

# A POLITICALLY INCORRECT REFORMER

How Pandita Ramabai changed the future of women in India.

by RAJKUMAR BOAZ JOHNSON

In 1986, my wife, Sarita, and I experienced a life-changing experience when we took a train ride to Ramabai Mukti Mission. The mission is about thirty-six miles from Pune, where we were teaching at Union Biblical Seminary, one of the largest seminaries in India. We thought the trip would be a good way to get away from the hustle and bustle of academic life.

When we arrived, the head sister of the mission escorted us from one dormitory to the next, where we saw hundreds of women, girls, and babies living there. Each had a heart wrenching story behind them. All had been rescued from some of the most dangerous places in India. We felt like we had entered a sacred domain. It was apparent that the power of God was present in this place.

And it all began with the vision of one woman, Pandita Ramabai.

Ramabai was born in 1858, the daughter of a *Maratha Chitpavan Brahman*, a member of the purest of the highest caste. People of this caste, at that time in the history of India, never associated with people of any other caste. They considered themselves to be the purest of pure priestly caste. Any association with people from other

castes would make them unclean.

There was just one problem. Women, even those who came from the highest caste, were regarded as being much lower than men of the lowest castes. As Ramabai wrote in her autobiography, *My Testimony*, “Women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons.” A woman’s sole hope of release from the cycle of Karma and Samsara—that is, countless millions of births and deaths, and untold suffering—was to worship her husband.

“The husband is said to be the woman’s god,” Ramabai wrote, “and if she pleases him in all things, she will have the privilege of going to Svarga, heaven, as his slave.”

Most Indian women of the time just submitted to what society required them to be. Ramabai however, contrary to the norm, set about the task of studying the Hindu texts. Her father, a rebel of sorts, had initiated her into the study of Sanskrit, the language of Hindu priests. She became a diligent student of the language, and later studied the Hindu texts in great detail. Her scholarship was so impressive that the Sanskrit scholars of Calcutta University conferred on her the titles of *Saraswati* and *Pandit*.

In the Hindu texts, she found no hope for women. This led her to the study of ideologies beyond Hinduism. In the course of her search, she came across a Bengali translation of the Gospel of Luke in her library. “I do not know how it came there,” she would later write, “but I picked it up and began to read it with great interest.”

The stories of Jesus’s dealings with women in particular grabbed Ramabai’s attention. Throughout the text, whenever women encountered Jesus, he elevated their status. He offered them spiritual salvation. He offered them emotional and social salvation. Of course, this was a great contrast to the place of women in Hindu texts.

Ramabai started reading the rest of the Bible. In Genesis, she came to realize that men and women were created equal in the image of God. The reading of the Bible gave her a complete new understanding of the place of women in society.

Ramabai’s solution to the problem of racial and caste discrimination in her life was bold, yet simple. She married a man from the lowest caste—the *Shudra*, or untouchable caste. This was an unthinkable act with immense ramifications. Ramabai was a woman, but at least she was a woman who belonged to

the highest caste. When she married a man from the lowest caste, her stature in society plunged to the lowest level. She was now a “lowest caste woman” in the eyes of Hindu society. She was well aware of the fact that in Hindu society, “they are looked upon as being very like the lower species of animals, such as pigs; their very shadow and the sound of their voices are defiling.”

Ramabai’s husband died of cholera two years into their marriage, leaving her a widow at twenty-three, with an infant daughter, Manorama, to raise alone. Hindu society would have interpreted her husband’s death as a curse. The life of a widow in the India of her time was very hard. Most widows had to disassociate themselves from society, lest their curse descend on people with whom they associated. Most widows just lived lonesome lives on the banks of rivers like the holy Ganges, hoping for some sort of reprieve in their next life. Ramabai, again contrary to the norm, decided to engage deeply in the study of the Bible and confront society.

In 1883, she traveled to England, to visit the Sisters of Wantage, an Anglican order that was involved in the emancipation of prostitutes from slavery and cruel urban gangs. Ramabai found that the work of the Sisters of Wantage was bathed in the teaching of Jesus. The work of the sisters had a deep impact on Ramabai, as she thought about the complex issues women faced in India.



**Ramabai was of the opinion that if the gospel of Christ was to make an impact in Hindu and Muslim society, it had to happen in politically incorrect territories. She saw no good in a gospel that did not transform culture.**

This work among the orphans, widows, and prostitutes became the model of Ramabai’s work and words in India.

“I had never heard or seen anything of the kind done for this class of women by the Hindus in my own country,” Ramabai wrote. “The law of the Hindus commands that the king shall cause the fallen women to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town. They are considered the greatest sinners, and not worthy of compassion.”

When she asked one of the head sis-

ters why they were ministering to prostitutes, and “fallen” women, she read Ramabai the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

“She spoke of the infinite love of Christ for sinners,” Ramabai wrote. “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 Savior he claimed to be, and no one but he could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India.”

#### **The Mukti Mission**

She returned to India with a deep desire to have the gospel of Christ transform society. Yet, she found that the challenges were complex and difficult. First, there was the horrible practice of female infanticide. Girls were a great liability among all the castes. Parents had to pay huge sums of money in dowry to get their daughters married. Female infanticide was a

very common practice.

A second challenge was the practice of *davi dasis* (or prostitute-priestesses). This was an alternative for parents to female infanticide. Girls were sent to certain temples as soon as they got their first period. These *dasis* became the property of the temple priestly hierarchy, and became prostitutes. It was a form of spiritual-sexual slavery. ➤

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A third challenge Ramabai faced was the forced marriage of girls to men who were as much as thirty or forty years older. They would become the third or fourth wife of a rich, high caste man. Supposedly, this was a more humane alternative to female infanticide or temple prostitution.

The fourth challenge that Ramabai faced was the practice of *sati*. This was the practice of the widow being forced to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband.

Ramabai knew that God wanted her to do something to change these horrible practices. Yet, she was just one person. As widow, she had no social standing. Undaunted, Ramabai decided to begin the Mukti Ashram or “Home of Salvation.” She encountered much opposition from Hindus and Muslims. This she expected. But she did not expect opposition from Western missionaries. They did not want to get involved in the dangerous territory of cultural change. But Ramabai was of the opinion that if the gospel of Christ was to make an impact in Hindu and Muslim society, it had to happen in politically incorrect territories. She saw no good in a gospel that did not transform culture.

After the initial opposition, slowly but surely, people began to take notice of Mukti. Instead of killing their female babies, parents began leaving them at the door of Mukti. Instead, of giving into pressure and jumping into the funeral pyre of their husbands, widows—some as young as thirteen—began running to Mukti for refuge. When young women who brought “insufficient” dowry were threatened with death, they fled to Mukti.

Ramabai and her group of sisters began going from one place to another, rescuing young women from temple prostitution. She advocated for women’s education and started the Sharda Sadan School. In 1896, during a severe famine, Ramabai took a caravan of bullock carts and rescued thousands of abandoned children, child widows,

orphans, and other destitute women.

These young women began to transform their culture. In the early twentieth century, as a result of Ramabai’s work, there was a huge spiritual awakening in western India. Hindus, Muslims, nominal Christians began experiencing the transforming power of God.

During these years of this great awakening in India, in addition to an incredibly busy life, Ramabai (who spoke seven languages) translated the Bible, from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into Marathi, her native language; wrote a number of theological works; and composed profound devotional songs. Much of this material has continued to transform the lives of succeeding generations of Indians.

### **An example for today**

We would be remiss to think that the issues Pandita Ramabai dealt with were peculiar to her time and her geographical confine. They are very much the issues we face in today’s world. They just take on a different garb. We would do well to learn from the wisdom of Pandita Ramabai as we seek to address the challenges of our time: challenges like gender identity, the place of women in society, racial and class discrimination, human trafficking and slavery, child prostitution, abortion and female infanticide, and religious extremism.

How do we address the issues? Ramabai is a great model for us. She was courageous enough to let Christ confront and transform a very dangerous and complex culture. She sought to understand the issues from a biblical perspective. When she saw the vision, she did not hesitate to take action. She overcame much opposition. She trained leaders who were able to carry on the work long after her death in 1920. Indeed, the work of the Mukti Mission continues throughout different parts of India. This is a great testimony to an enduring awakening. We would do well to learn the lessons that Ramabai teaches us and apply them today. □