harsh criticism increasingly strengthened her religious faith and now she contended that the only solution to the plight of Indian women lay in seeking shelter in her 'home' and embracing the Christian faith. Ramabai could not offer any suggestions to alter the social fabric of contemporary India to address these issues but strongly advocated the building of a new society by accepting a new religion, which she believed, fostered an egalitarian society. This was the only way to salvation for Indian women and Indian society at large.

In the year 1907 Ramabai published her autobiography *A Testimony*. Even here the confessional attitude, conforming to the religious practice, is noteworthy. She also embarked on the ambitious project of a new translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into Marathi and simultaneously also wrote a Greek grammar in Marathi.

Soon Ramabai found herself beset with new challenges. The homes that she had set up posed their own problems regarding finances. Furthermore, a few new 'homes' which offered a 'Hindu' alternative to the space that she had created, came to be established by the conservative social reformers. These threatened her mission and became great obstacles to her own ideals of a social emancipation through religious awakening.

However, Ramabai remained the face of Christianity in India and successfully channelized the resources-both monetary and in terms of manpower, from various organisations and agencies worldwide. In the midst of scathing criticism at home, she relied on support from across the seas. The personal tragedy of the death of her daughter Manorama was the final blow to this spirited personality; she passed away the next year in 1922. Denigrated at home and lionized abroad, until her last breath Pandita Ramabai remained embroiled in contradictions.

A TESTIMONY OF OUR INEXHAUSTIBLE TREASURE

Pandita Ramabai concludes the tract *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*³ by describing it as an "...account of my spiritual experience..." (324). She fervently expresses her gratitude to the divine for enabling her to "give this testimony of the Lord's goodness" (324) albeit in a brief sketch. The testimony comprises of an autobiographical account, which includes her conversion to Christianity and her various attempts to alleviate the oppression against women in particular and the society at large. Ramabai also emphasizes that she intends the 'testimony' to demonstrate the truth of Christianity to the reader and the people of this country who can then be "...saved... (by) our Blessed Redeemer..." (324).

A cursory reading of this account of the Pandita's life may suggest that it is the passionate outpouring of a heart full of devotion. However, that would be a very simplistic reading of the text and one that ignores the complex issues that it addresses. In fact, it provides a vantage point for uncovering the much misunderstood Ramabai's plans for national revival.

Ramabai illuminates diverse issues pertaining to late-eighteenth century India, such as religion, culture, gender and above all, nationalism. Interestingly all these were male prerogatives and controlled by the strict orthodoxy of a patriarchal tradition. In this nation-building enterprise Ramabai, thus, had to fight exclusionist strategies at various levels.

In *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* Pandita Ramabai views her whole life from a perspective enriched by her religious faith. It is a moving account of the trials and tribulations refracted through a religious lens. She affirms that her religious awakening derived from her dissatisfaction with the Hindu Shastras and the scepticism which tormented her through the months of privation during and after the severe famine. The pronouncement of the scriptures, which insisted on the lowly status of all women, irrespective of their class/caste, and the Shudras, only added to her disillusionment. Not only were their present lives doomed, there seemed to be no flicker of hope even in the distant future lives. The only consolation is to be "contented" (303) with one's lot and for the women "utter abandonment of (their) will" and in the "worship... and most degraded slavery" (302) of their husbands. Ramabai is candid enough to mention how "angry" and annoyed her husband had been to learn of her "intention to become a Christian" (305) and ruminates about the course of events had his life not been cut short so tragically. The realization of this bleak future, "gradually

³ Kosambi, Meera. comp., ed. and trans. *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words: Selected Works*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. All quotations in the lesson pertaining to the text are from this edition.

opened" (304) her eyes and in the "search for something better" (305) she came upon the Christian religion. Ramabai was not only "intellectually convinced" (308) but positively thrilled at the prospect of a promised salvation.

This brings us to the root of Ramabai's fascination with the Christian religion: she believed that it did away with all the man-made barriers of discrimination and exclusion. In addition, the universality of Christian theology also served the larger ambition of social upliftment that she had long nurtured. It supported the practical measures that she had adopted to make a 'real' impact on the lives of women at large and specifically the widows, the most marginalized of the lot. Christianity to Ramabai was not merely a religion but it held the vision of an egalitarian society, a utopia. Significantly in *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* Ramabai primarily focuses on the Gospels of Paul and John, who reiterate that the Son of God will come to earth to reconcile the sinners with God. Everyone was assured of salvation-there is no injustice here on earth and thereafter in the realms beyond. Ramabai believed that the Indian society lacked the capacity to regenerate and the adoption of this new religion and social order was the only solution to this crisis. The religion of Ramabai's choice was also that of the colonisers and would seriously question her claims to patriotism.

Initially, Ramabai's erudition and discourses were greatly praised but constant efforts to appropriate her voice in the service of patriarchy are evident in the requests made to her to "lecture to the Pardah women on the duties of women according to the Shastras" (301-2). Incidentally this only increased her 'hunger' for an alternative to the same. Her singularity elicited responses similar to the Pandita's reaction on interacting with Indian Christians who appeared like "great curiosities" (301) to her. Any divergence with regard to gender roles and religious practices was seen as an oddity and met with the same social disapproval.

Furthermore, the auto-biographical sketch further convincingly explains Ramabai's decision to embrace the new faith. Rooted in the exigencies of her plans for emancipation, the decision to go to England was intended solely to equip her with the required skills. However, the visit to the Rescue Home there which gave shelter to the "the so-called fallen woman" (307) increased Ramabai's appreciation of Christianity as her own ancestral faith did not make provision for such victims. The compassionate nature of Christianity convinced her that "no one but He (Christ) could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land" (308). Thwarted by the resistance to her plans for a widows' home and increasingly haunted by a sense of alienation from the orthodox majority, it was not easy for Ramabai as a widow to intrude into a space that was designated masculine. The public domain was baffled by this social

trespass; Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), also known as the Lokmanya, was a key figure in the Indian nationalist movement, and the newspaper *Kesari* (under his editorship) were the most vocal of the critics of Ramabai when she converted to Christianity.



Bal Gangadhar Tilak

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bal_Gangadhar_Tilak#/media/File:Bal_G._Tilak.jpg

Ramabai was conscious that her decision would “displease” (308) her compatriots. She was subjected to scathing attacks vis-a-vis her gender as well, for her ‘fickleness’ and ‘betrayal’ were seen as endemic to her sex.

On her return from the United States, the Pandita was welcomed due to her phenomenal success abroad yet the jubilation was short-lived. She was in an incongruous position as she had gone over to the colonisers’ side and was still championing the cause of her ‘compatriots’. The first attack on her, since she was supervising a home for the widows, was motivated by religious reasons. There were allegations of forceful conversions. The issue was not resolved but further aggravated by Ramabai’s forceful and cogent arguments whereby she drew on the nationalists’ demand for ‘independence’ and ‘equality’ and asserted that women were entitled to the same. Her insistence on women’s agency and rejection of the traditional prescriptions for widows, along with her advocacy for widow re-marriage, were seen as an open challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy and the patriarchal system. Ramabai had brought to fore the inherent contradictions in the nationalists’ vision but the later were reluctant to support radical reform; after all, any such attempt could be inimical to the struggle for independence as it would bolster the colonisers’ claim to wield power in the service of a ‘civilizing’ mission.

In the face of this patriotism, attempts were made to gloss over the concerns raised by Ramabai. However, the success of the venture that she was directing led to the need for suitable alternatives. Ramabai and her vision had now transformed into something threatening and dangerous. D.K.Karve set up a parallel institution for widows but this was basically a high-caste widows' home, unlike Ramabai's Mukti Mission, and soon another compromise was made. The social reformers also acceded to widow re-marriage as it was deemed to be less objectionable than conversion. Ramabai was out to change the sanctified territory of their households, but the orthodoxy was unwilling to relinquish control over this space to the state, the liberal reformers or women. Consequently the patriarchal order was unrelenting in its criticism of her work.

One of the other 'homes' as an alternative to Ramabai's Sharda Mission was set up by D.K.Karve. Interestingly, not only was the Pandita an inspiration for Karve but he was in fact married to Godubai Natu, the first widow pupil in the Sharda Sadan.

Although Ramabai's tract clearly delineates her trajectory to the broad Anglican tradition, it is also very honest about her critical attitude to religion. She did not blindly accept any religion but embraced only certain aspects of her new faith in the light of personal, social and cultural considerations. Ramabai clearly states that "I want to find out the truth about everything including religion by experiment" (314). Her initial encounter with Christianity is vividly sketched as she is confronted by the different denominations and their contradictory teachings- "a Babel of religions in Christian countries" (308). She confesses as having to "labour under great intellectual difficulties" (309) and again yearning for "something better which I had not found" (309). The objectivity of the Pandita is noteworthy; she had subjected her earlier faith to a similar scrutiny. Her critique of the Puranikas not translating the scriptures in the vernacular and offering explanations, if any, of an exaggerated nature without any attention to the audience, is of a similar nature. The same critical spirit is also found when she muses that a "secular education" (297,299) could have proved to be a practical investment as against the dogmatic belief of orthodox followers like her parents.

Pandita Ramabai's highly individualistic take on religion comes to the fore, when she earnestly points out that she had been reading 'about' the Bible but not the text itself, as she should have done. Subsequently she has intense religious experiences yet interestingly even now her privileged position is articulated vis-a-vis the Hindu religion as she still retains the use of Sanskrit terms for concepts such as "Svarga" for Heaven and "Moksha" for "liberation" (312). Ramabai's intellectual queries pertaining to Christianity became a great point of contention with the preachers of her new faith and sometimes her independence of mind would only confound the latter. In fact, her

personal interpretations of Christian tenets were often seen as instances of the *native's* proverbial pride and ignorance. Her discussions with Sister Geraldine had given her a personal experience of a similar nature. Stereotypes were instantly invoked to account for any such divergence and ironically, the religion which advocated equality would be quickly appropriated as an instrument of Western hegemony. Her travels had exposed Ramabai to the West's reductive image of the East, which glossed over its complexities. Ramabai was not immune to this 'objectification' of herself and her country and also the general ignorance about the latter. Like some of her predecessors including, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, for instance, she would take strong objection to Hindus being described as 'heathens'.

RAMABAI AND THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

We must also mention here Ramabai's experiences in America. Although a Western country, America shared a bond with India that derived from its own struggle for independence from the British. Ramabai is mindful of American socio-political conditions and strongly highlights the differences between colonial England and democratic America. The United States provided an alternative to the complicated relationship with the colonial 'master' and offered a space where an unprejudiced assessment of the Western civilization could be carried out. However, Ramabai was scathing in her critique of the barbaric custom of slavery as practised in this temple of democracy.

Ramabai's travels in the West, and especially her American 'experience', are crucial as less than a decade later in 1893, the young and fiery Vivekananda would set sail for the same shores and strongly uphold the glory of the ancient Aryan woman. Paeans were sung to Gargi and Maitreyi and contemporary women were exhorted to follow the glorious ideals of the glorious past. This interesting revisionist take on history was exactly the opposite of Ramabai's, who deplored the same tradition. In this attempt at 'social regeneration' Swami Vivekananda had also aligned himself with religion, but his project was distinct from that of Ramabai. He proudly claimed that India had nurtured a society characterized by egalitarian virtues, and the country had no need for foreign ideals. The only issue on which the Swami concurred with Ramabai was the critique of British colonialism.

Ramabai's position with reference to the colonial regime was further complicated despite her conversion because of her interrogation of the imperial enterprise. The critique distanced her from the Christian fraternity as well. Her religious and political orientation left the Pandita doubly isolated. This uneasy relationship is highlighted by Ramabai's outrage at the segregation camp at Pune during the plague of 1897, and

especially the treatment of the women there, which made her assert that Lord Sandhurst, the governor of Bombay, was answerable to the British Parliament. While the governor was dismissive of the charges and described them as highly exaggerated and hence deceptive, Ramabai was quick to respond by labelling the accusations as baseless and deceitful, a 'vice' which the West would usually associate with the Orient. Further she called upon the Christian community to condemn the incident as a betrayal of the Christian values of truthfulness and impartiality.

In continuation of the confessional tone, Ramabai is apologetic for being "so very personal" (314). Yet she admits that she had no choice as she could only offer her life as a concrete illustration of the wonders of this new faith. This personal narrative also propels a public agenda as Ramabai had often wished for some faith-missions in this country, similar to those the Lord had engineered through her. It is in this context that Ramabai mentions the various homes that she had been running. While she firmly defends the "religious liberty" (319) at Sharda Mission she is honest to mention the "slightly" (320) changed constitution of the Mukti Misson. Regarding the latter, she claims that the students still retain "the liberty of conscience" (320) and aligns religious awakening with an awakening of the self insofar as "they are capable of thinking for themselves" (320).

STYLE AND FORM

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita⁴ draw attention to the features of the modern autobiography claiming that it "exhibits certain ambivalence" (160) where often "the accent is personal...the preoccupation with intimate, (and) even the confessional" (160). This emphasis on the personal often obscures the fact that "the autobiography always draws on the repertoire ... (that) cultures provide at particular junctures in their history" (160). This certainly seems true of Ramabai- although she carefully chronicles the social and historical anxieties of her era, she does so in relation to the issues which affect her mission. Meera Kosambi points to the "effort to re-plot her entire past on the meridian of Christianity" (13)⁵ in Ramabai's later writings.

It would also be pertinent to mention that the first autobiography to be ever written was called *Confessions* by St. Augustine of Hippo, an early Christian theologian

⁴ Tharu, Susie and K.Lalita, eds. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. 2 vols. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁵ Kosambi, Meera. comp., ed. and trans. *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words: Selected Works*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

and philosopher. Significantly, the title of the work points out how the genre, from the very inception, has been inclined to define itself as a point where attempts at the discovery of the self also converge with a religious quest. Literary archives provide further facts to substantiate this claim. An early extant female auto-biography, also the first in the English language, by a Christian mystic of the late 14th –early 15th century, Margery Kempe called *The Book of Margery Kempe*, also confronts similar concerns. Kempe writes about the strenuous negotiations between the claims of her marital life and the spiritual path to which she aspired to devote herself. Echoing the same sentiments we also have the autobiography of a 17th century female Marathi saint from the Varkari sect, Bahinabai. In her autobiography called *Atmamanivedana*, Bahina also talks about the compromise between domesticity and the fervent zeal of spirituality. In this context, Pandita Ramabai's confessional tone does not appear to be inconsistent in the tradition of auto-biographical writing within which she positions herself.

The genre of the auto-biography thus, not only provides a space and a context for self-scrutiny, both at a secular and a religious level, twentieth century women's auto-biographies, in fact, also re-assess the conventional (self-)portrayal of women. Auto-biographies like the Pandita's bring to the fore the tension in the construction of the 'self', the relationship between the writer and the reader and the reflection at that particular moment in history, though the latter might not be a deliberate objective. Twentieth century female auto-biographies, and there are quite a few at the turn-of-the-century in India, can thus be seen as revolutionary as these explore hereto uncharted territories of experience. Women like the Pandita herself are aware of their being the 'sites' on which ideologies of caste, class and nation, all coloured by the dictates of patriarchy, fight themselves out. From this marginalised space these voices that emerge also deviate from the usual trajectory of the traditional 'male' auto-biography as the Pandita does set about constructing herself as an exemplary figure who merely recounts her accomplishments. Rather it is a touching portrayal of the emergence of her feminist consciousness vis-a-vis her thrust on particular areas of social reforms and also her choice and practice of religion. The genre of the auto-biography thus becomes a suitable platform which can address new concerns of alternative forms of historiography.

A comparison with Rassundari Devi's (1810-?) autobiography *Amar Jiban*, the second part of which was incidentally published just a year before Ramabai's in 1906, can sharpen our insights into the religious tropes that both female writers use in their works. Although certainly not privileged like the Pandita who was educated and also spared the practice of child marriage, Rassundari craved to be educated. It was only God that she could turn to and the miraculous intervention occurs in a dream where she finds herself reading the Vaishnav text *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. Divine intercession also causes

her husband to leave a copy of the same text in the kitchen. It is only as a devotee that Rassundari can confess to the readers that she stole a leaf from the same. Occasional perusal of the page motivates her to embark on an arduous journey of self-education; the journey is remarkable as it culminates in the first autobiography in Bengali, produced two decades before male writers dared to venture into this particular genre.

The message of *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* must not be mistaken for mere proselytization. Christianity assured Ramabai of a space where liberty was the foundation of a society and any divorce between these two would only result in a collapse of the latter. The notions of equality and justice inspired Ramabai's strategies for socio-cultural and religious change as well as her mission of women's reforms.

In this moving auto-biographical account the reader can clearly discern how Ramabai even surpasses her father, the "orthodox reformer" (296) in her objective of social reform. However, much like him she too "stood the persecution with ...characteristic *manliness*" (305) and also "cared little for what people said, and did what (s)he thought was right" (297).

Reviled and glorified, widely read and silenced, evoked in historical narratives and erased from them, Pandita Ramabai remains an elusive personality, difficult to appropriate and to ignore.

GLOSSARY

Ashram: Residential school which imparted religious instruction.

Chitpavan Brahmin: A Brahmin community from the Konkan, the coastal region of Western India. The Peshwas, the Brahmin rulers of Maharashtra, belonged to this particular sub-caste.

Pandita: Eminent female scholar and teacher.

Proselytization: Converting someone from one religion to another.

Puranas: Collection of ancient tales used to convey Vedic teachings to women and lower-caste men.

Puranika: A male or female Purana reciter.

Saraswati: The goddess of learning.

Shastri: A scholar or theologian.

Shudra: The lowest of the four castes.

NOTES

Gangamul: A forest in Karnataka controlled by the court of Mysore.

Gargi: Famous female philosopher who finds mentions in the Upanishads due to her intellectual debate with sage Yagnavalkya.

G.G.Agarkar: Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856-1895) was an Indian nationalist, social reformer and an educationist.

Hunter Commission: Also known as the First Indian Education Commission and was appointed by Lord Ripon, the then Governor –General of India, under the chairmanship of Sir William Hunter. The Commission mainly focussed on the state of primary education in the country.

K.T.Telang: Kashinath Trimbak Telang (1850-1893) was an Indian nationalist, social reformer and a great scholar who translated the Bhagavad Gita.

Kashibai Kanitkar: (1861-1948) First major woman writer (fiction and non-fiction) in Marathi who was also an active social reformer.

M.G.Ranade: Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) was a prominent social reformer and scholar of late nineteenth century India.

Maitreyi: Famous female philosopher during the Vedic ages.

Prathana Samaj: A movement for religious and social reform in Bombay. It was founded by Aatmaram Pandurang in 1867.

R.G.Bhandarkar: Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925) was a great Indologist and a social reformer.

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