

Pandita Ramabai – Champion of Women's Rights

Throughout the history of India it was traditionally men who were concerned with improving the status of women. It was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that a number of influential women reformers arose. The most notable of these was Pandita Ramabai.

Pandita was born in 1858 into an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family. This upper-caste sect mandated prepubertal marriage for girls and denied women educational opportunities. However, Pandita's father was a priest, scholar and social reformer who had a liberal, progressive view of the caste system. While traveling on endless pilgrimages throughout India he gave public lectures on the need of women for education. He provided Pandita an extensive formal education with a focus on Sanskrit.

Pandita soon became a famed lecturer who, like her father, championed women's rights. She had witnessed the suffering of child widows and the uneducated and wanted to help them. Oppressed women became her first call to service.

Life was hard for Pandita and her family, and she eventually lost them all to starvation and disease. Seeking security, she married a Bengali lawyer who was outside her caste.

But her happiness was short-lived. She lost her husband to disease soon after the birth of their daughter. During these difficult times, Pandita turned to Christ mainly because Christ knew no caste system but treated all people as equals.

Her quest for further education took her first to England and then to America. Here she raised money for a widows home. When she returned to India in 1888, she immediately purchased land

and established a home she called Mukti, which means "deliverance and salvation."

Against insurmountable odds and great persecution, Pandita trusted God in the running of her mission, where she offered aid to thousands of child widows, orphan girls and outcasts of society. She provided food and clothing as well as educational and vocational training. Mukti was one of the first institutions of its kind to be established in India. Throughout her life Pandita campaigned in India for the rights of widows and women.

In her final years Pandita translated the Bible into the language of Marathi. She died a few days after finishing the translation in 1922. In 1989 the government of India recognized her work and issued a commemorative stamp in her honor. Today the Mukti Mission continues to provide an orphanage, schools, medical services, homes for the unwanted and a church that seats 2,000 people.