

PART IV KEDGAON

8. Famine Experiences (1897)	247
9. To the Friends of Mukti School and Mission (1900)	261
10. A Short History of Kripa Sadan, or Home of Mercy (1903)	278
11. <i>A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure</i> (1907)	295
12. The Word-Seed (1908)	325
References	328
Index	332



INTRODUCTION

In the mystic's spirit of seeing the world in a grain of sand, one may find Pandita Ramabai's whole life (1858–1922) encapsulated in a photograph of her during her last years, head bowed over her Marathi translation of the Bible. In this cultural narrative of conflated contradictions lie embedded several simultaneous readings. The photograph shows an Indian woman sitting on the floor in a pose mandatory for upper caste Maharashtrian women of the time, although the rest of her unconventional appearance—a plain white five-yard sari, a Western-style high-necked, long-sleeved blouse, and short hair—suggests a Bengali Brahmo widow, except for her typically Maharashtrian (and also south Indian) way of modestly covering her right shoulder with the sari.¹ The showcasing of her act of writing serves to privilege her over her contemporaries who did not have access to education and could nurture no literary ambitions. Further exoticizing this unusual blend of customs, cultures and creeds is the intrusive presence of the 'Western' photographer, suggested by the potted palm ubiquitous in contemporary posed portraits. To all these spontaneous readings can be added the fact that the translation of the Bible, Ramabai's magnum opus, marked the apogee of her religious divergence from her orthodox Brahmin origins, via a series of intermediate stages landmarked by her earlier writings. The aim

of this book is to present this entire spectrum, which allows us to reconstruct and plot Pandita Ramabai's complex religious, feminist and personal evolution.

The recent resurgence of national and also international academic interest in Pandita Ramabai stands foregrounded against her elision during the last few decades from the mainstream record of Maharashtra's social history.² So far this resurgence has left untouched the complex and problematic niche Ramabai occupies in Maharashtra's collective psyche in which pride in her extraordinary learning and fame remains stifled by a sense of betrayal at her conversion to Christianity and subsequent proselytization, as if these were recent occurrences and their wounds still fresh. It is now time for a healing, for a sensitive, unblinkered exploration of her writings and activities from today's secular vantage point.

In a sense this book is a more organized replication of my own journey into Ramabai's fascinating world, which began as an exploration of the region's social-cultural regeneration that had occurred a century and a half ago. The excitement of rediscovering the region's history and culture which I had absorbed during my formative years and education at Pune—the cultural heartland of Maharashtra—and of re-reading the impassioned eloquence of revered public leaders soon gave way to puzzlement as I stumbled upon the militant feminist rhetoric of Pandita Ramabai. She seemed to have inhabited the same age but not shared the same social space; her thoughts resonated well with late twentieth century thinkers—at least feminist ones—but have been almost erased from mainstream records of history. This enigma paved the way for my gradual retrieval of her obscure—and obscured—writings, in the hope of serving several simultaneous agendas: to reconstruct Ramabai's ideological evolution and transformation in interaction with her changing social milieu in order to assess her contribution, to help to 'engender' the social history of Maharashtra by reinscribing women into it and thus broaden its epistemological base and correct the imbalance in historical discourse, and to reclaim a significant part of our feminist heritage.³

This volume, planned as a comprehensive source-book of Ramabai's writings, includes her internationally known works in English, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (selection 5) and *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* (selection 11) on which,

together with her published *Letters and Correspondence*, non-Marathi-speaking scholars tend to place sole reliance in their analyses; importantly, it also includes her other, lesser known and painstakingly retrieved English writings. But its *raison d'être* is Ramabai's Marathi works—both the well-known and the obscure, recently recovered ones—which appear here in (my) English translation for the first time. They help us traverse an entirely new and startlingly different experiential world in her company. In fact, her writings plot a trajectory involving a hundred and eighty degrees' turn through three clearly contoured phases of cultural transition, starting with an orthodox Hindu world-view which gradually imbricates with a Christian world-view, only to be completely edged out in a final rupture.

From these collected writings (in the original and in translation) also emerges the key to an understanding of Ramabai—the fact of her being positioned simultaneously as an 'insider' and an 'outsider', both within Maharashtra's turbulent social regeneration, and within the larger international project of Christianization. Ramabai shared the ethos and psyche of her reformist contemporaries, but transgressed the boundaries of space, culture and religion—and even of time—through her vision of a gender-egalitarian society. She presented a graphic picture of oppressed Indian womanhood to her Western readers with a trained ethnographer's eye, but without sacrificing her nationalist pride and right to interrogate colonial rule; and she brought news of exciting social and political reforms in the far-off United States of America to her Marathi readers with an empathetic understanding of the prevailing local conditions. The ease with which she straddled the East and West was unique in the heyday of Empire and Orientalism. Hence the imperative to approach Ramabai through both her Marathi and English writings which represent nearly separate cultural spheres and whose juxtaposition alone can throw adequate light on her complex world-view, mindset and personality.

A LIFE SKETCH

Ramabai's intellectual roots go back to the twilight of the (Brahmin) Peshwa reign, to just before Bajirao II lost political power to the East India Company's Mumbai-based government in 1818.⁴ However, the

multiple Brahmin hegemony, based also on religious, economic and social supremacy, was to survive this event. Ramabai's father, Anant Shastri Dongre, a descendant of Chitpavan Brahmin settlers in Karnataka, was then a promising student at the Peshwa capital Pune. On one of his visits to the Peshwa's palace with his reputed teacher, Anant Shastri was held spellbound by the mellifluous Sanskrit recitation of the Peshwa's wife. He vowed to teach his own wife 'the divine language' from which tradition—and allegedly scriptural injunctions as well—had mandated the exclusion of women and Shudras.

Anant Shastri's attempts were foiled by his uninterested wife, presumably under pressure from his conservative family. Years after her death, he acquired a second wife at the age of forty-four while on a pilgrimage, in a rather cavalier manner (which Ramabai herself marvelled at, though without mentioning names, in her chapter on 'Married Life' in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*).

Predictably, Anant Shastri's success in teaching his second wife Lakshmibai the Sanskrit language and texts incurred the wrath of his orthodox fellow caste men against whom he defended himself in an assembly of learned *shastris*, citing passages from the sacred texts. He later withdrew to a simple, peaceful life in the forest of Gangamul in Karnataka (having earlier enjoyed patronage from the court of Mysore), ran a residential school and tended rice fields and orchards with his wife's capable help. Of the couple's six children, three survived—Srinivas, Krishnabai, and the youngest Ramabai who was born in 1858.

Launched practically from infancy upon a life of unceasing pilgrimage, Ramabai, along with her family, traversed the length and breadth of the subcontinent visiting holy places and earning a precarious living by reciting the Puranas. Once their frugal needs were met, the surplus money and food received as gifts from devout listeners were offered to holy Brahmins as an obligatory meritorious deed. This life style was punctuated by two unorthodox elements. One, Anant Shastri insisted on giving his daughters a Sanskrit education. In Ramabai's case, this happened through Lakshmibai as he was too old for the exertion. Two, he refused to arrange the customary early marriage for Ramabai, in the aftermath of Krishnabai's unhappy child marriage (an episode described by Ramabai in the chapter 'Woman's Place in Religion and Society'

in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, without identifying her sister).

A significant consequence of this unconventional upbringing was that Ramabai managed to escape a rigid gender-specific role, unlike her peers who were locked into wifehood and motherhood at an early age, confined to the domestic sphere, subjected to the pressures of the extended family, and denied education or even literacy. Treated as her brother's equal, educated and trained in public speaking before mixed audiences, Ramabai later entered the public, male arena of social reform without hesitation. Again, from early on, her life was anchored in a deep religiosity, with conscience as the sole arbiter of conduct; this explains her later spiritual quest which was coupled with an intellectual curiosity and defiance of dogma. Finally, a life of physical hardship, often at the very edge of survival, forged in her a strength of character and an intense individualism which was, and still is, rare in Indian society—which has rested on collectivity and conformity—and which led her later on to tread a solitary and difficult path to spiritual salvation and contestation of patriarchy.

Despite enjoyable moments that the close-knit nuclear family experienced, the Dongres ultimately paid a high price for their endless travel and rigorous ritual observances. After years of privation and even starvation, Ramabai's emaciated parents died in 1874, victims of a severe famine in the Madras Presidency. (The painful experience of the indignities of starvation, suffered both by its victims and its survivors, was later described graphically by Ramabai in 'Famine Experiences', selection 8.) Krishnabai died of cholera in late 1875, having just undergone the trauma of a lawsuit for the restitution of conjugal rights. The truncated family, Ramabai and her brother Srinivas Shastri, continued the long travels on foot and the ritual austerities. On one occasion, they combated the Punjab winter, in the absence of warm clothes, by burying themselves up to the neck in dry sand on the bank of the Jhelum, as Ramabai narrates in 'Famine Experiences'.

It was their chance arrival in Calcutta in 1878 that catapulted Ramabai into prominence. Her rare Sanskrit learning was honoured and she was bestowed the titles 'Pandita' and 'Sarasvati' by notable scholars after a public examination. She was also inducted into social reform by Brahmo Samaj leaders and delivered public and private lectures on the emancipation of women, drawing heavily upon Hindu texts and mythology, lectures that soon established her

fame as a champion of women's education and as a public speaker.

But personal tragedy struck again and again. Srinivas Shastri died of cholera in 1880, and Ramabai married his friend (and her own persevering suitor) Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a Bengali non-Brahmin, Brahmo lawyer. After less than two years of a happy married life in Kochar, Assam, Medhavi also died prematurely of cholera in 1882, leaving the twenty-four year old Ramabai an impecunious widow with an infant daughter, Manorama.

The news of Ramabai's sudden widowhood catalysed the social reformers of Maharashtra into laying claim on their 'native daughter'. She went to Pune (via Madras, to explore briefly the possibility of studying medicine) where she joined the social reform circle of the Prarthana Samaj, which was modelled on the Brahmo Samaj and led by M.G. Ranade. The strength of caste bonds helped Ramabai slide effortlessly into the Chitpavan Brahmin community, as 'one of us' (Ranade 1953: 80).

But a majority of this social stratum also held extremely orthodox religious beliefs and was conservative in its social mores; and desired to keep women under strict control. Its patriarchal ideology positioned woman firmly within the domestic sphere as a wife/mother/housewife—underlining her sexual, reproductive and home-making functions—as mandated somewhat ambiguously by the ancient Hindu *śāstras* and unambiguously by contemporary social custom, two sources of authority whose relative strength continued to be debated. Prepubertal marriages for girls and immediate post-pubertal consummation of marriage was mandatory in order to harness their sexuality, from its inception, to marriage and motherhood. The highest status for a woman was that of a *saubhagyavati* (or 'blessed' woman whose husband was alive), and a mother of sons, rather than daughters who were considered inferior and undesirable. This status was proclaimed by her appearance—wearing a colourful nine-yard sari and a profusion of ornaments. A woman only with daughters, or one without children had a lower status and was in danger of being deserted by her husband. A widow had the lowest status, especially a child widow or one without children, being neither wife nor mother and thus having forfeited her right to a normal existence. Widowhood was also proclaimed through appearance—having to wear a coarse, plain, borderless maroon sari, denied ornaments, and disfigured through a completely shaven head which had

to be carefully covered. Construed as a result of sins in previous lives, widowhood bore the stigma of inauspiciousness; and the widow became a household drudge expected to live on meagre food, sleep on the floor without a bedding, and spend her time in ritual acts, all calculated to underline her superfluity in patriarchal society (Kosambi 1988; forthcoming).

This tragic figure was to become the focus of Ramabai's future career, although the agency which Ramabai claimed as a social reformer was undercut by her own status as a widow, however unconventional. The entry of a woman, moreover an 'inauspicious' widow with a 'sinful' past and a 'polluting' presence, into public life aroused the outrage of the local orthodox Brahmins (Ranade 1953: 81), which festered over the years and ultimately defeated her.

Ramabai moved rapidly into the male- and upper caste-dominated social reform discourse in Maharashtra and attempted to reinscribe women into it as subjects rather than objects. The movements around caste and gender, the twin axes of reform, had taken largely divergent directions; gender issues had become the preoccupation of the upper castes, whose women were the most oppressed. The recent colonial cultural encounter had introduced reformist ideas of women's 'upliftment' through an amelioration of the coercive customs of child marriage and enforced widowhood, and through education, which had been reserved for Brahmin men until the advent of caste- and gender-neutral English education. But these reforms were to be circumscribed strictly within a patriarchal framework and geared towards making women better wives for the English-educated Indian men expecting companionate marriages, and more enlightened mothers of the future generations who would restore India to its former glory and ultimately to political autonomy. 'Emancipation' of women was thus essentially an investment in societal—that is, male—progress, rather than aimed at bringing about gender equality.

The disparate reform initiatives in Maharashtra coalesced around the mid-nineteenth century under the leadership of 'Lokahitavadi' Deshmukh who operated largely within the Brahmin orbit and 'Mahatma' Jotirao Phule who championed the cause of lower castes against oppressive Brahmin hegemony and also struggled for gender-related reforms (although both shared a generally pro-British ideological stance). In the late 1870s, a more liberal generation of reformers, led by M.G. (later Justice) Ranade and Professor (later

Sir) R.G. Bhandarkar, claimed centrestage and sought to introduce social reform through legislation while also mobilizing public opinion. A significant shift occurred in the mid-1880s with the attempt, especially by K.T. (later Justice) Telang, to prioritize political reform at the cost of social concerns (Telang 1886). This was also the thrust of Professor (later 'Lokamanya') B.G. Tilak's politics. Social reform came to be gradually sidelined with Tilak's ascendancy in the national political scene, especially from the 1890s, reinforced by the newspapers under his leadership, the Marathi-language paper *Kesari* and the English-language *Mahratta*. The liberal faction was led by Professor G.G. Agarkar who resigned from this group and started his own weekly in 1888, newspapers being an essential weapon in the battle for social and political reform. Ramabai would initially enjoy the cautious support of even the conservative papers until her own radical activities led to an open split, and it was the acknowledged social reformers who would support her the longest. Significantly, Ranade, Bhandarkar and Agarkar were to later take a tolerant view of Ramabai's conversion to Christianity, while Phule applauded it as a rejection of Hindu bigotry towards women and Shudras and hailed her as their champion (Kosambi 1992a).

Ramabai's reform career in Maharashtra was launched with the *Arya Mahila Samaj*, established by her on 1 June 1882 in Pune on the rudimentary foundations of an existing women's association. Several branches were opened in the region later. The pioneering venture, intended to mobilize women themselves through 'consciousness-raising' and discussion to demand reform in the oppressive social customs, was supported by the social reformers as a welcome initiative, and opposed by anti-reformers as a threat to male hegemony—the *Kesari* flatly denied women the agency to 'interfere' in the 'men's task of eradicating the evil customs' affecting women (8 August 1882: 5*).⁵ This faction was placated by her Marathi work *Stri Dharma Niti* (or *Morals for Women*, its English title given for the mandatory registration of vernacular books) which was published at the end of June 1882, but it opposed her plea before the Hunter Commission on Education in September 1882 for better facilities for women's general and medical education.

With a renewed ambition to study medicine herself, Ramabai planned to travel to England. She took some English lessons and arranged for her stay with the *Sisters of the Community of St. Mary*

the Virgin at Wantage where she was to earn her living by teaching Marathi to the Sisters who would be sent to western India, on the clear understanding from her that she would not convert to Christianity. This progression of events and her voyage during April–May 1883, accompanied by her daughter Manorama and a companion of the Maratha caste, Anandibai Bhagat, was described by Ramabai in a long letter which was later published as a booklet entitled *Pandita Ramabai Yancha Englandcha Pravas* (Pandita Ramabai's Voyage to England') (Ramabai 1988).

On reaching England, Ramabai soon met Sir Bartle Frere, former Governor of the Bombay Presidency, in June 1883 and wrote him a long letter entitled 'The Cry of Indian Women' (selection 2). The letter was an appeal on behalf of the *Arya Mahila Samaj*, intended for circulation and fund-raising for a proposed 'destitute home' for the women victims of multiple oppression in India. It was probably the first such Indian initiative in England.

Unfortunately, a series of disasters followed. Anandibai Bhagat committed suicide by swallowing poison, but was baptised on her deathbed ostensibly to respect her own earlier wish to convert to Christianity. Still in a deep depression (and probably under pressure, as discussed below), Ramabai herself converted to Christianity at the end of September 1883 and was baptised into the Anglican Church as Mary Rama, along with Manorama (Manorama Mary). Her Anglican patrons and guardians, especially her spiritual preceptress Sister Geraldine, had already decided upon a missionary career for Ramabai, although they were to face unexpected challenges from her on many counts (Kosambi 1992a; 1998c). Then in the midst of a protracted theological debate with the Anglican nuns and even with bishops, Ramabai discovered that her incurable deafness would preclude her from pursuing medical studies. Ramabai was then enrolled in December 1883 by the Wantage Community in the Cheltenham Ladies' College as a teacher-student who would study the natural sciences, mathematics and English, and give Sanskrit lessons in return. Miss Dorothea Beale, the founder-principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College and a champion of women's education (Spender 1983: 447–8), provided empathetic and intellectual support, in contrast to Sister Geraldine's dogmatic stance (and self-confessed inability to relate to Ramabai on her own intellectual plane; *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* [hereafter, *Letters*], edited by A.B. Shah, p. 5).

After almost three years in England, Ramabai went to the USA at the invitation of Dr Rachel Bodley, Dean of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, to attend the graduation of a distant relative⁶ Anandibai Joshee, who was to become India's first woman doctor (in vicarious fulfilment of Ramabai's own thwarted ambition). Ramabai was instantly lionized in the USA as an internationally reputed advocate of the Indian women's cause. A glowing account of her life and her speech at a special gathering the day after Anandibai's graduation appeared in the American press. While reproducing it *The Mahratta* of Pune (2 May 1886: 6-7) tried simultaneously to undermine Ramabai through a new and enduring installation of Anandibai (whose conformity to convention had been well-publicized) as the icon of educated Maharashtrian womanhood.

Ramabai was to spend two-and-a-half years (from March 1886 to October 1888) in the USA, studying the educational system in Philadelphia and later (after sending Manorama to England and then to India to await her arrival), travelling from coast to coast in order to publicize her plan to open a home for high-caste Hindu widows in India. In 1887 she published *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* as part of her fund-raising efforts. The campaign resulted in the creation of The Ramabai Association of Boston in December 1887, that would support an unsectarian educational institution for child-widows in India; a number of 'circles' across the country (numbering seventy-five in early 1890 according to the Association's *Second Annual Report*) made annual pledges to the Association. The Association in turn pledged financial support for ten years to a secular widows' home.

The educationist in Ramabai surfaced in other ways. In 1888, while still in the USA, she started writing her Marathi book *United Stateshi Lokasthiti ani Pravasaavritta* which she completed and published in Mumbai in 1889 (registered under the English title *The Peoples of the United States*). Its purpose was to share with her compatriots her experience of a free and progressive democracy, repeatedly contrasted with colonial Britain.

After sailing from San Francisco, via Japan where she delivered a few public lectures, Ramabai reached India in February 1889. She settled down with Manorama in Mumbai and almost immediately, on 11 March 1889, opened a widows' home, the *Sharada Sadan* (Home of Learning), at Chowpatty. The enormous venture underscored Ramabai's enterprising spirit, organizational capability and

nationalistic credentials and generated excitement in which her conversion was at least temporarily forgotten. All leading social reformers of the Bombay Presidency supported the Sadan; many, such as Ranade, Bhandarkar and Telang, served on its Advisory Board. The general reaction was captured by the *Kesari* (12 February 1889: 3*). It applauded her 'marvellous deed' of collecting funds for the cause of Indian widows in a foreign land, regretted her conversion and the consequent social and emotional distancing, and prophesized that 'if her conduct is straightforward, people will shortly develop a trust in her'.

In November 1890, the Sadan was shifted to Pune for reasons of economy and direct access to the orthodox Brahmin community, a move that sharpened the conservative attack on its secular credentials and for its perceived 'pampering' of widows. In 1891, a storm broke out over allegations of proselytization—a sensitive issue that snowballed rapidly into a regular verbal warfare with all prominent newspapers of the time engaging in 'investigative journalism' by trying to collect information from current or past inmates of the Sadan. In its bitter aftermath, members of the Advisory Board resigned, and most girls were withdrawn from the Sadan by their guardians. The Ramabai Association of Boston sent Mrs Andrews, chairperson of the Executive Committee, to inquire into the matter. Ramabai was exonerated, but the breach between her and mainstream Hindu society—and later, even the social reformers—never healed.

It was mainly outside the orbit of mainstream upper caste society that Ramabai's project of helping widows and deserted women expanded to wider proportions. After a massive rescue operation following a famine in the Central Provinces and Gujarat in 1896, she housed hundreds of the victims in huts at the village of Kedgaon near Pune, on land she had recently bought. Here she opened a new and Christian institution, the *Mukti Sadan* (Home of Salvation), later expanded into the *Mukti Mission*. In 1899 she obtained a renewed pledge of support from the reconstituted American Ramabai Association for an unsectarian Sharada Sadan which was later shifted to the overtly Christian *Mukti Mission*, alongside *Kripa Sadan* (Home of Mercy, a rescue home for sexually victimized women), a separate section for blind women who were given a general education in Braille and taught useful crafts, and another that looked after aged women.

Ramabai's shift to Kedgaon and focus on lower caste famine victims rather than upper caste widows made her activities peripheral to mainstream society. Her last years were spent in relative isolation, albeit with a gradual *rapprochement* with the numerous Christian denominations that had earlier criticized her policy of religious neutrality. Through incessant activity—running a school and classes to develop income-generating skills of the inmates (which included teaching, nursing, tailoring, embroidery, laundering, weaving of cloth and carpets, gardening, and even operating a printing press), fund-raising and maintaining international networks—Ramabai had built what an impressed Christian visitor described as 'a female kingdom' in which all the tasks 'from top to bottom' were performed by women (*Dnyanodaya*, 28 November 1907: 380*). It had been Ramabai's cherished dream to develop self-reliance in, and provide an alternative shelter for, women whose homes were their 'social universe' but often an oppressive one (Kosambi 1998b). The dream finally came true at Mukti Mission (renamed 'Ramabai Mukti Mission' after her death, and 'Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission' in 1969), but was to remain outside the reach of upper caste widows whom she had tried desperately to reach.

These shifts were paralleled by her religious evolution. In 1891, during the darkest hour of the storm Ramabai had a revelation in the classic Christian tradition; faith superseded intellectual questioning and her earlier freshness and openness on religious issues gradually rigidified into a proselytizing zeal, as she describes in her Christian confessions, *A Testimony* (1907) and in occasional pieces in her newsletter, the *Mukti Prayer Bell*. She also launched her most ambitious work, a new translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into Marathi, during the course of which she also wrote a Greek grammar in Marathi.

But this newsletter, the *Annual Reports* and other writings show a creeping frustration, resentment, isolation and bitterness. They also reveal the fatal flaw in her reasoning—the conviction that Hindu women would flock to her institutions for shelter and realize that their oppression could be remedied only by conversion to Christianity.

The opening years of the twentieth century found Ramabai beleaguered—Sharada Sadan was marginalized, the Mukti Sadan, that housed hundreds of famine victims, was beset by multiple problems ranging from paucity of funds to imposition of discipline,

the uniqueness of her pro-women interventions was partly overshadowed by Karve's 'Hindu Widows' Home opened at Pune in 1896 (and later shifted to nearby Hingne), explicitly intended as an alternative to the 'Christian' Sharada Sadan (Kosambi 1995: 164) and by Malabari's Seva Sadan launched at Mumbai in 1908; its Pune branch, under Ramabai Ranade's management, opened in 1909. But already an international icon of Indian Christianity, Ramabai was able to function as the strongest single pivot and conduit for 'international aid' to Indian women through funds and volunteer workers. During the last two decades of her life, she relied for support largely on these wide international networks. Her social contribution was recognized by the British Government, which awarded her the Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal in 1919.

Her last personal tragedy befell Ramabai in 1921 with the death of forty year old Manorama, an able assistant in all her mother's enterprises and active in setting up girls' schools in Hyderabad state. The following year Ramabai herself passed away at the age of sixty-four, having just completed her Marathi translation of the Bible which was being printed at the Kedgaon press by her specially trained girls when she died.

THE SELF IN RELIGIOUS TRANSITION

Ramabai never documented her rich and variegated life in any great detail. Her earliest available autobiographical sketch (1883; selection 3) is a terse narrative written in Marathi on the eve of her conversion in England and translated immediately into English. It presents the bare bones of her already eventful life. The account was fleshed out with the occasional incident of her childhood related in passing in some episodes about her parents and sister in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), and the harsh realities of poverty and starvation in 'Famine Experiences' (1897). Her final word on her own life was *A Testimony* (1907)—another terse autobiographical account, though leavened with a wry humour.

Most conspicuous in Ramabai's later writings (after 1900) is a marked transition, a deliberate effort to re-plot her entire past on the meridian of Christianity. This occurs at various levels. One is the attempt to trace the red thread of Christianity running right through her life as a conscious or unconscious guiding force. Not only does

she locate and reconstruct her life entirely within the framework of Christianity in *A Testimony*, she also rediscovers echoes of Christianity in an almost forgotten childhood experience narrated in 'The Word-Seed' (selection 12), in an attempt to lay claim to the Christian core of her personality which had lain dormant under an orthodox Hindu shell.

Although this reconstructed passage to Christianity was imbued with a sense of inevitability, the suddenness of Ramabai's conversion continues to remain a mystery given her public and convincing promise to her Prarthana Samaj supporters before leaving for England not to convert to Christianity. Recent research indicates that 'pressure' to convert, though not necessarily amounting to 'coercion', was exerted on Ramabai (and Anandibai Bhagat) by the Wantage Sisters in the genuine belief that Ramabai was an 'inquirer', who had come to England to make a concentrated study of Christianity away from other distractions prior to actual conversion. This was the basis for their financial and practical support, although Ramabai's understanding of the situation differed significantly (Glover 1995: 71-109). This version is indirectly corroborated by Professor Max Mueller (1899: 127) whom Ramabai visited at Oxford about this time. He found Ramabai in a state of 'nervous prostration' because Anandibai Bhagat had been so frightened by the possibility of forced conversion that she had tried to save Ramabai by attempting to strangle her one night and finally killed herself.

It was in this mood of disappointment, depression and even despair that Ramabai was baptised. The reasons she herself offered for her conversion—'recollected in (Christian) tranquility' many years later—therefore appear to be more in the nature of justifications, though they are by no means unconvincing. They cover the progression from her early disillusionment with the gender- and caste-based discrimination of orthodox Hindu faith, acceptance of Brahmo belief, the proof given by the Reverend Nehemiah Goreh (a Brahmin convert himself) that the Brahmo Samaj was derived not from the Hindu Vedas but from Christianity, the Christian promise of universal salvation without discrimination, and the compassionate deeds of Christians such as the kindness of the Wantage Sisters and the Christian concept of redemption rather than punishment for sinners (Kosambi 1992). Ramabai records her visit to a Rescue Home in London where 'fallen' women, shunned by Hindu scriptures and

custom, were being rehabilitated as useful members of society. This was the model for her own Kripa Sadan years later (see selection 10). A hidden but strong dimension of this conversion was loneliness and isolation which increased the appeal of a supportive social structure that she had missed all her life, the need 'to be able to worship together with those whom she loved and who had long been so kind to her' (Max Mueller 1889: 128).

The aftermath of conversion found Ramabai embroiled in a protracted debate with the Wantage Sisters and the Anglican Church. Her primary contestation of the Church rested on issues of theology: her selective acceptance of Christian doctrine and rejection of the miraculous birth and divinity of Christ. The secondary issue was Sister Geraldine's insistence on the need for implicit acceptance of 'the authority of those over her in the Church' (*Letters*: 43), and Canon Butler's that 'to a neophyte in the Faith . . . self-reliance is intensely dangerous' (*Letters*: 76). The third contentious issue was the patriarchal insistence of the Anglicans that as an Indian woman Ramabai could not jeopardize her future chances in India by teaching Indian languages to men. Ramabai contested the authoritarianism of the Anglican Church by insisting that 'I have a conscience, and mind and a judgment of my own. I must myself think and do everything which GOD has given me the power of doing', and claiming that after having 'with great effort freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe . . . I am not at present willing to place myself under [a] similar yoke' by obeying the instructions of the Anglican clergy 'as authorized command of the Most High' (*Letters*: 156).

Underneath this friction ran the barely disguised current of racism: the Anglican bishops' generalization about the 'natives' that 'vanity is one of their very faults', and that academic status 'might lead to a little undue self-exaltation' (*Letters*: 43-5); and Sister Geraldine's bitter complaint of Ramabai's 'pride and vanity' which were 'dangerously inflated' (*Letters*: 4), her 'want of candour and sincerity' and her 'deceitfulness' like 'the generality of the Hindoos' (*Letters*: 114-15). Colonial rule formed the core of this problematic relationship, because Christianity was the religion of the conquerors and the Anglican Church itself bore the title The Church of England which, as Sister Geraldine saw, 'would tend to alarm and repel' Ramabai (*Letters*: 406). This is borne out by the opening passages

of Ramabai's chapter on religion 'Religious Denominations' (selection 6) in *United Stateschi*. . .

The second stage in Ramabai's Christian evolution came after many years, during the dismal days when Sharada Sadan was boycotted and she herself discredited even in the eyes of her former reformist supporters. She now saw the deficiency in her intellectual acceptance of Christ without the emotional support of unquestioning faith. In 1891, during these desperate times, she had a revelation, like a burst of light followed by a sense of great relief. It led to a change in Ramabai's attitude to proselytization, and to intense missionary activity. The shift of the Sharada Sadan to Kedgaon, where Ramabai had bought a farm, was caused fortuitously by a plague epidemic in Pune; it facilitated the establishment of the Mukti Mission where hundreds of famine victims were housed and converted. By 1900, the strength of the Mission was close to two thousand and generated a fresh set of problems. The new inmates were drawn from depressed castes, very different from the disciplined Brahmin widows of the Sharada Sadan, and their needs ranged from creature comforts to character building, secular and spiritual education.

This led to the final phase of uncompromising Christianity that saw closer contacts with the Christian communities within India, while maintaining international Christian networks. Ramabai's touching desire to explain the pure essence of the Vedas to fellow Christians (see 'Indian Religion', selection 4) gave way to a total 'othering' of Hinduism across an ideological divide; her experiential world was now refracted only through the prism of Christianity.

THE EVOLUTION OF A FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

Ramabai entered the gender reform discourse in Maharashtra through *Stri Dharma Niti* as a surrogate male social reformer by virtue of her unusual Sanskrit education, oratory and leadership qualities, all of which had long been a prerogative of men. A natural extension of her lectures to women in the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies on the need for their education, *Stri Dharma Niti* is a guide on morality and deportment for women, featuring the Hindu mythological models of womanhood. It is also a book of general

knowledge peopled by historical figures such as Shivaji and Napoleon, and set entirely within the parameters of the liberal tradition espoused by reformist newspapers and magazines of the time. Hence *Kesari's* satisfaction that 'the task of championing the women's cause and of speaking or writing on their behalf, which hitherto fell to the lot of men, has now been undertaken by one belonging to the female sex herself' (1 August 1882: 2*).

The jarring notes in *Stri Dharma Niti*, in view of our image of Ramabai as a militant feminist, are her endorsement of the Sita-Savitri model of femininity and her castigation of the average woman as lazy, stupid and obstinate, and therefore culpable not only for her own but for the entire country's subjection and stagnation.

At the same time, *Stri Dharma Niti* also indicates Ramabai's radical divergence from the positions taken by social reformers on two counts: her advocacy of relatively late marriages by mutual choice, and her exposure of the androcentric and misogynist bias of the *dharma-shastras*. The tension between her castigation of women as culpable for their own subjection and her simultaneous exoneration of them as victims conditioned to internalize their subjection, was to be finally resolved in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the product of a cohesive feminist perspective. But a blueprint for this Indian feminist manifesto had already appeared in 'The Cry of Indian Women' (a newly discovered manuscript, published for the first time in this volume). It also details Indian women's oppression through early marriage, marital harassment, desertion by the husband and widowhood, before outlining her proposed 'destitute home' in India.

The mystifying sea-change between *Stri Dharma Niti* (June 1882) and 'The Cry of Indian Women' (June 1883) has no easy explanation. The former was obviously a product of social liberalism advocated by Ramabai's reformist supporters, but at variance with her own reform efforts through the Arya Mahila Samaj which had challenged the patriarchal ideology and practice. It was a development of this incipient feminism, perhaps further reinforced by the early feminist articulations by Tarabai Shinde⁷, Anandibai Joshee and Rakhmabai, which found expression in 'The Cry of Indian Women'. In 1882 Tarabai Shinde (1975) had contested the masculine double standards of morality and unabashed misuse of patriarchal privilege, in February 1883 Anandibai Joshee had protested publicly against the denial of educational opportunities and medical care to women (after having

privately protested against the general subordination, neglect and dispensability of women), and in 1885 Rakhmabai was to write about the misery of child brides and widows of all ages (Kosambi 1994; 1995; 1996a; 1996b). Both Anandibai and Rakhmabai, part of Ramabai's wide informal network, figure in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. With Anandibai's premature death and Rakhmabai's self-imposed seclusion from public life and dedication to medical duties, Ramabai was to alone mount a sustained attack on Hindu patriarchy, although the internationally known *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* was to have a minimal impact in Maharashtra, or the rest of India.

But the major influence that shaped the evolution of Ramabai's feminist consciousness, as reflected in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, was her exposure to the more progressive and less asymmetrical gender relations that prevailed in England and America. During her later years she stressed what she saw as the gender-egalitarian impulse of Christianity and its compassion to sinners (especially the rehabilitation of 'fallen women'), contrasting these favourably with the discriminatory and less humane Hindu doctrine (see *A Testimony*). But arguably a far greater influence on Ramabai than religion was the women's movement in the West, especially in America. Dr Rachel Bodley and Frances Willard, President of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), were Ramabai's personal friends and office-bearers of the Ramabai Association, and the international WCTU networks were to support Ramabai's reform efforts for the rest of her life. Her chapter on women in the United States 'The Condition of Women' (selection 7) sketches the brave new world she had glimpsed, with only minor flaws. Her description of women in America is a polemical statement of feminist solidarity.

That American society seemed like a utopia to women readers of *United Stateschi*... is suggested in the review by Kashibai Kanitkar, the first major female novelist in Marathi and a rarity as a book reviewer, being a woman. Kashibai's review indicates the appeal of the book for both expanding the female readers' horizons and reinforcing their incipient feminism which only needed an outlet for public expression: 'It would be hardly surprising if every one of our countrywomen who reads this book mutters dejectedly that such a golden day will never dawn for us. However, we will have to swallow these words hastily before they reach anybody's ears for fear of

committing "treason against men", just as our men are afraid of committing treason when they discuss the government' (cited in Vaidya 1991: 235-6*). The review itself, which established a vantage point qualitatively different from that of male reviewers, was sufficient proof of the progress in women's education since 1882 when the female readership of *Stri Dharma Niti* was expected to be non-existent—although the progress did not necessarily take the direction anticipated or desired by the (male) reformers.

United Stateschi... marks the end of Ramabai's feminist writings (except for a brief spark in *A Testimony*) as her religious preoccupations claimed centre stage. It was also the end of her career as a mainstream writer. *A Testimony* and the Marathi Bible hardly reached the general Marathi readership, and her narratives of women's oppression in several reports were intended for a specific, chiefly Western readership.

TRIADIC ENCOUNTERS

While her upper caste contemporaries remained confined within the home which became their 'social universe' (Kosambi 1998b), Ramabai had not only traversed the Indian subcontinent several times over, but also travelled widely within England and the USA, besides visiting other countries such as Japan. (Only a handful of women—or even men—from Maharashtra travelled abroad before 1900, mainly for higher studies: prominent among them were Anandibai Joshee who lived in the USA from 1883 to 1886, Rakhmabai in England, from 1889 to 1895, and Cornelia Sorabji also in England, from 1889 to 1893.) The formative part of Ramabai's social reform career (the period 1883-8) was shaped by her Anglo-American encounters within the larger context of Christian denominational, ideological, and nationalistic tensions.⁸

The Indo-American connection, relatively slight in the late nineteenth century, was heavily mediated by the British colonial link, and was contingent upon it. The conduit for the American presence in India were the Christian Missions that started operating soon after the East India Company's monopoly of trade with India ended in 1813, which allowed the entry of private commercial and religious interests, a history Ramabai hints at in her chapter on religion in the United States, 'Religious Denominations'. The American Marathi Mission,

which opened the region's first public school and started the Anglo-Marathi weekly *Dnyanodaya*, extended overt support for British rule in India in an article revealingly entitled 'The Destiny of the White Race', claiming:

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 . . . the mission of the white race to be the instrument through which is carried to the world a pure religion . . . (*Dnyanodaya* 1885: 500).

While Anglo-American religious interests coincided in India, where most Westerners were complicit in the Orientalist, Christianizing project in some way, the experience of an Indian visiting the two countries was often agreeably different, more so in the USA than in England. For Ramabai, the persistent religious friction with some Anglicans in England, with their vested interest in her proposed missionary career in India, was replaced by American tolerance of her non-denominational Christianity; it allowed her to forge an instant and effective bond with her audiences. Her maiden speech in the USA, for example, ended on a 'startling' and 'unique' note when 'the earnest little lady' asked 'an American company of educated and refined men and women to join with her in a moment's silent prayer "to the Great Father of all the nations of the earth" in [sic] behalf of the millions of her Hindoo sisters to whose cause she has given her life' (*Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 13 March 1886).

Ramabai was situated radically differently in the two countries. In England, she was always conscious of being a colonial subject—a 'native'. Having objected, in her article on Indian religion in *The Cheltenham Ladies' College Magazine*, to the indiscriminate and derogatory use of the term 'native' to describe all the people of the British colonies, she herself consistently used the term in its original meaning throughout *United Stateschi*. . . . The book amply reflects Ramabai's affinity with the country that had freed itself from the colonial yoke a century earlier—in her glowing description of the American Revolution, her repeated comparisons of America's superior political, economic, cultural and religious situation with England's, and her conspicuous solidarity with both the women's movement in America and American blacks. Across the racial divide her American friends camouflaged their racial awareness of her by a certain exoticization; Ramabai's pale skin and hazel eyes made her

acceptable as almost 'one of us'. The first, and generally representative, reaction of Caroline Dall—a feminist activist and writer, biographer of Anandibai Joshee and a friend who donated the sale proceeds of her biography of Anandibai to Ramabai's cause—was that 'Ramabai is strikingly beautiful' and that, apart from her 'white widow's saree . . . [t]here is nothing else about her to suggest the Hindoo [i.e. Indian]' (Dall 1888: 130–1). The Brahmin mystique (despite her conversion to Christianity), her acute intelligence and English education ensured her entry into the elite circles of Philadelphia and Boston.

If the perception of the 'civilized' West being the donors of benefits such as education to colonized nations like India was common to both countries, Ramabai received a great deal of concrete help in the USA, especially from Dr Bodley. In a tribute to the Dean after her death, a colleague recalled the 'noble aid' she extended to Ramabai (and Anandibai Joshee), adding: 'Their two names will thus be long linked together—shall we not say immortalized—the one representing the needs of the far East, and the other the Christian civilization and benevolence of the West' (Hartshorne 1888: 21.) Undeniably, Ramabai's international career was launched in the USA, through the help of friends like Dr Rachel Bodley and Frances Willard.

The international publicity that pervaded Ramabai's successful fund-raising in America and the opening of the Sharada Sadan compelled Sister Geraldine to alternate between denying the 'false reports that England had given Ramabai the cold shoulder, and she had consequently turned from England to America' (*Letters*: 295), acknowledging that 'America stole Ramabai from England', and insisting that 'England and her colonies have hardly been behind America in the gifts they have sent out to Ramabai; and England would have done still more for her, had she had [the] patience to wait and prove the generosity of the English public' (*Letters*: 423.)

Of considerable interest is Ramabai's ideological location *vis-à-vis* India, the original point of the triad, which she referred to variously in her Marathi writings, from the initial, Sanskritized *Bharatavarsha* in *Stri Dharma Niti*, to the more prevalent *Hindustan* in *United Stateschi*. . . . The contemporary Indian response to the question of her 'nationalism' was dominated by the largely hostile view of her conversion and later, of her missionary activity as anti-Hindu and therefore anti-Indian.

Ramabai's own stance remained largely stable over time: starting with patriotic indignation over a few foreigners having reduced millions of Indians to subjection in *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882); to demanding from Frere (in 1883) and the British government financial aid as a right, almost in compensation for having accumulated their wealth by impoverishing India; to a contestation of colonial power as exploitative, mercenary and patriarchal in discussing the Rakhmabai case in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887); and finally to an attack on the British policy of returning famine victims to the princely states as equalling the barbarity of those who had earlier pushed the widow onto her husband's funeral pyre, in her account of Mukti Mission (selection 9).

In these triadic encounters, Ramabai occupied a terrain permanently at the intersection of religion, culture and reform: as a high-caste Hindu turned Christian, an Indian straddling Western culture with equal facility and a social reformer aiming to alter the societal core of caste and custom.

OPPRESSED INDIAN WOMANHOOD: TRANSPARENCY, TROPING AND GENDERED SUBALTERNITY

Within this international context, diverse issues are raised by Ramabai's narratives of the oppressed Indian woman—as widow, deserted wife, and sexually exploited woman—which filled her reports of the Sharada Sadan, Mukti Mission and Kripa Sadan, as well as her *Letters*.

For her contemporaries, the most acceptable—or least unacceptable—part of Ramabai's contribution was her attempt to rescue the chaste upper caste widow, the noble symbol of Hindu patriarchal oppression, from her marginalized position within the domestic sphere and to reinstate her in a newly created (but still essentially marginal) space in the public sphere, by educating her and training her in professions such as teaching. But the sufferings of deserted and sexually victimized women, of any caste, revealed the far wider, more unpleasant repercussions of patriarchy and demanded a multi-pronged approach; they also laid bare the basic lack of compassion and will within Hindu society to face and solve these problems. Hence Ramabai's charge, in her account of Mukti Mission,

that Hinduism could be proud of such martyrs, only if they were willing martyrs.

Ramabai herself spelt out her strategy of transparency in her introduction to M.B. Fuller's *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, first published in 1900: to courageously tell the truth as the first step in making women themselves aware of 'the depths of degradation' they suffer, informing reformers about the real condition of women, and raising public awareness about the scene 'behind the purdah' (Ramabai 1984). But transparency was discredited as a dubious, anti-nationalist strategy in a social climate in which the existence of women's oppression within the family, or 'domestic slavery', was vehemently denied (Telang 1886), where the idea of consulting women themselves on issues that concerned them deeply, like the Age of Consent, was considered innovative (Kosambi 1998a), and where a private reformist belief was prudently suppressed by a public conservative stance for 'nationalistic' reasons even by articulate women such as Anandibai Joshee (Kosambi 1996b). Ramabai's exposure and criticism of this defensive nationalist posture as a (sometimes unwitting) attempt at a tacit 'othering' and an occlusion of oppressed women and a stalling of real social reform, was a double-edged sword.

The questions that arise spontaneously but defy easy answers are: Can Ramabai's narratives, whether in her own words or those of the victims, be construed as gendered subaltern articulations? Did she enjoy legitimacy as a representative or mediator of these victims, on the strength of her positionality as a disprivileged widow and a marginalized, converted Christian? Or was such legitimacy undermined by her being simultaneously a privileged, Sanskrit-educated Brahmin and English-educated Christian with an affinity with the hegemonistic Christian community worldwide?

At one level, Ramabai's troping of oppressed Indian womanhood which started with 'The Cry of Indian Women' and continued through the *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* and beyond has still not lost its power because her revolutionary, objective critique of Hindu doctrines and customs (to the extent that they can be homogenized) with a concrete programme to redress women's oppression resonate well with most Indian feminists today. If, lacking today's language of feminism, she couched her analysis in different terms, she still succeeded in 'naming' the problem. At another level, it is easy to

accept her generalized and unambiguous attack on patriarchy—whether described as the caste- and custom-based oppression of Indian women, the authoritarianism of the Anglican Church, or the gender-based subjection of an earlier generation of American women. The questions being raised today would not deny the validity of her attack, they would only expand its parameters in their focus on the persistent gender asymmetry in American society and the prevalent oppression of women—through wife-beating, desertion and sexual victimization—in Christian communities, both in India and abroad.

The obverse side of this troping is an increasing repetitiveness and forced quality as well as Ramabai's self-conscious underscoring of her unique position as a simultaneous insider and outsider and of her Christian affinity with her Western readers—all of which exude the staleness of a formalized, stylized narrative.

But the real problem lies deeper. Over the years, Ramabai's essentialization of the oppressed Indian woman was itself edged out of the western Indian discourse of social reform and became permanently lodged within a Western, Orientalist, Christian discourse. The basic question it raises is how her Christian idiom and emancipatory, missionary rhetoric is distinguishable from outright Orientalist works on Indian women by Western authors. The nature and extent of the service she was able and allowed to render to the cause of Indian women through this international publicity (quite apart from the fund-raising which it aided) still remains unclear because of her acute marginalization. Hence the allegation that her ostensible motive of helping women only disguised and legitimized her Christianizing agenda.

CONTEXTS AND CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES

Ramabai's very first book was her Marathi *Stri Dharma Niti* published in June 1882, about two months after her arrival in Pune, followed by the second, revised edition within six months owing to heavy patronage by the Directorate of Education.⁹ In her foreword to the third edition, published in 1967, Lilian Doerksen expressed the hope that *Stri Dharma Niti* would be found 'readable and instructive' by readers in the late 1960s because the problems and conditions of India's largely rural women had not changed much since Ramabai's time.

The archaic Marathi of *Stri Dharma Niti* was explained by Doerksen (1967) as being common among the emigrant Maharashtrian Brahmins settled in Karnataka. But it is the heavily Sanskritized style that obtrudes. The Marathi reviewer of the *Native Opinion* complained that 'the authoress, being well-versed in Sanskrit, has filled the book with Sanskrit words which are difficult for the average woman or even man to understand', but conceded that 'the advice given by her to women is worth accepting not only by Hindu women but by Hindu men also' (23 July 1882: 472*). The reviewer for the *Kesari* said less charitably:

We think that even a man learned in Sanskrit would be reduced to helplessness by some passages, what to speak of poor women who are almost drowning in the sea of ignorance! Sanskrit exerts such a powerful effect on this lady's mind that even if she feels favourably disposed towards the chaste Marathi language and decides to employ a simple word, it gets coated at least once with a Sanskrit brush (1 August 1882: 4*).

In the second half of the review, he went further and suggested that 'if Panditabai intends to write more books, she should first make a proper study of the Marathi language' (*Kesari*, 22 August 1882: 5*).

Ramabai's later Marathi work *United Stateschi* . . . shows considerable stylistic improvement. Although she had gained complete mastery over English in the interim and earned praise in the West for the instantly popular *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, her Marathi style did not quite acquire the ease and fluency of her English, nor the lucidity of her contemporaries' serious (and even ornate) Marathi prose. But the contents were well-received: her 'elegant and heart-stirring' language and 'gripping' descriptions won the approval of the *Kesari* reviewer (7 January 1890: 2*).¹⁰ His reservations were directed at her feminism: 'That Panditabai has given the male sex a lashing is not surprising; it is a bad habit she has formed. Who knows how she is going to achieve her desired goal without men's help!' But the reviewer admitted that Ramabai's 'occasional comments on our present condition', however unpalatable, 'were worthy of serious consideration', that her stated policy of describing only the good qualities of the Americans was sound and should be applied also while 'considering the customs and manners of other countries' (perhaps a reference to her criticism of Indian society), and concluded that there was 'absolutely no doubt that the book is worth acquiring'.

The Indu-Prakash commended the book for its eyewitness accounts and the author's useful and inspiring comments, adding that 'because this book has been written by a person tender-hearted by nature, its language also shows tenderness. Everyone should certainly read it at least once.' It also noted that this was the second book in this genre in Marathi (after Karsandas Mulji's description of England published in Marathi translation) (6 January 1890: 2*).

Remarkably, *United Stateschi Lokasthiti ani Pravasavitta* has been crafted with the language and perception of a Sanskritized, Hindu worldview, half-a-dozen years after Ramabai's conversion to Christianity. It is most conspicuous in the chapter on women, which opens somewhat startlingly by invoking Sita to validate the achievements of American women and views universities such as Harvard as temples of Sarasvati serving an inexhaustible supply of 'the nectar of knowledge'. In fact, the opening paragraph is a masterly statement of authorial location; it manages to fuse nostalgia for a Sanskritic Brahmin childhood (to capture the attention of her inevitably upper caste readers) with a distancing from the same childhood as both a wiser adult and an enlightened Christian who appreciates revered Sanskrit texts as 'ancient literary works' rather than as sacred books, and also with a remarkable knowledge of both popular and obscure Sanskrit works. The invocation of demon-killing goddesses to stress American women's agency also serves to legitimize a similar effort by Indian women by locating it within the existing tradition of empowered female figures.

Given these cultural moorings, the hiatus marked by her later writings shows signs of a painful wrench to uproot some deeply ingrained traits of her personality, in an effort to force it into an entirely different mould. The scars of this cultural and emotional violence are visible. From the time of her conversion, Ramabai had grappled with the complex intertwining of religion and culture, and repeatedly attempted to indigenize Christianity and transform its alien cultural trappings into a more recognizable Indian garb, because she saw its true message as transcending denominational, cultural and racial divides. In this sense, it was a different and somehow alien Ramabai who in her translation of the Bible strove meticulously for a Marathi language shorn of all its Sanskrit words with their inherent Hindu connotations, and who detailed the difficulties in making a faithful translation of Christian ideas into a language 'saturated with

idolatrous thoughts' (Adhav 1979: 206). The 'divine language' which had 'coated' Ramabai's prose in 1882, which she had described as 'the most beautiful and the oldest language of my dear native land' (*Letters*: 28) and which continued to pervade her writings until 1889 had become 'idolatrous' two decades later. Thus her retention of the accepted Marathi word *pavitra shastra*, despite its strong Hindu connotations, for this translation marked the last major contradiction in her writings.

The conflicting demands faced by Ramabai of fidelity to the original and readability of the translation also confront us in translating her: her Sanskritized Marathi is often archaic (sometimes even in her own social context, and invariably in ours). Her texts, each of which traverses cross-cultural and international terrains, from India's ancient Hindu past to the contemporary Anglo-American social scene, contain profuse Sanskrit quotes and allusions to the Christian doctrine and denominations. Even the tone and texture of Ramabai's Marathi show a far wider range than her evenly balanced and lucid English prose. *Stri Dharma Niti*, with its unrelieved didacticism, reads like a sermon and parts of *United Stateschi* . . . like a feminist polemic, but without the compactness of the hard-hitting *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*; both texts are ponderous. An altogether different problem for the translator is posed by Ramabai's feminism—in both its incipient and full-fledged forms—because concepts which have 'a local habitation and a name' today and which slide spontaneously to the tip of the tongue and pen ('gender construction', 'patriarchy', 'empowerment', 'complicity', 'co-option') were couched in different labels a century ago. The task of translating the three pieces proved to be far more challenging and daunting than I anticipated. After juggling with the various concerns outlined above, I arrived at a somewhat complex agenda: to make a readable translation while avoiding anachronisms, to employ some of the vocabulary current in her time and be as faithful to the original as possible in order to retain the flavour of the original, and accommodate the diverse cultural nuances and pre-empt the possibility of an unwittingly distorted analysis of her writings, which might in future be based on these translations.

Ramabai's cultural transition was also reflected in her English writings. Her piece 'Indian Religion' shows her deep attachment for what she perceived as the core of Hinduism and her touchingly keen

desire to convey it to unsympathetic (Christian) English readers. Her perception of Hinduism was to rapidly undergo both a feminist and a Christian transformation visible in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* published the very next year. Designed as an Indian feminist manifesto, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* tries to balance an incisive criticism of the Indian woman's inferior status in Hindu patriarchal society, with a nationalist defence of India *vis-à-vis* her Western readers. This effort to make the West understand Indian society shows that Ramabai's own understanding of Indian society was facilitated by the American feminist critique of contemporary Western society and her general exposure to the women's movement in the USA, especially through key figures like Dr Rachel Bodley and Frances Willard.

The book had a remarkable international circulation: its 'tenth thousand' was printed within a year of its first publication in June 1887. Newspapers across the ideological spectrum in America carried rave reviews,¹¹ variously labelling the book 'a cry for help', 'a revelation' to most Americans, a vindication of 'the activity of our Woman's Foreign Missionary Society'. A blend of Christianity and feminism, similar to that of Ramabai herself, ran through Frances Willard's review and was echoed across the Atlantic by Frances Power Cobbe. Evidently, Ramabai's book, while serving her agenda of creating a sympathetic understanding of the plight of Hindu women, strengthened the existing Orientalist, Christianizing agenda.

On arriving in India in 1889, Ramabai found herself and her Sharada Sadan initially accepted by Hindu social reformers of Mumbai and Pune. The later attack and the final boycott marks an end of Ramabai's writings other than reports and circular letters connected with her work, such as 'Famine Experiences' in 1897 and her letter to the 'Friends of Mukti School and Mission' in 1900. Had these eyewitness accounts of the gruesome realities of famine been heeded by her critics, she would probably have been spared further attacks, especially by Tilak who discredited her efforts by describing the rescued famine victims as 'widows caught in Ramabai's net during unprecedented opportunity of the famine years' (*Kesari*, 12 January 1904: 2*). The 'Famine' piece is noteworthy also for her autobiographical details and the second for her criticism of the hypocrisy of both the Princes of the native states and the British officials in dealing with the famine.

The small pamphlets that followed were written in the then usual missionary spirit that discredited Hinduism; together with *A Testimony* and 'The Word-Seed' (selection 12), both of which are Christian reconstructions of her life, they mark her complete transition to a Christian worldview and culture. A review of *A Testimony* in *Dnyanodaya* (19 September 1907: 299*) found the book truly remarkable, its truthfulness authenticated by the trust she received from 'Christians and non-Christians alike'. It went on, 'Had any-one else written this testimony, it would in all probability have contained exaggeration... We pray that a reading of this testimony may bring light to the non-Christians and enhance the faith of the Christians.' The second instalment of the review (26 September 1907: 308*) suggested that Panditabai should write this testimony in Marathi as well so as to assist 'the growth of the spiritual life of many people in Maharashtra'.

The Maharashtrian psyche still grapples with the dilemma of understanding, and slotting, Pandita Ramabai. The most conservative verdict is an outright condemnation of her for a betrayal of the cause of social reform and of the reformers. It was endorsed by *Kesari's* obituary which blames her overriding personal ambition and impatience which led her to succumb to the 'temptation of the missionaries' before testing 'whether or not her achievements could make an impact on the Hindu society', with the result that 'such an intelligent, determined and enterprising woman's achievements helped not the Hindu society but foreign missionary organizations'. It ends by claiming that gender-related reform in Hindu society could be achieved from within, as Karve's Widows' Home and Seva Sadan under Ramabai Ranade's guidance had shown; and that Pandita Ramabai could also have 'proved her capacity for organizational work while remaining a Hindu. But unfortunately this was not to be!' (11 April 1922: 5*).

More liberal verdicts have also bemoaned her conversion as unnecessary, and suggested that Ramabai could have derived emotional and spiritual comfort from the Prarthana Samaj with its *bhakti* tradition, as well as practical support in her reform endeavours. Others have charitably stressed the symbiotic relationship between religious belief and adherence in the pre-secular age which

necessitated her conversion. At the other end of the spectrum is the obituary of *Dnyanodaya* (13 April 1922: 117*) which detects a Christian impulse which propelled her to establish a woman's worth in an egalitarian society, and predicts (with an unfortunately unjustified faith in the verdict of history): 'If the history of Western India during the last thirty years is to be written, there would be no disagreement that Pandita Ramabai would be given a pride of place'.

But all alike have left untouched the obvious, vexed questions: Did Ramabai, as a Brahmin widow, have the same social acceptance, legitimacy and manoeuvrability (even with male support), the same 'agency' to which a Brahmin man like Karve, or the widow of a nationally revered figure like Ranade, could lay claim? Would the reformers have given her the freedom and support to exercise initiative in opening homes for rescued women, famine victims, the blind and the aged? Most of all, would her basically patriarchal male supporters have validated her vision of self-reliant women? And if the Christianity that provided the only moral and practical support in her struggle also totally alienated her from the society she sought to reform, can one adequately gauge the terrible mutual loss?

This brings us back full circle to the conflated contradictions between Brahmanical, Hindu cultural moorings and Christian belief, an insider's empathy and an outsider's critique, attempts to reform a society but only by recasting its religious base, the urge to contest and the need to be accepted, which inhabited Ramabai's personality with an increasing degree of unease. And to the fact that three-quarters of a century after her death, Maharashtrian society, having yet to produce an individual of her stature engaged in social reform on such a vast and variegated scale, still remains unwilling to remember her and unable to forget.

Meera Kosambi

NOTES

1. The term Maharashtra is used here to indicate the Marathi-speaking region which comprised parts of the Bombay Presidency, Central Provinces and Berar, and Hyderabad state.
2. Prominent among the academic writings on Ramabai are Kosambi (1988; 1992; 1995; 1998c), Burton (1995; 1998) and Glover (1995). Numerous full-length biographies of Ramabai have been written since

her death, mainly by Western and Indian Christian authors, including Macnicol (1926), Dongre and Patterson (1963), Sengupta (1970) and Adhav (1979) in English; and Tilak (1960) in Marathi. Among Ramabai's few non-Christian (and Marathi) biographers are 'Prabodhankar' Thackeray (1950) and Sathe (1975). The biographical introductions to her writings by Bodley (1977) and Shah (1977) are also useful.

The shift among historians in Maharashtra is indicated by Ramabai's earlier exclusion from the list of social reformers (Phadke 1975) to her reinstatement (Phadke 1989; Sunthakar 1993). Professor Y.D. Phadke himself attributes this shift to the year 1975 being designated as the International Year of Women and its effect on the Maharashtra state government, which commissioned both his books (personal communication). The Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture has made a significant contribution by helping the republication of *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) by the Ramabai Mukti Mission in 1967 with a grant (covering 75 per cent of the cost), publishing the *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* in 1977, reprinting the *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) in 1981, *Englandcha Pravasa* (1883; 1922) in 1988 and *United Stateschi Lokasthiti ani Pravasaavritta* (1889) in 1996.

3. See Lerner (1992) and Shepherd, *et al.* (1995) for problematizing women's history.
4. This biographical sketch is based on Kosambi (1988; 1992; 1995; 1998c), which utilize the English and Marathi biographies of Ramabai as well as her *Letters and Correspondence*.
- In my own text, current place names are used, such as Mumbai and Pune instead of Bombay and Poona; the Anglicized names are used in the translated texts.
5. The quotations marked with an asterisk are my own translations from the Marathi.
6. Anandibai Joshee's maternal grandmother was Anant Shastri Dongre's maternal cousin, as explained by Ramabai (*Indu-Prakash*, 5 August 1889: 5).
7. Tarabai Shinde, who hailed from an elite Maratha family from the Vidarbha sub-region of Maharashtra, remained an enigmatic and reclusive figure who produced only one booklet. The credit for retrieving it and reconstructing her sketchy biography goes to Dr S.G. Malshe.
8. Ramabai's 'triadic encounters' were the subject of my lectures at the University of Adelaide and Flinders University in Australia in August 1997, and at the Universities of Cincinnati and Pennsylvania in January 1998. The text of the lecture is currently being revised for publication.
9. The translation included in this volume is made from the third edition, published in 1967 (a reprint of the second edition, with a foreword and introduction by Lilian Doerksen).

10. This review has been obtained from the personal files of Dr S.G. Malshe, as the issue of the *Kesari* is missing from the paper's archives. Interestingly, an extract from *United Stateschi* . . . describing winter in America was included in a school textbook for Marathi during the mid-1940s (personal communication from Dr Pramod Kale).
11. From the archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission; some details regarding the place and date of publication are missing.

PART I



POONA

Stri Dharma Niti (translation)
(June 1882)