

# Transcultural conversion : the life of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922)

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# TRANSCULTURAL CONVERSION: THE LIFE OF PANDITA RAMABAI (1858–1922)

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## *Abstract*

Pandita Ramabai provides an instructively complex example for a transcultural biography, a life extending over different and distant cultural spaces, times and practices. After travelling around India, from south to north, east to west, in the function of an itinerant religious story reciter, she went and lived in England, spent two years in America, returned and settled in India. In the process of living across countries, Ramabai converted to Christianity, yet her autobiography documents that her conversion was socially not livable and conceptually problematic in the entangled history of India and Europe. Her own words reveal the traces of her self-imposed or historically determined silences or criticisms. For the research it leads to insights into religious and political challenges of her historical set up and allows for conceptual inquiries into transcultural conversion.

## 1. Introduction and problematic

Pandita Ramabai's life provides an instructively complex example for a transcultural biography, since it extends over different and distant cultural spaces, times and practices. After travelling around India, from south to north, east to west, in the function of an itinerant religious story reciter, she moved to England and spent two years in America, before returning and settling in India. Pandita has left us with several writings, including autobiographical reflections. She has written extensively about women and their need to emancipate from a patriarchal set-up, about religion, and on social reform, quite in line with the important subjects in fashion at her time. The present contribution concentrates on the question of conversion and reveals that conversion is ultimately not possible in the connected history between India and Europe as lived by

Ramabai.<sup>1</sup> Conversion is certainly lived reality on the social, cultural and historical level of Ramabai's life. The difficulties she experienced on all these levels, however, make the use of conversion as a concept to describe the contact between cultures or religions a "misfit". The biographical reality of Ramabai's life cannot adequately and logically be described as conversion. Conflicts, misunderstandings and rejections would have to be defining characteristics of conversion if her life is taken as a model or basis for the concept of "conversion".

The main sources of analysis are her own writings, in particular a text called *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* (1907) (hereafter *Testimony*), which is an autobiographical approach to her Christianity, disclosing her retrospective perspective on her own life.<sup>2</sup>

Pandita Ramabai was simultaneously an Indian feminist, a Diaspora writer in England, an insider to the Indian society yet an outsider because of her conversion to Christianity. Her choices put her at odds with many people and raises questions for those interested in her life story: What does it mean for a high-caste Indian woman in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to convert to Christianity? Why did she depart from Hinduism? Why could she not accept Christianity as it was exposed to her in England and how did she finally succeed in her search for a religious life? These questions can be answered by commenting upon her life story and by discussing the role of biographies as a source for understanding the complex intercultural exchange between Europe and India during Ramabai's time.

To speak of life history also means to *implicitly* accept that life *is* a history, the narration of the life of the chosen person.<sup>3</sup> As Dosse has observed, the genre of biography, if we approach it from a historical perspective, can be considered a good field of experimentation to measure the ambivalent character of the epistemology of the historical discipline that inevitably stretches between a

1 Speaking of connected history means to emphasize the intense relationship, cultural flows and circulation of ideas between India and Europe. See ROMAIN, 2007; SUBRAHMANYAM, 2007; HALBFASS, 1988.

2 BOURDIEU, 1994, speaks of the "illusion biographique", meaning the reconstruction by biographers afterwards of a coherence of life that never was. The question arises equally in the case of an autobiography in which the writer inevitably recalls his own life in the light of its meaning at the time of writing.

3 BOURDIEU, 1994: 81. "Pour une science des œuvres". Annexe I: L'illusion biographique.



scientific and a fictional pole.<sup>4</sup> The distinction between a purely scientific genre and a purely literary one is blurred, evoking the mixture and hybridity of the genre, and Ramabai's life-study is no exception.

Two perspectives may sum up the debate of how to evaluate or understand the biographical genre. On the one hand, there is the perspective that sees life as a road, a career, an advancement, a history, maybe even a progress; a passage from birth to death, linear in its proceeding and finding its aim or goal at the end of the road. The assumptions behind such a perspective are that life constitutes a whole, a coherent totality that is *one* and obeys a project.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand a different type of biographical studies, precisely trying to get rid of these assumptions, emphasises that there is no chronology, no history, perhaps just a name of a person, to which bits and pieces are attached without, however, any substantial or essential life story that would follow a meaningful logic.

Between these extremes, I will try to show that Pandita's life gains by being studied against historical and cultural events, and that her autobiography can be contrasted to other writings of the time and hence be interpreted by way of comparison.

As shown by biographers, we can extract from micro stories valuable insights into a society by putting the events into the frame of the historical background in all its complexity.<sup>6</sup> To pay close attention to the obstacles Pandita crossed during her life span, allows us to pinpoint the sensitive problems related to religion and conversion during the period of the British Empire. From an

4 To speak with DOSSE, 2005: 15: "Le domaine de l'écriture biographique est devenu aujourd'hui un bon terrain d'expérimentation pour l'historien qui peut mesurer le caractère ambivalent de l'épistémologie de sa discipline, l'histoire, inévitablement prise en tension entre son pôle scientifique et son pôle fictionnel. Le genre biographique revêt cet intérêt fondamental de faire éclater l'absolutisation de la distinction entre un genre proprement littéraire et une dimension purement scientifique car, plus que toute autre forme d'expression, il suscite le mélange, l'hybridité et manifeste ainsi les tensions ainsi que les connivences à l'oeuvre entre littérature et sciences humaines."

5 These perspectives are summed up throughout *Le pari biographique* by DOSSE, 2005. Bourdieu points to wordings that show the implicit acceptance of a life story such as the use of: "already then", "from that time onwards" [...] she or he would do this and that. Another assumption is that there is a sense or meaning to existence and that biography tends to prove it. Sequences are organised by a logic that just needs to be discovered. BOURDIEU, 1994: 81–89.

6 See GINZBURG's work, for example, *Le fromage et les vers. L'univers d'un meunier frioulan du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Aubier, 1980 (1976).



individual's micro history, we may be able to deduce more than a simple, personal history but also a collective reality as part of the individual story. Through the example of Pandita, one may realise how much she is a product of her time, yet played an active part in shaping her time meaningfully and creatively.<sup>7</sup>

Ramabai is sufficiently exceptional to attract our attention and of course one desires to know what are, or could be, the reasons that led to her being one living outside the norm?<sup>8</sup> The answer is obviously not simple and there is a succession of events and reasons that may explain her life. The interplay of personal creativity and the contextual framings demands that a single labelling be avoided. Since Pandita circulated in various backgrounds, her biography reflects multiple layers of transcultural encounters. A linear or mono-causal approach does not do justice to such a life and biography. The exceptional configuration of her life, precisely her travelling and exposure to various modes of being, religious in her instance, makes her trajectory and rebellion understandable. Explaining a person who struggled for freedom, free will and independence on all levels of her life, seems a difficult task, yet revealing when looked at in the framework of the circulation of cultural values. Her attitude towards religion and her analysis based on sharp scrutiny, of the functioning of the latter in India, England and America is one such example. She combines her reflection on religion with her feminist outlook and links the status of women to religion from the outset. She is convinced that Hinduism is responsible for the poor state of women<sup>9</sup>, but at a later stage of her investigation into the relationship between religion and women, she distinguishes *religion per se* from its concretisation in time and place.<sup>10</sup>

7 There is no need to overestimate the social and cultural context or to underestimate the part played by creativity and innovation by life stories. It is relevant to study how exceptional persons react creatively to their environment. See LAGASNERIE, 2011.

8 As recalled by de LAGASNERIE, 2011: 62, there is a tendency to qualify exceptional lives as "ahead of time", [...], whereas the interesting question would be to ask just how such times allowed for exactly this or that type of exceptional figure.

9 "I can say honestly and truthfully, that I have never read any sacred book in Sanskrit literature without meeting this kind of hateful sentiment about women" (example: "as impure as falsehood itself." "She is never to be trusted." RAMABAI, 1887: 56.

10 This is clear when we refer to her analysis of religion in America and the condition of women. She dissociates the two by accentuating the fact that there are multiple "christianities" and that the teachings of Christ rarely followed. RAMABAI, 1889: 198–199.

## 2. Sources

Two sets of material are available for the case study of Pandita, viz. a) her own writings containing also autobiographical texts, and, b) the biographical studies on Pandita.

- a) Mira Kosambi has put together in one volume the writings of Pandita which we may call the *Pandita-carita* or her life story. It contains, besides her biographical statements, important essays of her critical writings on society, culture and religion.
- b) The other source for the study of Pandita is a few biographies, each one reflecting the question and interest of the authors. Further, Pandita's *carita* attracted the attention of scholars working on women issues in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, on reform movements, on colonial politics or on missionary work. These analyses are more or less filtered according to the interest and demands of the authors. The historiography of works about Pandita is an interesting subject for the study of the connected history between India and Europe as these works highlight what was deemed important at what point in the recent history of this tense relationship.

Setting the (following) summary of the tumultuous life of Pandita will allow us to discover a personality that, far from submitting to patriarchal rules, made her own choices,<sup>11</sup> paying the high price of marginalization.

## 3. Ramabai's biography<sup>12</sup>

Ramabai was born in 1858, a year after the Indian Mutiny, (seen still today by Indian Nationalists as India's first war of Independence.) She was the daughter of a *Chitpāvan* Brahmin family, from Maharashtra.

- 11 FORBES, 1996, sees the first part of women reform movements as organised by men, and only later were women made to decide for changes according to their own choices. Somehow Pandita Ramabai does not fit this otherwise quite useful distinction. Since childhood she was trained to be independent.
- 12 I sum up her biography as it is presented in her own writing, completed by various biographical sources (see bibliography).



Taking her conflicts related to religion as criterion, her life can be divided into four periods.

a) *1858–1878 childhood and peregrination: Hinduism reconsidered and rejected*

Her father, Ananta Dongre Shastri, was a *paurāṇika* who exposed sacred texts while travelling with his family around India from one holy spot to another. He was in favour of the education of women and did educate his wife Lakshmibai, the mother of Ramabai, who in turn would educate her daughter. He was, however, blamed for doing so and spent his early-married life dedicated to the education of his wife in retirement in the forest, away from the critical eyes of the Brahmins. After some time, the family, short of money, travelled all over India reciting sacred texts for a living. These peregrinations started when Ramabai was six months old.

Her early education comprised reading, writing and reciting Sanskrit texts. She knew the Sanskrit grammar and the dictionaries, as well as thousands of verses by heart, drawn especially from the *purāṇic* literature as, for example, the *Bhagavāta Purāna*. Her education was solely religious, and she was kept away from any secular education.<sup>13</sup> To this we may add a direct knowledge of religion as practised in the temples and a critical observation of the life of the people.

During the 1870 famine her parents and sisters died by starvation. Hence she was orphaned at the age of 16 and travelled with her brother through India for many years on foot. She recalls how they would for instance bury themselves in the earth in order to avoid dying of cold and hunger. During this period she started to be *disgusted* by Indian religions. She realised together with her brother that religion did not hold its promises: their prayers and ritual acts were not effective.<sup>14</sup>

13 “Moreover, my parents did not like us children to come in contact with the outside world. They wanted us to be strictly religious and adhere to their old faith. Learning any other language than Sanskrit was out of question. Secular education of any kind was looked upon [...]” RAMABAI, 1907: 297.

14 “We had fulfilled all the conditions laid down in the sacred books, and kept all the rules as far as our knowledge went, but the gods were not pleased with us, and did not appear to us. After years of fruitless service, we began to lose our faith in them and in the books which prescribe this course [...]” RAMABAI, 1907: 300.



b) 1878–1882: *Encounter with Brahma-religion, Christianity, marriage and widowhood*

During the second period of the peregrinations, Ramabai expanded her horizon of knowledge to include vedic and shastric literature as well as a confrontation with then modern ideas.

It was in Calcutta, the heart of the *Rāj*, that her life took a turn. She was recognised for her knowledge and received from the circle of traditional sanskritists, the title of Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, a title which she probably is the only one to have received. A landmark among determining encounters was her interactions with the members of the *Brahmosamāj*, the then most important reform movement, which she found interesting but nothing more:

The Brahma religion was not a very definite one. For it is nothing than what a man makes for himself. He chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions known to him, and prepares a sort of religion for his own use. The Brahma religion has no other foundation than man's own natural light and the sense of right and wrong, which he possesses in common with all mankind. It could not and did not satisfy me; still I liked and believed a deal of it that was better than what the orthodox Hindu religion taught.”  
(*Testimony*: 305–306.)

Pandita started to read vedic literature and the *dharma śāstras*, which had been so far forbidden to her. She was puzzled by the variety of opinions these texts contain, but concluded that they all have in common the acceptance of the deprived status of women and the conviction that women cannot access salvation, or liberation from the bondage of life cycles. These two elements, inequality and non-access to salvation, were unacceptable to her and this conviction would play a strong part in determining her life and her choices. During the same period, she started to circulate among missionaries and received a Bible in Sanskrit, which did not, however, interest her at that time.<sup>15</sup> Besides, she also circulated among a new class of intellectuals who reflected on changing traditions and tackled new ideas brought by Western education. She was

15 Her comments on Christian behaviour are also revealing of her ignorance about it; she says, for example, that she is not impressed by people kneeling in front of a chair, which looks as if they were venerating and praying to the chair!

introduced to the national movement for the liberation of India, of which she would become a fervent practitioner and starts to become politically active.<sup>16</sup>

After the death of her brother in 1880, she married a member of a caste that she qualified as a *śūdra*, which meant that she acted against the caste rules of her origin. The Brahmins reacted very harshly against this decision. From this union she begot a daughter, Manorama. During her stay in Assam with her husband, she met a missionary who introduced her to Christianity in a more interesting way, but her husband was against her turning towards Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

However her husband died within two years of marriage and from then onwards she lived the life of a widow, a life she later described in her book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, as the worst state for a woman in India.<sup>18</sup>

As a widow, Pandita returned to her place of origin, Maharashtra, where she collaborated in bringing into existence the first movements to advance the condition of women, such as the *Ārya Mahila Samāj* in 1882, inviting women to liberate themselves.<sup>19</sup> Ramabai was deeply convinced that she ought to help the women of India. The same year she published the book *Stree Dharma Neeti (Sri dharma nīti)* which met with great success.<sup>20</sup> It was also subject to criticism by the Brahmins and its publication effected her increasing marginalization.

With the income from her successful book she could pay for her journey to England. She was motivated to write a book to earn enough money in order not

16 These various elements are important to be kept in mind, as they are necessary to understand her position in England, for instance, where she had to adjust to her decision to opt for the religion of the colonisers.

17 “My husband, who studied in a Mission school, was pretty well acquainted with the Bible, but he did not like to be called a Christian. Much less did he like the idea of his wife being publicly baptised and joining the despised Christian community.” RAMABAI, 1907: 305.

18 When introducing the chapter on widowhood she says: “We now come to the worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman’s life. Throughout India, widowhood is regarded as the punishment for a horrible crime or crimes committed by the woman in her former existence upon earth.” RAMABAI, 1887: 69.

19 “I am the child of a man who had to suffer a great deal on account of advocating Female Education, and who was compelled to discuss the subject, as well as to carry out his own views amidst great opposition... I consider it my duty, to the very end of my life, to maintain this cause, and to advocate the proper position of women in this land. [...]” Quoted in FRYKENBERG, 2003: 14.

20 The book met with as many positive as negative reactions!



to depend on anybody and pay her own ticket. This attitude of independence is an important *trait de caractère* of Pandita.<sup>21</sup>

Let us sum up who it was travelling to England: a restless mother-widow, wanting more from life than what was offered to her, with a genuine interest in helping women, and in finding answers to her existential and religious inquiries, a fighter also for the independence of India.

She was a deeply religious person, as she often says, but she had not received satisfactory answers to her inquiries. She went to England in the context of mission, but had no intention to convert. In her own words: “I was desperately in need of some religion. The Hindu religion held out no hope for me; the Brahmo religion was not a very definite one.”<sup>22</sup>

c) 1883–1888: *Travel to the West and her conversion to Christianity*

She lived first with the Anglican sisters of Wantage where she converted to Christianity, more precisely to Anglicanism, within a few months. She says that she wanted to share prayers with other people. This highlights her sense of community, and recalls the strong bounds of caste membership. She needed the group, and the sense of belonging to a group. Put at distance from her own tradition, she considered herself, however, as a “Hindu” and as a Christian.<sup>23</sup>

Her conversion to Anglicanism has given food for thought to many people who have tried to understand the reasons for her conversion, at her time as well as today. For many it came as a shock; especially to the reformers back in India, but also to the Indian mission in Pune, because Pandita never planned to convert while in India. Her conversion was a source of many conflicts with the sisters of Wantage based on mutual misunderstandings and Pandita’s habit of frankly voicing her standpoint. The epistolary exchange between Pandita and her spiritual mother are the testimony to very intense differences of opinion and clearly reveal that Pandita did not like Christianity as an institutional religion.<sup>24</sup>

21 When she was in America and able to earn some money, she sent it back to England to cover the costs the sisters in Wantage had had on her behalf. See letter from Pandita to Sister Geraldine, SHAH, 1977: 211.

22 RAMABAI, 1907: 306.

23 She educated her daughter in Indian manners; she kept for herself strict clothing and the diet habits of her caste origin; the term Hindu is often used as synonym of Indian.

24 SHAH, 1977.



At the same time it does not follow that because we are friends we ought not to have our own judgment and mind, [...] It seems to me that you are advising me under the WE to accept always the will of those who have authority, etc. This however I cannot accept. I have a conscience, and a mind and a judgment of my own, I must myself think and do everything which GOD has given me the power of doing.<sup>25</sup>

We have been feeling *very* anxious about Ramabai and I should like you to know a little the state of affairs at Cheltenham [...] I also enclose Ramabai's last two letters which I received on the same day, and you will see from these that she is altogether off the lines.<sup>26</sup>

From England, she travelled to America in 1886 to celebrate the end of exams of her friend Anandibai Joshi, also an exceptional figure in the modern history of Indian women. She gave a series of lectures, expounding her vision of women and became a figure of sensation! She published her most well-known book, the bestseller *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. In the perspective of a connected history, we may underline the fact that she learned very quickly how to write a book that would correspond to Western criteria.<sup>27</sup>

With this book she made travelling tours to raise money that would allow her to realise projects in India to help women, especially the widows of the upper castes. Her book hence helped to raise money and she left America for India with 25,000 Rps. earned by the sale of 10,000 copies.

d) *1889–1922: Return to India, the foundation of her mission and the inner conversion*

Back in India after six years of Western encounters<sup>28</sup>, she started realising her projects, the most important being Sharada Sadan, a school founded in 1889, expanding later into the Mukti Mission. At the start, her sole aim was to help the high caste widows without any religious dimensions. However, she would face countless obstacles along the road if not outright hostility when girls wished to take the religion of their benefactor.

25 SHAH, 1977: 59 (emphasis as from the original text).

26 SHAH, 1977: 71(emphasis as from the original text).

27 She writes in an almost academic manner, quoting Western translations of the sacred texts she refers to, and incorporates Western or modern perspectives into her analysis of Indian women. See BURGER, 2011: 121–136.

28 In fact, Ramabai visited many more places, such as Brazil, Japan and Hong Kong. Some of her letters allude in a comparative manner to the experiences gained from this travelling, see for instance Letter 130, SHAH, 1977: 226.

The People here insist upon misunderstanding me, and some have and are trying their best to pull the school down. At times the sky seems full of black clouds and it looks as if it will never be clear.<sup>29</sup>

Mostly, upper caste Hindus and Brahmins would not cooperate with her because of her conversion to Christianity, which was seen as a betrayal of her own tradition.<sup>30</sup> Further, Indians did not consider it necessary to convert in order to perform social work.<sup>31</sup> Using the medium of newspapers, she was accused of proselytising and of converting women in need under the cover of social welfare.<sup>32</sup> She had to leave Bombay, tried to realise her project in Pune in 1891 and finally settled in Kedgaon in 1898, where she reoriented her mission. If she had started out to help the widows from high castes, but understood that this was not welcome, she then turned to helping whoever was in need, suffering from natural disasters or for social reasons. By the time she reached Kedgaon, she had had enough of being criticised and marginalized and turned towards active Christian behaviour. Earlier she considered religion as a personal option, but

- 29 This is quoted from a letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine in 1891 from Pune; it may stand as a more general example of the hardship she faced. SHAH, 1977: 262.
- 30 In several articles the journal *Kesari* discusses the Ramabai case (1903/1905): Sharada Sadan should not be named a Widow's Home, but as the Widow's Mission-House and refer to Ramabai as a "deceitful demoness"; whereas Tilak accuses her of "nationwide missionary designs, starting with the "widows caught in Ramabai's net during the unique opportunity of the famine years", quoted in KOSAMBI, 1992: 69.
- 31 "It is a wondrous deed to collect a few thousand rupees in a foreign land by begging on behalf of people of alien religion and alien traditions and customs. The fact that this was accomplished by an unsupported weak woman through her firm resolve, courtesy, and other laudable traits makes us pity our menfolk and also makes us feel proud that such an extraordinary woman was born in our midst. By our misfortune she became somehow alienated through her religious conversion which is a sad event indeed", *Kesari*, February 12, 1889:3, quoted in KOSAMBI, 1992: 69.
- 32 In this respect, Pandita has written a very meaningful letter to an American friend. Pandita pleads for full religious liberty. On the one side the Hindus accuse her of proselytizing, on the other the members of the Board supporting the Mission are also accusing her. Hence Miss Hamlin is quoted by Ramabai with the following words: "[...] Miss Hamlin said that Christ had commanded His disciples to pray in their closets with the doors shut up, and that devotion should be carried on privately. And she considered it most effective proselytizing of the girls to allow them to come into my room while I was praying or reading the Bible." If she let the girls in, she could not call her school a secular one. Needless to say that Pandita disapproved of such a view. She wanted the girls to be able to choose their religion, be it Hinduism or Christianity. SHAH, 1977: 265.



now started to openly praise Christianity and even invited women to convert if they wished it so.

During the last years of her life, she retired from public life to concentrate on the translation of the Bible into Marathi. It is important to note how she reacted towards Sanskrit at this point in her life. She avoided in her translation all Sanskrit words, hence constructs a Marathi that is quite artificial.<sup>33</sup> Her annoyance with the Brahmin world made her step away from what she once cherished the most, her love for Sanskrit. It is also the consciousness that words carry tradition, and that she needed new words to dissociate her thoughts and the Christian faith from any reference to the Brahmanical outlook. At every step, her writing reflects her biography.<sup>34</sup>

She died within a year upon the early death of her daughter, in 1922, and leaves behind a mission that continues till today. Her lifetime conviction was that liberation has to be accessible for women during this human life span in the form of a happy respected life. Indian women were victims of the patriarchal system of the Brahmins she condemned without exception and holding their religion as responsible for the women's condition.<sup>35</sup>

She herself had stepped out of the system on several levels:

- social: by marrying somebody of another caste;
- religious: by conversion;
- political: by being a free woman, creating institutions going against tradition;

33 This is well explained by Kosambi on the basis of the Marathi translation.

34 At the beginning of her mission work in India, for instance, she had pleaded to have the inscriptions on the cross in Sanskrit so as to enable the Indian women to understand its meaning and was rebuked by the church for defending such a perspective. There is an interesting letter exchange between Pandita and Sister Geraldine on this debate, SHAH, 1977: 27–28.

35 It may be useful to recall here that Ambedkar chose to convert to Buddhism, because for him there was no possibility to do social reform while remaining a Hindu. In his view there was no way to dissociate social position from a religious one: “How can the Hindus ask the Untouchables to accept Hinduism and stay in Hinduism? Why should Untouchables adhere to Hinduism, which is solely responsible for their degradation? [...] Untouchability is the lowest depth to which the degradation of a human being can be carried. [...] In Hinduism there is no hope for Untouchables.” AMBEDKAR, 2002: 228–229. Ambedkar's perspective took root in his social situation, at the other end of Ramabai's, who was Brahmin. Both reached the same conclusion, which is to say the impossibility to remain inside Hinduism if one wished to liberate oneself from a social situation understood as unacceptable.



- textual: by searching for her own interpretations of the sacred texts.

She abstracts from her own experience her sense of life (poverty, loneliness, no local roots-itinerant-widowhood, desire to be liberated) and generalises its cause (shastric convictions, brahmanical dominance, pressure by media) and spends her self-gained money to practice improvement (helping other women).

#### 4. Interpreting Pandita's conversion

Pandita is in every respect an exceptional person, inscribed in a specific context that contributed to forge her decisions.<sup>36</sup> Her biography unfolds as a stage drama, in which the tragedy is slowly built up to culminate in her silence and her exclusion from social life. Far from being an illusionary reconstruction, her *carita* compels us to study the interplay between her personal and creative dimensions and the contextual constraints.

How do we explain the conversion of Pandita?<sup>37</sup> A close analysis of *Testimony* allows us to disentangle her position relating to conversion. It was written in 1907, 18 years after her return to India, 24 years after her conversion and 15 years before her death. This text documents that actually two very different conversions had taken place with Pandita and that a scrutiny of her life story is necessary to understand her conversion:

- On one side, there is the *outer* conversion in England, where she becomes Christian but was never happy about it.
- On the other side, the *inner* conversion where she realises Christ within herself.

*Testimony* is written in English, and might be intended for Indians as much as to Westerners/Christians. It reveals how she sees her own history and how she wants the reader to understand it. In this *carita*, she reads her life in the light of her inner conversion to Christianity. Hence, she typically constructs a biography

36 "To write about Ramabai's time at Cheltenham is to touch upon one of the most painful episodes in her career. Even now looking upon it from a long distance it is difficult to handle it. It is full of complexities." Letter from the Rev. Mother to an exterior sister, SHAH, 1977: 15.

37 Some put it on the ground of her being lonely in England, others that she acted under pressure; again others see it as the discovery of the true religion.

that should illustrate the final aim or achievement of her life, which was a kind of mystical union in Christ. Her choice of events, the rhetoric, everything is instrumentalized to relate her life in Christian terms. She makes her life appear as if Christianity had been her destiny, but that she did not always see it clearly from the beginning, or to say it in other words: it is a Christianized version of her life.

Her conversion story cannot be seen simply as a fiction as opposed to so-called facts demonstrating the inaccuracy of her memory.<sup>38</sup> The reconstruction of her own life shows how it is not a linear process, but that memory adjusts situation to make it coincide with fundamental options and especially with identity questions, for which, in the case of Ramabai, religion was a central part. In sharp contrast to her other writings, factual and scholarly, in *Testimony* Pandita Ramabai is quite personal and attributes all that happened to her to the will of God, perceived as the actual agent of her life.

*Testimony* shows that the moments of her life, which she covers with silence, are in fact relevant to understand the changes that have occurred in her outlook on life. A striking example is her silence regarding the conflicts with the ecclesiastic institutions that followed her conversion in England (no more in harmony with her inner convictions at the time of writing), which, paradoxically, are what is most spoken about by her biographers.

To understand her conversion I will go back and forth between her *Testimony* (her own way to present her conversion) and her biography (that sets the stage of her choices).

Pandita Ramabai encountered Christianity at a moment when she had had enough of: Hinduism, religion, priests. In Calcutta already she describes her state as:

My eyes were being gradually opened; I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned. I became quite dissatisfied with myself. I wanted something more than the Shastras could give me, but I did not know what I wanted. (*Testimony*: 304.)

38 But rather what DE CERTEAU calls “Science-Fiction”, as it has both dimensions. “L’histoire d’une passion nouvelle”, table ronde avec Paul Veyne, Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in *Le Magazine littéraire*, n°123, avril 1977: 19–20; see also *L’écriture de l’histoire*, Gallimard 1975.



Once she is in England, several incidents make her discover what love towards the others could be. The visit to the home of destitute women accounts for her first reflections of a comparative nature:

Here, for the first time in my life, I came to know that something should be done to reclaim the so-called fallen women, and that Christians, whom Hindus considered outcasts and cruel, were kind to these unfortunate women, degraded in the eyes of society. (*Testimony*: 307.)

After the visit in the home, she starts to recognise that there was a real difference between Christianity and Hinduism, which she sees in the infinite love of Christ for sinners. She reads John's Gospel 4<sup>th</sup> chapter to recognise Christ as the true Saviour and starts to believe in the truth of Christ. It is significant that in her reconstruction many years later, she only speaks of Christ and does not mention the Christian religion.

Her conversion occurs quite quickly, and only after this turn does she study Christianity intensively for about five years. She gradually discovers the various and unexpected facets of Christianity and is much puzzled by all the internal fractions and quarrels of the religion (*Testimony*: 308). Though she never regretted her step, she was also never fully satisfied and had many difficulties with the Christian religion. As already mentioned, the conflictory moments with Christianity are not part of *Testimony*: she simply speaks of the first approach to Christianity as not really satisfactory and claims that it took her eight years (which is to say until three years after her return to India) after conversion to find what she needed, meaning the discovery of Christ:

I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me, but I had not found Christ, Who is the life of the religion, and 'the light of every man that cometh into the world'. (*Testimony*: 309.)

The event of realising Christ and his message could be characterised as an inward experience, which she compares with having been blind in a dark room and then allowed to see. She also equates it with the Biblical story of the lame man who is asked to stand up and walk. She is deeply touched by the figure of Christ, whom she sees as the one who accepts her as a woman equal to men and guarantees love and liberation, the two major factors she was striving for. She finally realises that liberation was no more forbidden to her, but could be achieved in the present life through the love and grace of Christ.



The Holy Spirit made it clear to me from the Word of God, that the salvation which God gives through Christ is present, and not something future. I believed it, I received it, and I was filled with joy. (*Testimony*: 313.)

Pandita was not satisfied by following the dogma, her inner conversion shows the need to experience religion by herself.<sup>39</sup>

God has given me a practical turn of mind. I want to find out the truth about everything including religion by experiment. (*Testimony*: 314.)

When Pandita returns to India, she opted for not letting religion interfere with her social work and never did missionary work. It is only after bitter experiences and accusations of proselytizing under the disguise of social work, that she finally preaches Christianity and invites her people to openly convert:

Do not therefore lose time through pride or because of any other difficulty. The caste may put you out, your near and dear ones will perhaps reject you and persecute you, you may very likely lose your temporal greatness, and riches; but never mind, the great salvation which you will get in Christ by believing in him, and confessing Him before men, is worth all the great sacrifices you can possibly make. Yes, and more than that, for all the riches and all the gain, and all the joy of the world, do not begin to compare with the JOY OF SALVATION. (*Testimony*: 315.)

This passage shows on the one hand that she finally found *her* religion, but it also shows the hardship she had to go through in order to obtain that which was the dearest to her: Salvation.

I feel very happy since the Lord called me to step out in faith, and I obeyed. (*Testimony*: 318.)

The sentence implies further that she did not dare to show her faith in the Indian context. The difficulties that she experienced document how religion and conversion function in the Indian context and specifically in her case. Firstly, her conversion in England could be accepted, neither by freedom fighters, nor by Brahmins, as it was interpreted as a betrayal towards India and towards the caste. Her way to interpret religion as separate from her social work was not acceptable to the Brahmins of her caste (neither was it acceptable to her Christian

39 This predisposition to find out by herself made her read the sacred texts by herself, as well as experimenting, quite in a yogic sense, with religion.

missionaries). Having to face the refusal of the Brahmins to separate religion from social work and religion from social identity, led her finally, and paradoxically, to become an openly confirmed Christian. Christianity however became acceptable to her through an inner experience centred not on religion as such, but on the figure of Christ, which is to say an individualized (non-church), inward (non-dogma) type of Christianity.

It bears repeating that her autobiographical account of her becoming Christian does not include what happened to her in England, in terms of conflicts and theological debates. It is the correspondence, published in over 400 pages, that informs us about her first years of Christianity, her doubts and her critiques. Her newly acquired Christian identity eight years after the official conversion leaves no more space to debate or to show her previous doubts. However, to understand her position and choices, it is important to accept that the conflicts that characterised her first years of conversion, and several oppositions are marks of transcultural conversion as characterised by misunderstanding and irreconcilable positions. In spite of the continuity of personality (woman, Brahmin, independent widow, freedom fighter, social reformer, Madhva sect family background, scholar, anticlerical), and biographical time, her position in England (1) and in India (2) is different and both contexts react differently to her.

(1) These oppositions characterise her life in England: (a) the opposition between her being Indian and the discovery of being a colonial object; (b) the opposition between dogmatic and reflected theology and (c) the opposition between the patriarchal outlook versus her fight for a women's perspective.

a) At the heart of Empire<sup>40</sup>, she came to understand what it meant to be a colonial subject, that she was a native of the British Empire, and what this could imply in terms of identity and inferiority. Her encounter with domestic mission in Britain prompted her to refine her understanding of the ways in which colonial social relations were being established through theological arguments and evangelical institutional practice in Victorian Britain.<sup>41</sup> She tried to distinguish between her Indianness, her love for her country, and her choice to be a Christian, realising however that the

40 To take up the title of BURTON's 1998 analysis of the colonial subjects in England.

41 BURTON, 1998: 75.



Anglican Church was directly related to the idea of nation. She was *trapped* in the political and social implication of her choice for the religion of Christ. Aligning with the British nation was also quite in opposition with her wish to see India independent. These tensions resulted in her being a rebel and qualified her as a dissident subject.

- b) Pandita had a very rational approach to religion. She would question each and every thing that was taught her and very quickly her situation with the sisters of Wantage became difficult.

But a doctrine, which is essential to faith, is not left unnoticed by the Bible, and I am not prepared to accept an essential doctrine, which I shall not find in the Bible.<sup>42</sup>

She was considered a heretic, condemned for her pride and her conversion was in fact not accepted. Her free will and insubordination (especially in terms of not accepting the church and its laws) were unacceptable to the sisters of Wantage. She was seen as a sinner, incapable of being a true believer. She could not accept the Athanasian Creed and the refusal of the Trinity angered the sisters.

I honestly tell you, I am now standing between this voice (the inner voice she follows; MB) and you. Will you blame me for obeying this voice? You may if you like. The Athanasian Creed may pronounce its sentence – “Which faith except any one believe wholly and undefiled.” etc., etc. – upon me if it likes to do so. But I believe there is a higher justice which is milder than that of any man or man’s writing. The God of Mercy Who freely forgives sinner like me will not be too hard upon creatures like myself if they could not understand or feel called to accept a Creed “wholly and undefiled”.<sup>43</sup>

When she declared her inclination for Arianism, the preaching of the Archbishop of Antioch against the Trinity, she joined the rank of the accused. For her, Christianity, as understood by the sisters, was not monotheistic enough. Having fought already in India against pantheism, she needed a clear distinction between the realm of the divine and the human realm, and showed some interest in Unitarianism.<sup>44</sup> The theological debate cannot be dissociated from the colonial setting. Being Anglican

42 Letter from Ramabai to Rev. Canon William Butler, SHAH, 1977: 80.

43 This is from a long letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, in which she actually demands that the doctrine of Trinity is not taught to her daughter. SHAH, 1977: 89.

44 This inclination towards Unitarianism is paralleled in the *Brahmosamāj*.

implied being British, hence she cannot be Anglican Christian without denying her Indianness. The religion to which she “converts” must not be defined by a connection to a nation, be it Britain or India. The rejection by Anglicans as well as by Indian nationalists reveals this dilemma. Her choice for Christ, for an internal spirituality was “logical” even though it did not fit the expected pattern of conversion. Gauri Vishvanatha draws this parallel when stating that Ramabai’s refusal of trinity was also a refusal of the crown of England.<sup>45</sup>

Two historical positions – that of the colonial subject and religious dissenter – dramatically collapse into a single one in the missionaries’ representation of Ramabai’s questioning.<sup>46</sup>

Ramabai did not accept the 39 articles of the Anglican Church that would have made her a Christian belonging at the same time to the English nation.<sup>47</sup>

- c) Last but not least, Pandita could not acquiesce to the way women were not free in England. She discovered the lack of freedom of the sisters and the hierarchical organisation of the church, which really shocked her. That a freshly converted questioned the authority of the church and its structure was, however, unacceptable. Ramabai could not accept that the church would decide for her, and the paternal authority was felt as a threat to her liberty. She would say for instance: “(Since) baptism does not bind a person to obey certain rules laid down by uninspired men (...).”<sup>48</sup> The fact that she would question Church authority was interpreted by her contemporaries as a sign of vanity.

When she was forbidden to teach Christian beliefs to young men, she was outspokenly angered. Her feminist ideal to build an equal society meant also to change the perspectives of men; hence she could not understand this restriction of her freedom with regard to men. She resented it even more since she had been teaching all over India regardless of the question of

45 It would be wrong however to reduce her theological options to only political statements, as she had a deep knowledge and interest in theology.

46 VISHVANATHA, 2007: 272.

47 Interestingly enough, Pandita was not so much against the American nation. Here she received the freedom she needed. She also was not in the position of the colonised subject.

48 SHAH, 1977: 88.



gender. Pandita stepped out of her tradition by experiencing the hardship of poverty and starvation. Her sense of freedom, of struggle, of independence lies under the surface of a person who had to integrate an institution where a certain lifestyle as well as adherence to Anglican doctrine was expected. Her rebellion can be understood also as a result of the fact that her life experience had made her far more independent and inquisitive than the life spent by sisters in the shelter of the institution preparing for mission. On the other hand, the disappointment of the sisters was even stronger since they had expected Pandita to become the ideal missionary in India and certainly did not want to lose the promising missionary impact Pandita could achieve in India.

- (2) In the Indian context, two oppositions characterise her situation: (a) the impossibility of being a Christian Brahmin and (b) the separation of her involvement in social welfare and of religious commitment to being a Christian, for the matter with religion. The two points being linked, I will discuss them together.

When Ramabai came back from England/America, she was not ready to speak about Christian religion. Her sole interest was to help women. However, the very fact of being accused of what she did not do, viz. proselytizing, made her increasingly inclined not to isolate being a Christian from her social activities. As years passed, by the time of writing *Testimony*, she definitively was ready to preach. She addresses her Indian fellow women with the appeal to step out, as she did, and convert to what was for her, by then, the true religion. Ramabai developed a very personal way of understanding religion, where institutions did not constitute the important part. She rather opts for what can be called the *religion of no religion*.<sup>49</sup> It is a religion, but actually modelled in such a way as to accommodate the possibilities and needs of Ramabai. Her Indianness could not be rejected fully; she wanted to be part of the country she loved. Christianity, however, was the only way to have a religious identity, as her Brahmanism and belonging to the community of her birth was the very reason to be looked down upon and an object of critique, as a woman, as a widow, and later as a convert. She solved the paradox, by making her own religion centred on the sole figure of Christ and the Bible to avoid assimilation with institutionalised Christianity. The

49 To take up a term coined by KRIPAL, 2007, in his study on Esalen to signify modern trends of spirituality.

price seems to have been that she was increasingly alienated from the love of her original country and background.

She came to terms with the hardship of a cross-cultural biography by resorting to an inner living of religion – the religion of no religion – perhaps the only solution for her specific case in a situation where she could neither forget her Indianness (her brahmanical status) nor depart from a Christianity that gave her the two things she wanted: freedom as a woman equal to men, freedom in form of liberation, not *mokṣa*, but redemption.<sup>50</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Pandita's biography documents that conversion is logically unacceptable, socially not livable and conceptually problematic in the entangled history of India and Europe. She certainly "converted" on a factual level, changed her mind, her spiritual vocabulary, her attitude, but this cannot be generalized to describe what happens between cultures on an abstract level. The biography of Pandita depicts a unique situation of decisions and options. However, the historical background has a degree of generality to compare individual lives and choices. Pandita Ramabai could be a kind of Hindu in England, and a kind of Christian in India, but her conversion has not changed the contexts in which it happened, be it the brahmanical self-understanding or the hierarchy and dogma of the church. Paying close attention to this biography centred on conversion reveals the main clashes of cultural misunderstanding, and allows the research to include the micro-thematic of individual stories as essential elements to construct global history.

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