

Pandita Ramabai, Pandita Ramabai
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PART II



ENGLAND

The Cry of Indian Women
(June 1883)

An Autobiographical Account
(September 1883)

Indian Religion
(1886)



THE CRY OF INDIAN WOMEN^{*}

To The Hon'ble Sir Bartle Frere Saheb Bahadour

Honoured Sir,

While I was in India, I have at various times heard of your renown. The Indian people would never be able to obliterate from their minds the various good deeds done by you while Governor of the Bombay Presidency. I, as an Indian female, am so greatly obliged to you for the acts of kindness done to my country.

I cannot say how much I feel delighted at your kindly granting me an interview today, even though you had an urgent appointment elsewhere. Honoured Sir, I am not much accustomed to the presence of great men, and so was not able to pay you all the respect you deserve. But I hope you will kindly excuse these faults of mine, with that generous mind with which you so kindly granted me the interview.

While in India you must have come in contact with millions of Indians working under you, and I am a poor insignificant being living in a corner of that country. It is quite plain that I could not have had

^{*}Reproduced from a xerox of the handwritten translation in the Archives of the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission, Kedgaon, with very minor modifications.

the honour of your acquaintance. It will thus strike you with what audacity I write this letter to you. In answer to this I will try to explain in the best way my narrow intellect can suggest.

It was only today that I heard from yourself that you were in India for fifty years. Is not that dear country of my birth, where you passed half your life, and its people entitled to your friendship? If so, the people, whether rich or poor, bear towards you feelings of friendship. And this right of mine I for my part will not let go. And for this reason only I made myself bold to write this letter. And if in doing it I have been mistaken, you will kindly pardon me.

It is rather ridiculous for a person like myself to give information about Indian matters to you who have lived in India for so many years, and who are older than myself and possess superior knowledge. Yet the object of this letter is not to inform you but to present you the picture of the female community of India, as to their condition, which I beg leave to mention briefly.

The females in India consider it to be a result of sin to be born a female; and I myself endorse this view, because I think that the condition of women in India is not better than that of animals in hell. By this I don't mean to say that all women in India are miserable. Though there are many women in India that are happy, yet considering the entire female population of India, the happy ones are very few. I will try to give you an idea of the life of a Hindoo woman.

To commence with, the Indian people seem to think that no one ought to have a female child born to him. The supposed reason is that there is no use of a female in this life. Though this belief is not universal, yet it is general. If a female child happens to be born to anyone, there is a feeling of sadness. And it is sometimes observed that the parents of female children treat them badly. The reason for it is not that they are wanting in parental affection, but that they follow the general tide of opinion. As the girls grow older, their fathers feel them to be more burdensome. There is a saying that 'it is more difficult to rear up a girl than to keep an elephant'. The meaning of it is that the girl becomes of no use to the father, to rear her up without any corresponding gain being very difficult. It is quite right that no one should like to spend his money and energy without reason; but I fail to understand the reasonableness of the notion that it is difficult to bring up a girl because she does not happen to be of

any use to the parents. One is obliged to keep silent, only thinking how ignorant such people are of the utility of women in a household.

The Indian people do not take the same amount of care for the education of their girls as they do of their boys. Because it is not only considered to be of no use to give education to girls, but it is the general belief that girls rather spoil by education. Those learned men who call themselves 'reformed', and who are well aware of the benefits of female education, even they do not give the same attention to the matter as they ought, through fear of sacrificing their own interests. While delivering public lectures, they deplore the ignorant state of Indian females, and when brought face-to-face to great *Sahab-lokes* (Englishmen) express themselves as to the great want of female education in India; but when the matter comes to be put into practice, they do not act up to their precepts. Learned men, even though they know the great necessity of female education, 'hurl their daughters into the well of ignorance in a cruel way', through fear of being outcasted and laughed at by ignorant people if they were to give a high education to their sisters and daughters.

And thus it is that people rid themselves of their daughters by marrying them [off] at an early age, following the general practice. When a girl has attained the age of ten or eleven, she has to live with her husband's family. For the time they live with their parents they pass a tolerably happy life. But when these girls are married there is a life of misery in store for them in the future. Those that lead happy lives after marriage are very rare, and are considered to be very fortunate. Young children not even able to speak well, are snatched away from the lap of their mothers and thrown into the crush of worldly life.

In our country it is not the custom for a man to live separate[ly] from his family when married. Though it is difficult to decide whether the custom has good or bad effects, yet it will not be improper to say that from the want of it in India, millions of women kill themselves by suicide on account of the ill-treatment by their mothers-in-law. There are very few mothers-in-law that treat their sons' wives as their own daughters. In India a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law hold the same relation towards each other, as there is between a cat and a rat. There is no hope for a girl to receive education when she has gone to her husband's house. A girl, when she has gone to her husband's house, unlearns all she might have learnt while with her

father. There is no occasion offered to girls to receive their education, for while young their lives are spent in [enduring] the cruelty of their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law; and when they have grown up and live under the control of their husbands, they are engrossed in the cares of their households. Whether young or old, women are given a harsh treatment by their mothers- and sisters-in-law who may themselves have had to undergo a similar treatment. It cannot be said that this is a natural failing with all women. They commit these wrongs because they lack a good education. They cannot well remember the injuries they received in their very young days, but when they have grown up they do not pay much heed to the past wrongs if their husbands behave well towards them.

But in India well-behaved husbands are scarce. Women try their best to please their husbands, because on them depends their entire happiness. They feel and very naturally so, as if they were in heaven, if their husbands were to look with a pleased eye towards them. In our country the choice of a husband or wife rests with the parents, because at the time of marriage the couple, being very young, is not naturally able to make its own selection. When they grow old they do not feel satisfied with the choice made by others; owing to which the husband and wife bear ill-feelings towards each other from very slight causes. And when such is the case, the men instantly supersede the first wife, and marry another, even leaving the first one in the house. One cannot describe the miserable plight into which the first [wife] is thrown. If any man does not feel inclined for a second marriage, he takes to a mistress.

The state of the wives of such men is greatly deplorable. These men treat their wives in the same way as from history we know the Spaniards treated the Indians in America. In India when women are married, their husbands stand to them in the place of their parents, sovereign, and owner. If they treat them badly there is no one in the world to protect them. When it becomes known that a wife is not liked by her husband, the inmates of the house and even the neighbours ill-treat her on various pretexts. She is treated like a female slave that may be purchased. Though it requires no common courage to bear such treatment, there are some women of a patient temperament that put up with this unbearable suffering without grumbling. There is not a single day that passes, without recording that their husbands beat them like animals and call them names.

Some wives, when they feel the treatment [to be] unbearable, live apart from their husbands, or die a suicidal death; and in their great distress they do not find suicide a difficult deed. And there are some ignorant women, who not knowing the boon of this human existence, cling to an immoral life. They do not, by any means, like that greatly sinful life, but in their deplorable state, no other remedy suggests itself to them.

During the lives of their husbands the wives bear all the pain that is inflicted on them. And if through misfortune their husbands die in their lifetime, there is no end to their misery. On [the] one hand the sorrow of the death of their husbands is unbearable, and on the other the ill-treatment they receive at the hands of all is really great. The indignities to which widows are subjected in India is indescribable. All people look on them with disgust. [People] seem to think that it is a fault of theirs because [of which] their husbands have died (as if they themselves had killed their husbands), [and] that it rested with them whether their husbands be dead or living. They believe it to be inauspicious to see the face of a widow. On occasions of pleasure [such] as a marriage ceremony a widow dare not show her face, for it is believed that if the bride were to see the widow on the occasion of her marriage she is likely to become one herself. Some people, while going away to some other part of the country or starting out for some business, stop going if they come across a widow because they believe that some mishap will occur to them. Widows are allowed but one meal a day. It is considered sinful for a widow to eat oftener than once in a day. If there be a widow in a household there is considered to be no need for a servant-girl in it. It is considered to be a widow's duty to be working all day and night like a female slave. A woman if she happens to be a widow in her youth is not allowed to marry again. She is shut up day and night in a dark house. These demons in the shape of human beings don't content themselves with this treatment, but deprive the poor helpless widows of their natural ornament, the hair on their heads. It is believed that if [those] women were to wear hair on their heads, the messengers of death tie their deceased husbands with it. Thus the poor helpless widows, to relieve their deceased husbands from the supposed confinement, have to remove the hair from their heads. Women that become widows soon after their marriage are not aware of this belief and so are reluctant to remove their hair, but they are forced to get their heads shaved by

the people in the house, or others. After doing this cruel act, and feeding them only once a day, those people shut them up in the house, thus trying to enclose every chance of their satisfying their carnal desires.

In times of such difficulty even, there is no subduing of human nature. Though the widows are not considered as human beings yet they are in fact so. Those of a strong mind bear this misery with fortitude and pass the remainder of their lives in devotion to God. But all are not so strong-minded; not being able to bear the distress arising from widowhood, some widows give themselves up to an immoral life, and a great many secretly lead the same sort of life; thus committing great sins [such] as infanticide and abortion. It is just that such women are abhorred by people; but it does not enter the mind of anyone that a great share of this sin rests on the shoulders of men. The whole blame of the matter is thrown on women, even though the men that do it know the common saying that it needs two hands to clap. Howsoever great a sin a man may commit, it is considered that he is pure, but women are considered to be impure in their very nature. It is a common saying that 'a man is a lump of gold and a woman is an earthen pot'. The meaning of it is that even if gold were to fall into a dirty matter, its value is not lessened, but if an earthen pot were to be at an impure place no one would even touch it. Men don't [merely] say this proverb, but act up to it as well. In illustration of this I narrate briefly a story:

Last year a widow was with child in the town of Kolhapur. When this sin of hers came to light, the name of the man that participated in the sin became known as well. If this man's name had come to be known by one or two [persons] only, he should not have had to suffer for it; but as the matter came to be talked about by the whole community, it became evident that he could not be admitted into the caste without doing some penance; and so he was taken [back] into the community as a pure man by the Brahmins on his paying a fine of only twenty rupees! I believe that the man [having been] purified is now living a happy life in his community. What must be the condition of the ill-fated widow? There is no penance for her sin. No one would ever condescend to touch her, not even look at her. Now she has lost forever the happiness of her life and that inestimable boon of this life, viz. her good name, which is more valuable than life itself. Her whole living is now turned useless.

Oh, my dear brethren, are not you and we children of the same Almighty? Do you ever bring into your minds this wretched condition of the ill-fated female community of ours? It is not simply that the condition of these helpless and ignorant females is bad, but that you are to a degree responsible for the sins that they commit in this life. In your country of England, there are various means of protecting these destitute persons from their sins and offering them shelter. In this country your widows can remarry. Males and females can make their own choice of partners and marry according to their own wills. Poor helpless females, instead of resorting to an immoral life for their subsistence, can retire into a home for destitutes. Your people cannot marry a second wife while the first is living; and they do not treat widows in the same disrespectful way as our people do. But alas! what a miserable existence is it of women in India!

Oh, India, owing to thee how many people have become happy? Millions of foreign people have acquired riches through thee, and have become happy; but oh India, there is no shelter for thy daughters! Alas, to whom should we resort for redress? Who would, alas, take the trouble to wipe off the tears from the eyes of the helpless Indian women! In India there are 21,000,000 females, widows and married, and it is likely that the cry of these helpless women will not be vainly spent. One could bear the shock of a thunderbolt falling on the head, but it requires a very hard heart to bear with ease the drops of tears falling down the eyes of the helpless widows. But blessed be my countrymen, who will not feel a jot for these poor widows! Some kind-hearted people have set the practice of re-marrying widows, but owing to the sternness of our caste, their attempts have been rendered futile. In former days there was the practice of Suttee (burning widows), but Government having put a stop to it, has left us in a worsening state of existence. It would have been far better to be burnt once [and] for all, than being scorched gradually in the fire of misery for the whole of our lives; such exclamations of sorrow are frequently heard coming from the mouths of millions of women. Oh you English brethren of ours, since you have saved us from immediate death by the prevention of Suttee (widow-burning), you can as well now render the rest of our existence happy by some means! Is it proper that one of our sex, the great Queen Victoria should be the Sovereign of England and Hindoostan, and that we, women, should be subjected to this unbearable torture? You have conferred

various boons on Hindoostan and in return she has made your country wealthier. You ought not to treat us with contumely. The help that we ask from you ought not to be considered by you as a mere gift. We take you for our brothers and all assistance from you as a matter of right. Some of our countrymen would give us a helping hand, but our country being very poor, we would not be able to procure the required support; and so it is that now we have come with outstretched hands to claim your succour.

Last year I was at Poona and have established there a female association called Arya Mahila Samaj. This Association is working now even and has its branches at Bombay, Ahmedabad and Viramagaum[?]; and it is hoped that in a few years to come branches of this Association will be spread throughout India. The objects of that Association are three—1st, to put a stop to the marriage of children; 2nd, to prevent a man re-marrying while the first wife is living; 3rd, to give help to destitute women; and to encourage female education.

The accomplishment of the first two objects requires the countenance of the Government and the consent of the entire community; and so just now we do not make ourselves anxious about them. The third object is feasible just now, and we try our best to accomplish it as much as possible, and direct our energies to its achievement.

It is our intention to found an extensive home for widowed and helpless women, at Poona. If such a home is established, it will be resorted to by thousands of females. For the maintenance of so many people, and to provide them with clothing and an attached school where they can receive education, and in short to keep going an establishment of the kind would require us to have a capital of 500,000 rupees. We, the members of this Arya Mahila Association are poor, and our countrymen who favour this project of ours are as well without money, and so we are not able to raise the whole required amount. We will try every means to collect some portion of it in India, and it is our earnest desire that our English brethren should contribute four-fifths of the amount and give us a helping hand. If one such 'home for destitutes' is established at any place in India, there is a likelihood of it being followed by many others by way of example. If great men like your own worthy self were to take into your hands the work of collecting the above amount, it can be very easily carried out. We ask

you to give us your assistance by bringing this petition of ours to the notice of our and your sovereign Queen Victoria, our future sovereign the Prince of Wales, Mr Gladstone and other great men of note, so that this deserving object of our Association be accomplished. What you will do for the poor and helpless women of India with one hand, God will return it to you thousand-fold with thousand hands.

Honoured Sir, I am a poor, helpless, ignorant and weak being. I by my own self would not be able to do much good to my sisters in India. But I feel thankful to Almighty God for having offered me the opportunity of enabling the cry of distress of the female sex of India to reach your ears. I have not the power of relieving the poor helpless females of my country from their misery with money, but am prepared to give my powers and life for the object. Is it possible that yourself and fellow-countrymen of yours would not redress the grievances of your Indian sisters? I hope and feel that this adventurous mission of mine of bringing to you this cry of my Indian sisters would not prove useless, having left my own dear country and come to your land after travelling over six-and-a-quarter thousand miles. Is it possible that my hopes would be frustrated at your hands? No, never!

The state of Indian females that I have tried to show in this letter of mine, . . . [has been shown] in a very succinct way. If the distress of those helpless creatures were to be told [even] in a superficial kind of way, it would fill a volume. I think no human being would be able to do justice to their state of misery by describing it. I have travelled a great deal in India and that in a very modest way [i.e. without comforts or conveniences]. I have witnessed with mine own eyes the condition of the females in India. I believe you have as well seen something of the condition of the Indian females, but I don't suppose you have travelled like myself on foot two thousand miles to see the deplorable state of these females in India. If you should be kind enough to relieve the distress of these poor Indian sisters of yours, they will for ever be mindful of your kindness.

In conclusion I beg to take leave of you by wishing you every blessing from God, and that the Almighty may give you the power and will to give us your aid.

Your most obedient servant
Ramabai

Member of the Committee of the Arya Mahila Association

P.S. I hope you will be kind enough to get this letter of mine translated into English and distribute copies of it among your English friends; by doing which I shall feel greatly obliged to you.

I am living just now in St. Mary's Home at Wantage.

[London, 11th June 1883]



AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT[❖]

I was born in Mangalore District, in a forest named Gangamul, on the Western Ghats in April 1858. My father's name was Anant Shastri Dongre. He belonged to the caste of the Chitpavana Brahmins, and was a good scholar in the Sanskrit Shastras. When he was a lad of about sixteen years of age, he went to the teacher of the Peshwa Baji Rao for instruction, [who] was a great learned man named Ramchandra Shastri. In this capacity he had access into the palace of Baji Rao. There he became acquainted with the wife of Baji Rao, Shrimati Varanasibai Sahiba, who was learning Sanskrit with Ramchandra Shastri. This roused my father's attention to the cause of female education. When he came to manhood, he was honoured for his learning in Mysore, and other States, and received the title of Shastri. According to the present custom of our country, he was married in his childhood, so he could not carry out his desires as to female education with his first wife. Many years after her death, he married my mother, when she was nine years of age. Her name was Lakshmi Bai. From the time of their marriage, my father began to educate my mother. At that time, that is to say fifty years ago, in

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