RAMABAI, PANDITA. Ramabai (1858–1922) was an extraordinary woman of her time—an educator, scholar, feminist, and social reformer, whose life was an example of how womanhood and religious identity were negotiated against the backdrop of Brahmanical culture, Christianity, and colonialism. For Hindus and Christians, her life and work, including her intellectual probings and hermeneutical clashes with Hindu social reformers and Christian missionaries, seemed to signal contradictory and confusing messages. As a learned scholar of her own tradition, she vigorously questioned the status of women within Hinduism. Later, when she became a Christian, she challenged institutionalized Christianity with its creeds, which she felt stifled the power of the gospel, and she subsequently quarreled with Bible translators for their unwitting use of Vedântic terms in the Marathi version of the Bible. She seems to have lived and worked out her life on the margins of traditions, constructing her own independent agency.

Ramabai was born into a Chitpavan Brahman family in Karnata. She was the youngest child of Anant Shastri Dongre, a devout Hindu and erudite Sanskrit pundit, and his much younger wife, Lakshmibai. Contrary to the prevailing mood of the time, Anant Shastri believed in women’s education and he opposed outdated customs like child marriage, having witnessed the sad fate of his daughter Krishnabai’s child marriage. Ramabai had an unconventional upbringing in that she was taught at home, receiving Sanskrit education mainly from her mother, who herself was taught by her husband despite fierce opposition from their community. From an early age, Ramabai was exposed to a life of never-ending pilgrimage and the reciting of the Purâñas in various locations, a traditional religious vocation, which her family undertook in order to earn a modest living. While this kind of precarious living brought untold hardship later, it freed Ramabai from domesticity and any form of patriarchal control.

Ramabai’s life was marked by a series of unfortunate deaths in her family. She lost her parents, elder sister, elder brother, husband, and finally her daughter shortly before her own death. Her travels around India with her brother after her parents’ demise not only offered her the opportunity to visit several important Hindu holy places, but it also enabled her to witness the plight of women, which led her to champion their cause.

It was Ramabai’s visit to Calcutta in 1878 that brought a dramatic turn of events. Her knowledge of the Sanskrit language and literary and religious texts came to be widely known and appreciated, and in recognition of her Sanskrit learning the honorific title pandita (learned) was conferred on her. She defied traditional caste norms by accepting an offer of marriage from a non-Brahman Brahmô Bengali lawyer, Bipin Behari Das, but he died within two years of their marriage, leaving her with an infant daughter, Manorama.

While her early widowhood deepened her concern for women in a similar predicament, her faith in the kind of Purânic and ritualistic Hinduism in which she was raised was beginning to wear off. When she later became acquainted with other Hindu texts, such as the Dharmasûtras, with a pronounced patriarchal bias, she was not convinced that Hinduism as such had any hope for women. She found, however, that her early forays into reform movements, such as the Brâhma Samaj and Prarthana Samaj, were fruitless as alternatives to Hinduism because in her view these movements focused more on philosophical aspects than on the plight of women. She came into contact with Christian missionaries but had no intention of becoming a Christian until much later in 1883 while she was in England, much to the dismay of Hindus back home. She was not wholly accepting of Christianity at this stage. She was not willing to substitute one form of patriarchy with another. She proved to be a thorn in the flesh of Anglicans when she questioned such basic tenets as the Trinity, miracles, the divinity of Christ, and the resurrection.

What is extraordinary is that Ramabai was able to make an impression in the strongly male-dominated public discourse of her time. Her highly persuasive books, both in the vernacular and in English, established her as one of the important voices of the era. The fact that she wrote Sri Dharma Niti (Morals for women, 1882) in order to finance her trip to England (where her hope of studying medicine never materialized) testifies that her reforming zeal preceded her attraction to Christianity. In this book she urges women to educate themselves and transform their lives, citing mythological examples of Hindu womanhood. The High Caste Hindu Woman (1887) is a trenchant feminist critique of a Brahmanical patriarchy that accords its women a low position. United Stateschi Lokashiti ani Pravasavrîta (The People’s of the United States, 1889) is an account of her visit to the United States, and it reflects her feminist concerns whilst contrasting freedoms in the United States and colonial India. A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure (1907), her last public discourse, was a pamphlet narrating a spiritual odyssey that culminated in her final acceptance of the Christian faith.
The last decade of her life was spent translating the Bible into Marathi and producing Greek-Marathi and Greek-Hebrew lexicons.

Ramabai put teaching into practice. It was her early disappointment with her own community that made her turn to England and the United States to solicit help for her work among women. Realizing the importance of education for empowering women, she ran a number of vocational programs. Sharada Sadan (Home of Learning), initially a home for high-caste child widows but later for destitute women and children of all castes, provided training and education. Although the school was initially secular in orientation, it gradually became explicitly Christian. There were allegations of conversions at Sharada Sadan, which caused a major rift between Ramabai and Hindu social reformers; although Ramabai was exonerated, the rift remained.

The fact that Ramabai’s commitment to Christianity coexisted with her conscious attempt to declare herself a Hindu and Indian in public discourses, continues to puzzle Hindus and Christians who would like to categorize her neatly.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**SHARADA SUGIRTHARAJAH (2005)**

**RAMADAN** See **ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS YEAR; ŞAWM**

**RAMAKRISHNA** (1834/6–1886) was a Hindu ecstatic and mystic, and to many Hindus a “supremely realized self” (*paramahamsa*) and an *avatāra*, or incarnation of the divine. Through his disciple, Swami Vivekananda, his gospel of the truth of all religions became a source of inspiration for modern Hindu universalism.

**LIFE.** Born Gādādhār Chatterjee in an isolated village in Bengal, Ramakrishna belonged to a Vaiśṇava brahman family whose primary deity was the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Rāma, although the family also worshiped other deities, such as Śiva and Durgā. As a boy, Gādādhār was gifted with immense emotional and aesthetic sensitivity, which was nurtured by norms of ecstatic devotion (*bhākiti*) common within the Bengali Viṣṇu tradition. Often, when overwhelmed by beauty and emotion, the boy would lose consciousness in an ecstatic trance.

His father’s death in 1843 increased Ramakrishna’s dependence upon his mother, while the role of father figure was assumed by his eldest brother, Rāmkumār, whom he followed to Calcutta in 1852. Rāmkumār became adviser to a wealthy widow, herself a Sākta, or devotee of iakti (the divine power symbolized as the Goddess), who was building a temple to the Divine Mother Kālī at Dakshineshwar, just north of the city. Though dedicated to Kālī, the temple also included shrines to Śiva and to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, thus combining the major strands of Hindu devotional religion. Rāmkumār was appointed the temple’s chief priest and Ramakrishna became priest to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa.

When Rāmkumār died in 1856, Ramakrishna became priest to the Divine Mother. Bereft and overwhelmed by the pain of separation, Ramakrishna developed a frenzied longing for Kālī. Eating and sleeping little, his anguish over being separated from the Mother drove him to seize a sword in her temple, determined to end his life. Instead, he lost consciousness in a bliss-filled vision of Kālī. After this he desperately sought continual awareness of the Mother, seeking to become her instrument. As he later attested, he was nearly driven insane, spending several years in a state of divine madness in which visions of various deities came to him repeatedly, while he was unable even to close his eyes.

By 1858 concerns about Ramakrishna’s mental health were mounting. His family arranged for him to return to their village, where he was married to a local girl, Sāradānī Devi, then age six. Sāradā remained in her parents’ home for several more years, only visiting Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar for the first time in 1872. By this time Ramakrishna was practicing strict celibacy, his ascetic inclinations routinely summed up in his professed aversion to *kāminī-kāśica*, “women and gold.” His marriage to Sāradā was never consummated, but she served him as helpmate until his death.