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The High Caste Hindu Woman by Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati Pandita Ramabai's America: Conditions of Life in the United States (United Stateschi Lokasthiti ani Pravasvritta), edited by Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Kshitija Gomez, Philip C. Engblom, and Robert E. Frykenberg
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workers to make the rich richer in publishing and also in banking and other sectors. But Thompson, the author of *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1990), only hints at a critical view. A "web of collective belief" (p. 75) helps explain the huge advances on royalties from publishers, for instance.

The book updates the documentary record for sociologists and will rivet any wannabe author. When I fell ill at 24, the doctors gave me ten years to live; I dreamed of leaving some mark on the world by publishing a book. I tried poetry and stories, studied Strunk and White, and eventually published an essay, "The Lumpen Middle Class," in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1982, pp. 369–79), but when a New York agent asked me to turn it into a book, I didn't know how. Not until reading *Merchants of Culture*. a monument to trade publishing, did I recognize how lucky I was to spend my borrowed years since then gathering life stories to write and publish trade and academic books about another print form, newspapers, reports of whose death have also been exaggerated. Even though corporations like Borders file for bankruptcy, the book will survive, and Thompson describes the conditions, some menacing but others safeguarding its always-uncertain future.

The High Caste Hindu Woman. By Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati. Philadelphia: J. B. Rodgers Printing Co., 1887.

Pandita Ramabai's America: Conditions of Life in the United States (*United Stateschi Lokasthiti ani Pravasvritta*). By Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati. Translated by Kshitija Gomez and Philip C. Engblom. Edited by Robert E. Frykenberg. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

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David Émile Durkheim was born on April 15, 1858. Life would take him from a rabbi's house in Epinal, Lorraine, to a professorship in Paris via a detour to Bordeaux: a well-established if forbidding journey from the provinces of a world-dominant society to its capital, following the official high road of examinations and professorships. The rabbi's son would become an influential force in French politics and enjoy worldwide fame and influence in his chosen field.

Eight days later, a baby girl was born at the mountaintop retreat of an Indian holy man. Ramabai Dongre's life would take her on thousands of miles of pilgrimage through the subcontinent, then eventually to England, the United States, Japan, and China, before she returned to her native land. By age 20—when Durkheim was failing for a second time

*Another review from 2050 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

the entrance examinations to the École Normale Supérieure—Ramabai was given the honorific titles by which she has since been known. *Pandita* (roughly, "one greatly learned in Sanskrit and religious texts") was not enough, so her astounded admirers added *Sarasvati* (goddess of learning). A series of controversial life decisions—her cross-caste marriage, her trip to England, her conversion to Christianity, her evangelical witness—eventually cost her her great reputation, at least in India. Yet by the late 20th century, feminists, Indian nationalists, Anglo-Catholics, and evangelicals would all be claiming her as a shining predecessor. Only the metropolitan social scientists remained unaware of this extraordinary woman.

During her brief career as a social analyst, Ramabai wrote two works that command our attention. The first, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (HCHW), presented Indian society to Americans via an analytic indictment of the place of women in traditional upper-caste India. Impassioned and critical, the book yet maintained both Indian national pride and a profound sympathy for the Hindu culture that Ramabai would never lose. Reversing the exchange, Ramabai's second book, *Conditions of Life in the United States* (CLUS), presented American society to an educated Indian (Marathi-speaking) audience. A synthetic work, it can be read beside the other great foreign analyses of 19th-century America: Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837), Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840), and Bryce's *American Commonwealth* (1888). Unlike them, it brings a nonmetropolitan vision to its task.

The life that left us these books is the stuff dreams are made of. Ramabai was born April 23, 1858, at her father's ashram. Anant Shastri Dongre was a learned Chitpavan Brahman who, although a rigidly orthodox Hindu, conceived the forbidden idea of teaching his wife Sanskrit, the sacred language. This dream failed with his first wife, who herself opposed it. But after she died, another Brahman saw Anant Shastri bathing at a sacred site one day and offered Shastri (then about 40) his nine-year-old daughter as a wife. (The story is told in HCHW, without naming names.) The girl fell in with her new husband's linguistic plans and eventually became herself a master Sanskritist. When public outcry about the language instruction grew annoying, Anant Shastri moved his new family to a site he built deep in the forested mountains. Here he became a well-known holy man, and his ashram became a school.

And here Ramabai was born. Soon, however, her father's money ran out, and the family went on permanent pilgrimage. Moving constantly, they read the Puranas in public (receiving in return the alms on which they lived), visited the sacred sites, and gave away many of the alms they received. Through all this, Ramabai's mother taught her Sanskrit, the Puranas, the Gita, and the commentaries. By 15, Ramabai was herself a *puranika*, intoning the sacred texts for a living (indeed, she could recite the 18,000 lines of the Bhagavata Purana from memory). Having wandered the whole of the subcontinent, she could speak Marathi, Kannada,

and Hindi. It was now a time of famine, however, and when Ramabai was in her late teens, her father, then mother, then elder sister all succumbed. She and her brother wandered another two years, then came to Calcutta, where the girl became a sensation for her learning, receiving the titles of *Pandita* and *Sarasvati* from the most learned Indian and Western scholars of the city.

In Calcutta Ramabai began her disillusionment with Hinduism as then practiced, becoming a Brahmo (a monotheistic sect). She left Purana reciting and became a popular lecturer, speaking largely on women's topics. Here, as throughout her career, audiences found irresistible the combination of her astounding learning, her broad culture, her great beauty, and her quiet charisma. In this period, she also began reading the forbidden books—the Upanishads, the Vedantas, and ultimately the Vedas themselves. After two years, Ramabai's brother died of cholera. Surprising her progressive countrymen in Maharashtra (who were planning to bring her back to western India and fund her work), she quickly married a long-standing suitor, who was a pleader in the Indian courts. It was a forbidden marriage, for Bepin Behari Das Medhavi was a Kayastha (although Ramabai nearly always referred to him as a Sudra, which may simply have shown her ignorance of all caste distinction beneath her own level). The marriage caused a furor, followed by tragedy when Ramabai's husband died, leaving her with an infant daughter.

Ramabai then went to Poona, where she caused another furor by advocating the education of women (especially of women doctors) and founding an organization for the advancement of women. After about a year, she went to England to study medicine, planning to support herself as a lecturer in Sanskrit during her studies. She first stayed with the Anglo-Catholic Sisters of St. Mary the Virgin, whose missionary community she had known in India. Within months of her arrival, the friend who had accompanied her committed suicide (another parallel with Durkheim, whose close friend Victor Hommay committed suicide when Durkheim was 28). Ramabai's baptism as a Christian—never fully explained—came a month later. About this time, too, deafness put an end to her dreams of becoming a physician.

The Sisters of St. Mary proved too rigid for Ramabai, and she moved on to Cheltenham Ladies' College, again supporting herself in part by teaching Sanskrit. After two years of being mentored by Cheltenham's remarkable Dorothea Beale, she went to the United States to attend a countrywoman's graduation from the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia. Caught up in the active world of late 19th-century American feminism, she conceived the idea of creating a school for Hindu widows (the child-marriage system guaranteed that there were many of these). In her new language of English, she quickly wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman* as a fund-raising tract. She traveled thousands of miles around the United States, lecturing and organizing "Ramabai Circles," which would contribute the money necessary for her planned school. Also during

these American years, she took extensive notes, and on her return to India (via Japan and China) she completed these as texts and assembled them into the Marathi book *Conditions of Life in the United States*.

Thus by age 32, Pandita Ramabai had circumnavigated the globe, raised metropolitan funding for a feminist social reform in her native land, converted to a new religion (but only on her own terms), and written two insightful pieces of social analysis. The rest of her career—founding and managing her schools, becoming an evangelical Christian (and thereby losing even more of her Indian supporters), translating the Bible from original languages into Marathi (and in the process producing the first Marathi textbooks for both Greek and Hebrew), and raising her daughter—these things must be set aside here. We are concerned only with her social analysis. But there is one last tragic parallel to Durkheim. Like her French peer, Ramabai suffered the loss of a beloved child. Her daughter Manoramabai died in 1921 at age 40. Ramabai followed, nine months later.

Ramabai's two major pieces of social commentary are yoked by an eager desire to translate across cultural boundaries. In both works, the foundation of that translation is women's experience. Ramabai takes it for granted that certain aspects of female experience—in particular mothering and being mothered—are universal to all types and kinds of people. This focus on maternalism of course reflected the young widow's own life. In England she first lived in the all-female world of the sisters at Wantage. Although Ramabai often disagreed violently with her spiritual advisor Sister Geraldine, she was filled with respect and love for the much older nun. At Cheltenham, she came under the spell of the forceful, devout, but more free-thinking Beale, and in Philadelphia under the equally charismatic power of Dr. Rachel Bodley of the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia. And behind all of these was her own beloved mother Lakshmibai, who had died less than a decade before.

It is little wonder then that in places both works read like tracts from the militant world of late 19th-century American maternalism, accepting as given the notions that women are more moral than men, that women are thereby society's instructors in morality, and that the advent of women to any workplace or social setting inevitably improves its social order and harmony. Her accounts of the advances of women in education, in employment, and in such social movements as the Women's Christian Temperance Union all suffer from this somewhat one-sided position. But when her empirical self dominates, Ramabai is plain enough about the failings of women that complement this optimistic view of maternalism. In her eyes, many American women are preoccupied with fashion that has no meaning, with clothing and food that require the massacre of animals, with small matters and trivial thoughts. Many of them, like their male counterparts, participate in ethnic and racial hatreds that Ramabai finds repugnant. As for the Hindu women, many of them have neither the

education nor the emotional depth to take on mothering at the early stage of life when it is forced on them.

But all the same, it is an audience of women and, more particularly, reform-minded women that Ramabai takes for granted. Women's experience is the touchstone of her writing, and she is, for Indian women at least, the figure who first systematized the feminist case against "traditional" Hindu institutions. What made her difficult for later feminists to swallow was her explicit Christian commitment, which increased with time and which, despite her own efforts to contain it, would at times become overbearingly evangelical. Yet while Ramabai remained an active administrator and social reformer to her death, she turned increasingly inward, becoming in her later years a holy person like her father: focused on prayer and meditation and on the task of conceiving the meanings of the Bible in three different languages.

The complex inward self of the later Ramabai is not evident in these early works, however. Here feminism forms the universal experience that can sustain translation between radically different cultures. For Ramabai remained a Hindu, despite her conversion. Filling the pages of CLUS, for example, are long celebrations of the beauty of nature and the graces of the plant and animal environment. The writing is laced with Indian proverbs. As a denizen of the tropics, Ramabai found snow unutterably beautiful, but at the same time dangerous and frightening. Accustomed to the calm waters of the Indian Ocean, she was overwhelmed and energized by the fierce weather of the North Atlantic. These passages in CLUS on the natural beauties of America are among the best in the book. No other major social commentator on the United States took the country's physical beauty so seriously.

Also Indian is Ramabai's implicit social theory. The most obvious example is her sympathetic treatment of the "Indians" of America, whom she regards as analogous to the Indians of the subcontinent precisely because the expanding Europeans defined them as related peoples. The American "Indians" are for her an object lesson for the subcontinent, a fate to be avoided. But there is a broader nonmetropolitan aspect to her social theory. Throughout CLUS, she uses the word *jati*—typically rendered in English by "caste"—to mean "kind." Racial bigotry is thus (literally) kind-bigotry. Women are a kind. The black ex-slaves are a kind. Each immigrant group forms a kind. To be sure, there are "kinds" that later social critics would take seriously which Ramabai does not. Class is one. She traveled first-class on the North Atlantic passage and makes only a mild apology about getting preferred treatment when the boat ran aground. Or again, she remarks in HCHW that high-caste women "have inherited from their father to a certain degree, quickness of perception and intelligence" (p. 132). Thus she accepts certain differences without critique, although in the main her position is that "kind"-ness is not a legitimate rationale for the differential treatment of human beings. Or indeed of animals: her sympathy for the freezing herds out on the blizzard-

coated Great Plains is quite of a piece with her sympathy for mistreated immigrants and slaves. One does not find such things in Martineau and Tocqueville.

To be sure, one could read her entire position on "kind" as being utterly aristocratic and Brahmin, a view from "above it all." That this was not the case becomes clear later in her life, for she moved steadily toward a position that all human beings are in some sense equal. A better reading of "kind" in these early works would therefore be that Ramabai was deploying an early version of what would later be called the "other" concept. She altogether avoids particular words for "tribe," "community," "race," "caste," "ethnic-group," "people," and "sex." All are *jati*—kind. By doing this, Rambai insists that we view the world as filled not with particular stratification orders and groups, but rather with "kind"-ness. This is an important advance, one sadly missed by several of her later English translators, who dutifully render the words into their different (for the West) dimensions of difference.

Ramabai's position implies that it is human to be particular and that particularity comes in many types and kinds. Ramabai had, at one point, early in her public life, a similar theory of religion: that there is, as she put it, only one religion. "Now by religion one should not understand the many doctrines such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc. These names indicate doctrines and not religion. Religion is single in form" ("Strī Dharma-Neeti" [1882], trans. Meera Kosambi [New Delhi: Oxford, 2000], p. 76). Ramabai's implicit theory of "kinds" of humanity thus seems an important precursor of later ideas.

Ramabai's view of temporality curiously combines a theory of decline with a theory of progress. On the one hand, her interpretation of many of the evils of her contemporary world was that they resulted from the loss of the original messages. She goes to great lengths in HCHW to show that the Code of Manu was more hostile to women than the earlier Vedas. But she exonerates Manu on the subject of *sati*, which she attributes to later priests and their deliberate mistranslation of the Vedas. Similarly, she was scandalized to discover that Christians were as internally divided as were the Hindus, and she attributed this sectarianism to a failure to read and follow the original message of the Bible.

Thus Ramabai had a theory of decline. Yet at the same time, she accepted the 19th-century West's profound belief in progress, an acceptance which is evident not only in her accounts of American trade, industry, and agriculture, but also in her belief that most social problems can be overcome by sufficient education and by an end to ignorance and mutual distrust. Her faith in her American mentors Rachel Bodley and Frances Willard—and more broadly in the American example—is nowhere more clear.

Ramabai's ambivalence about the direction of history is complemented by her ambivalence about colonialism. It is easy to see her as having gone over to the imperialists' side. She chose their religion, although rejecting

their particular version of it. She accepted western arguments for progress and change. She got her funding and, after her Indian reputation faded, most of her personal support from outside India. Yet at the same time she was often a militant nationalist. In praising the religious pluralism of the United States, she emphasized that it did not undercut patriotism: "Although there are differences of belief among them [the Americans] there is no fundamental difference in the religion they espouse. These differences of belief do not stand in the way of anything that concerns the welfare of the country" (CLUS p. 197). Similarly, she disliked the Church of England because (among other reasons) the name of the imperial nation was part of its name. Or again, a problem with Hindu high-caste women is their failure to help their nation: "[Women] grow to be selfish slaves in their petty individual interests, indifferent to the welfare of their own immediate neighbors, much more to their nation's well-being" (HCHW, p. 119). And "The men of Hindustan do not when babes, suck from the mother's breast true patriotism and in their boyhood, the mother, poor woman, is unable to develop that divine faculty in them owing to her utter ignorance of the past and present condition of her native land" (HCHW, pp. 121–22). This nationalism occasionally crops out in the demonization of the preceding imperialists (the Mughals), on whom she blames (among other things) the rise of women's formal seclusion.

In this, then, as in so many ways, Ramabai became a woman between two cultures. One sees this especially in her analysis of *sati*. She gives a straightforward feminist account of *sati* as a device for controlling women with their "dangerous" desires. She is entirely in sympathy with the British government's proscription of *sati*. Yet she also realizes that that abolition in some ways made matters worse, since many widows had *chosen* ritual suicide, either because widowhood itself was so horrible, or because they genuinely believed the official interpretation of *sati*, or because they truly loved their husbands beyond life itself. The abolition, that is, removed from women even their power to act and condemned them to the horrors of widowhood or its only alternatives, escape and prostitution. It is a very modern analysis.

Ramabai challenges us, finally, because she exemplifies those many analysts of social life who were not professionals. Pandita Ramabai produced her view of America not because she was theoretically interested in improving a body of common knowledge called social science, but because she had an ambition to change the place of women in India. She thus takes a place beside the many reformers of the late 19th century whose work laid the foundations of sociology in the United States (foundations quite different from the historical and positivistic foundations in Germany and France, respectively). Most of that reform work disappeared from the sociological canon, partly for want of method, but mostly for want of "theoretical concerns," the trope by which an emerging academic discipline came to define itself.

But for Ramabai, social analysis was a precondition to—and a means

of—reform. It was therefore a way station on the path to her fulfillment as an activist whose life proceeded directly from her religious devotion. So also was social analysis a mere prelude to political power in the life of Jomo Kenyatta or to cultural banishment in the life of Qu Tongzu or to romanticized revolution in the life of Frantz Fanon. The non-metropolitan world could little afford the calm contemplations of academic life. So we often find social science texts issuing haphazardly from lives whose logic quickly drove their protagonists elsewhere.

This haphazard social science is all the more important for its commitment. A social science from nowhere lacks humanity: no human lives in nowhere. Hence a committed social science is doubly valuable. But at the same time, a social science utterly particular is equally problematic, denying as it does the validity of others' experience. The roots of humane social science thus lie in translation, in making the systematic leap from one social standpoint to another. Of this leap Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati provides a profound example, both in her writing and in her life.