PANDITA RAMABAI



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A Scholar of the Scriptures, the Widows of India, and a Treasure That Never Failed

Ochorus

Portraits of Courage – Pandita Ramabai

A Scholar of the Scriptures, the Widows of India, and a Treasure That Never Failed

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Preface

"A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, Is God in his holy habitation."
— Psalm 68:5, ASV

The first five volumes of this series told the stories of Watchman Nee in China, John Hyde in the Punjab, Corrie ten Boom in Haarlem, Mary Slessor in south-eastern Nigeria, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther on the Niger. This sixth volume returns to India, to a woman who was born in a forest in the Western Ghats in 1858 and died at Mukti, her settlement at Kedgaon outside Poona, in 1922, and who in between became one of the most remarkable people of her century.

Pandita Ramabai was many things at once, and people have never agreed which of them mattered most. She was a scholar of Sanskrit, so learned that the pandits of Calcutta acclaimed her with the title Sarasvati, after the goddess of learning. She was a pioneer of women's rights in India, who told a British commission in 1882 that the women of her country were "oppressed and cruelly treated" by the men, and who wrote a book that a modern scholar has called an Indian feminist manifesto. She was a widow and a single mother at twenty-three. She crossed the sea to England at a time when a high-caste Hindu woman who did so was thought to have lost her caste for ever. She became a Christian, argued with the Anglican sisters who had baptised her, lectured across America, and came home to found a school for child-widows that was attacked by the leading Hindu reformers

of her day. She walked into the famine districts of Central India and brought back hundreds of starving girls. She built a community at Kedgaon that at its height fed and housed some two thousand women and children, without an endowment or a bank balance. She saw a revival there that spread across India. And in the last years of her life she translated the whole Bible, from Hebrew and Greek, into the everyday Marathi of the village women she loved.

She also called herself a sweeper. "I sweep into this compound as many as I can get," she told a missionary who came to work with her in 1901, "child-widows, deserted wives, and orphans of every kind."

Why Her

This series is called *Portraits of Courage*, and courage in Ramabai's case took an unusual form. She was not a martyr. No one put her in prison. Her courage was the courage to think for herself and to act on what she thought, whatever it cost her. It cost her a great deal. When she was a girl it cost her family their standing among the Brahmins, because her father refused to marry her off as a child. When she married, it was across caste, to a man her world regarded as far beneath her. When she became a Christian, many of her own people counted her a traitor, and some still do. When she refused to be told what to believe by the Christians who had baptised her, they feared for her orthodoxy and rebuked her. When girls in a school she had promised would be neutral in religion began coming to her Christian prayers, and some of them asked to become Christians, the reformers who had supported her resigned in anger. And when she stood between the British government and the famine girls it had failed to protect, she warned that if the state again licensed vice, "British iniquity will reach its climax," words that her British biographers do not quote.

She did all this as a woman, in a society that gave women almost no public voice, and she did much of it half-deaf, often ill, and always short of money. She did it, as she came to believe, in dependence on God. The verse at the head of this preface is one she would have recognised as a description of her own work. God is "a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows." She spent her life trying to be his hands.

Her Own Words

We are fortunate in having a good deal of Ramabai's own writing in English. *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, published in Philadelphia in 1887, is her own book. *Famine Experiences in India*, written in 1897, tells the story of her parents' deaths in her own words. *A Testimony*, first printed at Kedgaon in 1907, is her account of her spiritual journey. Her letters to her American supporters were printed year by year in their reports. This book quotes her wherever it can, and marks the places where we depend instead on what others said about her.

Her biographers are a mixed blessing. The earliest were admirers who wanted to raise money for her work, and they told her story as a missionary romance, adding details she never gave and sometimes leaving out things she did say. The most careful of the older lives, by Nicol Macnicol in 1926, had access to sources in Marathi. Modern scholars in India and the West have written about her with great seriousness, some chiefly as a reformer and some chiefly as a Christian. The introduction that follows explains how this book has tried to find its way among them.

Her story is not always comfortable. She could be imperious and hard to work with. She changed her mind about important things, and said so. Her Christianity was not quite the Christianity of the missionaries who taught her, and she did not want it to be. Her faith grew in stages, and she

was honest about them. For eight years after her baptism, she said, she had found "the Christian religion," but not Christ. It is one of the most honest confessions any Christian has made, and it is part of why her testimony still rings true.

Like the Psalmist, she looked back at the end of her life and saw that she had been carried. "He upholdeth the fatherless and widow" (Psalm 146:9, ASV). She had been both, and she spent her life upholding others who were.

Introduction: The Pandita and Her Biographers

"and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
— John 8:32, ASV

Three Ramabais

If you ask about Pandita Ramabai in India today, you may hear of three different women.

The first is a social reformer. She appears in school textbooks and on a postage stamp issued in 1989. She was one of the first Indian women to speak in public for the education of women, to found a women's society, and to describe, in print and before government commissions, the lives of child-brides and widows. Historians such as Meera Kosambi and Uma Chakravarti have written about her chiefly in this light, as a pioneering thinker whose criticism of her own society was so sharp that the reformers of Maharashtra later preferred to forget her. In this telling, her Christianity is sometimes a footnote, sometimes a later and narrower phase.

The second woman is a Christian saint. She is remembered on 30 April in the calendar of the Church of England, under the name she took at her baptism, "Pandita Mary Ramabai, Translator of the Scriptures." She founded Mukti, which still shelters women and children at Kedgaon. She prayed down a revival in 1905 that historians of Pentecostalism count

among the sources of the movement. She translated the Bible. In this telling, her early life as a scholar and reformer is sometimes only a preparation for her real work.

The third woman, in the eyes of some Hindu nationalists, is a missionary who used her learning and her reputation to draw Hindu girls away from their faith. That charge was first made in her lifetime, and it has never quite gone away.

Each of these portraits leaves out something the others include. This book is written from a Christian point of view, and it will not pretend that her faith in Christ was a footnote. It was the centre of her life. But it will also try not to leave out the reformer, the feminist, the critic of her own church, or the Hindu critics who had reasons for their anger. The verse at the head of this introduction is Jesus' promise: "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Ramabai spent her life looking for the truth, and she was not afraid of it. Her story should not be told in a way she would have been afraid of either.

Her Own Words

The best guide to Ramabai is Ramabai. She wrote a great deal, in Marathi and in English, and much of her English writing survives.

The High-Caste Hindu Woman (1887) is her own book, written in America. The edition of that year also contains a long introduction by her friend Dr. Rachel Bodley, the dean of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, which includes many details of her early life that Ramabai told her. Some of these details do not agree with Ramabai's own later accounts. When the book was reprinted in 1901, Ramabai asked for Bodley's introduction to be left out.

Famine Experiences in India (1897) is a short pamphlet she wrote to raise help for the famine-stricken. It begins with the fullest account she ever gave of how her own parents died, twenty years earlier.

A Testimony, written at Mukti in 1907, is her account of her spiritual journey. We have not been able to find a copy of the original pamphlet. It survives in two later printings: a condensation made with her permission by the missionary J. J. Lucas in 1919, and a fuller text printed by Helen Dyer in a biography published soon after Ramabai's death. The two do not quite agree. Dyer's version, for reasons she does not explain, leaves out the names of the Hindu reformers who helped Ramabai in Poona, and the name of the Indian priest, Father Nehemiah Goreh, whose book, Ramabai said, convinced her of the truth of Christianity. This book uses both, and quotes Lucas where Dyer has cut.

Her letters to her American supporters were printed in the annual reports of the Ramabai Association in Boston between 1890 and 1898. Others were printed in Australia. They are among the most vivid things she wrote.

There are important gaps. Her letters to the Anglican sisters at Wantage, which record her arguments with them over doctrine and obedience in the 1880s, were collected and published in India in 1977, and that collection is still in copyright. We know their contents chiefly from what modern scholars have written about them. Her Marathi writings, including a book about America, are known to most English readers only through modern translations.

The Biographers

Three biographers who wrote during her lifetime or soon after it are in the public domain, and all three are useful.

Helen Dyer, an English writer who knew her and supported her work, published *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* in 1900 and a longer book, *Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith*, published after Ramabai's death, in about 1923. Dyer wrote to inspire prayer and giving. She calls her first book "a record of answered prayers." She sometimes adds colour that Ramabai's own accounts do not contain, and she writes of Hinduism with a contempt that goes beyond even Ramabai's own sharp later judgments, and without Ramabai's lifelong respect for her parents' sincerity.

Clementina Butler, an American Methodist and a member of the Ramabai Association, published a memorial biography in 1922, the year of Ramabai's death. It is short, warm, and valuable for its American documents.

Nicol Macnicol, a Scottish missionary and scholar of Indian religion who worked for many years in western India, published *Pandita Ramabai* in 1926 in a series called *Builders of Modern India*. It is the most careful of the three. Macnicol used the Marathi biography by D. G. Vaidya and the recollections of Ramabai Ranade, and he warns his readers that Ramabai's later descriptions of Hinduism were written "after she had been for many years a Christian," so that "we cannot expect a balanced judgment from such a witness." That is a fair warning for us as well.

Where these writers tell stories that do not appear in Ramabai's own accounts, this book says so. Where they disagree with each other, or with her, the disagreement is noted. The end of the book has a fuller note on the sources, and a list of popular claims that turn out not to be true.

Two Conversions

One more thing needs to be said at the beginning, because it shapes the whole story.

Ramabai was baptised in the Church of England in September 1883. But she herself did not date her conversion to her baptism. In *A Testimony* she wrote: "I came to know, after eight years from the time of my baptism, that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me; but I had not found Christ, who is the Life of the religion."

The difference between finding the religion and finding Christ is at the heart of her testimony. For eight years she was a Christian by conviction. She believed that Christianity was true, and that it was better than anything she had known. She was baptised, she taught, she lectured. But something was missing, and in about 1891 she found it. This book takes her distinction seriously. It does not read her later evangelical faith back into her earlier years, nor does it dismiss those earlier years as unimportant. The woman who argued with the sisters at Wantage about the Trinity and the woman who knelt at Mukti in 1905 to pray for revival were the same woman. Both were looking for the truth. The second had found more of it.

Paul wrote that Christians "know in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9, ASV). Ramabai would have agreed. Her life was a long discovery, and she was willing to be taught.

The Forest School

"And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."
— Deuteronomy 6:6-7, ASV

A Boy in the Palace

Ramabai's story begins with her father, and her father's story begins with a woman reciting poetry.

Anant Shastri Dongre was a Brahman from a village in the Mangalore district, on the south-western coast of India, below the long wall of mountains called the Western Ghats. He was born, as far as we can tell, at the end of the eighteenth century. As a young man, already married according to the custom of his people, he went north to Poona to study Sanskrit with a famous scholar named Ramachandra Shastri. Poona was then the capital of the Peshwas, the Brahman rulers of the Maratha lands, and Ramachandra Shastri had been engaged to teach Sanskrit to one of the Peshwa's wives. Anant went with his teacher to the palace, and sometimes he heard the lady reciting Sanskrit poetry.

It astonished him. The sacred language was not meant for women. The law-books of the Brahmans taught that women, like the lowest castes, could not study the Vedas, and most learned men held that they should not learn Sanskrit at all. Here was a queen who knew it well. Rachel Bodley, who heard the story from Ramabai, wrote that his astonishment turned to admiration, and that he resolved to teach his own wife as his teacher had taught the queen.

His wife refused. So did his mother and the elders of the family. The experiment was abandoned. Years passed, children were born, and at last his first wife died.

A Bride of Nine

What happened next Ramabai told herself, without naming anyone, in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. It is one of a number of examples she gives of how carelessly Hindu fathers married off their daughters.

> *I know of a most extraordinary marriage that took place in the following manner: the father was on a religious 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.*

The stranger was a widower. On learning his caste and clan and where he lived, the father offered him his nine-year-old daughter 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 went on with

his pilgrimage the next day, "with a light heart." Fortunately, Ramabai adds, "the little girl had fallen in good hands, and was well and tenderly cared for beyond all expectation."

Rachel Bodley, writing with Ramabai's help, identified the stranger as Anant Shastri, then about forty-four, and the little girl as Lakshmibai, Ramabai's mother. Ramabai told the story to illustrate an injustice, and she did not hide her judgement of the father who gave his daughter away so lightly. She allowed that "fortunately the little girl had fallen in good hands," and the reader who knows the sequel can see how fortunate: the stranger was the one man in a thousand who would teach her.

The Forest

Anant began at once to teach his young wife Sanskrit, and once again his family objected. This time he did not give in. He took his wife away, up into the mountains, and made a home in a forest on the top of a peak of the Western Ghats. Ramabai described it in *A Testimony*:

> *My father was a native of Mangalore district, but he chose a place in a dense forest on the top of a peak of the Western Ghats, on the borders of Mysore State, where he built a home for himself. This was done in order that he might be away from the hubbub of the world, carry on his educational work, and engage in devotion to the gods in a quiet place.*

Ramabai never named the place, but her biographers call it Gangamul, and it is usually identified today with a spot in the Kudremukh hills where several rivers have their source. Bodley, who heard it from Ramabai, records her mother's memory of the first night there, with no shelter of any kind, and a tiger crying across a ravine until dawn.

The Brahman pandits of the district did not leave him in peace. They reported him to the head of his religious order, and he was summoned to defend himself before the guru and an assembly of scholars, or be put out of caste. Ramabai tells what happened. "He quoted ancient authorities and succeeded in convincing the guru and the chief pundits that it was not wrong for women and Shudras to learn Sanskrit Puranic literature. So they did not put him out of caste." He became known, she says, as "an orthodox reformer. Some people honoured him for what he was doing and some despised him. He cared little for what people said, and did what he thought was right."

That sentence could stand as a summary of his daughter's life.

It is worth being clear about what kind of reformer he was. Anant Shastri did not question the Hindu religion. He was, Ramabai says, "a very orthodox Hindu and strictly adhering to caste and other religious rules." He kept the Vedas themselves from his wife, and taught her the Puranas, the great popular scriptures of Hinduism, not the most sacred texts. What he rejected was the rule that women must be kept ignorant. And his wife proved him right. "He found an apt pupil in my mother," Ramabai wrote, "who fell in line with his plan and became an excellent Sanskrit scholar." She did all the work of the household, cooked and washed and cared for the children and the guests, and then "devoted many hours of her time in the night to the regular study of the sacred Puranic literature."

Ramabai

Six children were born to Anant and Lakshmibai, according to Macnicol, and three of them died young. Three lived: a son, Srinivas; a daughter, Krishnabai; and the youngest, a girl, born in April 1858. Her American supporters recorded the date as 23 April, and it was written on her coffin

almost sixty-four years later. They named her Rama. With the ending that marks respect, she was Ramabai.

The forest home was a place of pilgrimage, and pilgrims came to it all year. Anant believed that hospitality was a religious duty, and he fed them all at his own expense. "For thirteen years he stayed there and did his work quietly," Ramabai wrote, "but lost all his property because of the great expense he incurred in performing what he thought was his duty." Before Ramabai was a year old, the money was gone, and the family had to leave.

> *My mother told me that I was only about six months old when they left their home. She placed me in a big box made of cane, and a man carried it on his head from the mountain top to the valley. Thus my pilgrim life began when I was a little baby.*

Rachel Bodley, writing in 1887, described Ramabai being lifted from her bed in the forest at dawn for her Sanskrit lessons, with the birds singing in the trees around her. It is a lovely picture, and it is often repeated. But it cannot be right, if Ramabai left the forest as a baby. Bodley also wrote that the family set out when Ramabai was nine. Ramabai's own account is different, and hers is the one this book follows. Whatever lessons she had, she had on the road.

Lessons on the Road

And she had them. "When I was about eight years old my mother began to teach me," she wrote, "and continued to do so until I was about fifteen years of age. During these years she succeeded in training my mind so that I might be able to carry on my own education with very little aid from others." Her first lessons, she remembered, were the committing to memory of two great Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavata Purana* and the

Bhagavad Gita. The grammar and dictionaries of Sanskrit were themselves written in verse, and she learned them by heart. Her admirers later said that she had memorised eighteen thousand verses by the time she was twelve. She never gave a number herself.

Her parents did not want their children to learn anything else. "Learning any other language except Sanskrit was out of the question. Secular education of any kind was looked upon as leading people to worldliness." To learn English, or to mix with *Mlechchhas*, as foreigners and non-Hindus were called, was forbidden "on pain of losing caste and all hope of future happiness." But a child on the road hears many languages. She picked up Marathi, which was her family's language, and Kanarese, Hindustani, and Bengali, simply by travelling. One day she would write and lecture in Marathi and English, and translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek.

The verse at the head of this chapter is Moses' command to the parents of Israel, to teach God's words to their children "when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way." Anant Shastri and Lakshmibai did not know the God of Israel. But they did exactly what Moses commanded. They taught their children, and taught their daughters as well as their son, in their house and by the way, and above all they taught them to love the truth. Ramabai never forgot it. Long after she had left their religion, she defended their memory. One early biographer, Jennie Chappell, records her saying in America that if anyone wished to say that her father and mother were lost, they were never to say so in her presence.

Not Married

One more thing her parents gave her, and it may have been the greatest gift of all. They did not marry her as a child.

In the Brahman society of her day, a girl was usually married well before she reached puberty, often by eight or nine, and sometimes as an infant. A girl who remained unmarried after that age brought shame on her family. Anant had married Ramabai's elder sister, Krishnabai, to a boy of her own age whose family had promised that he would study, and who did not. (Accounts differ on how young she was; Macnicol says her father had tried to keep her unmarried until twenty.) The marriage was unhappy, and her father did not want the same thing to happen to his youngest daughter. "My father and mother did not do with me as others were in the habit of doing with their daughters," Ramabai told Bodley, "i.e., throw me into the well of ignorance by giving me in marriage in my infancy. In this my parents were both of one mind."

It cost them. "This was of course against the caste rules," Ramabai wrote, "so he had to suffer being practically put out of Brahmin society. But he stood the persecution with his characteristic manliness, and did what he thought was right, to give me a chance to study and be happy by leading a religious life."

The proverb says: "Train up a child in the way he should go, And even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, ASV). Anant Shastri trained his daughter to learn, to think, and to do what was right whatever people said. She departed from his religion. She never departed from that.

Pilgrims

"Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; Eyes have they, but they see not;"
— Psalm 115:4-5, ASV

Puranikas

For the next fifteen years the Dongre family lived on the road. "Ever since I remember anything," Ramabai wrote, "my father and mother were always travelling from one sacred place to another, staying in each place for some months, bathing in the sacred river or tank, visiting temples, worshipping household gods and the images of gods in the temples, and reading Puranas in temples or in some convenient place."

They were *Puranikas*, public readers of the Puranas, the great Sanskrit collections of Hindu myth and legend. It was an honourable calling. A Puranika sat in a temple hall, under a tree, or on the bank of a sacred river, and read aloud from his manuscript in Sanskrit. Few of the hearers understood a word. That did not matter. The sound of the sacred text was believed to purify those who heard it, and those who stopped to listen gave the reader a present: a handful of rice, a coin, a flower, a few cowrie shells. "The reading and hearing of the sacred literature is in itself believed to be productive of great merit," Ramabai explained. "We never had to beg or work to earn our livelihood. We used to get all the money and food we

needed, and more; what remained over after meeting all necessary expenses was spent in performing pilgrimages and giving alms to the Brahmins."

So the child grew up reciting the scriptures in public, with her father, her mother, her brother, and her sister, in towns and temples across the south and west of India. She learned to speak before crowds while she was still a child. It was an odd education, and a rich one. It gave her a memory stocked with poetry, a voice that did not fear an audience, and a first-hand knowledge of popular Hindu religion that few Indian women and almost no Europeans possessed.

What She Saw

It also gave her a great deal to think about. Many years later, after she had become a Christian, Ramabai wrote down her memories of the sacred places she had visited as a child. Macnicol, who read them, warns that they were written by a convert looking back, and that "we cannot expect a balanced judgment from such a witness." That is fair, and we should read them in that light. But her memories are also specific and unsentimental, and they show a child who was watching closely.

Her earliest memory of religion, she said, was from about the age of four, at the hill shrine of Tirupati in the south. The priests there told the pilgrims "any number of lies." "My parents knew all about these lies and laughingly made mention of them. But yet the priests were looked upon as very gods and worshipped accordingly." The family bathed in a waterfall called Papanasini, the "destroyer of sin," though, she says, they "knew in their own hearts that the sins remained where they were, as before."

When she was about thirteen, the family spent a year at Dwarka, on the coast of Gujarat, the city of Krishna. According to legend, Krishna's golden city had sunk beneath the sea, but on one rare day, which came only once in

sixty years, Krishna would show it to the sinless. The day came while they were there. Pilgrims arrived in their thousands. The Dongres bathed in the sea, gave alms to the Brahmans, recited the sacred texts, and waited through a cloudy day for the vision. At sunset the clouds on the horizon glowed gold.

> *Many people did not dare to say that they did not see the city, for that would be confessing that they were sinners. They kept silence about it and so did we. But we were convinced in our inmost hearts that we saw no city but saw the ordinary clouds which we were accustomed to see, almost daily, at the time of sunset.*

"The pockets of the priests were filled with money," she added, "while the pilgrims went empty away."

At Pandharpur, in the Maratha country, the great shrine of the god Vithoba, the family prostrated themselves at the first sight of the holy city, and drank the muddy water of the Bhima river to wash away their sins. Ramabai wrote that she went there first "as a Hindu fully believing in all that I heard," but that "the seed of unbelief was planted in my young heart by the sight of the inconsistency of the priests and worshippers."

The First Call

She saw other things, too, that she never forgot.

When she was about nine, the family was living on the banks of the Jumna, in the north. There she saw a young wife beaten by her husband and her mother-in-law. Nearly thirty years later she wrote: "Her cries went right to my heart and I seem to hear them now after nearly thirty years. ... I suppose that was the first call I received to enter upon the sacred duty of helping my sisters according to the little strength that I had."

When she was about thirteen, she went with her mother and sister to visit the women's quarters of a prince who had four wives. The eldest had borne him two sons, and her rooms were bright with happiness. The other three had no children, and their faces, she remembered, were "sad and careworn; there seemed no hope for them in this world, since their lord was displeased with them, on account of their misfortune." She never forgot that either. When she came to write her book about the women of India, it was one of the scenes she described.

She saw such things as a Hindu girl, and as a Hindu girl she did not yet know what to make of them. The teaching around her, as she later described it in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, did not tell her they were wrong. It told her that a woman's suffering was the result of sins in a former life, and that her only hope lay in pleasing her husband. Her own parents had broken with that teaching in their own home. But the questions it raised were only beginning to take shape in her mind.

Stone and Silence

The verse at the head of this chapter comes from a psalm that mocks the idols of the nations. "They have mouths, but they speak not; Eyes have they, but they see not." It is a hard verse to use about the religion of a family that was sincere, learned, and devout, and it should be used carefully. Anant Shastri and Lakshmibai were not fools. They knew, Ramabai later wrote, that they did not worship the stone images themselves, but the gods whom the images represented. "We knew the Vedanta, and knew, also, that we worshipped not the images, but some gods whom they represented."

And yet, she went on, "all our learning and superior knowledge was of no avail. We bowed to the idols, as thousands of learned Brahmans do. We expected them to speak to us in wonderful oracles." What she remembered,

looking back, was not that the images were ugly or that her parents were foolish. It was the silence. “The stone images remained as hard as ever, and never answered our prayers.” She was writing of the last years before her parents died, when the family prayed day and night for wealth and help; but the silence was the same silence she had met at Dwarka.

When she wrote those words in 1897, she added a verse from the prophet Jeremiah, in the old version she knew. In the American Standard Version it reads: “every goldsmith is put to shame by his graven image; for his molten image is falsehood, and there is no breath in them” (Jeremiah 10:14, ASV). For the child at Dwarka, staring at the sunset clouds and seeing no golden city, there was no such verse. There was only the quiet suspicion that the promises were not true, and the knowledge that one must not say so.

Her family was not unusual in its questions. Many devout Hindus of that age, and many before and since, have looked beyond the images and the priests toward a God who could not be seen or bought. Ramabai was not yet looking for Christ. She did not know that he existed. But she was learning, as she stood among the silent pilgrims at Dwarka, that she would rather know the truth than pretend to see what was not there. That habit of mind would lead her, in the end, a very long way.

The Famine

"When my father and my mother forsake me, Then Jehovah will take me up."
— Psalm 27:10, ASV

Twenty Years Later

In January 1897 Ramabai sat down in Poona to thank the friends who had helped her and to describe her first journey into the famine districts of Central India. Before she described their sufferings, she described her own. "I feel deeply for these poor dying people," she wrote, "because I have myself [known] what it is to suffer from hunger and thirst, and have seen my dearest relatives die of starvation." She said she would never have written the story down, "had not the necessity of my present situation obliged me to do so." It is the fullest account we have of how her family died, and this chapter follows it closely.

She dated it "some twenty-two years ago," in a famine that reached its height in the Madras Presidency in 1876-77 but had begun at least three years before. Later in the same pamphlet she calls herself "a girl of sixteen" at the time, and Rachel Bodley, who heard the story from her in 1887, gives the same age. That would place their deaths in about 1874 or 1875, in the early years of the famine, not at its peak. She gives no year.

A Famine of Their Own Making

Ramabai did not blame the weather for all of it. Her father, she explained, had once been a landholder and an honoured pandit who had earned wealth by his learning. But as he grew old and blind he lost it all "in one way or another." His children had no secular education, and no trade.

> *We had all the sacred learning necessary to lead an honest religious life; but the pride of caste and superior learning and vanity of life prevented our stooping down to acquire some industry whereby we might have saved the precious lives of our parents.*
> *In short we had no common sense, and foolishly spent all the money we had in hand in giving alms to Brahmans to please the gods, who, we thought, would send a shower of gold mohurs upon us and make us rich and happy.*

In *A Testimony* she described it more simply. The sacred books promised that if people worshipped the gods in the prescribed ways, gave alms, fasted, and repeated the holy names, the gods would appear and give them what they asked. "We decided to take this course of meeting our temporal wants. For three years we did nothing but perform these religious acts. At last all the money which we had was spent, but the gods did not help us. We suffered from famine, which we had brought upon ourselves."

Her brother Srinivas, "a stalwart young fellow of twenty-one," ruined his health by fasting for months on end. When the money was gone, the family sold their jewellery, their good clothes, their silver, and at last their cooking pots of brass and copper, and gave the money to the Brahmans. They lived on a little coarse rice until the last grain was eaten. "Oh, the sorrow, the helplessness, and the disgrace of the situation!"

The Forest at Tirupati

They were staying at Tirupati, the hill shrine where Ramabai's memories of religion began. There, after a long discussion, they decided that it would be better to go into the forest and die than bear the disgrace of poverty among their own people. That night they left their lodging and walked into the jungle. For eleven days and nights they lived on water, leaves, and a handful of wild dates.

At last her father, old, blind, and starving, could bear no more. He decided to drown himself in a sacred pool nearby, which in Hindu belief was not suicide but a holy death. It was suggested that the rest of the family should do the same. First he said goodbye to each of his children, one by one. Ramabai, the youngest, came last.

> *I shall never forget his last injunctions to me. His blind eyes could not see my face, but he held me tight in his arms; and, stroking my head and cheeks, he told me in a few words, broken with emotion, to remember how he loved me, and how he taught me to do right, and never depart from the way of righteousness. His last loving command to me was to lead an honorable life, if I lived at all, and serve God all my life.*

"Remember, my child," he said, "you are my youngest, my most beloved child. I have given you into the hands of our God. You are His, and to Him alone you must belong and serve all your life."

She was too bewildered to answer. Twenty years later, as a Christian, she wrote: "He did not know the only true God, but served the, to him, unknown God with all his heart and strength." She was thinking of Paul in Athens, who found an altar inscribed "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD," and said to the Athenians, "What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set

forth unto you" (Acts 17:23, ASV). "I can now say to the departed spirit of the loving parent, 'Yes, dear father, I will serve the only true God to the last.' But I could not say so when my father spoke to me for the last time."

Her father asked for an hour alone to prepare for death. Then Srinivas stepped in. He could not bear to watch his father drown himself, he said. They would give up their pride of caste and go to work. He would carry their father down the mountain himself, and find work in the nearest village. Their father agreed. "Our hearts were gladdened," Ramabai wrote, "and we prepared to start from the forest. And yet we wished very much that a tiger, a great snake, or some other wild animal would put an end to our lives. We were too weak to move, and too proud to beg or work to earn a livelihood."

Sugar and Water

It took them nearly two days to drag themselves out of the forest to a village at the foot of the hill. They took shelter in a temple, but the Brahman priests turned them out. They moved into the ruins of an old temple outside the village, where nothing lived but wild animals. A young Brahman, seeing their helplessness, gave them some food.

On the day they reached the village her father fell ill with fever. "On the first day, at the beginning of his last illness, he asked for a little sugar and water. We gave him water, but could not give sugar." He could not eat the coarse food they had. He became unconscious, and died on the morning of the third day.

No one in the village would help to carry his body. The young Brahman who had fed them paid for a grave to be dug, but he dared not touch the corpse himself, for fear of losing caste, since he was not sure they were Brahmans. Before his death Anant Shastri had taken the vows of a *sannyasi*,

a holy man, and so he was to be buried, not burned. "As there was no one else who could help to carry the dead, my brother tied the body in his dhoti, like a bundle, and carried it alone over two miles to its last resting-place. We sadly followed to the river bank, and helped him a little." They buried him outside the village, away from any house, and went back to the ruined temple.

Raichur

That same evening her mother fell ill with fever. There was no work and no food, and they could not stay. They walked for a time with their sick mother, and then some kind people gave them a little food and the fare to the town of Raichur. There they stayed for some weeks, too weak to go on. Srinivas could not work, and they could not bring themselves to beg. Now and then someone gave them something to eat.

One day her mother was so hungry that she sent Ramabai to a neighbour's house to ask for a piece of *bajri* bread, the coarse millet bread of the poor.

> *I went there very reluctantly. The lady spoke kindly to me, but I could on no account open my mouth to beg that piece of bajree bread. With superhuman effort and a firm resolution to keep my feelings from that lady, I kept the tears back; but they poured out of my nose instead of my eyes, in spite of me, and the expression of my face told its own story.*

The woman understood, and asked if she wanted some food. "So I said, 'Yes, I want only a little piece of bajree bread.' She gave me what I wanted; and I felt very grateful, but could not say a word to express my gratitude. I

ran to my mother in great haste, and gave it to her. But she could not eat, she was too weak." A few days later her mother died.

This time two Brahmans came to help, and with them Ramabai and her brother carried their mother's body to the burning-ground, about three miles from the town. Bodley adds a detail that Ramabai must have told her: that because she was so short, she carried her share of the weight on her head.

Her sister Krishnabai died soon afterwards. "My elder sister also died of starvation, after suffering from illness and hunger. During those few months before our sister died, we three travelled on foot from place to place in search of food and work; but we could not get much of either." We do not know where she died, or when.

Taken Up

Within a few months, then, Ramabai lost her father, her mother, and her sister. She was about sixteen. Only her brother was left.

The verse at the head of this chapter is David's: "When my father and my mother forsake me, Then Jehovah will take me up." Ramabai's parents had not forsaken her. They had loved her to the end, and her father's last act had been to give her into the hands of God, the only God he knew. She did not yet know the God who would take her up. But she came to believe that he had already done so, in that forest above Tirupati. "My father's prayers for me were, no doubt, heard by the Almighty, the all-merciful heavenly Father, whom the old Hindu did not know."

She carried the memory for the rest of her life. "The memory of the last days of their life, full of sorrow, almost breaks my heart," she wrote in 1897. And it shaped her work in a way she could not have foreseen. Years later, Ramabai told her daughter: "When you go to Raichur, think of my

mother, and remember that it was there that I got my inspiration for famine work."

Four Thousand Miles

"They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way; They found no city of habitation. Hungry and thirsty, Their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto Jehovah in their trouble, And he delivered them out of their distresses,"
— Psalm 107:4-6, ASV

Two Left

After their sister's death, Ramabai and Srinivas were alone in the world. She was about sixteen. He was a few years older, the young man who had carried his father's body two miles in a cloth. They had no home, no money, no relatives who would take them in, and no training for any work but the reading of Sanskrit scriptures in public places. For the next three years and more they walked.

"My brother and myself continued our sad pilgrimage," she wrote in 1897, "to the northern boundary of India and back to the east as far as Calcutta." In *A Testimony* she gave the distance:

We wandered from place to place, visiting many temples, bathing in many rivers, fasting and performing penances, worshipping gods, trees, animals, Brahmins, etc., for more than three years after the death of our parents and elder sister. We had walked more than four thousand miles on foot without any sort of comfort, sometimes eating

what kind people gave us and sometimes going without food, with poor coarse clothing, and finding but little shelter except in dharma shalas (i.e., free lodging places for the poor), which are common to all pilgrims and travellers of all sorts except the low caste people. We wandered from the south to the north, as far as Cashmere, and then to the east, and went to Calcutta in 1878.

The figure of four thousand miles is her own, and there is no reason to doubt it. It is roughly the distance from the southern tip of India to Kashmir and across to Calcutta, with the detours that pilgrims make. Later retellings sometimes attach it to her whole childhood of pilgrimage, or inflate it. It belongs to these years, and to these two.

Four Rupees a Month

Srinivas found work where he could. "Brother got work here and there," she wrote, "but most of the time we lived a wanderer's life. Very often we had to go without food for days. Even when my brother had work to do, he got so little wages, only four rupees a month, and sometimes much less than that, that we were obliged to live on a handful of grain soaked in water and a little salt."

They had no blankets or warm clothes. They walked barefoot, without umbrellas against the sun or the rain, and slept "either under the trees on the roadside or under the arches of bridges, or lie down on the ground in the open air." Sometimes they were so hungry that they ate handfuls of wild berries, "swallowing the hard stones together with their coarse skins."

One night in the far north, they stopped on the banks of the Jhelum river, in the Punjab.

Once on the banks of the Jhelum, a river in the Punjab, we were obliged to rest at night in the open air, and tried to keep off the intense cold by digging two gravelike pits, and putting ourselves into them and covering our bodies — except the heads — with dry sand of the river bank.

It is one of the most unforgettable pictures in her writings: a brother and sister, the children of a learned pandit, lying in two graves of their own digging on the river bank, with only their heads above the sand.

She did not dramatise it. "Four long years we suffered from scarcity. We did not mind it much, as we were young and strong. We could stand it much better than our poor old parents and weak sister."

Losing Faith

They kept up their religious observances all the way. They bathed in the holy rivers, visited the temples, fasted, performed penances, and worshipped whatever the scriptures told them to worship. But their faith was draining away. "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."

They did not abandon their religion. "We still continued to keep caste rules, and worshipped gods and studied sacred literature as usual." But it no longer held them as it had. And as it loosened its grip, they became less strict about the rule that had cost their parents their lives: the rule against secular learning and ordinary work. "As our faith in our religion had grown

cold we were not quite so strict with regard to obtaining secular education and finding some means of earning an honest livelihood."

Some of her admirers later told stories of these years that she did not tell herself. One says that she worked as a cook in a high-caste household while her brother taught. Another describes Srinivas swimming out at dawn across a Himalayan lake to discover that the "floating mountains" the pilgrims came to see were rafts pushed by priests. Neither appears in any of her own accounts, and this book does not rely on them. Her own story is remarkable enough.

A Heart of Stone

What did these years do to her? It would be natural to say that her own hunger taught her compassion for the hungry, and that she learned on the roads of India to feel for the poor. Twenty years later, as she set out to rescue famine children, she herself warned against saying anything so simple.

> *Yet I must say that suffering alone is not able to produce sympathy for other sufferers. My own experience of the unconverted state of mind, and the present knowledge of my fellow country women and girls, whom I have ample opportunity to study, shows that suffering in itself has rather a hardening effect on the human heart. It takes away almost all delicate feelings from the soul, making it as hard as a stone.*

It is a striking thing for her to have written, and a brave one. She did not claim that she had come out of the famine a better person. She said that, left to itself, suffering hardens the heart. She understood now, she went on, what God meant when he spoke through Ezekiel: "I will take away the

stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, ASV). What changed her heart, she believed, was not suffering but grace.

This is worth remembering as the story goes on. The woman who later walked into the famine camps of Central India was not simply acting out of memory. She had known hunger, and she had also known what hunger does to the soul. She knew that pity could die. She believed it had been brought back to life in her.

The Wilderness Way

The psalm at the head of this chapter describes wanderers in the desert, hungry and thirsty, who "found no city of habitation." Ramabai and Srinivas had spent their childhood walking from one sacred city to another, and now they walked through city after city and found no home in any of them. The psalm goes on: "Then they cried unto Jehovah in their trouble, And he delivered them out of their distresses."

They did not yet know to whom to cry. But as they turned east, towards Calcutta, the greatest city of British India, they were walking, without knowing it, towards the next turning of their lives. There, for the first time, people would listen to her. And there, for the first time, she would meet Christians.

Pandita

"But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man knoweth not the price thereof; Neither is it found in the land of the living."
— Job 28:12-13, ASV

Calcutta

In 1878 Ramabai and Srinivas reached Calcutta. It was the capital of British India, a city of great wealth and great poverty, of English offices and Bengali mansions, of colleges, printing presses, and newspapers, and it was in the middle of an intellectual ferment that historians would later call the Bengal Renaissance. Educated Bengalis were arguing about everything: religion, caste, the place of women, the relation between Indian tradition and European learning. Into this city walked a young woman of about twenty who could recite thousands of verses of Sanskrit poetry from memory, compose Sanskrit verse on the spot, and speak with authority about the Hindu scriptures. She caused a sensation.

"We stayed in Calcutta for about a year," she wrote, "and became acquainted with the learned Brahmins." By now she and her brother had moved a long way from the religion of their parents. By her own account, as Macnicol reports it, two years before Srinivas's death they had given up much of their faith in the Hindu gods and adopted a simple belief in one

God. But they still kept caste, and much of their thinking was still the thinking of devout Brahmans.

The Christians

In Calcutta, for the first time, they met Christians. They were invited to a Christian social gathering, and were shocked when they were offered refreshments. "We thought the Last Age, Kali Yuga, that is, the age of quarrels, darkness and irreligion had fully established its reign in Calcutta, since some of the Brahmans were so irreligious as to eat food with the English." Then they watched the Christians pray.

> *We looked upon the proceedings of the assembly with curiosity, but did not understand what they were about. After a little while one of them opened a book and read something out of it, and then they all knelt down before their chairs and some said something with closed eyes. We were told that was the way they prayed to God. We did not see any image to which they paid their homage, but it seemed as though they were paying homage to the chairs before which they knelt.*

Before they left, the Christians gave her a copy of the Bible in Sanskrit. Two of the men there, she remembered, were its translators, "grand old men," whose names she had forgotten. "I liked the outward appearance of the book and tried to read it, but did not understand. The language was so different from the Sanskrit literature of the Hindus, the teaching so different, that I thought it quite a waste of time to read that Book; but I have never parted with it since then."

Sarasvati

The learned men of Calcutta were fascinated by her. Macnicol records that she was welcomed at the Calcutta Senate House by three Sanskrit professors, two of them Englishmen, who chanted her praises in Sanskrit verse, and that she answered them at once in an extempore Sanskrit poem. "I am not worthy of the praise you have showered upon me," she said. "I am only a humble worshipper in your temple of Saraswati." Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of learning. Soon afterwards an assembly of the city's pandits, after examining her, gave her the title *Sarasvati* itself.

The other title by which she has been known ever since, *Pandita*, the feminine of pandit, a learned scholar, seems to have come by popular acclaim rather than formal grant. From that time she was known as Pandita Ramabai. Her admirers later claimed that she was the first woman, or the only woman, ever to be given these honours. No one really knows whether that is true, and this book does not repeat it. It is enough that a young woman, orphaned and penniless, with no formal schooling, was hailed by the scholars of the capital as a master of the sacred learning.

Many years later, Macnicol noted, she counted all this as nothing. But at the time it mattered, and not only to her. A Bombay newspaper wrote that "the patriotic among us ought to feel proud that there is, even in our fallen condition, one such among their sisters who would do credit to the female sex in any country." She had shown, in her own person, what an Indian woman could do if she were taught.

What the Books Said

Her fame brought an invitation that changed her life. Some of the pandits asked her to lecture to women in *purdah*, the high-caste women who lived

secluded from the world, on the duties of women according to the Hindu scriptures. To prepare, she bought the Hindu law-books, the *Dharma Shastras*, and read them carefully for the first time. She had been taught the popular scriptures, not the law. Now she discovered what the law said about her.

She found, first of all, that the books contradicted each other on almost everything. "What one book said was most righteous, the other book declared as being unrighteous." She quoted a line from the epic *Mahabharata*: "The Vedas differ from each other; Smritis do not agree with one another; the secret of religion is in some hidden place." But on two things, she found, every authority was agreed.

> *There were two things on which all these books — the Dharma Shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day, and orthodox high caste men, all were agreed — that women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth; and that they could not get Moksha as men.*

A woman, the books taught, could not attain *moksha*, liberation from the endless round of death and rebirth. Her only hope was to worship her husband as her god, however wicked he might be, and so earn the merit to be born again, in some later life, as a man. The same was true of the lowest castes, the Shudras and those beneath them, who were forbidden even to hear the Vedas.

She had known something of this all her life. Now it came home to her with overwhelming force.

> *My eyes were being gradually opened; I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and*

clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned. I became quite dissatisfied with myself. I wanted something more than the Shastras could give me, but I did not know what it was that I wanted.

Her father had taught her mother Sanskrit because he believed that women could learn. He had defended himself before an assembly of pandits, and won. But the books he revered, she now found, held out no hope for the women he had taught. The books her family had followed into the forest had nothing to say to her, as a woman, except that she must wait to be born a man.

Keshab

Among the people who wanted to meet her was Keshab Chandra Sen, the most famous religious reformer in India. Keshab was the leader of the Brahmo Samaj of India, a movement that rejected image worship and caste and taught the worship of one God, drawing on the Upanishads, on other religions, and not least on the teaching of Jesus. He invited Ramabai and her brother to his house, took her into the inner rooms to meet his wife and daughters, and when she left he gave her a copy of one of the Vedas.

He asked if I had studied the Vedas. I answered in the negative, and said that women were not fit to read the Vedas, and they were not allowed to do so. I would be breaking the rules of religion if I were to study the Vedas. He could not but smile at my declaration of this Hindu doctrine. He said nothing in answer, but advised me to study the Vedas and Upanishads.

It was a small thing, a smile, but it was enough. "New thoughts were awakening in my heart. I questioned myself why I should not study the

Vedas and Vedanta. Soon I persuaded myself into the belief that it was not wrong for a woman to read the Vedas. So I began first to read the Upanishads, then the Vedanta, and the Veda."

Some of her early biographers later said that Keshab gave her a book of selections from the scriptures of all religions, including the Sermon on the Mount, as if the path to Christ had begun that day. Ramabai's own account says only that he gave her a Veda. Hers is the account this book follows. What Keshab gave her was not the Gospel, but permission: the permission to read what she had been told she must not read, and to think for herself about it.

Where Wisdom Is Found

The verse at the head of this chapter comes from the book of Job, from a poem about the search for wisdom. Men dig for silver and gold, the poet says, and find precious stones in the depths of the earth. "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" It is not in the mines, not in the sea, and it cannot be bought with gold. Ramabai had more of the wisdom of her people than almost anyone of her age in India. She had just been honoured for it by the scholars of Calcutta. And she had found, at the bottom of it all, that it held no place for her.

The poem in Job ends with an answer: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28, ASV). She did not know that answer yet. The Sanskrit Bible lay half-read among her books. But she had begun to ask the right question.

Nineteen Months

"Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth; and the reproach of thy widowhood shalt thou remember no more. For thy Maker is thy husband; Jehovah of hosts is his name: and the Holy One of Israel is thy Redeemer; the God of the whole earth shall he be called."
— Isaiah 54:4-5, ASV

Srinivas

From Calcutta, Ramabai and her brother travelled on through Bengal and into Assam, lecturing and being received with honour. Then, in 1880, Srinivas fell ill and died. Macnicol places his death at Dacca in May 1880. Other early accounts say Calcutta. The details are uncertain, but what passed between them in his illness, as she wrote it for Rachel Bodley, is not.

His great thought during his brief illness was for me; what would become of me left alone in the world? When he spoke of his anxiety, I answered: "There is no one but God to care for you and me." "Ah," he answered, "then if God cares for us, I am afraid of nothing." And, indeed, in my loneliness, it seemed as if God was near me; I felt His presence.

She was twenty-two. Her father, her mother, her sister, and now her brother were dead. Some of her admirers later retold the exchange in tidier words. In her own telling it is simpler and braver: there was no one but God to care for either of them, and her dying brother found that enough.

A Marriage Across Caste

Six months later she married. Her husband was Bipin Behari Medhavi, a Bengali lawyer with a master's degree and a law degree from the University of Calcutta, who had been a friend of her brother's. He was not a Brahman. Ramabai described him as "a Bengali gentleman of the Shudra caste." He was in fact a Kayastha, a respected caste of scribes and officials, but orthodox Brahmans counted such men as Shudras, and for a Brahman woman to marry one was, in their eyes, a scandal and a pollution.

She married him knowing all this, and she said plainly why. "Having lost all faith in the religion of my ancestors I married a Bengali gentleman of the Shudra caste." Neither of them wished to be married with Hindu or Christian rites. "We neither of us believed either in Hinduism or Christianity," she told Bodley, "and so we were married with the civil marriage rite." Modern scholars date the marriage to November 1880. In Poona, Mrs. Ramabai Ranade later recalled, orthodox women gossiped that the "horrid creature" had been married to Krishna at Dwarka by her father and had then gone and married a Bengali — a story Ramabai herself denounced as wholly false.

They made their home at Silchar, a small town in the Cachar district of Assam, where Bipin practised law. In the spring of 1881 a daughter was born. They had longed for a daughter, Bodley was told, and the name was waiting for her: Manorama, "heart's joy."

A Pamphlet in the Library

At Silchar something happened that seemed small at the time.

> *While living with my husband at Silchar, Assam, I had found a little pamphlet in my library. I do not know how it came there, but I picked it up and began to read it with great interest. It was Luke's Gospel in the Bengali language.*

There was a Baptist missionary in the town, a Mr. Allen, who sometimes visited them and spoke about the gospel. He explained to her the first chapter of Genesis. "The story of the creation of the world was so very unlike all the stories which I read in the Puranas and Shastras that I became greatly interested in it. It struck me as being a true story, but I could not give any reason for thinking so or believing in it."

She read and asked questions, and she told her husband that she meant to become a Christian if she were fully satisfied that it was true. Bipin was not pleased.

> *My husband, who had studied in a mission school, was pretty well acquainted with the Bible, but did not like to be called a Christian. Much less did he like the idea of his wife being publicly baptised and joining the despised Christian community. He was very angry, and said he would tell Mr. Allen not to come to our house any more. I do not know just what would have happened had he lived.*

It is a telling scene. The husband who had defied his caste to marry her was not prepared for her to defy it further. Crossing caste in marriage was radical, but a Hindu reformer could do it and remain respectable in progressive circles. Becoming a Christian meant joining a community that

most Hindus regarded as outcast, "the despised Christian community," and it would have cost him dearly.

Cholera

He did not live. Early in 1882, probably in February, Bipin Medhavi died of cholera. Ramabai remembered the marriage as "nineteen months of happy married life," though the dates that modern scholars give suggest it was closer to fifteen months. Manorama was less than a year old.

"My husband died of cholera within two years of our marriage," she wrote in *A Testimony*, "and I was left alone to face the world with one baby in my arms."

To understand what this meant, we have to remember what it meant to be a widow in Hindu India. A widow was believed to be to blame for her husband's death, through sins in this life or a former one. Among the higher castes she could not remarry. Her head was shaved, her jewellery taken away, and she wore coarse clothing for the rest of her life. She ate one meal a day and fasted often. She was kept away from weddings and festivals because her presence was unlucky. She was often treated as a servant by her husband's family. And child-widows, girls who had been married as infants and widowed before they had ever lived with their husbands, suffered all this from childhood to old age.

Ramabai was spared most of it. She had married outside Hindu custom, and she did not follow its rules for widows. But she knew them from the inside, and she had seen what they did. Now she was twenty-three, alone, with no family, a baby daughter, and no home.

"He Must Himself Draw Me"

She did not despair. In the grief of those months, she said, God seemed nearer, not further away. "This great grief drew me nearer to God. I felt that He was teaching me, and that if I was to come to Him, He must Himself draw me."

That is a remarkable sentence for someone who was not yet a Christian. She did not yet know who God was. She had lost her faith in the gods of her fathers, she was not satisfied with the religion of the Brahmos, and she had only begun to read the Christian scriptures. But she had grasped something that many Christians take years to understand: that she could not find her own way to God, and that if she was to come to him, he must bring her. Jesus said the same: "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him" (John 6:44, ASV).

Years later she described her state of mind at this time. "I was desperately in need of some religion. The Hindu religion held out no hope for me; the Brahmo religion was not a very definite one, for it is nothing but what a man makes for himself. ... It could not and did not satisfy me; still I liked and believed a good deal of it that was better than what the orthodox Hindu religion taught."

Thy Maker Is Thy Husband

The words at the head of this chapter were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to Israel in exile, pictured as a widow, forsaken and ashamed. "Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed ... the reproach of thy widowhood shalt thou remember no more. For thy Maker is thy husband."

Ramabai would come to know these words, and to see in them a promise for every widow of India. In the Hindu world, a woman's husband

was her god, and when he died her hope died with him. The Bible told her the opposite: that God himself would be a husband to the widow, that her widowhood was not her disgrace, and that she need not be ashamed. She would spend her life telling that to the widows of India. But first she had to learn it herself.

She did not go back to Calcutta. All her family were gone, and there was no one to go back to. She went first to Madras, meaning to learn English there, but found the language of the south wholly strange to her. So in 1882, with her baby, she went west, to the city where her father had studied as a young man and first heard a woman reciting Sanskrit: to Poona.

"Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb"

"Open thy mouth for the dumb, In the cause of all such as are left desolate. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, And minister justice to the poor and needy."
— Proverbs 31:8-9, ASV

Poona

Poona in 1882 was the intellectual capital of western India, and it was divided. On one side stood the reformers, men such as Mahadev Govind Ranade, a judge, and R. G. Bhandarkar, a great Sanskrit scholar, members of a society called the Prarthana Samaj, the Prayer Society, which worshipped one God and worked cautiously for social change: the education of women, the raising of the age of marriage, the remarriage of widows. On the other side stood the orthodox, who saw in every such change an attack on Hindu society and on the Hindu nation, and whose leading voice in the coming years would be the brilliant young journalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

The reformers welcomed Ramabai. "The leaders of the reform party, and the members of the Prarthana Samaj treated me with great kindness and gave me some help," she wrote. "Messrs. Ranade, Modak, Kelkar, and Dr. Bhandarkar were among the people who showed great kindness to me." She gave readings from the Puranas at the Ranades' house. Ranade's young

wife, also named Ramabai, who would become a pioneer of women's education herself, never forgot her. "The sweet and musical flow of her speech and the manner in which she presented her subject were alike admirable," Mrs. Ranade remembered. "In addition she had amazing skill in winning the hearts of her hearers for whatever she had to say."

The Arya Mahila Samaj

Within a few months of her arrival, Ramabai founded a society of women. She called it the Arya Mahila Samaj, the Aryan Women's Society. Its aims, as Macnicol records them, were "to work for the deliverance of women from the evil practices (e.g., child-marriage, the bondage of ignorance, etc.) which by tradition and custom have come down to India from the past," and to work for the raising of women's condition "in respect of religion, morality, etc." It met on Saturdays, and she travelled from city to city in the Bombay Presidency founding branches of it.

It was one of the earliest organisations in India founded and led by a woman to work for women, and she did not mince her words. "Men look on us women as chattels," she declared in June 1882. "We make every effort to deliver ourselves from this situation. But some will say that this is a rebellion against man, and that to do this is sin. To leave men's evil acts unrebuked and remain unmoved before them is a great sin."

That was more than orthodox Poona was ready to hear. The orthodox press attacked her almost at once. The Poona newspaper *Kesari*, which Tilak had helped to found, was criticising her by the summer of 1882.

She also wrote a small book in Marathi, *Stri Dharma Niti*, "Morals for Women," a practical guide for women on how to improve their minds and manage their lives. It was, by later standards, a cautious book, which accepted a wife's duties to her husband while urging women to educate

themselves. But it contained one sentence that summed up her impatience with her country: "No spirit of daring, no ardour, no enterprise, no self-reliance, no anything — it is all No, no, no." The sale of the book would help to pay for her voyage to England.

Before the Commission

In September 1882 the British government's Education Commission, headed by Dr. W. W. Hunter, came to Poona to inquire into the state of education in India. The women of the Arya Mahila Samaj and others, some three hundred Brahman women with their children, gathered in the Town Hall to welcome the commissioners, to show them that the best families of the Maratha country wanted their daughters taught. Ramabai spoke for them. Then she gave evidence before the commission herself.

Hunter thought her evidence so important that he had it translated from Marathi and printed separately. She began by explaining who she was: the child of a man who had suffered for teaching women. "I consider it my duty," she said, "to the very end of my life, to maintain this cause, and to advocate the proper position of women in this land."

She asked for women teachers to be properly trained and properly paid, and for women inspectors of girls' schools instead of men. Her reasons were blunt.

> *In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the educated men of this country are opposed to Female Education and the proper position of woman. If they observe the slightest fault, they magnify the grain of mustard-seed into a mountain, and try to ruin the character of a woman. ... Men being more able to reach the authorities are believed, while women go to the wall. ... It is evident that women, being one-*

half of the people of this country, are oppressed and cruelly treated by the other half.

And she asked the government to train women doctors. "The women of this country are much more reserved than in other countries, and most of them would rather die than speak of their ailments to a man. The want of lady-doctors is, therefore, the cause of hundreds of thousands of women dying premature deaths."

It was said at the time, on the authority of the *Times of India*, that her plea for women doctors reached the ears of Queen Victoria herself, and helped to inspire the movement later led by the Viceroy's wife, Lady Dufferin, to provide medical care for Indian women. Rachel Bodley reported this as something that was "believed." Whether or not it is true, the need Ramabai described was real, and she was among the first to describe it in public.

She was twenty-four. She had no degree, no position, and no family. But she had stood before a British commission and told it, in an answer the chairman later had printed, that the women of India were oppressed by the men. It was a courageous thing to do, and the verse at the head of this chapter describes it exactly: "Open thy mouth for the dumb, In the cause of all such as are left desolate."

A Girl Who Had "Eaten Her Husband"

That same year, a Brahman child-widow of about twelve was brought to her. She had been married at five, and her boy husband had died a few days after the wedding. Her mother-in-law would not look at her. "She said the girl had eaten up her son and was a great demon."

Ramabai took the girl to live with her. And as she looked at her, her plans began to take shape.

As I looked on that little figure my vague thoughts about doing something for my sisters in similar conditions began to take shape. ... I began to place a plan for starting a Home for Hindu widows before my countrymen and to ask for their help. For six months or more I tried my best to get help, but could not. Then the thought came to me that I had better get a medical education and then do what I could to help widows. With that purpose I made up my mind to go to England, if the way opened for me.

She wrote those words many years later, as a Christian, and she added: "The unknown God, who was directing my steps toward the way of life, made it possible for me to carry out the purpose which He had put into my heart."

Teachers

In Poona she met Christians again, and this time she listened more closely. A missionary of the Anglican High Church, Miss Hurford, came to teach her English and the New Testament in Marathi. "She used to teach me some lessons from the primary reading books, yet sometimes I was more interested in the study of the New Testament than in the reading books."

Another visitor was Father Nehemiah Goreh. Goreh was, like Ramabai, a Chitpawan Brahman, a learned man who had become a Christian more than thirty years before and was now a priest of an Anglican religious order. He was gentle, humble, and a formidable scholar of Hindu philosophy. "The Rev. Father Goreh was another missionary who used to come and explain the difference between the Hindu and Christian religions," she wrote. "I profited much by their teaching." It was a book by Goreh that would later convince her of the truth of Christianity.

But she was not yet ready. Macnicol, citing Goreh's biographer, records that she was said to have written to a vernacular newspaper around this

time declaring that nothing would ever induce her to become a Christian. The letter itself has not been traced. If she said it, she had reason to. She had seen what becoming a Christian had cost others, and she knew what it would cost her in Poona.

The Sea

To go to England was itself an enormous step. For an orthodox Hindu of high caste, crossing the sea meant losing caste. For a woman, and a widow, to go alone with a small child to a country where she knew almost no one was almost unheard of. She knew it, and later wrote that a Hindu woman who crossed the sea cut herself off from her people for ever.

She went anyway. The Sisters of the Anglican Community of St. Mary the Virgin, at Wantage in Berkshire, to whom Miss Hurford had introduced her, agreed to receive her. In the spring of 1883, with Manorama, who was just two, and a young woman friend, Anandibai Bhagat, as her companion, she sailed from Bombay for England.

The Psalmist prayed that God would arise "To judge the fatherless and the oppressed, That man who is of the earth may be terrible no more" (Psalm 10:18, ASV). The girl who had "eaten up her son" was one of thousands, and Ramabai knew it. She was going to England to learn how to help them. God, as she later saw it, meant to teach her something more.

As Abraham

> *"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went."*
> *— Hebrews 11:8, ASV*

Not Knowing Whither

Four years later, in Philadelphia, Ramabai tried to explain to Rachel Bodley what it had meant to leave India.

> *I could not have done this unless I had felt that my faith in God had become strong: it is such a great step for a Hindu woman to cross the sea; one cuts oneself always off from one's people. But the voice came to me as to Abraham. ... It seems to me now very strange how I could have started as I did with my friend and little child throwing myself on God's protection. I went forth as Abraham, not knowing whither I went.*

She was not yet a Christian. She had read some of the New Testament, and she had listened to Miss Hurford and Father Goreh. But she already knew the story of Abraham, and she already thought of her journey in its terms. The verse at the head of this chapter describes it: "he went out, not knowing whither he went." God had said to Abram, "Get thee out of thy

country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" (Genesis 12:1, ASV). Ramabai had no country, no kindred, and no father's house left to leave. But she was leaving her caste and her people's good opinion, and she knew she might never have them back.

Wantage

She landed in England in the spring of 1883, and the Sisters of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin met her at the ship and took her to their convent at Wantage, a market town at the foot of the Berkshire Downs, south-west of Oxford. The Wantage sisters were an Anglican religious order of the High Church kind, devoted to prayer, teaching, and works of mercy, with a house in Poona, where Miss Hurford had worked. One of them, almost certainly Sister Geraldine, took Ramabai under her care. "The Sisters took me to their Home," Ramabai wrote, "and one of them who became my spiritual mother, began to teach me both secular and religious subjects." She learned English there, and it was there that she spent her first year.

Her plan had been to study medicine. It did not work out. She was already partly deaf, whether from scarlet fever or from the hardships of her wandering years, and she was told that her deafness would make it impossible for her to train as a doctor. It was a hard blow. She had crossed the sea to become a doctor for the women of India, and now she could not.

A worse blow followed. Her friend and companion, Anandibai Bhagat, who had come with her from India, took her own life a few months after they arrived. The reasons have never been clear. Some people at the time, including the Oxford scholar Max Müller, suggested that the young woman had been terrified of being pressed to become a Christian. Others have seen

other causes. None of her published accounts mentions it. She was twenty-five, and she had now lost her parents, her sister, her brother, her husband, and the friend who had come with her from India. For a time, it seems, she was badly shaken.

Fulham

Then something happened that she never forgot. The Mother Superior sent her for a change of air to one of the order's houses in London, and there she was taken to see the rescue homes at Fulham, where the Sisters of the Cross worked among women who had been prostitutes.

> *The Sisters there took me to see the rescue work carried on by them. I met several of the women who had once been in their Rescue-Home, but who had so completely changed, and were so filled with the love of Christ and compassion for suffering humanity, that they had given their life for the service of the sick and infirm. Here for the first time in my life, I came to know that something should be done to reclaim the so-called fallen women, and that Christians, whom Hindus considered outcasts and cruel, were kind to these unfortunate women, degraded in the eyes of society.*

She had never seen anything like it in India. "I had not heard anyone speaking kindly of them, nor seen any one making any effort to turn them from the evil path." The Hindu law, she wrote, commanded that the king should cause such women "to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town." Here, the women whom society had cast out were nursing the sick in the name of Christ.

She asked the sister who was teaching her what it was that made Christians care for these women. The sister read to her the fourth chapter

of John's Gospel: the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

The Woman at the Well

It is not hard to see why that chapter struck her. The Samaritan woman belonged to a despised people, whom the Jews would not touch. She had had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband. She came to the well at midday, alone, when the other women had gone. And Jesus, a Jewish teacher, spoke to her, asked her for a drink, told her the truth about her life without condemning her, and offered her "living water." "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst" (John 4:14, ASV). She was the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus plainly said that he was the Christ. And she went back to her town and told everyone.

Ramabai had spent months reading the Hindu law-books and discovering that they had nothing to say to a woman except that she was "worse than demons" and could hope for salvation only through her husband. Now she heard of a teacher who went out of his way to speak to a woman of the worst reputation, and offered her, directly, the gift of God.

> *She spoke of the Infinite Love of Christ for sinners. He did not despise them but came to save them. I had never read or heard anything like this in the religious books of the Hindus. I realized, after reading the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Saviour He claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India, and of every land.*

"Thus my heart was drawn to the religion of Christ."

Goreh's Book

Her heart was drawn. Her mind still needed convincing, and she was not a woman who would believe anything without reasons. The reasons came, she said, from Father Goreh. "I was intellectually convinced of its truth on reading a book written by Father Goreh." Goreh was the author of a searching critique of the Hindu philosophical systems from a Christian point of view. He also wrote to her from India, and she wrote of one of his letters: "His humble, sweet voice has pierced my heart. I think no one would have had the power of turning me from the Brahman religion but Father Goreh."

It is worth noticing that the two voices that brought her to the point of faith were, one, a sister of an English order showing her Christians caring for outcast women, and, two, an Indian Brahman convert showing her, in her own intellectual tradition, why Christianity was true. She needed both. She was never satisfied with a faith that was only feeling, or with one that was only argument.

Baptism

On 29 September 1883, at Wantage, Ramabai was baptised in the Church of England, and Manorama with her. She took the baptismal name Mary. According to Macnicol, she was baptised in Wantage parish church by Canon William Butler, the founder of the order, with Sister Geraldine among the witnesses; later accounts call Geraldine her godmother. She was later confirmed.

She was calm about it, not ecstatic. "I was comparatively happy," she wrote, "and felt a great joy in finding a new religion which was better than any other religion I had known before. I knew full well that it would

displease my friends and my countrymen very much; but I have never regretted having taken the step. I was hungry for something better than what the Hindu Shastras gave. I found it in the Christian's Bible and was satisfied."

She was right about her countrymen. When the news reached Poona, the friends who had helped her there were dismayed, and the orthodox felt vindicated. The brilliant Brahman widow who had stood before the Education Commission had gone to England and been lost to the Christians. For some of her countrymen, she has never been forgiven.

But there is one more thing to say about this baptism, and Ramabai herself said it. What happened at Wantage, she came to believe, was real, but it was not the whole story. She had found the religion. She had not yet found the Person. That would take another eight years.

The Religion Without Christ

"prove all things; hold fast that which is good;"
— 1 Thessalonians 5:21, ASV

Cheltenham

In September 1884 Ramabai moved from Wantage to Cheltenham, the spa town in Gloucestershire, to the Ladies' College founded and run by Dorothea Beale. Miss Beale was one of the great pioneers of women's education in England, a devout Anglican, a thinker, and a formidable personality. At Cheltenham Ramabai taught Sanskrit and studied mathematics, natural science, and English literature. It was the first formal schooling she had ever had.

A student at the college remembered her at Miss Beale's Saturday Scripture classes, where they studied the opening verses of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." Ramabai, already troubled with deafness, sat on a high stool beside the Principal "with her aurophone touching her teeth," following every word. She was not an easy pupil. Another woman at the college remembered that her mind became clouded with religious doubt, and that she went away to fight the battle alone, and came back joyfully to tell Miss Beale "of faith restored."

She owed Miss Beale, and the sister at Wantage, almost certainly Sister Geraldine, who became her "spiritual mother," a great deal, and she said so.

"I owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to her and to Miss Beale," she wrote of her "spiritual mother." "Both of these ladies took great pains with me and taught me the subjects which would help me in my life. ... Their motherly kindness and deeply spiritual influence have greatly helped in building up my character."

But gratitude did not mean agreement. The years at Wantage and Cheltenham were years of argument.

The Quarrels

Ramabai's letters from these years, and those of Sister Geraldine and others about her, were preserved by the sisters and published in India in 1977. That collection is still in copyright, and this book knows it chiefly through the work of modern scholars who have studied it. What they describe is a long struggle.

Ramabai had been baptised as an Anglican, but she did not accept everything the Anglicans taught. She questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, and whether Christ was fully God. She questioned eternal punishment. She objected to the Athanasian Creed, with its warnings that those who did not believe it would perish. She would not give up her vegetarian diet, which she had kept all her life. She wanted her cross inscribed in Sanskrit. She asked why she should accept the teaching of one church over another, when the Christians she met disagreed so much among themselves. And she refused to let the sisters, or the Canon who had founded their order, or the Bishop of Bombay, direct her life and work.

Sister Geraldine, who loved her and considered herself responsible for her soul, treated much of this as pride and heresy. The sisters wanted Ramabai to return to India as a teacher in their own Anglican mission. Ramabai wanted to be free. The historian Antoinette Burton has described

the relationship as "less a question of sisterhood than a struggle for authority." When the sisters warned her about her doubts and her independence, she answered, in a letter preserved in the 1977 edition of her correspondence and often quoted by modern scholars, that "the door of the Universal Church of God is not shut against me."

It is easy to take sides in this quarrel. Some modern historians admire Ramabai as a free thinker resisting the authority of a colonial church. Some Christian writers see a proud young convert who had not yet learned humility. Both are partly right. She was proud, in a way; she had been honoured by pandits, and she was not used to being told what to think. She was also right to refuse to be governed by people who, however kind, did not understand her country and assumed they knew best. And the sisters, however possessive, loved her and prayed for her, and she knew it. Years later, it is said, she still kept Sister Geraldine's photograph on her wall.

No Special Sect

In 1895, looking back, she described her faith in these years in a little tract published in Bombay.

> *I believed the Apostles' Creed, and all the essential doctrines of Christianity. My mind was at rest; and I trusted in God, believed on Christ, and prayed in His name. I did not adhere to any special sect, nor do I now. It was enough for me to be called a Christian, on the ground of my belief in Christ as the Saviour of mankind.*

She went on:

> *I had many doubts and many difficulties in the matter of belief. So many sects, so many opinions, so much want of spirituality and much shallow talk in the name of religion. All these troubled me very much,*

and I began to see much the same in the picture of Christianity as I have been accustomed to see in that of the Hindu religion. But all this time I was conscious that God was leading me; and I determined not to take the opinion of men as my ground of belief, and went on reading the Bible only and trusted in God's mercy.

That is a significant confession. She had left the Hindu religion partly because its authorities contradicted each other, and because they told her things about women she could not believe. Now she found the Christian authorities contradicting each other too. Her answer was not to abandon Christianity, nor to submit to whichever church had baptised her. It was to go to the Bible itself. "I determined not to take the opinion of men as my ground of belief."

The verse at the head of this chapter is Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians: "prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Ramabai was proving all things. She was not being contrary for its own sake. She was a scholar trained in a tradition of argument, and a woman who had learned at great cost not to accept what she was told without examining it. The Bereans in Acts were praised because they "received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11, ASV). That was what she was trying to do.

What Was Missing

Later she came to see these years differently. It was not that her questions were wrong, she thought, but that she had been looking in the wrong place. In *A Testimony* she wrote that for years after her baptism she had studied "other books about the Bible," and had not studied "the Bible itself as I should have done." She had also held on, without realising it, to ideas she had brought with her from Hinduism.

I thought that repentance of sin, and the determination to give it up, was what was necessary for forgiveness of sin: that the rite of baptism was the means of regeneration: that my sins were truly washed away, when I was baptized in the name of Christ. These and such other ideas, which are akin to Hindu mode of religious thought, stuck to me. For some years after my baptism, I was comparatively happy to think that I had found a religion which gave its privileges equally to men and women; there was no distinction of caste, colour, or sex made in it. All this was very beautiful, no doubt.

"All this was very beautiful, no doubt." But something was missing. She had found a religion that treated women and men as equal before God. She believed its creed. She had been washed in its water. What she did not yet have, she came to believe, was a personal trust in Christ himself as her Saviour.

It is worth hearing, too, how a sympathetic outsider saw her. Max Müller, the Oxford scholar of Sanskrit, who admired her, wrote to her American supporters in 1895, when she was under attack, that "in all essentials she had been a Christian even while she was still a Brahman," and that she had joined a church chiefly because "she felt the necessity of belonging to some communion, to be one with her friends." It was a kind judgement, and a mistaken one. It explained her conversion as a matter of sympathy and loneliness. Ramabai herself would have said that it was neither. It was, at this stage, a matter of conviction without life. The life came later.

To America

Late in 1885 or early in 1886 a letter came from America. Anandibai Joshee, a young Brahman woman from the Maratha country, a relative of

Ramabai's, was about to graduate in medicine from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the first Indian woman to do so. She invited Ramabai to her graduation.

The sisters did not want her to go. Nor did Miss Beale. There was talk of a government educational post for her in India. But after some weeks of painful indecision Ramabai accepted. In February 1886 she sailed for America. Manorama, not yet five, went with her at first, but was soon sent back to England, to live with the sisters at Wantage, who cared for her for the next three years.

It was, in its way, one more act of independence. And it would change her life again.

The High-Caste Hindu Woman

"learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."
— Isaiah 1:17, ASV

Philadelphia

Ramabai reached Philadelphia in the first days of March 1886. On 6 March, in the house of Dr. Rachel Bodley, dean of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, she met her relative Anandibai Joshee for the first time, and five days later she watched her graduate as a doctor of medicine, the first Indian woman to do so. Anandibai wrote of her admiringly, as a woman "delicate and flowerlike" who had yet, by her courage, "caused great yogis to quail before her." It was a proud moment for both of them. It was also a short-lived triumph. Anandibai went home to India that year to take up a hospital post, fell ill with tuberculosis, and died early in 1887, at the age of twenty-one.

Ramabai had meant to stay in America a few weeks. She stayed nearly three years. Rachel Bodley's house became her home, and Bodley herself became one of her closest friends. What held her was what she saw. "I am deeply impressed by and am interested in the work of Western women," she wrote that summer, "who seem to have one common aim, namely, the good of their fellow-beings. It is my dream some day to tell my countrywomen in

their own languages this wonderful story, in the hope that the recital may awaken in their hearts a desire to do likewise."

She studied everything that might be useful to her in India. A Philadelphia woman showed her the city's kindergartens, and in the autumn she enrolled in a course to train as a kindergarten teacher. She began to prepare a series of reading books for Marathi children, and when she found that illustrations were too expensive to have drawn in India, she bought hundreds of electrotype printing plates to take home. She visited schools and colleges. And she wrote.

The Book

The High-Caste Hindu Woman was published in Philadelphia in June 1887. Ramabai had it printed at her own risk to raise money, and by the time she left America some seven thousand copies had been sold, ten thousand within a few years. It is a short book, and an angry one.

She described the life of a high-caste Hindu woman from birth to death: the disappointment that greeted the birth of a daughter, the marriage of girls as young children to men they had never seen, the wife's life in her husband's family as the servant of her mother-in-law, and above all the life of the widow. She quoted the Hindu law-books against themselves. She described what she had seen herself. "A child of thirteen," she wrote, "was cruelly beaten by her husband in my presence for telling the simple truth, that she did not like so well to be in his house as at her own home."

She did not spare the British. English law in India, she pointed out, enforced child marriages through the courts. "Now, under the so-called Christian British rule, the woman is in no better condition than of old." It was a line her Western admirers did not always quote.

Modern Indian scholars have called the book a feminist manifesto, and it is not hard to see why. It argued that women were half the nation, that the nation could not rise while they were kept down, and that the reform of Indian society must begin with the education of its women. Above all it pleaded for the child-widows, and it ended with a practical proposal. She would go home and start a school for high-caste widows, where they could be trained as teachers and so earn their own living with dignity. It would need help for about ten years, after which, she hoped, it could be supported by Indians alone.

> *I am fully aware of the great responsibility the trial — and it may be the failure — will involve; but as some one must make a beginning, I am resolved to try, trusting that God, who knows the need of my countrywomen, will raise up able workers to forward this cause, whether I succeed in it or not.*

"Out of Nazareth"

The school she proposed would not be a Christian school. It would receive Hindu widows as Hindus, and leave them free in matters of religion. Bodley described the plan in her introduction: Ramabai "would make no condition as to reading the Bible or studying Christianity," but would put on the shelves of the school library, "side by side, the Bible and the Sacred books of the East, and for the rest, earnestly pray that God will guide them to His saving truth." That promise of neutrality would cause her great trouble later.

Bodley closed her introduction with a scene. Ramabai came into her library to say goodbye before a journey, and Bodley asked her if she had a last message for her readers.

"Remind them," she replied, with animated countenance and rapid speech, as she clasped my hand, "that it was 'out of Nazareth' that the blessed Redeemer of mankind came; that great reforms have again and again been wrought by instrumentalities that the world despised. Tell them 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!"

When Nathanael first heard of Jesus, he asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46, ASV). The despised town produced the Saviour of the world. Ramabai believed that the most despised people in India, the child-widows, whom their own families considered cursed, could be the means of its renewal. It was a vision grounded in the gospel, and it would govern the rest of her life.

Boston

She took her cause to Boston, and Boston responded. In May 1887 a public meeting was held at Channing Hall. Because the school was to be non-sectarian, the leaders of the different churches could not sponsor it without dispute, and so the meeting was held under Unitarian auspices, with the support of Episcopalians such as the great preacher Phillips Brooks. On 13 December 1887 the Ramabai Association was formed. Its president was the writer Edward Everett Hale. Among its officers were Phillips Brooks, the Congregationalist Lyman Abbott, the temperance leader Frances Willard, and Rachel Bodley. It promised to support her school for ten years.

That night, it was later reported, she could not sleep for joy. "I am crying for joy," she said, "that my dream of years has become a reality."

For the rest of her time in America she travelled and spoke. She went as far as Canada in the north and the Pacific coast in the west. She gave more

than a hundred lectures for the Association and many more on her own account, to pay her debts in England and America, and she insisted on repaying the sisters at Wantage for all they had spent on her. More than fifty local circles were formed to support her work. She also wrote a book in Marathi about America, describing to her own people the country she had come to admire, its schools, its women, and its freedoms, as well as its faults. It was published in Bombay in 1889.

Home

In November 1888 she sailed from San Francisco for India, by way of Japan and Hong Kong. As she set sail for home she was afraid. "I felt as if I were going to a strange country and to a strange people. I fell on my knees, committed myself to the care of our loving heavenly Father and sailed." She had left India as a Hindu widow and was coming back as a Christian. She knew the welcome she could expect.

She landed at Bombay on 1 February 1889. She had been away nearly six years.

The verse at the head of this chapter is God's command to his people through Isaiah: "seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." For three years in America she had pleaded for the widow, in lecture halls and churches and in a book that thousands read. Now she had to do what she had asked others to support. In less than six weeks, she would open her school.

Sharada Sadan

"Wisdom hath builded her house; She hath hewn out her seven pillars:"
— Proverbs 9:1, ASV

The Home of Wisdom

Ramabai spent the six weeks after her return preparing, and on 11 March 1889 she opened her school in a rented house at Chowpatty, on the seafront in Bombay. She called it Sharada Sadan, the Home of Sharada, which is another name for Sarasvati, the goddess of learning. The name was a deliberate choice. It told the Hindu families of Bombay that this was not a mission school, and that it honoured learning in their own terms. It can be translated simply as "the Home of Wisdom."

The opening meeting was chaired by a Hindu woman, Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar, and a leading Marathi paper called it the first time an Indian woman had presided over such an occasion. Ramabai spoke about her travels and her plans, and she did not flatter the men in the audience.

Let the newspapers and the general public say what they will, there is not the least doubt that the condition of the women of our country is heart-rending in the extreme. It is we, and we only, who can ever have a real knowledge of the welfare of our people. Foreigners can never know. ... Gentlemen, in your parliament no one has allowed one of us

sisters to plead the cause of India's unfortunate women; I am fully convinced that you men have no better idea of the oppression and woe suffered by Hindu women than the British Parliament has of the misfortunes of Hindustan.

It is worth noticing what she was saying. Indian nationalists complained that the British Parliament could not understand India because no Indian sat in it. Ramabai turned the argument on the nationalists themselves. They could not understand the women of India, because no woman was allowed to speak among them.

Two Pupils

When the meeting ended and the guests went home, the school had two pupils. One was a young widow, whose name was Godubai. She had suffered greatly in her husband's family and had more than once tried to take her own life. She was not quick to learn, and teaching her needed patience on both sides. Four years later she married a widowed professor at Fergusson College in Poona, Dhondo Keshav Karve, who became one of the great pioneers of women's education in India. The other was a girl named Sharada, not a widow, who came as a paying day-pupil.

By the end of the first three months there were twenty-two. By the end of the first year there were twenty-seven, twelve of them widows. The aim was to train them, above all, to become teachers themselves, so that they could earn their own living with dignity. And the girls were allowed to keep the rules of their caste, so that no Hindu family need fear that a daughter would be polluted by living there.

The girls were also allowed to sing, which in orthodox homes was thought unbecoming for a respectable woman. "We have happy times in the evening," Ramabai wrote, "when all the girls come into my room and

we sing together as best we can. We have no love songs to sing, no comic bits to say; but we sing hymns, and feel quite content. You see, they do not allow women to sing; they think it is a bad thing in a housewife. But we are getting unruly in this school of ours. We are going to turn the tide, and make it a good and honourable taste."

The Open Door

Sharada Sadan was not a Christian school. Ramabai had promised her American supporters and her Indian advisers that it would be neutral in religion. The Bible was not taught in class. The girls were free to follow their own religion. But she did not pretend not to be a Christian. Every morning, in her own room, she read the Bible and prayed with Manorama. And she left the door open.

One of her American friends, Miss Sarah Hamlin, described what happened. Going to Ramabai's room one morning, she found eight of the older girls sitting on the lounge, listening intently to the Marathi Bible. When Ramabai knelt to pray, they knelt with her. Afterwards each girl came up to her, and she spoke a kind word to each, and kissed them.

> *"These are my own private prayers," explained Pandita Ramabai. "No girl is compelled to come in; but one by one they have come of their own accord. At first, when they heard me with Manorama, they peeped in the door: then, one by one, they ventured a little farther. Occasionally, one would sit, but all would leave when I knelt: now all remain."*

It is a lovely scene. The Association in Boston, worried by newspaper talk of "converts," warned that more had been made of it than it deserved. But it contains the whole of the conflict that was coming. To Ramabai, the open

door was a matter of simple honesty. She would not force her faith on anyone, but she would not hide it either, and she would not shut out a girl who wanted to hear. To her Hindu advisers, the open door was a breach of trust. The parents who sent their daughters to Sharada Sadan had been promised a neutral school. What went on in the Principal's room, they felt, was part of the school, whatever the timetable said.

A Voice Too Small

That December the Indian National Congress met in Bombay. Among the delegates were a handful of women, largely because of Ramabai's influence. She spoke in support of two resolutions about widows. She denounced the custom of shaving widows' heads, and the belief that if a widow kept her hair it would bind her dead husband in hell, and asked the men how they would like to have their own heads shaved on the death of a wife. When she stood up to speak there was a crush of men trying to hear her. She began, according to the *Indian Magazine*'s report: "It is not strange, my countrymen, that my voice is small, for you have never given a woman the chance to make her voice strong!"

The next hot season, in 1890, she went back to the forest of her birth for the first time. "The whole ground," she wrote to a friend, "seemed hallowed with the association of my beloved parents."

Poona and the Board

In November 1890 the school moved to Poona, where living was cheaper and the climate healthier. The move brought it under the eyes of the Poona reformers, and also of their opponents.

At first a new managing board was formed in Poona, which claimed full control of the admission of pupils and the funds, and gave Ramabai one vote in twelve. Under it, according to the Association's chairman, the school was run as strictly Hindu, and Ramabai herself was forbidden to enter the dining-room, the kitchen, or the corridor while the girls were eating. The American Association refused to accept these terms, and the board was dissolved in the summer of 1891.

That summer and autumn the Poona papers attacked her fiercely. She was accused of disloyalty to her own people, of taking money from Americans under false pretences, of interfering with her pupils' religion, and of getting rid of the managing board so that she could teach Christianity openly. Some of the attacks were indecent. One editor later withdrew his charges and apologised. Worn out, Ramabai offered to hand over the school and its funds, and to let someone "wiser than herself" be put at its head. The Association in Boston cabled back: "Be firm. The Association supports you. Funds and letters coming."

"Those were the darkest days in the stormy time," she wrote. "I was in great doubt, and was at a loss to know what would be the best course to follow. When this cablegram came, I was sure you would support me, and I went on in the usual way."

But the storm left its mark. "Although we are living in our own country, and among our own people," she wrote, "we are continually made to feel that we are among a strange and hostile people in a strange land. We are utterly defenceless, and almost friendless, in this beloved land of ours."

In July 1892 the school moved into a compound of its own in Poona, bought by the Association, with two bungalows on nearly three acres of bare ground, which she soon turned into a garden. Within a year it had sixty-two pupils. The Home of Wisdom had its house. The verse at the head of this chapter describes Wisdom building her house and hewing out

its pillars, and then sending out her maidens to call to anyone who would come: "Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither" (Proverbs 9:4, ASV). Ramabai's house was open to any widow who would come. The question that was about to tear it apart was how open its mistress's own door should be.

The Storm of 1893

"What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in thee. In God (I will praise his word), In God have I put my trust, I will not be afraid; What can flesh do unto me?"
— Psalm 56:3-4, ASV

The Morning Prayers

By the spring of 1893 the school in Poona had more than sixty pupils, most of them widows. And more and more of them were coming to Ramabai's room in the early morning.

Soonderbai Powar, an Indian Christian teacher who had become Ramabai's close friend and colleague, returned from a visit to England that spring and found "all the girls attending Ramabai's prayer-meetings." Helen Dyer, who knew the school well, estimated that fully half the widows were by then coming to the morning prayers. Some of the girls in the school were not widows but orphans or poor girls whom Ramabai had taken in and supported herself, and a few she had adopted outright. These girls, Dyer wrote, she felt it her duty to instruct in the Christian faith.

That May, on a Hindu festival day during the hot-weather holiday, Ramabai offered the girls a choice between a picnic and a day of prayer. According to Dyer, about thirty of the sixty-odd girls chose to stay for

prayer, and more than twenty of them said they wished to learn about Christ.

Nothing was done in secret. And that was precisely the problem.

The Resignation

On 13 August 1893 the three Hindu gentlemen whose names appeared on the school's reports as its advisory board in Poona wrote to the Ramabai Association in Boston. They were R. G. Bhandarkar, the Sanskrit scholar; M. G. Ranade, the judge and reformer who had welcomed Ramabai to Poona eleven years before; and C. N. Bhat. Their letter is worth quoting at length, because it put their case fairly and it was the case that most educated Hindus believed.

> *Encouraged, apparently, by some expressions contained in your Committee's communications, Pundita Ramabai has during the past year or so departed from the lines of strict neutrality on which the institution was started and managed for some time. We have strong reasons to believe that many of the girls are induced to attend her private prayers regularly, and read the Bible, and that Christian doctrines are taught to them. Pundita Ramabai has also shown her active missionary tendencies by asking the parents and guardians of girls to allow them to attend her prayers, and in one case at least, to become Christians themselves; and we are assured that two of the girls have declared to their elders that they have accepted Christ. Such a departure from the original understanding cannot fail, in our opinion, to shake the stability of the institution, and alienate public sympathy from this work. We are sorry our individual remonstrances with the Pundita Bai have proved of no avail. If the Sadana is to be*

conducted as an avowed proselytizing institution, we must disavow all connection with it.

According to the Association, they published their resignation in the newspapers before it reached Boston; according to Ramabai, they sent a circular to parents and guardians asking them not to send their girls to the school.

The effect was immediate. The Poona papers, already hostile, grew fiercer. Anonymous letters threatened Ramabai's life. Parents came and took their girls home. Ramabai's own register records that thirty-one pupils were withdrawn: twenty-six widows and five others. She kept track of every one. Twelve went to the Poona High School for girls, where some of her former advisers paid fees for some of them. Nine later came back. One remarried. One went to train as a nurse. Four, she wrote, were "kept at home in a miserable condition," and one "went to her destruction."

Two Sides

It would be easy to tell this story as a simple conflict between a faithful Christian and her persecutors. It was not. Ranade and Bhandarkar were not bigots. They were among the most liberal Hindus of their day, men who had risked their own standing to support women's education and widow remarriage. They had supported Ramabai when few others would. They had lent their names to her school on the understanding that it would not be used to make converts. And they believed, with reason, that the understanding had been broken.

They were not wrong about the facts. Girls were attending Ramabai's prayers and reading the Bible, and she did not deny it. She did deny that there had been any conversions or baptisms, though rumour said that two

of the widows had privately professed faith in Christ. In an interview published in a Madras newspaper she told her side of the story.

> *They had nothing practically to do with the internal management of the Sadan. ... We went on satisfactorily for some time, but when the number of girls attending my private prayers rose to about twenty, the matter was reported to them. We did nothing in secret. My room was always open. They asked me whether some of the girls attended my private prayers. I replied that they did. They then asked me to prevent them from doing so. I told them I could not conscientiously do that — I could not restrict my intercourse with the pupils. As a Christian was at the head of the institution, the girls must be more or less under Christian influences.*

Some time earlier, according to Macnicol (drawing on Kelkar's life of Tilak), she had told one of her leading critics plainly that she could not undertake that a Hindu girl entering her school would always remain a Hindu.

Where does the truth lie? Both sides were honest, and both had a point. The reformers were right that the school had been presented as neutral, and that a school run by a devout and persuasive Christian, whose room was always open, could not in practice be neutral in the way Hindu parents understood. Ramabai was right that she had never compelled anyone, that she had never made the Bible a school subject, that the girls who came to her prayers came freely, and that no one could reasonably ask her to shut her door against a girl who wanted to pray. The underlying problem was that the promise of neutrality had been made in America, in good faith, by people who did not fully understand what it would mean in Poona. Even in America the message had been double: her own book had told Christian readers that such a school would "prepare the way for the spread of the

gospel," and Boston had soon been embarrassed by newspaper talk of "converts." Ramabai herself had helped to make it. Now she could not keep it in the way her critics understood it, and she would not pretend to.

The Americans sided with her. Mrs. Judith Andrews, chair of the Association's executive committee (the very committee whose letters the advisers had blamed), reached Bombay on Christmas Day 1893 and stayed more than six months. She concluded that Ramabai had kept faith with her promises as she understood them, that no girl had been compelled, and that many of the charges against her were baseless. The Association stood by her. But the school was badly damaged. "The last and greatest of all storms," Ramabai wrote, "in 1893 did us a great deal of harm, — we have not yet recovered."

The Girl Who Was Hidden

There was another episode that year, less creditable to Ramabai's friends, and it should be told. One of the girls she had taken in was not a widow but the young daughter of a Bombay woman attached to a temple, placed with Ramabai by a Hindu reformer. When the storm broke, the reformer turned against the school and urged the mother to reclaim her daughter. The girl did not want to go back. The girl was first sent into a Bombay hospital to gain time. Then Helen Dyer and a friend living in her house moved her out of the city to a missionary, and kept Ramabai herself in ignorance of where she was. The case came before the police. The mother did not appear. The missionary then baptised the girl, at the girl's own wish but without Ramabai's knowledge or consent.

Dyer, who used the phrase "justifiable expedients" for the steps Ramabai took to keep girls from being carried off, plainly approved. Ramabai, by Dyer's own account, had begged for the girl to be produced,

fearing that otherwise the school would be ruined. The episode added fuel to the fire, and it showed how difficult it was for Ramabai to control what others did in her name. It also shows why Hindu parents feared her school. It is to her credit that she wanted the girl returned. It is to the discredit of some of her friends that they did not listen.

Not Afraid

What kept her going? According to Helen Dyer, in that terrible year three promises from the Bible came to her. One was from Isaiah: "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper" (Isaiah 54:17, ASV). Another was Jesus' word to his disciples: "In the world ye have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." The third was from the prophet Malachi: "prove me now herewith." That last one would matter greatly in the years ahead.

The psalm at the head of this chapter was written, its title says, when David was a fugitive in the hands of his enemies. "What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in thee." Ramabai was afraid, in 1893. She was a woman alone, attacked by the leading men of her own people, threatened with death, abandoned by friends, her school half empty, her work in danger of collapse. She did not pretend not to be afraid. She trusted anyway. And she came out of that year freer than she went in.

Looking back, she wrote that she had been delivered twice: "I have been first delivered from the slavery of man's opinions, from the fear of man which holds so many of my dear people, and a second time from the bondage of sin." It is hard not to think that the first deliverance was won in the storm of 1893. The second had already begun, quietly, two years before.

"I Had Not Found Christ"

"The people that sat in darkness Saw a great light, And to them that sat in the region and shadow of death, To them did light spring up."
— Matthew 4:16, ASV

A Quieter Story

While the storms of the Sharada Sadan were raging in public, a quieter story was unfolding in private, and Ramabai later came to see it as the most important thing that happened to her in those years. She told it in *A Testimony* in 1907. It is the heart of that pamphlet, and it deserves to be heard in her own words.

It began, she said, when she came home from America. For years she had studied "other books about the Bible," and not the Bible itself. Now she put them aside. "I gave up the study of other books about the Bible after my return home from America and took to reading the Bible regularly."

It did not make her happy. It made her miserable. "Following this course for about two years I became very unhappy in my mind. I was dissatisfied with my spiritual condition."

Building from the Top

One day she went on business to the Bombay Guardian Mission Press, and picked up a book called *From Death into Life*. Its author, William Haslam, had been a clergyman of the Church of England with a good parish, busy with every kind of church activity. One day a woman of his congregation told him that he was "trying to build from the top." She meant, Ramabai explained, that he had never been converted. He had the religion without the life. It was the beginning of his conversion.

It changed Ramabai's understanding of herself. "I read his account of his conversion and work for Christ, then I began to consider where I stood and what my actual need was. I took the Bible and read portions of it, meditating on the messages which God gave me. There were so many things I did not understand intellectually. One thing I knew by this time, that I needed Christ, and not merely His religion."

That sentence is the key to her whole testimony. She had believed the creed. She had been baptised and confirmed. She had argued with Anglican sisters about the Trinity. She had lectured on Christian love to American audiences, and founded a school that was attacked for being too Christian. And she knew, when she looked honestly at herself, that something was missing. "I realised that I was not prepared to meet God, that sin had dominion over me." She had not received, as Paul put it, "the Spirit of adoption," and had "no witness of the Spirit" that she was a child of God.

The Burden

"What was to be done? My thoughts could not, and did not, help me."

> *I had at last come to an end of myself, and unconditionally surrendered myself to the Saviour, and asked Him to be merciful to*

me and to become my Righteousness and Redemption, and to take away all my sin.

Only those who have been convicted of sin and have seen themselves as God sees them under similar circumstances can understand what one feels when a great and unbearable burden is rolled away from one's heart.

In a tract she published in Bombay in 1895 or 1896, she described the same experience with more physical detail. She had been brought to see, she wrote there, that hers was "only an intellectual belief — a belief in which there was no life." "I repented long; I became very restless and almost ill, and passed many sleepless nights." Then the burden rolled away.

She dated it, in 1907, to "sixteen years ago," which is 1891, eight years after her baptism. It happened, then, in the same year as the first great storm over the Sharada Sadan in Poona, when the papers were accusing her of deceit and disloyalty. We do not know the exact day. She did not want us to. "I shall not attempt to describe how and what I felt at the time," she wrote. What mattered was not the moment but the result.

Sitting in Darkness

She tried to describe it with an image from the Gospels.

I do not know if any one of my readers has ever had the experience of being shut up in a room where there was nothing but thick darkness, and then groping in it to find something of which he or she was in dire need. I can think of no one but the blind man, whose story is given in John 9. ... I can give only a faint idea of what I felt when my mental eyes were opened, and when I, who was "sitting in darkness, saw great

light," and when I felt sure that to me who, but a few moments ago, "sat in the region and shadow of death, light had sprung up."

She was quoting the words at the head of this chapter, Matthew's quotation of Isaiah's prophecy of the dawn in Galilee. She could have chosen a hundred verses. She chose one about people who had been sitting in darkness, which is what she believed she had been doing, first as a devout Hindu and then as a Christian without Christ.

Good News for a Woman

What struck her most was that salvation was free, and that it was for women.

All her life she had been taught that happiness had to be earned by merit, through rituals, pilgrimages, and gifts to Brahmans. As a woman, she had been taught that liberation was simply not available to her. She might, by serving her husband as a god, earn a better birth, and in some distant future life be born a Brahman man, and only then begin the long work of attaining release. And the Christianity she had first embraced had not really changed that picture. She had thought, she said, that forgiveness depended on repentance and resolution, and that baptism itself washed sin away. These, she wrote, were ideas "akin to Hindu mode of religious thought."

Now she read the Bible differently. "The Bible says that God does not wait for me to merit His love, but heaps it upon me without my deserving it." She quoted Paul: "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, ASV).

How good, how indescribably good! What good news — for me, a woman; a woman born in India among Brahmins, who hold out no

hope for me and the like of me. The Bible declares that Christ did not reserve this great salvation for a particular caste or sex. ...
No caste, no sex, no work, and no man was to be depended upon to get salvation, this everlasting life; but God gave it freely to any one and every one who believed on His Son.

There is a direct line between this discovery and everything she did afterwards. The famine children she rescued, the widows she sheltered, the women she took from the streets, did not have to earn anything. Neither had she.

The Holy Spirit

In the years that followed, her faith deepened again. In about 1895 she read the life of Amanda Smith, an African American evangelist who had been born a slave. When Amanda Smith was converted, she said she had been delivered twice: once from slavery and once from sin. Ramabai wrote that she too had been delivered twice: "first delivered from the slavery of man's opinions, from the fear of man which holds so many of my dear people, and a second time from the bondage of sin."

Reading Amanda Smith's account of her spiritual life, Ramabai felt her need of "the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit." She heard an English evangelist, Gelson Gregson, preach in Bombay on the text "I am crucified with Christ," as her Bible put it, and in April 1895, at a camp meeting at Lonavla in the hills above Bombay, she asked him to pray with her. Later that day, she wrote, she became conscious of the Spirit's presence in her. A year later she brought fifteen of her own girls to the same camp meeting.

The First Baptisms

In the summer of 1895, a group of girls at the Sharada Sadan asked to be baptised. Ramabai was in an impossible position. She had promised her American supporters that the school would not make converts, Her biographer Helen Dyer says she would have preferred them to wait while they were pupils. By her own account to Boston, she gave the permission they asked for, but told them that she could not keep them in the school after baptism unless her American friends consented. Some twelve girls were baptised, in the Methodist church in Poona. On 26 July 1895 six of them wrote to the Association in Boston.

> *We are very glad to be able to tell you that our hearts have been quite changed and made new by the gracious Lord, and we came out and confessed our faith in Christ. This we have done out of our own free choice. No human being could have wrought this change in us, and no one could have induced us to become Christians. To God alone we give the glory, and hold no one except ourselves responsible for our change of faith.*

They offered to stay on as servants, and did. They signed themselves "your grateful children." Their names were Vittiabai, Sarasvatibai, Sukhadabai, Manikarnikabai, Rukminibai, and Bhimabai. They were the first fruits. There would be many more.

Remember the Days of Old

"Remember the days of old, Consider the years of many generations: Ask thy father, and he will show thee; Thine elders, and they will tell thee."
— Deuteronomy 32:7, ASV

A Voice from Within

In 1896 the rains failed across much of India, and famine spread through the Central Provinces, north-east of Poona. Ramabai read the reports and felt the old memories stir. She did not want to go. Her school was still recovering from the storm of 1893. Money from America was barely enough for the girls she already had. She was thirty-eight, partly deaf, and tired. She argued with herself, and later wrote the argument down.

> *The human common sense said: "You had better stop here; and 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it,' here. You have no means and no strength to do what you wish. Your powers are limited, and you will not be held responsible for not doing anything to help those famished people. Indeed, what can a weak woman do to help the dying thousands? Besides, the government of India and other benevolent people are doing what they can to relieve the poor and the needy. There is nothing for you to do."*

"I tried to quiet my conscience in this manner," she wrote, "but louder and louder spoke the voice of God from within my heart: 'Remember the days of old'; 'Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondsman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee'; and 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' I could no longer keep still."

The first of those verses is the one at the head of this chapter. Moses, near the end of his life, told Israel to remember where they had come from. Ramabai remembered. She remembered her father in the forest above Tirupati, and her mother at Raichur, and the bajri bread, and the sand-pits by the Jhelum. She had been a famine child herself. She could not now sit in a good house in Poona while other famine children died.

Sohagpur

At the end of 1896, having sent two workers ahead, she set out for the Central Provinces with a missionary friend. At the first town they visited, Sohagpur, they went early to the hospital to ask the doctor for permission to take orphan children. He was not there yet. Outside the hospital, three small children were walking.

> *Right before that hospital were walking three little famished, skeleton-like forms, and this first sight of their distress I shall never forget. ... The eldest was a girl of about seven, the second a boy of five, and the youngest a baby-boy three years of age. The girl was protecting herself from the intense cold with a covering of rags, but the two boys had nothing on their bodies.*

Their mother had died the day before. The youngest was desperately ill. They were crying for food, and Ramabai and her companion had none

with them. Believing that they needed official permission before they could take the children, they went on to find the officer in charge of the poorhouse. When they came back, the children had gone. She searched the town and the country round it, and never found them.

"The memory of the three little ones, especially of the youngest child, who, I am sure, could not have lived many days after that, haunts me to this day. ... The Lord have mercy upon us all, and give us repentance for not going to help such innocent little sufferers."

It is characteristic of her that she did not blame the officials, or the doctor who was late, or the rules. She blamed herself.

The Poorhouses

She visited the government poorhouses and relief camps, and she described them without softening anything.

> *The first poorhouse we saw was no house at all. It was a grove in the outskirts of the town. Groups of famished people were seen sitting all round the grove. Some were lying down in heaps or sitting or lying in ashes on the dirty ground. ... The food was nothing but dry flour and some salt. An accustomed eye could at once see that the grain was adulterated with earth before it was ground into flour.*

She was fair to the government. "The government officials are kind, and are doing what they can," she wrote. But the officials were few, and the thousands in their care were in the hands of overseers, cooks, and guards, many of whom stole the food and abused the people. Above all, she saw what happened to girls. Young women, widows, and orphans were being enticed away from the camps with sweets and promises and sold into

prostitution. The traffickers, she wrote, were "carrying on a wholesale trade in young girls."

At Itarsi she met a girl of fourteen in the street, an orphan held by a man who had taken possession of her and her little sister. The girl was afraid to leave him. Ramabai could not take her that day, but a week later, with the help of a young missionary and the police, the girl was freed, snatched back by her captor, and freed again. That night Ramabai took her to Jabalpur. She was already, Ramabai wrote, "ruined for life, and is suffering from horrible disease."

"Hell has become a horrible reality to me," she wrote, "and my heart is bleeding for those daughters of fond parents who have died, leaving them orphans. Who with a mother's heart and a sister's love can rest without doing everything in her power to save at least a few of the girls who can yet be saved from the hands of the evil ones?"

Three Hundred

From that first journey she brought back some sixty young widows to Poona. It cost more than eight hundred rupees, and most of her own school's funds were already spoken for. She wrote a letter from Poona on 20 January 1897, which was printed and circulated to raise help. In it she told, in her own words and at length, the story of her parents' deaths, and she announced a decision.

> *The Lord has put it into my mind to save three hundred girls out of the famine districts, and I shall go to work in His name. The funds sent to me by my friends in America are barely enough to feed and educate fifty girls, and several people are asking me how I am going to support all these girls who may come from Central India. ... I do not know, but the Lord knows what I need.*

"It seems a sin," she added, "to live in this good house, and eat plenty of good food, and be warmly clothed, while thousands of our fellow-creatures are dying of hunger and are without shelter." She and her girls, she promised, would live on one meal a day if necessary.

"It is a bold step I am taking without your permission," she wrote to Boston before leaving again. The Association had agreed to support a school for high-caste widows, not a famine rescue mission, and when the news reached them her American supporters were alarmed. She had already gone. Within days she was back in the Central Provinces.

Girija

On the second journey she brought back more than a hundred widows, and helped to place many more orphans with other missions. One story from that journey she told at length, because it had taught her something about God.

They were travelling back from Damoh in a line of seven bullock carts, and stopped one morning to rest beside the river Herna, west of Jabalpur. One of the famine girls, still hungry, slipped into a field and picked some green gram. Ramabai made her give it back to the owner, gave the girls a lecture on honesty, and thought no more of it, until the ringleader ran away. A cart driver went after her and brought her back. Ramabai decided to make an example of her. She told the girl that she might go her own way, since she did not wish to stay, and that she would not be taken back. That evening, when the carts moved off, the girl said she was sorry and begged to come. Ramabai did not believe her, and ordered the carts to start without her.

> *The poor girl stood there for some moments; and then, her thin legs seeming not able to carry the weight of the body, she sat down on the*

ground and looked on the starting procession of carts in silence. ... It was getting dark, the sky was clouded and looked as though it was going to rain. The dark mountain range and the river bank, now deserted by people, formed the background of that living picture of misery and helplessness. The world seemed very, very wide; and on it was thrown one little girl, friendless, homeless, and helpless. The picture is everlastingly engraved on my heart. ... The sad picture was too much, too much for me. I ordered the driver to stop the cart, for I could not move an inch from that place.

As she sat in the cart, she thought of how often she herself had rebelled against God and gone her own way, and how often he had called her back. "The Lord taught me a precious object-lesson of His love in that desert place; and His Holy Spirit took Rom. v. 8 for a text, and showed me that, just as I was the object of His love, so ought the poor wandering girl to be an object of my love." That verse reads: "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, ASV).

She motioned the girl to come. The girl was too far away to hear, but she saw the hand, "and at once bounded and ran toward me, looking as though a new life had been put into her dead soul." Her name was Girija, "a child of the mountain."

It is a story about a hard woman learning to be soft, and Ramabai told it against herself. She had been right, by every rule of discipline, to leave the girl behind. She had also been wrong. The God who had waited for her had not waited until her repentance was genuine. He had called her while she was still a sinner. The whole of the work that was about to grow at Mukti was in that moment on the bank of the Herna.

"My Great Sin"

"Deliver them that are carried away unto death, And those that are ready to be slain see that thou hold back. If thou sayest, Behold, we knew not this; Doth not he that weigheth the hearts consider it? And he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? And shall not he render to every man according to his work?"
— Proverbs 24:11-12, ASV

A Different Kind of Letter

Ramabai's first famine letter, written in January 1897, was an appeal: sad, humble, full of Scripture. Her second, written in May, after she had been back to the famine districts and home again to a new disaster, was angrier. It is worth reading carefully, because it shows a side of her that many of her admirers preferred not to show. She was not only a gentle saint gathering orphans. She was also a fierce critic of injustice, and she did not exempt the British rulers of India from her criticism, or even her Christian friends.

"Kept"

On her second journey she went back to the government poorhouses looking for young widows and girls. In one of them she asked a girl of about fourteen whether she would like to come with her.

She said she would, but that she was "kept" there by some one. I did not understand her at first. So I asked her three times over, to know if she was detained there against her wish; but I understood the dreadful meaning of that word "kept," when an old woman sitting beside her explained it to me. This was in a government poorhouse, where the government officers are supposed to protect the virtue of young women detained under some pretence or other. I told the deputy commissioner of that district about it. He was staying in the same town. He nodded his head, and said that it is quite possible that such things are happening in the poorhouses, but he cannot help it.

The women who worked in the relief camps, she wrote, were paid so little, and had to pay so much to the overseers who hired them, that young women "have either to starve or sell their virtue. There is no other alternative for them."

Then she turned to the British army. In the princely states of Central India, she had learned, British soldiers and officers were among the chief opponents of missionaries living near them. When some American women missionaries had tried to settle near a military camp, the soldiers had refused to have them. The reason, she said, was plain: many of the soldiers wanted no witnesses to what they did. They took the daughters of the local people, kept them as long as they wished, and turned them out when they were tired of them. The parents, many of them respectable people of high caste, were powerless. "These devils in human shape keep the girls so long as they want, and turn them away when they get tired of them."

The Contagious Diseases Acts

For years the British government in India had run a system of licensed prostitution for its soldiers, under laws known as the Contagious Diseases

Acts. Women in the cantonments were registered, inspected, and confined if found to be diseased. Christian reformers in Britain and America had fought the system for years, and two American women, Kate Bushnell and Elizabeth Andrew, had recently exposed how it worked in India. The laws had been repealed, but there was pressure to bring them back.

Ramabai wrote without restraint.

> *Christians in India and England must wake up at this time, and try their best not to allow the dreadful demon, the C. D. act, to come into existence again. The birthright of Indian women had been trampled down long enough. If the C. D. act comes into existence again, British iniquity will reach its climax, and God's vengeance is sure to come down on the ruling nation. The wicked must not think that the poor, ignorant women of this country have no defender; for "their Redeemer is strong, the Lord of hosts is His name: He shall thoroughly plead their cause."*

"British iniquity." "God's vengeance ... on the ruling nation." These were not words that a colonial subject wrote lightly, and they are not words that appear in the admiring biographies written by her British friends. But they are hers, and they belong in her story. She had written ten years earlier that "under the so-called Christian British rule, the woman is in no better condition than of old." She had not changed her mind. She was grateful to the British for many things, and she supported the government when she thought it was right. She did not think that being a Christian meant excusing a Christian nation's sins against the women of her country.

The Magistrate

When she came back to Poona early in 1897, she found that bubonic plague had reached the city. The authorities, terrified of its spread, were imposing drastic measures, and many of them fell hardest on the poor.

The city magistrate, a Mr. Plunkett, ordered her to remove more than a hundred of her famine girls from Poona within forty-eight hours. She had nowhere to take them and no money to move them. He told her, in effect, that she had brought them there, and she could take them away again, or send them to the segregation camp. "To have brought the girls here to save them from starvation and death," she wrote, "was my great sin." She would not be allowed to keep any famine girls in Poona, even in hired houses, nor to enlarge her school. Her compound of nearly three acres was to hold only thirty people.

She was furious, and her letter shows it. She wrote that "the reign of terror had begun in Poona," and that the magistrate had come under the influence of the Poona men, "of all men in India ... famous for their disregard of women's feelings." She added a sharp reminder that he too had once had a woman "to nurse him and rock his cradle when he was a helpless little baby."

It is not a saintly letter. It is a very human one. She had brought starving children out of the famine and was being treated as if she had brought the plague. And the consequences were real. She sent the girls to camp in the open at Telegaon, some twenty miles away. The water was bad and the sun intense. Within a week one of the school's own pupils, "a nice, healthy child, the only child of her old father," died of sunstroke. Two others died later.

Kedgaon

There was one place left. In 1894 or early 1895 the school had bought a farm at Kedgaon, a village on the railway some thirty-five or forty miles from Poona, as a source of fruit and income. There was no shade, no proper building, and no water supply fit for hundreds of people. But there was land, and it was outside the municipality.

"A little over five weeks ago I took all my girls to dwell at Kedgaum," she wrote in May. They lived in sheds fenced with thorn bushes. The heat was intense, and the girls fell ill with fever and sore eyes. Her own eyes were so strained that she could hardly write. A cattle-shed was being built, and when the rains came, she said, they would have to live in it with the cows and bullocks. She was planning small houses where the famine girls could live in families, each in the care of one of the trained pupils of the Sharada Sadan.

It was a dismal beginning. Out of it came Mukti.

"We Knew Not This"

The verse at the head of this chapter is a warning. "Deliver them that are carried away unto death," it commands, "And those that are ready to be slain see that thou hold back. If thou sayest, Behold, we knew not this; Doth not he that weigheth the hearts consider it?" The deputy commissioner who said "he cannot help it" knew. So did the soldiers, and the overseers, and the magistrate who told her to take the girls away. So, she said, did she, and she blamed herself for the three children at Sohagpur.

She did not claim to be better than they were. But she would not say, "We knew not this." She had seen, and she would act, and she would tell others what she had seen whether they wanted to hear it or not. Moses had

said of the Lord: "He doth execute justice for the fatherless and widow" (Deuteronomy 10:18, ASV). She intended, in her own small way, to do the same.

Prove Me Now

"Bring ye the whole tithe into the store-house, that there may be food in my house, and prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."
— Malachi 3:10, ASV

Three Books

Some time around 1895, Ramabai read three books that changed the way she thought about money. One was the story of the China Inland Mission, founded by Hudson Taylor, who had gone into the interior of China without guaranteed support, trusting God to provide. One was *The Lord's Dealings with George Müller*, the journal of the Bristol pastor who had fed and housed thousands of orphans for decades without ever asking anyone but God for money. The third was the life of John G. Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides in the South Pacific.

I was greatly impressed with the experiences of these three great men. ... I wondered, after reading their lives, if it were not possible to trust the Lord in India as in other countries. I wished very much that there were some missions founded in this country which would be a testimony to the Lord's faithfulness to His people and the truthfulness of what the Bible says in a practical way.

Why, she asked herself, did no missionary come forward to start such a "faith mission" in India? The answer, she said, came from God himself.

> *Then the Lord said to me, "Why don't you begin to do this yourself, instead of wishing for others to do it? How easy it is for any one to wish that some one else would do a difficult thing instead of doing it himself." I was greatly rebuked by the "still, small voice" which spoke to me.*

It is one of the most practical rebukes in Christian autobiography, and one of the most widely applicable. She took it to heart. "At the end of 1896, when the great famine came on this country, I was led by the Lord to step forward and start new work, trusting Him for both temporal and spiritual blessings."

Mukti

The new work was the farm at Kedgaon. The school had bought about a hundred acres there in 1894 or 1895, as a fruit farm to help support the Sharada Sadan. In the spring of 1897, driven out of Poona by the plague regulations, Ramabai took her famine girls there, to live in sheds fenced with thorns. It was meant to be a temporary refuge. It became her life's work.

That autumn help arrived. Minnie Abrams, an American Methodist missionary who had been working as a village evangelist, woke one morning with a strong sense that she was called to Kedgaon. When she told Soonderbai Powar, Soonderbai said that she and Ramabai had been praying for months for such a helper. On 15 October Abrams moved to Kedgaon. Abrams became one of her closest co-workers.

Many of the famine girls now asked to be baptised. On 6 November 1897 seventeen bullock carts full of them went six miles to the Bhima river, the girls singing all the way, and were baptised in the stream. One who was there remembered each girl clasping her hands as she was presented, and joining in the words of the baptismal formula "with beaming face." At Christmas, Ramabai gathered all the girls and told them how God had led her in finding them. The following Sunday she and Abrams and the missionary W. W. Bruere organised a church at Kedgaon, "taking the Bible only as our creed."

In December 1897 Ramabai held a camp meeting of her own at Kedgaon, with missionaries and Indian Christians camping in grass huts and meeting in the barn. There, according to Dyer, she dedicated the new settlement to God and gave it a name. (The finished buildings were dedicated on 24 September 1898.) She called it *Mukti*. In Hindu thought, *mukti* is the word for liberation, the release from the endless cycle of births and deaths that she had been taught a woman could never attain. To her, now, it meant salvation. She took the name from Isaiah's prophecy of the restored city of God: "thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise" (Isaiah 60:18, ASV).

It was the perfect name. The liberation that the Shastras had denied to women was here offered freely to thousands of them.

No Bank Account

Mukti was run on Müller's principles. It had no endowment, no guaranteed income, and no support from any missionary society. The American Association continued to support the Sharada Sadan, but the funds for Mukti came, as Ramabai believed, directly from God, through the gifts of people who heard of the work and gave without being asked for

money. Increasingly, she made no appeals for money at all. She prayed, told the story of what God had done, and waited.

"It is quite true that my resources are very limited," she wrote around 1900; "not only that, but I am literally penniless, with no income of any kind. I own nothing on earth except a few clothes and my Bible." And in a letter of 1899: "One would not like to exchange this life of faith, after tasting it, for all the riches in the world."

Her fullest statement of it came in *A Testimony* in 1907.

> *I am spared all trouble and care, casting my burden upon the Lord. There are over 1500 people living here; we are not rich, nor great, but we are happy, getting our daily bread directly from the loving hands of our Heavenly Father, having not a pice over and above our daily necessities, having no banking account anywhere, no endowment or income from any earthly source, but depending altogether on our Father God; we have nothing to fear from anybody, nothing to lose, and nothing to regret. The Lord is our inexhaustible treasure.*

It should be said honestly that faith finance was not always easy, and that it had its costs. There were months when money ran short. At one point, in a financial crisis, she withdrew the guaranteed salaries of her workers and asked them to trust God as she did, and some of the best of them left. The American supporters of the Sharada Sadan worried constantly about her debts and her health. Faith missions can become a burden on those who work in them, and Mukti was not free of that. But for twenty-five years, through famine, plague, and war, the work went on, and the people at Mukti were fed.

Prove Me Now

The verse at the head of this chapter is God's challenge to his people through the prophet Malachi. They had been robbing God, the prophet said, by withholding their tithes. If they would bring them in, God promised to open the windows of heaven. "Prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts."

It is one of the few places in the Bible where God invites people to test him. According to Helen Dyer, this was one of three verses Ramabai received in the storm of 1893. She took it literally. Her whole approach to religion, from childhood, had been to test it by experience. "God has given me a practical turn of mind," she wrote. "I want to find out the truth about everything, including religion, by experiment." She had tested the religion of her fathers and found that the stone images never answered. Now she tested the God of the Bible.

> *I have responded to the Lord's challenge, "Prove Me now" (Mal. 3. 10), and have found Him faithful and true. I know He is a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. ... I entreat you, my readers, to prove the Lord as I have proved Him.*

Another verse became her motto. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24, ASV). "This golden text," she wrote, "has been written with the life-blood of Christ on my heart." And she summed up everything in one sentence: "I have come to believe the Word of God implicitly, and I have found out by experience that it is true."

The Sweeper

"He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, And lifteth up the needy from the dunghill; That he may set him with princes, Even with the princes of his people. He maketh the barren woman to keep house, And to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye Jehovah."
— Psalm 113:7-9, ASV

The House of Grace

Mukti grew faster than anyone had planned. Among the girls brought out of the famine districts were some who, in the words of the time, had been "sinned against by wicked men." Around the turn of 1898-99 two American women came to Kedgaon to work among them, and Ramabai decided to build a separate home for such women and girls, where they could be cared for without shame. She called it Kripa Sadan, the House of Grace.

There was no money for it. On the evening of 20 March 1899 the foundation stone was laid anyway, at a service with missionaries and nearly a hundred workmen standing by. Ramabai, or one of her workers (the accounts differ), explained to the workmen that "although there was not a single pice in hand to build this new house, yet the foundation stone was laid in obedience to God's order." No debt would be incurred. They would look to God alone. The house was built, and in the years that followed it

sheltered hundreds of women whom most of society would have treated as beyond help.

It was a remarkable thing for a woman of her background to do. In the Hindu law-books she had studied, a "fallen" woman deserved no pity; a king might have her thrown to the dogs. At Fulham, sixteen years before, she had first seen Christians caring for such women, and had been told the story of the woman at the well. Now she built them a house and gave it the name of grace.

The Second Famine

In 1899 the rains failed again, and a terrible famine struck western India, especially Gujarat. It was one of the worst of the century. This time Ramabai could not leave Mukti herself, and she sent out others in her place: nearly twenty helpers, eight of whom, she noted with evident joy, were women who had themselves been rescued from starvation in 1896. They brought back girls by the hundred.

By August 1900 there were more than thirteen hundred and fifty Gujarati girls at Mukti. Ramabai listed them by age: about a hundred and fifty under seven, five hundred between seven and fourteen, some six hundred between fourteen and twenty, and the rest under thirty. Most could not read. She prayed for teachers, and chose fifty of the older Christian girls to train as teachers themselves. A school of more than fifty classes was planned.

There were other problems. At one point more than nineteen hundred people, and over a hundred cattle, depended on the wells at Mukti for water. Many of the famine children were ill, and many died. The Mukti cemetery, one of her colleagues wrote, was "very full of those who have died from the effects of famine." A missionary who visited at the end of 1901

found some two thousand women and girls living in stone buildings with tiled roofs, with dormitories, kitchens, kitchens and dining rooms in a building four hundred and twenty-five feet long, a hospital, schools, workrooms, gardens, five wells, and a great church. "Five years ago," he wrote, "there was nothing here but an open field."

Work

Ramabai did not believe in charity that left people idle. The girls were taught to read and to earn a living. They worked in the fields and the gardens, cooked and cleaned, wove cloth, made clothes, and later printed books on the mission's own press, set up about 1900. Older Christian girls helped the matrons care for the newcomers. Many were trained as teachers and Bible-women, and went out to work in villages and other missions. A home for boys was opened in 1902.

She had not forgotten what had destroyed her own family: "the pride of caste and superior learning," which had kept them from "stooping down to acquire some industry." She meant her girls to be able to work with their hands.

A Day at Mukti

What was it like to run such a place? Around 1901 she kept a diary for a few days, and part of it was printed. It is one of the few places where we see her ordinary life. A girl who did not like to be corrected cursed her and called her names. "I smile at it," she wrote, "for I am so well used to hearing them curse me and speak dirty words about me." The storekeeper reminded her that blankets and other things were needed, not knowing that there was no money to order grain. People came with their wants and their grievances all

day. The last complaint of the evening was from a girl who said she did not get enough oil for her hair. Ramabai quieted her, kissed a few girls standing near her door, said goodnight, and shut it.

> *My feet were aching and my head was tired. Before going to bed, at half-past eight, I opened my Bible and began to read. The Holy Spirit brought one special verse to my mind to comfort me. "And the Government shall be upon His shoulders." "What a blessing," I said to myself, "all this burden does not fall on me, but He bears it on His shoulders."*

The verse is from Isaiah's prophecy of the child who would be born: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder" (Isaiah 9:6, ASV). She had two thousand people depending on her, and that night, at least, she went to bed knowing that the weight was not hers to carry.

"I Am a Sweeper"

In 1901 a missionary named Mary Macdonald came to work at Mukti. Ramabai, as Helen Dyer later reported, told her what she wanted.

> *Now I want you to go through this institution and teach them all about the Lord Jesus Christ. I am a sweeper; that is all I am. I sweep into this compound as many as I can get; child-widows, deserted wives, and orphans of every kind, and I want you missionaries to preach to them.*

In India a sweeper was one of the lowest occupations there was, the work of the untouchable castes who cleaned what others would not touch. That a Brahman woman, a pandita honoured by the scholars of Calcutta, should

call herself a sweeper was a deliberate reversal of everything she had been brought up to believe about purity and rank. It was also exactly what she did. She swept up the people their families and their society had thrown away.

The verse at the head of this chapter says that God "raiseth up the poor out of the dust, And lifteth up the needy from the dunghill; That he may set him with princes." It ends with a promise to the barren woman, who in the ancient world was a figure of shame: God "maketh the barren woman to keep house, And to be a joyful mother of children." Ramabai had only one child of her own. By 1901 she was mother to two thousand.

Christian Outcasts

Not everyone saw it that way. To many Hindus, Mukti was a place where famine children, who could not choose for themselves, were made into Christians. Some families came and took their girls back, and the government returned about thirty to relatives who claimed them. When two of her former pupils were gathering widows and children from a princely state, an official of the Raja asked them bluntly: "How many more women and children are you going to turn into Christian outcasts, and when do you intend to stop this work?"

The young women answered that their Saviour had commanded them to make disciples, and they would go on until the world was his. Ramabai would have given the same answer. But the question was a fair one from where the official stood, and it was asked again and again, and is still asked today. The famine girls did not come to Mukti because they wanted to become Christians. They came because they were starving. Most of them did become Christians. Ramabai never hid that she hoped they would, and never pretended that Mukti was anything but a Christian community.

What she would not accept was that the gospel made them outcasts. In her eyes, they had been outcasts already. Now they had a home.

“Ramabai Is Dead”

“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? or am I striving to please men? if I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ.”
— Galatians 1:10, ASV

A Hard Question in Boston

The Ramabai Association in Boston had been formed in 1887 to support a secular school for high-caste Hindu widows for ten years. By 1897 it found itself the patron of something it had not planned: a school where the bell was rung for morning prayers, where nearly half the pupils were now famine children, and where the number of avowed Christians had almost doubled in a year. Before the year was out, Ramabai would bring three hundred more famine girls out of the Central Provinces.

At its annual meeting in March 1897 the Association’s officers faced the question openly. One of them, the Rev. Dr. E. W. Donald, who presided, put it with painful honesty. Ramabai, he said, had begun gathering the pupils for morning prayer, and the school bell had been rung to call them. “There has been no coercion,” he admitted. But when the head of the school rang the official bell and presided at the prayers, many girls would come who would not have come to a private room. And Ramabai “very

frankly discloses the fact that she has not attempted to conceal from her pupils her desire that they should become Christians."

> *Now, of course, we have to admit that this is a reversion of the past method of the school; and it is apparently — nay, really — a contradiction of the elementary principle of our Association. Secularity has been displaced by religion.*

Should the Association, he asked, send Ramabai a mandate that she must give up her prayers, stop ringing the bell, "and cease her efforts to bring these women to the feet of Christ"?

Donald was not hostile. She had not, he granted, "proselyted or publicly preached," and he wondered aloud whether a frankly Christian school might do the work as well, "and certainly with more permanent and beautiful results." The difficulty was the promise that had been made.

The executive committee was just as frank. A visitor had reported Ramabai saying, "I have asked God to send only those girls who will become Christians." Whether or not she had put it so bluntly, the committee wrote, the school had plainly changed. "The Sadan has become a Christian institution." If the change came from the indirect influence of her Christian life, it was God's work, and they rejoiced. But if any direct influence had crept in, "then the pledge to the people is broken." They were also alarmed by her famine rescues, undertaken without their consent, and by her debts, and by her health.

They were not wrong. They had raised money from Unitarians and Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists, on the understanding that the school would not try to convert its pupils. They had defended her in 1893 on exactly that basis. And now she had, in their view, quietly changed the terms.

"Ramabai Is Dead"

In early 1898, as the ten years drew to an end, she came to Boston herself. On 16 March she spoke to the tenth annual meeting at Channing Hall. She did not apologise. She explained.

Her Hindu friends, she said, had wanted her to shut the door of her room when she read the Bible and prayed. "I said, No, I have the same freedom to practise Christianity which these girls have to practise their religion. Why should I shut the door of my room, which I do not shut at any other time during the twenty-four hours of the day?" She insisted that the school was still what she had promised: "No kind of religious training is compulsory. We do not teach the Bible or the Vedas to the girls." The girls could keep their caste and their customs, and some still wore their gods around their necks. The girls who had come had read the Bible for themselves and compared it with their own religion. "Forty-eight of our girls have been brave enough to be publicly baptized and become Christians; and glory be to God for that! I think this is the best result of the school. We started an unsectarian school, and an unsectarian school it shall be to the end; but such must be the result of the shining light that comes from Heaven."

She gave an account of the money. Out of about ninety-five thousand dollars the Association had sent her over ten years, she said, the school buildings and the farm were worth sixty thousand. That much she was giving back, and the rest had been spent "in raising up this family to rise up and call you blessed."

Then she said something startling.

> *Now what shall be the future of the school? ... The first thing I have to tell you in this connection is that Ramabai is dead. The person who went in your stead is dead and gone. What will you do with the*

property? ... Do not concentrate your interest in one person, for that person will die and be gone, as many have gone before.

She meant that the work must not depend on her. People die; the Association must not. She asked them to found a new body "to go on working in the same old way." She proposed a new association, a "Faith, Hope, and Love Association," and asked for twenty thousand dollars a year. "Last year God told me I must go into the Central Provinces of my country for the rescue of three hundred girls. I had eighty cents in my hand; and I said, Where shall I get the money? But He said, 'Go on, and money will come.' ... The Father sent thirty thousand dollars in that year."

The Parting

The Association did what its charter required. It resolved to dissolve itself once a new body was formed. The Association's land and buildings in Poona were conveyed to Ramabai outright, though she soon transferred it to the new Association, not wishing to hold it in her own name, "absolute, and not to create any legal trust." And she was given formal notice that she was no longer authorised to contract any debt in the Association's name. A new American Ramabai Association was then formed to continue supporting the school without the old charter's restrictions. It supported her for the rest of her life.

It was not a bitter parting, but it was not an easy one. The old Executive Committee's final report captured both their exasperation and their admiration. If they had sometimes thought her unwise in "letting her heart mislead her judgment," and had seen in her "the impatience of a child under restraining advice," they had also recognised "the simple, absolute faith of a child, the courage of the martyr, the spirit of the true reformer, and the glory of womanhood."

The verse at the head of this chapter is Paul's, written to churches that wanted him to soften his message. "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? ... if I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ." Ramabai had depended on the favour of Hindu reformers, and lost it in 1893. She had depended on the favour of her American supporters, and in 1898 she risked losing it too. She did not court either. She told them the truth about what she was doing, and left the consequences to God.

It is fair to ask whether she had been entirely straightforward. The honest answer is that she had changed, and so had her work, and she had not asked permission before changing it. She had promised a neutral school in good faith in 1887, when she herself had not yet found Christ in the way she later did. By 1897 she could no longer run a school in which the gospel was kept behind a closed door. She held that she had kept the letter of her promise. Her committee was not sure she had kept its spirit. When the time came, she told her supporters plainly, and gave them back what was theirs.

Five Minutes at Keswick

The strain of the American visit wore her out, and for a day she lay in her room, crying to God. Two friends heard of it and gave her what was needed to meet Mukti's wants for a time. That summer she sailed for England, and on the way home to India she attended the Keswick Convention in the Lake District, the great annual gathering of evangelical Christians seeking a deeper spiritual life. Nearly four thousand people were there, she later recalled, in words Helen Dyer preserved.

> *At that time the Lord led me to ask those present to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all Indian Christians. Five minutes were given me to speak, and I made the very best use of them. I requested God's people to pray that 100,000 men and 100,000 women*

from among the Indian Christians may be led to preach the Gospel to their country people.

A hundred thousand men and a hundred thousand women. Jesus had told his disciples, "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:38, ASV). It was an enormous request, and it was characteristic of her that she asked for women as well as men. She returned to India in August 1898, and went on praying. Seven years later, the answer began, at Mukti.

Fire

"And it shall be in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh: And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams: Yea and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days Will I pour forth of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."
— Acts 2:17-18, ASV

News from Wales

In the last weeks of 1904, news reached India of a revival in Wales. In chapels across the Welsh valleys, ordinary people, many of them young, were praying for hours, confessing their sins publicly, and being converted in their thousands. Ramabai read the reports with joy. She had prayed at Keswick for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Christians of India, and she wondered whether this might be the beginning of an answer.

In January 1905 she told the girls at Mukti about Wales and asked for volunteers to meet with her every morning to pray for revival in India. About seventy came forward. In *A Testimony* she described what they prayed for.

I was led by the Lord to start a special prayer circle at the beginning of 1905. There were about seventy of us who met together each morning

and prayed for the true conversion of all the Indian Christians, including ourselves, and for a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all Christians of every land.

Note the words "including ourselves." They did not pray for revival as something for other people. They prayed for themselves first.

The circle grew. By June, Dyer records, five hundred and fifty were meeting twice a day. Ramabai asked for volunteers from the Bible school to give up their ordinary studies and go out to preach in the villages, and thirty young women offered themselves. They were meeting daily to pray for power for their work when the revival came.

Fire

Minnie Abrams had been teaching the girls about the baptism of the Holy Spirit as "power for service." One morning, late in June 1905, she was woken by one of the older girls. "Come over and rejoice with us," the girl said. One of the young women had received the Holy Spirit. "I saw the fire, ran across the room for a pail of water, and was about to pour it over her when I discovered she was not on fire."

When Abrams arrived, all the girls in that compound were on their knees, weeping, praying, and confessing their sins. The next evening, as Ramabai was teaching from the eighth chapter of John's Gospel "in her usual quiet way," the whole congregation broke into prayer, so loudly that she had to stop. Girls of every age wept and confessed their sins. Some saw visions. Some prayed for hours.

"From that time," Minnie Abrams wrote, "our Bible school was turned into an inquiry room. Girls, stricken down under conviction of sin while in school, or in the industrial school, or at their work, were brought to us.

Lessons were suspended, and we all, teachers and students, entered the school conducted by the Holy Spirit."

For days, and then weeks, Mukti was transformed. There was prayer all night in the compounds. Girls who had come out of famine and abuse confessed thefts and lies and hatreds, and made restitution, and were filled with joy. The girls called it a "baptism of fire," a burning sensation that the girls said was almost unbearable, followed by peace. Hundreds prayed aloud together, the sound rising and falling "like the rolling thunder." One of the workers wrote of a twelve-year-old girl whose plain face had become radiant, and who did not know it: "She is occupied with Jesus."

Ramabai's Part

It is worth noticing what Ramabai herself did, and did not do. According to Macnicol, she took little part in the more dramatic experiences. She once felt the Holy Spirit like a burning flame within her, and once, praying alone, she found herself speaking some sentences in Hebrew. When the girls prayed with loud crying, she prayed with them, but quietly. She did not lead the way in the ecstatic side of the revival, and she did not discourage it.

At first she did not want it publicised. About a month after the revival began she was asked for permission to publish an account of it, and refused, fearing that publicity would spoil the work. She fell into a time of depression. When the workers prayed together about it, she came to believe that she had been wrong to withhold the glory from God. She allowed the story to be told, and accounts were printed in the *Bombay Guardian* and elsewhere.

Then she did something characteristic. She took a band of her girls to Poona, and there, before Europeans and Indians, Christian and Hindu, she confessed that she had "neglected her opportunities of preaching Christ

boldly." After that, praying bands went out from Mukti to orphanages, schools, and mission stations across western India, led by Minnie Abrams, by Manorama, and by others. Their purpose, Ramabai said, was "prayer for the Christian people living in the places to which the bands go." "Our work will bear lasting fruit," she told them, "if we pray more and work less." Before long, some seven hundred girls and women were involved in the praying bands, and about sixty went out every day. A circular letter asked Christians everywhere to pray by name for others, and in time more than twenty-nine thousand people were being prayed for by name at Mukti. "When we were Hindus," she explained, "we used to repeat one or two thousand names of the gods daily. ... Why should we not, as Christians, be able to pray for many hundreds of people by name?"

In November 1905 she closed the school and all ordinary work for ten days of prayer. It ended, a worker wrote, in a "tremendous time of 'house-cleaning,'" when things that had been stolen were returned to their owners.

Tongues

The revival at Mukti began in June 1905. That was nearly a year before the famous meetings at Azusa Street in Los Angeles in April 1906, which are often counted as the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. For that reason Mukti is sometimes called one of the sources of Pentecostalism, and historians of the movement have written about it at length.

But it is important to be accurate. The revival of 1905 was marked by repentance, confession, prayer, visions, and joy. Speaking in tongues, which Pentecostals came to see as the sign of the baptism of the Spirit, did not appear at Mukti until December 1906, after reports of Azusa Street had reached India. The historian Gary McGee has traced this carefully. Minnie Abrams's little book *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, printed at

Mukti in 1906, was later read by missionaries in Chile and helped to begin a Pentecostal movement there.

Ramabai herself never made tongues a test of anything. When the revival's physical features were criticised by Christians who watched from outside, she defended them in the *Mukti Prayer Bell* in 1907, but she put them firmly in their place.

> *Love, perfect divine love, is the only and most necessary sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But other gifts, such as the power to heal, to speak with tongues, to prophesy, are not to be discarded. Indeed we should seek from God such gifts as will enable us to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with power and draw men unto Him. I have to learn a great deal more than I know at present. So I shall wait upon the Lord and ask Him to teach me and lead me as He will.*

"I looked upon these features with much concern for some time," she admitted, "but did not try to interfere with God's work in any way."

Not everyone was convinced. An Anglican missionary who studied the revival concluded that its physical accompaniments were largely "to be explained physiologically rather than as due to the direct influence of the Holy Spirit." But he also concluded that Ramabai had "showed herself wonderfully wise in the way she fostered and guided the entire movement," and that its permanent results were real: "the true conversion of hundreds of women." Paul had written to the Corinthians, who also prized spiritual gifts, that without love they were nothing: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1, ASV). Ramabai had learned the same lesson.

Daughters and Handmaidens

The words at the head of this chapter are from Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, quoting the prophet Joel. God's Spirit would be poured out on everyone, "your sons and your daughters," and even on servants: "on my servants and on my handmaidens." In the Hindu world Ramabai grew up in, a woman was forbidden to study the Vedas, and was taught that she could not attain liberation as a woman. At Mukti in 1905, the Spirit of God fell first on famine orphans and former child-widows and outcast girls, and they went out across India to pray and to preach. It was, she believed, exactly what Joel had promised. The handmaidens were prophesying.

A Famine of the Word

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord Jehovah, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of Jehovah."
— Amos 8:11, ASV

The Book She Had Been Given

Ramabai owed her faith, as she saw it, to a book. In Calcutta in 1878 some Christians had given her a Sanskrit Bible, which she thought a waste of time to read and never parted with. At Silchar she had found Luke's Gospel in Bengali in her library. In Poona she had read the New Testament in Marathi with Miss Hurford. In England she had heard John 4 read aloud. And around 1891, by her own account, she had come to Christ only when she gave up reading books about the Bible and read the Bible itself.

So it is not surprising that in the last part of her life she gave more and more of her time to giving the Bible to others. Her great project was a new translation of the whole Bible into Marathi. It was not the first Marathi Bible. Missionaries, beginning with William Carey at Serampore early in the nineteenth century, had translated the Scriptures into Marathi long before, and a revised version was in use in her day. But she believed that a new one was needed, for two reasons.

Two Reasons

The first was that the existing Marathi Bible was written in a high, literary language, full of Sanskrit words. Educated men could read it. The village women she loved could not. She wanted a Bible in the plain everyday Marathi of ordinary people, a translation, as Helen Dyer put it, in "the simplest form of Marathi speech, so that the women of the country with no mental training and a limited vocabulary could easily understand it." The Psalmist had said: "The opening of thy words giveth light; It giveth understanding unto the simple" (Psalm 119:130, ASV). She wanted the simple to understand.

The second reason was theological. Many of the Sanskrit words in the older translations, she believed, carried Hindu ideas that would mislead those who heard them. As a scholar of Sanskrit and of Hindu philosophy, she knew those associations as few missionaries could. About 1909, five years into her own work, she wrote a strong letter to the revisers of the Marathi Bible. She thanked the missionaries for giving India the Scriptures, but protested:

> *Almost all the vernacular translations of the Bible were made with the help of Hindu pundits for the sake of putting the translations into correct language, so they have many words which teach pure Hindu ideas of religion. There are some words which cannot be separated from idolatrous ideas. They make wrong impressions on non-Christian hearers, and if done knowingly it is dangerous and sinful to use them.*

She gave a long list of examples. "Supposing in each chapter of the Bible there are five mistakes, or mistranslated words, then we have no less than

5945 mistakes or mistranslations in the whole Marathi Bible. Ought we to teach and preach the Bible with so many mistakes?"

She was also alarmed by the influence of what was then called the "higher criticism," the critical study of the Bible that was spreading from German universities into the missions. She believed it undermined the authority of Scripture, and she wrote bitterly about preachers who had "determined to know everything, save Jesus Christ." In one letter she used the words of the prophet at the head of this chapter: "We are living in a strange time. There is famine, not of food and water, but of the Word of God." She had lived through two famines of bread. She feared this one more.

How She Worked

The work began, according to Dyer, in 1904, with a Marathi concordance giving the Greek and Hebrew meaning of each word. Ramabai believed that God had given her the plan, with the words: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith Jehovah of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6, ASV).

She learned Greek and Hebrew for the work. For the Old Testament she spent years preparing an interlinear comparison of five different versions of its words and idioms, and her preparation for the New was as thorough. Some of her students made a special study of Greek and of Hebrew to help her, and she had the help of members of the ancient Jewish community of western India, the Bene Israel, who knew the Hebrew Scriptures. How much of the final translation was her own work and how much she supervised is not entirely clear. Macnicol, the most careful of her biographers, says that she acquired "some knowledge" of the languages so that she might supervise the translation with intelligence. Others give her a

greater share. She would not have cared which. It was the Bible that mattered, not the translator.

She thought it would take seven years. It took fourteen, and more. It was done in the midst of everything else: running a community of two thousand, praying through the revival, rescuing girls from famine, raising money by prayer. The press at Mukti, worked by the girls themselves, set the type in Marathi, Greek, Hebrew, and Roman letters. A tentative edition of the New Testament as far as Acts was printed in 1912. As each part was finished, it was put to use. When she reached the Psalms, she sent for an Indian musician to set them to music so that the girls could sing them.

She never allowed it to be sold. She had received the Bible as a gift, she said, and she must give it freely. Jesus had said to his disciples: "freely ye received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8, ASV).

A Narrowing?

Macnicol, who admired her greatly, also thought that something was lost in these years. In her early years in Poona, he says, a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* had gone on alongside her plans for the Bible. Now she saw only darkness in the religion of her fathers. For many years she would not allow Sanskrit to be taught in her schools, for fear of "the subtle poison of Vedanta," and she would not let her own daughter learn the language of her mother and grandfather. Macnicol wondered whether the danger of Hindu words in the Bible was as great as she feared. After all, he pointed out, the very name of her settlement, Mukti, was a Sanskrit word with a Hindu meaning, and every Christian who used it understood it to mean the salvation of Christ.

It is a fair point, and a reminder that great Christians can have blind spots. A woman who had once defended her parents' faith against those

who called it worthless came, in later life, to see almost nothing good in it. But it is also fair to remember why. She had seen what the Hindu law-books taught about women, and what she had seen done to widows at Brindaban and Pandharpur. She knew, as Macnicol did not, what it was to be a Brahman woman. And Sanskrit did eventually come back into her schools, once she had prepared textbooks of her own.

The First of Its Kind

The translation of the whole Bible was finished shortly before her death in 1922, and the complete edition was published after it. It is often said that she was the first woman ever to translate the whole Bible. That is not quite right. An American woman, Julia Smith, had published her own translation of the whole Bible into English in 1876. What can be said is that hers is generally regarded as the first translation of the whole Bible into colloquial Marathi, the language of ordinary people, and that she was among the first women anywhere to undertake the translation of the whole of Scripture from the original languages.

In the Church of England's calendar, where she is remembered on 30 April, she is described simply as "Translator of the Scriptures." Of all the things she did, it was perhaps the one that she would have chosen to be remembered by.

Manorama

"and he said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: Jehovah gave, and Jehovah hath taken away; blessed be the name of Jehovah."
— Job 1:21, ASV

Heart's Joy

Of all the people in Ramabai's story, the one who appears most often and is known least is her daughter.

Manorama was born in Assam in the spring of 1881, the daughter her parents had longed for. Her name means "Heart's Joy." Before she was a year old her father was dead. She sailed to England with her mother at the age of two, was baptised with her at Wantage in 1883, went with her to America at nearly five, and was sent back to England to be cared for by the Wantage sisters while her mother travelled and lectured. For about three years she did not see her mother at all. She was brought back to India by one of the sisters, and was about eight when her mother opened the Sharada Sadan.

She was a Christian from childhood, and said so. Not long after the school opened, Soonderbai Powar visited and read the Bible to the pupils while Ramabai was out of the room. Little Manorama announced that she was a Christian, and that the Bible was her Shastra.

It cannot have been an easy childhood. She grew up shared with hundreds of other girls, first widows and then famine orphans, and her mother's attention was always divided. She was sent away again for her education, to England and then to a seminary in New York State, and she was preparing to enter Mount Holyoke College when she was called home. Her mother, Macnicol tells us, would not allow her to learn Sanskrit, the language of her mother and grandfather, for fear of its Hindu associations. Whatever she felt about any of this, she did not record it. What she did was to give her life to her mother's work.

Her Mother's Right Hand

She came back to India in 1900, when the second famine had filled Mukti with more than a thousand new girls, and she took charge of the Sharada Sadan and the high school. She was nineteen. From then on she was her mother's right hand. She taught, organised, edited the *Mukti Prayer Bell*, wrote reports and appeals, and travelled. In 1903 she went with Minnie Abrams to Australia and New Zealand, where she spoke about the work and helped to found circles of supporters who prayed by name for the girls at Mukti. In 1905 she led praying bands out from Mukti during the revival, and A visitor quoted by Macnicol, Canon Butcher, later heard her pray aloud in tongues at Mukti. She wrote a sequel to the Australian edition of her mother's life, bringing the story up to 1902, and it is one of the sources on which this book depends.

In 1912 she was invited, and in 1912 or 1913 she started, a work of her own, a Christian school for girls at Gulbarga, in the Muslim-ruled state of Hyderabad to the south-east. She called it Shanti Sadan, the Home of Peace, and she was entirely responsible for it, raising its money separately from Mukti and spending a few days there every month. It was hard. The

school taught the Bible, and the city was soon in a ferment because several pupils had confessed Christ in their own homes.

One episode from Gulbarga should be told plainly, because it shows the spirit of the time and the cost of it. When a plot of land was bought for the school, an idol stood in the middle of it, with a shrine where the farmers of the neighbourhood had worshipped every year at the start of the rains. Manorama wrote that "this we pulled down," and dedicated the land to God standing on the spot where the shrine had been. To her it was an act of faith. To the people of Gulbarga, who were already angry, it can only have seemed an act of contempt. "This caused an uproar again," Helen Dyer wrote, and the school fell from seventy pupils to two, though it slowly recovered to nearly forty. Manorama acted as most missionaries of her day would have acted, and probably as her mother would have approved. A modern reader, Christian or not, may still wish that it had been done differently.

In 1917 Manorama took her degree at the University of Bombay, so that the Mukti schools could be recognised to train teachers. She was by then her mother's chosen successor, and everyone expected her to carry the work on after Ramabai's death.

July 1921

Her health had long been fragile. In the summer of 1921 she was taken to the mission hospital at Miraj, south of Poona. An operation was attempted, but, as Clementina Butler wrote, "her heart was not equal to the strain." She died there in July 1921. She was forty.

Ramabai was sixty-three, growing deaf, worn out by thirty years of labour, and dependent on her daughter for almost everything. The blow

was terrible. Her letter to the officers of the American Association is short and restrained.

> *Let me thank you for your loving sympathy. All I have to say is "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, Blessed be the name of the Lord." There are 360 pupils studying in the Sharada Sadan, the Primary and the Kindergarten. This work shall be continued as long as God gives us grace and strength. The school was well organized and brought to its present state by my daughter, who has gone to the next world before me!*

One of Manorama's last acts, her mother added, had been to draw up the timetables for the school year.

The Lord Gave

The words Ramabai quoted, in the older translation she knew, are Job's, spoken when he heard that his children were dead. They are the words at the head of this chapter: "Jehovah gave, and Jehovah hath taken away; blessed be the name of Jehovah." Job said them in the first shock of his loss, before his long argument with God began, and they have been said by grieving Christians ever since. Ramabai did not argue. She had lost her father, her mother, her sister, her brother, her husband, and the friend who had come with her to England, all before she was twenty-six. Now, near the end of her own life, she had lost her only child. She blessed the name of the Lord.

Butler, who knew both of them, believed that the loss of her daughter, and of the support Manorama had given her, was more than her mother's body could bear. It is very likely true. Ramabai lived less than nine months longer. But she did not stop working. When her old friend Ramabai

Ranade, the widow of the judge who had resigned from her board in 1893, came to visit her in her grief, Mrs. Ranade later said that Ramabai preached the gospel to her.

Paul told the Thessalonians not to grieve over those who had died in Christ "even as the rest, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13, ASV). Ramabai believed that her daughter had gone ahead of her to the country they had both been travelling towards, and that she would follow soon. She was right about that.

Having Nothing

"as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."
— 2 Corinthians 6:10, ASV

The Later Years

In the last decade of her life, Ramabai seldom left Kedgaon. She was growing deafer, and in the end could hardly hear at all. She worked at the Bible translation for as many hours as she could spare, ran the community through her daughter and her helpers, wrote letters, prayed, and received visitors. Her own voice becomes harder to hear in these years. She had resolved, she wrote, that nothing should be "sown in my name," and she wrote less and less about herself. Most of what we know comes from others.

The visitors came from everywhere. A young American, Howard Walter, spent three days at Mukti in 1918 and wrote that he had not been prepared for the impression she made on him. She was translating the Bible, and supervising the printing of a Marathi life of Christ of which 23,000 copies were already in Hindu homes. In 1919, when famine came again, Mukti fed some eight hundred starving people every day.

In the New Year's honours of 1919 the British government awarded her the Kaisar-i-Hind gold medal, an award for public service in India, for

distinguished service to Indian education. She was too weak to travel to Bombay to receive it from the Governor. Macnicol says that she chose to receive it instead from the hand of Mrs. R. A. Adams, the wife of the secretary of the Bible Society in Bombay, because of her love for the society's work; Butler says that Manorama received it for her. Helen Dyer remarked that they had "heard nothing from her concerning it." It is easy to believe. She had been given titles before, in Calcutta, forty years earlier. She had long since counted such things as nothing.

Setting Her House in Order

After Manorama's death in July 1921, she knew that her own time was short. She appointed as her successor Lissa Hastie, an English friend who had worked beside her for twelve years, on condition, as Dyer's book put it, that the work be "continued on exactly the same lines," that is, as a work of faith. She signed a call for a Bible League to defend the authority of Scripture. She made her will. According to a friend, she set her house in order weeks before the end, and on the very day before she died wrote a letter about the care of some of the children.

A few days before her death, the secretary of the Bible Society in Bombay came to Mukti. She was too weak to speak, and too deaf to hear him. She sent for him to her room, and wrote with a trembling hand:

> *I want to say that I greatly appreciate your Society's work. I have been a Christian for thirty-eight years. I have found a great salvation through the Society's work. God bless you and yours.*

Thirty-eight years took her back to her baptism at Wantage in 1883. Over the last ten years of her life, Macnicol records, she had given more than eleven thousand rupees to the Bible Society, and for years the girls at Mukti

had set aside a fifteenth part of their daily grain for it. The Bible had been given to her freely. She gave it freely to others, and she gave to those who gave it to others.

5 April 1922

She died early in the morning of 5 April 1922, at Mukti. "She slipped away quietly in her sleep as the day broke," Macnicol wrote. She was sixty-three, less than three weeks short of her sixty-fourth birthday. No source records a medical cause of death. Butler, who knew her, believed that her grief for her daughter, and the loss of all that Manorama had carried for her, had been too much for a body long weakened by the hardships of her youth. That is as near as we can come.

The cable to the American Association read: "Ramabai Promoted."

The Funeral

The funeral service was conducted by her old friend Robert Hume of Ahmednagar, representing the American Association, with W. W. Bruere, who had helped to found the church at Mukti in 1897. Her plain coffin was carried on the shoulders of the young women of Mukti, and a thousand girls followed it to the cemetery. Over it was laid a white cloth inscribed with Paul's words: "We shall all be changed, the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." On the lid were the words: "The Pundita Ramabai Medhavi — born April 23, 1858; slept April 5, 1922."

All day, one of the Mukti workers wrote, people came from the villages around Mukti, people whom "Bai" had fed in every famine since 1896, to pay their respects. High castes, low castes, and outcastes stood together and

folded their hands before the body of a Brahman woman who, in her youth, would have been polluted by the touch of most of them. One old Brahman widow, bent with age and with a lifetime of the fasting and hardship that were the lot of Brahman widows, leaned over the bed and cried out: "O, Great Mother, Great Mother, whom now shall I call Mother? Who will care for me?"

There was no money. Because all the gifts for Mukti had been sent in Ramabai's name, none of them could be drawn until her will had been proved, and the courts were on holiday. "Here we were with a thousand people to feed," Hastie wrote in June, "to say nothing of other expenses, and no money." They prayed, and from day to day, she wrote, enough came to keep them going. Mukti was carrying on as its founder had intended.

Remembered

Across India, people gathered to honour her. At a memorial meeting in Poona, the British Collector of the district imagined her deaf ears "wakened to hear her Master say to her, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'" In Bombay, the poet and nationalist leader Sarojini Naidu, who was not a Christian, claimed her for India as "the first Christian to be enrolled in the calendar of Hindu saints." It was meant as the highest praise a Hindu could give, and it was a sign that some of her countrymen, who had once called her a traitor, were ready to claim her as their own.

Having Nothing

The words at the head of this chapter are Paul's description of the apostolic life: "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." They describe Ramabai's life as well as any words could. She had

been born into wealth and lost it in a famine. She had been honoured by the scholars of Calcutta and lost her honour in the eyes of her people. She had founded a great work and would not hold its property in her own name. She owned, as she said, nothing on earth but a few clothes and her Bible, and the Bible she translated she gave away, never allowing it to be sold. And she left behind her a community of more than a thousand people, a Bible in the language of the village women of Maharashtra, and a multitude of women and girls who had been given back their lives.

"I have fought the good fight," Paul wrote at the end of his life, "I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7, ASV). Ramabai would not have claimed so much. She would have said, as she had said all her life, that God was faithful, and that she had proved him.

No Caste, No Sex

"There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus."
— Galatians 3:28, ASV

Three Women Again

The introduction to this book described three Ramabais: the reformer, the saint, and, to some of her critics, the missionary who drew Hindu girls away from their faith. Having followed her life to its end, we can see why each portrait exists, and why none of them is enough.

The reformer is real. Ramabai was one of the first Indian women to speak in public for the rights of women, to found a women's organisation, to give evidence before a government commission, and to write a book arguing that the women of India were oppressed and must be educated and set free. She did it in her twenties, as a widow, against the united opposition of orthodox Hindu society. The historian Meera Kosambi has argued that her disappearance from the standard histories of Maharashtrian reform was caused as much by her being an outspoken woman as by her being a Christian. The Indian government recognised her contribution in 1989 by issuing a postage stamp in her honour.

The saint is real too. She gave away everything she had. She rescued thousands of women and girls from starvation and from prostitution. She founded a community that has lasted for more than a century. She trusted God for every meal for twenty-five years, and the meals came. She prayed for revival, and saw one that spread across India and beyond. She translated the Bible into the everyday speech of the people she loved. The Church of England remembers her every year on 30 April as "Pandita Mary Ramabai, Translator of the Scriptures," and she appears on 5 April in some trial and supplementary calendars of the Episcopal Church in America, though not in its current official calendar. In 2018 the *New York Times* published an obituary of her in a series on remarkable people it had overlooked in their own time.

And the critics have a point that should not be dismissed. She did promise her Hindu supporters a neutral school, and that school did become a place where many girls became Christians. Most of the famine girls she rescued were children, who did not choose Mukti for its religion but because they were starving. She hoped they would become Christians, and most of them did. To those who believed that the Hindu tradition was the soul of India, this could only look like a loss. From 1897 on she made no secret of what she hoped for, and no source shows her compelling anyone to be baptised. But her Hindu critics believed in 1893 that she had concealed her aims, her own American committee feared the pledge had been broken, and the famine children at Mukti had little real choice about the teaching they received. But it is not surprising that those who did not share her faith saw her work differently.

One Woman

The truth is that all three portraits describe the same woman, and the threads cannot be separated. Her feminism and her faith were not two different things. She became a reformer because she read the Hindu law-books and found that they held out no hope for her as a woman. She became a Christian, in the deepest sense, when she discovered that in Christ there was hope for her as a woman, freely given. "What good news," she wrote, "for me, a woman; a woman born in India among Brahmins, who hold out no hope for me and the like of me." Her famine rescues were acts of faith and acts of social reform at once. Her Bible translation was for the women of the villages.

The words at the head of this chapter are Paul's, written to the churches of Galatia, who were arguing about whether Gentile Christians must become Jews. "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus." Ramabai summed up the same truth in her own words when she described her discovery of the gospel: "No caste, no sex, no work, and no man was to be depended upon to get salvation, this everlasting life; but God gave it freely to any one and every one who believed on His Son."

No caste. In the community she founded, Brahman widows lived alongside the daughters of outcastes and prayed with them, and at her funeral high castes and outcastes stood together by her body. No sex. She taught that the Spirit of God was given to daughters as well as sons, to handmaidens as well as servants, and she sent young women out to preach across India. No work. She believed that salvation was not earned by pilgrimages or alms or fasting, as she had once believed, but freely given, and she gave freely in turn.

Mukti Today

The community she founded still exists. The Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission still stands at Kedgaon, east of Pune. According to its own figures it is home to some fifteen hundred people, among them orphaned and abandoned girls, widows, elderly and disabled women, and boys, and it runs schools for more than two thousand pupils, a hospital, a farm, and a Bible school, on a site of some two hundred and forty acres. One of its schools is still called Sharada Sadan. Another is named after Manorama. Ramabai would not build the mission on an endowment, and it still relies on gifts.

Her other legacies are harder to measure. The revival of 1905 spread to many other places in India, and through Minnie Abrams's little book it reached as far as Chile, where it helped to begin a Pentecostal movement. Her Marathi Bible was printed and given away at Mukti, in the plain speech she had chosen for the village women. The women she trained became teachers, nurses, and Bible-women across western India. And her life became a story that has been told in many languages, to many people who never heard of the Shastras or the famines of the 1870s, as an example of what one woman's faith and courage could do.

The Fatherless and the Widow

This book began with a verse from the Psalms: "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, Is God in his holy habitation." The verse goes on: "God setteth the solitary in families" (Psalm 68:6, ASV). Ramabai was fatherless at sixteen and a widow at twenty-three, and she knew what it was to be solitary. She spent the rest of her life setting the solitary in families: child-widows whose families had cast them out, famine orphans who had

lost everyone, women whom society called fallen, girls sold in the camps. At Mukti they found a family, and a mother.

She would not want to be remembered as a heroine. She described herself as a sweeper. She would want to be remembered, if at all, as a witness to the faithfulness of God. "I have come to believe the Word of God implicitly," she wrote, "and I have found out by experience that it is true." And near the end of her testimony she turned from herself to her readers: "I entreat you, my readers, to prove the Lord as I have proved Him."

Appendix A: Lessons from the Life of Pandita Ramabai

> *"Remember them that had the rule over you, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith."*
> *— Hebrews 13:7, ASV*

The lessons below gather the themes of this book so that readers can return to them. Pandita Ramabai called herself a sweeper, and would have been uncomfortable being held up as a model. She wanted her life to point to the faithfulness of God. Each lesson therefore rests on Scripture, not on her example alone. The letter to the Hebrews tells us to consider how those who went before us lived and died, and to imitate their faith, not every detail of their lives.

1. Teach Your Daughters

Her father defied his caste to teach his wife and daughters, and everything Ramabai became grew from that. Children learn what their parents care enough to teach them. "Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way" (Deuteronomy 6:7, ASV).

2. Love the Truth More Than Approval

At Dwarka, as a girl, she saw no golden city, and would not pretend she did. All her life she preferred the truth to the good opinion of others. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, ASV).

3. Suffering Does Not Make Us Kind; Grace Does

She warned that hunger and grief had hardened her heart, not softened it, and that only God could give her a heart that cared for others. “I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26, ASV).

4. God Draws Those Who Cannot Find Their Own Way

Widowed at twenty-three, before she knew Christ, she wrote that if she was to come to God, “He must Himself draw me.” “No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him” (John 6:44, ASV).

5. Speak for Those Who Cannot Speak

She told a government commission that women were oppressed by men, when almost no Indian woman had a public voice. “Open thy mouth for the dumb, In the cause of all such as are left desolate” (Proverbs 31:8, ASV).

6. Christ Receives the Outcast

She was drawn to Christ by seeing Christians care for women society had cast out, and by the story of the woman at the well. “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (John 4:14, ASV).

7. Religion Is Not the Same as Christ

For eight years after her baptism, she said, she had "found the Christian religion" but "had not found Christ." Many people still stop where she stopped. "The people that sat in darkness Saw a great light" (Matthew 4:16, ASV).

8. Salvation Is a Gift

"No caste, no sex, no work, and no man was to be depended upon to get salvation." What she had tried for years to earn, she found was freely given. "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, ASV).

9. Do Not Shut the Door

She would not hide her faith from those who wanted to hear, and in time she told her supporters plainly what her work had become. Honesty about faith can cost friends and still be right. "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?" (Galatians 1:10, ASV).

10. Begin It Yourself

When she wished someone would start a work of faith in India, she heard God ask why she did not begin it herself. Wishing that others would act is easy. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10, ASV).

11. Love the Wanderer

She was ready to leave the runaway girl at the Herna river, until she remembered how God had loved her while she was still a sinner. Mercy that waits for repentance is not yet the mercy of God. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3, ASV).

12. Prove the Lord

She fed hundreds, and then thousands, without endowment, guaranteed income, or bank account, and found God faithful. She invited her readers to test him as she had. "Prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts" (Malachi 3:10, ASV).

13. Revival Begins with Ourselves

The prayer circle at Mukti prayed first for "the true conversion of all the Indian Christians, including ourselves." "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven" (2 Chronicles 7:14, ASV).

14. Love Is the Sign

In the excitement of the revival she insisted that "love, perfect divine love, is the only and most necessary sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit." "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1, ASV).

15. Give the Word Freely

She spent her last years translating the Bible into the language of ordinary women, and never allowed it to be sold. “Freely ye received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8, ASV).

16. Be a Sweeper

One of the most learned women of her generation called herself a sweeper, and spent her life gathering up those whom others had thrown away. “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, And lifteth up the needy from the dunghill” (Psalm 113:7, ASV).

Appendix B: Chapter-by-Chapter Study and Reflection Guide

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves."
— James 1:22, ASV

This guide is for personal reflection, small groups, or a reading course of about twenty-four weeks. Its purpose is not to make Pandita Ramabai an object of admiration, but to let her life hold up a mirror in which readers can examine their own discipleship under Scripture. Groups may find it helpful to begin each session with the chapter's opening verse and to end with prayer. Several chapters raise hard questions about women, caste, conversion, colonial rule, and the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. They are meant to be discussed honestly, not settled quickly.

Introduction - The Pandita and Her Biographers

Central idea

Ramabai is remembered as a reformer, a saint, and a missionary; her own words are the surest guide to which she was.

Scriptures to revisit

John 8:32; Proverbs 18:17.

Reflection

1. Why do different groups remember the same person so differently? 2. What is the difference between finding a religion and finding Christ?

Chapter 1 - The Forest School

Central idea

A father who defied his caste to teach his wife and daughters shaped everything Ramabai became.

Scriptures to revisit

Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 22:6.

Reflection

1. What did your parents teach you that has lasted? 2. Who in your community is being kept from learning?

Chapter 2 - Pilgrims

Central idea

A child who saw no golden city learned to prefer the truth to the approval of the crowd.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 115:4-8; Jeremiah 10:14.

Reflection

1. Have you ever pretended to see something you did not see? 2. How should Christians speak honestly but respectfully about other religions?

Chapter 3 - The Famine

Central idea

Her father gave her into the hands of the only God he knew, and she came to believe that God had heard him.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 27:10; Acts 17:23.

Reflection

1. What does it mean that God may answer prayers offered in ignorance? 2. What did pride of caste cost her family?

Chapter 4 - Four Thousand Miles

Central idea

Suffering does not of itself make people kind; Ramabai believed only grace can give a heart of flesh.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 107:4-6; Ezekiel 36:26.

Reflection

1. Has suffering made you harder or softer? 2. What changed Ramabai's heart?

Chapter 5 - Pandita

Central idea

Honoured for her learning, she found that the sacred books held no hope for her as a woman.

Scriptures to revisit

Job 28:12-13, 28.

Reflection

1. Where do people look for wisdom today? 2. What did Keshab Chandra Sen's smile give her?

Chapter 6 - Nineteen Months

Central idea

Widowed at twenty-three, she found that grief drew her nearer to a God she did not yet know.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 54:4-5; John 6:44.

Reflection

1. What did widowhood mean in Ramabai's world? 2. How has God drawn you?

Chapter 7 - "Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb"

Central idea

She spoke publicly for India's women when almost no woman had a public voice.

Scriptures to revisit

Proverbs 31:8-9; Psalm 10:17-18.

Reflection

1. Who in your society has no voice? 2. What did it cost Ramabai to speak?

Chapter 8 - As Abraham

Central idea

Christians caring for outcast women, and the story of the woman at the well, drew her to Christ.

Scriptures to revisit

Hebrews 11:8; John 4:1-26.

Reflection

1. Why did the rescue homes at Fulham move her so deeply? 2. What did Father Goreh's book add?

Chapter 9 - The Religion Without Christ

Central idea

She refused to let others govern her conscience, and went to the Bible itself.

Scriptures to revisit

1 Thessalonians 5:21; Acts 17:11.

Reflection

1. Was Ramabai right to resist the Wantage sisters? 2. What is the difference between independence and pride?

Chapter 10 - The High-Caste Hindu Woman

Central idea

In America she pleaded for India's widows, believing that the despised could redeem their nation.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 1:17; John 1:46.

Reflection

1. What did she mean by "out of Nazareth"? 2. Why did she criticise British rule even while seeking Western help?

Chapter 11 - Sharada Sadan

Central idea

She opened a home of learning for widows, and left the door of her room open.

Scriptures to revisit

Proverbs 9:1-6.

Reflection

1. Was the promise of neutrality wise? 2. What would you have done about the open door?

Chapter 12 - The Storm of 1893

Central idea

Honest people on both sides clashed over her school, and she learned not to fear men.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 56:3-4; Isaiah 54:17.

Reflection

1. Were the reformers wrong to resign? 2. When is it right to keep a promise, and when to break it?

Chapter 13 - "I Had Not Found Christ"

Central idea

She surrendered to Christ and found salvation freely given to a woman.

Scriptures to revisit

Matthew 4:16; Romans 5:8; Galatians 3:28.

Reflection

1. Have you found the religion, or Christ? 2. Why was the gospel good news “for me, a woman”?

Chapter 14 - Remember the Days of Old

Central idea

Remembering her own famine, she went into the famine districts to rescue girls.

Scriptures to revisit

Deuteronomy 32:7; Esther 4:14; Romans 5:8.

Reflection

1. What do you need to remember about where God found you? 2. What does the story of Girija teach about mercy?

Chapter 15 - “My Great Sin”

Central idea

She exposed injustice in the poorhouses and the army, and was punished for saving starving girls.

Scriptures to revisit

Proverbs 24:11-12; Deuteronomy 10:18.

Reflection

1. Was her anger righteous? 2. Where do we say “we knew not this” today?

Chapter 16 - Prove Me Now

Central idea

She began a work of faith herself instead of wishing others would, and proved God faithful.

Scriptures to revisit

Malachi 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

Reflection

1. What are you wishing someone else would do? 2. What are the gifts and the costs of a faith mission?

Chapter 17 - The Sweeper

Central idea

She swept up the people India had thrown away, and gave them work and a home.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 113:7-9; Isaiah 9:6.

Reflection

1. What did it mean for a Brahman to call herself a sweeper? 2. How should Christians answer the charge of making "Christian outcasts"?

Chapter 18 - "Ramabai Is Dead"

Central idea

She told her American supporters plainly that her work had changed, and gave them back what was theirs.

Scriptures to revisit

Galatians 1:10; Matthew 9:38.

Reflection

1. Was Ramabai fair to her supporters? 2. What did she mean by "Ramabai is dead"?

Chapter 19 - Fire

Central idea

A prayer circle that began by praying for itself saw revival spread across India.

Scriptures to revisit

Acts 2:17-18; 1 Corinthians 13:1.

Reflection

1. Why did they pray “including ourselves”? 2. How did Ramabai keep spiritual gifts in their place?

Chapter 20 - A Famine of the Word

Central idea

She translated the Bible into the plain speech of village women and gave it away.

Scriptures to revisit

Amos 8:11; Psalm 119:130; Zechariah 4:6.

Reflection

1. Why does plain language matter in Scripture? 2. Did she go too far in rejecting her Hindu heritage?

Chapter 21 - Manorama

Central idea

Her daughter gave her life to her mother’s work, and died before her.

Scriptures to revisit

Job 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Reflection

1. What might Manorama's life have cost her? 2. How do Christians grieve with hope?

Chapter 22 - Having Nothing

Central idea

She died owning almost nothing, and left behind a community, a Bible, and thousands of lives restored.

Scriptures to revisit

2 Corinthians 6:10; 2 Timothy 4:7.

Reflection

1. What does it mean to be "poor, yet making many rich"? 2. What did the old Brahman widow's cry reveal?

Chapter 23 - No Caste, No Sex

Central idea

Her feminism and her faith were one, rooted in the freedom of the gospel.

Scriptures to revisit

Galatians 3:28; Psalm 68:5-6.

Reflection

1. Which of the three Ramabais do you find most compelling, and why? 2. Whom might God be calling you to set in a family?

Appendix C: Chronology of the Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai

"So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom."
— Psalm 90:12, ASV

The dates below are meant as orientation. Where Ramabai's own writings, contemporary letters, or the records of the Ramabai Association give a date, it is given plainly. Where the sources disagree, the chronology gives the best-supported date and the disagreement is noted in the chapters or in Appendix D.

Before 1858 - Anant Shastri

Anant Shastri Dongre, a Brahman Sanskrit scholar from the Mangalore district, studies in Poona, resolves to teach his wife Sanskrit, and later marries Lakshmibai, aged nine. He teaches her, and makes a home in the Gangamul forest in the Western Ghats.

23 April 1858 - Birth

Ramabai is born in the forest, the youngest of three surviving children: Srinivas, Krishnabai, and Ramabai.

Late 1858 - The Pilgrim Life Begins

Ruined by hospitality, the family leave the forest when she is about six months old, and live for some fifteen years as Puranikas, reciting the Puranas at sacred places across India.

c. 1862-1873 - Education and Pilgrimages

Her mother teaches her Sanskrit from about eight to fifteen. Pilgrimages to Tirupati, Dakor, the Jumna, Dwarka, and Pandharpur. Her father refuses to marry her as a child.

c. 1874-1877 - Famine

As famine spreads in the Madras Presidency, the family spends its money on religious merit. Her father dies near Tirupati; her mother at Raichur; her sister soon after. She is about sixteen. The usual date of 1877 is probably too late.

c. 1875-1878 - Wandering

Ramabai and Srinivas walk, by her reckoning, more than four thousand miles, north to Kashmir and east to Calcutta.

1878 - Calcutta

She meets Keshab Chandra Sen, reads the Dharma Shastras, is given a Sanskrit Bible, and is acclaimed by the pandits with the title Sarasvati. She becomes known as Pandita Ramabai.

1880 - Bereavement and Marriage

Srinivas dies, probably at Dacca. In November she marries Bipin Behari Medhavi, a Bengali lawyer of non-Brahman caste, in a civil ceremony.

1881 - Manorama

Her daughter Manorama is born, probably in April, at Silchar in Assam. At Silchar she reads Luke's Gospel in Bengali.

1882 - Widowhood and Poona

Her husband dies of cholera, probably in February. She moves to Poona, founds the Arya Mahila Samaj, publishes Stri Dharma Niti, and on 5 September gives evidence to the Education Commission.

1883 - England and Baptism

She sails for England in the spring with Manorama and a companion, Anandibai Bhagat, who later takes her own life. On 29 September she and Manorama are baptised at Wantage.

1884-1886 - Cheltenham

She studies and teaches Sanskrit at Cheltenham Ladies' College under Dorothea Beale, while arguing with the Wantage sisters over doctrine and authority.

1886-1888 - America

She reaches Philadelphia in March 1886 and attends Anandibai Joshee's graduation. The High-Caste Hindu Woman is published in June 1887. The Ramabai Association is formed in Boston on 13 December 1887. She lectures across the United States and sails from San Francisco in November 1888.

1 February 1889 - Return

She lands at Bombay.

11 March 1889 - Sharada Sadan

The school for high-caste widows opens at Chowpatty, Bombay. In December she speaks at the Indian National Congress.

November 1890 - Poona

The Sharada Sadan moves to Poona.

1891 - Finding Christ

By her own account, eight years after her baptism, she surrenders to Christ and finds peace. A press campaign in Poona attacks her school.

13 August 1893 - The Resignation

The Hindu advisory board resigns, charging proselytism. Thirty-one pupils are withdrawn. The Ramabai Association investigates and supports her.

1895 - Kedgaon and the Spirit

A farm is bought at Kedgaon. In April, at Lonavla, she seeks and receives the Holy Spirit. By July some girls of the Sharada Sadan have been baptised.

1896-1897 - Famine Rescues

She travels into the Central Provinces and brings back hundreds of famine girls. Plague restrictions in Poona force her to move them to Kedgaon in the spring of 1897.

1897 - Mukti

Minnie Abrams arrives in October. Many girls are baptised in the Bhima river in November. In December the settlement at Kedgaon is dedicated and named Mukti.

1898 - Boston and Keswick

On 16 March she addresses the Ramabai Association in Boston. The old Association dissolves and the property passes to her; she transfers it to the new American Ramabai Association. At the Keswick Convention she asks prayer for 100,000 men and 100,000 women to preach in India.

1899 - Kripa Sadan

The foundation stone of Kripa Sadan, the House of Grace for rescued women, is laid on 20 March.

1899-1900 - The Second Famine

Famine in Gujarat. By August 1900 more than 1,350 Gujarati girls are at Mukti. Manorama returns from America to lead the Sharada Sadan.

1901-1902 - Growth

Mukti shelters some two thousand women and girls. A home for boys opens in 1902.

1904 - Bible Translation

Work begins on a new translation of the Bible into colloquial Marathi.

1905 - Revival

A prayer circle of about seventy begins in January. Revival breaks out late in June. Praying bands go out across western India.

1906-1907 - Tongues and A Testimony

Speaking in tongues appears at Mukti in December 1906. In 1907 she publishes A Testimony and defends the revival in the Mukti Prayer Bell.

1912 - Gulbarga and the New Testament

Manorama begins Shanti Sadan at Gulbarga (1912-13). A tentative edition of the New Testament as far as Acts is printed.

1919 - Honour

She is awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind gold medal in the New Year Honours.

July 1921 - Manorama's Death

Manorama dies at Miraj, aged forty.

5 April 1922 - Death

Ramabai dies at Mukti, aged sixty-three, shortly after completing the translation of the Bible. Lissa Hastie succeeds her.

1924 - The Marathi Bible

The complete Bible in her translation is published.

1989 - Stamp

India issues a postage stamp in her honour.

Appendix D: Notes on Sources and Method

"it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write unto thee in order ... that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed."
— Luke 1:3-4, ASV

This appendix explains where the story told in this book comes from, how the sources were weighed, and which popular claims have been corrected. It is written for readers who want to check the story for themselves, and for anyone who will retell it.

Ramabai's Own Writings

Wherever possible, this book lets Ramabai speak for herself. Her principal English writings, all now in the public domain, are these:

- *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia, 1887), her own book, with an introduction by Rachel Bodley that includes much biographical material told to Bodley by Ramabai, and her 1882 evidence to the Education Commission. When the book was reprinted in 1901, Ramabai asked for Bodley's introduction to be left out. Where Bodley's account of her childhood differs from Ramabai's own, this book follows Ramabai.

- *Famine Experiences in India* (1897), two letters written for the relief of the famine, containing her fullest account of her parents' deaths and her own famine journeys.
- *A Testimony* (Kedgaon, 1907, with later additions), her account of her spiritual journey. We have not found a copy of the original pamphlet. It survives in a condensation made with her permission by J. J. Lucas (*Pandita Ramabai: A Wonderful Life*, 1919) and in a fuller text printed by Helen Dyer (see below). The two differ: Dyer's text omits the names of the Hindu reformers who helped her in Poona and of Father Nehemiah Goreh, and Lucas's includes them. This book quotes both, and follows Lucas where Dyer has cut.
- A short tract, *Trying to be Saved by Their Own Merit*, describing the pilgrimage to Pandharpur.
- Her letters to the Ramabai Association in Boston, printed in its annual reports from 1890 to 1898, and other letters printed in *Pandita Ramabai: The Widows' Friend* (Melbourne, 1903), whose later chapters were written by her daughter Manorama.

Her Marathi writings, including *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) and her book on the United States (1889), and her correspondence with the Wantage sisters, edited by A. B. Shah as *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* (1977), have been used only through what modern scholars report of them. The modern English translations of these works are in copyright.

The Early Biographers

- Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* (1900), and *Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith*

(London, after 1922), whose last chapter, on Ramabai's death, was completed by another hand after Dyer's own death. Dyer knew Ramabai and her circle, and her books contain many letters and first-hand accounts, especially of the revival. She wrote to inspire prayer and support, treats Hinduism with open contempt, and was herself a participant in at least one controversial episode (the hiding of a girl in 1893) that she describes approvingly.

- Clementina Butler, *Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati* (1922), a memorial life by the chairman of the American Ramabai Association's executive committee, valuable for its American documents and its account of Ramabai's last years.
- Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (1926), in the series *Builders of Modern India*. The most careful of the early lives, it draws on the Marathi biography by D. G. Vaidya and the recollections of Ramabai Ranade, and is willing to criticise its subject.
- Jennie Chappell, *Women Who Have Worked and Won* (1900), a popular account that adds romantic details found nowhere else. It has been used sparingly and never alone.

Modern Scholars

This book has drawn facts and interpretations, but not text, from modern scholarship, especially Meera Kosambi (*Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words*, 2000, and her edition of Ramabai's American book, 2003), Uma Chakravarti (*Rewriting History*, 1998), Gauri Viswanathan (*Outside the Fold*, 1998), Antoinette Burton (*At the Heart of the Empire*, 1998), Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed., *Pandita Ramabai's America*, 2003), Keith J. White (*Let the Earth Hear Her Voice*, 2022), Edith Blumhofer on the

revival, and Gary B. McGee on the history of speaking in tongues at Mukti. Short phrases from their work are quoted and attributed in the text.

Corrections to Popular Accounts

- **Birthplace.** She was born in a forest home at Gangamul in the Western Ghats, on the borders of Mysore State above her father's native Mangalore district, not in the city of Mangalore. She never named the place herself.
- **The famine deaths.** Her parents and sister are often said to have died in 1877. Her own account and her age (about sixteen) suggest about 1874-75, early in the famine.
- **Four thousand miles.** The figure is her own, and refers to her wanderings with her brother after their parents' deaths, not to the family's pilgrimages.
- **Her titles.** She was acclaimed with the title Sarasvati by the pandits of Calcutta in 1878; "Pandita" seems to have followed by popular use. Claims that she was the first or only woman to receive such titles cannot be verified.
- **Stories she did not tell.** Keshab Chandra Sen gave her a Veda, by her own account, not a book of New Testament selections. The story of her brother exposing the "floating mountains" of a Himalayan lake, and the claim that she worked as a cook, appear only in later admiring accounts and are not used here.
- **Her marriage.** Modern scholars date it to November 1880, and her husband's death to February 1882. She remembered it as "nineteen months." The two cannot both be exact.
- **The Education Commission.** She gave evidence in Poona in September 1882, not 1883.

- **Her baptism.** She was baptised at Wantage on 29 September 1883. The tradition that Canon William Butler baptised her has not been confirmed from the register.
- **Her return from America.** She landed at Bombay on 1 February 1889, not at Calcutta and not in 1887 as two early accounts say.
- **George Müller.** She read the life of George Müller, the Bristol orphanage founder, about 1895, not during her years in England. The Müller she knew in the 1880s was the Oxford Sanskrit scholar Max Müller.
- **The Marathi Bible.** Hers was not the first Marathi Bible; William Carey and others had translated it earlier. Nor was she the first woman to translate the whole Bible; Julia Smith published an English translation in 1876. Hers was the first Bible in colloquial Marathi, and she was among the first women anywhere to translate the whole of Scripture from the original languages.
- **The revival and Azusa Street.** The Mukti revival began in June 1905, before the Azusa Street meetings of April 1906. Speaking in tongues at Mukti came later, in December 1906, after news of Azusa Street had arrived.
- **Commemoration.** The Church of England remembers her on 30 April. She appears on 5 April in some Episcopal Church resources, but not in that church's current official calendar.
- **Her death.** She died on 5 April 1922 at the age of sixty-three, not sixty-four. No reliable source gives a medical cause.
- **Mukti's naming.** Dyer places the dedication and naming of Mukti at the camp meeting of December 1897; Manorama dates the dedication of the "New Home" to 24 September 1898.
- **Manorama's death.** The early sources give July 1921; one modern scholar gives June 1921.

Language

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources describe Hindu religion and Indian people in language that is often contemptuous and sometimes racist. Ramabai herself, as a Christian, wrote harshly about the religion of her childhood. This book quotes such language only where it shows what she or her contemporaries thought, and does not adopt it. It has tried to describe Hindu belief and practice fairly, and to treat Ramabai's Hindu critics as people with real reasons for their views.

Scripture

All Scripture quotations in the book's own voice are from the American Standard Version (1901). Where Ramabai quotes Scripture in her own words, usually from the Authorized Version, her wording has been kept.

Method

This book is not a work of original archival research. It tells a true story for general readers from the published sources. Where the sources are uncertain, it says so. Where they disagree, it has preferred Ramabai's own contemporary writings to later recollections, and contemporary records to the embellishments of admirers. No conversations have been invented. Every quotation comes from the sources named above.

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