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**Pandita Ramabai,
the High-Caste Hindu
woman who gave voice
to Indian women's
appeal**

The most controversial Indian
woman of her times, Sanskrit
scholar, social reformer, Christian
convert who tried to improve
women's life with her unique life
path

Relatrici

Ch.ma Prof.ssa Sara De Vido
Ch.ma Prof.ssa Bruna Bianchi

Laureanda

Elisabetta Bernardi
Matricola 829467

Anno Accademico

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Introduction

One of the biggest challenges I have faced is trying to delineate an honest and sincere portrait of a multifaceted figure like Pandita Ramabai, analysing her adventurous life, her multiple activities and social engagement but, above all, her incredible mission and passion for Indian women's rights. This particular topic has always been a dearest one to me, an issue which continues to resonate in my head and that I face every day in every field of life; growing up and developing a personal opinion about my gender and how it is perceived and treated by our society I have become more and more passionate about the great, but often hidden personalities of incredible women who were able to make a change, giving women a voice when they were not heard, creating a path to follow for future generations, fighting against the restrictions and the limits of their society.

In my research, which focuses in particular on Indian women and their long and constant struggle for their social improvement and the recognition of their rights, I have been lucky enough to “meet” Pandita Ramabai, through her own writings and the incredible work of Dr. Meera Kosambi¹, a recognised Indian sociologist and one of the most eminent scholars who studied and wrote about Pandita Ramabai, her incredible life and her multiple achievements.

I concentrated my study on Kosambi's latest, and unfortunately last work², published posthumously in 2016, which traces a clear and comprehensive biography of the Indian reformer, including some of her most important writings and letters, extremely interesting in order to fully understand Ramabai's perspective and feelings.

¹ Meera Kosambi (1939-2015) was an important sociologist and retired as a Professor and Director, Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. She was trained in India, Sweden, and the USA, and specialized in urban studies and women's studies.

² Meera Kosambi, *“Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings”*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, 308 pages.

In my work I will try to delineate and describe the most important phases of her life, mainly following Dr. Kosambi's analysis and works, in an attempt to give a brief, but exhaustive presentation of this great woman, her revolutionary impact on India social reforms and her role in the colonial and feminist spheres. Dr. Kosambi argued that Ramabai's exclusion from the social histories and reform discourses on Western India has to be found not in her adult conversion to Christianity, as many are tempted to think, but in her feminism so she tried to present Pandita giving voice to her own words, letting her present herself to the reader through some of her most important writings and, at the same time, tracing her ideological and social impact considering the various contexts where she was active.

The eminent scholar then underlined the exceptional role played by this incredible Indian woman who, despite being alone and unaided by the political and social figures of her time, was able to identify and define with accuracy, precision and consistently the issues of Indian women, which had been considered and described as a sort of oriental cliché to the Western audience.

The multiple trajectories of Pandita's life, her feminism and the development of her ideologies converged and, in many occasions, crushed with the structures of religion, patriarchy, nationalism and internationalism, which made the analysis and the description of her existence and, above all, of her achievements in the social field, very complex, challenging but, at the same time, fascinating.

In the introduction to her last work³, Kosambi stresses the "unique pattern"⁴ of Ramabai's life as she was born into a pan-Indian, orthodox, Sanskritic, Hindu family then, when she was only six months old her parents started a long pilgrimage which would take the family to travel across India. When she was a young woman in her 20s, she went to live in Maharashtra where tried to find her own place in the community. In her adult years she started giving voice to her personal need for religious research because she became acquainted with the most important reformist monotheistic religious movements of the time, the Brahma Samaj⁵ in Bengal and

³ Ibidem, *Introduction*, pp. 1-5

⁴ Ibidem, *Introduction*, pp. 2

⁵ Brahma Samaj, (Sanskrit: "Society of Brahma") Brahma also spelled **Brahma**, theistic movement within Hinduism, founded in Calcutta [now Kolkata] in 1828 by Ram Mohun Roy. The Brahma Samaj

Prarthana Samaj⁶ in Maharashtra. After her husband's death, when she was in her mid-twenties, she decided to leave India in order to study in England, where she also converted to Christianity. Her international activities then moved to the U.S.A., a country which welcomed her giving her the financial aid and the support she needed to start her project of a residential school for upper-caste Indian girls, especially young widows, in her native India.

After three years in America and a long journey back, also visiting Japan, Ramabai returned to India and started her activity. In the meanwhile, she had described her long staying in America and her various and distant journeys to foreign countries in both English and Maharathi, gaining the interest of her American and Indian audience.

In addition, the considerable amount of economic resources she had been given for her cause during her successful sojourn in the U.S.A., helped her gain a better position and a sort of recognition among the public leaders of Maharashtra, who had strongly criticised her religious conversion, so she could run her residential home within the Hindu society. Ramabai's school offered a chance for emancipation to upper-caste Hindu women, giving them the means to improve their situation and free themselves from the social, but especially familiar oppression they suffered.

From a geographical and spatial point of view, Pandita's biography takes the reader from the heart of British colonial empire, her native India, to its administrative centre, England, then to the U.S., to other peripheral and distant countries like Japan and Australia.

does not accept the authority of the Vedas, has no faith in avatars (incarnations), and does not insist on belief in karma (causal effects of past deeds) or samsara (the process of death and rebirth). It discards Hindu rituals and adopts some Christian practices in its worship. Influenced by Islam and Christianity, it denounces polytheism, image worship, and the caste system. The society has had considerable success with its programs of social reform but has never had a significant popular following. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brahmo-Samaj>)

⁶ Prarthana Samaj, (Sanskrit: "Prayer Society"), Hindu reform society established in Bombay in the 1860s. In purpose it is similar to, but not affiliated with, the more widespread Brahmo Samaj and had its greatest sphere of influence in and around India's Mahārāshtra state. The aim of the society is the promulgation of theistic worship and social reform, and its early goals were opposition to the caste system, the introduction of widow remarriage, the encouragement of female education, and the abolition of child marriage.

(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prarthana-Samaj>)

It is also interesting to observe the multiple social and cultural realities which are continually intertwined and cross each other in a dynamic discourse, from the description of the oppressed high-caste Hindu women in her native Western India, to the typical colonial perception of the Indians expressed by the British, based on race and supremacy, to the American reformers whose liberal principles and Christian faith contributed to their active support to the Indian cause. Ramabai then, devoted the last part of her life to the inclusion of also girls and young women belonging to the lower castes and coming from other parts of India.

In her native region, Maharashtra, she has always been simultaneously admired and criticized by her contemporaries, especially because of her Christian faith, which did not fit with the rigid community ties, as long as she was compelled to turn to Christian evangelization, which earned her international support from various sources. This caused her permanent marginalization from the dominant Hindu society and her absence in the documented and official social history of her country.

M. Kosambi then reiterated the concept that all these complexities and convergent factors in Ramabai's experience are neither considered or fully discussed in the existing texts on Ramabai which often give a static and inaccurate portrait of this woman as a feminist and/or a Christian convert, confining her personality and activity into this limiting dichotomy. The author then underlined the need to distinguish the different evolutions which Ramabai's feminism and her Christianity underwent as a consequence of the interaction with her social setting, in order to present a broader and more complete image of her and her impact on Indian women's conditions.

Most of the existing texts and biographies dedicated to this multi-faceted 19th-century Indian woman are built on her religious conversion, underlining the importance of Ramabai's presence as a Christian convert in an Indian context, portraying her figure and action almost like in the biographies of saints. Among the most famous biographies in English the one written by Helen Dyer⁷ who combines an exaltation of the Western superiority, as regards race, culture, and religion, with a denigration of Hinduism and of Indian practices in general. There are also some

⁷ Helen S Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The story of Her Life*, London: Morgan and Scott, 1900

examples of non-Christian Marathi biographies which concentrate on her efforts and relevance as a champion for women's education in India, omitting the description of the continuous religious and ideological tension with the conservative factions of her contemporaries.

Pandita's eventful life is then described by two different voices who knew only one dimension of her activity, tracing two parallel trajectories of her biography, each omitting an important side. As a matter of fact, the Marathi authors were aware of her regional social and political background where she started an important social reform in the first phase of her life from 1882 to 1899, except the period when she was abroad from 1883 to 1888, while the English and American authors mainly focused on her conversion, her relationship with the various Christian circles in both England and the U.S.A and her presence in the Christian missionary world during her staying in England and America and the following years until her death in 1922.

The description of this important figure results then divided and incomplete because of this binary perceptions offered by the various authors: on the one hand Pandita is the social reformer who fought against the mainstream radical and oppressive structures of Indian society, developing and spreading her feminist ideas in order to improve Hindu women's lives, on the other hand she has been portrayed as a religious revolutionary, not as a social revolutionary or a feminist *who ... had put the problem of the empowerment of women in the spiritual as well as the material domain as central to her activity*⁸.

Therefore, M. Kosambi's aim, which she underlines in the introduction of her last work on Ramabai, is to analyse the complex historical, social and discursive context of this incredible woman, considering the different ideological trajectories of her life which emerge in her writings, from her own words and reflections. According to professor Kosambi, Pandita Ramabai can be seen as

*the site for a series of overlapping encounters – primarily that between
Hinduism and Christianity, rationalism and dogma, individuality and Church*

⁸ Ram Pabat, "Pandita Ramabai: Faith and Reason in the Shadow of the East and the West" in *Representing Hinduism: the Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 1995, p. 251.

*hierarchy. Surrounding this there was the larger confrontation between Indianness and Western culture, feminism and patriarchy in its multiple guises.*⁹

⁹ Meera Kosambi, "Indian Response to Christianity, Church and Colonialism", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 24-31 October 1992, pp. WS 61 – WS 71 (ref. WS 61)

CHAPTER ONE

Ramabai's early life and the becoming of Pandita Saraswati

Pandita Ramabai was born on 23rd April 1858 in South Karnataka, a state in South-West India, where her father, Anantshastri Dongre had built an *ashram*, a residential school for the Sanskrit education of Brahmin boys, in the middle of the forest. In presenting Ramabai's life we cannot ignore the legacy of her father, whose unconventional and eventful life definitely influenced his daughter's future choices and mindset and, in order to understand Pandita's future activities, I will briefly cite some biographical information about her father.

Anant Shastri Dongre was born in a Chitpavan Brahmin family but expressed a non-conformist attitude towards his caste and its rules. Anant was trained as a Sanskrit scholar by Ramchandrashastri Sathe, the teacher of the last Peshwa of the Maratha Empire, Bajirao II, who ruled in Pune from 1795 to 1818, when he surrendered to the British after the Third Anglo-Maratha War ¹⁰. During his years at Pune, Dongre heard Varanasi Bai, the Peshwa's wife, reciting Sanskrit verses in the Peshwa's palace, an event which was breaking all the caste rules as custom forbade women even the basic literacy in Marathi, above all the knowledge of Sanskrit, the "divine language" which was reserved only for Brahmin men. This fact deeply impressed the young Anant, arousing a desire for reform in women's education, which would be eventually carried out by his daughter some years later.

When in 1818 Bajirao II lost his political power, Anant came back to his home in Mangalore District and tried to teach Sanskrit to his first wife, an attempt which immediately failed because of the hostilities of the conservative members of the family.

¹⁰ Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai*, Calcutta, Association Press (Y.M.C.A), 1926, p. 6

He succeeded in his task with his second wife, the nine-year old Lakshmibai, whom Anant married when he was forty-four. She was the daughter of another travelling Brahamana pilgrim who was looking for husbands for his two daughters. Such marriage with a huge age gap was not uncommon in that society where Brahmin girls were obliged to get married before puberty and widowers could remarry even late in life, while widows, of any age, were strictly forbidden to get married again, even if they were child widows.

Ramabai presents, without any specific references, her parents' marriage in her work *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, in chapter 3 titled "Married life"; here she makes a critical comment regarding the event, concluding the narration underlining the positive aspect that the young girl was in good hands but criticizing the careless conduct of the bride's father who wanted to settle his young daughter without even care about her future fate. She reports the fact as follows:

It not infrequently happens that fathers give away their daughters in marriage to strangers without exercising care in making inquiry concerning the suitor's character and social position. It is enough to learn from the man's own statement, his caste and clan, and the locality of his home. I know of a most extraordinary marriage that took place in the following manner: the father was on a pilgrimage with his family, which consisted of his wife and two daughters, one nine and the other seven years of age, and they had stopped in a town to take rest for a day or two. One morning the father was bathing in the sacred river Godavari, near the town, when he saw a fine-looking man coming to bathe there also. After the ablution and the morning prayers were over, the father inquired of the stranger who he was and whence he came; on learning his caste, and clan, and dwelling-place, also that he was a widower, the father offered him his little daughter of nine, in marriage. All things were settled in an hour or so; next day the marriage was concluded, and the little girl placed in the possession of the stranger, who took her nearly nine hundred miles away from her home. The father left the place the day after the marriage without the daughter, and pursued his pilgrimage with a light heart; fortunately the little girl had fallen in good hands, and was well and tenderly cared for beyond all expectation, but the

*conduct of her father, who cared so little to ascertain his daughter's fate, is none the less censurable.*¹¹

Anant's ground-breaking decision to educate his young bride caused a strong confrontation with both the family and the community, and the regional head of his regional sect accused him of heresy but the Sanskrit scholar was able to defend his position in front of an assembly of about 400 priests and scholars, who he succeeded to persuade about the need to democratising sacred learning. He had collected all his arguments about this topic in a volume, which also contained a lot of quotations from various Sanskrit religious texts, which proved that women and Shudras¹² could learn Sanskrit but not study the Veda, the earliest sacred literature of India. Unfortunately, Ramabai was never able to have access to it.

In Pandita's last work, *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure* (1907), she recognizes her father's important legacy in starting this reforming path concerning women's education, a mission that she will try to accomplish and make concrete during her life. She refers to her father's attempt as *an honourable heritage*, describing his decision to teach her mother to read and write the Sanskrit language, starting this revolution within the domestic environment.

My father, though a very orthodox Hindu and strictly adhering to caste and other religious rules, was yet a reformer in his own way. He could not see why women and people of Shudra caste should not learn to read and write the Sanskrit language and learn sacred literature other than the Vedas.

He thought it better to try the experiment at home instead of preaching to others. He found an apt pupil in my mother, who fell in line with his plan, and became an excellent Sanskrit scholar. She performed all her home duties, cooked, washed, and did all household work, took care of her children, attended to guests, and did all that was required of a good religious wife and mother. She devoted many hours of her time in the night to the

¹¹ Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, reprint, Bombay, Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture, 1981 (1st pub. 1887) in Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings"*, Selection 3, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 150

¹² The term Shudra refers to the fourth and lowest of the traditional social classes in India, traditionally artisans and labourers.

regular study of the sacred Puranic literature and was able to store up a great deal of knowledge in her mind.

The Brahman Pandits living in the Mangalore District, round about my father's native village, tried to dissuade him from the heretical course he was following in teaching his wife the sacred language of the gods. He had fully prepared himself to meet their objections. His extensive studies in the Hindu sacred literature enabled him to quote chapter and verse of each sacred book, which gives authority to teach women and Shudras. His misdeeds were reported to the head priest of the sect to which he belonged, and the learned Brahmans induced the guru to call this heretic to appear before him and before the august assemblage of the Pandits, to give his reasons for taking this course or be excommunicated.¹³

Anantshastri, tired of the pressures of his community, decided to move in a quieter place where he could carry on his scholarly activities and Lakshmibai's education so, in 1844 the family moved to the Gangamul forest, within the Mangalore District of Karnataka in Southern India, where their youngest daughter, Pandita was born in 1858.

In this wild site, as previously said, Anantshastri had founded an *ashram*, which functioned as a residential school for 13 years. Once the financial support for the family and the school ended, Anant, Lakshmibai and their three children, among them baby Rama, who was only six months, took up a pilgrimage all over the most important holy sites of the country. Here they performed as *puranikas*, public narrators of the Sanskrit Puranas, the traditional texts which combined mythology and philosophy, that were recited for wide audiences in the local languages, who then gifted the performers with various presents. This was the only accepted form of earning a living for Brahmins, as they were not allowed, by tradition, to do any manual work.

The family's financial situation got gradually worse during the long years of pilgrimages, as Ramabai's father performed expensive religious rituals and observances, also ruining his health, and gifted Brahmins with generous holy presents. Ramabai herself will then criticize these meaningless customs and rituals

¹³ Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, in Meera Kosambi, "Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 263

belonging to the Hindu tradition in her first published work *Stri Dharma Niti (Morals for Women 1882)*¹⁴, where in chapter 2, titled *Education*, she makes references to her older brother Srinivas-shastri, who wasted much of his money in following the foolish and expensive rituals of Brahmins¹⁵.

Despite her later criticism as far as regards her father's orthodox thinking, she will always appreciate two important and progressive aspects of his thought: his insistence on giving his daughters an education and his decision not to arrange a child marriage for Ramabai, due to the sad failure of his older daughter Krishnabai's child marriage¹⁶. The first task was carried out by Ramabai's mother because of the old age of her father when she was ready to start learning Sanskrit; as a matter of fact, when Pandita was eight, her father was almost 70. The kind of education the young girl was given consisted mainly in memorising thousands of lines of the Sanskrit texts, because of the lack of printed books, as well as learning by heart the vocabulary, the grammar, and other references.

As scholar Uma Chakravarti points out in her critical work about Pandita Ramabai titled *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*¹⁷, this peculiar and unconventional kind of education, received at home by her parents, differentiates Ramabai from her contemporary Brahmin men like Ranade, Tilak, Telang, who all went to school in order to take profit of the new possibilities provided by English education, as their families wanted them to pursue a career in the administration or the judiciary. Conversely, Ramabai and her brother were not trained to become

¹⁴ Pandita Ramabai, *Stri Dharma Niti (Morals for Women 1882)*, in Meera Kosambi, "*Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*", Selection 1, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 38

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 47

¹⁶ A detailed account of the sad episode was written by Ramabai herself in her famous *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, in Chapter 4, titled "*Woman's place in religion and society*", where she recalls what happened to her older sister Krishnabai, married to a boy with the agreement of letting him stay and be educated with his young bride at her place. Soon after the ceremony the boy was taken home by his parents and spent the following years without cultivating his faculties and doing nothing. Thirteen years later he went to claim his wife and sued the bride and her family in the British Courts of Justice because they had refused to let their precious daughter go and live with such worthless man. He won the case, thanks to Hindu Law and the young woman was obliged to go with him but, as Ramabai expresses, *she was soon released from this sorrowful world by cholera*.

References in Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, pp. 62-64

¹⁷ Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013

professionals as their family *still carried on with the traditional ideals of the truly religious vocation prescribed for Brahamanas – teaching, worship, and living off gifts*¹⁸. This choice was certainly unique in the social and geographical context of the Brahamanas in western India, who had followed a rapid process of militarisation and secularisation taking new roles and position in the society. Moreover, Anant's thinking as for family life and caste obligations put the Dongre family outside the usual pattern of Brahmanical compulsions made up of a system of compelling practices, which he consciously renounced. Looking for a space for themselves, they pursued an alternative existence, walking away from their society but they partially succeeded because some caste practices, like marriage, had to be respected.

As previously mentioned, the sad epilogue of her sister's wedding allowed Ramabai to remain unmarried until a quite mature age, a decision which was possible for the erratic nature of her family life. This same incessant search for space, cutting away from oppressive practices in order to project and live her own life freely and with a purpose, will be echoed in Pandita's future life, in her struggles against the boundaries of her age and her society, looking for a place for herself and her fellow Indian women.

This alternative kind of existence brought the Dongre family to suffer from physical hardships and especially from malnutrition, also because of the severe famine in the Madras presidency where at the time they were staying. As they did not want to beg for food, after several days of eating leaves of forest trees¹⁹, Anant Shastri decided to take his life, performing *jala-samadhi*, which consists of drowning oneself but does not count as suicide but he was stopped by his son Shrinivas's decision to do menial work to support his family.

Despite this initiative, the weak and aged Anantshastri died of exhaustion shortly after in 1874 and his wife Lakshmibai followed him a few months later, as a consequence of the painful loss of her husband and the continuous starvation.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 305

¹⁹ Ramabai herself describes these terrible hardships in her "Famine Experience, 1897" an autobiographical account of her first experience of famine, which caused the deaths of both her parents and her elder sister when she was only 16.

This document is in Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings"*, Famine Experience, 1897 Selection 4, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 217-229

Pandita described the events of the famine, her parents and sister's deaths, the painful burials of her parents and the consequent difficult situation she had to endure in her *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure* as well as in "*Famine Experience, 1897*", and the incredible chain of misfortunes and sorrows would slowly erode her faith in the traditional gods.

I cannot describe all the sufferings of that terrible time. My brother and I survived and wandered about, still visiting sacred places, bathing in rivers, and worshipping the gods and goddesses in order to get our desire. We had fulfilled all the conditions laid down in the sacred books, and kept all the rules as far as our knowledge went, but the gods were not pleased with us and did not appear to us. After years of fruitless service, we began to lose our faith in them and in the books which prescribed this course and held out the hope of a great reward to the worshippers of the gods. However we still continued to keep caste rules, worshipped gods and studied sacred literature as usual.²⁰

Ramabai and her brother Shrinivas, after the multiple losses, went on travelling to various pilgrimage sites, continuing to suffer from extreme hardships because of the rigid winter temperatures which obliged the two siblings to bury themselves up to the neck in the sand of the bank of the river Jelhum, to survive the cold weather as they did not have any warm clothes.

Her unconventional upbringing and the unusual absence of an early marriage, helped Ramabai to forge her own personality, escaping the rigid gender code, and giving her the chance to enter the public sphere as a public preacher, a quality which would eventually help her to join the field of social reform, commonly dominated by men, without any particular hesitation. The fundamental role played by religion and conscience, considered the only moral guide, since her childhood will then explain her constant spiritual quest, her intellectual curiosity and her confrontation with rigid dogmatic truths; moreover her strong and individualistic personality is definitely the result of the physical sufferings she was able to overcome during the difficult years of the pilgrimages with her family.

²⁰ Meera Kosambi, "*Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*", Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 266

The two siblings' visit to Calcutta in 1878 introduced them to the cultural and intellectual elite, who welcomed them and praised Ramabai's knowledge of the Sanskrit language and texts; she was later examined by a group of Sanskrit scholars who awarded her the titles of Pandita (woman scholar) and "Saraswati" (Goddess of Learning).

During her period in the Bengal Presidency, Pandita was asked to give both public lectures on women and private speeches for women in their homes, in particular on female emancipation and women's education and her main sources were the Hindu texts and mythology. She was also introduced to the Brahmo Samaj, a monotheistic socio-religious reform group which was concerned with the issue of women's education.

Thanks to her ability as a woman lecturer, her fame as champion for women's education and woman public speaker spread both nationally and internationally and reached Dr. W. W. Hunter, the chairman of the Hunter Commission on Education in 1882, who described Pandita's ability to his fellow English audience in an article in *The Times of India*

How a learned young Brahman lady had gone through India, expressing in every province that liberality which Bombay shows in regard to the education and treatment of women. When I spoke of a high-caste Indian lady being thus employed, that great English audience rose as one man and applauded the efforts which the Pandita Ramabhai was making on behalf of her country women.²¹

Furthermore it was during her staying in Bengal that Ramabai had her first encounter with Christianity, as she was invited to attend a Christian service, an episode described in her spiritual memoir *A Testimony*, but this event did not impress her much neither did the Sanskrit Bible which she was gifted during this religious gathering and which she attempted to read later, without understanding much

²¹ *The Times of India*, 12 September 1887 in Meera Kosambi, "Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 14

because she found the language and the teachings very different from Sanskrit literature.

The advice she was given by one of the leading Brahmo reformers, Keshub Chandra Sen, to study the Vedas, which she thought were forbidden texts for women, started to arouse many doubts as regards her orthodox Hindu beliefs, and after reading the Upanishads, the Vedanta and the Veda, she felt a general dissatisfaction with her religion. In this same period, Pandita was asked to give Purdah women some lessons on women's duty according to the Shastras, the books containing the precepts, norms and teachings on various disciplines and subjects. The reading of these texts, in particular of the Dharma shastras, treatises on duties, responsibilities and ethics in the personal, domestic and social field, grew the young Pandita's awareness with regards to the strict limitations and the degrading treatment of women and the low castes. In *A Testimony* she writes

While reading the Dharma Shastras I came to know many things which I never knew before. There were contradictory statements about almost everything. What one book said was most righteous, the other book declared as being unrighteous. [...]

but there were two things on which all those books, the Dharma Shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day and orthodox high-caste men were agreed: women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, and that they could not get Moksha as men [could]. The only hope of their getting this much-desired liberation from Karma and its results, that is, countless millions of births and deaths and untold suffering, was the worship of their husbands. The husband is said to be the woman's god; there is no other god for her. This god may be the worst sinner and a great criminal; still HE IS HER GOD, and she must worship him. [...]

The woman is allowed to go into higher existence thus far but to attain Moksha or liberation, she must perform such great religious acts as will obtain for her the merit by which she will be reincarnated as a high caste man, in order to study Vedas and the Vedanta, and thereby get the knowledge of the true Brahma and be amalgamated in it. The extraordinary religious acts which help a woman to get into the way of getting Moksha are utter abandonment of her will to that of her husband. She is to worship him with

*whole-hearted devotion as the only god, to know and see no other pleasure in life except in the most degraded slavery to him. The woman has no right to study the Vedas and Vedanta, and without knowing them, no one can know the Brahma; without knowing Brahma, no one can get liberation; therefore no woman as a woman can get liberation, that is, Moksha. Q.E.D.*²²

Her increasing sense of alienation and distance from the religious structure of Brahmanic Hinduism, was deepened by the sudden death of her brother Shrinivas, on 15th May 1880 following a sudden illness which resulted to be fatal because of his weak health, severely proved by years of fatigues.

Ramabai, who was 22 at the time, was completely alone in the world, homeless and without any economic support; she decided then to accept Shrinivas's friend marriage proposal and the couple got married on 13th June 1880 according to the Civil Marriage Act so they did not have a religious wedding. Her husband, Babu Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a Bengal lawyer, belonged to a different caste as he was a non-Brahmin and he was active in the Brahma Samaji circle, the Hindu monotheistic sect, which Ramabai herself supported at the time. This inter-caste marriage, which marked an overt break with tradition, did not find the support of the groom's family, who tried to ostracize the young couple.

Nevertheless, Pandita and her husband led a happy, independent life at Silchar in Assam, in the Bengal Presidency and, on 16th April 1881 they welcomed their only daughter, Manorama.

One of the first literary work by Ramabai, a Sanskrit poem titled "*Lamentation of the Divine language*", was written in this period and it was sent to the Oriental Congress in Berlin of 1881, promoted by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. The fact that she chose to write the poem in the Sanskrit language shows a strong support for the ancient language of India's past and can be interpreted as a plea to resisting the colonialist contamination of the language, in order to preserve the ancient Hindu culture. In this perspective, the old language is referred to as

²² Meera Kosambi, "*Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*", *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 268-9

Mother Sanskrit, who is discarded and abandoned by her children, who are following the foreigners' [British] influences.²³

Despite having started to reject and reconsider her Hindu religious limitations, having married a man outside her caste, having joined the Brahmo faith, Pandita's recognition of Sanskrit's value was still prevalent in her writings and in her thinking until the end of the 19th century, when she started to criticise, question and contest her cultural and social background, consciously considering it as Other.

Life put Ramabai to the test again as, after less than two years of marriage her husband Bipin died from cholera on 4th February 1882 and the young widow was left, once again, all alone with a baby daughter and without any financial support. Her late husband's family refused to help her and little Manorama and Ramabai's distant cousin, Anandibai Joshee²⁴, who will later become India's first woman doctor, offered the young widow hospitality but Ramabai did not accept.

She was helped by Maharashtrian social reformers, like Justice M.G. Ranade and other reformers belonging to the Prarthana Samaj circle, who wanted Ramabai to join them in promoting and supporting women's education in Maharashtra. Pandita decided then to leave Bengal with Manorama and, after a long journey, she reached Pune in April 1882.

²³ The poem was translated into English by the Sanskritist Monier-Williams, who titled it "A Sanskrit Ode". The original text and its English translation are reproduced in Padmini Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work* (Asia Publishing House) Bombay, 1970, p. 340-7

²⁴ Ramabai will later travel to the U.S.A. to attend Anandibai Joshee's graduation and this event will mark the beginning of her American sojourn.

CHAPTER TWO

First reform activity in Maharashtra and the publication of *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882)

Ramabai's return to western India marked the beginning of her reformist activity and her definite active participation to the social field of her times, especially regarding her work for the improvement of women's condition.

Her arrival in Pune was received with a mixed reaction because on the one hand she was immediately welcomed by the Prarthana Samaj's reformists, who considered her as "one of us", as Ramabai Ranade, Justice M.G. Ranade's wife defined her in her autobiography, easily integrating her into the Chitpavan Brahmo community; on the other hand she found the strong criticism of the conservative and orthodox Brahmin community who held extremely rigid positions as far as regards women's place in society.

As a matter of fact, according to the patriarchal ideology which pervaded the most orthodox sect of Brahamans, woman's only acceptable roles were those of wife, mother and housewife, relegating in this way her action within the domestic walls, secluded and excluded from any aspects of social life. Child marriage and post-pubertal consummation were compulsory, in order to control the girls' sexuality, following the subsequent path of marriage and motherhood. The most appreciated and valued status for an Indian woman was that of being the wife of a living husband (*saubhagya vati*) and the mother of sons, because being the mother of daughters was, and is still sadly considered a misfortune and a disappointment. Childless women or women with only daughters belonged to a lower status, while the lowest and most miserable one was occupied by widows, especially child widows of childless widows.

According to the Hindu customs, a widow had to be identified also by her appearances because she had to wear a simple maroon sari, she could not wear any

jewels nor ornaments and she had to repeatedly shave her head as a distinctive sign of permanent mourning, covering it with her sari. Widowhood was considered as a punishment for women for the sins of their previous lives so a widow was a disgrace for a family and she had to survive with little food, she was made to sleep on the floor without any bedding and she had to spend her time performing religious rituals. The double punishments of both the physical disfigurement through head-shaving and the austere living conditions the widow had to endure, as professor Kosambi points out, fulfilled two goals: on the one end to extinguish her sexual desire and to make her unattractive for other men. These extreme measures were not always successful, as many widows were seduced and abandoned themselves to carnal passion, as it was documented in the newspapers and literature of the 19th century. In order to stem these unhappy consequences a process of rehabilitation for widows was undertaken and it included the possibility for child widows to remarry and the training for adult widows for occupations in the teaching field and others.

Ramabai herself was seen with suspicion by mainstream Maharashtra because of her unconventional past, which was still obscure, especially regarding her single status until she was 22, about which there were many speculations circulating at the time. One rumor said that she was unmarried because she had been dedicated to Krishna by her father as a child, which would have made impossible for her to get married “again” in her adulthood. Furthermore, she was accused, with harsh criticism, by the Brahmin women in Pune, to have married a “Bengali Babu”, to be incapable of leading an acceptable and proper domestic life and to have “come to defile the world”²⁵ with her unorthodox behaviour.

Perhaps the most relevant impediment for Pandita to be completely accepted and absorbed into the Maharashtrian Brahmin community was her break with Hindu tradition in her stubborn but determined rejection of the traditional confinement for widows into the domestic sphere. As U. Chakravarti explains,

²⁵ Ramabai’s introduction into the Maharashtrian Brahmin society is recorded by Ramabai Ranade in her own autobiography titled *Amachya Ayushyatil Kahi Athavani (Reminiscences of Our Live)*, 7th edn, Pune: K.G. Sharangpani, 1953 (1st pub.1910), p. 80-81

With widowhood however Ramabai became potentially a dangerous figure. Her life was henceforth subjected to much great surveillance by a public that was unused to seeing women except in the domestic space. Ramabai refused to stay in the domestic space; she refused also the traditional role for the widow, that of withdrawal from society. Instead, following widowhood, she turned once more to a 'public' career, this time with a focused mission of serving the oppressed women of India.

Her background, her life choices, her personality and her career now catapulted her into the public gaze, making her the most controversial Indian woman of her times.²⁶

Despite her unconventional behaviour, she respected the Brahmin rules as for her clothing and appearances because she followed the typical norms for Bengal widows and wore white for the rest of her life and kept her hair short.

Her position into the reform movement proved to be difficult and challenging because it was an entirely male project; the rigid and pervading patriarchal structure of Indian society made impossible to introduce a radical gender egalitarian change, as the promotion women's education was merely seen as an opportunity to make women better wives for the English-educated men, who needed more brilliant and enlightened partners. Being the social field completely controlled by male hegemony, the issue of women's emancipation was merely considered as an investment in this male-centred society, rather than an actual revolution towards a real gender equality.

In her work, which I have used as my main source of information for Ramabai's life, works and historical period, prof. M. Kosambi briefly traces the three phases of social reform in Maharashtra in the 1880s, during which Pandita entered the political and social scene; she also reports about the most important figures of the time like 'Mahatma' Jotirao Phule, whose efforts were dedicated to the improvement of lower castes' conditions and gender justice, and Justice M. G. Ranade, an important

²⁶ Uma Chakarvati, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013, p. 311

Maharashtrian judge of the Bombay High Court, who introduced new legislations to support social reforms, like the fundamental Age of Consent Bill (1891).²⁷

Pandita's actual reform career started with the setting up of the first organization for women in Maharashtra, called Arya Mahila Samaj (Arya Women's Society) on 1st June 1882 in Pune, whose aim was to lead women's emancipation, discussing and changing some oppressive customs like child marriage, the cruel treatment of child-widows and widows in general, the lack of education for women and their marginalization and exclusion from the social discourse. The members of the association, which later would open other branches in various cities of the region, had equal rights and they were asked to dedicate to public causes with impartiality and no prejudices.

The meetings of the association mainly consisted in weekly lectures on various topics concerning women's issues and the creation of a support network for women. This incredible first attempt, promoted by a woman, to discuss with women about social reforms concerning their situation was revolutionary because it aimed at arousing the active participation of female subjects in Hindu society, giving them voice and letting them stepping in as subjects and agents of the reform, rather than simply objects and passive and silent recipients of male reformist bias.

Ramabai's reception was mixed as her new social enterprise was welcomed by liberal figures like Ranade, but it also received strong criticism and by professor B.G. Tilak, the editor of *The Maharatta* at the time, and his faction. He showed an increasing social conservatism and he will be one of Ramabai's harshest critics and opponents throughout her long career in the social field. In the famous Maharathi weekly newspaper *Kesari*, in the issue of 8th August 1882, Tilak criticised Pandita's imprudence in entering an exclusively male domain, the one of social reform, warning the young woman about her role and her space. As a matter of fact, he affirmed:

²⁷ For further information about this particular moment of social reforms in India, see Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 26-27 and Meera Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds. Feminist Essays in Social History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, in particular p. 17-23, 204-233

In real life, it is the task of men to eradicate these and many other evils customs prevalent in our society. Women cannot interfere with them for many years to come, even if they are 'panditas' and have reached the ultimate stage of reform ...

*Our women will have to submit to male control for a long time to come.*²⁸

Tilak would continually criticise Ramabai's position in the reforming field, considering her words, works and actions very dangerous for women's situation in India and he even wrote a really offensive and vicious article about Pandita in 1904, which she never replied back to.

With the Arya Mahila Samaj, Pandita wanted, through her speeches, to raise women's awareness about their unhappy domestic and social conditions, exhorting them to free themselves from male oppression. Brahman men, but also women disregarded and criticised Ramabai's unorthodox words and alienated her from their social elite, despite being a Brahmin woman herself.

Unfortunately, the social experiment of Arya Mahila Samaj did not find the actual support it needed to flourish and imposing itself as the cradle of the first feminist movement in western India, because it lacked the help of the reformist women, who did not have enough space to emerge at the time and did not have the courage to break the chains of men's domination.

2.1 Stri Dharma Niti (Morals for Women, 1882)

In June 1882 Pandita published her first Marathi book, titled *Stri Dharma Niti*, translated in English as 'Morals for Women', which she dedicated to her late beloved husband and to her fellow country women. In this book, Pandita surprisingly adopted the position of a male reformer, inviting women to self-cultivation, as far as regards their moral conduct, domestic abilities and their education, in their social roles of wives and mothers; she also gave some pieces of advice on how to prepare for marriage and to become a good wife and a good mother.

²⁸ *Kesari* (Marathi Weekly, Pune), 8th August 1882

The book sold very well and it is believed that she wrote and published this work in order to earn some money as, after her husband's death, she did not have any economic support and her financial situation was definitely uncertain. She probably used the money she collected from the sale of her book to pay for her travel expenses for her journey to England the following year.

In the preface to the first edition of the book, Pandita describes the sad condition of women in her country, underlining how their total lack of education and the desperate condition of ignorance prevent them to improve their situation. One of the main reasons for Indian women's ignorance in morality and conduct has to be found in the fact that they did not know the *shastras* as they were written in a very difficult Sanskrit language, which made them inaccessible for illiterate women. Her task, as she states in the preface, is to write a small book in Maharathi, relying on her *own limited intellect*²⁹, so that her fellow women can understand the content of these sacred books.

The book is divided into eight sections, each one dealing with a particular aspect of women's life and conduct.

In chapter 1, titled "The Foundation", Ramabai, concentrates on the need for women to have a firm foundation, which mainly consists in a proper education, self-improvement and self-reliance, underlining the fact that they are always dependent on men and this fact obviously prevent them from advancing in their own education and in the development of their intelligence. Then she refers to the colonial rule, explaining how despite being of a limited number, the Europeans control her country and fulfill all their tasks thanks to their incessant dedication to improve themselves and the efforts they make to accomplish their various missions and to ameliorate the community. She then points out that she is aware of the many faults and defects of the English but that they are hidden by their love for their motherland, their sense of unit and community and their virtues.

²⁹ Selection 1: *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for women, 1882, TR) p. 38 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016

In chapter 2, “Education”, Pandita suggests the solution for the improvement of her country, in particular of the female population. She defines education as an “indestructible wealth”, the only means which gives the real richness, the source of light and reason for man’s life as it allows him to go beyond the outer reality of things, seeing them with the inner eyes. The subjects she advises to study cover a wide range of field and, as Kosambi says, the curriculum Ramabai proposes is quite improbable and too extensive; as a matter of fact it would comprehend the study of grammar of the chosen language, History in order to understand customs and traditions of the ancient times, the *dharma shastras* as regards religion and morals, Physics and Geography, Political Economy and Moral Science, some notions of Medicine to be able to take of children and sick people, the Culinary Art and some knowledge of Arithmetic, to be able to check the incomes and the expenses of the family life.

In the two following chapters number 3 and 4, “Modesty” and “True Religion”, Ramabai focuses on the importance of moderation, self-restraint and caution to achieve happiness; as a matter of fact, in the first paragraphs of chapter 3 she compares two important qualities of the sea, its depth and its limits, to religion [dharma] and morality [niti], which help men keep worldly happiness within right boundaries. In chapter 4 she affirms that true religion is the basis of all things, as it gives people the roots they need to carry out their lives, giving them peace and relief at the time of death and offering that ethical conduct that can be found in most doctrines.

The most relevant chapter for my research is chapter 5 “Conduct for brides”, because Pandita underlines the main guidelines for brides to follow after marriage. She starts pointing out the need for man and woman to support each other as complementary elements of God’s creation, especially as far as regards domestic life. According to the author the two sexes result in an incomplete state, leading to the incapacity to perform any task properly if they do not cooperate. This mutual relationship is described as God’s intention, the purpose of his creation and Pandita urges her

readers to fulfill His will because a different behaviour would be considered contrary to religion, an offence to God and a source of sin.

It is God's intention that man and woman should support each other, and depend upon each other. This is why He has created a relationship between them, which cannot be fulfilled without mutual assistance.³⁰

After pointing out the value and importance of marriage as a right and natural expression of God's will, she analyses the custom of marriage in her own country, India, describing the usual practice of child marriage which is arranged as soon as a young girl reaches the age of nine or ten.

The girls are commonly married to equally young ignorant boy and she recognizes in it the cause of unhappiness and the failure of the relationship. In addition, she points out that the age between eight to twenty years is the most suitable period in a person's life to study and improve the personal knowledge. If a young boy gets married so young, he will never get involved in a course of study or he will probably never finish one so, this valuable period of human life, which should be devoted to knowledge, will be wasted.

The writer, in order to underline the importance of knowledge for men and women adds that the lack of an appropriate education makes human life inferior to animal one.

Continuing she draws attention to the *weak, dull and unintelligent*³¹ offspring resulting from such early marriages and the severe consequences for undeveloped female bodies, which are deeply damaged by early pregnancies.

Another disadvantage of child marriage is the fact that the young spouses' intelligence is not fully mature during their childhood years, leading to their inability to choose a suitable partner who fits their wishes and personality. As a matter of fact, they are forced to marry and live their conjugal life with a spouse chosen for them by their parents. This inevitably results in an unhappy marriage and foolish and disagreeable children.

³⁰ Selection 1: *Stri Dharma Niti* (Morals for women, 1882), tr pag. 54 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 55

Starting from the statement that a marriage is supposed to last a lifetime, the author then progresses in analysing the calamities which may derive if the two partners do not share the same freedom and possibilities, a very common situation which can lead the woman to commit suicide because of her husband's bad behaviour but also the man to suffer for his wife's conduct that can make him commit horrible sins like gynocide and adultery. Pandita detects the responsible of these sad events in the society, which obliges young people of India to marry during their childhood, preventing them to grow, mature, develop in a proper and healthy way which consequently brings about a general backwardness of the nation.

In her report she identifies the marriageable age at the twenty years and the relationship has to be supported and encouraged by *the opinion of people who are more intelligent and far-sighted than oneself*³², listing then all the most suitable characteristics that have to be found in the future husband or wife, like *a religious disposition, a hood appearance, education, virtues, generosity, wealth, and love*³³.

The religious devotion, together with the personal virtues, are the qualities to build a marriage on, as they last forever and surely lead to a relationship of mutual and lasting love, which can overcome the sufferings of life, as love is the source of all happiness and gives meaning and sense to every human life.

Among the various manifestations and expressions of love – parental affection, friendship, devotion, compassion – conjugal love is the most complete one, as it is a gift from God, which couples have to cultivate and grow with patience and virtue.

In this context Ramabai expresses the need for man and woman, whose personal qualities and attitudes are different according to their gender, to blend together these qualities in order to enhance their value and to bring happiness and prosperity to their domestic life.

She further explains that the third objective of a good and balanced marriage is the presence of a faithful, loving and devoted companion who helps a person to overcome the difficulties and who shares the happiness as nobody, from the author's point of view, is able to live alone.

³² Ibidem, p. 56

³³ Ibidem, p. 56

After listing the objectives of a good marriage, she starts making references to the duties which come with a conjugal relationship, describing the common consequences, in Indian society, of a simple disagreement between husband and wife, which ends up with the husband abandoning his devoted wife, often committing adultery and even remarrying. To the author's indignation, these deplorable actions are not subjected to any punishments or criticism by their society and men simply become lascivious and dissolute, while women are abandoned in such situation, left helpless and alone.

With respect to this situation there can be several consequences for women, as some decide to withstand the situation in a religious form of obedience to their vows, others put an end to their lives committing suicide, the majority of them start behaving in a dissolute way like those men who abandoned them. These sins are to be associated to men's licentiousness, as men are given much more strength by God not to oppress women but to love and cherish them.

The author then describes some foolish women who tries to charm their husbands with spells, amulets, and other magical remedies, wasting in such activities and solutions a lot of money, which would be better employed for the household expenses. These women often rely on the words of this kind of magicians, who Pandita defines "wicked and ill-natured people"³⁴, and give their husbands strange and dangerous potions, which often cause terrible consequences for the man's health but also for the relationship of the couple.

With reference to this particular topic, the author then reveals to her readers the useful magical devices that a good wife should employ to charm and keep her husband close to her heart which, to a modern female reader, may sound quite repressive, dated and also too submissive for women's role in a conjugal relationship, but which will certainly be acceptable and understandable for Indian brides of the 19th-century society. She presents the ideal wife as a woman who behaves in conformity to her husband's wishes, being honest, loyal, modest, and assisting him with patience and care because this is what makes a woman respected and admired by her society.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 58

Pandita then presents the examples of virtuous Indian women, whose conduct and lives have been taken as models in India, as they showed a holy and noble behaviour towards their husbands, facing the hardships of life with pure, devoted and religious attitude. At the end of the brief chapter dedicated to the proper conduct a wife should have towards her husband, Indian women are invited to follow the footsteps of these saintly women with courage, determination and honesty, in order to be the perfect other half for their husbands.

Chapter 6, “Domestic duties” deals with the suggested daily routine of women as housewives, their care for personal hygiene, religious charities and the proper behaviour towards the various members of the family, while in chapter 7 “The Nurture and Care of Children” Ramabai introduces in the reform discourse the importance of eugenics as she points out the need for women’s psychological and physical health in order to generate healthy children. In this paragraph she also exposes her thought about men’s willingness to exclude women from education, keeping them in ignorant, so that they could exercise their power and superiority on them.

The eighth and final chapter of her work, “The Ultimate Goal”, has a philosophical tone and contains Ramabai’s reflection on the mutable nature of human happiness and the adversities of life, which can be overcome with the help of God, who never abandons his creatures, who shows them his compassion and guides them through the difficult moments of life, granting them welfare and support.

In the analysis of this small book, professor Kosambi underlines Pandita’s ability to speak about various topics, considering the philosophical aspects as well as the practical ones and the didactic value of this text because of the presence of various features like its location within the oral tradition on purana sermons, its illustrations taken from Hindu mythology, its references to European history and its Sanskritized language.

On the other hand, Kosambi points out the central dilemma of this book, which is determined by the fact that the author is not fully aware of the familiar reality of the

typical Indian household, where women were spatially and socially secluded, with no interaction between husband and wife. Ramabai's ideal familiar reality is then in contrast with the actual repressive reality, making impossible for women to access the book and to follow and put into practice the author's pieces of advice.

This first brief publication by Ramabai undoubtedly helped her reformist activities with the Arya Mahila Samaj and, thanks to Dr. W.W. Hunter, she became known to the British authorities and she was invited to give a testimony before the Education Commission about the situation of women's education in India, in September 1882.

In her testimony she made references to her father's reformist legacy towards women's education, suggesting an eclectic program for Indian women's education which included the study of the *shastras* as well as a secular curriculum with the English language, the presence of women teachers and the control of female inspectors in girls' schools as most Indian men did not support female education and criticised and ostracised every attempt to improve women's cultural and social position. As Dr. Kosambi records, Ramabai was the first woman to make an overt and officially recorded critique of men's opposition to women's education in India; moreover she asked the Commission for the support of the British government for women's medical education, a plea which was later reinforced by Mrs. Francina Sorabji³⁵, who ran the Victoria High School in Poona and the following year by Anandibai Joshee, who would later embark on a journey to the U.S.A. to study medicine at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, becoming the first female Indian doctor.

Ramabai's suggestions for women's welfare and education expressed before the Education Commission received the scornful opposition of most Indian social conservatives, who underlined her lack of teaching experience and dismissed Pandita's approach to the topic of female education which would transform the patriarchal system they strongly defended. Conversely, she received praise and help by her international audience as Dr. Hunter approved and supported her proposal for

³⁵ Francina Sorabji was married to Reverend Sorabji Kharsedji, a Parsee who had converted to Christianity, and mother of Cornelia Sorabji, the first female graduate from Bombay University, the first woman to study law at Oxford University, the first female advocate in India and the first woman to practice law in India and Britain.

medical education for Indian women and had Ramabai's testimony translated, printed, and circulated in England. According to Dr. Kosambi, the diffusion of Ramabai's testimony together with Dr. Hunter's personal activity on the topic may have given the impulse for the creation of the Dufferin Fund³⁶ to provide medical help to Indian women.

In her short book *Stri Dharma Niti*, Ramabai focuses the reform process on women's education as a starting point for other much needed changes in the social field, like for example in the marriage customs, which were deeply subjected to strict patriarchal rules. Nevertheless, education itself was under the monopoly of Brahmin men who did not want women to mine their domain, dreading female literacy as it would have given women freedom of communication and movement both in their households and in the public and social sphere. Women were deterred from desiring an education as it was linked to widowhood and to the public hostility. Even Dr. Hunter underlined the dangers young girls could face walking alone in the streets to go to school and Anandibai Joshee herself described the harassment and the hostile comments she lived while walking to school with her books.

During her permanence in Pune, Ramabai came into contact with various Christian organizations, starting her encounter with the Catholic faith, which she will eventually embrace. It is particularly important her meeting with Sister Eleanor and Sister Geraldine of the Anglican Community of St. Mary the Virgin (CSMV), who helped the young widow to travel to England to study medicine, supporting all the expenses, in exchange for teaching Indian languages to the missionary nuns of the Community. In addition, while in Maharashtra, Ramabai also met Reverend Nehemiah Goreh, a former Chitpavan Brahmin who had abandoned Hinduism to convert to the Catholic faith and their relationship will have a deep impact on the young woman's conversion and beliefs as they both shared a similar background and the constant questioning and engaging in the theological debates.

³⁶ The Dufferin Fund was also known as "The National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India". It was established by the viceroy's wife, the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, Lady Harriot Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, in 1885 and was dedicated to improving women's healthcare in India with the patronage of Queen Victoria. Thanks to this Fund, Indian women were granted scholarships for medical education.

CHAPTER THREE

Ramabai's voyage to England and the meeting with Christ

One of the most important and pivotal events in Ramabai's life and career in the social reform field is her first overseas journey to England in April 1883, which she described in a long letter³⁷ addressed to Mr. S.P. Kelkar, secretary of Mumbai's Prarthana Samaj, a dear friend of hers. The letter, which can be considered one of the first examples of travelogue written in modern Marathi, was later published by the Anglo-Marathi weekly paper *Subodha Patrika* as a booklet with a short biography of the young woman. Mr. Kelkar gave his dear friend Ramabai the profit of the booklet in order to provide her a financial support for her staying in England,

The letter with the attached biography received a general positive reception, even from the *Kesari*, whose reviewer underlined the woman's courage and strong will in embarking on such an adventurous enterprise in a foreign land, but he also made references to the circulating rumours about the young woman's conversion to Anglicanism, expressing his doubts about Ramabai's determination to maintain her conduct towards her native faith.

The letter starts with Ramabai listing all the reasons for coming to England and her friends' arguments against this venture, especially their fear of a possible conversion because she would live among Christians; she then vividly describes the landscapes she saw during her voyage on the steamer – Aden, Suez and the isle of Malta - and finally her arrival in London. While reading this travel account it clearly emerges Ramabai's personality, her self-confidence and courage to travel alone with her baby daughter and only a female friend, Anandibai Bhagat, her bold attitude in her

³⁷ Selection 2: *Englandcha Pravas* (Voyage to England, 1883, Abridged translation) in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016

relationship with the European passengers on the steamer, her humour in describing her efforts at speaking English with the other passengers and her attempts to adapt to such a different climate and temperature, her intellectual curiosity and interest in the new adventure and new places she was experiencing.

Once she arrived in London, she was taken to Wantage, near Oxford, at St. Mary's Home, the convent where she lived with her daughter Manorama and her friend Anandibai, under the care of Sister Geraldine, with whom she had a long but difficult relationship all her life.

Soon after her arrival in England, Ramabai started her feminist activities for the cause of Indian women and asked for a meeting with Sir Bartle Frere, the former governor of the Bombay Presidency, in order to present him a Marathi petition where she described the oppression of Indian women in all their stages of life. She wanted to have this petition translated into English to be brought to the attention of Queen Victoria and other eminent political figures of the time. She titled the paper *The Cry of Indian Women*³⁸ and she exposed the terrible conditions of her fellow women adopting the perspective of the colonial subject, to gain the attention and support of colonial authorities like Sir Bartle Frere, resulting in *a strange - and truly audacious - conflation of an awareness of colonial exploitation with an attempt at colonial bonding*³⁹. This appeal for Indian women anticipates her future work, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, where her social and feminist ideology will be expressed in a more definite and mature way.

Ramabai's staying in England was marked by depression, a consequence of her failure to enter the medical college because of her severe and incurable deafness, the result of the difficult living conditions and hardships of her early years, and the shocking and mysterious suicide of Anandibai Bhagat, her Indian friend, who took her life with poison.

³⁸ It is reproduced in Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words"*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 105-114

³⁹ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 83

After the terrible event Ramabai, deeply affected and prostrated by the situation, was given hospitality by Professor Max Mueller of Oxford, who describes a different version of Anandibai's death from the one offered by Sister Geraldine, who claimed the young woman killed herself because of her mental instability and the lack of attention from Ramabai. Conversely professor Mueller said that after Anandibai's failed attempt to strangle Ramabai in the fear of being made Christians by force, she decided to end her life committing suicide.

This fact had a deep impact of Pandita and led to her and her daughter's baptism on 29th September 1883 in the Wantage Parish Church by Canon Butler. They were both given new Christian names, 'Mary Rama' for Ramabai and 'Manorama Mary' for Manorama, even if they both continued to use their Indian names. Sister Geraldine, a key figure in Ramabai's life, served as witness during the christening and became Ramabai's spiritual godmother.

The conversion to Christianity of an Indian public woman like Ramabai was certainly considered a triumph for the CSMV because she would have become an example to follow and imitate for many Indian men and women, promoting the conversion of Indian people to the new faith.

The young woman's conversion is a central point in her life and career but the events and reasons leading to this important decision are still unclear and confused. Dr. Kosambi, analysing Ramabai's writings, like for example *A Testimony*⁴⁰ and personal correspondence to her friends, notes how the Indian woman tried to delineate her path towards her new faith starting from her childhood, when she came into contact with Jesus Christ's name, her later disillusionment with the strict Hindu doctrines, norms and practices which had had such severe consequences on her family members, her meeting and approach to the Brahmo Samaji and Prarthana Samaji but most of all, her personal continuous quest for a more complete and satisfying religion, which she eventually found in the religion of Jesus Christ.

Among the scholars who have studied and tried to clarify the complex set of circumstances surrounding Ramabai's conversion to the Christian faith, Gauri

⁴⁰ Selection 7: *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, 1907 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016

Viswanathan, professor in the Humanities and Director of the South Asia Institute at Columbia University, in chapter four of her book *Outside the Fold*⁴¹, titled 'Silencing Heresy, Feminist struggle and religious dissent', relying on Ramabai's letters, retraces the stages of her searching for a personal God and her relationship with both the Indian and the Anglican worlds.

In this chapter Gauri Viswanathan presents the figure of Pandita Ramabai describing her as a Christian convert and a social reformer underlining the fact that, despite her being a prototype of feminist aspirations, her life path was perceived by her own generation as confusing, inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. The author points out Pandita's continuous being outside the system, both her society as a scholar of Hinduism and the Anglican environment and her discussion and refusal of the Christian dogma after her conversion.

The author gives then a definition of Pandita made by A.B. Shah who says she was "the greatest woman produced by modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all history"⁴², noting that such laudatory sentence is definitely prompted by her incredible achievements as a learned woman but, above all, for her innovative role in the defence of women's rights and in the development of Indian social reform.

Since the beginning of her career she showed a particular interest in the amelioration of Indian women's status, in particular of those neglected by the Hindu society, the young widows who were obliged to live a life of continuous violence and abuses. In her first two works, *Morals for Women* (1882) and *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888), Pandita makes a devastating analysis of Hindu patriarchal society, which obviously on the one hand attracted the harsh criticism of the Hindu public, on the other earned Ramabai the admiration, support and recognition of the social reformers.

In both these early but fundamental literary works, Ramabai expresses a deep disillusionment with the religion of her parents, especially regarding the false views of sublime philosophy, those fascinating descriptions of Hindu religion and philosophy which hid, under a deceptive and orientalist cover, the actual situation of

⁴¹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*, Delhi: OUP, 1998

⁴² Amritlal B. Shah, ed., introduction to *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977, p. xi

seclusion and slavery which Indian women lived. In one of her letters to Sister Geraldine, Ramabai said

I beg of my Western sisters not to be satisfied with the looking on the outside beauties of the grand philosophies, and not to be charmed with the long and interesting discourses of our educated men, but to open the trapdoors of the great monuments of the ancient Hindu intellect, and enter into the dark cellars where they will see the real working of the philosophies which they admire so much.

There are thousands of priests and men, learned in the sacred lore, who are the spiritual rulers and guides of our people. They neglect and oppress the widows and devour widows' houses ... Thousands upon thousands of young widows and innocent children are suffering untold misery and dying helpless every year throughout the land, but not a philosopher or Mahatma has come out boldly to champion their cause and to help the ... Let not my Western sisters be charmed with the books and poems they read. There are many hard and bitter facts we have to accept and feel. All is not poetry with us. The prose we have to read in our lives is very hard. It cannot be understood by our learned brothers and comfortable sisters in the West.⁴³

In these lines Ramabai denounces the hierarchical structure of Hinduism, those *thousands of priests and men, learned in the sacred lore*⁴⁴ who tried to conceal the oppressive treatment of the widows and the harsh reality of their everyday lives, transforming this “prose” into a “poetry”, which shows a refined moral sensibility. Because of her deep criticism and condemn of Hinduism, Pandita could never perceive religion as an exclusively philosophical system, an attitude which will be evident even after her conversion and that the Christian missionaries could never understand and accept. They proposed her a philosophical approach to Christianity, which they thought would be more suitable to her intellectual and logical abilities, instead of a perspective presenting religion as a historical revelation, which would have implied a more personal involvement in the process of faith.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 308, Letter from Pandita Ramabai, Poona, to Sister Geraldine, C.S.M.V., Wantage, December 11, 1893

⁴⁴ Ibidem

Ramabai's idea of religious devotion was never linked to the ideas of personal salvation nor as a consolation for the adoption of such notion of religion which could rationalize women's submission. As a matter of fact, in her famous *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, she analyses and reveals the various philosophical supports and explanations given by Hinduism in order to keep the low status of Indian women in the society like the idea that women's literacy would have caused the death of their husbands.

Ramabai's denunciation of Hinduism, its patriarchal structure and practices has always been a controversial field of analysis because this same discourse was used by English missionaries to convert Indians to Christianity so that it is difficult, for the scholars, to define Ramabai's position.

According to Iderpal Grewal⁴⁵, she adopted the rhetoric of the colonial state and missionaries to create her own independent activity in the defence of women's rights. Almost the same position is shared by Antoinette Burton⁴⁶ in her book *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865 – 1915* she affirms that

*In Ramabai case, and perhaps in that of others, resistance to British women's imperialist gestures was arguably a spur to individual self-consciousness, if not feminist identity. [...] Empire helped to shape the conditions under which imperial and colonial women articulated their claims for equality and citizenship, both differently and similarly, in the modern world*⁴⁷.

Other scholars agree on the convergence of Ramabai's critique of imperialism with that of Hindu patriarchal society while Gauri Viswanathan suggests that Ramabai's activity as a social reformer and an advocate for women's rights is an essential part of her developing religious sensibility, not a strategy copied by her colonial mentors. Consequently, her strong criticism of colonialism should not be interpreted only as the attempt to expose Hindu patriarchal structure but as a means which would be useful to create her own religious system, which maintained her critical sensibility.

⁴⁵ Iderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Culture of Travel*, Durham: Duke University press, 1996

⁴⁶ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865 – 1915*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 32

The author of the book then retraces Ramabai's break with Hinduism and the subsequent conversion to Christianity, affirming that it was not a linear journey, but it was made up of gradual steps like, for example her acquaintance with reformist organizations like the Brahmo Samaji and the Prarthana Samaj during her staying in Calcutta. These organization's practical agenda was aimed at the elimination of the obsolete superstitions and rituals which were present and controlled Hinduism in order to improve the social conditions of the poorer castes and the rigid caste system. Ramabai felt she could make a change in this field dedicating her agency to women's welfare, an enterprise she undertook when she went back to her native Maharashtra where she founded the first institutions for women's care. After receiving little help for her school in Poona, Pandita decided to look for a wider support both financially and ideologically and she started her period abroad, first in England and then in the USA, where she found a strong network of sympathetic organizations.

During her period in Poona she had first met Sister Geraldine, the Anglican nun who would become fundamental in her process of conversion and in the following sojourn at Wantage, in England. Sister Geraldine was a member of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin and she had come to India as a missionary, together with other sisters of her religious order who had immediately noticed the young Hindu woman's interest in learning everything she could about Christianity. Actually Ramabai's primarily interest was not in the Christian doctrine, but in her strong will to learn English, the language which could have allowed her to speak about the education for Indian women to a larger audience, promoting in this way her idea of the creation of an institute for women.

The role of the missionary nuns was crucial in her decision to leave for England and, together with her little daughter Manorama and a female companion, Anandibai Bhagat, on 20th April 1883 she sailed for Europe. Once in England she was hosted at St. Mary's Home and on 29th September 1883, after only five months from her arrival, Pandita and her daughter Manorama were baptised in the Wantage Parish Church.

It would apparently seem easy to reconstruct Ramabai's encounter with Christianity by reading and analysing this chronology of events made up of precise steps and

crucial presences. Conversely her relationship with both the new adopted creed and the sisters of the Community of St. Mary in England was anything but simple and it was continuously a source of criticism to both parts.

The origins of the difficult relationship between the newly convert and the new religion can be detected in Pandita's initial approach to Christianity, mainly driven by pragmatic interests at first, but which then acquired a deeper dimension with regards to her profound conflicts with Anglican structure and position in England. Pandita started to doubt the promise of Christian liberty which the Holy Scriptures offered as, according to her personal point of view and her previous experience, it was the result of the hierarchical government in which it was rooted, the same hierarchical structure she had sharply denounced in the religion of her birth. Despite having assured her fellow people she would have not converted to Christianity once in England, her Hindu faith had already been compromised before sailing for the West because she had firmly underlined the cruel and unjust treatment of women by Hinduism. As G. Viswanathan explains in her above-mentioned volume, once baptised and formally entered the new religion, Pandita understood that the new religion she had embraced did not allow her to express and develop those aspects of her personality and those sensibilities which had determined her to abandon Hinduism.

The author of this critical volume points out that the feminist aspect of Ramabai's agency and life has always overshadowed her intense spiritual struggle as her experience of faith was considered either a coincidental aspect of her feminism or the vehicle through which she attacked Hindu patriarchal system. Moreover,

Her anguished search a personal God who is also a source of justice and love rarely finds a place in accounts of her battle with the Maharashtrian elite society. These accounts also invariably omit her protracted effort to define a conception of divinity that satisfy her craving for interpretative freedom.

*Ramabai's spirituality is accorded relevance only to the extent that it illuminates her protest against brahmanical ritualism and codification of women's social roles.*⁴⁸

In addition, her developing religious sensibility gave her the means to point out and criticise the philosophical contradictions within British colonialism, an aspect which has almost been neglected by critics. Her incessant search for a moral and theological structure for her social criticism of the caste system and the hardships and injustices suffered by the female gender, offered Ramabai an important insight into different aspects of British colonialism, which resulted in a devastating analysis of its limits and faults. Her gradual distance from the Anglican doctrine, as regards for example the acceptance of the Trinity and other religious dogmas, was determined by the observation of how certain religious groups, like Jews, Methodists, Congregationalists and others were left outside the religious community or, as the author defines it, outside the fold, and the same treatment was reserved to colonial subjects. Her discussion on the theological inconsistencies in British Christianity helped her to gain this further point of view about colonialism whose criticism has to be inscribed *uniquely in the framework of both Indian nationalism and English religious dissent*⁴⁹.

As professor Viswanathan clarifies, Pandita's approach to Christian faith was the result of several factors, not only her wish to break with her native religious and cultural background, or her will to identify with the Western thought, but it was helped by her readings of religious Christian literature and by her correspondence with Sister Geraldine. Consequently, Pandita exposes two possible meanings of religion, one as a universal moral value and the other as the source for national and cultural identity and she tries to distinguish and delineate her personal and subjective location for belief beyond the Anglican doctrine. In her answers to the sisters' rebukes for her arrogant questioning, Pandita affirms she believes in the Universal Church of God, which is not limited within the walls of the Anglican Church,

⁴⁸ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the fold. Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 121

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 121

separating in this way religion from political and national institutions. In her personal interpretation, Catholicism becomes the synonym for unity and universality as she sees it in a different light, without considering all the divisions brought about by institutions which, in the course of history, have fought themselves in the religious field. In her strong assessment, as Professor Viswanathan points out, it is also evident her attempt to dissociate religion from the various forms of territorial associations, as

*Baptism and the solemn oath which we take before GOD do not belong exclusively to one person or to one church with particular belief or customs. They are Catholic, i.e. universal.*⁵⁰

In her personal practice and understanding of the new-found religion, Ramabai adopted a moral scale of values which is independent of both her native and adopted religion, incurring in the warnings of the missionary sisters regarding the dangers of making a self-chosen religion. In this perspective it is possible to read conversion as *a dynamic process that creates the ideal system to which the convert aspires*⁵¹, and the subjective and personal nature of the interpretation of a new religious system makes it heretical and separates it from the assimilationist purposes of conversion.

Because of the absence of a comprehensive perspective which considers religious dissent as a form of resistance to both dogmatic aspects and the political structures which support them, her conversion to Christianity is seen and interpreted solely as the source of a divided consciousness which causes her estrangement from the first nationalist agitations of Indians.

Moreover her conversion has been seen as a fundamental step in the acceptance of the colonialist agenda regarding the reforms for Indian women but the only records supporting this interpretation are the missionary records and it is important to analyse and fragment these important sources to detect the voice of Ramabai herself, her position as a converted subject in the missionaries' agenda for reforms.

⁵⁰ Letter from Pandita Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, September 22, 1885, in Amritlal B. Shah, ed., introduction to *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977, p. 88

⁵¹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the fold. Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 122

Ramabai's journey of faith is long, troubled, filled with constant questionings and criticisms towards the institutional hierarchies of the Church of England and the dogmatic truths; it is a constant search for a God who could be close to her, for an unconstrained spiritual freedom she wanted to find outside the boundaries of the hierarchical system. Because of the nature of her spiritual path, G. Viswanathan defines her conversion not as a turning point, as most of critics and authors have always defined it, but rather as an intermediate stage *in her pursuit of a moral goal that she believed Hinduism obscured by its denial of parity to women*⁵², inserting itself in a framework which overcomes the evident contestation of the patriarchal system she criticises.

In her search for spiritual freedom Ramabai makes a distinction between two forms of obedience: obedience to the word of God which, according to her leads to liberty and salvation, and the obedience to the law which she sees as the source of human enslavement. This distinction of two different forms of obedience, brings her within a tradition of dissent based on the antinomian rejection of "Moral Law", seen as a product of the repression exerted by ecclesiastical institutions and priests. As the author of the book explains, the etymology of the term "antinomian" comes from the Greek: ἀντί, "against" and νόμος, "law" and it means "against the law" and it takes inspiration from St. Paul's letter to the Romans and the Galatians, where he emphasises the justification by faith (*sola fide*) in contrast with a form of worship mainly regulated by ceremonial observance and rituals but where he also makes a contestation of the imperatives of Mosaic Law.

Taking into account these distinctions and this particular perspective Ramabai, in her dialogue with her missionary mentors in England, vindicates the idea of religious belief as personal testimony, not only as religious ideology, which she sees as *a product of the instrumental rationality of the colonial English state*⁵³. In her affirmations she makes references to St. Paul's words and affirms her will to be respected not only as a student "of letter alone but also of the spirit of religion".

When Sister Geraldine, in one of her letters to Ramabai, compares the Christian kingdom to the English nation, identifying in this way the Christian hierarchical

⁵² Ibidem, p. 122

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 124

structures with the organisational requirements of the modern state, the personal and subjective component is erased from the idea of religious belief which is then assimilated to a form of cultural and national identity, which their subjects must accept and obey.

Furthermore, the disobedience and refusal to such system where religion belief is identified with state structure means a refusal of both the content and structure of civil and ecclesiastical law, which makes Ramabai a strong opponent of the colonial subjection as well.

Ramabai's conversion mostly received strong and negative reactions in her homeland, especially by the press and, even the usually supportive Anglo-Marathi *Indu-Prakash*, expressed the general disappointment for the woman's fickleness which led her to convert to embrace Christianity, mostly for financial reasons. The only supportive voice among the strong criticism of her people was the one of Jotirao Phule, who in his essay *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*⁵⁴, congratulated Ramabai on her conversion, citing her as an example of freedom against the oppressive practices and norms inflicted to women by Hinduism.

While in India the debate and comments on Ramabai's change of faith occupied the public opinion, the young woman found herself in a difficult situation in England; as a matter of fact her conversion had certainly made things easier for her as for certain aspects of her life but it had also arisen new difficulties, especially regarding her career. Once cancelled her medical studies because of her defective hearing, she was suggested a teaching career, which would eventually be useful for a future missionary activity, which was intended for her by the Anglican community.

In January 1884, the CSMV sent her to the Cheltenham Ladies' College, a girls' school with a teacher training section to study natural sciences, mathematics, and English. The school was run by Miss Dorothea Beale, who became an important mentoring figure and a dear friend for the young Indian woman whom she

⁵⁴ Jyotirao Phule, *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*, p. 286 translation by Meera Kosambi in *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p.86

influenced, encouraged, and supported with her patient and loving presence throughout the course of her life. The meeting between the two women is described by Elizabeth Raikes in one of Beale's most famous biographies, *Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham*, as follows:

*[...] The teachings of Hindoo religions and philosophy, and the progress of Christianity in India, came before her as matters of real interest in 1883, when Pundita Ramabai was sent by the Wantage Sisters to study at the College. Miss Beale received her with the utmost warmth and friendship. She made every possible arrangement for her health and protection she not only put at her disposal every advantage the College could offer, but gave up a large portion of her own valuable time in order to help her personally. She welcomed Ramabai's long letters on religious questions and difficulties, answering them at equal length. She obtained introductions and arranged interviews for her with many whom she thought could help her. Ramabai's 'appetite for philosophy' (to quote Miss Beale), her enthusiasm and unsparing devotion to the cause of her unhappy sisters in India, touched her deeply, and when the Home for Widows was established at Poona (now at Mukti, Poona District), Miss Beale became a large and regular subscriber to it. [...]*⁵⁵

Beale's liberal thinking and empathetic attitude were essential elements in her relationship with Ramabai, who she helped with her philosophical and religious doubts and with whom she began a close relationship which lasted many years. Pandita would forever be grateful for Miss Beale's encouragement, help and prayers which helped her throughout her life.

The conversion to Anglicanism, as previously said, produced a sharper friction between Pandita and Sister Geraldine, who had inserted the event into the paradigmatic frame of the British missionary and the Indian convert, assuming the subaltern position of India with respect to England, the motherland which showed superiority in the racial, religious and cultural field. As the newly-convert Indian woman refused to adhere to such stereotyped view and expressed a considerable

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Raikes, *Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham*, London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1908, pp. 299-300

intellectual superiority, the friction in the relationship between the two women increased and created a status of discrepancy which frustrated the Anglican nun. As Dr. Kosambi points out, Sister Geraldine would remain culturally insular, as she was not equipped for instructing Ramabai in Christianity because she had only taught European and Eurasian girls while she was on a mission in India. She later admitted her inability to carry out the task due to her lack of adequate equipment, both intellectual and cultural, and her feeling of failure in this mission, which also determined a deterioration in the relationship with Ramabai.

It has been really interesting analysing Ramabai's position in the Anglican world as she lived the process of conversion and faith in a very personal way, questioning the theological aspects and dogmas of the new religion, the racism and imperialism of the Anglican Church and the patriarchal and controlling authority embodied by the clerical community. In her work, professor Kosambi reports that the aspect which disturbed the most the Anglican community was the convert's desire to engage in the theological debate instead of showing an unquestioning faith and obedience towards the new religion, adopting the same rational attitude which she had made her rejected and confute the Hindu religion and the other religious doctrines which she had come in contact with. Thanks to her rational and enquiring approach, Ramabai never fully accepted the new religion but, on the contrary, she selectively adopted some of its aspects, showing a continuous explorative approach to its dogmas. Sister Geraldine considered Ramabai's positions as heretical and accused her to trying to make a self-chosen religion and to have undergone baptism on false pretence because she should have subordinated the intellect to faith in order to be a good Christian. In one of her letters, the nun addressed these harsh words to her protégé:

At first the lamp of Faith shone brightly in your heart, and your intellect bowed before it ... Humility, childlike simplicity, obedience, truthfulness and trustfulness were there and daily developed themselves in your life. But gradually their graces faded from sight.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Amritlal B. Shah, ed., introduction to *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977, p. 91-92

She also suggested her pupil to rely on faith rather than on reason in order to understand the Truth, an advice which could not be fully accepted by Ramabai, whose upbringing and education was based on religious debates and argumentation. Moreover, she revealed the difficulty and, in many cases, the inability for Anglican missionaries to communicate with the converts, in terms of their own religion and to engage in a fruitful conversation.

When in spring 1884 Miss Dorothea Beale offered Ramabai to teach Indian language to English young men and women who wanted to pursue a career in India as missionaries, the Anglican authorities reacted with harsh criticism, seeing in this initiative a potential danger for Ramabai, who would have become victim of her vanity and self-exaltation, features which were common of the natives. Among the voices of this protest there were the Bishop of Bombay and the Bishop of Lahore who were both in England at the time, and Canon Butler, who had previously baptised Pandita at Wantage who, despite agreeing on the Indian woman's knowledge and qualification at teaching Indian language and culture, feared that this would have increased Ramabai's vanity and self-reliance, asserting that *all that she needs is an English development of her Indian brain*.⁵⁷

The newly-convert Pandita disputed these allegations claiming her right to exercise her freedom of conscience, the independence of her mind and thought and her will not to submit to the Anglican clerical authority and not to accept the Anglican teaching as an article of faith. While she had found in the Christian doctrine the gender-egalitarian nature which was missing in her native Hindu faith, Pandita had to face the patriarchal aspect of the church's authoritarianism, especially as regards the role and the place of the woman, which was actually a position shared by both the Anglican and the Hindu faith, a position which had to be found among her own sex and above the clerical male authority.

Ramabai could not accept these remarks and rebelled to these accusations threatening to leave the CSMV even if she did not have neither the economical possibilities nor the friendships which could have helped her being independent in a foreign land. She also pointed out how the fact that she should have taught men had never been a

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 45

problem neither for her father nor her brother while it seemed to have been a major issue for English society. An interesting aspect which emerges from this intense interaction between Pandita and the Anglican society, as Dr. Kosambi underlines, is the fact that Sister Geraldine's racism towards her protect did not have its roots in her skin colour, but more likely in culture and religion as, for her, *the fair-skinned, grey-eyed Ramabai was always a 'native' (and thus inferior by definition), but never the dark-skinned Mano who was a Christian baby whom Geraldine genuinely loved.*⁵⁸

In one of her articles, the author of the book further analyses the particular and complicated relationship between Sister Geraldine and the Anglican Church in general with Ramabai, in particular as regards the mother-daughter role of the two women and Ramabai's role as a mother for Mano.⁵⁹ The religious debate and interior doubts and reservations presented by Pandita, according to Sister Geraldine, were a proof of her maternal unfitness as her self-will and pride made her questioning the Anglican teachings and her choice for a non-denominational Christianity undoubtedly damaged her credentials as a "Christian mother", making her inadequate to choose for her daughter in the religious field. In their close correspondence there are allusions to the fact that Ramabai's religious position made her still heathen and represented a menace for the young child who should have been taken care by her Christian grandmother.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the Anglican opposition to Ramabai was the result of a racial, cultural and colonial sense of superiority as she was attributed all the faults of a 'native' and treated as a subject of imperial control and education, without any possibility to escape this strict guardianship. This ended up to be a negative impact on the Indian young woman, who was not able to reconcile in her mind the Christian hierarchical structure and Christian liberty, leading to her refusal of the Anglican doctrine and the adherence to a non-denominational Christianity.

⁵⁸ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 92

⁵⁹ Meera Kosambi, "Motherhood in the East-West Encounter", *Feminist Review*, No. 65 (summer), pp. 49-67

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 59

The authoritarian behaviour exercised on her was the result of the fact that Ramabai was perceived and considered as an instrument for evangelization in India, a Christian wedge into Hindu society and moreover as a High-caste Hindu representative, she received a lot of pressure to conform in order to transmit the Christian message to the rest of society and to convert not only the Dalits (lower classes), but also members of the higher ranks of society. inevitably Pandita continued to rebel against the Christian dogma, the authoritarianism of the Church but also its sectarianism, maintain a critical attitude towards the various Christian denominations and, in a letter to Miss Beale, she tells how the Anglican nun ran away with anger because she had replied to her statements about the superiority of the Anglican creed saying that *she had no rights to call the dissenters heretics, because she herself belonged to a Church which is but a dissenting sect of the Roman Catholic.*⁶¹

The personal interpretation of the Christian doctrine pursued by Ramabai is a result of the always clear distinction between Hinduism as a religion and Indianness as a culture, the latter being always sustained and cherished even after Ramabai's English and American sojourns because her change of religion never implied a change of country and identity nor diminished the love for her country. Furthermore Prof. Kosambi detected other fields of cultural and denominational confrontation for Ramabai and the Anglican elite, like for example her refusal to wear a crucifix with Latin inscriptions and the suggestion to wear a crucifix inscribed with Sanskrit as it is the oldest and most beautiful language of her native land, showing a very personal blend of her Indian culture with the Christian rituals, symbols and practices. In this perspective she interpreted the Christian doctrine in her own way, preserving in her lifestyle the traces of her orthodox Hindu upbringing, like for example her strict vegetarian diet, which had to be considered as part of Pandita's cultural background and not as residues of her Hindu religious beliefs.

The Indian woman's personal and religious struggle as a new member of the Anglican creed is reported in her collection of letters, which also show her ability in

⁶¹ Amritlal B. Shah, ed., introduction to *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977, p. 170

writing in English and discussing complex themes concerning personal, theological, and religious questions.

At the end of 1885 Pandita clearly understood that her period in England was coming to an end as she did not see any possibilities for her to have a fruitful future for her and her professional development. As an Indian woman, a colonial subject, a woman without economic means and resources, dependent on the CSMV for living, she showed an incredible courage in rebelling to the Community's imperialistic-racist Christian gaze. In England Pandita could not find the support and acceptance she hoped and professor Kosambi suggested the reason lying in the asymmetrical structure of imperialism which made the bonding between British and Indian women impossible and she quoted three scholars' articles about the role of English missionaries in India.

Geraldine H. Forbes, in her article *In search of the "Pure Heathen"*⁶² describes the women missionaries in India as not only the helpmates of the imperialists, but as cultural imperialists themselves.

Barbara Ramusack in her essay *Cultural Missionaries, Maternal imperialists, Feminist Allies*⁶³ analyses the polyhedric careers of five British women, outside the formal colonial imperial establishment, who felt the need to go to India to devote themselves to the cause of the condition of Indian women. Ramusack underlines how the categories of gender and race played an undeniable influence in the promotion of social reforms within an imperial frame and she describes these women as *cultural missionaries preaching a gospel of women's uplift based largely on models adapted from their experience in Britain*.⁶⁴ She also defines these British missionaries as *maternal imperialists who wanted to socialize immature daughters to their adult rights and responsibilities*, as well as *feminist allies whose effectiveness depended on*

⁶² Geraldine H. Forbes, *In search of the "Pure Heathen"*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 April 1986, pp. WS 2-8

⁶³ Barbara Ramusack, *Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies*, in *Western Women and Imperialism*, edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Stroebel, pp. 119-36, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1992, p. 119

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 119

their own personalities and skills, the institutional and personal alliances they formed, and the state of the women's movement in India when they were active. ⁶⁵

Antoinette Burton reinforces the idea that British feminists did not see Indian women as equals, but as *unfortunates in need of saving by their British feminist 'sisters'...* [and] *as helpless colonial subjects* ⁶⁶. As previously stated, all these aspects and behaviours conflated in the figure of Sister Geraldine whose spiritual, racist, cultural and maternal authority led Ramabai to a contestation of the colonial power and to a self-definition as an Indian woman in England, a convert and a mother.

When Pandita decided to leave England in December 1885 she had not written the account of her three-year staying and her travels in Britain, nor about the political, social, and cultural conditions of England which were worth emulating by Indian women. Her continuous references to England as a negative counterpart and example when she later wrote about the conditions of the USA clearly prove Ramabai's negative attitude towards her British experience, even if it marked an important turning point in her life and career.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 120

⁶⁶ Antoinette Burton, *The White Woman's Burden in Western Women and Imperialism*, edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Stroebel, pp. 137-57, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1992, p. 137

CHAPTER FOUR

Ramabai's American period and her reforming agenda in *The Hight-Caste Hindu Woman (1887)*

In December 1885 Pandita received a letter from Dr. Rachel Bodley, dean of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania located in Philadelphia, who invited her to attend the graduation of Ramabai's distant cousin Anandibai Joshee⁶⁷ in March 1886, the first Indian woman doctor. The institution had been founded in 1851 and it was the only one which granted a formal degree for women, while in Europe most medical colleges only allowed women students to join the classes and the training reserved to male students without awarding them a degree.

In order to understand the importance of this event for the history of Indian women and the unique personality of Mrs. Joshee I will give a brief biographical account of her short but eventful life.

The young Anandibai was born into an aristocratic but impoverished conventional Chitpavan Brahmin family, who tried to "educate" her since her childhood to her

⁶⁷ The figure and personality of Anandibai Joshee and her incredible life trajectory has been described and analysed in many works. Among her biographies the first one was published a year after her premature death by American feminist Caroline Healey Dall, *The Life of Dr. Anandabai Joshee, a Kinswoman of the Pundita Ramabai* (Roberts Brothers), Boston, 1888.

A year later, the Indian writer and feminist Kashibai Kanitkar paid Anandibai her tribute writing her biographical account in their shared mother-tongue, Marathi, portraying the young Indian woman as a devoted upper-caste wife, a social reformer, and a nationalist. Kashibai Kanitkar, *Kai. Sau. Dr. Anandibai JosheeYanche Charitra* [The Life of the Late Dr Mrs Anandibai Joshee] (Kulkarni ani Mandali) Pune, 1889.

For a further insight and analysis of the importance of Anandibai for both Western and Eastern culture, see Meera Kosambi, *A Prismatic Presence: The Multiple Iconisation of DrAnandibai Joshee and the Politics of Life-Writing*, Australian Feminist Studies, Vol.16, No. 35, 2001.

For a comparative perspective on three important Maharastrian female figures of the late 19th century, Dr. Anandibai Joshi, Dr. Rakhmabai and Pandita Ramabai, see Meera Kosambi, *The Meeting of the Twain: The Cultural Confrontation of Three Women in Nineteenth Century Maharashtra*, Bulletin (Centre for Women's Development Studies), Vol. 1, issue 1, p. 1-22, published March 1, 1994.

future wifely role with physical punishments and discipline. When the girl was 9 her father gave her in marriage to Gopalrao Joshi, a widower almost 20 years older than her, who was employed as a postmaster and who sought to a possibility to pursue his social reformist ambitions through his brilliant child-bride. He began to educate her and, after her early pregnancy at 12 and the tragic death of her baby in infancy, Anandibai concentrated all her efforts in her studies, learning with incredible rapidity both Sanskrit and English and mastered other subjects which she studied both at home under her husband's guidance and in the various government-run or Christian missionary schools in the Bombay Presidency. She was to become the first high-caste working woman because she was offered a job in the postal department of the Bengal Presidency, but she declined the offer as a protest against the offensive behaviour of the British officials towards their Indian employees.

Meanwhile her husband had started cultivating plans for her wife's future medical career and wrote to many American missionaries to seek help to fund Anandibai's studies. After some time Mrs. Carpenter responded to Gopalrao's plea and started a close correspondence with the young Anandibai which soon grew into an affectionate friendship.

In 1883, when Anandibai was 18, she was invited to the USA to be admitted to the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia thanks to a scholarship and succeeded in her studies which led to her graduation in 1886, attended by Pandita Ramabai.

After her studies in the USA, Anandibai was offered a prestigious job of lady doctor in Kolhapur state in the Bombay Presidency but she could never exercise the medical profession there because she prematurely died of tuberculosis, at the age of 22, a few months after getting to Pune.⁶⁸

Dr. Rachel Bodley saw in Ramabai's participation to the degree ceremony of her fellow Indian friend a possibility to involve Anandibai into Ramabai's project for women's emancipation in India and a strong message for Indians that Ramabai's work would receive additional support and strength thanks to Joshee's involvement.

⁶⁸ Meera Kosambi, *The Meeting of the Twain: The Cultural Confrontation of Three Women in Nineteenth Century Maharashtra, Bulletin (Centre for Women's Development Studies)*, Vol. 1, issue 1, published March 1, 1994, pp. 6-7

When Pandita arrived in the USA she was received and perceived as an *internationally renowned advocate for Indian women's advancement* ⁶⁹ and, after her first maiden speech on 12th March 1886, she obtained an immediate success among the American people, who admired her personality, her ability to combine and blend her Eastern and Brahmin cultural background and origins with her Westernized personality, her Sanskrit knowledge with an English education, her nationalistic pride with a strong and objective critique of Indian society. Furthermore, she immediately obtained an instant racial acceptance due to her fair and delicate physical features which made her perceive not as a typical Indian woman, but as a more Western one. Caroline Healy Dall, in Anandibai's biography, describes Ramabai using an enthusiastic tone, saying that

*Ramabai is strikingly beautiful. Her face is a clean-cut oval; her eyes dark and large, glow with feeling. She is a brunette, but her cheeks are full of color. Her white widow's saree is drawn closely over her head and fastened under her chin. There is nothing else about her to suggest the Hindu.*⁷⁰

Thus, the instant success of Ramabai among the American audience was determined by both her figure of Indian Christian champion of Hindu women's cause and her racially and culturally acceptable aspect, which drew her closer to American public opinion. Her maiden public speech received great publicity in American newspapers, which praised her fluent speaking ability, her simple and unembarrassed attitude which won American women's hearts and captured the audience's attention, who shared the conviction that she was woman who would have been remarkable in any birthplace. When Pandita invited her audience to share a moment of silent prayer to God on behalf of her fellow Indian sisters' cause, she had definitely won their hearts. As prof. Kosambi reveals, the American response to Ramabai was complex as she was perceived as 'one of us' as regards religion and even race but, at the same time, as the exotic Other, an Indian in the Western discourse. Her presence in the USA allowed American people to engage in the philanthropic aid to India, which had been

⁶⁹ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p.121

⁷⁰ Caroline Healey Dall, *The Life of Dr. Anandabai Joshee, a Kinswoman of the Pundita Ramabai* (Roberts Brothers), Boston, 1888, pp.130-1

mainly performed within the British sphere of influence. The British imperial project had always influenced the Western and American public opinion as far as the view and perception of India, which was seen from an ethnocentric perspective of racial, cultural and religious superiority, considering the British colonial rule as a necessary and providential for Indian people, as the white race would be the fittest one to fulfill the great civilising mission.

The American Mission, the oldest Christian mission operating in Western India since 1813, had exalted, in the pages of their Anglo-Marathi weekly, *Dnyanodaya* of Mumbai, the helpful and compassionate action of the British government in India, stating that *it is fortunate for India that it is England that rules over her. No other of the white races is so fitted to fulfill her high mission over so great empire.*⁷¹ This imperial perspective would continue to influence the American perception of India and this was evident in the controversial work by Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (1927)⁷² which emphasized the backwardness of the country and its inferiority, justifying the British exploitation and supporting their colonial rule in an exaltation of the white supremacy.

At the same time the Americans had grown the ambition to break England's monopoly of aid to India and they had sent missionaries and medical doctors to the country; besides American women were deeply interested in the cause of the Hindu widows and saw in Ramabai the means to create a structure of aid and assistance. She was seen as an Indian, rather than a 'native', as a Brahmin woman who criticised Hinduism and converted to Christianity, maintaining a critical attitude towards her new religion: she was able to blend her Indianness with a Christian practice and this granted her to enter into many American reform discourses, promoting her project of a residential school for high-caste widows in India.

The president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Frances Dillard offered Ramabai her support and introduced her to the international network of her association and to the highest American feminist circles. In addition, Willard served as vice president of the 'Ramabai Association' which had been formed in

⁷¹ *Dnyanodaya*, "The Destiny of the White Race", 6 August 1885

⁷² Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, edited by Mrinalini Sinha, University of Michigan Press, 2000

December 1887 in Boston and showed admiration towards her Indian friend, who she viewed as a Christian wedge into Hindu society and whose influence would have helped Indian women to set them free from the ignorance and cruelty of their condition, to reach the light of the Gospel.

Pandita participated to the annual meeting of the WCTU in November 1887, which took place in Nashville, Tennessee and she was also invited to give a speech at the International Council of Women, held in Washington DC between March-April 1888. During her participation to this latter event, she could meet many American feminists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Mary A. Livermore and Lucy Stone, and pioneering women educators like Mrs. Quincy Shaw and Elizabeth Peabody, who admired her persona as well as her agenda for Indian women.

Ramabai's project of the Sharada Sadan, a residential school for upper caste women, mainly widows, in Maharashtra was the entry point for American women into western India's social reform movement, without missionary patronage. Many American women went to India like Emma Ryder, an independent medical doctor who accompanied Pandita on her journey back to India, many members of the Ramabai association, who were sent to India for organisational assistance and support and a stream of American missionary women who worked with Pandita during the following years.

Ramabai's American sojourn, which was intended to last three months and was later extended to three years, included many travels coast to coast to promote her project for Indian women, many public lectures and, as previously reported, the establishment of the Ramabai Association in 1887 with the purpose to ensure a ten-year financial support for Pandita's secular school for Hindu widows.

4.1 The High Caste Hindu Woman

The most meaningful event which marked Pandita's American period is undoubtedly the publication in the English translation of her most famous work, the book that

made her reach the international reputation of social reformer and of passionate advocate for her fellow Indian girls and women.

In fact, in 1887 Pandita, with the help of Frances Dillard, published *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, which had originally been written in Marathi, and which rapidly sold 10,000 copies within a year. Pandita, inspired by the feminist movement in the USA and willing to describe the typical high-caste Indian woman life, wrote this incisive analysis of women's condition and religious customs, which can also be considered as an unofficial Indian feminist manifesto.

Dr. Rachel Bodley wrote the introduction to the volume, where she described with admiration and respect Ramabai's personality and mission, using an Orientalist tone and presenting her double nature of Hindu woman who embraced the Christian religion and tried to make Indian women aware of their condition and to promote the self-help. Dr. Bodley uses these words to introduce Pandita to the reader:

*Pundita Ramabai, the high-caste Brahman woman, the courageous daughter of the forest, educated, refined, rejoicing in the liberty of the Gospel, and yet by preference retaining a Hindu's care as regards a vegetable diet, and the peculiarities of the dress of Hindu widowhood, sole'mnly consecrated to the work of developing self-help among the women of India*⁷³

Moreover, Bodley suggests that Ramabai considered American women as a source of inspiration and help for herself and that she hoped, with her work, to arise a feeling of compassionate help for Indian women. Dr. Bodley, to refer to Indian women seclusion and exclusion from social life, uses the term *zenana* which designated to the hidden and dark part of the traditional Indian house which was reserved for the women of the household, where nobody could have access. As a matter of fact, she writes that

Ramabai has written in the belief that if the depths of the thralldom in which the dwellers in Indian zenanas are held by cruel superstition and social customs were only fathomed, the light and love in American homes, which

⁷³ Rachel Bodley, *Introduction in The High-Caste Hindu Woman* by Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati, Philadelphia, 1888, p. xxi

*have so comforted her burdened heart, might flow forth in an overwhelming tide to bless all Indian women.*⁷⁴

Dr. Bodley's idea on the kind of participation which Ramabai asked for, which entitled American women of the role of agents of Indian women's liberation, is far from Ramabai's agenda, whose basic idea was the faith in self-help and independence. She would not deny the fact that American women had been a source of inspiration for her, but she clearly did not entitle them to be in charge of Indian women's salvation.

At the end of the introduction Bodley herself reports the last request made by Pandita for the readers of the book, which underlines the crucial divergence in the perception of her program, as the Indian reformer asks her American host to

*Tell them [American readers] to help me educate the high-caste child-widows; for I solemnly believe that this hated and despised class of women, educated and enlightened, are, by God's grace, to redeem India.*⁷⁵

The work is divided into 7 chapters which try to follow the various stages of a woman's life, describing and presenting the general treatment which was reserved to the female sex by Indian society and religion.

The chapters are divided as follows:

- *Chapter I, Prefatory Remarks*
- *Chapter II, Childhood*
- *Chapter III, Married Life*
- *Chapter IV, Woman's place in Religion and Society*
- *Chapter V, Widowhood*
- *Chapter VI, How the conditions of Women tells upon Society*
- *Chapter VII, The Appeal*

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. vii-viii

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. xxiv

4.1.1 Chapter I, Prefatory Remarks

To the religious aspect of the Hindu nation is dedicated the first chapter, which presents a deep and articulated analysis of the religious and social customs of India since, according to the author, they are essential elements to have a broad comprehension of Indian society, especially as regards the caste system.

Ramabai makes a brief excursus of the main points which connoted the Hindu creed among which the belief in the immortality of the soul and the fact that man is awarded or punished according to his deeds and actions and he is born many times, as many as the consequences of his actions. The Brahmans represent the first caste and they have to be careful not to transgress the law with imprudent actions otherwise they will be condemned to the degradation of perpetual births and deaths. These main ideas together with the caste beliefs represent the main articles of the Hindu doctrine. Ramabai then makes a digression on social customs, affirming that the daily life and the habits of Indian people are immensely influenced by religion and explaining that when a custom is old enough to be considered “the way of the ancients”, it becomes religion and it is carefully observed.

She then explains the complex concept of caste, which originated by the economical division of labour: the Aryan Hindu, the most intelligent and talented section of the population, became the governing body of the society and divided it into sections, each of them had to carry out its duties for the welfare of the nation. At the top of the social structure there is the Brahman caste, made up of the priesthood, the spiritual governors and the head of society; then follows the Kshatriya or warrior caste who were vigorous people whose task was to defend the country and to help the priesthood to administer the justice.

At the third step of the social ladder there is the Vaisya or trader caste, composed by businessmen, tradesmen and artisans and the fourth and last caste was the servile class, the Shudra caste which comprehended all those members of society who were not included in the other three castes. The assignation to a caste was originally determined not by their birth, but by one’s personal merit and personal abilities; this principle of assignation was later completely modified when caste became an article

of the Hindu faith, making law overruled by custom which determined the assignation of caste by faith and the impossibility to perform intermarriages, which bring about serious consequences, making the offenders outcasts.

The aforementioned four castes are divided into high and low clans and the intermarriage even between different clans belonging to the same caste would determine the loss of family honour, of caste privileges and even of the relationships with friends and relatives. Any transgression of the caste rules is severely punished with excommunication and those who marry a member of a different caste or who decide to change faith are without redemption.

Pandita affirms that nowadays caste has become the first article of Hindu religion all over India and even if wisemen like Buddha, Nanak, Chaitanya and others rebelled against this tyrannical custom, promoting the principle of social equality for all men, they could not overcome the powerful influence of the caste system.

The final part of this first chapter exposes, with a scholarly precision, the Hindu holy texts called the Vedas, which for the Hindu represent the eternal, self-existing Word of God, revealed by him to different sages. They are more than 25 books of sacred law on which the main customs and religious institutions of the Hindus are based. One of the most important books is the Code of Manu which, with other lawgivers, agree on the subject of women. As Pandita recounts in her chapter, according to this sacred law a woman's life is divided into three parts: childhood, youth or married life and widowhood or old age.⁷⁶

4.1.2 Chapter II, Childhood

The second chapter, titled 'Childhood' explains the American reader the undeniable superiority of male children over female ones as, according to Manu, through the birth of a son a father obtains immortality and a girl is considered to be the property of somebody else and she is supposed not to be of any use to her old parents. Moreover, Manu suggested that if a wife only produces daughters and no son, the husband can replace her with another wife during the eleventh year of marriage. This

⁷⁶ Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, pp. 1-11

comprehensibly causes a great pressure on the mothers, who live the pregnancy and the birth of their babies with apprehension and fear as she would incur into her husband and relatives' disdain.

Ramabai then reports, adopting a somewhat light vein, some anecdotes about the girls' conditions inside the families, their almost complete lack of education and their duties inside the household.

Having little or no education, except a few prayers and popular songs to commit to memory, the little girls are mostly left to themselves, and they, play in whatever manner they please. When about six or seven years of age they usually begin to help their mothers in household work, or in taking care of the younger children.⁷⁷

She then identifies in the marriage the main cause of the contempt shown to Hindu girls as marriage is the most expensive of all Hindu ceremonies and it requires the father to invest a huge amount of money in the expenses for the daughter's dowry and the wedding ceremony. Ramabai says that if in a family there are more than two daughters, the father's ruin will be inevitable as not many fathers could afford this expense.

The saddest account made by Ramabai in this chapter dedicated to Indian girls' childhood is the introduction of the *inhuman and irreligious custom of female infanticide* into Hindu society, the very first act of discrimination girls were subjected to, soon after their birth. She was aware of this infamous practice from her travels to Rajasthan, where the social groups of the Rajputs, belonging to the Kshastriyas caste (the warrior caste), introduced it into their society due to their impossibility, because of religious rules, to economically support too many wives and daughters. Pandita explains that *this cruel act was performed by the fathers themselves, or even by mothers, at the command of the husband whom they are bound to obey in all things.*⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 21

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 25

She also reports the joyous and happy reactions which take place when a boy is born in contrast with the cold welcome reserved to a girl's birth as *the father coolly announces that "nothing" has been born into his family, by which expression it is understood that the child is a girl, and that she is very likely to be nothing in this world, and the friends go home grave and quiet.*⁷⁹

Infanticide becomes then an easy solution, both from the practical and the moral point of view as it was encouraged by the society itself and could be easily performed with the use of a small pill of opium or by a technique called '*putting nail to the throat*', which consisted in a skillful pressure on the neck of the baby girl. Moreover, the Indian reformer writes down other methods used to get rid of baby girls among which the sudden kidnappings by mysterious thieves and the insatiable hunger of wild animals, who apparently preferred to be satiated only with the soft flesh of female infants. To corroborate her statements, Pandita also reports the data of the 1870 Census and the inefficiency of the British Government to acknowledge the situation.

*There are several other nameless methods that may be employed in sacrificing the innocents upon the unholy altar of the caste and clan system. Then there are not a few child-thieves who generally steal girls; even the wild animals are so intelligent and of such refined taste that they mock at British law, and almost always steal girls to satisfy their hunger. [...] The Census of 1870 revealed the curious fact that three hundred children were stolen in one year by wolves from within the city of Umritzar, all the children being girls, and this under the very nose of the English government.*⁸⁰

Despite being prohibited by law, girls' suppression had become a commonly performed practice and the Census returns of 1880 showed that the Indian female population was 5 million lower than the male population. Among the causes of this dramatic result were the female infanticide, but also the lacking treatment of women's diseases and the lack of proper hygienic care and medical assistance for them, especially during pregnancy and childbirth.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 25

⁸⁰ Ibidem, p. 26-27

Through this work Ramabai was able to internationalize Indian women's problems and her thoughts and arguments were shared by her women contemporaries, like the Maharashtrian writer Kashibai Kanitkar who underlined how the undesirability of daughters was prevalent in all strata of society, even in her own family as *Kashibai own father, along with two Brahmins under the family's patronage, raved and ranted at the news of a girl born into any family of their acquaintance.*⁸¹ The Indian writes also adds that the girls constantly live an inferiority complex, which is interiorized as they are never perceived with favour and joy, they are never a source of happiness for their families because of the great expense they have to face in order to marry them.

4.1.3 Chapter III, Married Life

The third chapter of HCHW deals with 'Married Life' and in particular with the early marriage system and its consequences for girls' physical and mental health; the social and religious implications of Indian wives are then described in the following chapter, titled 'Woman's place in religion and society', including the custom of seclusion of women in India, her position of subalternity to the male figures of her family and the religious norms a woman has to follow in order to respect her husband and been obedient to his will.

*It is not easy to determine when the childhood of a Hindu girl ends and the married life begins.*⁸²

This is the incipit of Ramabai's dissertation about child marriages which, according to Manu, could be performed between the age of eight and twelve for a high-caste girl and the popular belief was that a woman could not attain salvation unless she was formally married. For this reason, parents are urged to set their daughters' marriage as early as possible because their compensation in heaven will be directly proportionate to how soon they marry off their daughters.

⁸¹ Meera Kosambi, *Feminist vision or 'Treason against Men?'*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, p.11

⁸² Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 29

Despite the presence of this rule in Indian society, there have always been some exceptions and Pandita mentions, among the eight different kinds of marriages described in the Sacred Laws, the presence of a mutual agreement of love and loyalty, without even the need of the presence of a witness to legalize the promise. This possibility of union demonstrates how, in ancient times, marriage was not considered a religious institution by Hindus and that the same freedom to choose the right partner was granted both to men and women. In addition, women were able to make the first move without being recriminated and shamed, something which would be unthinkable in both Europe and America in Pandita's present times. The practice of choosing the husband, as Ramabai reports, was known by the term *Svayamvara* (or Swayamvara)⁸³ and it was in use until the 11th century A.D, even if mainly among the Kshatriyas (the military and ruling class).

The author then underlines how decisive was the role played by the Mahomedans invasion in spreading the vile practice of child marriage in India, denouncing the fact that in the present moment, in Brahmin society, the age group of the girls involved in this practice ranges from 5 to 11 years old. The future husband is traditionally chosen for the girls by their parents or their guardians but, in the northern part of India, parents ask the family barber to carry out this task, as too shameful and howling for the parents to go out looking for a husband for their daughters. Once again, Pandita points out that although the sacred law of Manu defines the minimum marriage age for men at 24, popular custom largely ignores the law and boys as young as 10 and 12 are made to marry girls of 7-8 years of age, as it would be a shame for the family if the son was not married by the age of 20-25.⁸⁴

Moreover, the writer reports that it is not uncommon for some fathers to give their daughters in marriage to perfect strangers, without carrying out any type of investigation into the suitors, but simply relying on their claims, on the caste and clan they belong to and on their place of residence, as once they have secured their own salvation through their daughters' marriage they do not really care too much about the girls' fate.

⁸³ For further information about this ancient practice see Candrabalī Tripāṭhī, Chandra Mauli Mani, *The Evolution of Ideals of Womenhood in Indian Society*, Gyan Books, 2005, pp. 111-114

⁸⁴ Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 31-32

Traditionally, as Pandita describes in this chapter of her book, the Hindu wedding was divided into three different moments and the first ceremony, during which the parents formally handed over their daughter to the groom, was a religious ceremony that established the union between the two spouses, as the priests officiating it, recited the sacred Vedic texts and pronounced them husband and wife in front of their families and friends.

According to the different traditions of the various Indian Provinces and territories, after this first ceremony the child-bride was either left to live with her natal family and, once reached puberty, a second ceremony would take place confirming both socially and religiously the union and the girl was sent to her husband's family or she would be directly taken home by her new husband and handed over to her mother-in-law.

In the marital household the girl was under the control and supervision of her mother-in-law, who employed her in all kinds of domestic chores and who, in many cases, had a strict and abusive behaviour towards the young wife. With marriage the girl becomes not only her husband's property, but also his family's, becoming an invisible and impersonal being.

Even the structure of the typical Indian house reflected the clear separation between men and women, as it was divided into two sections, an outer court, illuminated and visible also from the outside, which was dedicated to the men of the family, and an inner court, without windows and on the back of the house, which hosted the women. It was extremely common for the inexperienced young bride to be badly mistreated by the husband's family and, as Ramabai tells, one of the priorities, for the husband's family, once she had entered the marital home, was to *break the young girl's spirits*.

⁸⁵ Among the various rules the child bride was made to follow, she was forbidden to speak and laugh out loud, she could not speak to her father-in-law, brothers-in-law and any other male relatives at any time, unless asked to do so. In the northern regions, where the practice of women to wear the veil was in use, the young bride was forced to cover her face with a veil or go to another room if she was in the presence of a male member, while in the south of India, where there was no

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 45

obligation to wear a veil for women, they were asked to stand up to show respect in front of the male family and husbands as long as they were in their presence.

At the conclusion of this third chapter, Ramabai informs her readers that, despite these terrible descriptions of Indian married life, there are also numerous happy married couples, in which mutual love reigns and, as Ramabai sarcastically points out, the only thing the young wife can complain about is the lack of freedom of thought and action but, since she has never known and experienced it is not a great deal for her. The typical family life reflects this separation between the two spouses as the husband usually spends the evenings and his free time in the company of his male friends, in his part of the house or outside. Due to the traditional notion of false modesty, the father is reluctant to show affection to his children and speak to them when in presence of the elders. Meal times are also lived separately by the spouses, as the husband and the men of the house eat their meals first and, only once they have finished, the women of the household can eat, the wife feeding on what her husband has left on his plate.

4.1.4 Chapter IV, Woman's place in Religion and Society

In chapter 4, which Pandita titled *Woman's place in Religion and Society*, the author tries to give a brief analysis of women's role in Hindu religion and society, according to the sacred books of Manu. She starts quoting some commandments of the sacred books of Hindu religion that underline women's innate position of inferiority, with the exception of the role of the mother, a figure that in India, as Pandita says, is honoured more than in any other country. The woman is therefore worthy of recognition solely for the fact of having generated a son. However, this ephemeral glory and honour they are granted are quickly replaced by an infinite series of harassment and restrictions. Being women dangerous, false, and impure, as described by Manu, they are subjected to the common practice of seclusion, as *all male*

relatives are commanded by the law to deprive the women of the household of all their freedom. ⁸⁶

Pandita points out that she never happened to read any sacred book of Sanskrit literature without stumbling upon this feeling of hatred and contempt for women and that Manu can certainly be counted in the large group of those who have done everything to make the woman be most hateful to everyone. Just as in sacred literature, even in secular literature neither laudatory descriptions nor respectful comments about women are to be found and even if, as Pandita says, *they contain here and there a kind word about them, but such words seem to me a heartless mockery, after having charged them, as a class, with crime and evil deeds.* ⁸⁷

A series of cruel proverbs, which are parts of the traditional and popular literature are then listed by Pandita so that her audience could grasp how common and socially accepted cruelty against women was.

Q What is cruel?

A. The heart of a viper.

Q. What is more cruel than that?

A. The heart of a woman.

Q. What is the cruelest of all?

A. The heart of a sonless, penniless widow. ⁸⁸

Pandita then starts to explain the so called ‘woman religion’ as, according to Hindu law religion is said to have two different natures, the masculine and the feminine and the latter can be easily summarized in a few basic prescriptions, as the woman is required to

To look upon her husband as a god, to hope for salvation only through him, to be obedient to him in all things, never to covet independence, never to do anything but that which is approved by law and custom. ⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 54

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 56

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 57

⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 58

Furthermore, in the holy Vedic texts of Manu, the wife is also declared to be a 'marital property' of her husband and she *is classed with "cows, mares, female camels, slave-girls, buffalo-cows, she-goats and ewes"*⁹⁰ and the husband can demand her in the courts of justice and claim his 'marital property' if she is unwilling to submit to him. Considering these degrading and intolerable conditions women had to suffer by unfair laws and precepts in any field of their life, the frequent epidemics that hit the country annually were welcomed by women with relief, because the idea of death was more pleasant than their actual painful life.

Pandita's analysis of the judicial injustices suffered by women does not spare criticisms of the current British Christian Government, under whose rule the woman continues to suffer the same inequalities despite minimal changes having been introduced, as her husband persists in exercising absolute control over the wife. He is even ordered to take his wife to court if his marital rights are not respected and fulfilled.

In order to explain better the status of the Indian woman as "marital property", Ramabai, without making explicit her identity but referring generally to a close relative of hers, tells her audience the sad story of her older sister Krishnabai, who was sued by her husband because she refused to go and live with him. The unfortunate girl, when she was only a child, was married off to a boy and the parents of the young couple had agreed that the boy would have lived with his wife's family so that they could be both educated. But soon after the wedding ceremony had been celebrated, the boy's parents took the boy home with them without respecting the agreement and educating him as a lazy and useless ignorant. On the other hand, the young girl, *through the kindness and advanced views of her father, developed into a bright young woman and well accomplished.*⁹¹ Thirteen years after the wedding celebration, the young man came to claim the bride, as the appropriate age for cohabitation had come, but her parents refused to hand over their precious and educated daughter to him as he was unable to properly provide for his wife and support her because of his laziness. The young wife as well, who did not know the

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 60

⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 63

husband and had not developed any feelings of love and respect for him due to their long separation, was not flattered by the idea of going to live with him.

The story had further developments and Ramabai reports that some people, belonging to the more orthodox part of the community and who condemned the position of the young bride's family despite the little value and seriousness shown by the husband, decided to collect funds to help the man bring the young bride and her family to court.. The case was brought before the British Court of Justice and, after carefully examining it, the judge gave reason to the man, not to interfere with the traditions and customs of Hindu law, according to the non-interference treaties stipulated between the colonial government and the inhabitants Indians. according to the non-interference treaties stipulated between the colonial government and the inhabitants Indians. The young woman was then forced to go with her husband but, citing Pandita's words, *fortunately she was soon released from this sorrowful world by cholera.*⁹²

As reported in Chapter 1 of this work, the tragic loss experienced by Pandita's father, for which he would always feel responsible, convinced him to dismiss the practice of child marriage for his youngest daughter, thus allowing Pandita to complete her education in her family environment.

The Rakhmabai case

The most interesting section of this chapter is the one that Ramabai dedicated to the analysis and brief description of the legal case of Rakhmabai⁹³, a fact which had a profound impact on Hindu society of the time and which is considered the best-known court case in 19th – century India and, according to several historians, a precursor of the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which dealt with the raise of the age of consent to sexual intercourse for Indian girls from 10 to 12.

As Pandita underlines, the relevant element in this case was the fact that, for the first time, a well-educated young woman had defended herself and strongly opposed to

⁹² Ibidem, p. 64

⁹³ Also written as Rakhmabai

the obligation to go to live with her husband as the marriage had been concluded without her consent.

The judicial case had started in March 1884 when Dadaji Bhikaji, Rukhmabai's husband, turned to the Bombay court to have his conjugal rights recognized and to oblige his wife to cohabitation. The young girl belonged to a high-caste influential family and she was living with her mother, who had remarried after the death of the first husband when she was only 17, and her stepfather, Dr Sakharam Arjun, a renowned physician with liberal views and active in the social field of Bombay. He had brought up the young girl under his loving care, giving her a proper education, a good cultural environment and allowing her to have a social life. Rukhmabai could even attend the *American Mission House*, where she met the Scottish feminist Edith Pechey-Phipson, who was in India to practice her medical profession and their relationship resulted to be extremely valuable for the young Hindu woman. As a matter of fact, thanks to the help and patronage of the British doctor and of a group of English feminists in London Rukhmabai, after the end of the case, was invited to go to study medicine in London at the London School of Medicine for Women. She graduated there as a doctor in 1893 and then came back to her native India where she practiced with success and recognition the medical profession until she retired.

When she was 11, Rukhmabai was married to 19-year-old Dadaji Bhikaji, a poor cousin of her stepfather, but her adoptive father kept the young girl in his house to take care of her education. As reported in prof. Sudhir Chandra's book, *Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights*⁹⁴, whose first chapter is dedicated to this case, the two parts had made an agreement that the young man would have stayed with his young wife's family so that he could have received a proper education and made him *a good man*⁹⁵, even if it would have been a deviation from the traditional patriarchal norm.

The young man, however, as reported by the scholar, broke the agreement, and left the school and home of Rukhmabai's family to go and live with his maternal uncle who had a dubious moral conduct and a harmful and negative influence on his nephew. Among the reasons for this abandonment was the denial, by Rukhmabai's

⁹⁴ Sudhir Chandra, *Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2 ed.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 27

stepfather who had reformist views, of consuming the marriage, despite the fact that the girl had reached puberty a few months after the wedding, moreover Dadaji's lack of interest in studying and his aversion to school and the death of his mother, who had shared the proposal of this particular marriage arrangement to guarantee her child, who lacked brilliant talents, the prospective of a secure future.⁹⁶

Unlike her husband, the young woman during these years cultivated her education and personal growth and, thanks to her stepfather's acquaintances, she came into contact with the reformist sphere, influences that will contribute to forming her character and personality. As for the fundamental role played by education in her life and her future, Rukhmabai would later write in one of her famous letters to the *Times of India*

I am one of those unfortunate Hindu women whose hard lot it is to suffer the unnameable miseries entailed by the custom of early marriage. This wicked practice has destroyed the happiness of my life. It comes between me and the thing which I prize above all others – study and mental cultivation. Without the least fault of mine I am doomed to seclusion; every aspiration of mine to rise above my ignorant sisters is looked down upon with suspicion and is interpreted in the most uncharitable manner.⁹⁷

In this brief paragraph, the young woman lets herself go to a moment of personal confession, bringing to light one of the many evils caused by child marriage, the exclusion from education, which prevents girls from planning to have a better future, different from the sad life reserved to an Indian wife. Besides determining the loss of freedom in cultivating one's education and future life, child marriage also determined *the loss of mental and physical freedom for the girl [...] when [she] begins the reproductive cycle of childbirths, most often when she is fourteen.*⁹⁸

In March 1884, Dadaji sent Rukhmabai's stepfather a letter from his solicitors to ask for his wife to go to live with him, requiring the restitution of conjugal rights, but

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 27-28

⁹⁷ *Times of India*, 26 June 1885 in Sudhir Chandra, *Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2 ed., p. 29

⁹⁸ Uma Chakravati, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013, p. 254-255

Rakhmabai refused on the grounds that having the marriage been celebrated when she was a child without her consent, was not to be considered legally valid. Consequently the case was brought to the court and it was the first time that an Indian woman refused the idea of non-consensual marriage, one of the strongest and untouchable aspect of traditional Hindu custom; her daring and fierce attitude was definitely the result of her education, which gave her self-consciousness and the power to stand for her rights.

In 1885 the first-instance sentence was issued in favour of Rakhmabai, denying her husband's marital rights and this raised the biggest debate on female sexuality in India. Upon hearing the court's decision, the conservative party all over the country rose and started to collect money needed for the appeal, threatening the British Government with public disapproval if it had failed to make the Hindu law been applied, forcing the woman to cohabit with her legitimate husband. As scholar Uma Chakravarti underlines, the conservative G.B. Tilak's reaction to this first sentence issued by the court was one of deep scorn as he considered the Rakhmabai case to be in contravention to the traditional Shastras and he took advantage of this national legal controversy *to bolster his argument that education corrupted women*⁹⁹, as one of the main aspects which prevented the young woman to go to live with her husband was his illiteracy and poor education. As Radha Kumar cites in her book *The History of Doing*, B. G. Tilak, to endorse his position against women's education used a strong image where the threat represented by women's access to education is associated with the castration of Hindu religion as he *wrote that the women's education movement was the route 'for an attack on our ancient religion under the cover of Rakhmabai with the intention of castrating our eternal religion.*¹⁰⁰ For this reason, Tilak supported the husband's position, demanding the case to be judged not according the British Common Law, but according to the Hindu Dharmashastra standards and not as a civil law case, but rather as a criminal offense. This famous court case turned out to be the ideal opportunity for conservative nationalists, such as Tilak, to claim the supremacy of the ancient religion and reiterate the importance of

⁹⁹ Uma Chakravarti, *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past*, pp. 27-87 in Sangari Kumkum, Vaid Sudesh, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Rutgers University Press, 1990, p. 74

¹⁰⁰ Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing, An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's and Feminism in India 1800-1990*, Zubaan, 1997, p. 64

remaining faithful to tradition to build a national identity that could oppose the British rule.

In 1886 the court overturned the previous judgment and imposed Rakhmabai the cohabitation with her husband, decision that she steadfastly refused.

In this chapter, Ramabai inserts the letter that on 18th March 1887 the young Rakhmabai sent her to show all her indignation for the colonial rule, which had preferred to guard and preserve the Hindu tradition, instead of moving towards the recognition of gender equality:

"The learned and civilized judges of the full bench are determined to enforce, in this enlightened age, the inhuman laws enacted in barbaric times, four thousand years ago. They have not only commanded me to go to live with the man, but also have obliged me to pay the costs of the dispute. Just think of this extraordinary decision I Am we not living under the impartial British government, which boasts of giving equal justice to all, and are we not ruled by the Queen-Empress Victoria, herself a woman? My dear friend, I shall have been cast into the State prison when this letter reaches you; this is because I do not, and cannot obey the order of Mr. Justice Farran. "There is no hope for women in India, whether they be under Hindu rule or British rule ; some are of the opinion that my case so cruelly decided, may bring about a better condition for woman by turning public opinion in her favor, but I fear it will be otherwise. The hard-hearted mothers-in-law will now be greatly strengthened, and will induce their sons, who have for some reason or other, been slow to enforce the conjugal rights to sue their wives in the British Courts, since they are now fully assured that under no circumstances can the British government act adversely to the Hindu law." ¹⁰¹

Ramabai wisely comments saying that the conclusion of the case was inevitable, as the English Government was simply complying the agreement made with the Indian male population. Moreover, she wants to emphasize the courage of a young woman like Rukhmabai who, all alone, raised her single voice to denounce the perpetuated oppression experienced by her and by millions of other women in India. In an unequal struggle, a clash between David and Goliath, Rukhmabai accused the great

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 66-7

powers of controlling and inflicting suffering on Indian women: the rigorous Hindu Law, British rule, Hindus gods and the entire male gender

*Taught by the experience of the past, we are not at all surprised at this decision of the Bombay court. Our only wonder is that a defenseless woman like Rakhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty-nine million men and the three hundred and thirty million gods of the Hindus, all these having conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English government for, not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India.*¹⁰²

The case ended with Dadaji's renunciation of the conjugal rights, while Rakhmabai went on pursuing a career in the field of medicine in order to help Indian women, becoming an example for Indian women, showing them the way which Ramabai herself advocated to set women free and encourage them to reveal their sufferings.¹⁰³

This legal case and Ramabai's volume marked an important starting point in exposing the issue of early marriages in India to an international audience, encouraging in this way the activity of the women's movement for this cause.

4.1.5 Chapter V, Widowhood

The practice of enforced widowhood is the main topic analysed by Ramabai in the fifth chapter of her book and the main focus of her book, where she describes to her audience, *the worst and most dreaded period in the life of a high-caste woman's life*¹⁰⁴.

The two previous parts about childhood and married life, which correspond to the first two stages of a Hindu woman's life according to the division made by the

¹⁰² Ibidem, p. 67

¹⁰³ For further studies on the Rukhmabai case see Uma Chakravati, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013 pp. 254-260 and Antoinette Burton, *From the Child Bride to "Hindoo Lady": Rukhmabai and the Debate on Sexual Respectability in Imperial Britain*, in "The American Historical Review", 103, 4, 1998, pp. 1119-1147

¹⁰⁴ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 69

‘Sacred Laws’, have prepared the reader for the climax of pain and oppression to be found in this chapter. Prof. Chakravarti recognizes Pandita’s uniqueness and incredible value in the way in which the reformer exposes and denounces the patriarchal ideologies from which the evil practices towards widows have taken origin. This kind of analysis was possible thanks to her knowledge of Sanskrit, which was very rare for a woman in those times, that gave her access to study the sacred texts, and to her particular feminine sensibility and observation skills, trained by her numerous travels.¹⁰⁵

As the author states, the general concept of widowhood in India is closely related to the idea that it is the manifestation of gods’ punishment inflicted on the woman for the crimes she had committed in one of her previous existences on earth. The extent of the punishment is related to the seriousness of the crime supposedly committed in a previous life by the woman and among the various crimes committed against the husband, Ramabai lists disobedience and disloyalty to the husband and his murder.

Pandita then informs her readers about the different categories of widows, according to the age they enter widowhood and them being mothers or not because these two factors strongly determine the way in which they are made to experience widowhood. As a matter of fact, she points out that if a widow is a mother of sons she will not suffer much abuse and social hostility because she bore superior beings and for this she occupies the highest rank of the classification of widows.

In the second place of the ranking there are those women who became widows in their old age, who were considered virtuous women for being able to resist the numerous temptations and persecutions of daily life; these merits were recognized and appreciated by Indian society, who honoured and respected them also for their senior age.

Then there are the widows who only have daughters, to whom is paid general indifference but often, especially if the daughters are still to be given in marriage after their father’s death, they are treated very badly.

¹⁰⁵ Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013 p. 282

But the categories of widows with the most unfortunate and unhappy fate, which the Hindu community loathed and abused the most are the child-widow and the young childless widow, who are considered the worst criminals on whom the judgment of the gods has fallen.

As for the treatment of widows in the ancient times, Pandita informs her readers that before the Manu code was written and the priests had given their misinterpretation of the Vedic text concerning the condition of widowhood, a custom of remarriage was in use. This ancient custom invented by the ancient sages and used among the Hindu Aryans, was known as *niyoga* or ‘appointments’ and, as Ramabai reports, it was common also among the Jews in order to *raise up seed for the deceased husband*.¹⁰⁶ As a matter of fact, if the husband died without male offspring, being then condemned to perpetual exclusion from immortality, his widow could cohabit with her late husband's brother, cousin or close relative in order to be able to father a male child. In fact, the absence of a son made it impossible for the late husband to enter heaven as, according to the Vedas, only those men who had a son were granted immortality, while it was denied to those who had not generated male heirs.

Pandita describes in this way the process, underlining the fact that *niyoga* was firmly part of a patriarchal structure, in that it simply responded to the need to guarantee immortality to a deceased husband by means of a son; in no way was it a practice that responded to the needs of young widows nor could it be considered a possibility of new life and remarriage for young women.

The husband's brother, cousin or other kinsman successively was "appointed" and duly authorized to raise up offspring to the dead. The desired issue having been obtained any intercourse between the appointed persons was thenceforth considered illegal and sinful.

*The woman still remained the widow of her deceased husband, and her children by the appointment were considered his heirs.*¹⁰⁷

Pandita then goes on to list those that were prescribed as widows’ duties in the Manu code who had to lead a life of hardships, self-control, and chastity, feeding herself

¹⁰⁶ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 71

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 71-72

only with pure flowers, roots, and fruit, repressing any kind of physical and sentimental need.

The duties of a widow are thus described in the code of Manu:

" At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died"

*" Until death let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled, and chaste, and strive to fulfil that most excellent duty which is prescribed for wives who have one husband only. * 7 Manu v, 157, 158."*

*. . . . Nor is a second husband anywhere prescribed for virtuous women. * * Manu v., 162. "*

A. virtuous wife who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches heaven, . . ." Manu v., 16a

*" In reward of such conduct, a female who controls her thoughts, speech, and actions, gains in this life highest renown, and in the next world a place near her husband." * Manu v., 166.*

In stark contrast to the terrible restrictions imposed by widowhood on Hindu women by the Sacred texts, Ramabai reports the rules for the widower, to whom no prohibition or mortification was imposed. In fact, once he has honoured his wife's death with the sacred flames of the funeral pyre, he was allowed to remarry as many times as he wanted and continued to live in his home.

Among the terrible sufferings imposed on the young widow by custom and religion, the cruellest one was definitely the sadly known practice of the self-immolation of widows on their husband's pyre, called *Suttee* which was invented by the priesthood who saw this act as *sublimely meritorious*.¹⁰⁸ Ramabai argues that the reasons for the introduction of this terrible custom are difficult to detect as it was not mentioned nor authorized neither in the Manu code nor in the Vedas, but it can be considered another example of the patriarchal ideology which was employed to legitimise some practices and create the idea of consent to such a horrible act by widows. In fact, Pandita reports that they needed to find a text which gave the needed authority to

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p.74

justify such a horrid rite and which would help widows overcome their fears. They claimed they had found a text in the ancient Rig-Veda, which they reported with this translation:

*"Om! let these women, not to be widowed, good wives, adorned with collyrium, holding clarified butter, consign themselves to the fire! Immortal, not childless, not husbandless, well adorned with gems, let them pass into the fire whose original element is water."*¹⁰⁹

The description of a beautiful heaven and the nobility of this sublime act of self-sacrifice convinced the poor widow of the righteousness of this sacrifice and of the countless benefits, including salvation, that this action, however extreme and painful, could bring to her, her late husband and her family up to the seventh generation. On the other hand, she was also well aware of the lifelong hardships and miseries she would be subjected to because of her condition of widow. The perspective of reaching peace and salvation in heaven, as Pandita pinpoints, was far desirable than the hell she was made to live on earth so, in order to please the gods and her husband, committed herself to the extreme rite.

Pandita offers her reader the description of the terrible rite of Suttee, made by the poet and journalist Sir Edwin Arnold:

"The widow bathed, put on new and bright garments, and, holding Kusha grass in her left hand, sipped water from her right palm, scattered some Tila grains, and then, looking eastward, quietly said, ' Om! on this day I, such and such a one, of such a family, die in the fire, that I may meet Arundhati, and reside in Svarga; that the years of my sojourn there may be as many as the hairs upon my husband, many scores multiplied; that I may enjoy with him the facilities of heaven, and bless my maternal and paternal ancestors, and those of my lord's line; that praised by Apsarasas, I may go far through the fourteen regions of Indra; that pardon may be given to my lord's sins whether he have ever killed a Brahman, broken the laws of gratitude and truth, or slain his friend. Now I do ascend this funeral pile of my husband, and I call upon you, guardians of the eight regions of the world, of sun, moon, air, of the fire, the ether, the earth and the water, and my own soul. Yama, King of

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 74

Death, and you, Day, Night and Twilight, witness that I die for my beloved, by his side upon his funeral pile.' Is it wonderful that the passage of the Sati to her couch of flame was like a public festival, that the sick and sorrowful prayed her to touch them with her little, fearless, conquering hand, that criminals were let loose if she looked upon them, that the horse which carried her was never used again for earthly service?" (E. Arnold.)¹¹⁰

As previously said, this act was supposed to be a voluntary one and many women performed it because they were driven by the love they had for their husbands, some because they hoped to finally find their everlasting happiness afterlife, some to gain the social recognition from their community which erected celebratory tombstones or statues to remember their deed but also from their families, who would write their names in the list of the family gods, many of them chose suttee to avoid falling into temptation, sin and enduring a miserable life as a widow.

Moreover it is reported that in the region of Bengal, where this custom was very common, some girls who had declared the intention to die but who tried to escape from the pyre because of the fear, were obliged to respect their solemn oath and priests and other men force them to comply their action.

This wicked practice was denounced, as Pandita reports, even by Christian missionaries in India who signed a petition to ask the British government to abolish this criminal act but the government could not interfere in the management and regulation of Indian social and religious customs because it would have damaged the political relationships between the British rule and Indian population.

The rite was finally abolished within the British domains by a law of 1829 enacted by Lord William Bentick during his tenure of Governor-general of India as it had been demonstrated, by the Indian religious, social, and educational reformer Raja Ram Mohum Roy, the absence of such a practice in the Veda, as the Brahmin priests had claimed. Those who had been found guilty of this crime would have been sentenced to death penalty and Pandita informs that despite having been enacted in 1829, the law failed to enter the Orthodox Hindu community until 1844.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 76

Ramabai then demonstrates the voluntary mistranslation by the priests of the ancient verses of the Rig-Vedas in which they claimed to have found the indications for the immolation of the widows on the husband's funeral pyre, a thesis that had been formulated by his friend Max Muller who, in his famous work *Chips from a German Workshop* had thoroughly studied and analysed this topic, expressing his theory as follows:

Now, this is, perhaps, the most flagrant instance of what can be done by an unscrupulous priesthood. Here have thousands and thousands of lives been sacrificed, and a fanatical rebellion been threatened on the authority of a passage which was mangled, mistranslated, and misapplied. If anybody had been able, at the time, to verify this verse of the Rig-Veda, the Brahmins might have been beaten with their own weapons; nay, their spiritual prestige might have been considerably shaken. The Rig-Veda, which now hardly one Brahman out of a hundred is able to read, so far from enforcing the burning of widows, shows clearly that this custom was not sanctioned during the earliest period of Indian history.¹¹¹

Despite Suttee rite having been banned in the whole country, Ramabai explains that the miserable existence of the young widows did not improved the slightest as their living conditions were appalling and their life was made unbearable in every possible way, mortifying both her physical appearance and her soul, As a matter of fact, the young woman is seen as a threat and a source of possible dishonour by her own family because of her beauty and youth that could make her attractive for men. She is then stripped of her femininity, becoming a mere object to despise and marginalisation, an outcast or, as Rukhmabai had written in her second letter to *The Times of India* under the pseudonym of *Hindoo Lady*, she becomes *a leper of society, doomed to pass her life in seclusion, [...] unbeloved of God and despised of man – a social pariah and domestic drudge.*¹¹² Her vanity and sexuality are cruelly repressed in every possible way, she must have her head tonsured every fortnight, she is banned from wearing any kind of jewellery, she is required to have only one meal a

¹¹¹ Friedrich Max Mueller, *Chips from a German Workshop Volume 2*, New York, C. Scribner's sons, 1872, pp.34-35

¹¹² *The Times of India*, 19 September 1885

day and fast regularly, she can only wear a rough white, red or brown dress and she is excluded from any party and family gatherings.

Traditionally the widow is believed to bring back luck and people call her by the word *rand*, the same word used to refer to a dancer and a prostitute.¹¹³ The Hindu widow, doomed with such a cruel and hopeless fate, without any possibility of accessing any kind of education and employment, with no freedom and economic means, has only two possibilities left if she wants to escape her life, either suicide or prostitution.

As Dr. Chakravarti points out, these [...] *are not real choices, because they are forced upon what may appear to be her circumstances but are actually a consequence of 'cruel custom'*.¹¹⁴

An interesting insight on the issue of Indian child widows is offered by the film *Water* (2005) directed by the Indo-Canadian film director and screenwriter Deepa Metha who, through the story of 8-year-old Chuya, a girl widow living in an ashram in Varanasi in 1938, presents the theme of Indian widowhood and the injustices brought about by religious misinterpretations, which have condemned too many women's lives. The film sheds a light on the oppressive religious and traditional customs which regulated Hindu widows' lives, forcing them to a life of renunciation and deprivation, solitude, and exploitation.¹¹⁵

Ramabai, in her excursus on the condition of high-caste Hindu widows traced in this chapter 5, also reports an excruciating prayer written by a pupil of a British Zenana missionary, one of the few able to read and write, in which she addresses the Lord begging Him to turn his gaze of mercy on their deplorable conditions of widows, asking to stop the injustices inflicted on them daily. The young girl's words must have had a strong impact on Ramabai's American audience and readers who, after reading the desperate and inhuman conditions of so many women, could not but

¹¹³ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 82-85

¹¹⁴ Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013 p. 283

¹¹⁵ Deepa Metha, *Water*, 2005

sympathize with the desperate plea for help of a young Indian widow.¹¹⁶ In addition Pandita,

To further corroborate her report on widowhood in India, she quotes the testimony published on the periodical *Nineteenth Century* in the issue of September 1886 of a Hindu gentleman, Devendra N. Das, as she does not want her readers to think that she has exaggerated, because a woman, in describing her sister-widows' conditions.¹¹⁷

In the final part of her chapter, the Indian reformer turns her attention to the analysis of the proposals made by a group of Indian reformers to solve the issue of widows, who saw in the possibility of remarrying the solution to the problem. Pandita finds the conclusion reached by the reformers reductive and simplistic, as the proposal would benefit only one group of widows, that is, the child widows who, having reached the age of puberty, want to remarry, while it would exclude the condition of many other women.

Furthermore, she underlines how the introduction of a remarriage system for widows would be difficult to be accepted and introduced as a custom within the upper castes of Hindu society due to their strongly rooted popular beliefs, thus creating a discrepancy between the ideation of a proposal and its actual and concrete put into practice. Then follows Ramabai's reproach to those renowned and educated men who swore that if they were ever widowed, they would marry a widow as second wife, but who then lacked the courage to live up to this oath and married young maidens instead. Although in words they were animated by reform principles, the ostracization of family and society was still strong and the persecutions suffered by those who dared to infringe and break the traditional custom were a burden too heavy to bear. As scholar Chakravarti rightly underlines, in her criticism, *Ramabai was objective enough to recognise that men failed to live up to their stated ideals because of the tremendous power of the weapon of excommunication and of emotional blackmail.*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 87-88

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, pp.89-90

¹¹⁸ Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting history: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Zubaan an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2013 p. 284

Pandita concludes her dissertation saying that remarriage, as proposed by some reformers, cannot serve as a solution to relieve widows' miserable condition as it is *not available, nor would it be at all times desirable*.¹¹⁹

4.1.6 Chapter VI, How the condition of women tells upon society

In chapter six of her book, titled “How the condition of women tells upon society”, Pandita explains how the condition of dependence and ignorance of Indian women can be considered an important and major factor for the situation of decline and backwardness of India in those days, and that the and that the oppressive and degrading situation experienced by women also involves the male part of society, which is not excluded from the consequences of this extreme seclusion. In this respect, as Kosambi underlines, *Ramabai stresses the eugenic dimension of the problem [...] by discussing the doctrine of prenatal influence* ¹²⁰, which she had anticipated in her previous work, *Stri Dharma Niti*, explaining how one of the society's priorities has to be the care for mothers' health so that they can breed healthy children. Pandita affirms that the doctrine of pre-natal influence could be explained in an exemplary and satisfactory way in India since the constant state of confinement the young Indian mother is obliged to, the inactivity of both her body and mind, the depression she suffers and the perpetual ignorance she is relegated to since her young age, will severely affect the psychophysical well-being of her offspring.

Seclusion, complete dependence, and absolute ignorance not only as regards literacy but also the most common hygienic laws and childcare of Indian mothers are then the three causes identified by Pandita of the social and political backwardness of her nation.

As a matter of fact, in denouncing this continuous state of subjugation exerted by Hindu law, from which the various generations of Indians have inherited a propensity to dependence, Pandita also finds the explanation of the actual situation of colonial

¹¹⁹ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 93

¹²⁰ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p.130

submission which, among the other reasons, has been also dictated by the indolence of India as a nation and by its tendency to depend upon other powers, like the British Empire, as she writes that

[...] The complete submission of women under the Hindu law has in the lapse of milleniums of years converted them into slavery-loving creatures. They are glad to lean upon any one and be altogether dependent, and thus it has come to pass that their sons as a race, desire to depend upon some other nation and not upon themselves.¹²¹

After having listed and explained to her Western audience the evils inflicted on her fellow Indian sisters, Pandita exposes the three fundamental points she has identified according to which her agenda for Indian women's reform has to be built and put into action, which are *Self-Reliance*, *Education*, and *Native Women Teachers*, who should be trained in Indian schools.

As regards the first point, she describes the state of complete dependence high-caste Indian women live in, which makes them unable to gain any sort of individual self-reliance and she asks her Western sisters to teach them how to gain confidence in their own skills and their value, in order to be able to build their independence.

Then she presents the extensive and worrying percentage of illiterate Indian girls, as stated in the report of the Educational Commission for 1883 and the census returns of 1880-81 which say that of the 99.700.000 women and girls under the British rule, 99.500.000 resulted unable to read and write. The remaining 200.000 cannot be considered as educated as they only attend school for two years, between the age of 7 and 9, before being married off. These figures of women who are equipped with the basic notions of reading and writing, as Ramabai mentions include students from different educational agencies in India, government schools, private schools managed independently by Indian citizens, private societies, and Zenana mission agencies. Despite their number being so limited, with respect to the huge totality of women in India, Pandita underlines its immense value because of the constant attempts to sabotage and fight female education in her native country. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these girls, once they are married are even forbidden to pick up a book

¹²¹ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 98

and a pen as it is a popular belief that if they did so, their husbands would die and she is continually verbally abused and laughed at by her husband's family whenever she shows interest in learning and improve her knowledge.

Pandita passes then to the description of the status of Indian schools, which are not really inviting for children because of the extremely poor education and teaching skills of their teachers resulting in their inability to engage children's attention during the lessons. Moreover, in this situation of seclusion and illiteracy, girls do not even have the possibility of having access to the current news reported by the newspapers and are therefore excluded from the world, unaware of what surrounds them and what happens both at home and abroad. In this vicious circle of ignorance and hopelessness, without any prospects for the future, young women also drag their husbands, thus creating an *ignorant, unpatriotic, selfish and uncultivated* ¹²² population.

In analysing the third and last point of her reforming agenda, regarding the need to train native Indian women to become teachers, she explains that although extremely valuable and important, the contribution of English and American women as Zenana missionaries, is not as effective as it could be because of the problems and obstacles linked to the language and the weather conditions, which make their task very difficult to carry out, furthermore their small number compared to the millions of Indian women who should benefit from education makes their, albeit honourable and appreciated effort, a small drop in the middle of a vast ocean.

She also wisely states that *efforts for the elevation of a nation must come from within and work out ward to be effectual* ¹²³ and that *the one thing needful, therefore, for the general diffusion of education among women in India is a body of persons from among themselves who shall make it their life-work to teach by precept and example their fellow countrywomen.*¹²⁴

Ramabai seems to suggest that the only possible solution to this and other problems of Indian women has to be found in self-help, not in state intervention and, in the last

¹²² Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1888, pp. 102-105

¹²³ Ibidem, p. 106

¹²⁴ Ibidem, p. 106

two chapters of her volume, she presents her agenda and an appeal to American women to fund her project for ten years.

In the analysis of her Hindu society, religious practices and cultural customs, Ramabai inserts her strong anticolonial protest because Indian women are, on the one hand the victims of oppressive Hindu customs and, on the other, they pay the consequences of the British promise of non-interference as far as the Indian religious matters. Thus she underlines the male-dominated perspective used by the colonial rule, despite it being embodied by a female ruler, Queen Victoria, in order to respect the promise made by British men to Indian men, which did not take into consideration the women's issues, towards whom was showed apathy and almost total indifference.¹²⁵

4.1.7 Chapter VII, The Appeal

In the last chapter of her pamphlet, titled *The Appeal*, Ramabai draws the main ideas regarding the creation of residential schools for high-caste Hindu women, in particular of high-caste Hindu widows, whose fate was a lifelong path of sufferings, hardships and a miserable life. In order to give her audience an idea of the number of young widows she reports the 1881 Census data, according to which, at that time there was a total of 20. 930. 626 widows, of all ages and castes and among them, 669.100 widows were under the age of nineteen, making the number of child widows impressively high. She then lists five basic points to take into consideration as the guidelines for the creation of the residential school:

1. These houses are meant to be established for the young and high-caste child widows and there they can be hosted and live without fearing of losing their caste, having the freedom of following and practising their caste rules.
2. In this institution the young widows will be helped to become independent from their families and honourable, so they will be educated to become teachers,

¹²⁵ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p.130

governesses, nurses and house-keeper, or to develop other practical abilities, according to their personal skills.

3. The houses will be administered and supervised by influential Hindu ladies and gentlemen, whose task will be to create a serene and stimulating environment for the young people welcomed here.
4. Together with Indian educators, there will also be well-qualified American women who will help as assistants and teachers, in order to give the young guests, the best of both Eastern and Western culture and civilization.
5. These residential schools will be provided with libraries containing the best books on history, science, art, religions, literature and other subjects in order to be available for the inmates and for all those women, living nearby, who want to read.

Lectureships will be held in the libraries and the lecturers will deal with various topics, taking care of issues such as hygiene, geography, elementary sciences, travel; these lectures will have the main purpose of opening the eyes and ears of the girls who have long remained in the prison of ignorance, making them aware of the world surrounding them.

After describing the structure and functioning of her schools, Ramabai turns to her audience asking to help and financially support her in this project for ten years, while being aware of the hostility that this proposal will find among the high-caste Hindu gentlemen in her motherland, who will ridicule and most likely ignore her. On the other hand, she is also aware of the efforts which a limited number of Hindu people are making in order to reform the religious and social customs of Hindustan and who, she is sure, will definitely encourage her project.

In presenting her project of the residential school for high-caste Hindu women Ramabai, according to M. Kosambi, *makes the fatal mistake of describing her endeavour as a means 'to prepare the way for the spread of the gospel ... in the Indian zenana'*¹²⁶, as this will be one of the main reasons for Pune's social conservatives to sabotage her school for women, putting Ramabai in a difficult

¹²⁶ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 130

position in her home country and attracting the hostilities and criticisms of Indian society, thus remaining in a marginal place to implement a real change from within in Indian society.

Owing to the publicity received by the publication of Pandita's *HCHW*, the Ramabai Association, whose aim was to collect funds for the residential school, was established in Boston in December 1887 as well as a number of "Ramabai circles" started to grow all around the country, implementing in this way Ramabai's supporters. The Association committed itself to financially support the secular, non-sectarian residential school for young widows for a period of ten years, after which it would have had to support and finance itself.

From the founding of the association in 1887 until October 1888, Ramabai held 113 conferences around the United States and Canada and on 28th November 1888, after three incredible and eventful years in the USA, she sailed to India from San Francisco with Dr. Emma Brainard Ryder, who offered her skills as a doctor for the health care of Indian women.

They followed the Pacific route and had planned some intermediate stops before landing to India; in December 1888 they reached Japan where Ramabai held at least eight meetings, during which she presented to her foreign audience the condition of Indian women and her project for the residential school and she was able to collect some more funds to her cause.

She then moved to Canton and Hong Kong where she was engaged in other talks about her project, making a plea to the Indian community living in Hong Kong to help her to free Indian women from their condition of submission and ignorance. When Pandita left for India on 22nd January 1889, the local press expressed sympathy for her cause, praising the efforts of the young woman to rescue the child widows, giving them a hope to lead a different life.

Ramabai's journey home ended in February 1889 when she reached her native shores, after a period of six years during which she had lived in two different continents, Europe and America, and had visited a number of countries by far higher

than any of her male contemporaries, making an international impact with her conferences and speeches. Prof. Kosambi argues that it was probably her experience abroad, her many travels, her being a public figure in an international perspective which gave rise to jealousies from which some of the opposition she faced in her homeland then originated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ramabai's return to Maharashtra and the opening of the *Sharada Sadan*

Less than a month after her arrival in Mumbai, Pandita was able to open her residential school for upper caste women, primarily widows. The “Sharada Sadan” or “Home of Learning” was inaugurated on 11th March 1889, at the presence of many Indian social reformers and British sympathizers and it gained a lot of publicity and recognition in the local newspapers of Mumbai and Pune. This institution was the first one of this kind in India because it was opened for Brahmin women, widows, but also unmarried girls and day scholars, offering them a regular school education but also vocational training like teacher education and nursing. She based her project on the idea that she had previously described in her pamphlet “*Stri Dharma Niti*” and in her later work *HCHW*, about achieving economic self-reliance for women, empowering them to build their self-esteem, discovering and developing their personal skills and abilities, giving them the possibility to plan their future life with new perspectives which the oppressive presence of male control prevented.

The fact that Pandita could count on the support of the local reformers and did not find general ostracism when starting her school were the result of her continuous correspondence and contact with Maharashtrian public leaders during her staying abroad and of her impressive fundraising in the U.S.A. to finance her ambitious project, which would eventually become, as prof. Kosambi says *a paradigm shift in the project of women's emancipation* ¹²⁷. The social reformers appreciated and admired her perduring devotion to the reform of Indian society as well as the fact that

¹²⁷ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 176

her conversion to Anglicanism had not “denationalised” her, an aspect which was considered relieving and not dangerous.

Among the various reviews of the time about the opening of Ramabai’s residential school the one published in the extremely conservative Marathi weekly of Pune the *Kesari* is particularly interesting because it expressed a proud appreciation for such a talented woman like Ramabai, saying that *today our society has a great need for women like Pandita Ramabai ... it is to her credit that she has not given up her national pride together with her religion* ¹²⁸.

The inauguration ceremony was presided by the writer and friend Kashibai Kanitkar, who Ramabai chose to underline the feminist and nationalist nature of her project, giving voice to an Indian woman writer and advocate for women’s rights, rather than to a renowned public man or a British woman. Ramabai herself, on this occasion, made a speech, describing the genesis of her project, its aims and its nonreligious character and her words were welcomed by the local Indian press with enthusiasm as her revolutionary and ambitious project from a social but, above all, an ideological point of view highlighted her enterprising spirit and her organizational ability.

All these positive aspects created a general excitement in the public opinion and, for a while, Ramabai’s conversion to Christianity was forgotten even if it was mentioned as a possible obstacle for the success of the organization by *Indu-Prakash* and this would eventually be proven as a difficulty for the support to her organization.

The general reaction to the Sadan was positive and welcomed with optimism by the public opinion and by all the leading social reformers of the Bombay Presidency.

The condition of child widows and of women in general in India had already been discussed by a circle of liberal Indians and Englishmen who, considering the impressive figure of child widows in the 1881 Census of India, had expressed the need to act with some practical means to solve the situation, questioning about the most effective strategy to follow in order to be able to deal with the issue.

In the meanwhile, the Ramabai Association had already been founded and, a year after, the Sharada Sadan was opened. The first annual report of the Ramabai

¹²⁸ *Kesari*, 12 February 1889, p. 3

Association gives an interesting insight into the agenda of the newly founded association, which had been integrated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and whose task was to finance Indian child widows without any missionary nor evangelizing purpose. This latter point raised some ambiguity in the words of one of the Association's vice presidents, Reverend George Gordon, because he stated that the main objective of the Sadan was *simply to bring an educated, an emancipated life, according to the Christian conception, to the degraded and suffering souls in India; to bring a life of Christian freedom and power and joy to those who are without it.*¹²⁹ In his statement it is evident the equation between the idea of "emancipated life" and Christianity, assuming that the only freedom would come from a Western organisation under the Christian ideals.

Moreover, the reports of the Ramabai Association were useful to clarify some crucial points, like for example the type of inmates that could be welcomed in the institution, who had to belong to Hindu high-caste, namely Brahmin caste.

As a matter of fact, the first two pupils of the Sadan were the child widow Godubai Natu and the unmarried girl Sharada Gadre, as Ramabai had received the permission to accept non-widow students too, until a full number of widows could be enrolled.

Godubai Natu was a Brahmin child widow who had lived in the rural area of Konkan, a region of India which comprehends the west coast, from the Mumbai bay to Mangalore, first with her parents and then with her late husband's ones, who ritually disfigured her. Her older brother decided then to take her to Mumbai, where he was studying, so that she could help him with the housework as his wife had died. He also wanted to give his sister a proper education and he found in the Sharada Sadan the perfect location to ensure her a better future. The young widow, who was over the age of 21 at the time, which had been stipulated as the age limit, was accepted into the Sadan by Ramabai. When it became difficult for the young student to manage between the housework at her brother's house and her studies, Ramabai gave Godubai's brother monetary compensation for her to stay at the Sadan full time

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¹²⁹ Ramabai Association, *Annual Report of 1890*

¹³⁰ For further information about the life and career of the first pupil of Ramabai's Sharada Sadan, see Meera Kosambi, 'Women for All Seasons' in *Crossing Thresholds*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, pp. 336-68.

As Dr. Kosambi reports in Pandita's biography, female education, in addition to being scarce and limited to a few girls, was also dangerous because young students, even in large cosmopolitan cities such as Mumbai, were subjected to ridicule and bullying, also because they were dressed with the typical maroon sari of the Brahmin widows and their shaven head covered so that they were easily identified. The son of a former pupil of the Sadan reported how Pandita set a peon in a 'hooded carriage drawn by bullocks'¹³¹ to escort the students who were attending the school by day from their homes to the school, in order to grant them a higher level of safety.

One of the fundamental points on which the Sadan experience was based was the religious freedom and neutrality that is, the agreement that the girls hosted in the Sadan structure would maintain their traditional beliefs and rituals of worship, without being converted to the Christian faith. Ramabai kept this right for herself and she recited her prayers in her room every day, with her little daughter Manorama, keeping the door of her room open, allowing the students to enter and stop there to listen to their prayers. As professor Kosambi writes, this behaviour could be interpreted as an indirect strategy for influencing and converting the girls and Godubai and two other widows decided then to join Pandita and Mano during these moments of prayer.

In a letter to Sister Geraldine, Pandita explains that even if Godubai had reached the legal age and could make independent decisions, she would never force her students to convert in order not to hurt her parents' feelings, leaving this task in God's hands. Godubai did not mention her possible conversion in her autobiography and she eventually accepted the proposal of marriage by D.K. Karve and four years after the opening of the Sadan they got married in Pune and she changed her first name to Anandibai Karve. The newlywed had to face some degrees of ostracism as remarriage for Hindu widows was not completely accepted and was still seen as an outrageous act against the moral and religious law.

¹³¹ *The Times of India*, 20 April 1922

Most of the information regarding the activity of the Sharada Sadan but above all of the lives of its pupils can be found in Ramabai's correspondence to Sister Geraldine, her English friends, the Ramabai Association in Boston and circular letters to Christian institutions creating, in this way, like prof. Kosambi defines it, *a series of such 'widowhood narrative' [...]* which

were variations on the core theme of a girl married in childhood, widowed early (sometimes after a spell of happiness with a loving husband) then harassed and battered by in-laws almost driving her to suicide and finally helped by friends to escape to the Sadan and enjoy a meaningful life ¹³².

Ramabai used the stories of her young widows, rich in details and with a poignant narrative tone, to endorse the need for a shelter for these girls, to make the reader closer to their reality and willing to be involved in the cause of Indian girls.

As previously said, Pandita Ramabai was undoubtedly an active member of India's social and political life, taking part, with a delegation of four women, to the fifth annual session of the Indian National Congress, held in Mumbai in December 1889. She also participated to the Third National Social Conference ¹³³, where she made a speech, appreciated by her audience, about the sad custom imposed to widows to completely shave their heads, affirming that it was definitely not their will to be disfigured by such a practice and carry this lifelong mark, but it was the pressure imposed on them by the widows' families which played a major role.

Ramabai's positions and ideas found a harsh and, sometimes rude opposition, especially with respect to her work, the travelogue journal titled "*The Peoples of the United States*" (1889), where she described the condition of American women, the social equality she encountered there, the unity and nationalism of the USA which went far beyond any differences of caste and class. She was strongly criticised during

¹³² Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 182

¹³³ The National Social Conference was a liberal event founded by M. G. Ranade and Raghunath Rao. The conference met annually from its first session in 1887 at Madras and their meetings took place soon after the Indian National Congress' sessions. At its meetings, the members had discussions about social issues and advocated inter caste marriage, opposed polygamy and kulinism, namely caste and marriage rules in Hinduism.

her lectures on her American sojourn, often with obscene comments and intolerant opposition, as reported in the newspapers of the time.

Her organisation for women, the Arya Mahila Samaj, which she had founded in Pune in 1882 was still active and its meetings were held at the Sharada Sadan until Ramabai moved her school to Pune on November 1890.

During the years 1890-91 Pandita actively participated in the campaign for the modification of the Age of Consent Bill, which aimed to raise the age of sexual intercourse for girls inside and outside the marriage bond from 10 to 12 years and the infringement of this age limit would have led to the report for the rape crime. Pandita sought to raise public awareness through her Arya Mahila Samaj association and collected signatures to support a petition to be presented before the Viceroy Council in Calcutta as she saw this bill as a possibility to alleviate Indian women. by an inhuman and unjust custom, which continued to cause unbearable sufferings and severe consequences for the entire Indian society.

This reform campaign met the criticisms and ostracism of the conservative and orthodox part of society, headed by the Braminic caste, which claimed the sacred shastras in which it was prescribed that the consummation of marriage should take place within 16 days after the beginning of puberty of the girl. If the girl had reached puberty before she turned 12, her husband would have faced a possible violation of the law and he would have faced the dilemma of deciding whether to break the civil or the religious law. This was one of the many indictments exposed by the conservative faction opposed to the modification of the law and the debate on the implementation of the law occupied the social and political scene for many months.

The change of the location of the school was determined both by the need for Ramabai to reduce the expenses and by her wish to penetrate the orthodox outback of Maharashtra even if this choice would eventually mark the decline of Ramabai's popularity and support. As a matter of fact a strong patriarchal backlash rapidly followed, accusing the young woman to disregard the customs of austerity, imposed by religion for the widows and to practice a covert Christian proselytism, as she let the inmates attend her private prayers, leaving the door of her room open.

A key but controversial figure in this period was Miss Sarah Hamlin, who came from San Francisco and had been trained in Boston to help Pandita with the school. When she arrived in Mumbai in December 1889 she decided to live with the inmates of the institution and she was particularly impressed by the acts of tenderness showed by Pandita towards the girls, being the Indians very reserved and little affectionate in public. As Professor Kosambi reports, when Miss Hamlin arrived at the Sadan there was a total of 25 girls, 10 of whom were young widows.¹³⁴

Hamlin's role in the rise of hostilities and conflicts over Pandita's alleged infringement of religious neutrality within her institution appears to have been dominant. In fact it seems that it was Hamlin herself who spread the rumor that the young woman intentionally left the door of her room open during her evening prayers with her daughter Manorama, considering this action as an attempt at religious education, in open contradiction with the declared religious neutrality of the school.

Despite expressing appreciation for Pandita's work in her frequent letters to the Ramabai Association, Sarah Hamlin identified the potential danger of the school being associated with Christianity and the Association itself were afraid that even an apparent infringement of the secularity of the institution had to be avoided at any cost in order for Hindu people not to lose faith in the promises made by Ramabai herself and the American people who had supported her project.

In her letters, Pandita will then report that if it had not been for Miss Hamlin's suggestion, no one would have questioned the matter¹³⁵, defending her right to profess her faith. Pandita's charismatic presence within Sharada Sadan and her strong leader personality undoubtedly influenced the attraction of her students towards her religious practices, resulting in the public accusation of proselytization.

This ambiguity in Hamlin's behaviour certainly casts many shadows on her position towards Pandita, regarding her true feelings for the Indian reformer despite, as reported by Prof. Kosambi, the Ramabai Association repeatedly refers to the loyalty of the American collaborator. The scholar hypothesizes that this attitude was

¹³⁴ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 180

¹³⁵ Amritlal B. Shah, ed., *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977, p. 265

determined by a cultural prejudice that is made particularly evident in some letters exchanged between Hamlin and Sister Geraldine, in which Hamlin shows a criticism of Pandita's educational methods towards her daughter Mano, who according to her they are excessively "Indian", while a more western environment like that of the sisters' community in England would have certainly benefited the girl much more. Faced with these observations, made explicit to Ramabai herself, the young woman replied by stressing the importance of raising her daughter among her people, in an Indian environment.¹³⁶

As previously said, the declared religious neutrality of the institution was then questioned and the hostilities began between her conservative detractors and the reformers who supported her, both factions using their newspapers to express their opinions and defend their positions regarding Ramabai's work. The toughest and heaviest accusations came from B.G Tilak, a member of the nationalist faction who denounced that Pandita's institution was nothing more than a cover for a work of religious conversion to Christianity.

This controversy had a negative impact on Ramabai's school as the local Advisory Committee quit their position inside the institution, most of the supporters left and the guardians of the school removed their departments from it. An investigative team was even sent by the Ramabai Association in Boston to the Sharada Sadan and they absolved Ramabai but could not do anything to solve the damage caused by the strong protest. These series of events and her suspected missionary attitude towards the girls in her school caused Pandita's marginalisation from mainstream Hindu society and the subsequent boycott of her organization.

As Professor Kosambi explains in her article *The Meeting of the Twain: The Cultural Confrontation of Three Women in Nineteenth Century Maharashtra*¹³⁷ the strong opposition by part of the orthodox Hindu society to Pandita's reforming agenda stemmed not so much from the reformer's suspicious missionary activity, but rather from her open challenge to the patriarchate system that governed Indian social and

¹³⁶ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 187

¹³⁷ Meera Kosambi, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 1:1 (1994), Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London, p. 20

religious life. As a matter of fact, it had never been challenged and denounced as openly as in Pandita's reforming vision before, because she considered her Sharada Sadan as a first step towards the acquisition by women of some basic rights and freedoms, hitherto completely denied.

The Sri Lankan scholar and feminist Kumari Jayawardena as well expresses the incredible force of Ramabai's pioneering reformist vision and in her famous work "The White Woman's Other Burden"¹³⁸ she affirms that

Ramabai was also strong in her advocacy of women's rights long before such ideas were generally acceptable in either the West or India, and she was ahead of her time in her challenge to patriarchy. By focusing mainly on the condition of child widows, Ramabai was choosing an area of action that hit out against Hinduism, Brahmin oppression and male domination. To her, the condition of Hindu widows was not merely a social evil to be reformed, it was a symptom of the disease that had to be eradicated.¹³⁹

Despite the numerous hostilities and the strong criticism that her reforming vision faced during her Maharashtrian period, other reformers would accept Ramabai's legacy and continue the work of support for young widows, empowerment, and education of girls in India.

An example of Pandita's influence in the reforming agenda is the creation of another residence for widows by Professor D. K. Karve, who had married Godubai Natu, the first pupil of Sharada Sadan and a young widow herself, who after the marriage changed her name into Anandibai. Karve and his wife were strong advocate about the improvement of Indian widows' condition and in 1896 Karve established an Association with the purpose of recollecting funds to build a Widow's Hindu Home, an educational institution shaped on the model of Sharada Sadan, which he was eventually able to open in 1901 and whose first inmates were eight widows and two unmarried girls. He was a reformer and an advocate for women's education which he saw as the most powerful instrument to create and maintain social progress, to free women from the oppressive chains of chaste and custom. In 1915 D. K. Karve started

¹³⁸ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, Routledge, New York, 1995

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 60-61

to plan a women's university in Maharashtra, inspired by the model of the Japanese Women's University of Tokyo he had read about. He brought his idea to the attention of the National Social Conference in Bombay in the same year and was supported by Annie Besant, Mahatma Gandhi, and other social reformers, who welcomed the project which was to be realized in 1916. However, this higher education institution did not reach much recognition until 1919, when a wealthy industrialist from Bombay, Sir Vithaldas D. Thackersey, donated Rs. 1.5 million for the university. As a mark of gratitude, the university changed its name into 'Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (S.N.D.T.) Indian Women's University' and under D. K. Karve supervision and guide it became one of the most important centres for women's education in India. It was eventually recognized as a statutory university by the Government of India in 1949.¹⁴⁰

The 1895 saw the progressive cessation of the social reform movement in Maharashtra, as its main social leaders and exponents had died. On the other hand, there was the unstoppable rise of Tilak's influence on public opinion and of his leadership in the region, which determined the gradual shift of general and political interest from social reforms to political struggle. The coincidence of Tilak's political life with Pandita's reforming activity is, according to Professor Kosambi, among the causes of the general consideration of the work of the reformist in subsequent generations and of her relegation to a shaded area that only recently has been raised. One of the methods used by Tilak to discredit and bewilder Ramabai's reforming work was the publicization of other female figures in Maharashtra who, according to Tilak represented better examples of modern femininity in respect of Hindu orthodoxy and tradition.

Among these respectable women the most celebrated one, who became an icon of the modern woman of Maharashtra, was Ramabai Ranade, endorsed and acclaimed by conservatives and reformers for her total devotion to her husband and her loyalty to the patriarchal paradigm that were fundamental for her social work for the women. Another female icon celebrated and exalted by Tilak was Anadibai Joshee, the young

¹⁴⁰ For further information on the life and works of the social reformer Dhondo Keshav Karve see G. L. Chandavarkar, *Dhondo Keshav Karve Builders of modern India*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1970, Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton Legacy Library, Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 239-241, Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp 51-53

Indian woman who had gone to the United States to study medicine, becoming the first one to receive a degree in medicine. According to her biographies she had declared her loyalty to her Indian identity, culture and traditions saying “*I will go as a Hindu, and come back here to live as a Hindu*”¹⁴¹. In this perspective, Anandibai represented Pandita’s perfect counterpart since the latter had also gone to England in the same period to study but once there she decided to abandon her Hindu faith and, in doing so, her Hindu identity, to convert to Christianity.

At the beginning of 20th century another important and influential female figure both in England’s and India’s social and political scene, Annie Besant, was supported and praised by Tilak for her promotion of traditional Sanskrit education in Indian schools and her critical attitude towards widow remarriage. Besant, a Western woman who had abandoned Christianity to embrace Hinduism championing its cause, represented the perfect counterpart of Pandita who had moved in the opposite direction. Ramabai was critical towards the ideas expressed by Western women like Annie Besant and she felt a sort of disdain for their positions which she considered backward and harmful to the future of Indian girls.

On the other hand, Besant accused the Indian reformer of having slowed, with his conversion and the alleged use of Sharada Sadan to convert young widows, the development of women's education in India, describing Pandita’s behaviour in 1904 as *the unhappy perversion of an Indian lady had shaken the confidence of the Hindu public with respect to girls’ education, and they feared Christian proselytizing under the garb of interest in education.*¹⁴²

Ramabai's conversion was definitely considered the ideal pretext by the orthodox traditionalists to sabotage and attack her school project and to warn the society of late 19th-century Maharashtra about the dangers of female education, because it exposed young girls to Western Christian influences at the expense of Hindu culture and traditional religion.

¹⁴¹ Caroline Healey Dall, *The life of Dr. Anandibai*, Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1888, p. 87

¹⁴² Annie Besant, *Essays and Addresses Vol. IV, INDIA*, London and Madras: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913, p. 318

CHAPTER SIX

Ramabai's Mukti Mission and the last years of activity

During this period of strong social criticism for her supposed activity of conversion to Christianity of the girls hosted in the Sadan, Pandita's main concern was about the future of her institution, as the ten-year period of funding and support by the Ramabai Association in the U.S.A. was coming to an end. She was determined to make the Sharada Sadan self-supporting and she had planned to buy a large farm and plant a fruit orchard, referred to by the Ramabai Association as the "Mango Farm" in a land near the village of Kedgeon, which would guarantee a fast and steady gain for her school. Later, Ramabai was able to buy other plots of land to expand her property to more than 230 acres.

However, to accomplish this enterprise she had to rely on the help of her American friends once again, who managed to individually collect the amount of money she needed. As a matter of fact, this sum of money could not be given by the Ramabai Association because it would have been in contrast with the constitution of the Association itself which had pledged to finance only the Sharada Sadan. Pandita was finally able to buy a large plot of land 40 miles from Pune, in the nearby village of Kedgaon, where she moved her school and where her future institutions would be based. This place will be known as Mukti and it will become the permanent residence of Ramabai and her institutions until the reformer's death.

In 1898 Pandita had embarked on another trip to the United States to take part in the annual Ramabai Association meeting, which marked the tenth anniversary of the commitment to financially support Sharada Sadan. She first made a stop in England where her daughter Manorama was staying because Pandita had sent her in 1896 to study under the care of Mr. and Mrs. Dyer. Although the girl had not attended school at CSMV but several boarding schools, she had maintained a constant

correspondence with Sister Geraldine, whom she considered like a grandmother. Pandita wanted Manorama to complete her education in the United States, so she brought the girl to Boston with her.

During the annual meeting of the Ramabai Association held in Boston, Pandita gave a positive account of Sharada Sadan, presenting to her American audience all the activities which had been taking place at the institution since its opening. The curriculum covered a varied range of age groups, from the kindergarten program to higher education, offering different possibilities for vocational training courses. Since its inauguration in 1889, Sharada Sadan had welcomed and trained 350 girls, 75 still residing within the institution, providing them with both study and developing skills to make independent earnings.

Ramabai also provided some data referring to the new Mukti residence in Kedgaon which, despite the recent opening, was already hosting more than 300 people among boys, girls and women, most of whom were victims of a terrible famine, which spread in the Gujarat region and in the Central India in 1896.

An important change made during this meeting was the dissolution of the existing Ramabai Association in order to create a new one, with the participation of many of the same members of the old one, at the request of Ramabai herself. The new "American Ramabai Association" set itself the goal of individually supporting both Pandita's institutions, the Sharada Sadan in Pune and Mukti Sadan in Kedgaon. The first and historical institution would continue to maintain its status of secular school, welcoming the young widows of the high Hindu castes, while the second one would have been financed as an openly Christian institution for different people: high-caste women, unmarried women and girls, abandoned wives and victims saved from the terrible famine and the plague. Funding would have been collected as before, but without the ten-year time span.

Judith Andrews, a dear friend of Pandita's and head of the executive committee of the newly founded Association also stated, as recorded in the report of the association's first meeting, that while Puna, where Sharada Sadan was located, had been considered as a stronghold of Brahmanism, the new location of Kedgaon could

have become a new stronghold of Christianity since it was already identified as a sort of Christian colony.¹⁴³

The move of the school to Kedgaon marks an important moment of change in Pandita's trajectory of life and work, as she could fully embody the role of the Indian missionary woman, showing her creed and making the conversion to Christianity explicit and effective, being able to exercise openly that proselytism that had caused her marginalization from the public and social sphere of Maharashtra. The fact that she had been freed by the American Ramabai Association of the religious neutrality at the end of their ten-year agreement, the urgency to respond to the needs of the victims of famine and plague who needed to be healed, fed, recovered and disciplined, her wish to find a sort of revenge after the fierce accusations made by her Hindu detractors and her will to be accepted and supported by the Christian part, all these were factors which made her missionary activity possible and fruitful.

As previously mentioned, the last years of the 19th century were intense for Pandita who, in addition to having moved the headquarters of her institution to Kedgaon and seeing her new Mukti mission grow with incredible speed, had to face and manage two terrible calamities, the famine and plague. She was ready and attentive to respond to the human needs that emerged with these two calamities, engaging in first person, and making available to the victims all the means necessary to alleviate their suffering and misery. In a letter to her friends¹⁴⁴, where she describes her visit to the famine districts, Pandita recalls her personal experience lived with her family in 1876-77 during her childhood, an event which impressed a deep mark on her life and that made her particularly attentive and sensitive to the needs of the most afflicted by these misfortunes. As a matter of fact, the constant parallelism between her tragic childhood experience and the situation of the poor people affected by the famine in the Central Provinces is evident throughout her letter and in this past experience

¹⁴³ The American Ramabai Association, *Report of the First Annual Meeting held March 24, 1899*, Boston, 1899, p. 18

¹⁴⁴ Pandita Ramabai, *Famine Experience, 1897*, Selection 4 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 217-229

Pandita found her strong motivation to write this report and to invite her friends to join her cause.

She recounts the deaths of both her parents, the difficult living conditions she had to endure with her siblings, the four years spent wandering for food, the unbearable sorrow of those moments and she affirms that

[she] would never have written this account had not the necessity of my present situation obliged me to do so. None of my friends can ever understand what my feelings are for the famine people unless they know that I have had once to go through the same experience as that of the starving thousands of Central India.¹⁴⁵

Her decision to have an active part in helping the population in need arose in her heart as soon as she became aware of the situation and she wondered what a weak woman like her could do to help those thousands of unfortunate people who were starving. Pandita says that the voice of God sounded loud and clear in her heart and mind and she could not remain deaf in front of an invitation from the Almighty. So, together with Mrs. Drynan, a missionary lady who was accompanying her, she decided to visit these afflicted areas and gather some children to take to the missionary orphanages of Pune. In her story Pandita recalls the sight of three little children who were skin and bones, dying of hunger and deprivation and of her sense of helplessness and regret for not having been able to help them immediately.

The missionary woman visited several Poor Houses and Relief Camps, describing the terrible conditions, the dirt, the lack of basic care and the poor quality of food supplied by the Government and the inhuman conditions of the refugees. She also recounts of parents obliged to sell their girls in exchange for some rupees or some rations of food and the Government's inadequacy in handling the situation. Pandita exposes the danger of these institutions which, instead of helping poor people, inflicted even more sufferings on them and exploited their desperation. Moreover Pandita warns about the destiny of women, both young girls and widows, who on their way to these relief camps were kidnapped and taken away by evil people, who would take advantage of their weakness obliging them to a disgraceful life of sin.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 222

In a later account written in 1900 to the 'Friends of Mukti Mission' Pandita, after informing her supporters about the Mission's progresses in the improvement of the inmates' living conditions and education, of their personal, spiritual and professional growth and the possibility of a better future for them, made a brief excursus on the terrible situation faced by the victims of the famine, which she had the chance to see first-hand. One of the focal points Pandita deals with in this letter is the inadequacy of both the local and the colonial Government to face and manage an emergency of such immense dimensions. Once again emerges Pandita's cross conflict against colonial power and the Hindu religion as she embodied the multi-faceted "Other", the colonized subject by a western power whose injustices and wrongs she denounced, the Hindu woman who had broken with her traditional religion to embrace Christianity, rebelling against a social and cultural system based on caste, the social reformer who tried to give space and voice to the invisible people, the most wretched of society, offering them a chance for dignified life.

In this short pamphlet, which is part of the Mukti Mission's Archive, she criticises the conduct of the Rajas and Chiefs of the different Indian states who

*[...] will not allow kind Christian people to rescue the starving widows and orphans – because their ministers and other grand people have brought their influence to bear on them for the defence of the Hindu religion. [...] It were a noble thing for the Hindu religion to have so many thousands of Martyrs, if only they were willing Martyrs, but these poor defenceless thousands are sacrificed on the unholy altar of caste prejudice by sheer force brought to bear upon them by both the British and the Native States.*¹⁴⁶

In addition, she underlines the British Government's inability and unwillingness to take a position, to intervene to save its colonial subjects in need, maintaining an attitude of apparent neutrality and freedom of action towards the local Indian authorities, which actually concealed a profound sense of indifference and carelessness to the famine victims. In Ramabai's harsh words,

¹⁴⁶ Pandita Ramabai, *To the Friends of Mukti School and Mission, 1900*, Selection 6 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 241

The Government's policy of non-interference with religious customs is an admirable and noble one, but in such cases as these forced deaths of thousands, it is to say the least, inhuman. What difference is there between allowing people to burn their widows alive, or to sacrifice their children to Kali, and to force women and children and weak people back into the States where they will surely die or be sold to sin to die a dog's death later on? My language may seem strong, perhaps unwise, but, dear friends, you must remember I am speaking for those thousands who are too feeble and powerless to lift up their voices – and I am speaking the truth.¹⁴⁷

Pandita urges her American and British friends, who are faithful Christian, attentive to the needs of the weakest, to support missionaries in India who are dealing with this emergency situation to protect the most fragile sections of society, young children and young women, as well as the elderly and abandoned women, those categories which have always been dear to the reformer's heart. In making this invitation, Pandita refers to the *woman's work*, that effort and commitment that only women can fulfill, recognizing in this way the essential importance of female role in the social and missionary context, addressing to the kindness and generosity which only a mother's heart and a sister's love can have towards fellow women's sufferings. As a matter of fact, she writes

Why do not good Christian people in England and America send money to the missionaries in this country, who are so anxious to help the poor people, and are trying hard to do as much as they can for them, but cannot do more for want of means? The great motherly heart of missionary ladies is yearning for the dying children and other poor of the Central Provinces. Let benevolent people send generous donations to them for feeding and caring for the Lord's little ones. Men can do much, but all godly women must come forward at this time and care for little children and protect young women whom the Government officials are not able to help and care for. It is woman's work and cannot be left to the officers and their subordinates.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem

¹⁴⁸ Pandita Ramabai, *Famine Experience, 1897*, Selection 4 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, pp. 227-228

The missionary, despite the precarious state of her finances, says that she went to the Central Provinces to save as many defenseless young widows she could, as the Lord had instilled in her mind the mission to save 300 girls from the districts afflicted by the famine.

Thanks to the help and strength deriving from her faith, feeling invested of this noble and beneficial mission, Pandita was able to bring 60 widows with her, 47 of whom would have been sent to school to study and the others would have been employed in some works. As she explains in her letter, she would have to devote much of her time and efforts to "civilize" those rescued women, in order to teach them to have proper hygiene and cleanliness, given their wild and uneducated nature. She then says that the funds generously sent to her by her American friends had barely covered the costs of feeding and educating the famine victims, but additional financial aids would be definitely needed to meet the costs of food, clothes, the construction of new dormitories and new dining rooms in the Mukti Sadan, given that the current size of the structure did not allow to accommodate many women. She then reiterates her total trust and faith in the powerful action of God's providence, who will not abandon her in this merciful mission and will go on blessing those who act in His name.

Pandita then took charge of this salvation mission and from 1896 onwards she welcomed more than 2000 survivors of the famine in Kedgaon, whom she had gathered in massive rescue operations and housed them in tents and huts built on the land she had purchased. These continuous and numerous constructions led, as previously mentioned, to the creation of the Mukti Sadan, or the Home of Salvation and subsequently to the Sadanand Sadan, a separate mission which hosted boys. This phase, as stated by prof. Kosambi, marked a real triumph for Ramabai, who could finally express herself in the role of the Christian missionary woman, gaining the recognition and public approval for her charitable activity she had been denied during the last years.

Almost contemporary to the terrible famine, a serious epidemic of bubonic plague broke down from Mumbai to the main cities of western India and Pandita was forced to evacuate her girls hosted in the Sharada Sadan in Pune to her new Mukti Mission

at Kedgaon, of which it became a new sector. The institution's high-caste widows were located in a different part of the mission, in order to keep them separate from the victims of the famine, who were ill and with dubious moral conduct. As reported by Prof Kosambi, Pandita's untiring activity in the implementation of the preventive measures against the spread of the plague infection had positive repercussions on her public image, and this occasion was last time that she was seen by the majority of public opinion in a positive light. In a letter published in the liberal newspaper *Bombay Guardian* in May 1897¹⁴⁹, Pandita describes her visit to a Plague Hospital where she had gone to assist one of her boys and denounces the government's questionable management of the emergency. In fact, one of her girls, a famine widow, had been admitted to the hospital used to treat plague patients because the doctor who had examined her had assumed it was an alleged case of plague, because she had high fever. After six weeks of permanence in the facility, as she had not had any news about her girl, Pandita went to the hospital to check the situation and, after receiving a series of evasive explanations and lies regarding the fate of the young patient, she was told that the girl had been discharged some time earlier and that the hospital staff had not felt compelled to inform Pandita about this.

The reformer, in her letter to the *Bombay Guardian*, strongly denounces the authorities of Pune, the City Magistrate and who proved to be insensitive and reprehensible in the management of this terrible emergency, not handling the situation with the conscience and seriousness which should be displayed towards the poor victims of this tragedy.

Furthermore, Pandita also briefly describes the filthy conditions and inadequate organization of the so-called Segregation Camps, which were superficially and only externally controlled by local officials and colonial government representatives. The lack of adequate toilets and places for those who came to assist the sick patients, the copious presence of insects like mosquitoes, fleas and bugs, the limited spaces that made it difficult to avoid the transmission of the infection and preserve the privacy of patients, all these were aspects that public authorities had ignored and that made

¹⁴⁹ Pandita Ramabai, *About Government Provision During Plague Epidemic*, Selection 5 in Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 231-233

these places that should have been of healing and relief, dangerous places especially for young women. Therefore, Pandita formally accuses the authorities of wanting to deliberately ignore the evil and pain caused to the population resulting from their poor and evil government choices.

The outbreak of this plague epidemic in the Bombay Presidency is remembered as a particularly dramatic event due to the high number of deaths, the mass displacement of a large part of the urban population towards rural areas to escape contagion, the strong anti-colonial feeling which arose from the drastic measures implemented by the staff of the Special Plague Committee, made up of both civilian and colonial military personnel. Prof. Kosambi recounts how random inspections were carried out in the houses by British soldiers, very often desecrating areas of the house that for the Hindus were sacred for the rituals that took place there, destroying statues and idols of houses and temples without any valid reason. The inspections were not only reserved for places but also for people, whose bodies were examined in an abrupt and disrespectful way, to find any swellings that could be an indication of the disease. The main victims of these attacks were women, who often suffered true harassment and violation of their privacy and intimacy. These extreme and ineffective behaviours to contain the epidemic led to numerous protests and revolts, above all by Hindu and Muslim citizens of Pune and Mumbai, who criticized the violation of the sanctity of their houses by Government officials. The assassination of a Special Plague Officer in Pune in June 1897 marked the culmination of the widespread feeling of popular discontent. Once again Pandita was the only one among social leaders to take a stand against the British Government, denouncing in her letter to the *Bombay Guardian* the atrocities committed by Her Majesty's officers, in particular towards women, who were exposed to the dangers of corruption of their morality by the staff of the plague hospitals.

This strong anti-British and anti-colonial stance by the Christian reformer led to the resentful reaction of Sister Geraldine, a faithful imperialist, who accused Pandita of having had a capricious and childish behaviour in having her denunciation letter published as, according to the Anglican nun, it only had had the effect of inflaming anti-colonial feelings. Both her British and American friends spoke out to Pandita, suggesting her to formally retract the claims and affirmations stated in her letter to

the newspaper, which was even presented to the House of Commons a couple of months after its publication.

Her commitment to the Indian population's cause during the outbreak of plague together with her incredible courage in denouncing the injustices and the unfair administration of the emergency by the local and central government, made Pandita gain a prominent position in the public opinion, as she embodied the anti-colonial protest through the voice of an Indian widowed woman, who had converted to her western colonizer's religion.

The extraordinary nature of Pandita, as has been said many times, lies in the multifaceted nature of her personality, in the various nuances of her work as a social reformer, in the audacity of her choices and actions, in her being frequently misunderstood by a society and a world more backward than her visions, in her being an unconventional woman and a pioneer in social reforms, especially for her fellow countrymen women.

The multiplicity of Ramabai's activities and the creation of the Mukti Sadan which had significantly expanded the sphere of her missionary action, required further funding, which were sought and collected by the American Ramabai Association, headed by Ramabai's loyal friend Judith Andrews. Mrs. Andrews made it possible to broaden the female audience, since she considered the Indian reformer's mission as purely aimed at the attention of women, who would feel a deep sympathy for the sad and unfortunate condition of their fellow Indian women.

Manorama, Pandita's only daughter, played a fundamental role in this awareness and fundraising work promoted primarily by Mrs. Andrews as she became her mother's mouthpiece in portraying the situation of young women in India and the importance of institutions like those created and promoted by her mother. Together with five other Indian girls, Manorama was studying in the U.S.A. at the Chesbrough Seminary in the state of New York, so she was able to help a lot giving many speeches in various places in the country which were aimed at raising awareness in the American audience about her mother's missionary and reforming work. Besides, Manorama described the rescue and recovery operation of the victims of the famine

and how the older girls who were already residing in the Mukti Mission volunteered in taking care of the skeletal girls and children saved by her mother from those areas of the country more severely affected by food shortages. In this context, new Ramabai circles were created thanks above all to the image of Pandita's resilience and courage portrayed by various newspapers of the time during the famine and the plague epidemic.

As a result of this campaign to publicize Pandita's work, the Ramabai Association was able to subsidize the missions of the reformer, who even received numerous private donations from other foreign countries including Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australasia, Hawaii, Egypt, China and Ceylon, as reported by Pandita herself in the Annual Report of the American Ramabai Association of 1902. These events, as usual, had a negative echo in Maharashtra and Pandita once again became the target of the pungent offenses of the *Kaesari*¹⁵⁰ which accused the reformer of being a jailer for the victims of the famine she kept locked in the various prisons of the Mukti Mission.

The Ramabai Association, as suggested by prof. Kosambi, perhaps as a consequence of these newspaper articles that cast shadows over Pandita's missionary work but also because of their firm fear of a conversion action within the secular school of the Sharada Sadan, sent Pandita an investigative questionnaire aimed at ensuring the freedom of religious profession of the high-caste widows housed in the school. The investigation forwarded to Pandita also highlighted the danger of relocating the Pune school to Kedgaon permanently as this move would have ended up in a contamination between the high-caste girls of the Sharada Sadan and the other Mukti Mission inmates belonging to lower classes. The Association also advised that Manorama should be appointed principal of the Sharada Sadan so as to let Pandita free to conduct the Mukti Mission as a Christian structure.

The response of the Indian reformer was not long in coming and she revealed that all the 123 students who were housed in Sharada Sadan at the time had converted to Christianity immediately after joining the structure. Ramabai ensured the total respect for the religious freedom of the girls who had all expressed the desire to embrace the Christian faith with total autonomy and freedom. This assurance

¹⁵⁰ *Kaesari*, 29 January 1902

evidently satisfied the curiosity of the president of the Association, Dr. E. W. Donald, who in the usual annual report of the year 1903 renewed the esteem and appreciation for Pandita's efforts, guaranteeing even greater financial support to ensure a long future for her structures. Despite this mission statement, there was a significant drop in the supporters' donations for the Mukti Mission after the first few years.

Despite the controversy, Pandita's missionary activity was a great success as the population of her Mukti Mission reached about 2000 people by the first years of 20th century and the educational methods used by the missionary, such as teaching grammar, household chores and developing those personal skills which would be used to earn money, were well welcomed by her inmates.

As for the organization and structure of the institution, the Mukti Mission, as previously reported, was divided into numerous sections which hosted a total amount of 2000 people, divided into various areas according to their origin and needs. The Sharada Sadan which had been definitively moved from the city of Pune to the village of Kedgaon at the beginning of the century, had become a section of the Mission, apparently still Hindu, dedicated exclusively to the widows of the upper castes, thus maintaining its historical identity despite, as reported by Ramabai in her annual report of 1902 at the American Ramabai Association, all of the girls hosted there had converted to Christianity.

Another section of Mukti Mission was dedicated to the reception and care of elderly women, who found a safe place to spend their last years of life. Particularly interesting and innovative for the tools used on an educational level was the section for visually impaired women, to whom Manorama, who had had the opportunity to study the Braille alphabet in England during her stay, dedicated with care and patience. Blind women were therefore taught to read in Braille and to carry out small jobs that would allow them to obtain an income. As reported in the monographic book of prof. Kosambi, the reports of the time describe these women as

always well-groomed, self-reliant and active. One photo in the Mukti archives shows them going to the dining room for lunch in an orderly line, each one holding on to the shoulder of the one ahead of her. Other published

photos show a woman being taught Braille, another reading the Bible in Braille to village women and two visually impaired women making cane baskets.¹⁵¹

Pandita's missionary work also extended to the guests with physical and mental disabilities, to whom another area of the Mission was dedicated and who were considered Pandita's "special friends".

One of the most interesting and, in my opinion, innovative sections, was the Kripa Sadan, whose name literally means 'Home of Mercy', which became the refuge of the 'fallen women' from 1899 onwards. The term, of Victorian echo, designated those women who had "fallen" into sin, moral corruption, and prostitution because they were victims of a system of patriarchal exploitation and social exclusion. Indian society, as well as the English one, had always rejected these women, confining them to the margins of society, condemning them to a life of invisibility and shame, excluding them from any social reform project, as Pandita herself explains in a pamphlet she wrote in 1903 entitled "*A Short History of Kripa Sadan*"¹⁵², which was meant for a private circle of readers. In this pamphlet, the reformer makes a brief excursus on the inhuman treatment and punishment reserved for this category of young women, as prescribed by the traditional ancient Hindu legal treaties, which continued to influence the common thinking of the 19th-century society. The royal command imposed to throw the unfortunate women to the dogs on the outskirts of the city as an exemplary punishment for their sin.

The issue of fallen women and their sad fate had become dear to Pandita after visiting some 'rescue homes', run by the sisters of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin (CSMV) in Fulham in 1883, during her English staying. In these reception facilities women were welcomed and treated with respect and compassion, providing them with the tools to be able to live a dignified life and renewing their social utility. Ramabai's encounter with these unfortunate women made her change her mind about them, as they were not immoral sinners, as much as victims of unscrupulous and

¹⁵¹ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 211

¹⁵² Rajas Krishnarao Dongre, Josephine E. Patterson, *Pandita Ramabai: A Life of Faith and Prayer*, Christian Literature Society, 1963, p. 41

lustful men, whose wicked actions were however promptly hidden, justified and condoned by the society of the time, whose judgment system was completely controlled by gender inequality and a patriarchal organization.

Pandita recounts this visit at the Houses of Fulham run by the Sisters of the Cross, in her spiritual biography, *A Testimony*, where she describes the meeting with these women who, thanks to the action of the nuns but above all to the saving Word of God, had managed to abandon their previous sinful life, and they *had so completely changed, and were so filled with the of Christ and compassion for suffering humanity, that they had given their life for the service of the sick and infirm.*¹⁵³ For the first time, as she declares, she understood from the Christians and their merciful work that fallen women, who for the Hindu were emarginated and condemned to be out of society, could be saved, that they could be treated kindly and their path of sin could be reversed and transformed.

The encounter with the merciful face of Christianity made her see and consider, for the first time, to what extent were her native Hinduism and Christian faith different. When she asked the Sister who was accompanying her on her visit to the refuge for women, what was the motivation that led Christians to take care and try to recover women like those hosted there who had fallen into the sin of prostitution, she read Pandita the passage from the chapter 4 of St. John's Gospel where Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman. The Sister explained to her Jesus' message of love for the sinners, as He came to save them and give them the hope of a new life in Christ, not to condemn and despise them.

The impact that this message of forgiveness and hope, especially for women, contained in this passage of the Gospel had on Pandita was remarkable and inevitably made her compare it with the Hindu sacred books, in which she had never read anything of this kind. The meeting with the fallen women and the Samaritan woman described by St. John became the real turning point for Pandita's path of faith, as she decided to embrace the Christian creed because she understood *that Christ was truly the Divine Saviour He claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land.*¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 27

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, pp. 273-274

The need to build a separate structure within the Mukti Mission emerged when Pandita began her rescue work of the victims of the famine districts, the majority of whom belonged to the category of 'fallen women'. Since it would have been neither beneficial nor healthy to mix them with the other girls who were housed at Mukti Pandita, thanks to the help of some American missionary women, managed to build a separate and fenced home within the perimeter of the Mission. The poor women who became part of the Kripa Sadan could attend school, receive a Christian education, and learn different crafts according to their personal skills. Thus was born the section of the Kripa Sadan which hosted 350 of the 2000 victims saved from the districts of the famine between 1900 and 1901, most of whom, however, died very soon due to their severe condition of malnutrition and to the serious diseases contracted.

Some of the sad life stories of these unfortunate women were narrated by Ramabai herself in a series of narrations called 'victimized women's narratives', where the readers could find the accurate descriptions of the sufferings, deprivations and humiliations inflicted on these young victims by their torturers. The framework which characterised these narratives always presented some recurrent features like

*child marriage, marital harassment including battery which left psychological and often also physical scars, household drudgery and near-starvation, parents' refusal to help because of poverty or social pressure, eviction from the marital home leading to begging in the streets as the only option – and then inevitably to prostitution.*¹⁵⁵

The rescue and reintegration experiment, carried out by Pandita, of these destitute women hosted in the Kripa Sadan did not always have positive results, as there were cases of rebellion and hostility towards the missionary woman, although most of the girls were grateful for the opportunities of redemption and social rehabilitation they were given at Mukti Mission.

Once again Pandita emerged as a dissenting voice, as an outsider in her own society, a reforming woman who criticized the obtuse traditional Indian orthodoxy who had

¹⁵⁵ Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 213

always ignored the unfortunate situation of these women, denouncing the total lack of compassion and humanity of the Brahmin caste. The woman denounced the hypocrisy of the latter who only complained about the fact that these rescued girls had converted to Christianity, because they considered this fact as a loss and a weakening factor for the unity of nation without considering the thousands of widows who were marginalized, stigmatized and forced to a life of misery and hardships. Ramabai's testimony and precious action in conceiving and implementing this human and social recovery project of the victims of a deeply unjust and male-dominated society certainly marked an important step in 20th-century history of Indian social reforms, even though it failed to modify the closed mentality and indifference of her contemporaries.

Since its opening, the Mukti Mission continued to grow and expand and had several buildings which were built around a large area, surrounded by fields, orchards and vegetable gardens that made the Mission totally self-sufficient as regards the food supplies. A dairy was also created which housed 100 cows and 100 sheep that supplied milk and dairy products consumed by the Mission population. The vast and arid land purchased at the end of the 19th century by a farsighted Pandita, in a few years had been transformed into a fertile oasis, a safe haven for the forgotten by society.

The work activities within the Mission were fervent and a typical daily timetable was divided between the hours devoted to the studies, which occupied half the time of the girls, and other useful activities which were aimed at training the inmates for their possible future professions. The young women could be trained to become teachers or nurses, others could devote themselves to learning manual and domestic jobs such as laundry work, cooking, sewing, weaving, agricultural work which comprehended the orchard maintenance, the care of the fields and the work in the dairy, technical skills which could be useful both for their professional and private life. The boys, who lived in a separate wing of Mukti for some time, were taught to handle the printing machine which, once the male section of the Mission was closed, was run by the girls. The typical day at Mukti was also marked by an hour of Bible study, half an hour of singing and half an hour of evening prayers.

As reported by Prof. Geraldine Forbes in her work *Women in Modern India*¹⁵⁶, the curriculum designed and carried out by Pandita for her girls at the Mukti Mission included a variety of subjects, which were intended to educate the girls on general school notions, but also to give them the tools to get to know their bodies, thanks to physiology lessons, and to know the physical world around them, for example, during botany classes. Besides these subjects, there was also what Prof. Forbes calls "*industrial training*", which included all that series of manual and practical activities previously mentioned. It is also reported how Pandita stimulated her students join cultural circles, which could help to bring them together for their interests and not for belonging to the caste. Among these clubs, Forbes cites the Temperance Union or the Christian Endeavor Society which, in addition to offering cultural and educational activities, provided the Mukti girls with basic parliamentary notions, thus also increasing their awareness of their social identity and increasing their sense of autonomy and independence.

The mission was located near the Kedgaon railway station, where visitors could find a small carriage drawn by a single horse which took them to the entrance of the institution. The latter was crossed in length by a small road that led to its front door and, on the left side of the road, there were the hospital, the rescue home and the home for elderly women, while on the right side the main buildings of the Mission were arranged, almost all of them built in stone.

One of the first constructions built at the very heart of the Mission was the Mukti Church, erected in 1899, large enough to accommodate 2000 people which was to serve as a place for collective prayer, where the inmates could listen to sermons but also as classroom for the students of the Mission. The church, in the shape of a cross according to Pandita's project which is said to have been revealed to her by God himself in a dream, was built by his nephew Krishna Rao Dongre, using the stones

¹⁵⁶ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in modern India*, Chapter 2 'Education for women', Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 48

extracted from the excavation of the 13 water wells that provided the Mission's water resources.¹⁵⁷

As previously stated, from 1900 until her death in 1922, Ramabai's missionary, reforming and social activity was clearly imbued with her Christian faith, and all his actions can be inserted in her trajectory of religious exploration and testimony.

The biggest challenge of her religious activity was the translation of the Bible from the original versions in English, Hebrew and Greek into Marathi, the native language of her region, the language spoken by most of the population. The aim of her translation was to make the Holy Scriptures accessible to her audience, which was mainly made up of uneducated women belonging to the lower castes, in order to convey Christ's message of hope, resurrection and salvation.

Even though some complete translations of the Holy Bible in Marathi had already been published, Pandita considered them too related to the Sanskrit language for the adoption of numerous Sanskrit words and phrases. Since she saw her once loved language, the language she was taught by her beloved father, the "divine language" which had given her recognition and honour as Sanskrit scholar in the first part of her public career, as a vehicle for the spread of Hindu religion thought, which she now criticised and despised, she wanted a more neutral version of the Scriptures, to be employed to get the Marathi-speaking population closer to God's words. She devoted herself to studying Hebrew and Greek with some experts and this translation work took the last 18 years of her life, as she could only see the final drafts of the book and correct them before her death. In 1924, two years after Ramabai's death, the first edition of *Pavitra Shastra (Old and New Testament)* was printed and published at Mukti Mission, by the girls in charge of the printing press of the mission.¹⁵⁸

As reports prof. Kosambi, this Marathi translation of the Holy Scriptures was neither particularly fluent nor pleasant to read due to the translator's need to oversimplify the language and make the spiritual, ethical and abstract concepts of the Bible easily

¹⁵⁷ For further information about the Mukti Mission Church and its building process see the official website of Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission <https://www.pmm.org.in/projects/pandita-ramabai-mukti-mission-church/>

¹⁵⁸ For further information about the genesis and peculiarities of Pandita's translation of the Bible see Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, pp. 254-258

understandable and immediately comprehensible in Marathi, excluding those words in Sanskrit that could have had a faster understanding because widely known.¹⁵⁹

A particularly significant event in Pandita's spiritual life and that of her Mukti Mission was the so-called Holy Ghost Revival, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit which, according to the evidence of the time, revealed itself on 30th June 1905 to one of the Mukti's girls, who suddenly felt her body burning, like it was pierced by flames. The other girls who assisted to the manifestation tried to help the girl, throwing some water on her to alleviate her burning but, when they realized something incredible was happening, they knelt and burst into a loud, spontaneous and simultaneous prayer of devotion, asking for God's forgiveness for their sins. It is also reported, by one of Pandita's biographers, Nicol Macnicol, that during these events of revelation, which happened several times at Mukti, those who received the revelation of the Holy Ghost developed the ability of *speaking with tongues*¹⁶⁰ simultaneously. He also reports the strangeness of the missionary to these events and her wish to maintain as a balanced position, as he writes that [...] *it is to be noted that in none of these ecstatic accompaniments of religious experience did the Pandita herself have any large share.*¹⁶¹

There are many interpretations that have been given of these events, which by some scholars have been seen as moments of collective catharsis, where the girls, during these moments of intense prayer, asked for forgiveness of their sins, in a sort of community confession that gave peace of heart to the women.

Others have seen these moments of revelation as supernatural and transcendental manifestations thanks to which a process of self-revelation of the greatness of God, of His presence in their lives and the intrinsic human need to rely on Him as he is a Father of Mercy and Forgiveness, was triggered in the faithful.

Still other scholars see in this revival movement an opportunity for the community of Mukti to reaffirm its Christian faith and an instrument to organize and discipline the spiritual life of the community. While Manorama actively participated in these moments of revelation prayer, Ramabai maintained a rationally detached attitude and

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem p. 256

¹⁶⁰ Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai*, Calcutta, Association Press (Y.M.C.A), 1926, p. 118

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 118

was able to manage this spiritual movement in a pragmatic and fruitful way because, as testified by Reverend Butcher ¹⁶², she was able to grasp and preserve the positive spiritual aspects of these revivals, preventing the situation from getting out of hand and becoming unmanageable.

As Ramabai herself reports in her spiritual testament, *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*¹⁶³, written in 1907, she started a special prayer circle in 1905 made up of nearly 70 people who gathered every morning at Mukti to pray for *the true conversion of all Indian Christian including ourselves, and for a special out pouring of the Holy Spirit on all Christians of every land* ¹⁶⁴. She then points out how God listened to their invocations and *in six months from the time we began to pray in this manner the Lord graciously sent a glorious Holy Ghost revival among us, and also in many schools and Churches in this country* ¹⁶⁵. She does not add further details about the manifestations, perhaps not to fuel excessive reactions, but she pinpoints the general positive effects of conversion, salvation and testimony which resulted from these experience, In fact she says that *the results of this have been most satisfactory. Many hundreds of our girls and some of our boys have been gloriously saved, and many of them are serving God, and witnessing for Christ at home, and in other places. [...]* ¹⁶⁶

After having had the opportunity to read and deepen the religious parable of this extraordinary woman, her experience of conversion and faith that marked her path of life and social action in a clear and defined way, the central role that Christianity has played in her life, the action of change that it has implemented at different levels has to be acknowledge and stood out.

¹⁶² Ibidem, p. 121

¹⁶³ Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016

¹⁶⁴ Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, 283

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem

In her interesting article, *Multiple contestations: Pandita Ramabai's educational and missionary activities in late nineteenth-century India and abroad*¹⁶⁷, which analyses and delineates Ramabai's encounter with Christianity, Dr. Kosambi identifies the various levels of action of faith in the reformer's life. Pandita sought and found in Christian philosophy comfort and aid during the difficult times and the moments of despair and marginalisation and, on a more practical and concrete level, it allowed her to get in touch with an international Christian network that became a support system for her reforming and missionary activities, as it provided economic funds and the assistance of numerous volunteers for her Indian institutions.

In December 1919 the British Colonial Government rewarded the important work of social reform and education implemented by Pandita Ramabai for the child widows and the lowest castes of Indian society with the 'Kaiser e-Hind'¹⁶⁸ gold medal, one of the highest honors granted by the Crown to anyone who had distinguished himself/herself for his/her action to improve and advance the public and social situation in India. Because of her poor health condition that prevented her from travelling, Ramabai could not attend herself the ceremony in Mumbai because of her

¹⁶⁷ Meera Kosambi, *Multiple contestations: Pandita Ramabai's educational and missionary activities in late nineteenth-century India and abroad*, *Women's History Review (UK)*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1998, p. 193-208

¹⁶⁸ The **Kaisar-i-Hind Medal** for Public Service in India was a medal awarded by the British monarch between 1900 and 1947. It was awarded to civilians of any nationality who rendered distinguished service in the advancement of the interests of British India. The name, Kaisar-i-Hind, means 'Emperor of India' in the vernacular of the Hindi and Urdu languages. The word 'kaisar', meaning 'emperor' is a derivative of the Roman imperial title Caesar. It is also cognate with the German title Kaiser, which was borrowed from Latin.

The medal was instituted by Queen Victoria on 10th April 1900. The title of Empress of India or Kaisar-i-Hind was taken by Victoria from 1st May 1876 and proclaimed at the Delhi Durbar of 1877. Following Victoria, Queen Empress, were the King Emperors, Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII (briefly) and George VI. The Royal Warrant for the Kaisar-i-Hind was amended in 1901, 1912, 1933 and 1939, and while never formally rescinded, the Kaisar-i-Hind ceased to be awarded following the passage of the Indian Independence Act 1947.

The Kaisar-i-Hind Medal for Public Service in India had three grades. The Gold medal was awarded directly by the monarch on the recommendation of the Secretary of State for India. Silver and Bronze medals were awarded by the Viceroy.

The most famous recipient of the Kaisar-i-Hind Medal is Mohandas Gandhi, who was awarded it in 1915.

poor health conditions and sent her daughter Manorama to collect the award on her behalf.

The toughest event that touched Pandita's life was Manorama's unexpected and sudden health deterioration in the summer of 1919, probably due to her incessant work activity in which she had always been engaged which resulted in an advanced state of physical exhaustion. In addition, she was suffering from a severe heart condition, so she was hospitalized to undergo a healing treatment at the Wanless missionary hospital in Maharashtra. Despite the treatments she had received, after an apparent recovery, Manorama's condition got increasingly worse so that she had to be taken back to the hospital where she died, on 24th July 1921, after enduring days of suffering. She had always been her mother's right hand, an affectionate and devoted daughter, a loyal and reliable helper in Pandita's reforming and educational projects and she should have taken up her mother's social legacy and continue, as her successor, to manage her reforming and educational work.

Ramabai was now completely alone in the world, with no relatives alive, without her precious only daughter and future director of the Mukti Mission. She was able to endure the painful loss of Manorama for less than a year and on 5th April 1922, after a period of illness and overwork, she died in her beloved Mukti, in Kedgaon, a few days before her 64th birthday.

Miss Clementina Butler, who at that time was Chairman of the Executive Committee of the American Ramabai Association, in her book about Ramabai's life titled *Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati; Pioneer in the Movement for the Education of the Child-widow of India*, describes the last moments of Pandita's life, her designed successor and the way in which the members of the American Association were informed about the reformer's death

Soon after sending to the Association the Annual Report of the Sharada Sadan she quietly appointed as her successor Miss Lissa Hastie, an English friend who had worked with her for the past twelve years and who is in full sympathy with her ideals. On April 5th came the cable which announced "Ramabai Promoted." Yes, promoted to the service above! What a welcome from the thousands whose lives she had touched with blessings-the little ones,

*the famine stricken, the blind and the leper; all these had received ministry from her hands.*¹⁶⁹

Pandita's earthly departure had a profound impact on Mukti's community, on the population of Kedgaon and on that of the villages near the Mission but they mourned their reformer with a simple funeral service, which was characterized by controlled expression of sorrow and intimate prayer. After the funeral service in the Mukti Church, she was laid to rest in the Kedgaon cemetery and her simple coffin was carried, in turn, by her girls.

¹⁶⁹ Clementina Butler, *Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati; pioneer in the movement for the education of the child-widow of India*, New York, Fleming H. Revell company, 1922, p. 86

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ramabai's legacy, her testimony today and final conclusions

Ramabai's death undoubtedly marked the end of a particular period in India's social and reforming field, especially in the Maharashtra region, where she had autonomously created with no other helps than the foreign funding and collaboration, a complete system of care, support and education for the most afflicted and the neglected by Hindu society.

Despite the support of her international friends and the active and generous network of aid and collaboration which she was able to entwine during her life, her revolutionary feminist project realized with the foundation of Mukti Mission, would never obtain a prominent and relevant position within the fabric of Indian traditional and conservative society.

The main reason for her almost total exclusion from the mainstream Maharashtrian society during her life but also after her death, has to be found in her strong confrontation with Hindu religion, customs and that particular mindset which she wanted to eradicate and change, as she considered all these the main reasons for the inequalities suffered by women, in particular, but also by the lowest castes.

She was always described with hostility by the conservative part of Hindu society and even after the death of its founder, B. G. Tilak who had always been one of Ramabai's fiercest critics, his Maharathi newspaper *Kaesari* did not hide its sharp criticism in writing Pandita's obituary. In the issue of 11th April 1922, the Maharathi paper underlines the fact that the ability and intelligence of Ramabai did not improve nor bring any beneficial aid to the Hindu society, as it should have been, but rather to the Christian missionary organisations. The brief article then explains that this was determined by the woman's personal ambition and impatience which made her prefer to rely on the foreign missionary organisations to fund and support her project, rather

than calmly and concretely investigating the possibilities of undertaking this project within her Hindu society. With these statements, *Kaesari* criticizes Pandita's western choice, her alleged betrayal of her origins and her lack of trust in her society, giving the example of Prof. Karve's institutions and of the Seva Sadan led by Mrs. Ramabai Ranade, which grew and flourished within the Hindu fold. The *Kaesari* ends its obituary for Pandita with this sentence, the last harsh condemnation of the reformer's rebellious attitude and disdain of her native Hindu society, saying that [...] *Unfortunately, had Pandita Ramabai taken it seriously, she too could have demonstrated her organisational capacity while remaining a Hindu. But, unfortunately, this was not to be!*¹⁷⁰

The Maharathi-language Indian newspaper seems to deliberately omit the fact that its fierce criticism towards the Indian reformer had started well before Pandita's conversion to Christianity, since the first years of Pandita's activity in Maharashtra, before she left for England. Furthermore, the newspaper, in praising the educational initiatives of Karve and Ramabai Ranade, does not recognize that they were directly inspired by Pandita institutions themselves and that their success within the Maharashtra society was due to their patriarchal foundations.

There were several reactions to the death of the great Indian reformer and, although as seen in the death announcement reported in the *Kaesari*, criticism and reproof were not long in coming, her figure was honoured and remembered with affection and gratitude by many, in particular by the Christian community which lamented a sudden sense of loss for Pandita's early departure. In the Maharathi section of the *Dnyanodaya*, a newspaper founded in 1842 and run by the American Marathi Mission, whose aim was to give a correct and realistic overview about Hindu and Christian theology and be engaged in the reform movement of the 19th century, Pandita is remembered as a courageous woman, strong-willed and resolute in her mission, who definitely deserves a special place in western India's history. The newspaper also recognizes her value and commitment, underlining the fact that she showed, with her own life, [...] *that Woman is not an animal, her status is in no way*

¹⁷⁰ Meera Kosambi, "Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 288

*inferior to that of Man, and that the souls of both would be saved in the same way and both have to serve in the same manner.*¹⁷¹

As emerged in the different works, articles and studies which focused on the unique life of such a multifaceted personality like Pandita, it is very challenging to attempt a comprehensive and satisfactory description of her life and social work only using a Western colonial lens rather than an Indian one, a Hindu perspective rather than a Christian one, a feminist lens rather than a social reformer one.

Pandita is at the intersection of various directions, as she is part of the colonial discourse, she participated in the Indian but also international feminist movement's debate, she is a relevant figure in the context of the educational reform for child widows and assistance for Indian women, she was a leading and prominent exponent in the fight against traditional and patriarchal Indian society and the caste system, she joined the theological and religious debate on her interpretation of the Christian faith and the official doctrine of the Church. Most importantly, she was a woman who gave voice to her fellow Indian women, who tried to break the oppressive chains of the condition of the most invisible and undesired subjects of her society, who questioned the patriarchal society she was born in, who entered the colonial discourse in a critical way, who lived her conversion and faith profession trying to find her own path, moving away from the patriarchal structure of the Church of England, making the teachings of the Gospel concrete.

After her funeral at Mukti Mission, Pandita was also remembered by the Indian Christian community in a large commemorative ceremony in Mumbai, during which she was celebrated and honoured as a saint, a great woman, a huge loss not only for the Christian community in particular, but for the whole of India, who had lost one of its greatest women.

As previously said, it is reductive to analyse the figure of such an interesting and at the same time complex woman, considering her mainly from the perspective of her Christianity, certainly a decisive and important part of her life, but which does not comprise her work as a reformer and social activist. As pointed out by prof.

¹⁷¹ Meera Kosambi, *Multiple contestations: Pandita Ramabai's educational and missionary activities in late nineteenth-century India and abroad*, Women's History Review (UK), Vol. 7, No. 2, 1998, p. 290

Kosambi, it was her feminism of the first phase of her life that determined her marginalization from traditional Maharashtrian society, because of her questioning and denouncing the oppression and injustices of the patriarchal system.

Prof. Jayawardena sees Pandita's *attacks to the 'jugular' of Hindu patriarchy* ¹⁷² during the 1880s as the main inspiration for the subsequent generations of Indian women, who considered her a role model and a true hero for the feminist movement in India but, at the same time, her conversion and her later commitment for the translation of the Bible made her possibility to lead the Indian women's struggle fail. As the scholar argues, Indian women's life would not have improved in the passage from their subjection to the Hindu patriarchal society to the Christian fundamentalist ideology, likewise *in seeing British rule as the protector of Christianity, Ramabai also lost the opportunity to emerge as a truly national woman leader who could also challenge colonialism.* ¹⁷³

In this respect, prof. Gauri Viswanathan as well, highlighted the fact that despite Pandita's life could represent the prototype and the embodiment of feminist aspiration for Indian women, given her double identity of social reformer and Christian convert, this career of hers was not understood by her contemporaries, by her own generation, to whom it *appeared confusing, inconsistent and even contradictory.* ¹⁷⁴

This basic misconception and rejection of Pandita's work have survived to this day in Maharashtrian public opinion, where Pandita is often confused with her namesake Ramabai Ranade who, unlike the Indian missionary, never broke the ties with the Brahminical patriarchal society, which would eventually result in her praise and endorsement by the conservative part of society. Maharashtra society in particular and Indian society in general still hold Pandita responsible for betraying, with her conversion to Christianity, the social reform work, and the whole nation, as she had collaborated with the colonial rulers by embracing their religion.

As analysed in chapter 4 of this work, Ramabai's choice to abandon her native creed and embrace the religion of the Church of England was dictated by multiple factors,

¹⁷² Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 62

¹⁷³ Ibidem

¹⁷⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*, Delhi: OUP, 1998, p. 118

including the spiritual comfort and peace she had found in the latter. The decisive reason that marked her choice to convert however, was the message of universal salvation for all human beings, without distinction of caste and gender, promised by God to humanity and the prospect of a gaze of mercy and compassion for women victims of injustices. All these characteristics were at the core of his social reform project and during her life she managed to independently shape her path of social activism, living religion freely and personally.

This obscuring action towards Pandita's work perpetuated, as already said both in the social dimension of Maharashtra and in the national one has caused, according to Meera Kosambi, a considerable delay in the development and evolution of the system of social reforms for the women of India. In fact Pandita had concluded her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, written in 1887 outlining the main points on which the path of emancipation of Indian women had to be built, that is, the importance and accessibility of female education, the need to give women an alternative place to live and the effort to grant women their independence and economic autonomy. Less than a century later, Indian social activists have identified the same pillars presented by Pandita as necessary measures for the treatment of some groups of particularly vulnerable women, such as abused wives. Kosambi rightly points out that *this reinventing of the wheel more than a century later would have been unnecessary had Ramabai's message been heeded.*¹⁷⁵

In a broader perspective, Ramabai's legacy still exercised a strong interest in U.S. society, which continued to finance and support the Mukti Mission even after the death of its founder thanks to the American Ramabai Association.

Mukti Mission is a reality that has survived until today and it has been taking care of vulnerable Indian girls, destitute women, and people with special needs since its foundation in 1889, in the village of Kedgaon, near Pune. Today it has 18 more locations in 8 other states of India and almost 1,500 residents, giving them the home they have never had and empowering them in order to change and improve their lives.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Meera Kosambi, *"Pandita Ramabai, Life and landmark writings", A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*, Selection 7, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2016, p. 292

¹⁷⁶ For further information about the activity of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission see the official website of the institution <https://www.prm.org.in/>

I would like to quote the words of Lorraine Francis, the actual Mission Director for Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission who, in a presentation video of their work today at the Mission, perfectly summarizes Pandita's message, that idea, that vision, that project that she had so long fought for, a message of hope, of inclusiveness and of love. That love which has guided Pandita's life since her childhood, that love that she learnt from her parents, who helped her shape her unique personality, that love for her only daughter Manorama, who she had designated as her successor in continuing her reforming mission, that love for her fellow Indian women, who she had always put at the centre of her agenda, trying to create a safe home for them, where they could experience the warmth of a family. The love that she found in the words of Christ, which filled her heart of peace and hope, changing her life forever and making it possible for her to change many other people's lives.

The word Mukti means freedom, giving freedom to traumatized lives, heavy hearts that need a place to call home. Mukti Mission is a family, to shelter, care, educate and empower these heavy hearts that come here and need a safe place and that is what Mukti is all about.

Mukti provides a safe refuge and home for abandoned children, widows, outcast women, unwed and single mothers and special needs women and children including the visually or mentally challenged. The main focus of Mukti Mission is to educate and empower the needy people and send them out to make an impact into the society.

We are committed to the transformation and empowerment of vulnerable women and children irrespective of their background, because we believe empowering women and children is the key to bringing about changes in family and whole community and is effective in breaking generational cycles of poverty and exploitation.

Each individual here at Mukti matters, each one is unique, each one is important, each one is loved and each one has hope for a brighter future. Over the years we have seen that girls with hope grow into women with a future and the capacity to transform their communities.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Lorraine Francis Mission Director for Mukti Mission
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQsculYM9JA>

I have loved reading and discovering such a unique woman as Pandita, a pioneer in so many fields, a strong-willed reformer with a modern vision on the female world, its challenges, and its strengths, a woman who lent her voice to those who could not speak, who taught her fellow women that education is the most powerful tool and an inexhaustible source of wealth they can have to gain independence, which is the highest happiness.

Pandita still has so much to say nowadays, her message and mission are as relevant as ever, her incredible life is an inspiration for us women, who are still trying to conquer our place in the world, to make our voices heard, to make our freedom recognized and respected and to find our happiness in conquering our independence.

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