

## **Circling around Pandita Ramabai and the Little Wives of India**

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In 1893 the American physician, Dr. Emily Brainerd Ryder published in Melbourne, Australia *The Little Wives of India*. <sup>1</sup>[SLIDE OF COVER]

It was marked for private circulation only, but Dr. Ryder was selling this volume, comprising the public lectures on child marriage and Indian marriage law that she had been delivering in the Australian colonies from 1892. This publication manifests the entanglements of US, Australian and India women, and more broadly Western Protestant Christianity, and Indian social reformers.

In sketching the productive uncertainties and complexity of cross-cultural relationships encompassed in her activities and those of the women around the famous Indian Christian feminist Pandita Ramabai and her Mukti mission for Hindu widows and other destitute women I will refer to circles of attachment and endeavor and also draw upon Ballantyne's notion of the 'web of empire'.

Stamatov has identified, 'long-distance advocacy,' as rising from 'religious radicalization',<sup>2</sup> while Dunch sees religious missions as 'uniquely placed' for cultural exchanges, noting the 'the possibility for transnational and intercultural communications that the missionary enterprise facilitated'.<sup>3</sup> They drew together people who were historically and culturally different, who became entangled as they worked closely.

Such connections were underwritten by modern technologies of communication, telegraph, cable, the greater mobility available through steam ships, post, print and publications.

Johnston has written, Missionary texts as 'crucial to understanding cross-cultural encounters...because they illuminate the formation of a mode of

*mutual imbrication*, between white imperial subjects. White colonial subjects, and non-white colonial subjects.<sup>4</sup>

Another important circle, wound through these developments was the western women's movement and women's desire for more power, information, and better health.

Indeed Ryder herself, a young widow, graduated in 1876 from the Pennsylvania Women's Medical College, a determinedly international institution. After a decade of private practice she was appointed by the WCTU in 1888 to accompany Pandita Ramabai on her return to India from the US, with a ten day visit to Japan with Ramabai as delegate of WCTU. Ramabai carried glowing references from Frances Willard, the president of World WCTU (WWCTU), a known figure in Japan, and was received warmly in Japan.

The importance of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) in exploration of entanglements cannot be underestimated. She was globally recognizable. A rock star of later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Christianity, whose importance continues to resonate through global Christianity.

Kosambi describes her as 'an international icon of Indian Christianity'.<sup>5</sup>

Born into a Hindu family she was unusually taught Hindu scriptures by her father, learned Sanskrit and as a young woman earned the title 'Pandita'. Orphaned and then a young widow (with a daughter Manoramabai), after involvement with reform Hindu in the Brahmo Somaj, she converted to Christianity on a visit to Britain, in 1883, where she hoped to study medicine. She could not pursue this vocation but seeing the power of education, dedicated herself to improving the lot of young high-caste widows. She emphasized 'self-reliance', wanting to train the widows as teachers to 'redeem India'.<sup>6</sup>

As a high-caste Brahman, well-educated and quite outspoken in her criticism of Hindu social practices around women, marriage and widowhood, she was a

highly valued convert. She had set up a women's organization in her native Maharashtra, spoken on Women's Education at a government inquiry in 1882, and her book the *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, was published in 1887.

In 1886 on a visit to see her distant cousin, Anandabai Joshi graduate from the Pennsylvania Women's Medical College, she forged strong connections with leading US Protestant women, especially Frances Willard and Rachel Bodley, largely in WCTU and men and women in Unitarian circles. In 1887 we see the launch of the Ramabai Association based in Boston, which was dedicated to supporting her in her work to set up a home and school for High Caste widows. Ramabai addressed that meeting and many others across the US, attracting a great deal of attention and admiration for herself and her plans.

Meera Kosambi notes, Ramabai's 'international career was launched in the USA, through the help of friends like Dr Rachel Bodley and Frances Willard.'<sup>7</sup>

And that '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.'<sup>8</sup>

Ramabai travelled around, giving lectures, observing educational methods. Gathering supporters, who pledged financial support.

By end of 1889, there were 57 Ramabai circles in US and Canada with 4069 members, with a balance of \$27,000.

The Ramabai Association raised money for the institutions, which Ramabai, in the face of Hindu patriarchal opposition, established at Bombay, moving later to Poona and then to more rural Kedgaon, positioned strategically near a railway station. With a farm of 230 acres she ran a home and school for Brahman widows, later during the famine of 1896 she took in hundreds of outcast and low caste children, young boys and destitute girls and women,

orphaned or abandoned by desperate family. She certainly seems to have been operating under the slogan coined by Willard, 'Do Everything':

Meanwhile Ryder, on arriving in India seems to have been drawn away from her involvement with Ramabai into medical practice. She had many requests from Hindu families to attend their women. She was horrified by the physical condition of the young wives, aged from 8 years old. She began campaigning on their behalf, working with other women physicians based in India to raise the age of consent and then during regular vacations from her medical practice in Bombay c 1892-1898, embarking upon speaking tours about the Little Wives and Ramabai's work in Australia, NZ and across the Pacific islands. Ryder's reputation had preceded her in print, and her book *Little Wives*, later went into a number of editions in the US.

Often hosted by members of WCTU, she spoke in small centres and in cities. It was generally Protestant women who pledged to contribute money to the assist the young wives. They seem to have pledged a penny a week for 5 years. 'Little Wives of India circles' supporting Ramabai's work sprang up in her wake.

SLIDE In February 1894, the South Australian *Christian Colonist* noted that circles had been formed in 'Adelaide, Orroroo, Hawker, Petersburg, Port Augusta, Gawler, Mintaro, Gumeracha, Mount Pleasant, Millicent, Mount Gambier, Mount Barker, Woodside, Semaphore, Port Pirie, and the Burra, with a membership at present of between five and six hundred, pledged to give financial aid for five years to help carry on the work in India.'<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes her lectures on the ills of the Indian women were preceded by as a lecture-performance, with local people being dressed in Indian costumes, and presenting a sort of tableau of aspects of Indian life on stage.

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'The lectress will be assisted by forty ladies, gentlemen and children, who will all be dressed in the beautiful costumes of the people they picture, and

will give life-like representations of the various religious ceremonies, festivals, and every day occupations of the Hindus. The platform - will be brilliantly fitted up, and the lecture entertainment will be given in the most complete and elaborate manner.' *Geelong Advertiser*, 24 September 1892, p. 4

The complexity of these relationships emerge from accounts of her audience being, 'raised to the highest pitch of excitement with her recital of the barbarous marriage customs of the natives or convulsed with merriment by her stories of the many quaint and foolish superstitions of the people.' *Christian Colonist*, 31 March 1893, 8.

How can we read Ryder's performances of Indian-ness, can we see it as an exercise in racial and cultural superiority or about instruction about different cultures, what Joan Brumberg terms a 'rudimentary form of cultural anthropology'?<sup>10</sup>

Her training as a doctor saw the development of other lines of information between her and the women on Australia and NZ. She partly financed her tour by giving lectures on women's health. Thus, in 1895, the women in Kiama, heard her speak on 'How not to be ill' and 'The Human Body; Proper Food, Drink, and Clothing'.<sup>11</sup>

Ryder's message was implicitly Christian rather than strongly evangelical.

She was chiefly concerned to gather support for medical help for Indian women and for campaigns for legislative change.

As Rumi Yasutake notes, 'WCTU women strived for the more secular purpose of realizing a woman-friendly environment.'<sup>12</sup>

Ryder worked for this. She established a Bombay Ladies Association and Ramabai spoke at its inauguration.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly she supported work that Indian reformers were undertaking, mentioning her Hindu friends. She spoke of schools established by Hindus in Bombay and a women's club, and women studying medicine, teaching.<sup>14</sup>

[SLIDE] 'There are Hindu men and women whom no religious belief, no customary law could make dishonourable, unkind, or selfish, and whose education, honor, and sense of justice are equal to any in the world.'<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately she did not set up a hospital for the little wives of India, but donated the money raised to the Ramabai Association to support the work at Kedgaon.

16

SLIDE 'Australian Fund for the Legal and Medical Aid of Little Wives of India' funds reported in the Annual Reports of the American Ramabai Association.

1901 US \$4, 328.18

1902 US \$4328

1903 US \$3,920

1918 US \$2,924.33

1923 US \$2,981.83

NB These funds from Western especially US women were crucial to the survival of Mukti.<sup>17</sup>

In 1932 104 Australians were on mailing list for Mukti publications. Australian support of the Mukti mission and Ramabai continues to this day. Ryder's activities fed and promoted the intense desire many had to know about Ramabai and Mukti.

#### Visitors to and from Mukti

Tyrell has noted the importance of 'personal communication' and 'personal contacts' and publications for the development and maintenance of the WCTU and its global reach.

There was a constant stream of travel between the Mukti Mission and their supporters, in 1898, Ramabai herself visited the US and Canada again,

speaking at the Annual Meeting of the Ramabai Association, about Mukti now reformed to reflect her strong Christian mission.

Her daughter Manoramabai spoke there in 1899. Later young widows, studying in the US spoke at Annual Ramabai Association Meetings.

Thus in 1903 Nermadda an orphan who came to the home aged 9 where she became a Christian.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly she referred to the annual ritual of the Mukti widows writing to their US supporters<sup>19</sup> saying also 'I have always heard of the members of the Association ever since I went to school'.<sup>20</sup>

### Visiting Ramabai

Ramabai was famed in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. I will speak about her impact upon women in Western countries, but she also influenced Kartini in the Dutch East Indies, as already noted Japanese women in and around the WCTU were excited by her example. In South Africa, Betty Govinden has written about her grandmother, descended from Indian indentured labourers who turned to Ramabai for a Christianity in an "Eastern Cup".<sup>21</sup> Mukti was supported by people in Ceylon, Egypt and China. (MK) Missionaries taught and wrote about Ramabai, spreading her fame further, and facilitating south-south relationships.

Ramabai's institution attracted many. Women in particular wanted to know as much as they could about it and the work begin undertaken there. Feelings of pity, love, solidarity and admiration/inspiration drew many to Ramabai and Mukti.

Women from Britain, US, Australia, NZ and Sweden travelled to work for years at Mukti to assist Ramabai and Manoramabai with their work. During Ramabai's time there were 25 foreign women there.<sup>22</sup>

A.W. Stroberg, from Sweden served about 30 years, from 1906, working in the weaving area and at an outlying bungalow.

Before 1920 six Australian women worked at Mukti for long periods.

This was largely a faith mission, so each of these had a network of supporters in their home country, sending in money, parcels and goods, and reading the *Mukti Prayer Bell*, a monthly publication, issued from Mukti in which the missionaries wrote in such a way as to draw in their readers to the experience of Mukti. This was framed in a way to 'seek to draw the reader into an affective community of Christian activists.'<sup>23</sup>

[SLIDE] In 1914 the Australian Rosa M. Smith penned her 'First Impressions of Mukti'

'Mukti speaks of industry, printing, drawn-thread work, embroidery, weaving, basket-making, and others industries are seen on every side and give employment during the day to many hundreds of girls; nor is education forgotten...[many] have 'at least half a day in school'...there is no time here for the idle sitting about, gossiping or sleeping you so often see in the villages of India.'<sup>24</sup>

There was a constant stream of visitors at Mukti, as Jayawardena noted through the winter months 'Tourists were "daily at the gates" wanting to look around the school.'<sup>25</sup> MK notes 'every train was met'. p. 162.

The visitor book there has been signed by countless people, for whom a visit to Mukti was long anticipated. For many westerners visiting India, in particular Christians, for Christian missionaries, the Mission was a must-see.

One minister noted, '...[in] a list of the seven wonders of the religious world, the Mukti Mission would surely be among that number.'<sup>26</sup>

The visitor book includes the whose-who of the Protestant missionary world in late C19<sup>th</sup> and the heartfelt messages of many.

Lily F. Ambrose, a nurse at Poona Mission (PIVM) visited with an Adelaide friend, Edith Bower in 1911, the latter wrote, 'My short visit to Mukti has been a joy and an inspiration to me.'<sup>27</sup>

It was not only Christians who visited, thus in 1906 we find the signature of Rukhmabai, the woman doctor who had made history by refusing conjugal rights to the man to whom she had been married as a child. SHOW SLIDE

Katie Fell. A young Sydney graduate wrote to her mother in 1903, 'It is almost impossible to describe all we have seen – it is so wonderful. 1700 souls to support and not a penny asked for! The wheat is grown, the meal ground, the oil pressed from the seed. The saris women [wore] all of the premises [ie woven there] and everywhere there are such happy joyous faces. Ramabai herself poor thing is deaf but how she shows the power of God in her life!'<sup>28</sup>

Canadian Rachel Nalder met Ramabai in 1898 and spent years , indeed a career speaking in her support.

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I travelled a great deal to speak of this work for India's women, first throughout my own province New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island Ontario, Quebec, New York, Chicago, Indiana, California, Michigan, Ireland, New Zealand, Tasmania and Australia.

All through these years there has been a deep desire to see the work myself'.<sup>29</sup>

She finally got to Mukti in 1916.

#### A WOMEN'S ESTABLISHMENT EMPOWERING WOMEN

Women in particular found this huge institution, dominated by the large chapel, inspiring,

For these Western women, women feeling themselves 'outside of the nation state's barriers', we can remember Tyrell's point, that the WCTU and relations with organisations like Mukti furnished, 'a surrogate international community that gave women the prestige and power that they lacked at home.'<sup>30</sup>

Mukti was a 'female kingdom' from top to bottom with all the jobs 'from top to bottom' performed by women.<sup>31</sup> There were some men there but there was never any sense but that Pandita Ramabai was in charge. This was a work for women. For its time a unique space which brought together Indian and other women to serve God, and care for poor women and girls. Here they could see a sisterhood in action.

Furthermore, while Indian women were often represented as victims, Pandita Ramabai was a great agent, leading, directing foreign women. The women were printers, entrepreneurs etc Occupations from which they were largely excluded in US, Australia etc

#### SLIDES OF MUKTI

Such treatment accords her great importance, as Lucy Guinness reported, 'An atmosphere of quiet power surrounds her.'<sup>32</sup>

NZ graduate, Winifred Griffiths first went to Mukti in 1907, with the American, Agnes Hill, first National secretary of YWCA of India, Burmah and Ceylon. Griffiths appeal to her NZ supporters was expressive of the productive uncertainties and the range and complexity of cross-cultural relationships.

#### FINAL SLIDE

'PR and her family of 1500. If you have not read of her life you ought to do so. She is indeed a wonderful woman and to see her is to love her. She is so simple and humble, and she is certainly one of the most learned women living today... We less learned people love her for her great faith - the faith of a little child... One comes away from her feeling one has been with Christ. She is his channel and one praises God for it.'<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Certainly in the circles around Ramabai, Mukti, and Ryder, the idea of Christian universalism was crucial, so too was the reach of the WCTU and the notion of the unity of womanhood, of sisterhood. Here was the notion of Oneness in Christ and the desire for Indian women to enjoy better lives.

Whether we might think of the Western women who flocked to Mukti, who felt emotionally bound to Mukti and the Mukti women who wrote to these supporters, who spoke at the Ramabai meetings, who toured US and Australia as cosmopolitan, these actors were able to move in different cultural spaces, between India and various Western settings. Increasingly they understood the cultural ways of other societies.

Western women's feelings towards the child wives and widows were at once sisterly and egalitarian and also hierarchical and racialised.

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Manjapra has written, 'Entanglements occur when groups, alien from each other in many other ways, begin to need each other like crowbars or like shovels to break apart or to dig up problems of the most pressing concern for themselves. In other words, entanglements are always political—they have more to do with the realm of necessity and power than with the realm of freedom. And because they are political, they are also bound by historical conditions.'<sup>34</sup>

Kumari Jayawardena notes says she could not call on Hindus nor on British officialdom to bring changes for women's position.<sup>35</sup>

NB Check all Kosambi Jayawardena and MPB quotes, which may be from different books.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Brainerd Ryder, *The Little Wives of India*, Melbourne : Varley Bros., Printers, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Stamatov, Peter, 'Activist Religion, Empire, and the Emergence of Modern Long-Distance Advocacy Networks' *American Sociological Review* v. 75 (4) p. 621.

<sup>3</sup> Dunch, Ryan. "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity", *History and Theory* 41:3 (2002) 310-25.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire 1800-1860*. London, CUP, 2003, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Meera Kosambi *Pandita Ramabai Through her own words*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Kumari Jayawardena 'Going for the Jugular of Hindu Patriarchy: American Women Fundraisers for Ramabai' in Vicki L Ruiz, and Ellen Carol DuBois (eds) *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader on US Women's History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed NY and London, Routledge, 2000, p. 19. ??

<sup>7</sup> Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai Through her own words selected works*, New Delhi, OUP, 2000. p.21. see also Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai : life and landmark writings* Oxford, Routledge, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Meera Kosambi *Pandita Ramabai Through her own words selected works*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Christian Colonist*, (Adelaide) 9<sup>th</sup> Feb 1894 p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Joan Brumberg quoted by Ian Tyrell in *Woman's World* p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> *Shoalhaven News and South Coast Districts Advertiser*, 6 July 1895, 4. Also *Evening Star*, (NZ) 23 April, 1896, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Rumi Yasutake, 'Transnational women's activism: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Japan and beyond, 1858-1920' Ph.D dissertation UCLA, p.78.

<sup>13</sup> 'Ladies Association Bombay', *The Dawn*, 5 December 1889, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> *Evening Journal* (Adelaide) 19 April 1893 p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ryder *Little Wives*, p.115.

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- <sup>16</sup> See for example financial reports of 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting American Ramabai Association Boston 1903 pp. 6-7.
- <sup>17</sup> Mark Laing, 'Pounds, Dollars and Rupees: Pandita Ramabais's Funding of Mission', in , in Roger Hedlund, Sebastian Kim and Rajkumar Boaz Johnson (eds) *Indian & Christian: The Life and Legacy of Pandita Ramabai*, Chennai, MIIS/CMS/SPCK, 2011. pp. 256-278.
- <sup>18</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting American Ramabai Association 1903 pp, 40-45.
- <sup>19</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting American Ramabai Association 1903 p, 40.
- <sup>20</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting American Ramabai Association 1903 p, 45.
- <sup>21</sup> Betty Govinden, "'Spelling out the Fragments of a Broken Geography" Claiming Pandita Ramabai in an Indian Diasporic Location in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century', in Roger Hedlund, Sebastian Kim and Rajkumar Boaz Johnson (eds) *Indian & Christian: The Life and Legacy of Pandita Ramabai*, Chennai, MIIS/CMS/SPCK, 2011. p. 120.
- <sup>22</sup> Meera Kosambi *Pandita Ramabai Through her own words selected works* p 162??
- <sup>23</sup> Jane Haggis, Margaret Allen, 'Imperial Emotions: Affective communities of Mission in British Protestant Women's Missionary Publications c1880-1920', *Journal of Social History*, Spring 2008, p.694.
- <sup>24</sup> Rosa M. Smith, 'Impressions of Mukti', *Mukti Prayer Bell*, April 1914 pp. 3-5.
- <sup>25</sup> Jayawardena??
- <sup>26</sup> Rev T. B. Fischer, *A Month in India* 1914, p. 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Mukti visitors book, 20 Dec 1911.
- <sup>28</sup> Mitchell Library MSS 1114 ADD 2032.3.3 Wood Family papers.
- <sup>29</sup> *MPB* Feb 1916, p. 4., Nalder's piece in *The Latter Rain Evangel*, 1908 p. 7-12, manifests the intense emotion of the Revival period. Ie 'Miracles of Salavation, Healing, Provision and Protection, God's Wonderful Work through Pandita Ramabai.'
- <sup>30</sup> Ian Tyrell, 'Women and Temperance in International Perspective: The World's WCTU, 1880s-1920s' in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History* ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room, University of California Press, 1991, p. 234 {pp. 217- 240}.
- <sup>31</sup> Meera Kosambi *Pandita Ramabai Through her own words*, p. 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Lucy E. Guinness *Across India at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, London, Religious Tract Society ,1898, p. 86.
- <sup>33</sup> MSUW, No 256 Griffiths NZ settler 23 May 1910.
- <sup>34</sup> Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement* p. 6.
- <sup>35</sup> Jayawardena article. p. 29.