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Indian Christian Women And Their Contributions to the Upliftment of Women in Christian Works

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Abstract:

Whenever we dig deep into the contributions of the Indians in the upliftment of their fellow citizens and their contributions towards Christianity we focus mainly upon the men in general. There develops a notion upon the contributions as 'men as contributors and women as passive spectators'. But this is not true, and there are active roles being played by women in empowering their fellow women citizens of the nation and in the upliftment and breaking apart the boundaries which makes them suppressed and unheard.

When we dive into the religion of Christianity and look upon the world with a Christian perspective it has always been a religion which empowers and liberates people from their poverty and belief systems, that makes them marginalised from the society. The caste system and other practices which makes the women as a weaker section present in the society is being torn apart by the introduction of Christianity to India. In the Holy Bible, it is seen that we have an ever-loving God who liberates the human race from its fellow beings who are being governed by the worldly laws which usually terms one to be 'powerful' and the other as 'powerless'. This liberation is seen in both the Old Testament and the New Testament as well. Jesus is the one who is a personal saviour for everyone and he loves everyone irrespective of caste, gender and even an unbeliever. When one walks into the religion of Christianity, they have decided to follow the ways of Christ in saving the world.

In an Indian context, the concept of saving the world is by breaking certain belief systems which are namely caste and gender based ones which causes the marginalisation of certain class and community from the society. Also, when we look into the Indian history, women were not allowed to be educated and only a few women from wealthy and prosperous families belonging to the high-caste were allowed to attend the schools and colleges which were started by the missionaries from foreign lands in India. The works of translation of Christian texts and the Holy Bible were taken up by men but also a few women took up this task.

This article focusses upon the life of Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus and Lilavati Singh who were some of the Indian women who served the Indian women and children in the spheres of their upliftment and bringing out their voices into the society by their efforts in gaining the status of equality for them. They have pre-dominantly

fought for the rights for women and also against the misogynistic practices such as child brides and the social alienation of the widows, and have also actively contributed in the field of Indian Christianity by taking up the role of a translator by translating the Bible and other Christian works into Indian languages for these texts to be read by the Indians.

Keywords- Indian Christianity, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus, Lilavati Singh, Women Missionaries

Introduction:

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati And Her Early Life

Pandita Ramabai (23rd April 1858 - 5th April 1922) is an Indian widow who was chosen by God to do mighty works in his great name. She is an emancipated member of a class of women who were held in the bondage of idolatry and superstition for ages. Ramabai had been a person who found light, liberty and salvation for herself and also seeks the same for her fellow-widows, her race and her country.

When we move back in time to forty years before she was born, we can see that her father Ananta Shastri witnessed a sight which astonished him. It is none other than the sight of a woman being taught to read and recite in Sanskrit. Ananta Shastri made up his mind that, knowledge was an excellent thing for both man as well as for a woman and he was firm in his idea that his wife should be taught to read. With her father's efforts in making a woman who can read and recite, met with many failures in his attempt during his first marriage and finally succeeded in his mission when he married for the second time when his first wife was dead.

Ananta Shastri was successful in his attempt in educating his wife and made the favourable arrangements for attaining the goal. Since, the attempt of this man had made his second wife (Ramabai's mother) to be well acquainted with reading and reciting, eventually passed on to Ramabai as well. At twelve years of age she had committed to memorise eighteen thousand verses from the Puranas. This religious learning is known to be the highest education of the Brahmins or the priestly caste, to which Ramabai's family belonged. Ramabai acquired the language of Marathi through the conversations which happened between her mother and father, and also by having a habit of reading newspapers and books.

Pandita Ramabai's Transition From Hinduism To Christianity

Poverty overtook Ramabai's family at a point of time. The family's pilgrimage had resulted in parting away with all their money, jewels and valuables in a vain hope of propitiating gods and securing a return if their fortune favours. This happened even though her father was a land-holder and an honoured Pandit, who had acquired his wealth through his learning.

Then, the tough times came in, when her father, mother and sister died because of weakness caused by starvation and a fever from which they never recovered back to life. It was during the wanderings with her brother which shook Ramabai's faith in the Hindu religion, even though until twenty years of age she worshipped the gods of brass and stone. The freedom which had paved its way in Ramabai's life made herself and her brother to test the teachings of the sacred books whenever possible. The tests conducted by them with their keen powers of observation, they saw how their religion exposed its hollowness and also the deception used by the priests.

While wandering from place to place, Ramabai had a free access to the homes of the high-caste Hindus and she witnessed the home-life with all its cruel details, and resolved to devote her life for the redemption of her unfortunate sisters, especially the child-widows. Ramabai and her brother gradually developed into public lecturers in the cause of the education of women. In Calcutta, Ramabai attracted much attention and a solemn conclave of Pandits bestowed on her the title of Sarasvati, on the account of her learning. She was the only woman permitted to call herself as a Pandita.

Ramabai was married to an educated Bengali gentleman who took her to his home in Assam. The marriage was a civil rite, as they both have rejected Hinduism and knew nothing of Christ. The marriage was a happy one, but of a painfully short duration. In nineteen months, cholera snatched away her husband, leaving Ramabai and her little daughter Manorama. This was the beginning of her career as an Indian widow.
Ramabai also busied herself with writing and translating, in the endeavour to create a literature helpful to her cause. In her leisure hours she gave lessons on morality and religion to the women of Poona.

Ever since the death of her brother, and more particularly again after her husband died, Ramabai had felt in an undefined manner that God was guiding her. Disillusioned by painful experiences during her girlhood from the superstitions of Hinduism, she was still working from the Hindu standpoint. She only knew a little of Christianity, and had no thought of becoming a Christian, but believed in an all- powerful deity whom she felt to be guiding her. Her mind became possessed of a divine unrest; and given the opportunity, she one day found herself bound for England, going forth, as she says, like Abraham, not knowing whither she went. Arriving in England with her baby daughter, Ramabai was kindly received by the Church of England Sisterhood at Wantage, a community having a mission at Poona. Here, she remained for a year, studying the English language, and adding to her stock of information in many ways. Four years before, when in Calcutta, Ramabai had made her first acquaintance with the Christian Scripture. Keshub Chunder Sen, the founder of the Brahmo sect of Reformed Hindus, had given her a little book of precepts from all religions, most of which were from the New Testament. This has greatly attracted her; and later she possessed herself of a complete Bible, and commenced to read it. At Wantage, time and opportunity to study the subject were afforded; and here Ramabai confessed herself a Christian, and was

baptized, with her little daughter, according to the custom of the Church of England, on September 29th, 1883 .

Pandita Ramabai's Idea Of Indian Christianity

Ramabai realised Christianity to be an Asiatic religion, and found it to be adaptable to India without Western additions, she determined to maintain her Indian habits in all customs of food and dress. She showed her country people, on her return to India, that to become Christians, it was not necessary to denationalise themselves. In fact, Ramabai's strict vegetarian diet had caused some difficulty to her American hostesses, even at their grand dinners, she could eat so little, and it was a source of embarrassment for her. Ramabai was persevered in her determination, and returned to India as much of a Brahmin in food and habits, according to their religious aspects.

Ramabai as a Christian, placed her, however, in a more serious difficulty than that of food, the place in regard to religion which her educational home for widows should occupy. She left her country in full sympathy with the more advanced Hindu reformers; she was returning, having cut herself off from their sympathies by becoming a Christian. But she yearned more than ever to reach her own people; and the only method that approved itself to her judgment was to offer an education neutral as to religious teaching. Her plans in this respect were fully criticised by the American audiences.

Plight Of High Caste Hindu Widows

Pandita Ramabai is known for devoting herself for the upliftment and enlightenment of the Hindu widows. She was instrumental in forming a society for the high-caste women which had the objective for imparting education for girls and also the postponement of marriage to maturity. Ramabai wrote her famous book, entitled, "The High-Caste Hindu Woman." Here, she portrayed the true history of countless thousands of lives doomed by a perverted and decaying religious system of lifelong ignorance; to child-marriage with all its evils; to the absorption of young wives into the joint family system; to the terrible abuse and degradation of widowhood; and to the re-action of this treatment of women upon social and family life in India. Ramabai's lifelong desire to educate Hindu widows that through them a door might be opened into the dense darkness of Hinduism, now took tangible shape.

The agents of the rich priests who own the city of sacred temples, go about the country and by inquiry find where the rich young widows live. They enter into conversation with them, and persuade them of the merits of pilgrimage to expiate the sins which have caused their widowhood. They tell them they will go direct to heaven if they will live at these sacred places and serve the priests and Sadhus and worship Krishna. They are courteously received on arrival, then subtle temptations are laid to deprive them of their money and jewels, and when these are gone their virtue follows. Brindaban is largely devoted to the deity Krishna, whose vile and immoral character is rejoiced in by his followers.

Opposition Towards Conversion To Christianity

Among converts to Christianity in India, especially those of the older Missions, there is a frequent trend towards a European style of living, fostered in some cases, without any

intention on the part of the missionary, by the life in Christian boarding-schools, conducted after European plans. This, by setting Western ideals of life before the Indian Christian, leads to discontent with the simple native customs of food and dress. Their incomes will not support them in Western luxuries; and, in consequence, the converts find themselves frequently in debt and difficulty. This aspect of conversion to Christianity is looked upon with great disfavour by the Hindu community; and by its more ignorant members is regarded as part of the Christian religion.

Widows were taught that it was better to commit suicide and be sure of heaven, rather than to enter any institution established for the purpose of turning them away from their ancestral faith.

Pandita Ramabai's Role In Protection Of The Widows

The Sharada Sadan hosted the child-widows who were rescued by Ramabai either in the streets or by knowing their plight and harsh conditions of survival. We can see the case of one poor ill-used girl widow and Ramabai's desire to rescue her. This girl was used most cruelly by her relatives. She was beaten for the slightest fault. She was also punished by being suspended from the rafters of the roof by her wrists, while a heap of prickly pear-bush was placed underneath to receive her if she should succeed in freeing herself. Another punishment was to shut her in a cook-house with burning chillies (red peppers) on the fire; this produces the most irritating smoke, and, if often repeated, can injure the eyesight. This poor girl was a most unhappy creature, fearful and suspicious of everybody. Ramabai's success in bringing the girl for education and a peaceful living under her Sadan is something worthy to make a mention.

Pandita Ramabai's Service To The Famine Survivors

Ramabai's service to the victims of famine was not only done by her but also by the girls trained by her. They treated the victims affected by famine who had bowel troubles, piles, etc. which needed special attention in their diet. Some had great boils and sores to be washed, cleansed out, bandaged, and treated every day. Others have bad sore eyes. Some had a kind of whooping cough with vomiting of blood and the most dreaded of all, and what is so painful, is the famine sore mouth. The services rendered towards these survivors had given life to so many who would have died out of these illnesses if they were not rescued and treated.

Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus And Her Early Life

Hilda Mary Lazarus was born on January 23, 1890, into an accomplished family at Visakhapatnam, in southern India. Her grandparents on both sides had converted to Christianity in the early nineteenth century, her maternal grandfather abandoned his Brahmin identity to become an ordained missionary for the London Missionary Society (LMS). Hilda was one of the nine surviving children born to Eliza and Daniel Lazarus. Her father was a highly regarded Christian educator and an author who ran the oldest high school in the Madras Presidency, an institution founded by the LMS and later administered by the Canadian Baptist Mission. After obtaining a solid education in this school, Hilda Lazarus attended a local college and then, like her brothers, left "Vizag" for professional training and a remarkable career.

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Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus As A Medical Leader

Dr.Hilda Lazarus was a nationally recognized medical leader and a deeply committed Christian. Lazarus served at CMC for only seven years, retiring just before the beginning of its "golden years," 1955–70.

During her seven-year tenure she played a vital role in ensuring the survival and future success of the institution, which remains today as a landmark in the town of Vellore and a centre recognized throughout India for compassionate medical expertise. Dr. Scudder recognized the gifts that Hilda Lazarus could bring to the cause of Christian medical education in India. When a convergence of nationalist goals and new professional standards led in the late 1930s to a requirement to upgrade medical schools like the one at Vellore. She was eager to obtain Lazarus's services for what would be India's first fully professional Christian medical college. Other contemporaries in India and the West also recognized Lazarus's gifts and the positive impact of her brief tenure at Vellore. Yet no buildings, wards, or other facilities appear to have been named in her honour, even after her death, when one-third of her estate was left to the college. Nor has her life been the subject of a book-length work.

Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus And Her Role In Improvising The Medical Services For The Women

Lazarus had a strong personal Christian faith to her work and had close links with medical missions. Lazarus entered the first stage of her career with the WMS by serving briefly at Lady Hardinge Medical College and Hospital, New Delhi. It was established under government auspices in 1916 as the only fully professional medical college in India concerned exclusively with the training of women, Lady Hardinge was open to qualified students from all religious backgrounds. Full professional training was also available in some coeducational institutions, such as the one in Madras where Lazarus herself had studied, but other facilities in India exclusively for training medical women, such as the Missionary Medical School for Women in Vellore, offered only licentiate-level instruction and thus only limited professional horizons for their graduates. Lady Hardinge Medical College was thus unique within India, and it was to this institution that Lazarus returned in triumph in 1940 as its first Indian principal. During the years that intervened, she worked in various parts of India, superintending hospitals, training nurses and midwives, and taking other steps to improve the quality of medical services for women and children. In addition to broadening her professional horizons and areas of expertise, these years also led her to acquire facility in several new Indian languages in addition to the Telugu and Sanskrit that she had learned in childhood, along with English. Lazarus was one among the three women invited to serve on the government of India's Health Survey and Development Committee, headed by Sir Joseph Bhore. Lazarus's appointment to the Bhore Committee was an exceedingly important recognition of her status in the Indian medical community.

The Plight Of Christian Medical Institutions In India

A fully professional Christian medical college for India, those who had previously held out against coeducation were brought round by arguments that coeducation was

acceptable, even desirable, in a modernizing India and by the urgency of training Indian Christian doctors. Especially in the context of wartime India's increasingly strong demands for independence, there was great pressure both to upgrade and to Indianize Christian medical education. In a colonized country where Christianity had made only a tiny dent, and that mainly among people whose commitment to nationalism had long been questioned, Christian institutions were tainted by their assumed links with colonialism and thus had to demonstrate that they would have both utility and a strong national identity in a future independent India.

Dr. Hilda Mary Lazarus' Role In Creating An Indian Christian Institution

In 1950 Dr. P. Kutumbiah, a senior medical educator who had retired from the Madras Medical College, succeeded Lazarus as principal. Yet she continued to teach and perform operations in obstetrics and gynaecology and to do religious work with students. She had also participated in conferences and became CMAI president. And as director of CMC, she faced administrative, financial, and political challenges. The college remained dependent on overseas sources for most of its funds and for some specialised staff. As a Christian institution in an overwhelmingly non-Christian country, it sometimes faced criticism for its external links. There were additional hurdles to be overcome in establishing viable relationships with the national and state governments and the University of Madras. For instance, in order to receive funding from the Madras government, CMC had to deal with questions about the number of non-Christian students it was prepared to accept. In 1950 Lazarus argued successfully against a proposed increase by pointing out that CMC already did more in acceptance of non-Christian students than some non-Christian institutions did in acceptance of Christian students.

The skill and determination with which she made this argument did not stem from hostility to the aspirations of the new India but rather from a commitment to keeping CMC a strongly Christian institution, even as it became increasingly Indian. The institution's clear religious commitment was something many patients found helpful. Indeed, she seems to have practiced and defended forms of overt evangelism that many medical missionaries had by then eschewed in favour of a more informal approach and the witness provided by their professional and personal lives.

Lilavati Singh And Her Early Life

Lilavati Singh (14th December 1868 – 9th May 1909) was born on December 14, 1868 in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh and she was a third generation Christian. Lilavati Singh's grandfather was baptized, his Hindu name was changed to what the missionaries in those days called a "Christian name." The family name became Raphael, and Lilavati Singh was baptized as Ethel Raphael. Missionary thought has changed in regard to this matter, and many Indian Christians have taken again their old family names. While Miss Singh's father still was called Stephen Raphael, she took her family's original name when she became of age.

Miss Singh was an illustration of the best qualities of the Rajputs and Gurkhas in combination with Christian training. From her father she had inherited a strong physical constitution and a love for independence and truth. In her school days the warlike spirit of her people often manifested itself, while in maturer years this same spirit, controlled and trained, carried her through many difficulties. Although her mother died when she was seven years old, her mother's love seemed to surround her all her life. She traced her love of flowers to the jasmine in her mother's room; the Persian songs and poems of which her mother was so fond gave her an intense love for music and poetry.

From the time when, at ten years of age, she came to school, the influence of Miss Thoburn was the dominant human power of her life. Although Miss Singh used the plural in speaking of Miss Thoburn's influence on the girls under her care, it is safe to say that no other girl so fully understood Miss Thoburn or was so wonderfully influenced by her.

Lilavati Singh's Journey Towards Christian Service

Lilavati Singh and her friend Shorat Chuckerbutty went to a college in Calcutta for Brahmo Somaj girls, and to the Bethune College. Here, Miss Singh had won many friends among the Brahmo girls and was also charmed by their social life, but her thought was influenced by their religion. She became very cold and indifferent towards her religious life and her ambitions were all for the world, but the memory of Miss Thoburn 's life had a restraining influence on her. One night when some of her friends had persuaded her to go to the theatre with them. They came to call for her at eight o'clock that night, but when they came she could not go. Although Miss Singh was in India and Miss Thoburn thousands of miles away in America, yet she could imagine and could see her eyes looking sad and disappointed at Miss Singh for forgetting the teaching she had from her. That night Miss Singh began to think more about her life and the teaching she had received from Miss Thoburn; finally she wrote a letter and told her dissatisfaction with secular work and her willingness to take up some form of Christian service.

Lilavati Singh's Role As An Indian Christian

Miss Singh was the only Indian teacher of the college staff, the only Indian member of the missionary family at the Isabella Thoburn College. While the American missionaries welcomed her as their equal, it was harder for the European and Eurasian teachers. The educated Indian Christian has not gained his rightful place in his own land even yet, and eighteen years ago it was a revolutionary thought that an Indian woman could equal a foreigner in ability and position. The complex social life of India was reflected in the college at Lucknow, where the race question had always been one of great perplexity.

She felt that her true work was to help her students to live true Christian lives. Although a few Hindu and Brahmo girls in her classes never accepted Christ, they were strongly influenced by her. The impression made by her upon the European and Eurasian students was very remarkable, for those girls generally come from hill schools, and have never met educated Indians. It was a revelation to them to find in the Lucknow college an Indian professor, whom all admired and respected.

She saw the sins of India, the weakness of Indian Christians, but she had faith in her people. She often spoke of the natural instinct for religion inherent in the Indian people, which led them to give generous offerings to religion. These characteristics turned into the service of the true God would develop a Christianity that would conquer Asia for Christ. She recognized that this same religious instinct unless properly trained, might create a religion of feeling divorced from morals. She carefully studied the revival movement of the last few years, not criticising nor fully sympathizing with it, waiting for results to manifest themselves. She once said to a friend that, *"It has always been the weak side of Indian religions that they make a difference between religion and morals. The danger is now that Christianity may fall into the same line. To be religious, to pray, to preach, to witness, to be stirred up to a revival,— nothing is easier for Indians. But let us wait and see what moral effects this movement will have on the Indian churches. We cannot judge it until we have seen whether it has made these churches more independent, stronger and more self-sacrificing, more devoted and more spiritual."*

The people of India expected only foreigners to be Christians, but the example of an Indian woman, educated, yet devoting her life to the humblest service, makes an impression upon the dullest woman of an Indian zanana. Miss Singh longed for the salvation of the women of her nation. In her speech at the India Jubilee, in 1906, she urged self-denial upon the Christians of India that they might win the land for Christ.

Lilavati Singh's Role In Translating The Christian Literature For India

Lilavati Singh was deeply impressed with the need of good literature for the Christians. Speaking at the Ecumenical Conference, in 1900, she said there was no literature for the Christians in India, and that no foreigner could make such a literature. She pleaded for the translation of good books, that educated Indians might be trained by reading these to prepare an indigenous literature. She tried to do a little of this work, translating from time to time, but she had not the leisure to do what she planned. She was especially impressed with the independence of Americans; as the career of Booker T. Washington seemed to her an example that should inspire Indians, she translated most of his autobiography, which appeared in the *Kankab-i-Hind*, a weekly paper for Indian Christians published at Lucknow. Her interest in helping her people through literature was not confined to the Christians. For some time she was editor of the *Rafiq-i-Niswan*, a paper issued in Urdu and Hindi for the Mahommedan and Hindu women of the zenanas. She had many plans for the development of this journal, but her second visit to America forced her to resign her position as editor. The thought of the women in the zenanas of India was always an undercurrent in her mind, and she constantly made plans to help them.

Conclusion

From the lives and contributions of these three Indian Christian women we can see that each had their own way of looking upon Indian Christianity and found it to be a tool to liberate the child-widows and for the transformation of thousands of lives which over the time has reached in a manifold manner. Here, the conversion to Christianity was not the function of the imposition from outside of foreign beliefs and practices, but a dialogical

process involving the agency of the convert and a series of complex negotiations about the impact of the new religious identity on Indian lives. With sympathy for the sincerity and authenticity of the motives of both missionary and convert, and for the intense engagement with encounter and transformation. The significance of the adoption of Christian values and behaviours by Indians. The concept of female respectability provides a wonderful example of the ways in which Western missionaries and Indian Christians invested a model for women's comportment with divergent meanings: on the one hand, as representing (and inculcating) the Christian virtues of modesty, chastity, and self-discipline, and on the other, as marking the convert's rising status with reference to Indian society's norms for the movement outside the home, and sexual behaviour of women positioned variously within the hierarchy of caste.

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