

COOCH BEHAR PANCHNAN BARMA UNIVERSITY COOCH BEHAR

B.A. HONOURS IN ENGLISH

UNDER CHOICE BASED CREDIT SYSTEM

SEMESTER -6

CE 14

WOMEN'S WRITING

Q. Evaluate Ramabai Ranade's critique of religion and patriarchy in "A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasures".

Pandita Ramabai concludes the tract *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* by describing it as an "...account of my spiritual experience...". She fervently expresses her gratitude to the divine for enabling her to "give this testimony of the Lord's goodness" albeit in a brief sketch. The testimony comprises of an autobiographical account, which includes her conversion to Christianity and her various attempts to alleviate the oppression against women in particular and the society at large. Ramabai emphasizes that she intends the 'testimony' to demonstrate as a critique of religion and patriarchy.

In *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* Pandita Ramabai views her whole life from a perspective enriched by her religious faith. It is a moving account of the trials and tribulations refracted through a religious lens. She affirms that her religious awakening derived from her dissatisfaction with the Hindu Shastras and the scepticism which tormented her through the months of privation during and after the severe famine. The pronouncement of the scriptures, which insisted on the lowly status of all women, irrespective of their class/caste, and the Shudras, only added to her disillusionment. Not only were their present lives doomed, there seemed to be no flicker of hope even in the distant future lives. The only consolation is to be "contented" with one's lot and for the women "utter abandonment of (their) will" and in the "worship... and most degraded slavery" of their husbands. Ramabai is candid enough to mention how "angry" and annoyed her husband had been to learn of her "intention to become a Christian" and ruminates about the course of events had his life not been cut short so tragically. The realization of this bleak future, "gradually opened" her eyes and in the "search for something better" she came upon the Christian religion. Ramabai was not only "intellectually convinced but positively thrilled at the prospect of a promised salvation.

This brings us to the root of Ramabai's fascination with the Christian religion: she believed that it did away with all the man-made barriers of discrimination and exclusion. In addition, the universality of Christian theology also served the larger ambition of social upliftment that she had long nurtured. It supported the practical measures that she had adopted to make a 'real' impact on the lives of women at large and specifically the widows, the most

marginalized of the lot. Christianity to Ramabai was not merely a religion but it held the vision of an egalitarian society, a utopia. Significantly in *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* Ramabai primarily focuses on the Gospels of Paul and John, who reiterate that the Son of God will come to earth to reconcile the sinners with God. Everyone was assured of salvation-there is no injustice here on earth and thereafter in the realms beyond. Ramabai believed that the Indian society lacked the capacity to regenerate and the adoption of this new religion and social order was the only solution to this crisis. The religion of Ramabai's choice was also that of the colonisers and would seriously question her claims to patriotism.

Furthermore, the auto-biographical sketch further convincingly explains Ramabai's decision to embrace the new faith. Rooted in the exigencies of her plans for emancipation, the decision to go to England was intended solely to equip her with the required skills. However, the visit to the Rescue Home there which gave shelter to the "the so-called fallen woman" increased Ramabai's appreciation of Christianity as her own ancestral faith did not make provision for such victims. The compassionate nature of Christianity convinced her that "no one but He (Christ) could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land". Thwarted by the resistance to her plans for a widows' home and increasingly haunted by a sense of alienation from the orthodox majority, it was not easy for Ramabai as a widow to intrude into a space that was designated masculine.

On her return from the United States, the Pandita was welcomed due to her phenomenal success abroad yet the jubilation was short-lived. She was in an incongruous position as she had gone over to the colonisers' side and was still championing the cause of her 'compatriots'. The first attack on her, since she was supervising a home for the widows, was motivated by religious reasons. There were allegations of forceful conversions. The issue was not resolved but further aggravated by Ramabai's forceful and cogent arguments whereby she drew on the nationalists' demand for 'independence' and 'equality' and asserted that women were entitled to the same. Her insistence on women's agency and rejection of the traditional prescriptions for widows, along with her advocacy for widow re-marriage, were seen as an open challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy and the patriarchal system.

To conclude, the message of *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* must not be mistaken for mere proselytization. Christianity assured Ramabai of a space where liberty was the foundation of a society and any divorce between these two would only result in a collapse of the latter. The notions of equality and justice inspired Ramabai's strategies for socio-cultural and religious change as well as her mission of women's reforms. In this moving auto-biographical account the reader can clearly discern how Ramabai even surpasses her father, the "orthodox reformer" in her objective of social reform. However, much like him she too "stood the persecution with ...characteristic manliness" and also "cared little for what people said, and did what (s)he thought was right".