

# Indian Response to Christianity, Church and Colonialism

## Case of Pandita Ramabai

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*Pandita Ramabai's relationship with Christianity was a long and complex one influenced by many factors. On the one hand was disillusionment with Hinduism, on the other, the attraction of a faith which promised salvation to all without discrimination. Ramabai saw her own conversion as a protest against the inherent discrimination against women in Hinduism, a protest which remained a personal statement without developing into a social protest.*

*This article attempts to view Ramabai's conversion to Christianity and her later life in a socio-temporal frame whose contours were shaped by British political, cultural and racial supremacy.*

DURING those periods of heightened religious sensitivity when a matter of personal faith gets enlarged into a societal concern, the passage of an individual—and especially an individual prominent in public life—from one religion to another predictably flames into a mass protest. Located at one such fateful period in the history of Maharashtra,<sup>1</sup> Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) sent shock waves through the orthodox Hindu society of her birth by first embracing Christianity and then propagating it through every resourceful means at her disposal. Ramabai's relationship with Christianity was a long and complex chain of events, as was society's response to her actions. Both need to be understood within a socio-temporal frame whose contours were shaped by British political, cultural, and racial supremacy which extended overt and covert patronage to Christianity, and which paradoxically nurtured the indigenous social reform movement with its nascent nationalistic overtones.

Within the confines of her own life, Ramabai's involvement with Christianity meant that a deeply personal matter of belief was transmuted into the motive force for social action, the fountainhead of spiritual solace became a source of friction with an organised hierarchy and the private acceptance of a doctrine had to be defended by public opposition to its official patrons. She can be seen as the site for a series of overlapping encounters—primarily that between Hinduism and Christianity, rationalism and dogma, individualism and Church hierarchy. Surrounding these was the larger confrontation between Indianness and western culture, nationalism and colonial rule, feminism<sup>2</sup> and patriarchy in its multiple guises.

Society saw this not as a personal quest and struggle but as a betrayal of a religion already threatened by alien rule and as a desertion of the fledgling social reform movement. The vision of an ally turned enemy caused a social trauma severe enough to lead to what can best be described as a century-long conspiracy of silence by mainstream society of Maharashtra—the very society which could and should have been the chief beneficiary of Ramabai's pioneering feminist endeavours. Even the re-

cent resurgence of interest in her life and activities has succeeded in lifting the veil of silence only in bits and pieces. The present essay takes yet another step in this direction by attempting to grapple with the very core of the process which was to lead to Ramabai's exile from the collective consciousness.

### I

#### Towards Christianity

When Christianity began to make inroads into western India in the early 19th century, its chances seemed minimal against the deeply entrenched beliefs and customs, especially of the small but monolithic brahmin stratum which had enjoyed a century-long religious as well as political hegemony in the area.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most succinct statement of this near-total permeation of every human activity with religious significance was Ramabai's own—post-conversion—summing up: "As regards social custom, it may be said that the daily life and habits of the people are immensely influenced by religion in India. There is not an act that is not performed religiously by them. ... The rising from the bed in the morning, the cleaning of teeth, washing of hands and bathing of the body, the wearing of garments, lighting the fire or the lamp, eating and drinking, and every act of similar description, is done in the prescribed manner, and with the utterance of prayers or in profound silence. Each custom, when it is old enough to be entitled 'the way of the ancients', takes the form of religion, and is scrupulously observed" [High Caste Hindu Woman (hereafter HCHW): 3].

The doors to this seemingly insular society were opened in 1813 when the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly of Indian trade allowed the entry of private commercial, as well as religious, interests. Official, though not always overt, patronage to the latter was ensured when the Company established its political rule in the area in 1818. Missionary activity then became a fact of urban life, to be encountered in street corner sermons, the distribution of Christian literature in the vernacular languages, and most ubiquitous of all, in the rapidly proliferating institutions of western educa-

tion which held the key to all major avenues of employment.<sup>4</sup>

The particularly strong equation between Christianity and western education was highly valued by the missionary societies, and sometimes openly acknowledged: "The work of the American Mission falls into two departments, the directly Evangelistic, and the Educational, a difference which is more in name than in reality for the end is but one. The young have to be elevated through Christian education, and all through the direct preaching of the Gospel of Christ" [Dnyanodaya 1886:229]. The brahmins, the literati whose livelihood under the new British dispensation depended on access to western education, were especially vulnerable. But after the initial and futile attempts at resistance, such as a temple meeting in Bombay in 1842 which forbade all children and adults to attend missionary schools [Hewat 1953: 124], they seemed to capitulate.

The impact of the Christian doctrine, coupled with the western value system and reinforced by the reality of British colonial rule, produced two diametrically opposite results. One was the conversion to Christianity of a few influential brahmin and other upper caste individuals, the most prominent being Nilkantha Shastri (later Nehemiah) Goreh in 1848, Baba Padmanji in 1854, Pandita Ramabai in 1883 and N V Tilak in 1895.<sup>5</sup> The other type of reaction, that of strengthening Hinduism through reform and revival, was much more widespread among the upper castes. The very first reform-oriented group, the secretive and short-lived Paramahansa Mandali of Bombay was later reincarnated in 1867 in a somewhat different form as the Prarthana Samaj which was modelled on the Brahma Samaj of Calcutta. In its monotheism were incorporated some of the principles of Christianity and other world religions. The revivalist trend sought to purify and strengthen Hinduism to face the Christian onslaught: it was ushered in by Vishnubva Brahmachari who was active in the third quarter of the century; and reinforced by the Arya Samaj of Bombay founded in 1875.<sup>6</sup>

While the Christian converts of the missionary movement were intent on the

spiritual salvation of their Hindu brethren, the religious reformist and revivalist movement had a distinct interest in social reform, focusing on caste inequalities and more particularly on gender inequality. The principal concern of the latter was the emancipation of women by abolishing the more coercive practices like child marriage and oppression of widows, and by extending to women the benefits of modern education. Pandita Ramabai's uniqueness lay, *inter alia*, in her position at the intersection of these two movements.

#### RAMABAI'S PATH TO CONVERSION

At first glance, Ramabai's sudden conversion to Christianity at the age of 25, in 1883, appears to be a mystery to which her childhood and youth provide no clue—except by suggesting the somewhat simplistic interpretation of the swing of the pendulum from one extreme to another. However, an insight is provided into the internal turmoil which led to this momentous decision, by her booklet *A Testimony* written in 1907, which retraces her path to conversion—and beyond. What follows is an attempt to piece together disparate facts culled from various sources into a reconstruction which may not be definitive but is the most plausible one.

Spirituality and ritual observances dominated the life of the orthodox brahmin family into which Ramabai was born in 1858. It was presided over by her father Anant Shastri Dongre, a Chitpavan brahmin from Maharashtra whose forefathers had migrated to Karnataka. Practically from her infancy, she was launched upon a life of unceasing pilgrimage with her parents, elder sister and brother. The family traversed the length and breadth of the sub-continent, visiting holy places, and earning a precarious living by reciting the 'puranas'. But even the gifts of money and food from the devout listeners were, after meeting their own frugal needs, offered to holy brahmins as an obligatory meritorious deed.<sup>7</sup>

This life pattern was distinguished by two unorthodox elements. One was Anant Shastri's insistence on educating his daughters in the Sanskrit texts (with the exception of the 'vedas'), as he had educated his wife earlier, in the face of severe orthodox opposition. This was a truly radical departure from convention which dictated that women (as well as shudras) were unworthy of learning this language of the gods. However, secular education or a knowledge of the English language remained suspect and altogether forbidden. The other unorthodox element was Ramabai's unmarried state, again in defiance of the custom of child marriage, as a result of the unhappy outcome of her elder sister's early marriage.

In hindsight two important consequences of this highly unusual upbringing seem predictable. One was that the social construction of gender did not follow the contemporary pattern where a girl was locked into wifehood and motherhood as early in life as possible, confined to the family and the domestic sphere, and denied

education or even literacy. Treated by and large as her brother's equal, educated in the same way, and encouraged to give public purana recitals, Ramabai had no hesitation in later life in sharing fully the activities of male social reformers. The other consequence was that a life of physical hardship, complete faith in religion as the guiding force of life, and total reliance on the conscience as the only arbiter of conduct resulted in a strength of character as well as intense individualism—rare in Indian society which has rested on collectivity and been governed by conformity to convention—which led her later to tread a lonely path to spiritual salvation.

During the family's endless cycle of travels, the severe famine of 1876 took a toll of Ramabai's parents and sister. With her brother Srinivas, Ramabai continued the same routine of austerities for another two years before their travels led them to Calcutta. This chance event changed the future course of Ramabai's life as she suddenly shot into prominence, being hailed as a rarity and honoured for her Sanskrit learning with the titles of 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati'.

This new-found fame was not without its price. Two influences disruptive of her inbred faith in Hinduism crept into her life, in the form of her exposure to the Brahmo Samaj and Christianity. For the first time, religion began to be viewed as not a matter of performing unquestioningly the practices of one's forefathers, but as a matter of conscious choice among a diversity of faiths. The monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj proved a strong attraction for Ramabai, as did its impulse for the upliftment of women. Encouraged by the Brahmo leaders, she started to give informative lectures to the 'purdah' women of Bengal, and also to address public audiences on the status of women, echoing the then popular theme of contrasting the glorious past of Hindu women with their present degradation. Ramabai's feet were now firmly planted in a public career.

By contrast, the entry of Christianity into Ramabai's life was more obtrusive. Her presence at a Christian gathering in Calcutta made little impact. She admits to being amazed by the sight of Indian 'sahibs' who were not only dressed in the English style, but also "ate bread and biscuits and drank tea with the English people and shocked us by asking us to partake of the refreshment". This irreligious behaviour of converted brahmins seemed proof enough that Kali Yuga, "the age of quarrels, darkness, and irreligion, had fully established its reign in Calcutta". The service itself seemed meaningless, consisting as it did of reading out of a book and then kneeling down to pray. "We did not see any image to which they paid homage but it seemed as though they were paying homage to the chairs before which they knelt" [*Testimony*:17].

Beneath this exposure to new experiences and fame ran the now familiar undercurrent of personal tragedy. After two years in

Bengal, Srinivas died prematurely in 1880. By this time Ramabai's belief in orthodox Hinduism had eroded to the point that she married Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, "a Bengali gentleman of the shudra caste", according to the newly introduced civil ceremony. He was supportive of her activities and encouraged her studies, but only until the incursions of Christianity through English lessons with a missionary kindled her interest. Soon thereafter, the marriage itself ended abruptly with his death in 1882, leaving Ramabai a widow with an infant daughter.

But although without a family, Ramabai was not alone. Already a part of the nationwide social reform network, Ramabai made a meteoric appearance in Pune in 1882 at the invitation of Justice M G Ranade and his reformer associates. Ranade who spearheaded the social reform movement in Maharashtra and helped to found the Prarthana Samaj movement, tried successfully to absorb her within this orbit. The Ranade family extended various kinds of support, and true to the spirit of the times, also welcomed her as "one of us Chitpavan Brahmins" [Ranade 1910:10]. A personal friendship, which was to prove life-long, developed between the Pandita and Ramabai Ranade, and together they attended English lessons given by a missionary lady at the Ranade's residence (a circumstance which initially compelled Ramabai. Ranade to take a purificatory bath in the evening after every such 'polluting' contact [Ranade 1910:98-99].

Seemingly well-ensconced in the Prarthana Samaj set-up, Pandita Ramabai fulfilled all expectations of reform effort. Within a few months she founded the Arya Mahila Samaj on the existing rudiments of a women's association. She lectured widely from public platforms, and made special efforts to reach audiences of women for whose benefit she also wrote the Marathi book *Stree Dharma Niti* (Morals for Women). In her testimony before the Hunter Commission, she made an impassioned plea for women's education, including medical education which was crucial for reaching out to women patients in that gender-segregated society. This idea had been fast gaining ground at the time, and Ramabai's own ambition turned to the pursuit of medical studies in England. Contacts were established through the Sisters of the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Pune with their mother organisation at Wantage in England, which promised to provide hospitality and help to Ramabai, without any religious pressure. Ramabai herself was resolved on not changing her religion, as she declared publicly on the eve of her departure in late 1882.

Arriving in England in early 1883, Ramabai found life to be beset by difficulties. The first blow was the discovery that her hearing was so defective as to disqualify her from medical studies. Her despair was compounded by the suicide of her sole Indian companion, Anandibai

Bhagat, as a result of inner turmoil regarding conversion to Christianity. It was in this state of mind that a few months later the same year, Ramabai was baptised, together with her daughter- Manorama, into the Church of England.

The reasons for her conversion which Ramabai herself advanced are worth noting, although admittedly recollected in—Christian—tranquillity many years later.

Foremost among these was her disillusionment with the orthodox Hindu faith, for feminist as well as egalitarian reasons. The bewildering diversity of Hindu thinking, she found, admitted of a monolithic 'Hindu view' only on the subject of women. There were "only two things on which all those books, the Dharma Shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day and orthodox high-caste men, were agreed, 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" [*Testimony*: 19]. A woman's only hope lay in worshipping her husband who was her only god. "This god may be the worst sinner and a great criminal; still he is her God, and she must worship him" [*Testimony*: 19]. This alone guaranteed a woman's spiritual advancement in future births until she was reborn as a high caste man, able to study the vedas and the vedanta, gain knowledge of the true Brahma, and be amalgamated in it. Thus "no woman as a woman can get liberation" [*Testimony*: 20], and a widow was sunk beneath redemption. The shudras were similarly placed outside the pale of salvation in this birth, and their hope lay in serving the upper castes in the hope of achieving upward mobility in a future rebirth and the final attainment of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Her disenchantment with Hinduism coincided with the appearance on the scene of the Brahmo Samaj as the first alternative. However, "the Brahmo religion was not a very definite one. For it is nothing but what a man makes for himself. He chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions known to him, and prepares a sort of religion for his own use. The Brahmo religion has no other foundation than man's own natural light and the sense of right and wrong which he possesses in common with all mankind. It could not and did not satisfy me..." [*Testimony*: 23-24]. The search continued and led to Christianity, especially after the Rev Goreh demonstrated to her that the Brahmo faith "was not taught by our vedas as I had thought, but it was the Christian faith, which was brought before me by my friends disguised under the name of Brahmo religion. Well, I thought, if Christ is the source of this sublime faith, why should I not confess Him openly to be my Lord and my Divine Teacher?" [cited in Adhav 1979:136].

The attractiveness of the Christian faith which promised salvation to all without discrimination was reinforced by the compassionate deeds of the Christians. The

kindness of the Wantage Sisters and the Christian concept of redemption rather than punishment for sinners impressed her deeply. Ramabai records her visit to a Rescue Home in London where 'fallen' women, whom the Hindu shastras commanded to be driven out of the town and thrown to wild dogs,<sup>9</sup> were being rehabilitated as useful members of society. To all appearances, this was the test case which proved the superiority of Christianity both as a doctrine and as a way of life, and guided Ramabai's decision to convert.

Possibly there was a hidden dimension to her conversion, born out of personal loneliness and social isolation. Never having belonged to a kin group or caste community, Ramabai perhaps saw the community of Sisters as the supportive social structure she had missed all her life. The "holy life of the Sisters and their sublime unselfishness" had a great appeal though it was not in itself sufficient inducement to accept their faith [cited in Adhav 1979:136]. However, the need to belong to such a community was probably strong. Such at least was the perception of Max Muller who had met Ramabai several times at Oxford: "...as she told me, she could no longer stand quite alone, she wanted to belong to somebody, and particularly to be able to worship together with those she loved and who had long been so kind to her" [Sengupta 1970:136].

#### —AND BEYOND

After hovering at the crossroads for a few months, Ramabai made her choice. But it was not the straight and easy road which fresh converts usually travelled. She cut her own trail through the doctrine, dogma, and doubt. Conversion through baptism into the Church of England<sup>10</sup> thus became only the first hesitant step in a long and complex spiritual quest beset with hurdles.

The biggest hurdle was the divergence of perspectives on Christianity adopted by the ecclesiastical community and by Ramabai. For her, it was a religion from which the universal elements could be retrieved while discarding others of doubtful validity. Doctrinal debates thus became inevitable. Ramabai's brahminical metaphysical background made it difficult to understand the nature of the Holy Trinity<sup>11</sup> and even more to accept the divinity of Christ or "entirely to believe the miracles of the Bible" [Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai (hereafter L and C):155]. In her inimitable style, Ramabai listed those parts of the Christian doctrine which she accepted and the parts she could not accept. In effect, she formulated her own creed which was derived from Christ's teaching and which she considered to be strictly necessary for salvation. It included the belief in one god, namely, the god and father of Jesus Christ; the second commandment to love thy neighbour as thyself; the belief in Jesus Christ as the messiah sent by god to save his people from sin; baptism as a form of bearing witness unto Christ and as open proof of rejecting all other faiths; partaking of Holy Commu-

nion as acknowledgement of the fellowship of all Christians [L and C:157-58]. Ramabai's doubts centred on two themes in the Christian creed: firstly, the Immaculate Conception or the idea that Christ was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of Virgin Mary"; and secondly the implications of "He Descended into hell, the third day He rose again from the dead" that resurrection referred to Christ's earthly body and that he had actually descended into hell [L and C: 159-61]. Ramabai's faith continued to remain eclectic and non-denominational.

In the meanwhile, Ramabai's plan of studies in England had to be modified and after her conversion she spent three years studying at the Cheltenham Ladies' College. In 1886 she went to the US on an invitation to attend the graduation of her distant cousin Anandibai Joshi who had completed her medical studies (to become the first Maharashtrian woman doctor). She spent two years in the country, travelling from coast to coast propagating her idea of starting a residential school for Hindu widows in India. It was here that she wrote her best-known book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* which was a militant denunciation of women's oppression, in order to defray the cost of her return journey to India. In the meanwhile, the newly established Ramabai Association of Boston had collected sufficient funds to support a secular widows' home in India for a period of 10 years.

The plan was implemented immediately after Ramabai's return to India and the Sharada Sadan was opened in Bombay in early 1889 amid much fanfare and the blessings of social reformers. The publicity was natural for this was the first ever residential school for high caste Hindu widows and unmarried girls in Maharashtra (and one of the earliest in India) where secular education as well as vocational training was made available to women. Whether or not it was perceived in such terms at the time, the Sharada Sadan introduced a structural change in the patriarchal social set-up by carving out a new space for women outside the private domain, though not quite within the public domain. It was a semi-public space where women were to be given education and skills towards economic self-reliance, a hitherto unheard of concept in the upper castes.

In 1891 the Sadan was shifted to Pune with the dual purpose of reducing expenses and facilitating access to widows in the orthodox heartland of Maharashtra. In its initial days in Pune, the Sharada Sadan was under close scrutiny for its general management. Especially important was the question of its secular policy which promised that no religion would be propagated, but that the religious practices essential to the daily routine of its brahmin inmates would not be interfered with. The elite of Pune was invited to inspect the 'domestic arrangements', and the local newspapers (such as the *Kesari*) pronounced themselves satisfied. By all accounts it appears that Ramabai herself was walking a tight-rope by not openly providing instruction in Christianity, but exposing the

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girls to its doctrine and encouraging them to join her in her private prayers. When this strategy bore fruit and some girls expressed a desire to embrace Christianity, Ramabai sent them to a Christian mission for proper instruction.

In a lightning swift reaction, the predictable storm broke out over the incident. The members of the local Advisory Committee (including Ranade and Bhandarkar) sent in their resignations to the Ramabai Association of Boston in protest against this breach of good faith, the valuable support of the reformers was severed, and all the well-to-do guardians withdrew their wards from the Sadan. An inquiry was instituted by the Ramabai Association of Boston and she was cleared of the charge of direct proselytisation. But the alienation from the mainstream Hindu society was permanent and the Sadan was left with a small number of poor homeless widows who had no other shelter.

Ramabai's future prospects seemed dim. "At times the sky seems full of black clouds and it looks as if it will never be clear", she wrote to Sister Geraldine [L and C:262]. It was a time of great spiritual questioning and doubt. She became acutely aware of the deficiency of her intellectual acceptance of Christ without the emotional support of unquestioning faith. This feeling of dissatisfaction gradually bordered on desperation: "One thing I knew by this time, that I needed Christ, and not merely His religion. ...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" [Testimony: 29-30]. She sought enlightenment in the sermons of missionaries and evangelists, including Pentecost, and especially from the book *From Death unto Life* by Haslam, which put her in a receptive frame of mind for "finding Christ".

It was at this point in 1891 that a revelation came to her—like a burst of light followed by a sense of great relief as if "a great and unbearable burden is rolled away from one's heart". This was also an assurance of deliverance. "O the love, the unspeakable love of the Father for me, a lost sinner, which gave His only Son to die for me! I had not merited this love, but that was the very reason why He showed it to me" [Testimony:30-31].<sup>12</sup>

This revelation led to a corresponding change in Ramabai's attitude to proselytisation. Her missionary activity became obsessive. At a mission camp meeting at Lonavla in 1896 she became inspired with the spiritual power gifted by the Holy Spirit, and her thoughts turned increasingly towards obtaining more 'spiritual children' through conversion.

Ramabai's reformist zeal flowed into ever new channels. In 1895 she set out on a tour of Brindaban and other holy places disguised as a Hindu pilgrim, to rescue the homeless widows who were forced to take shelter in temples and were thus open to exploitation by priests and others. The venture

revealed the extent of the widows' plight, but met with little success. From 1896 to 1900 she worked incessantly in famine areas in central India and Gujarat, both directly and through helpers, to save hundreds of girls and women from starvation and moral degradation. Her increasing preoccupation with missionary activity, combined with the outbreak of the plague at Pune, resulted in the shift of the Sadan from Pune to Kedgaon in 1898 when its first 10 years under the sponsorship of the Ramabai Association were completed. It was now an openly Christian missionary establishment known as the Mukti Mission. By 1900 the population of the Mission was close to 2000. Ramabai was now faced with an entirely different set of problems. She had withdrawn from Pune both physically and socially, and confined herself to Kedgaon; and the women she was now required to work with were far different from the disciplined brahmin widows of the Sharada Sadan. The new inmates were mostly famine victims drawn from depressed castes, and their needs ranged from creature comforts to character building, secular and spiritual education. These girls brought their own behaviour patterns with them, including superstition, belief in evil spirits, and being possessed by them. This new atmosphere was to be changed to that of faith and prayer [Macnicol, 1926:92-110].

Quick to respond to these changed circumstances, Ramabai sent Manorama and an assistant to witness Christian revivals in Australia, and later also started a prayer circle at Kedgaon. Soon thereafter, in 1905, occurred the first Holy Ghost Revival at Kedgaon, as a reaffirmation of Christian faith and discipline among the inmates. The revival was akin to the common Indian phenomenon of possession by spirits and its physical manifestations were a burning sensation which accompanied the descent of the Holy Spirit, a loud clamour of simultaneous prayer, and "speaking in tongues" or incoherent speech in unrecognisable language which the speaker alone understood as meaningful [Macnicol 1926:111-21]. The revivals were considered questionable by some of her missionary friends, while others saw them as a consciously sought answer to her problems. The Rev Butcher, a sympathetic observer of a revival at the Mukti Mission, commented that Ramabai "showed herself wonderfully wise in the way she fostered and guided the entire movement so that real spiritual results were conserved and spiritual disorder avoided", and observed that the permanent results were "the true conversion of hundreds of women" and "the full consecration of large numbers, making them keen to witness and work for Christ" [cited in Macnicol 1926:121].

The Mukti Mission of Kedgaon had expanded enormously and diversified its activities. In addition to the original Sharada Sadan meant for Hindu widows, there was Mukti Sadan for Christian women, and a Rescue Home known as Kripa Sadan. Small sections were opened for old women and for the blind (for whom special teachers were

brought from England). Practically all the work of this large establishment (including cooking, cleaning, laundry) was done by the inmates who received schooling up to the matriculation level as well as vocational training in teaching, nursing, tailoring, embroidery, weaving, horticulture, carpentry, masonry, and even running a printing press. Ramabai's dream of self-reliance for women had come true, but had remained outside the reach of upper caste widows whom she had tried desperately to reach.

Over the years Ramabai's Christian belief was considerably strengthened. In 1907 she wrote *A Testimony* to bear witness for Christ. She also undertook the massive task of translating the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into Marathi, to supersede the existing Marathi Bibles which were written either in "missionary Marathi" or used Sanskrit words which could not be dissociated from their clear Hindu connotations. Ramabai went to extreme lengths to avoid both.

The task of supervising the Kedgaon establishment was shared by her daughter Manorama and a string of Indian and western missionary women. Manorama was also active in opening missionary schools for women in nearby areas. In one such demanding effort in the Nizam's dominions she succumbed to over-exertion leading to her untimely death in 1920. Outwardly at least, Ramabai bore stoically the loss of her last personal bond, but survived only for another two years. She breathed her last in 1922 as the first proofs of her Marathi Bible were being rolled off the Kedgaon press by her girls.

It was a death mourned widely, though mostly outside Maharashtra.

#### HINDUISM THROUGH CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EYES

In the atmosphere charged with religious debates, a comparison of Christianity with Hinduism—and other major religions of India—was a daily occurrence in the late 19th century. However, instead of developing into a true dialogue based on mutual respect, the debates retained an acrimonious quality, in which the Christian challenge consisted of emphasising the 'deficiencies' of Hinduism [Lederle 1976:188-90]. The major themes in this comparison were voiced by Ramabai and by her converted Christian contemporaries many of whom had made a study of other religions as well.<sup>13</sup>

Christianity's main appeal for Ramabai—though perhaps not for her male brahmin co-religionists—was its egalitarian doctrine. In contrast to Hinduism which made spiritual salvation contingent upon an individual's sex and position in the caste hierarchy, Christianity treated all as equal in the sight of god. To a devout Hindu widow such as Ramabai who was placed outside the pale of salvation, Christianity held out a promise: "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" [Testimony: 32].

Again, Christianity offered salvation to all believers, here and now, while Hinduism stressed conformance to duty ('dharma' or appropriate way of life), and linked the fruits of one's 'karma' (action) to future rebirths and possible salvation. "How very different the truth of God was from the false idea that I had entertained from my earliest childhood. That was that I must have merit to earn present or future happiness, the pleasure of Svarga, or face the utterly inconceivable loss of Moksha or liberation." Christianity did not make such stipulations. "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 in His Son whom He sent to be the propitiation for our sins." Again, this salvation was available in the present life, without the need to undergo countless millions of births and deaths [Testimony: 31-33]. This idea surfaced also in articles in the *Dnyanodaya* [1887:53,68], the Anglo-Marathi organ of the American Marathi Mission: "One of the essential doctrines of Hinduism is that salvation is to be earned by man, not the free gift of God as Christianity presents it"; and again, "Here we see how diametrically opposed Christianity is to Hinduism. Salvation and forgiveness of sins are a free gift of God, and not earned by man."

Christianity perceived god as love: "If we love one another God abideth in us and love is perfected in us; hereby we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit" [Dnyanodaya 1889:143]. Christianity therefore advocated forgiveness and compassion, unlike the Hindu social order which was preserved through punishment for its violation. The Rev Tilak who was deeply impressed by the "burning words of love and tenderness and truth" in the Sermon on the Mount, also emphasised the divergent perspectives of Hinduism and Christianity, the former advocating the dichotomy of good and evil, and the latter advocating love and forgiveness for all.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of sin was central to Christianity, while being absent from Hindu thinking. As Ramabai expressed it: "The Lord, first of all, showed me the sinfulness of sin and the awful danger I was in, of everlasting hell-fire; and also the great love of god as a means of redemption" [Testimony: 30]. "In popular Hinduism the wickedest thing which a man can do is to break caste or some other outward requirement. Evil thoughts are not what popular Hinduism cares about. So it cannot make men anxious about what alone is truly sin" [Dnyanodaya 1884:177]. Further, the very idea of salvation is said to be distinct in the two religious systems. In Hinduism, salvation can be attained through faith and implies a release from suffering and rebirth; in Christianity, salvation means repentance for past sin, hatred for all sin, and holy living

[Dnyanodaya 1884:755:56].

Another recurrent idea was that Christianity revealed spiritual truths of a higher order. The truths of the vedas and the puranas were appropriate for the stage of the society of their times. As society evolved further and became capable of comprehending superior and more profound truths, a treasure of the perfect essential truths was given to the world by god through Christ [Dnyanodaya, 1889:133-34]. Some years earlier, the Rev Baba Padmanji had claimed that the 'light of truth' was available only through Christianity: "Who studies the Bible carefully and prayerfully will find that it is the only timely God-given Holy Writ" [cited in Lederle 1976:189]. Later the Rev Tilak was also to claim that in the Sermon on the Mount, he found "answers to the most abstruse problems in Hindu philosophy" [Winslow, 1923:18-21].

Finally, in Ramabai's view the metaphysical and impersonal nature of the Hindu doctrine compared unfavourably with Christianity which was a contract between god and each individual. "The Hindoo religion brings the Supreme Being, the Holy God to the level of a creature like myself but Christianity lifts man up to God" [L and C:151].

## II

### Against Church and Colonialism

Ramabai's encounter with Christianity was also her first encounter with an organised religion. Having spent her earlier life by an eclectic form of the Hindu doctrine and outside a conventional social setting, she was unprepared alike for the Christian dogma as for the authoritarianism of the Church. The Anglican Church hierarchy, in turn, was unprepared for her rational and selective acceptance of Christianity.

What heightened these contradictions and dilemmas was the fact of Ramabai's conversion in England where, moreover, she was alone, isolated from her cultural support system, and exposed to the full force of white and Christian supremacy. A dominant role was played in her life during the years 1883-87 by Sister Geraldine, her spiritual preceptress and very much a part of the Church organisation. Ramabai's closest and life-long emotional bond within the Christian circle was thus tied to this lady who had little sympathy with India, no predilection for independent thinking, and who was intellectually, by her own admission, "not equipped for such a work as instructing Ramabai" [L and C:5]. Greater emotional and intellectual support was forthcoming from Dorothea Beale, principal of the Cheltenham Ladies' College, who was willing and able to enter into rational discussion on matters of religion. The copious correspondence of the times which has been preserved, unfolds an ongoing dialogue about different aspects of Christianity with these two women, and a parallel dialogue within the Church hierarchy regarding this unusual convert.

### CHRISTIAN DOGMA AND CHURCH

That Ramabai's conversion was qualitatively different became immediately apparent to her preceptors. Hers was no implicit acceptance of the new doctrine with a willing suspension of disbelief, but she brought to the study and understanding of Christianity the same rational and intellectual attitude which had made her analyse (and reject) Hinduism and theism of the Brahmo and the Prarthana Samaj. The shock and disbelief with which the Church reacted to its own weapons being used against itself clearly exposed its double standards.

In her characteristic rational attitude were rooted Ramabai's doubts about some elements of Christianity, such as the miraculous birth and divinity of Christ, which she made no attempt to conceal [L and C:33, 87-113]. In the resultant furor, Ramabai was accused of having undergone baptism on false pretence while withholding complete acceptance of the Christian doctrine—which was a matter of faith and not open to an intellectual debate. A shocked Sister Geraldine admonished Ramabai that the subordination of the intellect to faith was a pre-requisite for a good Christian: "At first the lamp of Faith shone brightly in your heart, and your intellect bowed before it. ... Humility, child-like simplicity, obedience, truthfulness and trustfulness were there and daily developed themselves in your life. But gradually these graces faded from sight... The germ of the new life given to you in holy baptism which at first sprang up and gave such fair promise, has been over-grown by rank and poisonous weeds of heresy" [L and C:91-92]. Her advice was: "your reason alone could never lead you to the Truth, but illuminated by the lamp of Faith... you will come to understand those deep truths of God which to you seem to be darkness and foolishness" [L and C: 94].

But Ramabai remained adamant. To one reared in the tradition of religious debates, the only way to settle such doubts was through discussion and logical argument rather than browbeating. Predictably, she was quick to point out that the weakness of many missionaries lay in their failure to communicate with potential and recent converts in terms of their own religion. (Undoubtedly, converted brahmins were a great asset in this task, as already proven by the Rev Goreh in Ramabai's own case.)

There were other sources of friction. The first was the need for submission to the authority of the Church of England into which Ramabai was baptised. Sister Geraldine insisted that "as a Christian, she is bound to accept the authority of those over her in the Church" [L and C:43]. A similar authoritarian attitude was also expressed by Canon Butler that "to a neophyte in the Faith, ... self-reliance is intensely dangerous" [L and C:75]. Needless to say, Ramabai protested against what she perceived as high-handed treatment, and insisted on exercising her liberty of conscience: "I have a con-



science, and mind and a judgment of my own. I must myself think and do everything which God has given me the power of doing... I have just with great effort freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything which comes from the priests as authorised command of the most high" [L and C:59], and further "I am fully aware of my ignorance in Christian theology but I cannot take everything which is thought by Church people to be an article of faith and, therefore, to be believed" [L and C:156].

If Ramabai was impressed by the gender-egalitarian nature of the Christian doctrine, she was soon to discover the patriarchal element in the Church's authoritarianism. In 1884, Beale proposed that Ramabai should teach young English women and men something of the 'native languages' as well as the religion and philosophy of India with the dual purpose of earning part of her living and "helping to establish a better understanding of Indian ladies by the English" [L and C: 40-41]. The Bishops of Bombay and Lahore, then in England, were consulted and reacted very negatively: "Above all things pray believe that her influence will be ruined for ever in India if she is known to have taught young men. Suffice it to say that it would cause scandal even among the better sort of native men, and that nothing would ever undo the harm it would do among native women" [L and C: 44].

The decision was duly conveyed to Ramabai as the considered opinion of the English Bishops from India who "from their knowledge of India and its people, are better judges than ourselves" of such matters. Ramabai responded with indignation that she knew "India and its people...better than any foreigners" no matter how long they had stayed in India [L and C:50]. But her indignation was far stronger on the subject of conduct befitting an Indian woman. "It is true, it is not necessary for me to be a teacher of men, but when either in India or England I can get women as well as men for my pupils there is no reason why I should not teach both. It is not a general custom in India for ladies to teach men, it is true, because there are scarcely any among ladies who can teach. It surprises me very much to think that neither my father nor my husband objected [to] my mother's or my teaching young men while some English people are doing so" [L and C:60].

The reasoning of the Bishops was also imbued with colonial condescension. The publicity which Ramabai received in England from her friends was considered to be fatal for a 'native', because "vanity is one of their very faults". Ramabai's "undertaking a Professorship among English young ladies", as proposed by Beale, "might lead to a little undue self-exaltation. But a less prominent position for a short time, with an humbler title such as teachership, making no demonstration in any way, would probably lessen the danger of elation of mind very considerably" [L and C:43-45]. The Bishops

were convinced that the "Indian native is prone to vanity" [L and C:76], and had seen this fatal flaw lead to an Anglicised native Christian being "ruined for life as far as future usefulness is concerned" [L and C:39]. The generally unflattering opinion of Indians surfaced constantly in the correspondence of those years, and was shared in ample measure by Sister Geraldine herself. A prolonged disagreement over some central points in the Christian doctrine led the Sister to complain bitterly of Ramabai's "want of candour and sincerity" and of her being no exception to "the generality of the Hindoos" who were deceitful [L and C:114-5]. In the years to follow, Sister Geraldine, for all her affection for Ramabai, never lost an opportunity to emphasise her arrogance and other—real or imaginary—faults. A comment she made in 1917 reveals her perception of Ramabai's spiritual struggle: "She took keen delight in intellectual fencing and her pride and vanity were dangerously inflated by getting hold of points of controversy from her non-Conformist friends and dragging them clumsily and offensively into her letters" [L and C:4].

Part of the Church's authoritarianism in Ramabai's case undoubtedly stemmed from their perception of her as an instrument for spreading Christianity in India: "one of India's daughters whom we hoped God was training to carry a ray of light back to that benighted land" [L and C:107]. These vested interests preferred to regard her not as an individual convert grappling with her own spiritual doubts, but as a Christian—and moreover ex-brahmin—wedge into the Hindu society.

The value of converting brahmins was evident especially at a time when a majority of the Christian converts were the formerly 'untouchable' Mahars and Mangs [Winslow, 1923:52]. The missionaries were caught in a dilemma of their own making. Having officially opposed the government's educational policy of downward filtration and having concentrated on the lower castes, they were exposed to the danger of making 'rice Christians'. The obvious corrective strategy was to convert a few high caste Hindus to spread the message to the rest of the society [Hewat 1953:170,175]; and it intensified the pressure on Ramabai to conform.

But Ramabai continued to rebel against not only the Christian dogma and the church's authoritarianism, but also its sectarianism. The Anglican Church jealously guarded her against other Christian sects which vied with one another to win so valuable a prize. Ramabai maintained an objective and critical attitude to them all: "Besides meeting people of the most prominent sects, the High Church, Low Church, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Friends, Unitarian, Universalist, Roman Catholic, Jews and others, I met with Spiritualists, Theosophists, Mormons, Christian Scientists, and followers of...the occult religion. No one can have any idea of what my feelings were at finding such a Babel of religions in Christian countries, and at finding how

very different the teaching of each sect was from that of the others" [Testimony:27].<sup>15</sup> Sensing the danger of losing Ramabai to another sect or denomination, the Anglicans insisted on their creed being the only true one. Equally sharp was Ramabai's counter-reaction to the attitude that the "Anglican Church is the sole treasury of truth", that their clergy are "the only true priesthood and messengers of truth, and all other bodies of Christians are followers of false imaginations", that "GOD has chosen the Anglican Church only to be His favoured people" [L and C:111-12]. Her critical and defiant stance persisted and she recounts how Sister Geraldine "ran almost mad with anger when I said that she had no right to call the dissenters heretics, because she herself belonged to a Church which is but a dissenting sect of the Roman Catholic" [L and C:170].

#### CHRISTIANITY AND INDIANNESS

Maintaining the distinction between Hinduism as a religion and Indianness as a culture was a challenge which faced many of the Indian Christians of the day, each of whom tried to work out an individual solution to the problem. Ramabai's own pride in the Indian culture remained unabated after her contact with England (and later the US) and in spite of pressure from the church. Soon after her conversion in late 1883, she assured a friend in India that her change of religion did not mean a change of country, nor would her love for her country diminish as a result [*Dnyanodaya* 1883:566].

Early orthodox brahmin conditioning had left an indelible mark on Ramabai's way of life. As part of this, she maintained her strict vegetarian diet, excluding onions and garlic, to the end of her days. At Kedgaon her food was specially cooked for her by a brahmin woman. To Ramabai's mind this was part of her cultural background rather than a residue of Hindu religious beliefs, although it was interpreted as "little clings to caste prejudices" which should have been discarded at her conversion, and which fostered the pride which held her back from accepting the full teaching of the Gospel [L and C:100-1].

As a mark of her own personal blend of the Indian culture and an alien religion, Ramabai focused attention on indigenisation of the Christian ritual and practices. This was consistent with her view that the universal elements in Christianity could and should be presented to different countries of the world through the indigenous cultural idiom. In 1884 she protested against having to wear the crucifix which was an alien object to a recent convert. But if it had to be worn, she preferred it to be inscribed with not Latin but Sanskrit words, "not because I think it to be sacred or the language of gods, but because it is the most beautiful, and the oldest language of my dear native land", and because it would be intelligible to Indians to whom the doctrine was to be carried [L and C:28-29]. Ramabai's love of Sanskrit

was, however, later to be eclipsed by her total aversion to Hinduism. In her translation of the Bible into Marathi, she assiduously avoided all Sanskrit words because of their Hindu religious association (resulting in a stilted style of little literary appeal), and even forbade the teaching of Sanskrit at Kedgaon.

This preoccupation with indigenisation of Christianity also led Ramabai to the field of hymnology. Precedents for this had existed in western India since the 1860s when the first attempts were made to bring the tradition of Marathi devotional songs into Christianity and also to employ the *kirtan* for evangelisation [Hewat 1953:220-21]. In later years Ramabai translated the Psalms into Marathi and had them set to classical Indian *raga* tunes [Adhav 1979:46-47].

The struggle between Christianity and Indianness was carried over into Ramabai's personal life. Secure in her Indian roots, she insisted on bringing up her daughter Manorama as a true Indian adapted to the Indian culture, in spite of constant efforts to the contrary by Sister Geraldine in whose care the girl had been left periodically during Ramabai's travels. In 1887, Ramabai wrote to the Sister: "I cannot make up my mind to leave Mano in England...I want her to be one of us, and love our country people as one of them, and not a stranger or a superior being. ... I do not want her to be too proud to acknowledge that she is one of India's daughters. I do not want her to blush when our name is mentioned, such being too often the case with those who have made their homes in foreign lands" [L and C:199]. The Sisters continued their efforts to prove her decision wrong (and, one suspects, perhaps to obtain unofficial custody of the girl). In 1889, another Sister of the same Order reported to Sister Geraldine from Pune: "Mano is as dirty as a little pig, ... sits on the floor, eats with her fingers. Ramabai erroneously thinks she is doing right in making her like the common Hindoos and, wonderful to say, she does not grasp the idea that more civilised ways would not ruin them as well as education" [L and C:240]. The tussle continued, but Ramabai won.

#### COLONIAL RULE AND NATIONALISM

The dilemmas inherent in the early social reformers' love-hate relationship with the British rulers could have been intensified in Ramabai's case through her acceptance of Christianity while she was in England, but she seems to have maintained a consistent anti-colonial and nationalist stand.

In Maharashtra, the early social reformers' perception of British rule was explicitly positive, and western knowledge and ideas were received as a blessing. By the time of Ramabai's conversion, this attitude was undergoing a change; but the close correspondence between British government, the white race, and Christianity was hammered home by western missionaries in India. The American Marathi Mission spoke of "The Destiny of the White Race," claiming that:

"It is fortunate for India that it is England that rules over her. No other of the white races is so fitted to fulfil her high mission over so great an empire. Better than all, it is the mission of the white race to be the instrument through which is carried to the world a pure religion, a true idea of God, a knowledge of a real Saviour" [Dnyanodaya 1885:500].

But Ramabai made no attempt to hide her impatience of colonial superiority, even in England. She complained of the "comprehensive minds" of the English who embraced under one term 'native' the inhabitants of India, America, Australia, and the Pacific Islands, and of the missionaries who went out to convert the 'natives', being utterly ignorant of their culture, language, religion, and philosophy [cited in Sengupta 1970:149-50].

Even in the field of English education, an area where most Indians felt inferior and vulnerable to criticism of their cultural deficiency, Ramabai reacted with her usual matter-of-fact attitude: "People ought to remember (when they say that coming over to England and learning English only makes them highly educated) that we Indians can be learned in our own country and can be useful too. We are anxious to come to England and to learn English because these two countries are so closely connected and also because the best scientific books are written in English" [L and C:25].

Contrary to the speculation about her being 'denationalised' due to conversion, Ramabai in her public life adopted an anti-government stand on several occasions, especially on women's issues. Her most scathing criticism was reserved for the government stand in the famous case of Rakhmabai who was in danger of being sentenced to a prison term in a case of restitution of conjugal rights. On this occasion Ramabai wrote: "We cannot blame the English Government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement with the male population of India. ... Should England serve God by protecting a helpless woman against the powers and principalities of ancient institutions, Mammon would surely be displeased, and British profit and rule in India might be endangered thereby. Let us wish it success, no matter if that success be achieved at the sacrifice of the rights and the comfort of over one hundred million women" [HCHW:35].

Sister Geraldine found such an anti-government attitude reprehensible, but was able, many years later, to perceive the complication arising from the identification of colonialism and Christianity. Citing the above-mentioned extract, she commented that "the very title *The Church of England* would tend to alarm and repel [a nationalist like Ramabai]. Had it been *The Church of Christ in England*, the results with Ramabai might have been different. But the last Society such a woman (with her great inspiration to work for the benefit of her people) would ally herself with would be—the Christianity which bore the impress of their con-

querors" [L and C:406].

Perhaps Ramabai's best-known anti-government position was during the plague epidemic during the closing years of the 19th century. The hygienic measures rather high-handedly implemented by British soldiers under the instructions of the Plague Commissioner had aroused widespread anger and resentment, especially at Pune. G K Gokhale, then in England in connection with a Finance Commission, was persuaded by friends in India to lodge a complaint before the parliament. After his return to India, an inquiry was instituted at Bombay but none of his friends was willing to testify or even to let his name be divulged, so that Gokhale was forced into the disgraceful position of having to withdraw the charge and tender an unconditional apology. His only support came from Ramabai who was ready to testify, and who, in fact, also took up the matter directly with the Plague Commissioner. This instance of her courage was popularised in a Marathi ballad [Kelkar 1923:331].

But Ramabai's anti-colonial stance was not situation-specific. She was able to see and condemn the very basis of colonialism which was exploitative: "The British government is sucking Indian blood and wealth while perforce despatching Indian armies to march and fight the British battle in Egypt and ultimately die over there. This very government has swallowed our Indian States wherever they found no legitimate heir to the throne! Not to speak of other atrocities enforced by treatment of the Press Act; Act that reduced the age of Indian Civil servants; Act of Disarmament, and worst of all, our poor Indian citizens have to pay so many taxes to government, whether we afford them or not. We may as well sell our houses and properties but we must pay the taxes levied by the Government!" [cited in Adhav 1979:37].

### III

#### Ramabai and Her Contemporaries

The multifarious reactions which Ramabai's conversion and her later missionary activity provoked from her Indian—both Hindu and Christian—contemporaries, defied a simple equation of Hindu condemnation and Christian applause.

The immediate Hindu response to the news of Ramabai's conversion was one of shock and incomprehension. Speculation about her motives was rampant. The most charitable view was taken by the liberal *Indu-Prakash* of Bombay, that Ramabai's fickle-mindedness, arising out of a lack of education, made her first give up her Hindu faith to become a Brahmo, and to discard that in turn to become a Christian and that she was soon expected to embrace Islam. The same paper also attributed a mercenary motive to her, seeing her conversion as a price paid to those who helped in achieving her cherished goal of going to England [D N Tilak 1970:44-45]. At the other extreme was the report in the *Pune Vaibhav* of Pune, which



indulged in its usual muck-raking by predicting that Ramabai's conversion was a preliminary to her remarriage with a widower who had recently become a Christian. However, for this defamation of character the paper had to tender her a public apology [D N Tilak 1970:138].

But, as the initial shock wore off and a cooler assessment of the situation became possible, a reluctant admiration for the Sharada Sadan venture outweighed indignation over its founder's change of faith. Even the conservative *Kesari* of Pune was able to express its appreciation for Ramabai's contribution to the public good and for her enterprising spirit which ensured the Sadan's financial viability, and thus overcame the major stumbling block for such indigenous experiments. "It is a wondrous deed to collect a few thousand rupees in a foreign land by begging on behalf of people of an alien religion and alien traditions and customs. The fact that this was accomplished by an unsupported weak woman through her firm resolve, courtesy, and other laudable traits makes us pity our menfolk and also makes us feel proud that such an extraordinary woman was born in our midst. By our misfortune she became somewhat alienated through her religious conversion which is a sad event indeed" [February 12, 1889:3\*].<sup>16</sup> And again: "Today our society greatly needs women like Pandita Ramabai. The beneficial effects of good education will be more firmly imprinted on the people's minds through her mature thinking and zeal for her countrymen's uplift than through any other institution or through other efforts. It is our misfortune that the Pandita changed her religion. However, it would not be proper to abandon her only for this reason. It is to her credit that she has not given up her national pride together with her religion" [May 28, 1889:2\*].

However, when Ramabai's secular credentials were seen to be doubtful, the conservative wrath was directed towards her in full force and remained unabated during the years to come. The *Kesari* started to refer to the Sharada Sadan not as a 'Widows' Home, but the 'Widows' Mission-House', and to Ramabai as a 'deceitful demoness', while her provision of shelter to the famine-victims was seen as their 'incarceration' under her 'jailership' [January 28, 1905:5; January 27, 1903:4-5]. Tilak himself, at no time an admirer of Ramabai, started to openly accuse her of nationwide missionary designs, starting with the "widows caught in Ramabai's net during the unique opportunity of the famine years" [*Kesari*, January 12, 1904:05\*].

The social reformers, by and large took a tolerant view of Ramabai's conversion, but no one voiced a positive reaction with the solitary exception of Jyotirao Phule. This was significant because his was a lone struggle for a caste-egalitarian social order, which seemed to find an ally in Ramabai's egalitarian convictions. In his *Satsar* or *The Essence of Truth* (Series 1 and 2) written in 1885, Phule applauded Ramabai's conversion as a rejection of bigotry and injustice

of Hinduism as compared to Christianity, and hailed her as a champion of the oppressed groups of women and shudras [Phule 1969:277-304].

The Christian community of Maharashtra reacted variously. The spate of Marathi letters published in the *Dnyanodaya* in October and November 1883 expressed extreme joy at her conversion to extreme suspicion about its sudden and hasty nature, protests against the cautiousness which was perceived as the "injustice of Native Editors to Pandita Ramabai", and defence of her conversion as a product of deep thought, while the editors themselves maintained a cautiously positive note in support of Ramabai's decision.

Ramabai's selective position *vis-a-vis* the Christian doctrine, described above, caused a hostile reaction. The *Dnyanodaya* [1889:97] complained that to Ramabai the Bible was "not a rule of faith, but a storehouse, out of which she can take or reject, as may please her mind". This sentiment was echoed in the letters of 'Khristadas' [generally believed to be the Rev Baba Padmanji] in the *Dnyanodaya* [1889:102-03, 109-10] which complained that "it is evident from her writings that she does not believe the Holy Bible as a whole—as the word of god, but accepts only the teachings of Christ", and that there was a "vast difference and disparity in her Faith and the Faith we Christians hold". This criticism was countered by those who advised tolerance since Ramabai was, after all, a neophyte and lacked the deep-rooted experience of Christian life [*Dnyanodaya* 1889:120].

Another sore point was Ramabai's continued connection with the Hindu community and aloofness from Indian Christians. Khristadas objected that Ramabai had a close affinity with Theists (Prarthana Samajists), had "dear friends, brothers and dear sisters amongst them but hardly any to be found amongst us Native Protestants", and that she wrote about her thoughts and opinions in the official organ of the Prarthana Samaj, but never in any Christian magazines or periodicals [*Dnyanodaya* 1889:102]. Her Christian credentials were repeatedly questioned—why was the inaugural ceremony of the Sharada Sadan a secular occasion? Was it proper for Ramabai to give a lecture on morals to Hindu women in the form of a Purana recital? Why did she address only high caste Hindu women and never the low caste ones, if she had, as a Christian, discarded her belief in the caste structure? [*Dnyanodaya* 1889:142, 220, 253].

The Christian criticism also extended to the avowed religious neutrality of the Sharada Sadan. The editors of the *Dnyanodaya* [1889:82] claimed that "One cannot be true to god and man and neutral in questions referring to the relation between them. In the presence of sin and misery the mouths of those who know the way to peace must open, or they will be untrue to themselves and to their god." And further that "if the principles of religious neutrality is overstrained it will affect the institution not only in the minds of Christian philanthropists in America and

England, but also in those of the most intelligent Hindus who know that purely secular education cannot cure the ills of India's womanhood" [*Dnyanodaya* 1890:218]. The Rev Baba Padmanji mounted a strong attack on Ramabai for her neutral and non-Christian policy and also attacked the editors of the *Dnyanodaya* for their support of it [*Dnyanodaya* 1890:254]. The editors' repeated defence of their stand was revealing—they maintained that only Hindu parents were advised to send their girls to the Sharada Sadan, not Christian parents [*Dnyanodaya* 1890:245, 267].

Later years brought a reconciliation between Ramabai and the Indian Christian community. The *Dnyanodaya* paid a somewhat cautious compliment to the Mukti mission: "We are not prepared to endorse all its methods and practices, but have profound appreciation of its saintly leader, its devoted spirit and its Christian service" [1916:114]. Ramabai herself took a more active part in the affairs of the Christian community by hosting at Kedgaon, in 1920, the first ever conference of Christian leaders of different denominations in western India "to consider the problems of the Indian Church of the future" [*Dnyanodaya* 1920:282].

#### CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL REFORM

Ramabai's reform efforts for women reflect the essence of feminist concerns—providing shelter and education for women, and helping to make them economically self-reliant through vocational training. This task was first performed in Maharashtra by her and was difficult to replicate, as was speedily discovered when the Sharada Sadan became forbidden territory for the Hindus, and efforts began to be made to open a 'Hindu Sharada Sadan'. The only successful effort in this direction was the widows' home opened in 1896 by D K Karve who derived inspiration from Ramabai and whose concern for the plight of widows had earlier led him to marry a widow (who was, moreover, one of the earliest pupils in Ramabai's Sharada Sadan). The next effort of this kind was the opening of the Pune branch of the Seva Sadan in 1914 under the guidance of Ramabai Ranade, the widow of Justice Ranade. Both these institutions continue to flourish today, Karve's institution having led to the establishment of the first women's university in India, currently known as the SNDT Women's University.

Every assessment of Pandita Ramabai's contribution especially in Maharashtra, has centred on the connection between her conversion to Christianity and her work for women. The popular perception that her work could have been accomplished while remaining a Hindu was first formed during her lifetime, and continues to be maintained even now.

In its very brief obituary on Ramabai, the *Kesari* [April 11, 1992:5\*] wrote: "As the better part of Bai's [Ramabai's] career was shaped first at Pune and then in the close vicinity of Pune, the Maharashtrians are familiar with her defects as well as her salient