

# On the Shoulders of Giants (Part Two): An inspirational woman

**Keith White**

## **Abstract**

This is the second paper based on the keynote speech given by Keith White at the SIRCC conference on 7th June 2007. In the first paper (White, 2007) he identified a few of the historically significant figures in residential child care and discussed the life and work of Janusz Korczak. This paper will focus on the life of Pandita Ramabai, an extraordinary woman who lived an extraordinary life in extraordinary times.

## **Keywords**

Residential community, India, residential care

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## **Introduction**

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## **Pandita Ramabai: a brief introduction (1858-1922)**

Ramabai was born in 1858 in a residential community, her father's ashram. Her mother taught her in the open air, and lessons lasted for three hours at a stretch. She learned astronomy, botany, physiology and religious philosophy. This educational experience was radically different from that of most young Indian women. Her gifted intellect would help her in later years to establish some of the most forward-thinking residential facilities in the world.

During the great famine in India, which lasted from 1874 to 1876, Ramabai helplessly watched her parents and sister starve to death. She and her older brother continued to wander throughout India, experiencing extreme physical hardship and hunger before finally reaching Calcutta in 1878. There her exceptional knowledge of Sanskrit texts so astonished scholars that they immediately awarded her two titles: Pandita (a wise person) and Saraswati (goddess of learning). She married in 1880 and within 18 months had a daughter. However, her husband died in 1882 and she became a widow.

At that time in India, widows were effectively isolated from the public world for the rest of their lives, confined to the women's quarters of households and forced to devote themselves to menial tasks. But Ramabai refused to accept this status. With her charismatic personality, brilliant mind and organising genius, she challenged patriarchal authority and norms. Leaving behind the religion of her youth, Ramabai began to champion women's rights and education and soon became renowned in India as a lecturer.

In 1883, Ramabai was invited to Philadelphia to attend the graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshee, India's first female doctor. She was soon convinced that her life's work in India should be to transform the situation of India's high caste women, especially child widows, by establishing a sanctuary for them: a female residential school modeled on the radical kindergarten system pioneered by Friedrich Froebel (Valkanova and Brehony, 2006). As she travelled throughout the United States on speaking tours, supporters collected funds and set up the Ramabai Association to assist the formation of her proposed school.

### **A model community**

In 1889 Ramabai founded a residential community for child widows, orphans and destitute girls in India. It started life in Bombay and was called the Sharada Sadan. In 1900 a bigger facility was opened in Khedgoan and the name was changed to Mukti. Mukti means freedom. For several years, Mukti's newsletter sported the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia on its cover, inscribed with the motto 'Proclaim liberty throughout the Land unto all the inhabitants here' from Leviticus 25:10.

Soon the place was filled to overflowing with starving child widows, orphans, victims of famines in central India, and other needy young women. At times Mukti provided for as many as 2000 females. In addition to family homes, it had a kindergarten for young children, schools, a hospital and a refuge for 'fallen women.' In addition, it had a range of life and work resources including 64 cloth-weaving looms, five printing presses, tailoring and handicrafts, a flourmill, an oil press, a laundry, a farm, orchards, and wells.

Her community, method and philosophy can be summarised by calling them 'kindergarten' (children's garden): a place where the seeds of hope take root and are nurtured and given space to grow. Mukti survives to the present day and is one of Ramabai's lasting legacies. It remains as a beacon of hope in India, and an holistic working model that could still transform our understanding and practice of child care, education, welfare and community.

## The guiding principles of Ramabai

Ramabai placed inestimable value on the life and life-story of every girl child in her care. Using active listening, she developed an indigenous philosophy, curriculum and method of cognitive and social education applicable to the whole of India. She saw that any genuine relationship and intervention was impossible without contextualisation and respect for local culture. More astonishingly, given the time and oppressive structures under which she lived, she unmasked powers and ideologies whether Indian, British or international. As a strong patriot, she was the first to advocate Hindi as the national language of India and the first woman to promote allegiance to the motherland rather than to the British crown.

I will now go on to demonstrate how Ramabai put some of the key guiding principles of residential child care into practice.

### *1. Care includes education*

Ramabai saw learning as an integral part of every aspect of childhood. For her, caring and learning were inextricably linked. She loved to see children playing and said:

These children invent their own games and make toys with chips of wood, pieces of old tin, pieces of brick and broken tiles, or shapeless stones. The toys and games invented by them for themselves seem to give them more pleasure than all the more expensive toys bought from the shops and all the games taught by expert teachers (Macnicol, 1926, p. 26).

Ramabai arranged the purchase of a telescope to assist the study of the night sky. The importance attached to seeds, plants, flowers and the natural world reflected the experience and affection of Ramabai for creation. To her mind, the first task of the teacher was to awaken an interest in the mind of the pupil in everything around. In a clear example of what we may now call opportunity-led practice (Lishman, 2007), she said 'We have a beautiful garden in our compound, where they are taken to see the flowers and the birds' (Macnicol, 1926, p. 52).

She developed and produced a complete educational syllabus and curriculum for six grades. The main components of the curriculum were concerned with the ordinary environment of the child. The curriculum was based on the belief that insects, plants, flowers, trees, rivers and clouds provide some of the best stimulation for learning. It sought to link the inner world of the child (including spiritual, cognitive, moral and emotional dimensions) to the whole of the universe. It was not a set of facts or particular skills, so much as a process geared to realising the potential and inspiring self-confidence in children thus enabling them to take the initiative in learning for themselves. This is a real philosophy of education in sharp contrast to the target-driven, utilitarian models preferred in modern Britain.

### *2. Residential care can challenge the status quo*

Ramabai consciously challenged aspects of the status quo, particularly in relation to beliefs about children and women. The stress on the personal autonomy and choice of the

girls still sounds radical set in a traditional Indian context; in Ramabai's time it was little short of revolutionary (Kumar, 1993). Her aim was to nurture girls with an independent mind and the ability to make sound judgments. Thus it was that these insights, particularly the recognition of the oppression of girls in patriarchal oppressive communities and traditions, led her to develop a radical programme that required nothing less than the creation of a new social space involving dress, diet, relationships, status within the household, life-space, education and life-course.

It required nothing less than the creation of a new social space, and a whole new way of living and relating. Kosambi (2003) puts it in clear historical and sociological terms:

Whether or not it was perceived in such terms at the time, the *Sharada Sadan* introduced a structural change in the patriarchal social set-up by carving out a new space for women outside the private domain, though not quite within the public domain. It was a semi-public space where women were to be given education and skills towards economic self-reliance, a hitherto unheard of concept in the upper castes (Kosambi, 2003, p. 72).

### ***3. The ideology of 'the good family' versus 'the bad institution'***

There is a strong ideology in Western society that 'normal' families and neighbourhoods are loving, warm, friendly places. The corresponding ideology is that any institution is 'the bad institution' and the place of last resort. Ramabai combined the best aspects of 'institutional' organisation with individualised family-type care. She did this by creating small spaces, both physical and emotional, where children and young people who had known extreme deprivation, chronic anxiety and even persecution could feel safe. In addition, she guaranteed this security with her own presence and commitment. At the same time she understood economy of scale and the need to raise funds for a larger project. She was very successful in raising money for her ventures, especially in America where she toured as a lecturer.

The term 'flower families' created a powerful symbol of this radical newly-created life-space in which girls who were 'no people' were accepted, became respected as individuals with a personal name and life-story, and were equipped and empowered to leave as agents of change.

### ***4. Hearing the voice of children and young people***

The task of practitioners is to continue to listen and to be advocates for the voice of children. Ramabai was prepared to put the whole of her project at risk in order to respect the views of some of the girls with whom she lived. Mukti makes sense as a republic in which the girls and women were able and encouraged to make decisions, to take responsibility for their own lives, the lives of others living on site, and also the wellbeing of those less fortunate in other parts of the world. The process of listening to children and eliciting their views created in many cases the first trusting or respectful relationship they had known. Ramabai was very careful to observe boundaries that were transparent and fair to Hindus and Christians alike, and relating to her own daughter and the young widows who lived with them. In so doing, she gave a very real message that all of the young people were equally valued. Being listened to is at the heart of psychological wellbeing.

Ramabai saw Mukti not so much as an institution where young women lived en masse, but as a home where each individual and their views mattered uniquely. Part of the listening process is that of empathy and her stories of the girls indicate how deeply she identified with them. She spoke very eloquently about one child in her care:

I cannot describe to you how deeply I was touched to see Saraswati in rags with her forlorn state and emaciated sorrowful face...She used to faint almost every hour and we saw no smile light up her face no matter what we did to please her. But gradually as the baby saw no one was unkind to her, she began to change a little. I spoke kind words to her now and then and one day I found that she liked flowers, and won her heart at once by giving her some pretty flowers (Kosambi, 2003, p. 54).

She anticipated Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) by fifty years or so, sensing intuitively from her own traumatic experiences of loss, and those of hundreds of others, that the unconditional acceptance of a child by a significant other was vital to emotional wellbeing.

### ***5. Encouraging agency and responsibility***

Another aspect of Ramabai's child care was her encouragement of the children to understand the feelings of others, and to take some responsibility for them. This happened both in very personal situations, and in relation to humanitarian crises on a big scale. When a widow and baby arrived, for example, she described how the girls responded to the baby. The victims were now agents of care. One of the crises she alerted them to was a famine in Madras, and soon the girls, including a Brahmin widow, were sweeping the yard to earn money to send to the stricken people in the region.

## **Conclusion**

Ramabai is one of my greatest mentors. Yet Mukti's founder has been relegated to the margins of history. A wooden cross marks her grave amid scrubby farmland not far from a railway line. She is only hazily known, if at all, in her motherland, and almost completely unknown in the wider world. Perhaps this was inevitable. Ramabai was a pioneer who, way ahead of her time, challenged traditional values and stereotypes in both East and West.

It is hoped that this paper will go some way toward the rediscovery of this five-foot tall giant, otherwise India and the rest of the world will be deprived of an inspiring and challenging example of transforming residential child care. Her friend and biographer Professor Nicol Macnicol concluded, 'Pandita Ramabai stands at the head of a new way for India, flinging wide to her the gates of hope' (Macnicol, 1926).

Practitioners need inspiring examples, heroines and heroes, rather than slogans or mission statements. You could do much worse than to draw inspiration from the combined lives and work of Ramabai and Korczak, whose work was described in my previous paper (White, 2007). If we are inspired by their vision and hope who knows whether some of the children alongside whom we are now privileged to live will not be the giants of the future?

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