SETTING the Captives FREE

Oppressed women around the globe await those willing to carry on the legacy of PANDITA RAMABAI.

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SCRIPTURE REMINDS US THAT SOME PEOPLE lie awake at night imagining new forms of evil. More often than not, such evil involves wasting the lives of women and children. In India alone, millions of girls, some as young as eight years old, are “hired,” “rented,” or simply “sold” or “married” to old men. Victims of drudgery or sexual exploitation, many do not live long, and those who survive—the “broken” or “used up”—are thrown into the street to beg. Widow burning was outlawed in 1828, but today thousands of lives are lost each year to “bride burning,” when a mother-in-law “accidentally” spills burning oil on a new bride in the kitchen—usually for the sake of the dowry. About two million children around the world still succumb to “sex tourism” every year.

Many champions of women’s rights have given their lives to alter such situations. Christian and non-Christian activists look back for inspiration to the 19th-century Indian social reformer Pandita Ramabai.

No word better epitomizes the lifelong quest and career of Ramabai than mukti—the term for liberty, freedom, release, or salvation. It expresses her own personal journey to Christianity. It is the name she gave to her school for rescued girls. Emblazoned on the Mukti Mission’s newsletter, the “Mukti Prayer Bell,” was an engraving of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, along with the ringing words, “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the inhabitants thereof—Lev. XXV, v. x.” This was her hope for millions of oppressed people, especially women and children for whom she fought throughout her life.

Ramabai’s concern for the plight of women came from her father. A renowned Sanskrit scholar who had been ostracized for daring to teach his child-bride to read Sanskrit, he had been forced to wander the length and breadth of India with his small family, living on alms. He left his daughter a priceless legacy: rigorous training and a disciplined memory that enabled her to recite an enormous corpus of classical lore. After her parents and sister starved to death in a famine, Ramabai continued to wander until, at the age of 20, she was “discovered” by pandits (scholars) of Calcutta. Overnight, she became a national sensation.

In 1882, after social reformers invited her to teach young women, she spoke out against the degradations of child-marriage—which almost invariably resulted in homeless child-widows—and castigated men for their treatment of women. “I am the child of a man who had to suffer . . . on account of advocating Female Education. . . . I consider it my duty, to the end of my life, to maintain this cause . . . in this land.”

VICTIMS OF CIRCUMSTANCE. Children in the red-light district of Calcutta are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.
Meanwhile, Ramabai had been growing more and more disillusioned with ancient religious texts indicating that women had no souls, nor any place in eternity. Not long after she stumbled upon a copy of the Gospel of Luke, she had long discussions with Nehemiah Gore, a renowned Brahman Christian convert. She publicly declared her faith in Christ while she was visiting England. "I realized, after reading the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Saviour he claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden women in India." Her quest for mukti had reached its goal: "I was hungry for something better ... I found it in the Christian Bible and was satisfied."

When Ramabai attended her cousin's graduation from Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, her cause found an international audience. Her speeches made her famous throughout America as a pioneer in the battle for women's rights. Frances Willard, president of the Women's Temperance Christian Union, described Ramabai as "a woman-lover ... not man-hater, for she is too good-natured not to love all humanity ... but because women need special help."

Revenue from Ramabai's first English book, The High Caste Hindu Woman, and fund-raising efforts in America enabled her to found "Sharada Sadan" ("Home of Learning") for downtrodden women in Pune, India, in 1889. But when one of her students turned to Christianity, public outrages forced her to look for a new location. In the village of Kedgaon 30 miles away, on 100 acres of "base, stony, treeless and waterless" wilderness, Ramabai and her helpers dug wells, built housing, and set up schools. She called her new mission Mukti.

In 1895, Ramabai disguised herself as a sannyasini (female mendicant) and traveled on foot to the sacred sites of her youth, determined to rescue destitute women who were being forced into servitude and sexual degradation. She beheld unspeakable horrors: hundreds of agents enticing abandoned and helpless child-widows into institutions where they were shut up or rented out to men. Later such women were turned out onto the streets after they were deemed wasted and worthless, to "die a death worse than a starved street dog." Her initial effort to rescue seven wretched women nearly cost her life. She returned twice, during a terrible famine, to rescue and carry away scores of victims in her train of bullock carts—starving little girls (and on occasion a few boys) clad in filthy rags—and to give them a new life at the Muki Mission. Literate and skilled "graduates" of Mukti went out into the world. Many became teachers or widely sought-after wives. Some attended colleges in America and became medical doctors.

Pandita Ramabai died in 1922, having just finished translating the Bible into the local language, Marathi. Her name, long banished from public memory in her own country because of her Christian faith, is being resurrected today by feminists and others who are carrying on her vision to help the downtrodden. "Pandita Ramabai Sarawati," wrote Amritlal B. Shah, "was the greatest woman produced by Modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all of history. Her achievements as a champion of women's rights ... remain unrivaled even after the lapse of ... a century."

Ramabai believed that, since all have been made by God and can be redeemed through Christ, no human being should be oppressed or excluded from the blessings of liberty. Reactionary forces could neither crush her spirit nor defeat her mission. Indeed, she often declared, everything she accomplished had been made possible by the mukti she had found in the Lord to whom she turned for strength.

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