

Negotiating Identity in Colonial India: The Case of Ramabai Mary Dongre Medhavi

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Abstract

This paper will focus on Pandita Ramabai's attempt to question and expose the caste-race interlinkage prevalent in colonial India. Like her contemporaries, Ramabai too does seem to have believed that caste was a distinguishing feature of Indian society. Nevertheless, she apparently rejected the idea that it was a rigid and unchanging feature of Hinduism.

Introduction

In their article "Interrogating Caste and Race in South Asia", Gita Dharampal-Frick and Katja Götzen (2011) draw attention to the entangled, colonial history of caste and race. The "ideological inter-linkage" of these concepts, they claim, continues to dominate over relevant debates till today (Dharampal-Frick & Götzen 2011: 193). This article will use the example of Ramabai Mary Dongre Medhavi (1858–1922) to reflect upon this interlinkage. The article is divided into four parts. After a brief biographical sketch (section 2), section 3 traces how the interlinkage alluded to above impinges upon this Brahmin widow's and Christian convert's relationship with two of her Christian friends in England. Even a brief analysis of this relationship offered within the scope of this paper seems to suggest that Dharampal-Frick and Götzen are right in stating that "'caste' as a hermeneutical phenomenon has to a certain extent been racialized" (Dharampal-Frick & Götzen 2011: 194).

The trajectory of caste as we know it today can be traced to its colonial history. It was projected as an exact, scientific conceptual category, which could capture the supposed essence of Indian social reality. Refracted through the touchstone of modern science (read: the racialised discipline of anthropometry), this attempt at "social engineering" (Dharampal-Frick & Götzen 2011: 203), ironically, stultified the very social setup it sought to understand. Caste became *the* essential marker of a rigid and backward Indian social life. Having internalised this category, many Indian social actors interpreted it as the main distinguishing feature of their own society, which set it apart from contemporaneous

societies in Europe. As we will see in section four, however, some public personalities explicitly rejected the tacit Othering which ensued from such an interlinkage. The sources analysed in this section suggest that Pandita Ramabai was not wholly “entangled [...] in the net of [this] colonialist rhetoric” (Dharampal-Frick & Götzen 2011: 204). Her resistance to colonial and patriarchal hegemony was based on questioning this interlinkage to some degree.

From Exile to Becoming a Pandita and Back

Ramabai Mary Dongre Medhavi, or as she is most famously known Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, was born in 1858 to self-exiled parents. Her father as she narrates (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 4), hoped to carry on his educational work and “engage in devotion to the gods in a quiet place”. Soon, this Sanskrit scholar faced the ire of his Madhava Vaishnava sect because he chose to teach his child-wife Sanskrit (Ramabai 1977: 15–21). To stave off excommunication from the community, the father engaged with the pandits in a protracted debate to demonstrate that female learning was not always condoned by the scriptures. Ramabai was born in this ashram in Gangamul (today in Karnataka); her guru was her mother, who made her learn Sanskrit and memorise dictionaries, commentaries, classical texts. But the family did not earn enough to maintain this place of learning. They began wandering through colonial India as public narrators of the *puranas*, i.e., *puranikas*. The money they procured through this activity ran out. The parents suggested that the family follow certain religious rites to improve their financial condition; but as Ramabai crisply notes, “the gods did not help us” (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 9). Soon, the so-called ‘Great Famine’ of 1876–1878, which broke out in the Madras Presidency claimed the lives of her parents and older sister; only she and her older brother survived. With him, she continued to travel through India. In 3 years, she narrates, they covered several thousand miles by foot.¹ One of these stations was Kolkata, which they reached in 1878. The local Sanskrit scholars and pandits, being impressed by her learning, conferred the title ‘Pandita’ and ‘Saraswati’ (goddess of learning) on her. This title does not seem to have completely reconciled her with the Pandit community; she mistrusted it given the treatment meted out to her parents.

Kolkata was an exotic place for the siblings. She narrates her shock at seeing “some of the Brahmins” “eat food with the British” (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 11). Her year in Kolkata was an eye-opener in another regard too: Some of the

¹ Her *Testimony* (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 10) claims that they walked 4000 miles, while in her *Englandcha Pravas* she records 2000 miles (Kosambi 2016: 105). This latter distance is corroborated by a sister of the Community of St. Mary The Virgin in Wantage, England (Ramabai 1977: 17).

siblings' acquaintances, who were Brahmin priests, requested Ramabai to lecture to the women in Purdah on the "duties of women according to the Shastras" (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 11). For her preparation, Ramabai began reading the *Dharmasastras* and other relevant material on law. For the first time she was confronted by textual material of the Hindu tradition, which in her view unequivocally attributed an inferior status to women and to other "lower" castes. In addition, these texts denied an equal access of these societal groups to spiritual liberation.² In stark contrast to the ethos of gender equality she had imbibed from her father, the texts, furthermore, did not allow her to make sense of her experience as a woman. "I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned: I became quite dissatisfied with myself. I wanted something more than the *Shastras* could give me,³ but I did not know what it was" (Ramabai 1946 [1907]: 14–15).

While in Kolkata, the siblings were invited by the Brahmo Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) to his house too. Ramabai narrates how Sen initiated her study of the Vedas and Upanishads by presenting her, a female, with a copy of one of the Vedas. While she initially worried that she could be flouting the rules of the Hindu religion if she as a female were to read the Veda, Ramabai soon overcame this worry. Her dissatisfaction with the Hindu religion did not abate after studying it and other relevant texts. Meanwhile, upon the sudden death of her brother, Ramabai married one of brother's good friends in Kolkata, Bipin Behari Das Medhavi; he died within two years of their civil marriage. While her marriage to this non-Brahmin earned the wrath of the pandits, some male Indian reformers sought to promote this young widow with a baby child (cf. Chakravarti 2000: 308). However, principal differences between her and the reformers became apparent soon. One possible cause of this rift was her belief that their efforts at uplifting Indian women were superficial; they were incapable of effectuating systemic changes. These men were, in her eyes, complicit in the very structures they purported to overcome. She decided to study medicine so that her work as a female doctor could initiate lasting, systemic changes. For

² Ramabai (1946[1907]: 25) makes a distinction between the promise (even if vague) made by Hindu priests who claim that females and other castes can in principle achieve spiritual liberation and the texts, which in her reading, do not allow for this liberation. If females were to read the relevant literature, "we [would] find that there is nothing – no, nothing whatever, for us".

³ At least at this point in time, Ramabai seems to have believed that religion could not simply be a human artefact. While she seems to have largely agreed with the Brahmo religion, she also laments that "it was not a very definite one. For it is nothing but what a man makes for himself" (Ramabai 1946[1907]: 17).

this purpose, Ramabai took English lessons from an English missionary belonging to the Community of St. Mary The Virgin after her relocation to Pune. She was quickly invited by the mission to Wantage, England. Ramabai agreed to go on the condition that she was not forced to convert. Her passage to England in 1883 was covered by the royalties of her book *Stri Dharma Niti* written in 1882 in Marathi.⁴ She and her daughter Manorama were baptised soon after their arrival. However, the mission proved to be too narrow for her too. She thought of herself both as a Hindu and as a Christian; the mission's sisters imposed a conformist Anglican faith upon her. From there on, she sailed to the United States in 1886; ostensibly to attend the graduation ceremony of a female member of her extended family.⁵ Soon after reaching the USA, she began a series of lectures on the status of women in India. This series was published as *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in 1887. In the same year, the Ramabai Association was founded in Boston in December. Its Board members pledged to secure funds over 10 years for a secular girls' school in India. In some ways, this association complemented the 'Arya Mahila Samaj', which she had already set up in Pune in 1882 for the upliftment of women (Kosambi 2016: 28). After more than two years in the States, Ramabai returned to India (via Japan and Hong Kong) as a bigger public personality, albeit with a "cleft social status" (Kosambi 2016: 35). She was soon to break away from the largely Brahmin-dominated Hindu public in Maharashtra too. This time, the cause of controversy was an epiphany, which led some of her charges in her school to convert to Christianity too, on their own will as she stressed. The school's Board members, both in America and India, objected.⁶ Despite these differences, she had 2000 female students enrolled in her schools in Kedgaon by 1900 (now Maharashtra). She died in 1922, a few months after her daughter's death.

Ramabai's Attempt at Making Sense of Freedom in Anglican Christianity

During her years in England, Ramabai spent 2 years (1884–1886) studying at the Cheltenham Ladies College. The principal of this college, the suffragist Dorothea Beale (1831–1906), was entrusted by the sisters of the Wantage mission, especially Sister Geraldine, to look after Ramabai. Their correspondence (i.e., between Ramabai and these women as also their letters to each other)

⁴ The title literally means the "morals of women" (for excerpts see Kosambi 2016: 38–79). Kosambi critiques Ramabai's tone of a "surrogate male reformer" in this text (Kosambi 2016: 30).

⁵ Anandibai Joshi (1865–1887) graduated from the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia (USA).

⁶ For her next project, educating widows and stray girl children from all castes, she had to procure funds from Australia.

reveals how both Geraldine and Beale try to negotiate a tight, and safe, space for their protégé Ramabai during her stay in England. They perceived themselves as being her close friends (Beale) and allies (Beale and Geraldine). And yet, she was projected by both, albeit in varying degrees, as a “native”, a person who on account of her Hindu background principally differed from them (cf. Ramabai 1977: 78).

Although both Geraldine and Beale seem to have believed that Ramabai’s Hindu identity hindered her from wholly accepting Christian truth, there were subtle differences in the manner in which these women perceived Ramabai, and vice-versa. At least in the analysed correspondence with Ramabai, Geraldine tends to foreground the cultural superiority of Britain as compared to the Hindu background of this Indian female convert. Beale, on the other hand, seems to take pains to understand Ramabai on the latter’s own terms. The differences in their manner of communication are not lost on Ramabai, who points out to Beale that their conversation is based on another footing.⁷

In a letter to Beale in summer 1885, Ramabai suggests that the sisters in Wantage (like Geraldine) having already found truth are not open to questioning it. As a result, they regard Ramabai’s questioning of the same as being “sinful”. For Ramabai, Beale is, in sharp contrast, a “fellow-labourer” in truth; she is someone, who like herself is still searching for it. Precisely on account of this observed commonality, Ramabai requested Beale to follow one rule in argumentation: “I should at the same time expect you or any other with whom I may argue to be generously prepared to acknowledge the truth if it be proved on my side” (Ramabai 1977: 135). Nevertheless, their own social positionality in colonial England seems to have influenced this relationship too (see below).

One point of contention⁸ between Geraldine and Ramabai seems to have been the latter’s view that her new faith proclaimed, and allowed her to make use of, pure liberty. No ecclesial authority could infringe upon – or restrict – this liberty. Only an individual’s conscience was binding. As a consequence, Ramabai be-

⁷ Ramabai is more candid in her conversation with Beale. In her letters to the latter, she often draws on Hindu philosophical resources (cf. Ramabai 1977: 128, 136) and does not shy away from expressing her distaste of colonial politics, especially when it comes to the status of women. Drawing Beale’s attention to the hypocritical practices of the colonial powers in India, she notes the discrepancy between its promise of female education and its permission of “native customs”, which cement gender differences. The “English Government comes to break her [an educated female’s] spirit allowing its law to become an instrument for riveting her chains” (Ramabai 1977: 178; letter dated 22 May 1887). From Ramabai’s perspective, this exchange seems to be more symmetrical than the one with Geraldine.

⁸ Some other differences between them touched upon the Anglican dogma, the miraculous birth and divinity of Christ as also on how best to educate Ramabai’s daughter.

lieved that only divine guidance would show her the way to realise this freedom. In July 1884, she wrote to Geraldine “I cannot do a single thing without knowing what I am to do. [...] I am always surprised when I see or hear people troubling themselves to decide my future, when my Lord is All Powerful and knows best to do with me whatever he likes” (Ramabai 1977: 25). Geraldine’s letters to Ramabai (as well as to other correspondents) are rife with instructions on how this fresh Hindu convert should behave appropriately (see below). Ramabai, she wrote to a bishop, should not act independently, but “must defer her judgement to those in authority” (Ramabai 1977: 29; letter undated).

Although Beale shared Geraldine’s views that Ramabai could be a good conduit between Indian women and the church,⁹ she was more measured in judging Ramabai’s blatant disregard for established ways of conducting oneself. Beale painstakingly pointed out to Geraldine in her letter of 22 April 1885 that this convert from India must “study Christianity as a philosophy. She cannot receive it merely as an historical revelation” (Ramabai 1977: 32). In addition, Beale went on to make arrangements at the college so that Ramabai could teach female students Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

Matters came to a head, however, when an English male student requested to be instructed by Ramabai. The-then Bishops of Lahore and Bombay unanimously objected to this proposition. Geraldine chose to follow their instructions. Ramabai was warned that if she were to teach male students in England, this would affect, or weaken, her influence on Indian men after her return, since very few women taught in public institutions in India.¹⁰ Geraldine expected Ramabai to “accept the authority of those over her in the Church”, as she wrote to Beale on 6 May 1885 (Ramabai 1977: 47). In her response penned on 8 May 1885, Beale, however, attempted to make a case for her. Ramabai, she reasoned, was already used to throwing down “pernicious caste restrictions and those barriers which wrongly separate men and women” in her life in India. It was understandable that she was now not willing to accept the decision of the

⁹ In a letter to Geraldine in August 1884, she states that Ramabai’s “main thought of her life” is “helping her countrywomen to lead a higher life, and preparing them to receive the truth, and indirectly helping them by showing us better how to understand and help them” (Ramabai: 1977: 27).

¹⁰ The correspondence between Geraldine, Beale and the bishops reveals another perspective. As Rev. Dr. Mylne, the Bishop of Bombay, stated in his letter of 21 May 1884 to Beale: “A native Christian (Anglicised) is ruined for life as far as future usefulness is concerned. I consider that if Ramabai begins to lecture in this country, the hope of doing good work among her countrywomen is at an end. [...] Publicity of that kind is fatal to them” (Ramabai 1977: 39). For her part, Ramabai dismisses the argument offered to her as being “simply absurd” and writes to Beale on 8 May 1885 that she feels “personally insult[ed]” by the sister (Ramabai 1977: 124).

Anglican Church authorities, who objected to her teaching “mixed assemblies” in England (Ramabai 1977: 49). In her letter to Geraldine on the same day, Ramabai interpreted the sister’s unrelenting stance on this matter as a breach of trust and a direct interference with her “personal liberty” (Ramabai 1977: 50).

Given Geraldine’s belief that faith had to guide reason, she failed to be convinced by Ramabai’s persistent appeal. In addition, she reminded Ramabai on 10 May 1885 that a convert (and possibly colonial subject too) like her could hardly understand the “true sense” of the term ‘liberty’. Enclosing a passage from Ruskin, “one of the wisest and most literate of England’s people on the subject,” Geraldine instructed Ramabai to ponder about it and wrote: “You will see in its corrupted sense it means licence, lawlessness and on the other hand, true liberty means obedience to law” (Ramabai 1977: 53).¹¹ This letter to Ramabai was backed up by another one to Beale written on the same day in which the sister reiterated that Ramabai “being a convert and a foreigner and one who has everything to learn both as regards Faith and as regards the manners and customs of English people”, needs “careful guarding” (Ramabai 1977: 54).¹²

In this heated exchange between them, Geraldine, furthermore, sought to expose Ramabai’s “caste prejudices”. She attributed Ramabai’s strict vegetarian practices (like not eating pudding made of eggs) as “clings to caste prejudices which ought to have been thrown to the winds” when Ramabai embraced Christianity. This “fostering of pride”, she adds in her letter of 5 October 1885, “has held you back from accepting the full teaching of the Gospel” (Ramabai 1977: 101).¹³ Ramabai is quick to respond to this charge. Noting the irony of how the sister uses pies and puddings among other material goods to trace

¹¹ Geraldine’s reproach also incorporated a direct warning to the person Ramabai: “The most unhappy person of my acquaintance, and one who has made shipwreck of her life is one who in independent circumstances and without family ties can do pretty much as she pleases. She made fair promise of good at the outset of her career, but in consequence of having no restrictions is unprofitable to the world” (Ramabai 1977: 53).

¹² Ramabai’s response of 12 May 1885 indicates that she seems to have been relatively undaunted by the sister’s instruction in the true meaning of liberty. “It seems to me that you are advising me under the WE to accept always the will of those who have authority etc. This however I cannot accept. I have a conscience, and mind and a judgement of my own, I must think and do everything which GOD has given me the power of doing. [...] If it pleases you to call my word liberty as lawlessness you may do so, but as far as I know myself, I am not lawless. [...] I have just with great efforts freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything which comes from the priests as authorised command of the Most High” (Ramabai 1977: 59).

¹³ Geraldine’s compilation of Ramabai’s correspondence begins with some unflattering comments on Ramabai’s “keen delight in intellectual fencing” as also her pride and vanity (Ramabai 1977: 4).

Ramabai's pride, she retorts: "I confess I am not free from all my caste prejudices, as you are pleased to call them. I like to be called a Hindoo, for I am one, and also keep all the customs of my forefathers as far as I can. How would you an Englishwoman like being called [...] proud and prejudiced if she were to go and live among the Hindoos for a time but did not think it necessary to alter her customs when they were not hurtful or necessary to her neighbours?" (Ramabai 1977: 109; letter dated 15 October 1885)

Again, Beale's reaction was more measured than Geraldine's. In fact, she reminded the sister on 16 June 1885 that Ramabai was "teachable" (Ramabai 1977: 63). All three women were, after all, united in their love of the same god and by the fact that he guided them. In her letter to Beale in January 1886, the sister worried that Ramabai's understanding of Christianity, which the latter wanted to transport back to India, had "no claim to the name of Christianity" (Ramabai 1977: 114). In this letter, Geraldine also traced one root of Ramabai's problems: her being a Hindu. "I should think at one time she was an exception to the generality of the Hindoos; truthfulness was one of the traits of character in which she was an exception to the generality of her countrywomen; but she has both, in word and in letter, proved that she can no longer be accredited with this virtue and her great lack of this makes one feel that there is great difficulty in the way of true conversion" (Ramabai 1977: 115). Nevertheless, Ramabai's "noble" character, the sister hoped, would help her find her way to truth.¹⁴

Beale, as we see, endeavours to be judicial in her dealings with the Indian female convert Ramabai. However, her correspondence with the bishops reveals another aspect: Conceding to the Bishop of Bombay that Ramabai "may of course be spoiled by her stay in England" (Ramabai: 1977: 41), she draws the bishops attention to one decided advantage: Ramabai, she reasons, offers a good opportunity to engage with the "native mind" in England (cf. footnote 9). For this reason, she encouraged Ramabai's teaching activities at the Cheltenham Ladies College, thus enabling college students to engage with "native language, religion, philosophy", rather than picking up "the language only from

¹⁴ In her own ruminations on Ramabai, the sister traced Ramabai's behaviour to the latter's social positionality. For one, her Hindu religion lacked notions of the societal which enabled virtues in Christianity like "justice, strength, courage, truth, loyalty etc." (Ramabai 1977: 404). For another, the colonial subject Ramabai was wont to suppress bitterness, which "must out at times". The sister related this bitterness to the attitude of the missionaries who are "hateful to a people because they are their conquerors" (Ramabai 1977: 405). As Kosambi rightly observes: "Geraldine had been conditioned to believe implicitly in the racial, cultural and religious superiority of Britain over India. But Ramabai refused to adhere to the inferior stereotype provided for her" (Kosambi 2016: 88).

the talk of the Ayahs” (Ramabai 1977: 41; letter to the Bishop of Bombay, 22 May 1885). Her opportunistic tendency in her dealings with Ramabai is further corroborated in her correspondence with Reverend Canon William Butler.¹⁵ In the summer of 1885 she, expressed her “anxiety” to him about Ramabai’s behaviour and underscored that she was “grieved” by the tone of Ramabai’s letter to the Reverend (Ramabai 1977: 77–78). However, she warned him that their impatience with Ramabai could propel her to return to the Brahmo Samaj. This appraisal of the situation led her to recommend: “[O]ne has first to *learn* her thoughts, and then apply *argumentum ad hominem*” (Ramabai 1977: 78). Such points of friction, especially with the ecclesial authorities, prompted Ramabai to leave England and sail to America.

Positioning One’s Self: Ramabai in North America

Ramabai seems to be aware of the “racial and ethnocentric Othering of Indians” (Kosambi 2016: 2), which played out in her exchanges with the mission authorities in England.¹⁶ The warm reception she received during her talks in North America allowed her to free herself from the role of a “native” and present herself more fully as an Indian.¹⁷ *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1888) gives us an impression of what must have transpired in these talks. In general, this book can be read as a concerted effort at mapping out her own identity as an Indian, Brahmin, Christian female. Let us analyse it now.

In her *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai seems to have been very aware of her own positioning. She is presented to her American audience as the Pandita, a verified source of knowledge about Hinduism and India, and a female at that. Presumably, she must have realised that India was a distant, and wholly

¹⁵ Reverend Canon William Butler was the founder of the Community of St. Mary The Virgin. He officiated over Ramabai’s conversion and was opposed to Ramabai’s teaching too for the reasons espoused by the bishops mentioned above.

¹⁶ She had already experienced the Othering of male reformers in India, prior to her arrival in England. After her return to India, the Christian community too was highly skeptical of her selective understanding of Christianity, which one Indian Christian priest called a “squeezed-out residue of religion” (Kosambi 2016: 185).

¹⁷ Upon her arrival in England, Ramabai approached Sir Bartle Frere, former governor of the Bombay Presidency despite her rudimentary English skills then. She justified this move by claiming that she had a “right” to his friendship given that he had spent more than half of his life in her country. Colonial officials like him, she wrote, were morally responsible for the plight of Indian women and added: “You have conferred various boons on Hindoostan and in return she has made your country wealthier. You ought not to treat us with contumely. The help that we ask from you ought not to be considered by you as a mere gift. We take you for our brothers and all assistance from you as a matter of right” (Ramabai 2000 [1883]: 111–112).

alien, place for her American audience; she could take on the role of a conduit to open up a window for them on this distant land. Reading these lectures today, one is struck by the stark contrast between her nuanced portrayal of the life of an average female in India and the blunt, even bitter, appraisal of Hinduism, or rather of some of its customs.

Interestingly, caste is used as a significant marker in her depiction of Hinduism. Nevertheless, she carefully points out how customs in this religion “take the form of religion” when they are “old enough” (Ramabai 1888: 5). Very subtly, the attention of the audience is, thus, directed towards a religion which differs from Christianity. Hinduism, she tells her American audience, is a faith in which “a man is liable to be born eight million four hundred thousand times” before he can be born a Brahmin (Ramabai 1888: 3). Furthermore, it is an all-pervasive religion. “There is not an act which is not performed religiously by them, a humorous author has said, with some truth that ‘the Hindus even sin religiously’” (Ramabai 1888: 4). She then proceeds to distinguish between “canonical writings” and such customs; as also the possible disconnect between the two.

Drawing on the custom of not accepting food cooked by someone of an “inferior” caste, she notes how textual evidence for this prohibition may be scanty; in fact, it may even contradict this custom (Ramabai 1888: 5). She also stresses that the social institution of caste, “the tyrant”, had pervaded Islam and Christianity in India too. Caste, she lectures, was initially based on individual merit; however, after being adopted as a custom, it became inflexible and “assumed formidable proportions” (Ramabai 1888: 7). An “outgrowth of social order, [caste] has now become the first great article of the Hindu creed all over India” (Ramabai 1888: 9).

Ramabai, as we see, follows the general trope in marking out caste as a central feature of Hinduism, while simultaneously distancing herself from it. She draws attention to its contingent development within Hinduism, as well as to its prevalence in other Indian religions like Christianity and Islam. In one stroke, thus, caste is rendered a problematic, but widespread, custom in the whole of colonial India. It is not a problem specific to Hinduism.

In order to internationalise the problems faced by Indian women, Ramabai is keen to use the stage afforded to her by her North-American audience. Consequently, she does not explicitly break away from the general line of reasoning about caste. However, a close reading of the text illustrates her tight rope-walking between a nuanced description of her home in India and contemporary America.

Talking about marriage, for example, she draws attention to the practice of *svayamvara*, in which a female Hindu had the liberty to choose her own spouse

and even propose to him before he did, a custom which, in her reckoning, probably shocked her audience's sensibilities, both of men and women (Ramabai 1888: 30). She analyses how *svayamvara*, although present in the Indian imagination, had given away to the arranged marriage system in which "the yoke [was] put on her neck forever!" (Ramabai 1888: 43) Not all marriages in India, she stresses, are unhappy: "In spite, however, of all these drawbacks, there is in India many a happy and loving couple that would be an honor to any nation. Where the conjugal relation is brightened by mutual love, the happy wife has nothing to complain of except the absence of freedom of thought and action; but since wives have never from the beginning known what freedom is, they are generally well content to remain in bondage" (Ramabai 1888: 48).

But why should one strive for this freedom in the first place? Ramabai's answer is clear: Reasons for "keeping women in ignorance and dependence" [...] have been put to the fiery proof of science and found wanting" (Ramabai 1888: 94). And why should one heed science in this respect? Ramabai seems to lean on science to warn about the larger societal impact of female degradation. Society as a whole, she asserts, stands to suffer when large sections of the population are kept in ignorance and bondage "crushed under the weight of social prejudices and superstition, and their minds starved from absolute lack of literary food and of opportunity to observe the world" (Ramabai 1888: 96).¹⁸

Proceeding thus, Ramabai is able to deliver a nuanced sketch of life in India, while simultaneously delineating some common interests with her North-American audience (like faith in science). Against this background, she then launches her main argument. She vividly depicts the disadvantages which ensue for Indian women due to the male solidarity she sees developing between English colonial officials and Indian husbands. Wryly she notes how British rule allowed Hindu husbands to lawfully claim their right to their wives as "marital property" by appealing to Hindu custom (Ramabai 1888: 62). "We cannot blame the English government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling the agreement made with the male population of India. How very true are the words of the Saviour 'Ye cannot save God and Mammon'. Should England serve God by helping a helpless woman against the powers and principalities of ancient institutions, Mammon should surely be displeased and British profit and rule in India might be endangered thereby. Let us wish it success, no matter if that success be achieved at the sacrifice of the rights and the comfort of over one hundred million women" (Ramabai 1888: 67–68). Being "slavery-loving creatures" themselves, Indian women beget sons "who desire to

¹⁸ In her *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) too, she urges Indian women to become independent and learn to develop a sense of community (Kosambi 2016: 40–41).

depend upon some other nation, and not upon themselves” (Ramabai 1888: 98). The “Hindu nation,” she anticipates, will “die a miserable and prolonged death if timely remedy is not taken to them” (Ramabai 1888: 98).

With broad strokes, Ramabai is able to depict Indian women as human beings, who, in general, still have to learn the vocabulary of freedom. But the socio-political situation in contemporary India was not conducive to this learning. Colonial officials and/or Indian husbands directly profited from female oppression. They simply did not have a motivation to change the status quo. Ramabai appeals to Americans as citizens of this “highly-favored land” to redeem their “most sacred” duty to humanity (Ramabai 1888: 117). Regardless of “nation, caste or creed”, they should do their utmost best to help establish education institutions in India, for women (Ramabai 1888: 119).

Nonetheless, while Ramabai promises that these institutions will aim for the “combined advantage of Eastern and Western civilization and education” and hopes to enlist the help of her “Western sisters” in this regard, her educational plan only foresees a limited role for the latter (Ramabai 1888: 114, 101). Why? Her answer is unequivocal: “All experience in the past history of mankind has shown that efforts at the elevation of a nation must come from within and work outward to be effectual” (Ramabai 1888: 106). She places the burden of elevating the Indian women on the shoulders of Brahmin women since these, despite a prolonged generational disuse of intelligence, still possess – to some extent – the cognitive powers to observe and understand why their fathers value(d) knowledge (Ramabai 1888: 108). This is why she calls upon Americans to help women in India in the name of their, as she calls it, “sacred responsibilities as workers in the cause of humanity, and, above all, in the most holy name of God” (Ramabai 1888: 119).

To recapitulate: Ramabai lived in a period of history in which the race-caste interlinkage was relatively common. However, her writings, work and life indicate that, unlike Indian male reformers of this period, she did not accept the tacit Othering of Indian women on culturalist grounds, which ensued from this interlinkage. Rather, she deftly deployed the spaces given to her as a public personality to expose and question it. She used these spaces, furthermore, to fight male and colonialist hegemony, and reclaim her own agency. As Uma Chakravarti (2000: 308) aptly observes: The so-called progressive groups she engaged with in India and abroad “set an agenda for her in relation to uplifting other women but did not conceive of a situation in which Ramabai could go beyond it according to her own understanding”.

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