


*Women's Cultural Agency in British India:
Challenging Indian Culture with Female Education*

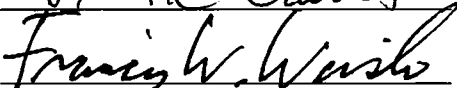
By
Joy Evans

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On the basis of this thesis and of
the written and oral examinations
taken by the candidate on

4/13/01 and on 5/3/01
that the candidate be awarded
High Honors in History:



Kate Crawford


Francis W. Warrick

In Honor
of
Two Women

who have assisted in the
construction and deconstruction
of my cultural perspective:

Mommie and Michelle

*Without your love, inspiration, and encouragement
this thesis would not exist.*

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Chapter 1

Women, Culture, and Women's Cultural Agency

During the second half of the nineteenth century, female social reformers began to focus on Indian culture and consequently Indian women. Two women's voices were heard internationally when they published their reflections on the low status of women in Indian society and the need for Indian women's education. Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai left clear historical records of the cultural agency that both British and Indian women were engaged in during the Indian colonial encounter.

Women's cultural agency is part of a complex process in which women engage in activities that are intended to change culture, while concurrently their actions are affected by culture. Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai publicly demonstrated their cultural agency by addressing the issues of Indian women in a pro-active manner through their advocacy for female education. Embedded within the two social reformers' writings was a new ideal for Indian womanhood and a vision for social change.

Both Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai believed that if Indian women could be changed by education, the entire culture of India could change, as well. As the social reformers set standards for female education, they were establishing values, which they believed would not only benefit Indian women but also were fundamentally essential for the progress of India's culture. Thus, Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai saw female education as the key to elevating all of Indian society.

Yet, education was not simply a goal for social progress. Instead, education was the very boundary of Indian and English cultures where ideals about Indian women could be shaped. According to their writings, through female education other cultural practices

could be altered which defined Indian womanhood. It became imperative to both social reformers that education be established as a feminine quality.

Thus, both social reformers challenged India's cultural construction of womanhood or gender.¹ It is important to recognize that "Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential," many historians have begun to treat gender "as constructed."² According to Indian colonial historian, Antoinette Burton, "gender is not an exclusive or stable identity...it is always mediated by race class, and historical context." In Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai's efforts to explain why Indian women needed to be educated, assumptions and projections about gender abounded in both women's writings.

In British India, women's cultural agency simultaneously aimed at changing India's culture and was greatly influenced by the cross-cultural exchange between England and India. Because cultures construct gender, the two women could not dissociate themselves from their identification as women or from the manner in which their culture had constructed their concepts of gender. Upon examining the reformers' cultural standards for Indian women, the complex exchange of ideals that took place between the English and Indian cultures is revealed.

Yet, in addition to the crosscurrents of culture, the cultural biases of Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai as an English woman and an Indian woman respectively, are also apparent in their writings. The women's writings reflected personal cultural

¹ The term gender should not be confused with sex. For this paper, the "distinction between sex, in the physiological sense, and gender, which is a cultural construct, a set of learned behavior patterns" will be applied. For a thorough but succinct discussion on the development of the anthropological view that gender is culturally constructed see, Pat Caplan's introduction in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* pp. 1-30.

² Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 2.

values. Furthermore, the women's agency became a victim of their culture or what Judith Walkowitz and Antoinette Burton have called "the givenness of circumstances within which individuals make their choices." English and Indian women social activists of the second half of the nineteenth century played a crucial role in advocating a change in Indian culture by challenging India's cultural constructions of gender for Indian women.

The Victorian Era, has been called a "crucial period for gender relationships in the context of politics."³ By the middle of the nineteenth century, England's influence and economic relationship with India had turned into violent domination. According to Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Britain's control of the sub-continent had threatened "all that was held sacred and dear by the peoples of India."⁴ However, The Rebellion of 1857, which resulted in the massacre of hundreds of English men, women and children, forced England to reconsider the way it governed India. This rebellion marked a crucial turning point in the dynamics between the two cultures. Because they feared another rebellion, English officials would no longer ignore the customs and culture of India.⁵ Yet, India was still in a position of submission toward England.

Female social reformers were not the first to focus on Indian women as the means for changing the culture of India. Many male reformers held Indian women responsible for India's degeneration and powerlessness.⁶ Consequently, a major discourse on Indian

³ O'Hanlon, Rosalind, *A Comparison between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the critique of gender relations in colonial India.* (Gujarat, 1882) Madras: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 61.

⁴ Mukherjee, Rudrangshu, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*, "Satan Let Loose Upon the Earth: The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857." Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. pp. 93-116.

⁵ Allen, Charles, *Raj: Scrapbook of British India*, 1977. pp. 11-13.

⁶ This projection onto the Indian female of the ills of Indian society is part of the process of hyperfeminization in India. Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India.* Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1996. pp. 13-20.

culture and the status of Indian females emerged among the intellectuals of England.⁷

According to British reformer, John Stuart Mill, the social conditions of Indian women were “extremely degrading,” and he compared Indian women to slaves. The social conditions of Indian women concerned reformers who measured civilization according to English standards. Without hesitation, an Indian social reformer quoted Tennyson to advocate the advancement of his culture.

“But sir, whatever system may be best adapted to promote the enlightenment of our females, I earnestly beg my educated fellow-countrymen to remember that the social and mental status held by women of a country is the truest test of its civilization. I would fervently impress on them the truth of what Tennyson has said- ‘The woman’s cause is the man’s-they rise or sink. Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free’... the fulfillment of [female enlightenment] is fraught with results of the most importance to our country.”⁸

The Indian woman became the locus of reform debates because, in essence, Indian women embodied India’s cultural problems.⁹ Thus, reformers believed by eradicating women’s problems they would help all of Indian society. Several women’s issues were of major concern to social reformers such as *sati* (the religious act of widow burning), *purdah* (the seclusion of high-caste women), child-marriage, health care, and female education.¹⁰ Male Indian and British social reformers agreed that in order for India’s culture to advance and become civilized, the social conditions of India’s women would have to change.

⁷ Ghose, *Women Travelers in Colonial India: the Power of the Female Gaze*. p. 56.

⁸ Carpenter, Mary, *Six Months in India*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, 1868. p. 216.

⁹ According to Mary Douglas, “the body, common to all humans, has to be viewed as a metaphor for society.” Caplan, Pat, ed. *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*. London, New York: Travistock Publications, 1987. p. 14.

¹⁰ The English spellings of many Indian words have changed over the past two centuries. Throughout this paper, I have used the spellings from the 1800s for persons’ names and geographical locations. I have also left direct quotes in their original spelling. Please notice that Mary Carpenter referred to Indians as “Hindoos,” and Pandita Ramabai discussed widow burning as “suttee.”

While male reformers were the first to initiate the intellectual discourse on Indian women, English and Indian women of the second British Empire experienced an exceptional atmosphere for women's cultural agency. From 1837 to 1901 a female occupied the throne of England. Yet, despite Queen Victoria's authority and power as a political leader, she violently disapproved of what she referred to as the "mad, wicked folly of Women's Rights" that was developing within her country.¹¹ In England, feminism or the public and formal awakening of women's desire for political, social and economic equality with men was seen as a threat to true womanhood.

According to Philippa Levine, in *Victorian Feminism*, Victorian culture had established two primary concepts for women. First, women and men were separated into two different spheres of activity. Home was the woman's acceptable sphere and work was the man's. Second, women were regarded as "the natural custodians" of all that could uplift society.¹² Thus, the ideal Victorian woman was not only domestic, but also the central figure and moral backbone of the family.¹³

However, during the nineteenth century, the ideals for English women began to shift. Even Queen Victoria's disdain toward the women's movement did not squelch its growth. The expansion of feminist thoughts was due in part to a surplus of women in England starting in the 1850s, which increased to over one million more women than men by the turn of the century. As some women faced the reality of not being able to marry, they became conscious of the status of females under English law.¹⁴ Women

¹¹ Longford, Elizabeth, *Eminent Victorian Women*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981. p. 8.

¹² Levine, Philippa, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, London: Hutchinson, 1987. pp. 11,13.

¹³ Hall, Catherine, *White, Male and Middle Class Explorations in Feminism and History*, New York: Polity Press, 1988. p. 76.

¹⁴ Gardiner, Juliet, ed., *The New Woman: women's voices, 1880-1918*. London: Collins & Brown, 1993. p. 147.

began to organize and engage in social advocacy for their rights as women and for the rights of others, as well.

Feminists found ways to transpose accepted Christian ideals. By advocating that females were morally superior, women were able to engage in social reform that would influence all of British society instead of just one home. Eventually, social activism was considered a moral duty of a proper Victorian woman. As female and male social reformers began to concern themselves with the “woman question,” they began to ask, “What do women want?” Particularly, the issue of female education was seen as “the key to a broad range of other freedoms.”¹⁵ Reformers believed education would give women the information and training they needed both to work and to seek out their rights as British citizens.¹⁶

However, in *Women in Modern India* Geraldine Forbes claimed that when the woman question was posed in India, imperialist attitudes entrenched in English racial superiority and moral supremacy transformed the question of “What do [English] women want?” into “How can [Indian] women be modernized?”¹⁷ English women assumed they needed to help their Eastern sisters become modern, Christian, and westernized, in effect, a good British subject.¹⁸

In *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Antoinette Burton explained “The White Woman’s Other Burden.” From the earliest letters and diaries of the first English women living in Indian, the Indian woman was portrayed as “savage.” According to Burton, since feminism emerged during the

¹⁵ Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*. p. 12.

¹⁸ Chaudhuri, Nupur, and Strobel, Margaret, eds. *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992. p. 151.

height of British imperial power, often feminists seeking social change adopted prevailing imperialist sentiments. English women who wanted to improve the British Empire internalized a moral obligation toward the “civilizing mission” of improving the cultural conditions for Indian women.¹⁹

As women from England crossed the sea to help Indian women, they did not simply meet Indian women. Instead, English and Indian women discovered an entirely foreign set of characteristics and values in the opposite culture. The British Empire was what Mary Pratt has called a “contact zone” for cultures.²⁰ Through colonization, Indian and English cultures were brought together in an encounter that affected how British women tried to change Indian culture.

I have approached this historical case study from the method of “history about women, for women, and by women” to deliberately give voice to the agency of women from their own words.²¹ The primary texts are the women’s own advocacy for Indian female education, and I believe they reveal the depth, complexities, and paradoxes of what I have defined as women’s cultural agency. The ultimate goal in this approach is to add to the “contributory” history, which exists on gender relations in colonial India. Geraldine Forbes had defined “contributory” history as a method that “privileges female agency while recognizing how patriarchy impedes women’s actions.”²² I have tried to represent the information in a manner that demonstrates the full range of cultural forces affecting the women as they were situated within a very particular race, respectively, and high class.

¹⁹ Burton, Antoinette M., *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994. p. 2.

²⁰ Pratt, Mary Louise, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 6.

The cultural agency demonstrated in this case study is twofold. First through their personal advocacy for female education, Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai challenged Indian cultural standards for women. By claiming education was necessary for women, they deemed intellectual knowledge as a feminine quality. Second through the medium of education, both reformers wanted to improve Indian culture by educating Indian women to be agents of cultural change.

Yet, the new cultural standards which the reformers put forth in their writings were constructed from their lived experiences within British culture and the social positioning of the two activists. In addition to their different cultural perspectives, the two women also had varying reasons for advocating education for Indian females. Therefore, although their plans for achieving education were similar the cultural change that Mary Carpenter envisioned was vastly different from that of Pandita Ramabai. When the women's texts are analyzed, deeper cultural issues of class, caste, race, and gender are illuminated. The personal advocacy and the ideals established in the educational plans of the two women, as well as, their vision for social change are fertile ground for exploring women's cultural agency in British India.

In chapter two, I begin with the English activist Mary Carpenter. As a feminist and imperialist she fulfilled her "White Woman's Other Burden" by traveling to India. In her journal, *Six Months in India*, Carpenter established her Victorian cultural standards for Indian womanhood. She also assumed English responsibility for India's social progress, and proposed a plan of action for establishing a training school for women. In chapter three, the focus shifts to Pandita Ramabai's British Indian perspective. Throughout her book, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai deconstructed Indian

society and set up new gender values for women. She also devised a plan for achieving female education in India. In chapter four, I compare and contrast the cultural agency of Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai including their ideal for Indian womanhood, plans for female education and vision for social change.



Mary Carpenter. Engraved by C. H. Jeens from a photograph

Chapter 2

One 'White Woman's Burden:' Mary Carpenter

English women had been in India as travelers, explorers, missionaries and military officials' wives for decades. However, in 1866, Mary Carpenter became the first of a series of Englishwomen to visit India as a concerned social reformer.²³ In India, English women often embodied Victorian identity to the point of becoming a symbol of British imperialism to the natives. As a symbol of England's culture and power, the white females, called *memsahibs* by the Indians, experienced a higher social status by virtue of their race over both the male and female Indians. As an embodiment of imperialistic values, memsahibs became an example of "proper" womanhood to the Indian women.²⁴ The distance of an entire hemisphere could not separate Carpenter from her identity with and belief in Victorian English ideals and constructions of culture. For Mary Carpenter, her experiences in India were directly influenced by her status as an English woman who accepted both imperialist and feminist values.

Social Reform: A Feminist, Imperialist Project

Mary Carpenter was familiar with social activism long before she went to India. Her father was a distinguished Unitarian minister and had been very active in the Abolition Movement in England. Yet, her father's influence went beyond instilling in her a sense of social justice. He also encouraged his daughter to pursue an excellent education, and he personally supervised her studies in Latin, Greek, mathematics and

²³ Ghose, Indira, *Women Travelers in Colonial India: the Power of the Female Gaze*. Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 110.

²⁴ Sen, Indrani, "Between Power and 'Purdah': The White Woman in British India, 1858-1900." *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1997, 34(3): 355-376.

science. By the mid 1850s, Mary Carpenter's work on behalf of juvenile delinquents had made her a well-known social reformer in England. Yet, as a spinster living in her father's home, Mary Carpenter continued to learn from her father's activism. Her father maintained several close relationships with some of India's most prominent male social reformers.²⁵

Both Rajah Rammohun Roy and Keshub Chender Sen frequented the Carpenters' home in Bristol just six years prior to her trip. The men described the wretched social conditions in India for women, and urged Mary Carpenter to "extend her mercy toward India's women." These words inspired Carpenter, but she was too involved in the reform movement in England to leave her work. She did not address her concerns about Indian women for several years. But in 1866, at the age of fifty-nine, Mary Carpenter became the first Victorian spinster to visit India.²⁶ The journey was six months long and covered a vast amount of the subcontinent including the cities of Ahmedabad, Surat, Bombay, Poona, Madras, and Calcutta.

In 1868, Carpenter published a journal in England. Two years had passed since her trip to India, and this lapse of time created a space where Carpenter could construct the narrative of her journal in a dynamic way. Her two-volume journal is divided by two writing styles. After the first chapter of the second volume, Carpenter shifted from daily journal entries to chapter summations of her general observations. In three of the seven chapters of Volume II, Carpenter focused on, "The Social Position of Women, Education,

²⁵ Ghose, *Women Travelers in Colonial India: the Power of the Female Gaze*. p. 114.

²⁶ Tuson, Penelope, ed. *The Queen's Daughters: an Anthology of Victorian Feminist Writings on India, 1857-1900*. Reading, Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 1995. p. 61.

and Female Education.”²⁷ Carpenter used these chapters to explain the current conditions of India and her suggestions for social improvement.

In Volume I, Carpenter assumed that the British reader would follow her through a developmental process of her views on India. However, in Volume II Carpenter delineated the social issues that she saw as most pressing. By integrating Colonial Government documents and letters from male Indian activists with her conclusions from her travels Carpenter tried to convince the British public of the need for Indian social elevation. In particular, she focused on women and the need for government support of female education.

In the introduction to the first volume, Carpenter described her objective for the voyage as a demonstration of “British sympathy toward the goal of Indian female education.” Carpenter set out to visit India without any formal connections with a social organization or church, but her Christian perspective was firmly established and colored her encounters with the native culture. During the voyage across the sea, she decided that, “the Hindoos ought not be judged by the same standard as Englishmen, who have so long enjoyed the advantages of education and Christianity.”²⁸ She earnestly wanted to observe the Indians objectively, and recognized that much of what she had heard about India varied greatly and was entirely subject to the narrator. However, she failed to see her own biases in assuming England’s superiority.

Upon arrival in Ahmedabad, Carpenter was met with official letters from the Government of Bombay’s Educational Department. Colonial officials requested her opinions and observations, as well as her suggestions on the improvement of education

²⁷ Carpenter, *Six Months in India*. Volume II, p. vi.

²⁸ Carpenter, *Six Months in India*. Volume I, p. 15.

and discipline in India.²⁹ Thus, a journey that began out of independent good will became an authorized excursion and acquisition of information for governing purposes. Carpenter believed the “elevation of the women of India” was synonymous with bringing women to a higher standard of womanhood. The British Victorian model would provide the highest standard.³⁰ According to Carpenter, it was the colonial government’s moral responsibility to aid the Indian women in the attainment of British cultural standards.

Daily Observations: Cultural Critique in Progress

From the onset of her travels, Carpenter measured Indian culture against that of Victorian England. She viewed any deviation from that cultural standard as inferior. Language became an indicator of what in her mind was formal, civilized education. While the educated Indian men spoke English in order to facilitate commerce in India, but the women were educated in the vernacular.³¹ It concerned Carpenter that so few female inhabitants of the subcontinent spoke English. With but one exception, the Indian women she encountered who did speak English were associated with Christian missions. Upon making the condition of female education a high priority on the journey, Carpenter visited numerous female schools, but was disappointed by the lack of female teachers for the women.³² Yet, the continued education of females was problematic because the culture secluded women and girls married as child brides.

Carpenter directly linked the education of women with larger social advancements. She was encouraged to find that there were many Indian men and women who were willing to forego cultural customs for the sake of female advancement. Groups

²⁹ Ibid. p. 24.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 22, 23.

³² Ibid. pp. 64, 66.

of Hindu women meet with Carpenter in public to discuss female education. Yet, she stated that, “the religious movement among the educated Hindoos of Bengal is so closely connected with their social progress, and through them that of the population generally.”³³

When Carpenter saw an obvious void of Victorian womanhood, she was repulsed. She described the lower castes females of Surat as, “wholly devoid of any feeling akin to delicacy,” but she placed the responsibility for moral uprightness upon the higher caste women. Victorian constructions of femininity and the distinction of class access to the standards of womanhood “It would seem as if the great seclusion of the women of higher classes withdraws the refining influences of the sex from society; -those who are not shielded are thus left in the rude position of barbaric life.”³⁴

By 1866, when Mary Carpenter traveled through India, some female schools had been established for almost fifteen years. Upper caste women had the most access to education either through colonial government schools, *zenana* schools, or even missionary schools.³⁵ Yet, in some orthodox Hindu circles education was feared as a vehicle of Christian conversion. In many schools this was a valid fear given the British and Christian standards used to organize them.

Carpenter encountered not only a fear of conversion but also opposition to female enlightenment, especially on the part of men who enjoyed the benefits of women’s submission. Carpenter attributed the response of one Indian man to ignorance when he proclaimed “I do not believe in Hindooism, nor does any educated man; but my ladies do, and it makes them virtuous and obedient to me. If they were instructed, they would see

³³ Ibid. p. 169.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 85.

³⁵ The *zenana* was a woman’s private apartment where she was privately tutored.

the folly of it, and I therefore do not wish them to be taught.” Mary Carpenter believed that if the Indian males could see beyond their particular interests, they would understand that female education benefited the entire community.³⁶

Carpenter saw British influence on Indian culture as the chief tool of elevation for the society. Institutions that were civilizing the Indians were directly linked with the colonial government. Thus, she was impressed to see what she described as, a “Direct and evident intention in officials to benefit as much as practicable the people among whom they were located.”³⁷ Mary Carpenter believed in good faith that the colonial government was going beyond what it had to do, and taking responsibility for the elevation of the Indian peoples. Thus she had all confidence in devising an educational plan for Indian women that required the government’s support and promotion of female education to continue modernization and westernization of India’s women.

Carpenter documented for her English readers how Indian women truly lived. She dwelled at length in Volume II on the living conditions for the high-caste women who were kept in *purdah* or seclusion. She quoted several Indian men who described women in *purdah* as being subject to the smallest, filthiest part of the house, and often no more than a “slave” to the entire household. Since many family members lived in one house, there was continuous fighting which produced a “perpetual growth of inferiority and meanness. And amongst the hostility within the home, women are in a disadvantaged position because invariably men are valued more than women in Hindoo society.”³⁸

Carpenter saw the religious beliefs of the Hindu society as the dictator of the inferior

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 213-214.

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 62-63.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 62-65.

status of women because without a male child the father was destined to remain in perdition.³⁹

Carpenter associated the elevation of women with western standards of culture, which included tightly interwoven Christian social principles. Since Carpenter thought that “religion and social habits” were “indissolubly connected,” the position of women was a true social dilemma.⁴⁰ If Hinduism was socially limiting to women, Carpenter could then legitimize the need for liberation through a belief system that would ascribe equal value to both sexes. “Surely it would be well to encourage all advances of pure theism, and all efforts to escape from the debasing system which prevents the elevation of the Hindoo nation!”⁴¹

To confirm her assertion that Christian principles would elevate India, Carpenter referred to Keshub Chunder Sen to supply an Indian perspective. He had claimed that, “Christian missionaries have performed...various intellectual, social, and moral improvements” and, “connected [India] with the enlightened nations of the West, politically, an all-wise and all merciful Providence has entrusted its interests to the hands of a Christian sovereign.”⁴² Hence western ideals that stemmed from a Christian society were seen as enlightened, modern views.

According to Carpenter, Indian society could not achieve complete modernization and enlightenment apart from Christian principles. Carpenter saw Indian women’s faith as a direct threat to not only women’s social elevation but also the elevation of the entire race out of the “thralldom of superstition.” Although even the Hindus could reach a lesser

³⁹ Ibid. p. 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 68.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 72.

⁴² Ibid. p. 74.

degree of enlightenment, women were the ones who needed to hold a pure Christian faith or else their families were doomed to live with an archaic culture. She quotes an enlightened Hindu man commenting on women's status that 'Indian can scarcely take a high position in the scale of civilization without raising the social condition of women in general.' Yet, to Carpenter this "condition in general" entailed "injustice" caused by the Hindu religious system and a position within society that left the women uneducated and thus unenlightened.⁴³

Carpenter's journal deliberates on the need for education as the solution to the deprived condition of the women. Since Hindu men had been enlightened by British education, the women could be as well. Moreover, it was the civilized, enlightened Indian men that were pressing for female education. Although an Indian woman was, "debarred from the exercise of powers given by the Creator, and from taking her place in society, she exercises a remarkable sway over those who enthralled her, and binds them down with the very chains of superstition with which she herself is enthralled."⁴⁴ This scenario creates a complex social position for Indian women. Simultaneously they are helpless or in need of liberation from their ignorant, degraded position within Indian society, and at the same time, wielding enough influence over society to successfully curb the elevation of the entire Indian culture.

Repeatedly, Carpenter refers to the "ignorance of women" as the greatest obstacle to Indian social elevation, and to the fact that all recognized this hindrance. Yet, it was not just the ignorance of the women that needed to be eradicated, but the Indian social constructions of gender -the very foundations of what Indian culture defined as being a

⁴³ Ibid. p. 75.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 75.

woman- need to be transformed into a modern and consequently westernized and Christianized definition of womanhood.

Referring to child-marriage Carpenter said, “All enlightened natives know, also, that their race is becoming physically deteriorated by the social customs to which they are bound. Mothers at twelve, and grandmothers at five-and-twenty, cannot be the parents of a strong and hardy race.”⁴⁵ It concerned Carpenter that the Indian women began to look old when they should have been in their “full beauty of womanhood.” Thus, clearly Carpenter held a Western standard for beauty and cultural constructions, which India failed to reach. The social customs of India left the women in a disadvantaged position in society and left their minds in a childlike, ignorant state.

While Carpenter considered their social structure to be “deviations from the laws which govern the universe,” she stated that, “none better than the Hindoos themselves understand all these things.”⁴⁶ She appealed to the frequency of writings and speeches done by educated Indian men on behalf of female education, early marriages, and the remarriage of widows; and she is exceptionally adamant that, “Hindoos must emancipate themselves.”⁴⁷ Cautionary after the Rebellion of 1857 to not dictate change unwanted by the natives, Carpenter believed that if the government proceeded with their non-interference approach that a natural process of elevation would occur when the Indian people were ready for the change.

Not wanting to overstep her position as a visitor, “who came to offer friendly sympathy,” Carpenter claimed that instead of suggesting reforms that were undesired by the natives, she, “followed their leading in the way in which improvements should be

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 77.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 78.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 78.

made, and showed them the result of the course [she] advised, in [England].”⁴⁸ There were no Indian females educated enough to teach other females, and natives feared Christian missionary schools because of the potential influence upon Indian women’s customs and religion.

The natives equated conversion with denationalization. So *pundits*, or male private teachers, were hired instead of British women. Yet, *pundits*’ effects were limited because girls withdrew from schools early since they could not have contact with men once they reached marrying age, which could be as early as nine. What Carpenter observed was that now “they wanted to secure a supply of female teachers; they desired English help and civilization, if this could be obtained without the danger of religious or social interference.”⁴⁹

Carpenter regretted to observe that there was no Indian movement to educate the lower castes. Although missionary schools were open to them, she hoped that the social desire by the upper castes to educate Indian females would trickle down to the lower castes. Collectively, Carpenter viewed the lower caste in India as “repulsive.” A woman performing ordinary labor or “men’s work” was unacceptable according to her Victorian ethos because it destroyed “femininity,” and even more bothersome was the fact that men performed “women’s work” such as needlework. She saw the impropriety in the division of labor as a hindrance to women caring for their children, which was the duty nature intended for women.⁵⁰

Unfortunately for the lower caste, Mary Carpenter’s only suggestion for improvement was to incorporate education into the factory system. British factories were

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 79.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 80.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 42.

being developed all over India during this time, if the predominantly female factory workers were required to go to a school connected with the factory, the lower castes could receive education on an ever-widening scale. Carpenter only gave passing references to lower caste education, because her primary interest lay in the education of the women that were eager and willing to receive enlightenment, and in her opinion, the lower castes had not reached that level.

Even Carpenter's general observations are very gender and caste focused. Without realizing it, Carpenter considered, "female education" to be education for the high-caste Hindu women. She supported the need for Indian female teachers and British female teachers until a generation of Indian women had been trained, but she could not see how teaching would enable women to be economically independent. She believed the impact British contact has had on India is beneficial and that "the direct as well as the indirect influence of every Englishwoman as well as every Englishman in India for good or for evil can hardly be estimated."

According to Carpenter, the place that was created for women was one of family prominence and influence. Mother was to be a respected, position within a family, especially as the care for the future generation rested in her control. Thus, education for Indian females was to better equip them as mothers, not allow them to be independent of a family unit, even though Carpenter herself had never married.

General Observations: English Responsibility

In the second volume of her travel journal, Mary Carpenter established five general observations derived from her six months in India. First, the British public had

little accurate information about the peoples and country of India except what it received from missionaries. Second, more information would foster social interactions and “improvements which can be made only through the medium of friendly confidence.” Third, the Hindus are receptive to the “intercourse with Europeans” as long as intentions are cordial and do not “interfere with social custom.” Fourth, England had the power to help “Hindoo fellow subjects” and English women specifically could help Hindu women. Fifth, if a British person could not be part of the direct progress happening through legislation, individuals could help by “drawing public attention” to the progress, which was happening in India and still needed to happen.⁵¹ Carpenter not only took it upon herself to educate the British public about India, but also to motivate the British people to social awareness and action, which she saw as an English responsibility. Although Carpenter, was acting in a philanthropic manner to help India, she assumed that Indian woman’s agency was dependant upon the goodwill of England.

Carpenter also assumed that England had a moral obligation to lend “sympathy, support, and encouragement” to the social reform in India. Yet, the lack of permanent English residence in India was a direct “hindrance to the improvement in the country.” Without direct contact between the English and their British subjects cultural elevation would cease. According to Carpenter, Indians needed a living model of civilization and culture that they could mimic. Thus, contact between the two cultures was vastly important, but only under the proper conditions.

Carpenter, viewed the human-to-human influence that British had on the Indians, as the catalyst for India’s enlightenment. Therefore all loyal British should feel obligated to do their duty for the empire. She praises those who had already contributed

⁵¹ Carpenter, *Six Months in India*, Volume II, p. 55.

to the Second British Empire's goals in India, and called on others to follow their example. Specifically she distinguished the women that have done their duty, and who have raised the standard of service for British women.

“The devoted work of multitudes of Englishwomen in that great continent shows what our sex can do: new light the rapid progress of civilization, the wants created by it reveal increasing need of women's work in India. May many more enlightened Englishwomen arise who shall devote themselves to the glorious and blessed work of raising their eastern sisters to fill that place in society for which the Creator has destined them!”⁵²

Although Carpenter believed that Christianity was a superior religion and western society far more advanced than Indian, she also thought help to the Indians must be granted in humble or friendly terms. However, if the, “weaker brethren” are “disliked by those wiser and stronger than themselves it increases the suspicion of their nature and makes them insensible to the real benefit which British Government is constantly conferring on them.”⁵³ Carpenter thought that the natives would be quite grateful for England's assistance if they perceived the British to regard Hindus as “fellow subjects,” with a “common Father” in the Christian faith.

As a feminist and imperialist, Carpenter believed strongly in the goodwill of the English and the consequences of lending the Indians sympathy. “Such friendly intercourse will almost insensibly and without any direct effort on our part effect great improvement in native manners and habits.”⁵⁴ Carpenter praised those she meet who had the air and appearance of an Englishmen, and she paid particular compliment to those families that lived alone (instead of multiple family cohabitation.) She was particularly fond of homes that allowed the lady to be the “central spring” of the family. She praised

⁵² Ibid. p. 83.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 59.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 61.

her fellow British subjects without any recognition of the contradictions that they raise to not “interfering with the social customs.” Carpenter perceived Indian families resembling English culture as a natural process, and even she herself recognized the influence from the direct contact between the cultures. “Surely intercourse with Europeans will lead to a desire to change the condition of such unhealthy abodes and to feel the justice of no longer secluding the most delicate part of the species to whom home is everything in the worst part of the mansion.”⁵⁵

Key to Indian Elevation: Female Education

According to Carpenter, the goal of education should always be enlightenment, but she failed to see the economics of education. In fact, she complained that male Indians were going to school just to get jobs instead of trying to develop their minds. She wanted to see independent thought instead of merely excellent memory. Indian (government) schools in comparison to English schools, produced, ‘intellectual machines, and not intellectual men.’⁵⁶ Carpenter justified her arguments by claiming that she was not guilty of presumption, and turns to her own journal as objective validation. She also asserted that,

“since we have now reached the very important point we aimed at, and have so widely established educational institutions in India, and excited a desire in the superior classes of its inhabitants to avail themselves of thee [the government], it becomes us to consider if the natures and wants of those whom we are educating, would lead us to make any improvements and modifications in the system which is being adopted.”⁵⁷

Carpenter argued that since Indian men were already enlightened by Western education, their voice should be heard. “The following suggestions are what the men have said they

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 127.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 120.

want.”⁵⁸ She admitted that Indian education focused on the intellectual facilities, and truly the Indian schools had a higher intellectual status than British schools because the youth were more devoted to their studies. Yet, the proficiency in academic standards could never replace an enlightened mind, which was contingent upon an English home. The private education received at home was crucial in developing an enlightened mind because formal education was only part of the enlightenment process.⁵⁹

Carpenter was pleased by the instruction of the English language in the schools, and claimed that the study must be encouraged. She developed several reasons for why English must be taught to Indians, but her primary argument was that, “our own language is the great medium for opening the mind to civilized influences and higher thoughts which cannot be conveyed through the vernacular.”⁶⁰ Only English could lead to an enlightened mind because it, “expresses better than any other the highest thoughts of which the human mind is capable and is above all others ill adapted for translation.”⁶¹ In turn, Carpenter described the native language of India as being “base” and full of superstition. She believed that in general it held thoughts, which would debase the hearer rather than elevate his mind, and she described the languages of the lower castes as coarse. Thus, there was no reason to hold onto the native tongue.⁶² Also because there were so many variants in Indian dialects, English could become a unifying, “medium of thought.”⁶³ Here Carpenter clearly demonstrates her thoughts on the superiority of English ways.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 120.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 121.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 131.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 132.

⁶² Ibid. p. 134.

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 133, 134.

Given the activist nature of her journal, Carpenter was continually tried to convince the British public that not only is India ready for social uplift, but also the, “desire for female education was rapidly spreading among enlightened Hindoos,” and that there was a general, “want of female teachers.”⁶⁴ While in India, Carpenter made several addresses to Indian social societies communicating her observations and concerns with female education, in addition to the formal response sent to the colonial government. Carpenter included a copy of the letter she sent to the Viceroy at Calcutta while she was still in India entitled ‘Female Education.’ Her opening remark to the Viceroy was an affirmation of her intent and object of visiting India to observe the condition of female education. After which she immediately began to advance the same two points in her letter that she promotes in her journal.

1) ‘A strong desire exists, in the minds of the most enlightened among them, that the future wives and mothers of their nation should be enabled, by sound education, better to fulfill their important sphere.’ 2) ‘The grand obstacle to the improvement of female schools, and to the extension of them, is the universal want of female teachers.’⁶⁵

To support her two claims, Carpenter pointed out the problems with the current educational situation. For example, girls were being withdrawn from school early and left without any “influence on their manners and character which a female teacher alone can give.” She claimed that “neatness,” “order,” and “needlework” are “so essential to a woman.” Interestingly, Carpenter offered the missionary schools as evidence that female teachers could have positive effects on Indian girls. Although she insisted that it was the woman-to-woman contact that has made the Indian girls, “in every way equal and in

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 141.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 142.

some respects superior, to those in our country,” no doubt it was the display of western behavior by Indian females that impresses her.

By demonstrating the need for female teachers, as opposed to male *pundits*, Carpenter justified her request for government assistance. Appealing to an equal opportunity ideal, Carpenter reminded the Viceroy that it was the government that supplied male teachers to boy’s schools. She felt that since the Indian public adequately demonstrated a desire for female education through petitions, letters, and community initiatives in creating girl’s schools, the government should assist in establishing a ‘Normal Training School’ for female teachers. The only hindrances she saw with the establishment of a training school for teachers was, “the ignorance of Hindoo women” and the lack of Indian women of the appropriate age who would be willing to train as teachers, with the exception of widows.⁶⁶

However, she believed that British women could and would be willing to help teach Indian girls until Indian females had been trained. Although her comments to the Viceroy were brief, she managed to outline a general plan of action to implement a normal school. Her four suggestions called upon full government funding by the Inspector of Schools of a boarding house supervised by a ‘Lady Superintendent’ and educationally directed by a ‘superior mistress.’ Both would have received a full fare to India and monthly salaries. All ‘students in training’ after applying and having been approved by the inspector would board at the house, and non-Christians would be given separate arrangements if necessary. She suggested the general organization, but the only curriculum she specified was that, “all English students must learn the vernacular, and all

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 144.

native students, English” and that the normal girl’s schools would be used to train the teachers, as a process of active learning.⁶⁷

During her tour of India, Carpenter was given access to colonial government documents on the development of female education. She summarized the general trends in female education allowing for differences among the different regions. From the official reports, she learned that the Inspector of the South-eastern Division had established a school for female mistresses under government sanctions. “In Lower-Bengal the Government gives gratuitous aid to girl’s schools, and also to *zenana*-teaching in Calcutta.”⁶⁸ Carpenter regretted that the aid was not enough to obtain, “trained female teachers as instructresses, and the women selected were very ignorant and not of a high caste.”

Yet, she considered the school, “an important first step” because it confirmed the need for female teachers. In Madras, because the education system was advanced, there was a “great anxiety for the adoption of suitable measures to obtain well-trained female teachers.” And in Bombay the natives were the crucial instigators of education through independent social support for the past fifteen years. By 1866, 1,906 girls were attending schools in the North-eastern Division of the Bombay Presidency.⁶⁹ Impressed by the number of girls receiving instruction in the Bombay Presidency, Carpenter never lost sight of her goal and reiterated “that real progress is arrested by the want of proper teachers—that they cannot, by the use of any means at their disposal, obtain such teachers.” She even pleaded on their behalf believing that they had done everything in their power and appealed to the government for assistance asking if “their just request

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 146.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 150.

[will] find a ready response?" In the Central and Southern Divisions of India, the government reports had found little advances for education and only inferior schools.⁷⁰ Carpenter did not travel to the North-Western Provinces.

Because the "Government of India acts on the principle of non-interference with religion and the social customs of the natives," Carpenter had established a direct need and desire on the part of the natives to support her proposal, which would require government funding.⁷¹ Carpenter strategically included another government document in her journal that was written in July of 1867 by the E.C. Bayley, Esq., Secretary to the Government of India. In his letter, Bayley responded to Carpenter's suggestions for the government to establish Female Normal Training Schools. He stated that the, 'primary object ...is to obtain larger and more constant supply of female teachers, capable of imparting a higher order of education to native females than has yet been attempted. The Government-General in Council is anxious to further this object.'⁷²

However, he believed that the government should not, 'assume the entire responsibility,' as Carpenter set forth in her suggestions. Instead, he offered a compromise that would assure that the native community wanted help from the government and placed the burden of success on their cooperation. He claimed that if a community makes a, 'genuine effort' the government will help by, 'liberal interpretation of the Grant-in-aid Rules, and by assistance in procuring teachers from England.' He even stated that the government would guarantee the English salaries for a reasonable period of time. Bayley was careful not to obligate the government to any one, 'particular

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 153.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 155.

⁷² Ibid. p. 154.

scheme,' but his suggestions confirmed the colonial government's active interest in Indian female education.⁷³

By including Bayley's letter, Carpenter was then able to rebut his argument in her journal. She claimed that the natives had already proven their co-operation, and that, "they have already done all in their power to accomplish," obtaining qualified female teachers. As there were no "qualified" Indian females, Carpenter again asserted the need for English women to help their Indian sisters, and "give themselves heart and soul to great work."⁷⁴ With the assertion that English women could be a solution to the absence of female teachers dilemma, and in turn the answer to Indian female education, Carpenter established a second factor, which would qualify government aid.

Not only were the native communities showing full support of female education, but also English ladies would only come to India under British government supervision. Government funding of the school would assure proper British travel, living arrangements, and security. In an attempt to address Bayley's concerns, Carpenter sent a second letter to the colonial government further outlining the plans for a Normal Training School. The letter was sent on October 8, 1867, "To the Right Hon. Sir Stafford Northcote, Bart., M.P., Secretary of State for India. The details of the Female Normal School were more clear and detailed than her first letter, but the plan was unchanged.

Carpenter believed in the British, goal of social uplift in India. She took her burden seriously, and to her the process was clear. Total social elevation could take place if the women of India were educated, and the only obstacle to this aim was a lack of female teachers. If Britain would supply the teachers, both in an economic and physical

⁷³ Ibid. pp. 154-155.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 156.

sense, the problem would be solved and Britain would fulfill its mortal duty toward India. In the midst of this reasoning, Carpenter saw no inconsistency with “non-interference” policy toward social customs and holding the Indian women to Victorian British standard of womanhood. In fact, she claimed that “It is evident that a scheme such as this can in no way possibly interfere with any of the prejudices or social customs of the natives, since none need avail themselves of it’s advantages but those who desire it.”⁷⁵ Carpenter clearly felt that Indian customs regarding women needed to change. However, if the natives themselves wanted social change, government aid would in no way be considered cultural interference.

Carpenter points out that without government aid male education in India would have never succeeded, and asks the reader, “why does the government do less for the girls than for the boys?”⁷⁶ As mothers, Indian women would have severe affects upon the future of India and, “their influence on society [was an] important means of elevating society.” Carpenter ends her chapter on female education with a moral plea intended to incite action from her readers that held her imperialist vision. “They invite the aid of the Englishwomen to do the work, so essentially their own, of raising their Eastern sisters. Our countrywomen are ready to respond to the call. May the government enable us to do so!”⁷⁷ Thus, Carpenter placed an important value upon Indian women’s influence over their culture and upon the work that British women would do in India. While documenting the imperialist vision for cultural elevation and the need for Indian female education, Carpenter asserted her ideas about woman-to-woman contact and the impact that Englishwomen would have on Indian women and Indian culture.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.162.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p.164.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p.165.

Conclusions

Despite how objective Mary Carpenter tried to be, she saw Indian women through the eyes of an imperialist, and her vision for Indian females incorporated her Victorian model for women. In her travel journal, Carpenter proposed a government-funded female training school in 1867. Despite England's great "civilizing mission" and belief that female education was crucial to India's cultural elevation, it would be over fifty years before a substantial monetary investment was made toward Indian female education.⁷⁸ Unlike Indian male education that trained men to be government officials, female education did not have immediate economic benefits for Great Britain.

However, Mary Carpenter did start a normal school with Keshub Sen and Annette Akroyd in 1872. While her observations in India were crucial in documenting the desires of Indian reformers, her personal suggestions for social change lacked cultural sensitivity. The social vision for Indian female education needed an insider's perspective that would fully understand the cultural needs of the women. Twenty years after Mary Carpenter visited India, another voice emerged from the sub-continent that shared the elite social position of Carpenter but comprehended the cultural specificity and religious devotion of the society. That voice was Pandita Ramabai.

⁷⁸ In 1922, the Lady Willington Training College and Practice School was opened as a boarding school to train Indian female teachers. The British government paid the rent and provided three scholarships; all remaining funds were found through donations and fees. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, pp. 58.



Pandita Ramabai

Chapter 3

A British Indian Perspective: Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati

Women in India were also active in shaping and reforming the ideals for Indian women collectively. Indian social activist, Pandita Ramabai, was a major presence in India during the late nineteenth century. Upon her death she was hailed as one of the “makers of modern India.”⁷⁹ Her entire life’s work and energy was dedicated to securing education for Indian women. Ramabai devised a plan for women’s schools that was similar to Mary Carpenter’s. Yet, Ramabai had very different results.

The difference was largely due to the fact that she “shared the ethos and psyche of her reformist contemporaries but transgressed the boundaries of space, culture, and religion-and even time-through her version of a gender egalitarian society.”⁸⁰ Ramabai was able to critique Indian culture from within, using a combination of ideals and thoughts that she gathered from her journeys throughout India, England, and America. In the preface to Ramabai’s book, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Rachel Bodely gives a full recount of Ramabai’s life and advocacy up to 1886.⁸¹ This biography, which was prepared for an American audience is one of the most complete accounts of Ramabai’s early experiences and revealed many of the paradoxes of her life.

⁷⁹ Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain*. p. 72.

⁸⁰ Kosambi, Meera, *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words Selected Works* New York: Oxford Press, 2000. p. 3.

⁸¹ This biography is used extensively in this paper. It is one of the main sources of modern biographies written about Ramabai because Ramabai herself agreed with its summation of her experiences. For a more recent biography written on Pandita Ramabai’s full life see Antoinette Burton’s *At the Heart of the Empire Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain*.

Following in Her Father's Path

Born in 1858 into the Brahmin caste, Ramabai's mother was the second child-bride of her father. Ramabai's father was himself a social activist who promoted female education, and lived according to his beliefs. A husband at age ten, Ramabai's father left his first bride with his mother while he went to study with the eminent Brahmin scholar, Ramachandra Shastri. While with his master, Ramabai's father frequented the Peshwa palace in Poona where the ruler's favorite wife was learning Sanskrit poems. When Ramabai's father returned to his family and first bride, he tried to teach his wife how to read. However, she refused to learn.

At the age of twenty-three, Ramabai's father took a second child-bride after the death of his first wife. He encouraged his new nine year-old wife to learn how to read, and they lived in seclusion in the forest of Gungamul, shunned from society as a result of his fervor for female education.⁸² Ramabai's father defended his actions with his faith claiming that the Hindu sacred literature permitted teaching women how to read 'the sacred language of the gods.'⁸³

The passion for education was passed from father to mother to Ramabai herself. She recalled, "from my earliest years I always had a love of books." Ramabai's mother began teaching her early morning lessons when Ramabai was only eight, and under her mother's tutelage Ramabai learned how to read many indigenous languages including Marathi, Kanarese, Hindustani, and Bengali.⁸⁴

⁸² Sarasvati, Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. Philadelphia: Press of the J. B. Rodgers Printing Co., 1887. p. xi.

⁸³ Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain*. p. 77.

⁸⁴ Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. p. xiii.

Ramabai spent most of her childhood as a wanderer. Although her parents had found refuge in the forest, they did not maintain their seclusion. Her father had settled near a riverhead, which the Hindus considered sacred. His reputation as a scholar brought many devout pilgrims and students to their home. Eventually, the family went into debt because they could not pay for the religious costs of their guests, and became homeless, wandering from one holy pilgrimage site to another. After her parents and sister died from the famines of the 1870s that swept India, Ramabai and her older brother continued to wander for almost seven years throughout India.

During the journey with her brother, Ramabai covered over two thousand miles visiting Punjab, Rajputana, the Central Provinces, Assam, Bengal, and Madras. Her journey exposed her to the vast variety of peoples and traditions within India. Together with her brother, Ramabai took up her father's cause to advocate female education. She felt that her father's dedication and suffering had set the supreme example of activism for female education and claimed that it was her "duty, to the very end of my life to maintain this cause, and to advocate the proper position of women in this land."⁸⁵ By the time they had reached Calcutta, Ramabai was a well-known scholar in ancient Sanskrit.

Ramabai created such a sensation in Calcutta with her advanced knowledge and oratorical ability that the pundits of the capital city called an assembly. After a thorough examination of her intellectual abilities, they bestowed upon her the honored title of Sarasvati, which referred to the Hindu goddess of learning. People began to call her Pandita, meaning eminent scholar-teacher, because she was as learned as a Brahmin pundit.⁸⁶ Although women were forbidden to read the Code of Manu, Ramabai read the

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. xvi.

⁸⁶ Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian*. p. 82.

sacred text and used it “in opposition to the degrading notions of the modern times.”⁸⁷

This was a radical step since even Ramabai’s father who had liberal ideas about women’s education would not teach his wife or daughters the most holy Code of Manu.

In 1880, her brother died, but soon afterward, Ramabai married his close friend. Her husband, having fathered their only child, died less than two years after they were married. At twenty-four Ramabai was a widow with a young daughter to support.

As an activist and lecturer, she went to Poona, which was known for its social reform. Within the same year of her arrival in the city, Ramabai formed a women’s society called Arya Mahila Samaj (Aryan’s Women’s Society) to promote female education and to discourage child-marriages. She then traveled to several cities within the Bombay Presidency forming branch societies.

That same year, 1882, the English Education Commission went to Poona to inspect the city’s schools. Arya Mahila Samaj assembled with other women from the community (300 women and children in all) to demonstrate their desire for female education despite the municipality’s lack of support. Ramabai welcomed the commission and proceeded over the evening. The President of the Commission, Dr. W. W. Hunter, interviewed Ramabai and was so impressed with her responses that he had them published in English.⁸⁸

When Dr. Hunter asked Ramabai “what is the best method of providing teachers for girls,” Ramabai had a highly refined answer. She believed teachers themselves needed special training to teach native languages, as well as, English. Yet, above all else teachers must be of high moral character because “Mere learning is not enough; the

⁸⁷ Sarasvati, *High Caste Hindu Woman*. p. xv.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* pp. xvi-xvii.

conduct and morals of the students should be attended to.”⁸⁹ Similar to Carpenter’s assumptions about providing women with an English example of manners, Ramabai claimed that living in a college compound was the ideal because a women’s full development could be overseen.

While elaborating upon her concerns about women’s education, she explained her plan for female education, which preferred women’s agency to male involvement. Her foremost concern was male involvement in the female schools established by the British government. She claimed that the women of India were so timid that the male inspector in all-female schools threw them “into confusion” and made them unable to speak or to even answer his questions. This confusion was perceived as the teacher’s incompetence and reported as such, which then caused the government to appoint a male teacher in the woman’s place. Female inspectresses who were over thirty, of a high class, and educated would be much better at accessing the true progress of the women. The inspectress could be English or native but “as the education of girls is different from that of boys, female schools ought to be in the hands of female teachers.”

Ramabai claimed that since 99% of the educated men in India were not for female education or the proper position of women they looked for ways to ruin woman’s character, and would use her silence as an indicator of her ignorance. Ramabai appealed to England as the civilized ruler when she stated, “It is evident that women, being one-half of the people of this country, are oppressed and cruelly treated by the other half. To put a stop to this anomaly is worthy of a good Government.”

Her final suggestion was the promotion of females as physicians. Again she attributed the reservation and modesty of women speaking to men as the heart of the

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. xvii.

problem. She believed women would rather die than tell a male doctor about an intimate problem. She felt that the government should arrange provisions for women to attend medical school because “want of lady- doctors is one very much felt and is a great defect in the Education of the women of this country.”⁹⁰ Even within the early years of her advocacy, Ramabai privileged female agency as the as the most efficient method of improving Indian women’s lives.

When Dr. Hunter returned to England he not only published Ramabai’s suggestions but also made her activism the subject of a lecture given in Edinburgh. Because Hunter was an influential English promoter of Indian education, Ramabai’s name quickly became known in England and India among the circle of reformers for “the social amelioration of the people of Hindustan.”⁹¹ Her plea for female doctors even caught the attention of Queen Victoria, and spurred The National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India, more commonly referred to as the “Countess of Dufferin Movement” after its president, countess Dufferin who was the wife of the viceroy of India.⁹²

After her encounter with Dr. Hunter, Ramabai began to think of furthering her own education. She wanted to become a physician, and felt “a restless desire to go to England.” Even though Ramabai had traveled all through India and did not consider herself a devout Hindu, she claimed that “I could not have done this unless I had felt my

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. xvii.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. xv.

⁹² Grewal, Inderpal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996. p. 183.

faith in God had become strong: it is such a great step for a Hindu woman to cross the sea: one cuts oneself always from one's people."⁹³

In 1883 with the help of the Anglo-Catholic Community of St. Mary the Virgin, which had a missionary post in India, Ramabai set sail for England with a friend and her young daughter. Coincidentally, her cousin Anandibai Josee (the first Indian woman to earn an M.D.) sailed to America the same month that Ramabai left for England. When Ramabai arrived in Oxfordshire, England, she stayed at Wantage, which was the motherhouse or supporting institution of St. Mary the Virgin in India.⁹⁴ Ramabai recalled later that she "gradually learned to feel the truths of Christianity, and to see that it is a philosophy, teaching truths higher than I had ever known in all our systems; that it does not give us precepts and an example only, but assures us of divine grace, by which we can follow that example."⁹⁵

On September 29, 1883, Ramabai and her daughter were baptized.⁹⁶ For a year, Ramabai learned to speak, read, and write English at Wantage. Then in 1884, she simultaneously attended the Ladies College at Cheltenham as a student in mathematics, natural science and English literature and taught Sanskrit.

In 1886, she decided to take a break from her studies to go to her cousin's graduation from medical school. Although she had never met her cousin, the two educated Indian women shared a deep passion for knowledge. As a "duty," to her

⁹³ Sarasvati, *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, p. xviii.

⁹⁴ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 73.

⁹⁵ Sarasvati, *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, p. xix.

⁹⁶ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 74.

countrywomen, Ramabai crossed another ocean to visit that “holy land called America” with her five year-old daughter.⁹⁷

Once in America, Ramabai was completely fascinated by the American public school system. She decided to prolong her visit and enroll in a kindergarten training school. America’s network of female public school teachers inspired Ramabai, and planted the seeds of her vision for widespread female education in India by Indian women. “I am deeply impressed by and interested in the work of Western women, who seem to have one common aim, namely, the good of their fellow beings. It is my dream someday to tell my countrywomen in their own language this wonderful story, in the hope that the recital may awaken in their hearts a desire to do likewise.”

Before seeing the American education system, Ramabai had focused on promoting higher education for females in order to provide health services to women. However, after seeing the exponential results that one teacher could have teaching just a roomful of girls, Ramabai began to rethink her reform efforts.

Ramabai began to shift her concentration away from higher education to the educational model that “native schools founded by and for native women.”⁹⁸ She purchased an American primer and began to translate it into Marathi. Once she had translated the primer, it could be printed as a text specifically for Indian girls. Ramabai’s advocacy for female education had developed a new dimension, which included a vision of women’s agency. Ramabai described the details of her vision for cultural change through female education in her book, *The High-Caste Hindu*.

⁹⁷Sarasvati, *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, p. xix.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. xx.

In 1887, Ramabai published *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in America as a fundraising effort to start her project of educating the women of India. Dedicated to her mother, “the light and guide of my life,” the content of the book was intended to eradicate misconceptions about Hindu women and explain their true needs. Ramabai believed “by the Divine Spirit, that revelation will stir the hearts of those who read the story to deeds of rescue and relief.”⁹⁹

In the book’s introduction, the Dean of the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, Rachel L. Bodley A.M., M.D., made a clearly Christian appeal to the women of America. She began the introduction with a dramatic statement.

“The silence of a thousand years has been broken, and the reader...catches the first utterances of the unfamiliar voice. Throbbing with woe, they are revealed in the following pages to intelligent, educated, happy American women. God grant that these women, who He has blessed above all women on earth, may not flippantly turn away...not to read it [*The High-Caste Hindu*] through attentively to the last word of the agonizing appeal, is to invoke upon oneself the divine displeasure of ‘him that had none to help them.’ ”¹⁰⁰

Bodley established that the condition of the Hindu woman should be an American concern and explained her own involvement. Bodley had housed Ramabai’s cousin, Anandibai Josee, as a medical student and met Ramabai when she first came to America to see Josee graduate from medical school.

Josee had died three months before the introduction to *The High-Caste Hindu* was written, and a memorandum was included in the opening of the book to commemorate India’s first female physician. Josee was well known in America and Bodley used her connection with Ramabai, as well as, Josee’s untimely death to encourage support for Ramabai. Bodley stated that, “Pundita Ramabai, her [Josee’s] beloved and trusted

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. ix.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. i.

kinswoman, still lives to perform, not her identical work, but to prosecute the general disenthralment of Hindu women, concerning the ultimate accomplishment of which Dr. Joshee cherished invincible faith.”¹⁰¹

Bodley reminded the reader of a speech Josee delivered in 1884 to a group of ladies convened for a missions anniversary. Josee spoke on “Child Marriage” and defended her native custom. However, Bodely asks the reader who might have been offended by Josee to read Ramabai’s details about a Hindu woman’s life to understand why a Hindu woman would defend such a custom. Bodely affirmed Ramabai’s love for India, but claimed that Ramabai was “satisfied, moreover, that India cannot arise and take her place among the nations of the earth until she, too, has mothers: until the Hindu zenana is transformed into the Hindu home, where the united family can have ‘pleasant times together.’ ”¹⁰²

Thus, Bodely introduced Ramabai to American women as a Christian sister in need but also as a social reformer who understood how Indian not only as women could be helped and raised to the level of western women. While Bodely was finishing writing the introduction, Ramabai stopped into her office. Bodely asked Ramabai if she had any final words for the women of America. Being the extremely eloquent orator that she was Ramabai said the following.

‘Remind them that it was ‘out of Nazareth’ that the blessed Redeemer of mankind came: that great reforms have again and again been wrought by instrumentalities that the world despised. Tell them to help me educate the high-caste child-widows; for I solemnly believe that this hated and despised class of women, educated and enlightened, are, by God’s grace, to redeem India!’¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. vii

¹⁰² Ibid. p. ix.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. xxiv.

The Life Cycle of a High-Cast Hindu Woman: A Personal Critique

Although Ramabai was observing Indian culture as an Indian, she was also British, Christian and a feminist. In her book, the values that she had for Indian women were clearly demonstrated by the deceptions of the social conditions for Indian women. She also included a critical reading of the sacred text of the Hindu faith, the Code of Manu. While women were allowed to read Sanskrit poems, any text that was associated with sacred rites or ceremonies was strictly forbidden to women.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, Ramabai's use of the sacred text was not only unorthodox, but also a glaring example of her independence from the traditional customs. Although Ramabai was herself a high-caste Hindu woman, her personal experiences deviated quite far from the life cycle she described in her book. While recounting the typical high-caste women's lifecycle, her ideals for Indian womanhood were apparent in her critique of traditions and social practices. Ramabai drew from her older sister's experiences of being a child-bride and her observed experiences of women throughout India.

While the sacred law divided a woman's life into three parts: "Childhood, Youth or married life, and Widowhood or old age," Ramabai saw a woman's life as a cycle of dependence upon men (father, husband, and son).¹⁰⁵ She pointed out: "Although the code of Manu contains a single passage in which it is written 'A daughter is equal to a son,' the context expressly declares that equality to be founded upon the results attainable through her son."¹⁰⁶ Having a son was security in the afterlife, as well as in old age. Thus, the scripture established a male-preference in society because a man without a male offspring could not enter into heaven.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. viii.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 12.

According to Ramabai, Hindu's did not see a daughter as part of the family because she was "the property of somebody else" and would not be able to help her parents in their old age.¹⁰⁷ If a woman did not bear a son after eleven years of marriage she could be "superceded" by another woman. Yet, despite the preference for sons, "maternal affection, sweet and strong, before which 'there is neither male nor female,' asserts itself not infrequently in Hindu homes, and overcomes selfishness and false fear of popular custom."¹⁰⁸ Ramabai equated a Hindu mother's love with true Christian love to appeal to her American readers in terms they would recognize. Yet, she was also used cultural shock to show the contrast between western and Indian conditions for women.

If a girl was born in proximity to the death of her brother, she would be reminded for the rest of her life that she had killed her brother. With such a cultural preference, boys became "proud of their superior sex" and learned to "despise girls and women."¹⁰⁹ Among the Rajputs in the Northern part of Indian and the Kshatriyas of Central India, female infanticide was practiced. The Census of 1870 "revealed the curious fact that three hundred children were stolen in one year by wolves...all the children being girls," and from 1880-1881 there were five million fewer women than men. Ramabai attributed this gap in the population first to infanticide and second to the "imperfect treatment of the diseases of women in all parts of Hindustan."¹¹⁰

Ramabai claimed that the early marriage system in India was "five hundred years older than the Christian era." Yet, Ramabai argued that the Code of Manu had set age

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 28.

limits, which the culture ignored.¹¹¹ She asserted that until the eleventh century women and men were able to choose their partners. Ramabai recognized that “women in Europe and America do choose their husbands,” but are never the “first to request marriage.” Yet, an Indian woman could “select her own husband...without being put to shame.” The practice of choosing a husband was called *Svayamvara*, and Ramabai attributed its decline and the rise of infant marriages to the “lawless behaviour of the Mahomedan intruders” into India during the twelfth century.¹¹² Thus, she attributed the origins of this negative social practice in Indian to another culture.

Since the culturally acceptable marrying age for girls was five to eleven, Ramabai admitted that the distinction between childhood and married life was “not easy to determine.”¹¹³ Hinduism dictated, “All girls must be given in marriage.” In addition, the popular belief that a woman could not go to heaven unless she was formally married prevailed in the society.

For the high caste woman, “marriage is the only ‘Sacrament’ administered.” Once a child-bride was married she was “given to the family of her husband, and not to her husband alone.” This ancient verdict meant that a girl’s mother-in-law had full control over the bride, and the bride’s happiness was contingent upon the treatment she received from the mother-in-law. “As a rule, the little girl is scolded for every mistake she commits.” Essentially young brides were trapped with their mothers-in-law because

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 29. “A man aged thirty years shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age.”-Code of Manu quoted in Ramabai’s text.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 31

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 29.

“the women’s court is situated at the back of the house, where darkness reigns perpetually. There the child-bride is brought to be forever confined.”¹¹⁴

Amid the displeasure that Ramabai displayed for the position of the child-bride, she concurred that the groom often did not have a choice either. The parents arranged the marriage, and the first ceremony was an “irrevocable betrothal.” The young couple would not have any contact until after the second ceremony, but even after the marriage was consummated they could never display any affection before a third party.

Ramabai claimed that since couples seldom talked, they were unable to form attachments and the mother-in-law would encourage “the young man to torment his wife.” The offspring of this arrangement were allowed to visit with their father or mother in their respective outer or inner courts, but the father’s “notion of false modesty” kept him from openly showing affection to his children. A woman would live in her husband’s father’s home, taking her meal last, and eating only “what her lord may please to leave on his plate” until her husband’s death.¹¹⁵

The final stage of the Hindu woman’s cycle was widowhood. Ramabai called this stage “the worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman’s life.” Widowhood was not considered part of the natural order of life. Instead, “throughout India, widowhood is regarded as the punishment for a horrid crime or crimes committed by the woman in her former existence upon earth.”¹¹⁶ Specifically, the crimes that were most often punished by widowhood were “disobedience and disloyalty to husbands, or murdering him in an earlier existence.”

¹¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 44, 46.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 49.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 69.

Widowhood was a period of disgrace and shame for “sinners.” If the woman had a son, she was less hated, and if a widow was aged and virtuous then she “commanded the respect of all people.” Widows with only daughters were despised, but the childless or child-widows were “the greatest criminal upon whom Heaven’s judgment has been pronounced.” Yet, Ramabai pointed out that in India’s past before priests “mutilated” the translation of the Code of Manu, a custom of remarrying widows existed.

If the deceased man had no male offspring, his brother or cousin could marry the widow and bring up children in his name. Once a male child was produced all further intercourse would be considered illegal. Then the woman would have a son to care for her, and the deceased husband could then enter into heaven.¹¹⁷ She also noted that according to popular belief, heaven for women was a seat in her husbands’ mansion, and the only independence a woman could have was in hell.

Ramabai was especially critical of the cultural practice of sati or widow burning. She went to great lengths to establish that sati was not in the original Code of Manu. She claimed that the ritual was a “custom invented by the priesthood after the code of Manu was compiled.”

According to Ramabai, sati did not exist in the laws taught prior to the compilation of the codes. In fact, she argued that the codes themselves had never included the “self-immolation of widows.” It was not until the Code of Vishnu that the edict “after the death of her husband [the widow] should either lead a virtuous life or ascend the funeral pyre of her husband” appeared and began to be practiced.¹¹⁸ Ramabai lamented that this practice continued despite missionary petitions to the British

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 72.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 73, 74.

government to stop the “inhuman custom.” But the British contended, “the social and religious customs of the people constituted no part of the business of the government, and that their rule might be endangered by such interferences.”

In 1829, Raja Ram Mohun Roy (the Indian reformer who sparked the desire in Mary Carpenter to go to India) had convinced the Governor-General of India to prohibit sati in the British domains. However, Ramabai believed that the law did nothing to the orthodox Hindu mind. She claimed that it took until 1844 when it was discovered that the priests had, in deed, mistranslating the Veda before men changed their attitudes toward the cultural practice.¹¹⁹

Beside the danger of sati, Ramabai also warned the reader of other cultural dangers that widows faced. They were subject to a host of insults such as being stripped of their ornamentation, forced to shave their heads, forbidden from all festivals, reduced to one garment, fed only one meal per day, and referred to as a “rand,” which was the same name for a “Nautch girl or harlot.”¹²⁰ A widow was a disgrace to the family and shunned by all society.

Ramabai cautioned reformers not to assume that widow-remarriage would solve this cultural problem because the customs and treatment of widows were so ingrained. She claimed that men would not want to risk excommunication from the community by marrying a widow. “So the poor, helpless high-caste widow with the one chance of ending her miseries in the Suttee rite taken away from her, remains as in ages past with none to help her.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ The Veda is the most holy text written in an ancient Sanskrit, which differs from the later versions.

¹²⁰ Ibid. p. 83.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 93.

The Root of the Problem: Indian Culture

As a social reformer, Ramabai saw culture as the root of the social problems for women. Similarly to Mary Carpenter's assessment, Ramabai believed that a drastic shift in the culture of India was needed if women's conditions were to improve. Yet, Carpenter thought of women's social uplift in terms of English responsibility. Whereas, Ramabai knew, what historian Nicholas Dirks said, that actually colonialism "created much of what is accepted as Indian 'tradition,' including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly and unambiguously at the head."¹²²

Ramabai's deep understanding of Indian culture allowed her to make more pointed suggestions for change. Although Ramabai was fully aware of the vast diversity of India's 250 million people that included "Hindus, Mahomedans, Eurasians, Europeans, and Jews," she also knew that the majority of the population was Hindu.¹²³ Ramabai believed that Hinduism influenced the social institutions and daily lives of all Indians and tried to establish for her readers a paradigm for understanding India in the context of Hindu influence.

The Code of Manu addressed women as a general category paradoxically. Ramabai displayed the spectrum of decrees about women with continuous quotes of the sacred texts. Whereas at one extreme 'Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-laws, who desire their own welfare' the opposite extreme pronounced that 'For women no sacramental rite is performed with

¹²² Dirks, Nicholas B., "Castes of Mind" Representations, No. 37, Special Issue: *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*. (Winter, 1992), pp. 56-78.

¹²³ Sarasvati, *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, p. 1.

sacred text, thus the law is settled; women who are destitute of strength and destitute of the knowledge of Vedic texts, are as impure as falsehood itself, that is a fixed rule.¹²⁴

Ramabai specifically pointed out to her reader that although Indian women were generally regarded as inferior to men in Indian society, women could be regarded with supreme god-like status functioning in certain societal roles. Ramabai claimed that the “honor bestowed upon the mother is without parallel in any other country.”¹²⁵ However, underlying the honor paid to the function of motherhood was the ever-residing suspicion and disgust toward the woman who was a mother only for a season. Ramabai believed that the “root of the custom” of purdah or women’s seclusion was the “low esteem of woman’s nature and character in general.”

Although the religion of Hinduism permeated the lives of Hindustani to the point of influencing social customs and order, Ramabai believed that many social customs were founded upon traditions rather than the authority of the sacred text within the religion of Hinduism.

“Each custom when it is old enough to be entitled ‘the way of the ancients,’ takes the form of religion and is scrupulously observed. These customs founded for the most part on traditions are altogether independent of the canonical writings, so much so that a person is liable to be punished or excommunicated for breaking custom even if sanctioned by religion.”¹²⁶

No social institution was safe from Ramabai’s critique; using her profound knowledge of Indian history she deconstructed the fundamental belief in caste. She claimed that “The talented and most intelligent portion of the Aryan Hindus became, as was natural, the governing body of the entire race.” These leaders then created social

¹²⁴ Ibid. pp. 50-53.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 51.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

caste for the “economical division of labor.” Brahmins were the “spiritual governors” and “heads of society.” The Kshatriyas were the warriors who defended the country and kept the internal peace. The “business-loving tradesmen and artisans” were Vaisyas, and all other people not in the first three castes were in the lowest Shudra caste.

According to Ramabai, “in ancient times” Indians were not born into one of the four castes. Instead, individuals were assigned a social standing according to their skills or “merit” allowing social mobility and intermarriage. However, caste did become an “article of Hindu faith” according to birth, and women could not be given to a man of even a lower clan within the same caste without serious social implications. “Offenders by intermarriage, or change of faith, are without redemption” and if a “Brahmin condescends to marry a person of lower caste, or even eats or drinks with any of them, he is despised and shunned as an outcaste.”¹²⁷

Although there was interplay between the influence of customs on religion and religious faith on the social customs, there were several written holy texts that were revered in the Hindu faith. According to Ramabai, Hindus believe the Vedas to be the “eternal, self-existing Word of God, revealed by Him to different sages.” In addition to the Vedas, there were twenty-five other “books of sacred law.” The Code of Manu was second in sacred authority only to the Vedas. “Although Manu and the other law-givers differ greatly on many points, they all agree on things concerning women.”¹²⁸ It was through these sacred texts that Ramabai both explained and combated Indian women’s social conditions. “Those who diligently and impartially read Sanscrit literature in the

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 9.

¹²⁸ Ibid. pp. 10, 11.

original, cannot fail to recognize the law-giver Manu as one of those hundreds who have done their best to make woman a hateful being in the world's eye."¹²⁹

Along with denoting the societal attitudes toward women, Ramabai also explained to her reader the role of "women's religion" in degrading Indian women. Not only was a woman seen as 'never fit for independence' but also a woman had a religious obligation not to be independent because her only hope for salvation was through her "obedience" to her husband.¹³⁰

Manu declared that a woman who failed in her religious duties to her husband would 'after death enter the womb of a jackal, and [be] tormented by disease, the punishment of her sin.'¹³¹ Women were the property of men, and according to Ramabai husbands had "absolute power over the wife." Therefore, a wife's submission to her husband was necessary for the woman's protection, as well as, part of her religious duty, and it was guarded by societal laws and even protected by British rule. Women were bound to "suffer silently, knowing that the gods and justice always favor the men."¹³²

After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British government in India would not interfere with the "social and religious customs and laws." Ramabai illustrated her frustration with the British government's lack of intervention by describing the famous Bombay case of Rakhmabai in 1887. Rakhmabai was a well-educated woman who contested her arranged marriage on the grounds that she did not give her consent and therefore the marriage was not binding and conjugal rites could not be claimed.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 55.

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 54, 58.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 60.

¹³² Ibid. p. 64.

The British official who heard her case ruled in her favor until a large number of “the conservative party” clamored and raised funds declaring that Britain was interfering with Hindu law. The official then sent the case back to the local court for a re-trial where Rakhmabai was ordered to live with the man and pay the court costs. Ramabai was in America at the time, but was well acquainted with Rakhmabai and included a portion of a letter sent from her friend directly after the retrial. In the letter, Rakhmabai questioned the justice of the decision and the fate of Indian women.

‘The learned and civilized judges of full bench are determined to enforce, in this enlightened age, the inhumane laws enacted in barbaric times, four thousand years ago...Are we not living under the impartial British government, which boasts of giving equal justice to all, and are we not ruled by the Queen-Empress Victoria, herself a woman?...There is no hope for women in India, whether they be under Hindu rule or British rule.’¹³³

Ramabai was not “surprised” by the decision, but instead saw the case as a direct affront to progress for Indian women. In her opinion, the court decision was a perfect example of the collaboration of male power dominating Indian women, “powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty-nine million men and the three hundred and thirty million gods of the Hindus, all these have conspired together.” The British government was just “fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India,” by upholding the customs of Hindu law, and Ramabai facetiously wished the government “success, no matter if that success be achieved at the sacrifice of the rights and comfort of over one hundred million women.”¹³⁴ Ramabai appealed to her Christian audience by implying that until change occurred for Indian women, heaven would be the only place of peace and justice for Indian women.

¹³³ Ibid. p. 66.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p. 68 Code of Manu quoted in Ramabai’s text.

Like many male Indian social reformers that went before her, Ramabai saw the condition of Indian women as a reflection of the level of progress in India. She detailed “how the condition of women tells upon the society.”¹³⁵ She felt that women and men composed the basic unit of society. If half of society was kept in ignorance then the entire society suffered, and India as a nation could not progress. The social condition of upper-caste women in purdah caused women to be “weak,” “dwarfed” their physical stature, “crushed” their spirits, and “starved their minds.”

After describing the degraded position of women, Ramabai questioned how the next generation could break the cycle when “men of Hindustan do not, as babes, suck from their mother’s breast the true patriotism.” Mothers who were mere babes themselves could not be expected to know how to take care of children, and Ramabai concluded that ignorance was not only costly to the progress of the nation but cost many infants their lives. She conceded that ignorant women hindered enlightened men, but did not blame the women themselves who had been converted by Hindu law into “slavery-loving creatures.”

To end the terrible cycle of ignorance Ramabai believed “efforts for elevation must come from within and work outward to be effectual.” However, she also thought that it was “the duty of our Western sisters to teach them how they may become self-reliant!”¹³⁶ Only after Indian women had learned self-reliance could “a body of persons from among themselves who shall make it their life-work to teach by precept and

¹³⁵ Ibid. pp. 94-106.

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 101.

example their fellow countrywomen” accomplish “the general diffusion of education among women in India”¹³⁷

The Appeal for Female Education

Ramabai’s standards for Indian womanhood were seen not only in her critique of culture but also in her plans for cultural change. She had advocated female education for many years, and after visiting America her plan for reaching her vision was finally completed. The Education Commission of 1883 and the 1880-81 Census had found that out of 99, 700,000 women in India only 200,000 were literate. Ramabai attributed these numbers to child-marriages and superstition. Women could only go to school from age 7 to 9 if they became a child-bride. Also there was a popular belief among high-caste women that they would become a widow if they learned to read. They feared the price they would pay for education, and many mothers-in-law who did not want to lose their resource in old age easily perpetuated this fear. From a very British standpoint, Ramabai called the women of India “ignorant, unpatriotic, selfish and uncultivated, they drag the men down with them in to the dark abyss where they dwell together without hope, without the ambition to be something or to do something in the world.”¹³⁸

Yet, according to Ramabai, there was hope for India if the elevation started from within the culture because Indian women were “hungering and thirsting for knowledge.”¹³⁹ Ramabai led her readers through the cycle of misery of Indian womanhood to arouse an emotional response of sympathy and anger that would “stir their

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 106.

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 105.

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 107.

hearts.”¹⁴⁰ She wanted to “bring to the notice of Western women the condition of their oriental sisters.”¹⁴¹ Ramabai was well aware of the international feminist network already in place, and tried to use that resource. Ramabai was the product of an activist father for female education and she had spent all of her life doing the same for her fellow women, and she felt that she had recognized the problem and developed a solution.

There were three tenets that Ramabai considered to be crucial to the advancement of Indian women: “self-reliance, education, and native women teachers.” Self-reliance would only come through education, and in order to reach the entire Indian population of women, education could only come through native women teachers. Just as Mary Carpenter had almost twenty years earlier, Ramabai saw the high-caste Indians as the answer to the problem because they were “the most intelligent” and had been “a refined and cultivated race for more than two thousand years.”¹⁴² If there were institutions that would train the young high-caste Hindu widows, they could become independent. Independence would have solved one social problem and the widows could, in turn, become teachers and educate other women, which would elevate the entire nation. “But alas! Institutions have not been found anywhere in India where high-caste widows can receive shelter and education.”

Although Mary Carpenter had visited India and convinced the British government to establish six normal training schools for women along with ‘Mary Carpenter Scholarships’ available for women to attend, Ramabai was critical of her work. “These schools were opened to women of every caste, and while they have undoubtedly been of use, they have not realized the hopes of their founder, partly because of the impossibility

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 116.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 107.

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 108.

of keeping caste-rules in them, and partly on account of the inadequacy of the arrangements for attendance.”¹⁴³

One of Ramabai’s primary concerns was the transition from seclusion to independence. She did not want widows to feel that their caste or religion would be threatened by exposure to the world beyond purdah. By adhering to strict caste ordinances, Ramabai hoped to relieve the fears of excommunication, which might hinder women from seeking education. Besides women’s hesitancy based on social and spiritual reasons, Pandita confronted economic obstacles to women’s education. High-caste widows who sought education would not have any financial support from their husband’s family. Thus, shelter and food needed to be provided for widows seeking education above and beyond the \$12-25 per year offered by the scholarships. However, even the inadequate scholarships were often unattainable because illiterate women were expected to pass examinations given by the educational department before they received a scholarship.

Besides the normal schools, missionary schools were also unacceptable because “no woman of any religion in which she firmly believes whether it appears to others to be true or false, would violate her conscience simply for food and shelter.”¹⁴⁴ According to Ramabai, the two options for education available to Indian high-caste women were completely unacceptable and virtually ineffective. Ramabai’s plan for a school focused on meeting the cultural and physical needs of high-caste Hindu women, and was devised from a lifetime of advocacy for Indian women.

¹⁴³ Ibid. p. 110.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 112.

Ramabai proposed a house that would shelter only high-caste widows from abuse without the fear of losing their caste. The widows would learn how to be teachers, governess, nurses, or housekeepers. Independence was the goal, and moral excellence was an imperative in all of the activities. Each house would be under the supervision of influential Hindu ladies and gentlemen from the community. American teachers would provide the training in order to “combine the advantage of Eastern and Western civilization and education.” The final touch of distinction would be an exceptional library in each home with books including the topics of “history, science, art, religion, and literature.” The women would not be required to read the Bible, but it would be on the shelf next to the Vedas and other holy books. Ramabai proposed the immediate initiation of her project. The only thing that remained to be done was to raise the funds for the project.

Ramabai had little faith in the majority of her fellow countrymen, claiming that most Indians were strongly opposed to female education, and “one must have the power of performing miracles to induce this class of men to receive the gospel of society’s well-being through the elevation of women.”¹⁴⁵ However, she believed that within ten years her project would create a miracle for Indian women and then the project would be self-sustaining. Ramabai had assessed the costs of her plan and decided that she needed \$15,000 for the initial passage back to India (for herself, her daughter, and two American teachers) and for the initial set up fees for the female training school. Then she would need \$5,000 yearly for the next ten years. Until the project could be self-sufficient, she pleaded for Christian help.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 116.

The final remarks of her book read like a sermon as she admonishes the reader to do their Christian duty. “It is my solemn belief that it is the most sacred duty of those who dwell in their highly-favored land to bestow freely talents of whatever kind they may possess to help forward this educational movement.”¹⁴⁶ Ramabai considered her mission as a preparation for the “preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to the heathen.” The work she would do to educate the women of India would open “the locked doors,” and prepare the sheltered women to be “able to bear the dazzling light of the outer world and the perilous blasts of social persecution.”¹⁴⁷ Her language was immersed in Biblical metaphors about salvation, and she continually painted a comparison in the reader’s mind between the privileges of America and the “inhumane social customs” of India. “Rescue the little widows” she pleaded, “in the most holy name of God I summon you true women and men of America to bestow help quickly, regardless of nation, caste or creed.”¹⁴⁸

Conclusions

Ramabai’s passionate words did not fall on deaf ears. The American and Canadian women’s communities heartily supported Ramabai’s mission and agreed with her vision of shedding light upon their Eastern sisters. One year after the *High Caste Hindu Woman* was published the Ramabai Association, established by American supporters, had raised \$30,000 for her cause of educating the Hindu widows.¹⁴⁹ This amount was almost half of the total sum that Ramabai projected for the initial set-up fee

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 117.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 118.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 119.

¹⁴⁹ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 47.

and passage back to India, as well as, the projects costs for the next ten years. With the funds for her project secured, Ramabai went back to India.

In 1889, the Sharada Sadan (Home of Wisdom), a school for High caste widows, was set up in Bombay. Although all caste rules were observed, Ramabai and her project received severe criticism from Indian reformers who claimed that she was trying to convert widows to Christianity. To minimize this criticism, Ramabai established an Executive Committee over the school composed of reformers known for their strict Hindu beliefs. But the critiques were not appeased and the same newspaper, *Kesari*, which had praised Ramabai's cousin for her 'undaunted courage and an eager desire to serve one's country,' charged Ramabai with trying to destroy Indian culture.¹⁵⁰ The school underwent financial trouble in Bombay and relocated to Poona.

Although criticism caused twenty-five women to drop out of Sharada Sadan, Ramabai's dreams were realized. "By 1900, the school had trained 80 women, who could earn their own living by teaching or nursing."¹⁵¹ Ramabai opened a second school, Mukti, in response to the famine of 1897. The school was located in Kedgaon, thirty miles outside of Poona, on 100 acres of land and housed women and children who were victims of the famine. By 1900, what began as a shelter was a "major institution" with 2,000 inhabitants learning a variety of technical skills such as printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, woodcutting, weaving, needlework, farming, and gardening. Ramabai continued to receive financial support from the American society in her name, and at Mukti she was less inhibited in encouraging Christianity. All students were

¹⁵⁰ Sarasvati, *High Caste Hindu Woman*, p. v.

¹⁵¹ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 47.

required to join unions or women's societies. Ramabai saw the formation of new interests and coalitions as a way to combat the divisions of caste.

Unfortunately for Ramabai in terms of the support she received, her motives often fell beyond the scope of Indian reformers who feared her Christian conversion. Within Indian culture, Ramabai had always lived her life outside of the normal constructs for women. Her conversion to Christianity seemed to validate the criticism of male Indian reformers viewed her radical ways as not being truly Indian. Yet, to dismiss Ramabai's reforms as non-Indian simply because she converted overlooks the first twenty-five years of her unorthodox life.

Pandita Ramabai's life and advocacy was extraordinary given the cultural expectations for Indian women during the colonial period. Like her father, Ramabai lived out her convictions. As a feminist, she felt contempt for indigenous patriarchy as well as colonialism and used any means necessary to raise Indian women's consciousness.¹⁵² She herself was not a child-bride, married below her caste, traveled throughout India, as well as, England and America. Some orthodox Hindu circles excommunicated anyone who traveled over the ocean, and many Indians felt that traveling "unsexed" women.¹⁵³ Ramabai spoke publicly, and even converted to Christianity. All of these acts were a direct affront to the ideals of Indian womanhood in the late Victorian Era. Yet, aside from her own independence, the most threatening facet of Ramabai's convictions felt by Hindu males was her committed desire to educate high-caste Indian women and her vision of cultural agency.

¹⁵² Ibid. p. 72.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 73.

Chapter 4

Constructions: Gender, Culture, and Agency

Colonialism brought English and Indian cultures face to face in an encounter that questioned the cultural norms of Indian society. English and Indian social activists often had differing motives for promoting social progress in India. However, most social reformers both male and female agreed that the social condition of Indian women was the main hindrance to India's development. In efforts to improve women's low status, social reformers questioned India's most fundamental cultural ideals regarding women. Child-marriage, purdah, and sati were seen as direct obstacles to progress. Thus, the Indian female became the focus of many social debates.

When female social reformers entered the debate on Indian female education during the second half of the nineteenth century, they became engaged in cultural agency. The writings of Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai revealed their own cultural biases, which were constructed by their position within British society and culture. Interestingly, the two women did have several parallel circumstances. Both Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai's fathers were social activists, as well as, critical contributors to the quality of education that their daughters received. Additionally, both women were exposed to the specific issue of Indian female education through their father's social advocacy. Carpenter met Rajah Roy because he stayed with her father while he visited England, and Ramabai's father was himself a major advocate for female education.

The women also shared a common privilege of being middle class or high-caste, as well as, being highly educated in Latin and Sanskrit, respectively. However, because English and Indian cultures responded differently to their father's advocacy, the women's

shared high social status afforded them very few of the same lived experiences until they began to advocate education for Indian women. When Carpenter traveled in India as a spinster and Ramabai traveled to England and America as a widow, the women both encountered the paradoxes of British identity. Whether the two women fully recognized these identity paradoxes is not clear, but the confusion found in their personal writings does exemplify the complexities of British identity.

Mary Carpenter found that her Englishness gained her a privileged voice with the British government over the Indian male reformers. Although most of her suggestions were simply a summary of what the reformers in India had been petitioning for over the past several years, the government did not give any heed to the Indians' requests until Carpenter voiced them. Similarly, Ramabai discovered that as a woman and advocate for female education her voice was better received and her plans better supported by the international Christian British community rather than by her native Indian community. Yet, despite the comparable incidents that the two women went through, they still critiqued Indian women from distinguishable cultural standpoints and developed plans for the achievement of Indian female education from their specific perspectives.

Throughout her journal, Carpenter measured Indian culture by a Victorian, English standard. While she did not think that the government should interfere with the culture, she did believe the culture should change. Specifically, she wanted the women to be educated according to a western Enlightenment model. Yet, she felt justified in her desires for cultural change by claiming that the Indian social reformers wanted the same.

In contrast, Ramabai's perspective on the culture of India vastly differed from Carpenter's even though she had converted to Christianity. Ramabai agreed that the

Hindu women were in a despicable state. but she did not entirely concur with the Victorian model of femininity. Ramabai had the distinct advantage and independence of thought to accept only what she wanted from Hinduism, Christianity, and feminist ideals for women. While Ramabai did share a respect for education and independence, she did not share Carpenter's cultural imperialist views toward Indian culture. Ramabai knew the history of India and did not accept the patriarchal constructions of imperial Victorian ideals. While the women's observations of Indian culture demonstrated the differences in Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai's cultural constructions of gender, their plans for educating Indian women only heighten the distinction.

As an English woman, it was inevitable that Mary Carpenter's plan for female education was an outsider's analysis of a social situation. However, it was largely based on internal critiques made by Indian social reformers. Most of the educated elites agreed that female education was the answer to Indian cultural elevation. Yet, within the specific details of Mary Carpenter's plan for normal training schools for women were undertones of British cultural imperialism, which included a Victorian model for ideal Indian womanhood. Carpenter's goal for Indian female education was grounded in her middle class social awakening. She wanted to help her Eastern sisters rise up and become British, Victorian women. Ultimately her plan ignored the cultural standards of caste for women. According to Pandita's critique of Carpenter's normal school, the scholarships available to high-caste women would be completely insufficient to live on given the reality that the woman's family would disown her if she tried to attend Carpenter's school.

Unlike Carpenter's goal of simply producing better mothers and wives, even though Carpenter herself did not fit into this Victorian model, Ramabai's main goal for female education was female independence. Ramabai believed that Indian women's status had fallen from a previous Golden Age. Thus, Indian women needed to return to a higher position within Indian society.

Although Pandita Ramabai reciprocated Carpenter's call for sisterhood by asking her Western sisters to teach Indian women how to be independent, her plan for Indian education was based on different standards. Pandita Ramabai was able to devise a plan for a normal school that met the needs of the women practicing Hinduism. Ramabai did believe that Indian women would be better off as Christians. However, her model for Indian femininity was a revision of traditional practices not the adaptation of all Western constructs for women. According to Ramabai, education and social progress were not directly linked with westernization.

As social activists, both women promoted education for women and by women. Specifically, Carpenter and Ramabai saw high-caste widows as the key to widespread female education. By shifting the ideals of Indian females to include formal education, both Carpenter and Ramabai were proposing a major change in Indian cultural standards that would affect the very core of Indian society, the identity of Indian women.

The shifts in the ideals for Indian women that emerged in the nineteenth century were a direct result of the intermingling of several cultural influences. English and Indian women were active participants in the process of shifting these cultural ideals as demonstrated by the advocacy of Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai. The actions, which they took to promote female education, were done in a deliberate attempt to

change India's culture. By promoting new definitions of Indian womanhood, they tried to reconstruct gender. Nonetheless, Mary Carpenter and Pandita Ramabai promoted values for Indian women that had been constructed from their own cultural perspectives. and it is important for historians to acknowledge the complex role that women played as cultural agents trying to define gender in the British India experience.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in late-Victorian Britain*. p. 19.

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