

## Pandita Ramabhai's Conversion: Personal Choice and Public Outrage

**Dr. Jessy Mani**

Worked As Assistant Professor

Raj Rishi College

Retired Voluntarily From Service

Taught At Various Govt Colleges in Rajasthan

Converting to another faith, moving out of the given religious framework, strictly speaking, a matter of personal choice, creates a furore. It is perceived as an act of betrayal, of cultural crossover and there's always a debate on the legitimacy of the individual's choice. Converting to the Christian faith is seen as a greater act of transgression because Christianity even now is seen as a western import.

The Christian faith came to India in the early centuries after Christ through the early followers eager to gain new entrants to the faith. It was then centered mainly to a small principality, Kerala. The second incursion the religion made into India was through the Europeans, especially the British. Initially when the British advocated western education and ideology, the reform movements had the much-needed Imperial support because the rulers also saw it as means of sanitizing the Indian mind. However as the missionary schools began its overt propaganda of the Christian faith, the small but very powerful section of the Indian community, the Bramhins were highly scandalized and began to protect their faith more intensely and fervently. They perceived the Christian faith as a challenge to their deeply-entrenched faith and belief. The Bramhin community grouped closely and firmly and this began a period of intense nationalism and cultural and religious resurrection. The Aryan models were quoted and cited as the ideals. Hence the religion now came to be associated with the Imperial masters, their culture and society. It was perceived more as the hallmark of the foreign rulers than the spiritual legacy that the religion claimed it was. Adopting the Christian faith was therefore seen as a denial of cultural roots, as a submission to a superior racial presence especially in a phase of nationalistic fervour, like the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Pandita Ramabai chose to become Christian. Her choice sent shock waves across Maharashtra, riding on a wave of fervent nationalism and cultural regeneration, and the reactions were intensely critical. For the conservative reform section, it was a betrayal of the reform cause. The most vehement condemnation came from Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who through his newspaper, **Kesari** launched a series of attacks on her. She was accused of overriding personal ambition and giving in to "the temptation of the missionaries" before testing waters, before examining "whether or not her achievements could make an impact on the Hindu society." As a glorious contrast the paper cited examples of other reformists who worked within the Hindu framework. The verdict was that "an intelligent, determined and enterprising woman's achievement helped not the Hindu society but foreign missionaries."

Tilak continued to discredit all her reform work. In 1891 there were accusations of forcible conversion in her widow rehabilitation home, Sharda Sadan, and though she was exonerated later, the breach between her and the mainstream Hindu society never healed. Even the liberal factions of her time, though more restrained in their reactions, felt that she was too premature in her conversion and that she could have operated within the Hindu cultural space that was available to her.

Such reactions, to a great extent, explain her absence from the cultural canons of Maharashtra and her blurred presence in the national consciousness. For a woman who

worked tirelessly at widow regeneration and women's education and women empowerment, it is surprising that she was denied the space that should have been hers.

Ramabai's relationship with Christianity was a long and a conflicting passage of trials and tribulations. It has to be understood within the frameworks of the British cultural and political agenda that sought to impose hegemony to propagate a belief, to sanitize the Indian mind as it were. Even their sponsorship of the Indian social reform movement carried the same agenda of establishing a cultural hegemony over the Indian consciousness. Strangely this carried overt and implicit tones of Christian tenets, something that Ramabai was irresistibly drawn to. Thus overlapping all these were the "larger confrontation between Indianness and western culture, nationalism and colonial rule, feminism and patriarchy in its various guises." [Meera Kausambi]

She was even perceived as an anti-national. Accepting the Christian faith was a betrayal of her culture and her nation. She was seen as consorting with the imperial powers, subscribing to western/ colonial dominance over indigenous people. Nationalism thus became synonymous with Hinduism. The reactions and consequent evaluation of Ramabai raises some intriguing questions. Did she really have the kind of space that her detractors claim she had? Did she have the legitimacy that Ramabai Ranade, M.G. Ranade's widow had? Was her conversion the only problematic issue? If one looks at these issues and works out the dialectics of personal and public spaces, one finds that matters were more intricate than they appear to be.

The answers to these questions I raised above will also explain the reasons to her conversion. For one who practised religion as a matter of spirituality and intellectual questioning and who believed that conscience and not dogmas and rituals was her arbiter, it is surprising that she converted to another faith. She questioned the Hindu religion into which she was born as it did offer her any space to carry her social agenda and reform hence it was extremely easy to convert into another faith that offered her the same space, "her involvement with Christianity meant that a deeply personal matter of belief was transmuted into a source of social action." [Meera Kausambi] Surprising because she, who contested the Hindu faith, its gender bias, its Brahmin hegemony and who always stayed outside the orbit of mainstream upper-caste society should have agreed to a religion that also carried the Imperial's stamp on it. Especially since the Anglican missionaries, who desired to ethically purge and spiritually cleanse the native heathen, expected that the convert submit to the Church and the Empire and yet remain the outsider. Ramabai also realized this and refused initially to submit to the yoke of the Church as she writes in one of her letters. She clearly states that, "with great effort [I have] freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe... I am not at present willing to place myself under a similar yoke." [Letters: 156]

Yet her act was not surprising because even within the social and cultural spaces of Maharashtra, she was always positioned as the outsider. She had an unconventional upbringing. She was born into a Chitpavan family and her progressive father, who sought to teach his wife Sanskrit, was ostracized by the Brahmin community. The family moved into the forest of Gangamul in Karnataka where the father insisted that his daughters learn the divine language and refused to arrange the customary early marriage for Ramabai. Thus she escaped the gender specific roles ascribed to other women. She never lived in the strict confines of a family life or a structured family life as the family was always on the move. Their father too was a reformist at heart, who refused to follow the constraints that the society imposed on the women and insisted that the women in the family also learn the scriptures hence Ramabai had never known gender constraints. Also she was always treated to her as

her brother's equal, again something unusual in the family context. Her life, though anchored in religion, defied dogmas. She was quite disillusioned with her religion given the impoverished circumstances they had to live in and owing to the fact that she lost one after the other of her family member, "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...our faith in religion had grown cold." [**My Testimony**, 300] She was fiercely independent and had intensely individualistic traits that were quite contrary to the Indian character that chooses to define itself in subservience to traditions and social grouping and "collective identity." [Meera Kausambi, p 5] Thus she was never the kind of figure who could be inscribed as a model in a patriarchal set-up. And being always on the margins she needed moorings which the Christian social space offered her.

Her life, though adventurous, must have wrought its own anxieties in her and bred insecurities in her. She spent a greater portion of her adolescent life moving from one place to another because the family subsisted on reciting **The Puranas** and in the process of these wanderings and unceasing pilgrimage the family members one after the other, succumbed to starvation and illness. Perhaps this loneliness also made her seek bonds to larger issues and when she did not find it within the reformist spaces she was attracted towards a faith that seemed to offer more answers. So throughout her life we see a strong urge to contest, question and also a need to be accepted.

In her terse autobiographical narrative, **My Testimony**, we see how she challenges the orthodox Hindu faith, its gender and caste discrimination. Elsewhere in her writings too the same spirit of questioning is seen especially in **the High Caste Woman** [1887] where she boldly asserts that a glorious period never existed for the Hindu woman and that discrimination runs in the very fabric of the Hindu society. It is ingrained in the scriptures and through them into the day-to-day living. A woman's life right from infancy is a long tale of misery and woe and to be a widow is a nightmare when she is denied even the dignity of living. The widow had to dress herself down so that she does not attract the attention of men. She had to be kept in guard, under heavy observation otherwise she might bring disgrace to the family and she was expected to live a life of mortification beginning with the food and such natural, everyday realities to suppress her natural desires. Thus Ramabai lists the endless number of ways in which women were discriminated and dismisses that the glorious Aryan woman never existed. As she maintains a sustained attack on the Hindu patriarchy, she also talks about the more progressive gender relations that existed in more humane Christian social structures in England and America. She confesses how she is attracted to the compassion that existed in the Christian faith that embraced even the sinners and provided for the destitute, the deprived, "There is real compassion here. In our country nobody knows what real compassion means." [Religious Denominations and Charities, p 193] She believed that the new faith will give her the space to realise her dreams. She worked to rescue the Hindu widow, a marginalised figure and tried to re-inscribe her into the domestic sphere and even into the mainstream space by educating her and training her in professions. She worked to reinstate the deserted, sexually exploited women and opened homes for them and later helped the lower caste famine victims too. Such operations and agendas did not go with the other reformists, primarily upper-caste in their thrust. Hence her activities were peripheral to them.

In her account, the Word Seed, she talks of the other overt influences that were imperceptibly shaping her mind and planting the spirit of Christianity and she mentions that she was not impervious to these influences. She refers to an incident of early childhood when she says she was drawn to the Christian faith by a strange encounter. She talks of a visit by a missionary in

Benares, who came to see the family and spoke of Jesus Christ and the name cast a spell on her and she kept repeating the name for many days. This alarmed her sister and her mother and then she was forbidden to refer to the name every again but it struck ground. Later in Assam after she was married, another missionary sent her a card, which had these words inscribed on it, “incline your heart unto the Lord” which struck a chord again in her and she thought that this could answer her spiritual barrenness. As she recalls, she says, “I felt as if a big emptiness within my heart which needed to be filled, and no one but The God Who was full of love and compassion for sinners would be able to fill it. I felt I needed his help, and for the first time in my life I prayed to the Unknown God to incline our hearts unto Him.” [Word Seed, p326] The account written much later, though a reconstruction of her spiritual acceptance of her new religion, does mention her dire need to accept a faith that seemed to answer certain needs like her reform agenda and the personal vacuity.

At the social level, her disillusionment with the reform movement was gradual. She was initiated into the social reform scheme in Calcutta by Bramho Samaj leaders, where she delivered lectures on the emancipation of women, championing the cause of their education. After she lost her husband, the social reformers of Maharashtra claimed that their ‘native daughter’ and even the Chitpavan Bramhin community into which she was born adopted her as “one of us” She was hailed because she seemed perfect to fit in perfectly in the scheme of cultural resurgence. She was seen embodying the glorious tradition of learned women. Though there was also a faction that murmured disapproval of unconventional life, unholy past [as they interpreted it] and her present status as a widow.

She however joined the Prarthana Samaj in Poona, led by M. G. Ranade. The other reform initiatives in Maharashtra were led by Lokahitavadi deshmukh, who worked within the Bramhin circle while Mahatama Jyotirao Phule operated among the lower castes. In the 1870s, R.G. Bhandarkar sought to legislate while mobilising public opinion on various issues. A significant change came in 1880s when Bal Gangadhar Tilak came into public domain when the focus shifted entirely to political issues rather than social reforms.

Initially a harmony existed between her and other reformers but her radical views were too problematic and she had to split into her own. Ramabai soon realized that the reform movements were basically male-dominated and class-centered. The patriarchal reformist ideology sought to position women in the domestic roles of wife/mother and the focus was to make them better wives and better mothers to the ascending enlightened men, a generation that attempted through the western education to restore India to its glory of the past. The attempt thus was to recast women in the same roles and to contain their selves in different frameworks. Emancipation of women was essentially an investment, as Meera Koshambi points out. These agendas were exclusive- it excluded women from the other castes. They still were invisible and unheard.

She also felt that many of the reformers for all their posturing did not entirely subscribe to what they preached. She talks of her disillusionment in an introduction to M.B Fuller’s *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* [1900]. She says that her reform attempts were seen as anti-national in a society that vehemently denied the reality of women’s oppression in the family, where the idea of seeking their opinion on issues like the age of consent for marriage was too radical. Tilak, for instance, strongly opposed the prospect of women interfering in “men’s task of eradicating the evil customs pertaining to women.”

For a social structure that prescribed invisibility to the widow, Ramabai with her independent spirit, her defiance of conventions, her refusal to comply to role expectations was too radical

and unacceptable. It did initially try to inscribe her in a certain framework but she could not be contained. So conversion was not the only reason that denied her legitimacy. It just happened to be one of the reasons.

This was seen as an act of severance from the mainstream culture and religion and as a compromise that betrayed those very voices that had earlier lauded her and welcomed her with open arms. Quote from a high caste widow.

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