

Denise:

Women have been a part of carrying the gospel where it's not for generations. And part of the legacy they've left can be found in the courage their stories inspire in an entirely new generation of women who would go. But that legacy can only be realized if their stories are told. Welcome to the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast.

Denise:

Hey, a great big welcome to you all. I am Denise Beck here with Sarah Hilkemann and Laura Chavalier Beer, and you have found your way to this month's edition of the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast. At Velvet Ashes we are a community of women who have lived or worked outside of our passport cultures for the purpose of taking the gospel where it's not. And this is the podcast where we highlight the work of women that have gone before us. Through their stories we are inspired and challenged and hopefully filled with a little courage to do the big and small things that may be the difference in someone's life. It's one more way we try to virtually link arms as a Velvet Ashes community across the globe. But you are joining us after a rare moment last weekend, we got to take a step out of virtual and into real life Velvet Ashes community as we joined 24 women in our community for the first ever in person Velvet Ashes retreat.

Denise:

And guys, my heart is so full, it's actually almost bursting at the weekend. And what it meant to me, Sarah, I know you were there with me, Laura, I know that you were praying with us. I am actually still here in Tuscany as we record, and I just need to mention that I don't have control over some of the sounds that are coming in off the streets. So I hope it doesn't alter the quality of this recording too much. But it's moments of real life story sharing that reminded me of how important it is for us to not neglect to tell the stories of these women that we highlight here each month. And the woman that we get to tell you about this month is truly a woman who shares our Velvet Ashes heart. Laura, who are we talking about this month?

Laura:

Yeah. So this month I'm excited to share with you about, uh, an amazing woman from the 19th century and early 20th century. Her name was Pandita Ramabai, and she was an Indian Christian convert.

Denise:

And I'm, I'm so excited to get to hear this story. Sarah, have you ever studied or read about Pandita?

Sarah:

No. This was, uh, really the first time that I was hearing even her name and learning a little bit about her. So I'm so excited, honestly, to, to learn from Laura as we go through the podcast today. Yeah. So Laura, let's jump in. Tell us about this woman.

Laura:

Yeah, so I'm just gonna start, um, at a particular time in her, her history in March, 1886, she actually traveled to, to the United States. Um, she had been a widow for about six or seven years and was a mother to one child. Um, she was also a scholar, a social reformer, and a spiritual seeker. I'll tell you more about all of those things in her life a little bit later. So at this time in March, 1886, she became well

known in American Christian circles. She was pretty famous actually. While she was there visiting the country, she had been invited by some prominent Christians, and she had the opportunity to observe the American public school system. And as she saw this school system, she was quite impressed by it. So she appealed to the Christian public to help her start a secular school and a home for high cast Hindu widows. So she, she was one of these people. She was, uh, a Brahmin, um, from the high cast, and she had become a widow. And in the Brahmin culture, they were not allowed to remarry. And so that meant that you were gonna be single for the rest of your life. And Brahmin girls were often engaged or married when they were very young, what we would consider to be children today. And so many became widows as children. So can you imagine being subjected to a life of widowhood from your childhood? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Denise:

No, I say that was really, uh, whenever you, I was reading about that, that was really impressive to me that that realization that so many of these young girls would've been widowed so young because of just the way life was for them.

Laura:

Yeah. And so often they were, um, engaged to men that were older than them, or even if it was the same age as them, they, they would've engaged at a young age. And then if they weren't even married yet, they would usually go and live with their betrothed's family and become part of the family even before they were married. Um, so if the husband or husband to be died, then there they were, they were with, with that late husband's family, they were often blamed for that man's death. And so then they were often abused and neglected by that family as, as young girls.

Denise:

Can I just ask one more thing at, is there a, like, can you do a brief, what is the caste system, you know, if there's anybody that's listening that maybe doesn't understand, just, you know, what were some of the restrictions of the caste system? You know, for those women in India.

Laura:

What I can say is I'm not an expert in the caste system, but my understanding is that there were different, um, levels. There was high caste, low caste, and these different castes had different roles that they were supposed to fulfill in society, and that certain castes were not allowed to interact with each other in particular ways. And the interesting thing is for, for the women being a high caste didn't actually improve their lives necessarily, so Hmm. Um, a lot of times the widows would be secluded and the the high caste woman would be more secluded from society. So that's just something to keep in mind as we're talking. So anyway, um, Pandita Ramabai had come from this background of being a Brahmin widow, and she appealed to the American public to help start a school for these, um, these girls. She made her appeal through lectures and publications, including a book that she titled The High Caste Hindu Woman, and where she told the American public all about the culture that she came from and kind of the life that she had lived, and that she saw other women and girls living. And Evangelicals across America responded in particular in Boston.

Laura:

They formed the Ramabai Association. Now, the daughter of Clementina Rowe Butler, who we heard about last month on our podcast, her daughter's name was Clementina Butler as well. She was one of

the founders of this Rambai association. So they, they took on, um, they promised to fund this school for 10 years, and others followed suit informed what they called Ramabai circles that pledged to support the association. By 1890 across the United States there were 75 of these groups helping support this school in India. And then there were people around the world. Ramabai had connections in the UK in particular. So there were people in other parts of the world also supporting this work. So periodicals across denominations covered Ramabai's life and mission closely. They printed articles and many letters from her where she shared about what was happening. And Ramabai also published a magazine herself.

Laura:

Now, her faith journey and life's work took many twists and turns that I'm gonna share with you here today. Um, she was constantly seeking a deeper experience and understanding of her Christian faith. She would take on larger projects for the benefit of women, the women of India, and she worked to build the church in India and around the world. So over the next 25 years or so, after this appeal to the American public, Ramabai's work and ventures of faith inspired and challenged evangelicals worldwide. Thousands of child widows were cared for and educated in her homes and schools, and many of them became believers in Christian workers. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So you might be wondering, okay, we're not covering what we would consider a a missionary in the traditional sense today, but Ramabai was a missionary. She, she might not fit that historical missionary box, but she represents what a missionary is in the truest sense of the word. As you hear her story unfold, you'll see that her life's work was to share the love and message of Christ with those in India who faced hardships and oppression and others who heard about her work. Her story also pushes back against that idea that Christianity only spread because of colonial power and Western domination, um, of other cultures. Instead, she actually aspired to live out a very culturally Indian version of Christianity, which

Sarah:

I think is so interesting and important. And I love that point, Laura, that she might not look like the traditional missionary, but how important is that for us even today, to think about, like, what does a missionary look like and can we have these different roles and missions that are all so important as we love Jesus and want other people to love Jesus, and that God's kingdom is, is so much bigger than maybe, you know, the definition that we would have in our head, um, and how important and beautiful that is.

Laura:

Yeah. And definitely, and it, and it, I think, corrects some of the history that people often think that Christianity was from the West to the rest mm-hmm. <affirmative>, where as in actuality there were so many believers in different parts of the world who were evangelizing in their own cultures and even going to other places to bring the gospel.

Sarah:

Yeah. Or being an advocate for their people. Yeah. Um, as it sounds like she was,

Laura:

For sure. So if any, if this any of this intrigues you, you're, you actually have the opportunity to learn much more about Ramabai. Her voice is very present in the historical record. If you're interested in learning more, there's tons of books, articles and letters that she wrote that are available electronically

on the, on the web. And there's plenty of biographies that have been written about her as well. So, if, if you're intrigued and wanna learn more, there's many opportunities to do that.

Sarah:

We could actually put the list in our, um, show notes.

Laura:

Yes. So let's jump back to her early life. One of the things I mentioned at the beginning was that she was a scholar, and this was rather unusual for someone in her position culturally. She was born in 1858 with the name Ramabai by Dongre Her family name was Dongre She was in, as I said, uh, in the high caste social hierarchy, a Brahmin. And she was born into colonial India, and it was changing at this point. Um, she was born the same year that the British crown took over rule of the Indian subcontinent from the British East India company. So that changed how things worked in some ways. And as we said, um, she was born into this cultural context where the caste system dominated the Indian culture, and there were some practices that she identified later that she believed were harmful to women.

Laura:

Now, her father was a scholar of the Hindu sacred text, and he was also a reformer. And he pushed back against a lot of the cultural expectations. One of the things that he did counter culturally was that he taught Ramabai's mother to read, who then in turn taught Ramabai. And Ramabai's mother had been, um, a child bride. So she was young when she was married. Now, Ramabai's father refused for Ramabai to be given a marriage as a child. So that's another way that he was, um, acting counter culturally. Now, due to this lifestyle that they were living, they were actually ostracized. And so they kind of had to travel around, um, because because of that, and during her life, at one point, they had wandered for about three years. And then in 1877, at the age of 14 or 15, both of her parents and one of her sisters, um, died from starvation.

Laura:

So you can see like this countercultural lifestyle that they live was costly to them. They didn't have a way to live and to provide food for themselves, but Ramabai's father's dying words to her were to follow God with her whole heart, and he committed her to God's care. And that's something that she looked back on later in life as, uh, being pointed towards the true God. Um, her father was not a believer in a, in a sense of knowing who Jesus was. Um, and, but she could see that God's hand was upon that conversation that he had with her later in her spiritual search. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So she and her brother, who was left wandered for three or four more years with really no way to support them. They tried to follow all the religious rituals that were part of their culture, but they really lost faith in them because they didn't see them as helping.

Laura:

They had lost their parents. They had lost their sister. They're, they're not getting enough food. And so they saw them as futile. Now, Ramabai herself was very brilliant. So by the age of 20, despite this hard life that she's come from, she became a lecturer in Calcutta University in Western India. And she was given the title Pandita. So Pandita was not really part of her original name. That's something that was conferred on her, and that she was known by for the rest of her life. And that title means Learned Woman. And she was also given a title, Sarasvati, Goddess of Learning. And these titles were very prestigious and very unusual for a woman to achieve. But she, her ability spoke for itself so much so that

they had the, these Brahmin scholars had to acknowledge, um, her. So while she was in Calcutta, she spent time reading the Hindu sacred text, and as she was doing, so, she became very dissatisfied with women's lot in the Hindu culture.

Laura:

She concluded that women were not valued and they didn't have a place. And during this time, she also became very concerned about child widows, and she sought to help them. She saw that they had low positions, they couldn't remarry, and they were often blamed for their husband's death and considered impure. So that's kind of where her social reforming started, um, being kind of cultivated in her life because she became mm-hmm. <affirmative> dissatisfied with what she saw in her own culture. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Early in this time, as well as she started to encounter Indian Christians. Some of them gave her a Bible in the Marathi language, but she wasn't really interested. However, at this time, she came to a theistic understanding of God through Hindu texts, which I think is really interesting. The, this, the text that she considered sacred actually helped her get this one step further to understanding a personal God and someone, someone who's like outside of the universe, taking care of, of the creation, and kind of holding it in in his hands.

Laura:

So that's, that's something that happened early on in her life. Now, in the 1880s, she faced some other tragedies. Um, her brother ended up dying, and then she married out of caste. So she found a man that she, she loved, and she married him. And he wasn't in the Brahmin cast, and her name became Pandita Medhavi, that was her married name. She had a baby who they named Manoramabai, a little confusing, kind of like the Butler's <laugh>, very similar names for the mother and the child <laugh>. Um, and 16 months after her marriage, her husband died. So here she is a widow, a high caste widow with a baby. She's 22 or 23 when this happened. So what she decided to do was return to is Eastern India, where she was from, and she began social reform efforts in earnest at the local level, and even approaching the national government.

Laura:

So this, this lady has a lot of, you know, motivation and a lot of, um, just ability to try to make things happen that that's not the case for everyone. But she, she certainly did. Around this time, she traveled to the, the UK and while she was there, she became skilled in English. And she also was surrounded by Christians. And she found Christianity superior to Hinduism because she saw how women were cared for at this time. Um, she, she saw some Anglican sisters caring for, you know, women that were in, um, hard situations. And that really spoke to her. So in 1883, while she was in the UK, she describes having a mental conversion. So in her head, she decided that she was going to become a Christian, and she was baptized because of this belief that Christianity was better for women. And then in March, 1886, as I mentioned before, she traveled to the US and witnessed the American public school system and decided that that was a model that she wanted to use back in her work in India.

Sarah:

Yeah. This is so interesting, Laura, looking at kind of her, her early life and seeing really God's fingerprints and like drawing her. These, these different experiences that she was having in these, um, encounters that she was having. And, um, yeah. So cool to see like how God was drawing her and working in her life. And it wasn't just like a boom, one time thing. Um, but just, yeah, these little circumstances. And the other thing that stuck out to me in this part of her life was, um, you know,

sometimes it seems like it's maybe a, a trait of missionaries to sort of push back against culture, or, you know, like maybe saying the status quo is not okay. You know, whether that's seeking justice for the oppressed or saying, you know, like there's this people group that doesn't have access to the, the gospel and saying that's not okay. And it was interesting seeing as you were sharing, like, in some ways that pushing against the status quo or that pushing back against culture was modeled by her father and in her family, even if it wasn't necessarily a Christian context, you know? But she sort of had that example from early on.

Laura:

Yeah. She she definitely did. And I think that's part partly why she was who she was.

Denise:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I was just, yeah. Noting that there were so many things that I think she had going against her. I mean, for the fact that she was basically starving to death after her parents starved to death. And yet, I mean, you can't help but deny the hand of God, that she somehow gets the ear of people that listen to her and give her, um, enough value to say, you actually have something to say. And, and then she finds the means to travel to the UK and then to the US. I mean, I feel like there's like all these things that should not have happened. You know, she should not have been given the platform or the means to be able to do all these things. So you just have to see that the hand of God was on her from the beginning.

Laura:

She had a lot of things stacked against her for sure. So at this point, she has appealed to the American public, and from between 1889 and 1899, she established the secular school that she had set out to establish, it was called Shârâda Sadan, meaning House of Wisdom in Pune, India. And at this school, she, they did training in teacher education and practical skills. And her philosophy at this time was that she did not want to participate or advocate for any overt evangelism. She didn't, um, want the, the girls, the child widows to feel like they were pressured in any way to become Christians. However, out of the, um, 350 that were at the school, nearly 48 of them converted just because of her example and lifestyle.

Denise:

Isn't this the tension that, I don't know, probably we will never get rid of as cross-cultural workers? I mean, I feel like books have been written about this tension of, do you do works or do you do evangelism? It's, it's that old adage of how can you change their hearts and minds if they're too hungry to even think about what you're saying to them, you know? So it's like, feed them, take care of them, so then you can, you know, meet their needs. And, and I just feel like there's, it's a constant tension that, that we live in. But I wonder, like, as Christians, can we ever truly separate that out? I mean, it's obvious that even though it wasn't something she was overtly doing, she was a believer who lived in such a way that even though it wasn't her focus, her life spoke about it, and people were changed because of that. So I feel like, you know, even though maybe that wasn't her focus as a believer, when you are meeting needs, you still do that because of the Lord and what he's done for you. And, and it looks different than somebody who's doing it for a different reason.

Laura:

Yeah. And I would say in her situation, I think she was really conscious of the context that these girls were coming out of. They were coming out of situations where they'd been exploited and abused. And

so to, to then potentially force some ideas on them would've felt very similar maybe to what they had experienced already. And so for her taking this much more, this softer approach of just living by example, seemed to be more effective. And also, it's important to keep in mind that at this point, she had still only what she called mentally converted to Christianity. So evangelism for her probably felt direct evangelism, probably felt a little bit uncomfortable, and maybe not something that she viewed as as important. So that was 1883 that she mentally converted. Um, she viewed it as salvation for the future. But looking back, she said that that decision did not contain life.

Laura:

However, in 1891, during this time that she was, um, running this particular school, she experienced, um, what she called a repentance of the heart, or what many, uh, listening today would call an evangelical conversion. She described this experience as becoming a child of God, um, repenting of her sins. And through this, she actually ended up changing her mission philosophy, and she began to engage in overt evangelistic activity. In 1895, just a few, um, years later, she also experienced what she called the personal presence of the Holy Spirit, or a second blessing that she described as very transformative for her. She believed it allowed her to live out the precepts of Jesus and the Bible through the power of the Spirit. Now, um, for some of you, this might sound a little unfamiliar, but for, for others of you who come from particular denominations, that might sound exactly what you were taught kind of growing up. That particular wording and way of describing a faith experience is very much a part of the holiness movement.

Laura:

Um, and those beliefs around the turn of the 20th century were very, very common. And for her, um, she had had contact with the Keswick Holiness movement out of the UK. And so this experience that she described had been something that she had heard about from these movements that she had been in contact with. If you're not familiar with the holiest news movement, some of the denominations that have come out of that are, are, um, the Wesleyan movement, the Free Methodists, the Nazarenes. So many of these denominations describe having this second experience of a greater infilling of the Holy Spirit and feeling more empowered to live the Christian life.

Denise:

Well, and I think what we see here is her continuing to grow, and as her knowledge increased, her obedience increased, and, and we just get to witness someone who didn't sit back and say, I'm gonna wait till I have it all figured out, then I'm gonna go do something about it. And we are journeying with her through, I'm convicted, and I have this knowledge and I'm gonna obey. And we are just watching that continue to grow for her entire life. And I wonder how many of us maybe even find ourselves in that situation where we're like, we're just obedient to where we are right now, and what God has given us to do, and, and we don't know what's next, but we're gonna continue to hopefully grow and be obedient as he gives us more. And, and so I've found this really an encouraging part of, of the story.

Laura:

Yeah. And I think many people can look back and say, there's particular times when, when they felt that their, their faith deepening. And so that's kind of what we're describing here, is she had specific times in her history where she felt like God was helping her move to a different level or a different way of understanding and being and in congruence with this particular experience of having feeling more empowered by the Holy Spirit. She also read the Life of George Mueller, and if anyone's familiar with

George Mueller, he was a guy that espoused a living by faith lifestyle. Um, he became convinced that he needed to, in his work with orphan children in Bristol, England, that he needed to just pray and ask God to provide for his needs and weight and expectation for the result. And then he would record what happened. And it, it's this idea of, you're, you're not operating with a, with a promised budget. You're just each day praying for your daily needs and trusting that God's gonna provide for that. Mm-hmm.

Denise:

<affirmative>, and I don't know how many of us as cross-cultural women have, or just workers in general, have heard the story of George Mueller and felt the wrestling and the tension of, is this how I should be living, scrap fundraising, scrap it all, and just live like George Mueller? Um, I just smiled and giggle when I see him. He reemerges in so many stories because he just, his life was so inspiring mm-hmm.

Laura:

And he, he was super, super influential during this time in history, um, and continues to be. So another key figure in this faith mission movement was Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission. He was the founder of the China Inland Mission. And it's important to keep in mind that sometimes it's over spiritualized, and people think that, oh, they, they never asked for anything. Well, maybe they didn't necessarily directly, um, but they always shared the needs that they had. And so they were telling people about the work that they were doing, and people knew that they could give to that. So it's important when you think about it to, to not over spiritualize it <laugh> because mm-hmm. <affirmative> people were giving money and it was known what their needs were. And, and Ramabai adopted this living by a faith lifestyle. But she did tell people about the needs that she had, um, and even provided opportunities for them to give.

Laura:

So the, the main difference is that in many, many situations before this time in history, people who went out, um, as evangelical missionaries had promised funding, and they were told, this is what your funding's for. If you have a project, this is how much you have. And if things changed, then they would have to like, write back to their ward and, and figure out how the funding would work. This new model of being a faith missionary was a lot more loose. And so people would decide to take on a new venture without any promised funding or people backing them. And then it was kind of like retrospect, like, oh, we have this thing that's come up, would anyone like to, to be a part of it with us? So that's, just to clarify a little bit, the, the difference between how mission had been done for the years before that, and then what was happening now in this time in history. So for Ramabai, she did believe that God was asking her to step out and provide for more children in the schools that she was working in. So this, or the one school, at this point, the school could only hold 50 or 60 children, but she believed God had asked her to, um, take in more and had asked, is there anything too hard for me? So at this time, she also gave up her salary and, um, began stepping out in faith to start new ventures.

Sarah:

Man, I mean, these, these stories like George Mueller and, um, as you were sharing Laura about Ramabai, like, it challenges and pushes me in a good way. I think, like it makes my faith feel really small sometimes of that sort of believing God for something, you know, when, when you don't have the funds already, or you don't have the building already, or it feels impossible. And I don't know if it's a lack of faith or a, a room to grow in faith or different personalities. I mean, I feel like I am so practical. And so



the idea of saying like, <laugh>, oh, I'm just, you know, trusting that God's gonna make a way and not necessarily having the funds in hand, like, that's really stretching for me. And so, yeah, I think, I think we can also trust God and still like fundraise ahead of time. You know, I think, I think there's not necessarily, like this is the only way to approach working in faith and having humility and Believing, believing how God is gonna work. Yeah.

Laura:

And I, I think Ramabai would agree with you too, on that point of it's okay to fundraise ahead of time.

Denise:

I think there's so many people that have a longing to partner for good, to make a difference, and they don't have the gifting or the calling to be the feet on the ground. And it's, they need the invitation. They want the invitation. And so I do feel like that there is a beautiful circle that happens when we, you know, invite others to be a part of what God is doing. It's just not comfortable all the time to be the one who's the inviter, <laugh> into those opportunities. But they're both, you know, good and stretching. Mm-hmm.

Laura:

<affirmative>. Yes. Yeah. So, kind of going along with this living by Faith lifestyle, um, in 1897, Ramabai took in 300 poor girls from a famine stricken area in the central provinces. These young girls were, were starving to death because there was a famine. So she brought to them to the school, which we said could only hold 50 or 60, um, before she knew where she could put them. And this was a step of faith for her. Now, soon after they were brought there, a plague swept the school, so she decided to move the school to the school's farm. Now, this farm had, was, had been purchased by Ramabai, by faith, meaning there was no underwriter. She felt like she was supposed to buy it, and she figured out a way to go and buy it, because she wanted to make her work sustainable and have a farm that they could supply the food and they wouldn't have to, to purchase as much.

Laura:

So she took this farmland and started a new boarding school there for the students that she had brought in. And by that time, it was 1898, seeing this farm as a source of survival. She called it Mukti, which means salvation. And so this was the establishment of Mukti mission, which becomes her most famous work. And she operated the mission by faith, meaning that there were no promised funds, though she told friends in the UK and the US about her needs. And I'd just like to share with you a quote here, just in her own words, describing kind of what it felt like for her to live by faith. She says, "occasional hard experiences are means of good discipline and teach us to look to God more earnestly for our temporal and spiritual needs. We have learned to thank God for them as for prosperity, to ask our Father to give us this day our daily bread in childlike trust.

Laura:

And to get it from his loving hand is blessed beyond all description. One would not like to exchange this life of faith after tasting it for all the riches in the world". And so, for Ramabai, this, this kind of life was a, a life of poverty, really, because she's kind of living they're kind of living hand to mouth. But at the same time, she believes it's a very blessed life because they're, they feel like they're totally dependent on God who supplies their needs through other people who are generous, typically. And at this Christian school, because it's now an overtly Christian school, she teaches the girls the Christian faith, and they're,

they learn to trust in God as their kind father as well, and look to him for him for provision, which I think in particular in a context of India where maybe it's not as easy to come by food and resources and things for many of these girls, what, what a wonderful way to, to grow up in faith, to learn, to trust, to trust God, and to look to him for your provision.

Laura:

And because this Ramabai had kind of had this change of heart and was very interest in, in bringing these girls to faith. Now she was very concerned about their spiritual nurture. She wanted to make sure that they were intentionally brought up in the faith, and that their spiritual lives were growing. In 1898, around the same time that she, um, started this new Christian school, she prayed for a missionary awakening among the Indians. And she also prayed for a Bible teacher for, for the school. Now, there's a whole nother story here, but in comes Minnie Abrams, she's a Methodist missionary that had a, she had a dream telling her to go to the Mukti mission in 1898, and she becomes the Bible teacher at, um, Mukti and she has her whole own story that we could go into. But she arrives at Mukti, tells Ramabai the story of how she got there.

Laura:

And Ramabai is like, you're the answer to the prayer. You're gonna teach the girls the Bible. And she decides to help Abram's understand this living by faith approach that she's taken on. So together they engage in evangelistic work and recruit other missionaries and start training these girls. Then the end of 1898, beginning of 1899, there's more famine and more orphans and, and the area, and another missionary family comes the Norton family, and they decide to take on the work with the boys, because during famine, it, it goes across gender. It's not just women or girls. There's also boys who are in need. And so the Norton family takes on the work of, um, starting a boy's Christian home and school. And the interesting thing is that many of the girls end up marrying boys from this school because they're all believers. And it's, it's can be hard to find a Christian believer to marry, um, and especially when you have the caste system, uh, at play.

Laura:

So it ends up being a really interesting dynamic, the relationship between these two schools. So by 1900, Mukti Mission had educated about 2000 females, including high caste widows, elderly women, lower caste famine victims, sexually abused females, and the blind. So they're kind of expanding who they're reaching and who they're ministering to. Now, around this time, Ramabai had also heard of a great revival or a spiritual awakening happening in Australia, in which thousands were becoming Christians. So in 1903, she decides that she's gonna send her daughter, who's now grown Manaramabai, and many Abrams to investigate. And so they go to Australia, they witness what's happening there, and they can't come back with the message that revival starts with prayer and repentance. So in January, 1905, Ramabai established a regular prayer meeting at Mukti Mission and asked for volunteers of girls to participate. It began with 70 volunteers, and eventually the meetings falled to 550 that was meeting twice daily. And eventually 30 of those girls decided to give up their studies and preach in the surrounding villages. And this is exactly the kind of thing that, um, Ramabai had been praying for, that there would be a spiritual awakening among the Indians, and that the gospel would be preached in the countryside.

Sarah:

So, amazing. Laura, you mentioned, um, her daughter and sending her daughter and Minnie Abrams to investigate this revival in Australia. Was her daughter actively involved in the work that she was doing?

Laura:

Yeah, so her daughter was, uh, with her for most of her life, except for, uh, there was a, a stint where she actually went to the US to school, um, to what is now called Roberts Wesleyan. Um, it's a Christian college near Rochester, New York. Um, it was run by the Free Methodist. And so her, she had gone there for training, but yes, she was actively a part of the work, and her mother had actually planned to hand off the work to her at some point.

Sarah:

Cool.

Denise:

I think it's so interesting because here, um, in this time, we are still hearing this word, revival, and we know that there were many revivals. And to hear, you know, like it started with prayer and repentance, and I think even in the wake of rumblings of revivals beginning, now you're hearing the same thing. It started with prayer and repentance. And what we've seen from Pandita is she wanted more of God through her entire life. She's continuing to grow and grow deeper, and she hears of something happening, and she's like, is there more still? And she wants to know. And so she's not just gonna sit there, she just, she's active, she's sending, go find out if there's more, because if there's more, I want more. And so she sends, you know, her daughter and Minnie to find out if there's more. And I just, I love that, that we're just getting to learn and see more about her as it almost is a defining characteristic of her life, is, I want to continue to go deeper and find out if there's more.

Laura:

Yeah. And I think some of that comes from having searched and tried, so, um, hard with her Hindu beliefs and practices mm-hmm. <affirmative> and finding that nothing was happening for her and feeling like it was futile. And then for her, coming to the realization that she was finding something different in Christianity. Um, and yeah, as you said something more and deeper as she continued on. So Ramabai really cultivated this, um, culture of prayer at Mukti mission. And, um, and the girls were really adopting that. Um, on June 29th, 1905, at 3:30 AM Minnie Abrams was awakened by the matron of the school. What had happened was that one girl had awoken to find fire engulfing her friend, and rushed to find water. When she returned, she discovered that her friend was not on fire, but was praying. So whether there was real fire or if it was just a vision, we're not sure.

Laura:

But, um, this idea that fire was involved was a part of what was reported about the, the revival. The rest of the girls then gathered around to hear the story of this spirit baptized girl. She testified to God's work and joy in her life, and urged them to repentance. The next evening, all the girls began to pray aloud so that to they ceased talking, all in the room were weeping and praying. Some were kneeling, some were sitting, some were standing. Many had hands outstretched to God. In the days that followed, the prayer meetings expanded. Regular Bible lessons were suspended, and the girls sought repentance, confessed their sins, and received assurance of salvation. However, Abrams reported that they sought for more saying, we are saved. Our sins are forgiven now, we want a baptism of fire. Their earnest cries and

petitions seem to be met with a spiritual experience characterized by joy. Trembling and burning from repentance gave way to singing, praising, dancing, and some experienced visions and dreams.

Laura:

Now, this experience of flames of fire or burning accompanying repentance, whether it was a, a physical manifest manifestation or just a, a feeling or a vision, um, that was not part of the original information that Abrams and Manaramabai had come back with from Australia. Mm-hmm. This was actually a development that was specific to the girls themselves who reported it, and it was based on their reading of the Bible and the expectation of literal flames of fire, um, that they, they read about at the day of Pentecost. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, now, a mission scholar, Aron Jones links this to the outlawed Hindu practice of sati or widow birding. That was a way for women to achieve purification. So the, this idea of purification by fire was actually culturally familiar to them and was kind of being reborn in a Christian format. It was the girls at the school who seemed to be the spiritual seekers and experienced these manifestations while the leaders offered spiritual messages and instructions.

Laura:

So the missionaries really had to decide if this experience was for them, and many did and received similar experiences of purification and empowerment. Now, the fruit of, of this particular, um, occurrence was that girls went out in evangelistic troops to preach the gospel in the countryside. Abrams wrote a book about this that circulated around the world and contributed to the spread of Pentecostal practices and beliefs. Now, if you're familiar with the Pentecostal movement, um, this is around the time that, that, that, um, movement started in the United States. Um, the Asuza Street Revival is what we often think of as the start of this movement, but there were revivals happening in other parts of the world, and this one at Mukti was part of that movement. And the Pentecostal movement, one of its characteristics is that it, um, produced a lot of evangelistic and missionary fervor. So the revival at Mukti was responsible for the spread of the pen Pentecostal revival in India in particular, but also around the globe, because people would, would read about it, and then people would come and visit. And yeah, it spread that way. Now, Ramabai never officially aligned with the movement because she, she tended to wanna stay independent. Um, but historically it is linked to the beginning of the Pentecostal movement.

Sarah:

I think it's important to note that, you know, all of us listening to the podcast, um, we come from different faith practices and backgrounds. And so this might sound strange to people, or it might sound familiar and exciting, but I think for me, hearing you share about this, Laura, the important piece that came out of it was there was more prayer. There was more turning to God and repentance, and then this further spread of the gospel, and just how beautiful that is to see, um, the fruit that came out of this.

Denise:

And I think, Sarah, this even just reminds me, when we were together in person with women this weekend, we were talking about a personal God, a God that sees you and, and does things that you know are personal to you. And, and when I hear this story, Laura, I feel like this was a personal God for these girls who wanted more of him. You know, like God shows up where he is wanted, they wanted him. And so in a personal way, he related to their context, to their culture, to what they wanted more of. And he, and he showed up to them, and, and there was joy and repentance and purification. And I

think all of those things he wants for us, and, you know, when we want more of him, those are things that, that happen. I don't, I was, I was really encouraged by that. And, and yes, I know we're, we're talking in tricky waters right here, because there are people that believe differently. That's one of the beauties of this community, is that we are made up of so many different denominations and sending orgs, and we are united over what we are together on, you know, that we want to spread the gospel where it's not. And, and our personal God shows up for us each, um, in those spaces. Mm-hmm.

Laura:

Yeah. So Ramabai continued this work at Mukti until her death in 1922. Um, her dau, her daughter was not able to take it over from her because she actually died unexpectedly in 1921, the year before her mother did. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, however, other believers carried on the work, and it actually still exists today. Um, if you look up Mukti Mission, you can find a website that tells you all about what they do. Hmm. So, just to summarize, Ramabai's legacy, she was a key figure in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements. Although she sought to remain independent from any organization, I think that probably has roots in some of her early history of just wanting to mm-hmm. <affirmative> stay a little bit aloof of, of people who wanted to control her. Um, she worked across denominations, so she was really, in many ways bringing people together.

Laura:

She trained and inspired missionaries and Christians across, around the globe. Through her works, writings and speaking the institution. She started housed, educated and cared for thousands of widows and orphans, many of whom became Christian workers and evangelists and believers. Um, some of the institutions, like I said, like Mok D still exists today. She also produced the first translation of the Bible in Marathi from the original Hebrew and Greek. So this, she's just brilliant <laugh>. And she advocated for a truly Indian version of Christianity that valued and respected various aspects of Indian culture, while at the same time pushing back against beliefs and practices that she believed harmed women and children. And I think this is a very important point, because I think sometimes when we talk about, um, bringing Christianity to a particular location, I think sometimes it can come across as trying to completely change culture.

Laura:

But I think over history, we've, um, Christian believers and missionaries have found that Christianity actually takes root when there's links to the current culture and the good things that God has placed in that culture. And so that's really what she was all about, is not wanting to throw the whole thing out, but find what was good and what was from God, and just try to remove those things that were not. And her work was actually recognized by others outside of Christian's circles in 1989. So, um, a century after she started her original school, the Indian government made a commemorative stamp in honor of honor of her advancement of women. So she was not only recognized across Christianity, but she was recognized by the Indian government, which I think is, is pretty, um, unique and special. Mm-hmm.

Denise:

<affirmative>. Absolutely. I mean, if you've made it on a stamp, you have really made it, you know, <laugh>.

Laura:

<laugh>.

Denise:

But man, I feel like, um, I love what you said about the culture and truly, you know, bringing the gospel to a culture requires us to either be learners to truly understand how to contextualize it well, or, or to, you know, to invest in and raise up those nationals who, who will understand those nuances that would take us a lifetime to figure out. And, you know, I, I think even Sarah this weekend, this last weekend there at the Velvet Ashes retreat, there were women who were, who were nationals, who were being resourced and encouraged by the Velvet Ashes community to give back and make a difference in their own country. And I, and I love just that even here in that this community that we, um, we see that happening and, and, and, you know, the thing that maybe unites all of us is like, Pandita, you know, no place probably felt like home.

Denise:

That's one of the defining things about cross-cultural women, is that we are probably never just gonna feel like we're gonna snuggle in. And this is it for us, because we are all living lives that are not for here and now, but for what's next. And that, that's what unites us, and that's what, that's what, um, makes us feel at home. So I, as we hear more of these stories, I just feel like we're in good company, <laugh>. These are, these are the people that we're finally gonna feel at home with someday. You know, you know, and maybe the closest thing we get to feeling at home is just with other like-minded people who, who get that. Who get that we're comfortable together, you know?

Laura:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Sarah:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah.

Denise:

I don't know. This was super powerful. Sarah, what are your thoughts after hearing Pandita's story?

Sarah:

Yeah, so many things. I love, um, some of the intersections with other women that we've even talked about, you know, on the podcast mm-hmm. <affirmative> and just thinking of the power of when we have, when we have the words of these women or the stories of these women, like, just yeah, how powerful that is. Not only at the time that they are living, you know, the, the influence that Pandita Ramabai had at her time, but then the power of the legacy of those stories. And so, you know, we don't have to wait to share how God is working and the journey that we are on. You know, we, I think that was one thing that really stuck out to me was that we learn about this, this way that God was drawing her this way, that she was growing in obedience and faith, and how that influenced the way that she did ministry through her life. Um, and so we can share the different points of our journeys and how powerful that can be.

Denise:

Laura, this has been somebody that you have been really familiar with. What, what has stuck out to you about Pandita?

Laura:

Yeah, I mean, I was not familiar with Pandita until I started my doctoral studies, but since then I've done a lot of, of research on her. And yeah, I'm continually challenged by her desire to grow in knowledge, both of whatever is out there in the world that can help her, um, help the people in her own culture or in her faith, um, commitments as well. She just was always a learner, and I, I really appreciate and respect people who are constantly trying to learn and to grow. And she certainly was that over her lifetime. Um, she was certainly gifted, but she cultivated what God had given, given her in so many ways.

Denise:

That's a really good point. And I also think just like if, if we could also just tell the story about she lost her mom, dad, and sister at one time because of starvation, how tragic to watch that happen. She then lost her brother, the only person that's left. She had so many opportunities to just fully grow bitter and to stay stuck. And yet she just kept moving forward and she was almost tenacious with her, you know, search for the good and for something that's right and true, you know, and, and so like, I think all, all the hardships that we maybe encounter in this life and, and that thank you for this inspiring story of someone who wasn't stopped by the hardships that she faced and made a difference in the world. And it was funny to me how many parallels there were between her and George Mueller's story because his, you know, his wife and daughter both died and there was nobody for him to leave things to.

Denise:

And yet the work went on. And, and that's what will happen, is that it's not about us. The work will outlive us. It is, it is because of him and, you know, we can just spend our lives with what he's given us and trust that it will go on. And honestly, that's what these stories are about. We're hoping that through these stories, you are being inspired and that your courage, the courage that maybe they're inspiring in you will cause you to keep going and take the next step. And someday your story is gonna inspire courage for someone else's legacy. And that's what the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast is all about. So until next time, we hope that you have enjoyed the story of Pandita Ramabai and, um, we wanna thank the group Eine Blume, our dear friends who are with us live this weekend at the Velvet Ashes retreat for the theme song for this podcast, Daughters and Sons. And we look forward to seeing you next time for the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast.