

THE STORY OF RAMABAI - FOUNDER OF MUKTI MISSION

Rowland S. Ward, 2001, updated 2016

Rowland Ward has been on the Australian Mukti Council since 1999, and Chair since 2002. If you would like to sponsor a child or otherwise support the work Ramabai began, contact Mukti Australia Inc, 5 Court Street, Box Hill, Victoria 3124 [email: admin@mukti.org.au]

A bit of Hindu background

Hinduism, the religion of India, includes a family of religious beliefs dating back 5000 years to a time of simple animal sacrifice. At first the emphasis was on God 'the heavenly one' or supreme ruler. However, over time the religion of the people became polytheistic. In fact, the idea was that the one Spirit was manifested in all the varieties of life. Belief in reincarnation prevailed so that a long series of many millions of earthy existences was a person's lot until he should at last be freed from the consequences of his actions by being absorbed in the Great Spirit. Society was divided into four castes depending on each person's ability - the priestly/ruling or Brahmin class, the warrior class, the trading class and the rest. Intermarriage between these castes was originally lawful.

In the course of time the system became much more involved and traditional practices became enshrined as law even though contradicted in the sacred Sanskrit texts. Within the four

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principal castes, now a matter of birth not ability, are clans, each with their own rules. In addition there are mixed castes and other castes for each type of task in society. The social organisation by caste is basic and all prevailing. Transgression of caste rules brings punishment and excommunication, but even outcasts have their caste rules.

In the caste system as it has thus developed, the importance of purity in the line of descent is obvious, since otherwise one's caste position is at risk. For unless one is a Brahmin he is not fit to be reabsorbed into the Spirit, so the rules to ensure he does not lose his position, and have to resume a long series of earthly existences to regain it, are powerful. The high castes in particular enforced a tight system of regulation of sexuality not unrelated to personal position and advantage for the men. To ensure legitimacy pre-puberty marriages were arranged, the typical age of marriage being ten. If a child bride was widowed while young, as frequently happened, she had no property rights but was dependent on her relatives and controlled by a close system of caste rules and kin ties.

A child widow or one without children was neither wife nor mother and had no status but the lowest. Her widowhood was regarded as the consequence of sin in previous lives. Her sexual existence ended with the death of her husband: remarriage was not allowed, particularly in the higher castes. She had to suffer the cutting off of her hair and a variety of social practices including drab clothing and no ornaments, that defeminised her reducing her to nothing more than a drudge. It is not surprising that young widows did voluntarily immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. Life as a young widow in India was grim indeed, a fate worse than death, but *sati*, as it was called, was not always voluntary. The practice was banned by the British in 1829 although it still occurs to some extent even today.

Ramabai's background

The story of one of the great Christian women of India begins with her father, Anant Shastri Donge, a Brahmin. He was trained as a Sanskrit scholar and was deeply impressed by the act of one of his teachers in instructing the wife of the last ruler of Poona before the British takeover. At the age of 44, and a widower, Anant Shastri married a 9 year old called Lakshmibai, and succeeded in teaching her Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hindu learning. This was quite out of the ordinary but he escaped excommunication by showing that the ancient texts in no way forbade the education of women. He spent the rest of his life in teaching, worship and living off gifts, existing on the edge of society and constantly travelling. This was traditional practice but by then was unusual given the more compact social organisation that had developed among Brahmins.

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Pandita Ramabai

Anant Shastri's wife taught her daughter Ramabai, who was born in 1858. At 16 Ramabai lost both her parents to famine and her sister to cholera, and she and her brother alone remained. So apt a student had Ramabai proved that at the age of 20 she was examined by the pandits (scholars) of Calcutta and they gave her the honour of *pandita*, the only woman to have received such a title. She was then, as earlier, an orthodox Hindu, and was feted by some reformers among the Hindu elite as an illustration of what they perceived was the ideal of a woman in ancient India. They had no thought that she would move from the general outline of Hinduism in her concern for the uplift of Indian women.

Disillusioned

She was invited to lecture on the emancipation of women and in order to do so made a careful study of the ancient Hindu texts, the Dharma-shastras. She was disillusioned. The texts were contradictory on many things but it was clear that women of whatever caste were as a class able to obtain redemption only through complete worship of and subservience to their husbands. Her brother died of cholera in 1880 and she then, despite Brahmin suitors, married a non-Brahmin lawyer in a civil ceremony, as both had given up on traditional Hinduism. They lived in Assam, but her husband also died of cholera two years later leaving her with a baby girl Manorama.

Her life to this point had been hard but her high caste and attainments in Hindu thought made her a potentially important figure. She now was a widow but she refused to stay hidden. Her personal search for salvation had not over, and her concern for the women of India remained. She returned to Poona where some moderate Hindu reformers were prepared to support her. However, her lectures often had hostile audiences and her desire to provide a home for high-caste widows received minimal practical support. Nor did she fit in with the close-knit Hindu orthodoxy. She needed personal religious satisfaction for herself, and a solution which would allow her social concerns to be expressed and implemented.

England

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Learning English, she resolved to go to England to gain a medical education. In the year of her husband's death (1882) she issued a guide to the morality and conduct of women called *Stri Dharma Niti*

[The Duties of Women] using examples drawn from Hindu mythology and written in a scholarly style using many Sanskrit words. In this book, which was much discussed, she criticises Indian women for being lazy and stupid, but at the same time urges relatively late marriage based on mutual choice rather than arrangement. She also attacked the anti-woman stance and double standards of Indian men. Through this means she raised money to go to England. She also had the support of an Anglican Order of Sisters who worked in Poona, the Community of St Mary the Virgin, and at first she stayed at their centre at Wantage, Berkshire after her arrival in June 1883.

Although she had had no intention of converting to Christianity she found in the teaching of a personal, loving God and in the dedication of the Anglican sisters in their work with the marginalised, that which moved her to this step. The suicide of a young Indian woman friend must also have had its impact. Ramabai and her daughter were baptised on 29th September 1883. Yet it is very evident that this was not quite a normal conversion. The High Anglican sisters found Ramabai very independent, refusing to accept anything on the authority of the Church with its male authority structures. She would accept the authority of the Bible, but at this stage she scrupled various miracles, and the trinitarian creeds, believed Christ was raised from the dead but doubted its physicality. Clearly there was a lot of baggage to be sorted out. She was a humanist who came to Christianity in reaction to a system which brutalised and crushed women. There was much for her to learn.

America

It was not possible for Ramabai to secure the medical training she wanted because of increasing deafness. She resolved to go to America to seek support for her projected work in India. She was in the USA 1886-88, speaking at hundreds of meetings and receiving an enthusiastic welcome. In 1886 she wrote *The High Caste Indian Woman* in which she outlined the problems of women in India. This was very well received in the West. From the proceeds she repaid the Wantage sisters, and set up a fund for a widows' home which she called Sharada Sadan, the House of Learning.

Bombay to Poona to Christ

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The House of Learning was opened in Bombay in March 1889, and was set up on the basis there would be no religious teaching. It removed south to Poona for reasons of cost in November 1890. Here, however, there was a more close scrutiny by the orthodox Hindus. She was a professed Christian, keeping women away from the control of their male kin, and giving freedom of religion which meant she also practised her own faith. The orthodox did not like it. Controversy arose over several conversions to Christianity on the part of the inmates. The moderate Hindu reformers drew back.

It was in 1891 that Ramabai realised that she had found the Christian religion but had not found Christ, who is its life. She had accepted teachings like baptismal regeneration which fitted a Hindu mindset. Now, particularly through a book *From Death to Life* by William Haslam [Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1880] she came to personal faith in Christ, communion with him, and a joy and peace she had never previously known. She continued to grow in appreciation of the truth of the Christian faith.

Kedgaon and Mukti Mission

In 1896 she established Mukti Sadan, the House of Salvation, on 100 acres of land at Kedgaon, about 60 kms east of Poona. Later she acquired more land. By 1900 there were 2,000 women and children at Kedgaon. Many had been rescued from the terrible famine in 1896. They were not just fed and clothed and nursed back to health where that was possible, they were also educated and taught useful trades at the same time as they were taught the Christian gospel.

Ramabai was influenced by the prevailing trends in evangelicalism in the 1890s, including Keswick, although she consciously made Mukti a non-denominational institution. One influential helper was Miss Minnie Abrams from America, and through her and others there was a strain of American revivalism and a pre-millennial emphasis. In April 1902 R. A. Torrey and Charles Alexander conducted a successful month-long mission in Melbourne with 8,600 conversions reported. In India Pandita Ramabai heard of the encouraging meetings and sent her daughter and Miss Minnie Adams (1859-1912) to Melbourne to assess and report. This was the beginning of the support group in Melbourne in 1903.

Ramabai also heard of the Welsh revival which began in late 1904. There was a significant outbreak of spiritual blessing at Mukti in June 1905, which predates the movement that began in April 1906 in Asuza Street, Los Angeles under William J. Seymour. Minnie Adams went on

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to be a significant Pentecostal leader. Ramabai however adopted the position that tongues were not the inevitable evidence of Holy Spirit blessing. Ramabai usually came back from her extremes quickly enough and she ended emphasising 'seek not, forbid not' in regard to spiritual manifestations, much as did the Christian and Missionary Alliance who had the care of Mukti after her death in 1922 until 1970, when it came under a more inter-denominational Board.

Translation of Scripture

Ramabai was only about 5 feet tall, but she was a woman of remarkable ability and faith. If her increasing deafness meant some restriction then it only helped her concentrate on her great desire to give the word of God to the people. There was a Bible in the Marathi language, as there was a German Bible before Luther, but it was not in the vernacular. She commenced the translation of the Bible into simple Marathi in 1904, learning Hebrew and Greek and publishing grammatical aids as she went. The Gospels were published in 1912, the New Testament in 1913 and the whole Bible, completed in 1920, in 1924. Overall she took about the same time as Luther, although he already had the languages. A revised edition was published in 1965. It stands certainly as the only example of a complete Bible translation by a woman to that time, and maybe even now. She also translated the Psalms for singing and employed an Indian musician to compose tunes for them. She did not Westernise her Christianity with inappropriate importations of cultural practice.

Ramabai is a woman whose like has not appeared in India since her death. God prepared for the work he had for her before she was born. Sadly, her work is still needed. Some 700 women and children are cared for today. The original centre at Kedgaon continues, but new smaller group homes are being established and the work is expanding with a model avoiding the dangers of institutionalisation. Hopefully there will be another in Gujarat, in the area affected by the recent earthquake.

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