

# FOCUS

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### Editorial

#### Important Persons

Human societies are shaped by people who take leadership roles or who promote ideas about change. These people inspire others to take action or to think of ideas that facilitate change.

Decades before human rights became a global language, there were people who worked for societal change based on ideas that we now consider as human rights.

These people pioneered such ideas or led movements to realize them. They have been hailed as heroines/heroes. They have been cited as icons, making them bigger than life figures in history.

But before they were put on the pedestal, they lived lives that portrayed their transformation into personalities that would influence their respective societies. Their personal histories are important, probably equal in significance in some cases to their public lives.

Knowing these icons beyond their public images prevents the temptation of projecting them as perfect human beings. The more they are seen as ordinary mortals, the greater the chance that their ideas and actions will be recognized with critical yet appreciative perspective.

Their contribution to the betterment of human society being already established, it is important to see them not simply with a sense of awe but more importantly with a sense of realism.

# Pandita Ramabai: Student, Seeker, and Visionary Leader\*

Sonia Hazard

On a hot July weekend in 1848, sixty-eight women and forty-two men—all of them American or European—convened in Seneca Falls, New York, as delegates to the first ever women’s rights convention. Perhaps it is because of this watershed event paired with lingering colonialism that many Westerners consider women’s liberation to be a uniquely Western initiative.

But when these early ripples from Seneca Falls were just beginning to make waves in the West, a beautiful baby girl named Ramabai was born over ten thousand miles away just outside Karkal, India. Equipped with courage, intelligence, and an unshakable Christian faith, Ramabai would eventually become known as Pandita, or “wise person,” and the preeminent pioneer of women’s rights in India.

This remarkable woman, whose feminist commitment was rivaled only by her ardent conviction for Christ upon her conversion at age 25, changed the lives of countless girls and women. The Mukti Mission she founded reached India’s neglected and abused child-widows.

## The Gifted Young Student

Pandita Ramabai was born Ramabai Dongre on 23 April 1858, to an intellectual Brahmin family. Her father was a

prominent Sanskrit scholar who directed an ashram, a residential religious community and school for boys. Defying social custom, he firmly believed that women, like men, should also be allowed an education—and accordingly took it upon himself to teach Ramabai and her mother. He was probably ostracized by his colleagues for his radical views on women’s education and soon after lost the ashram due to financial reasons.

The entire family—Ramabai, her father, mother, and two siblings—then took off on foot and traveled all over India. Her parents eked out a modest living as Puranikas, wanderers who recited and commented on the Vedas and other sacred Hindu texts. True to their dedication to education, Ramabai’s parents spent long hours teaching her during their travels. She proved to be quite a precocious student. Soon, she had learned 18,000 verses of the Bhagavata Purana in their original Sanskrit by heart, in addition to excelling in astronomy, botany, and physiology.

Ramabai’s first-class education was incredibly rare. She notes in her book, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, that less than one-quarter of one percent of Indian women at the time were able to read or write. Of these privileged few, many were required to cease their studies at a young age—often at nine- or

ten-years-old—when they were married. Early marriage was the norm for young Brahmin girls, and it was often considered dishonorable for a woman to continue her education once wed. Baffling and angering Hindu traditionalists, Ramabai’s father further went against the grain by refusing to arrange her marriage.

## The Passionate Social Reformer

Tragically, Ramabai’s mother, father, and sister died from starvation during the great famine of 1874–76, leaving Ramabai and her older brother hungry and without help. The pair continued to wander India until reaching Calcutta in 1878. After stunning scholars with her extraordinary knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient texts, the 20-year-old Ramabai became an instant celebrity in the city. She was honored with the title Pandita, meaning “wise person,” and heralded as a Saraswati, or “goddess of learning.” She soon joined the ranks of Calcutta intelligentsia.

In 1880, shortly after her brother’s death, Ramabai transgressed social norms yet again by marrying a man of a lower caste. Before long, she gave birth to a daughter named Manorama. Her new baby gave her much joy, if only ephemerally, for her husband died of cholera before their

second anniversary. Now a widow, Ramabai was left to raise Manorama on her own.

During this period of severe turmoil in her personal life that her public life really began to thrive. Troubled by the immensity of suffering she had witnessed during her travels and galvanized by the western Indian social reform movement, Ramabai soon established herself as a champion of the oppressed—especially women. She published, lectured, and founded Arya Mahila Sabha in 1881, the very first Indian feminist organization. The group fervently crusaded for female education and a higher marriage age for girls. Ramabai was called to speak before India's Education Commission in 1883, where she made an impassioned case that "it is evident that women, being one half of the people of this country, are oppressed and cruelly treated by the other half."

### The Silver Seeker

Stemming from an interest in women's public health, Ramabai left India with daughter Manorama in 1883 to study medicine in England. She was supported by the Anglican Community of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage. The Sisters gave her a home and allowed her to improve her English and teach Sanskrit in return. Many of her mostly Hindu followers were understandably suspicious of such an arrangement. They didn't trust Christian missionaries; in India, the cross often represented colonialism, not liberation. Before Ramabai left for England, she assured this

Hindu faction that "Nothing would induce me to embrace Christianity."

However, when her hosts encouraged Ramabai to read the New Testament, she was deeply touched by the gospel stories of Jesus ministering to the oppressed. The way he treated people like the Samaritan woman made a strong impression on her. Her feminism was freely reconciled with this new faith; she started to realize that Christ could truly "transform and uplift the downtrodden women of India." She wrote later,

One can feel that the teaching of our Lord Jesus comes from the All-Father, who loves not one nation, not one class, or one caste, but bears in His heart every creature of His hand; it would be a blessed day for India, if her sons and daughters could see that He is the revelation of the Father.

Ramabai and her daughter Manorama were baptized by the Sisters.

As an Indian woman, Ramabai's new faith met some unique challenges. Despite accepting the religion of Britain, she remained a die-hard Indian patriot and considered herself a cultural Hindu. This dual identity prevented her from completely fitting in with either Hindus or Christians. Ramabai was constantly living on the boundaries—she was accused by Hindus for deserting them, while simultaneously bearing the brunt of colonial British racism and condescension. She was further alienated by refusing to indiscriminately accept all church dogma and

doctrine espoused by Anglicans, emphasizing the importance of the Bible above all. She explained,

In this new Faith, there are some things which I cannot take in, and I shall not feel myself bound to do so, until I know them, as far as my poor understanding will carry me. But, I must ever continue to search Scriptures and never stop until I find the lost piece of silver—either in this world or the next.

In 1886, the dean of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania invited Ramabai to America for the graduation ceremony of one of her distant cousins, Anandibai Joshee, who was the first Indian woman to receive a degree in medicine. Like her rise to success in Calcutta a decade earlier, the 28-year-old became a sensation in Philadelphia. Through invitations to speak at several American women's organizations, Ramabai developed partnerships with feminist leaders like Frances Willard, Susan B. Anthony, and Harriet Tubman. With the help of Willard and her Women's Christian Temperance Union, Ramabai published her second full-length book in 1887, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, the first Indian feminist manifesto.

### The Founder of Mukti Mission

*The High-Caste Hindu Woman* also reflects Ramabai's emerging commitment to minister to India's high-caste child widows. The book delivers a heart-rending—yet culturally sensitive—feminist critique of the plight of these women and

girls. While it is more complex than can adequately be addressed here, Ramabai presents the issue, at its base level, as such: when Brahmin women are married off as children, they usually live with their husband's family. If the husband dies young, the child widow is often blamed for the death and despised by the family, as prescribed by a particular interpretation of Hindu scriptures. In her book, Ramabai documents the widow's plight in detail.

The widow must wear a single coarse garment, white, red, or brown. She must eat only one meal during the twenty-four hours of a day. She must never take part in family feasts and jubilees, with others. She must not show herself to people on auspicious occasions. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. A man will postpone his journey if his path happens to be crossed by a widow...

Ramabai returned to India in 1889 with a renewed sense of vision and generous financial support from the newly-formed American Ramabai Association. She soon opened the Sharada Sadan, a secular residential school for high-caste child widows. Ramabai made a point to make both Hindu and Christian texts freely available, although she conducted Bible study for those interested. The school operated for several years, until the bubonic plague epidemic of the late 1890s forced Ramabai and her students to flee to the rural village of Kedgaon.

It was in Kedgaon—in an unusual place with unusual circumstances—that Ramabai's Christian feminist vision became fully actualized in the Mukti (Salvation) Mission. Unlike the secular Sharada Sadan, Mukti was overtly Christian and ministered to all in need of help, eventually growing to house and educate over 2,000 girls and women. In addition to high-caste child widows, Mukti opened its doors and provided services for those who suffered from sexual abuse, famine, and disability—of every caste. While presiding over the flourishing Mission until her death in 1922, she continued to write and lecture. Among other achievements, she translated the entire Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek into her native Marathi, and was awarded the government's Kaiser-e-Hind gold medal in 1919.

### The Visionary Leader

Pandita Ramabai was a strong leader with a clear vision. Her lifelong refusal to conform to patriarchal norms and resolute commitment to equality and justice are truly inspirational. She clearly deserves a prominent place as one of the movement's heroes.

Her voice rings just as truly today as it did a century ago. While the situation for child widows in India has greatly improved, injustice, inequality, and the mistreatment of women still abound all over the world. Like Jesus, Ramabai still presents a challenge for contemporary women and men. She entreats us to respond to her urgent clarion call for

justice, expressed so well in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*,

In the name of humanity, in the name of your sacred responsibilities as workers in the cause of humanity, and, above all, in the most holy name of God, I summon you...to bestow your help quickly, regardless of nation, caste, or creed.

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### Endnote

\* This article first appeared in the Autumn 2006 issue of *Mutuality Magazine* of the Christians for Biblical Equality.

# Raden Ajeng Kartini: Indonesia's Feminist Educator

HURIGHTS OSAKA

Raden Ajeng Kartini is hailed as Indonesia's first feminist. April 21, the day of her birth, is celebrated as "Hari Ibu Kartini" (Kartini Day). She is seen as the symbol of Indonesian women's emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

Kartini was born on 21 April 1879, in a village called Mayong in the town of Jepara, North Central Java to an aristocrat family. She is the daughter of Raden Mas Adipati Aryo Sosroningrat, the Regent of Jepara. She went to a primary school, along with her brothers, for the children of Dutch planters and administrators. Other girls from aristocratic families did not receive the same formal education she obtained.<sup>2</sup> But under the old Javanese tradition of *pingit*, she was kept in seclusion at home until marriage upon reaching the age of twelve years.

Seclusion from twelve years of age until marriage did not stop Kartini from aspiring for further education. During her period of seclusion she wrote letters to many friends abroad, read magazines and books, and rebelled against the strong tradition of gender discrimination.<sup>3</sup> Her father gave her books on Javanese culture to "balance her western education and subscribed to a Literary Box, a box of magazines, children's books, modern novels and foreign

news, which was changed every week by a local library."<sup>4</sup> In 1892, when she was twelve years old, Kartini made friends with the wife of the new Dutch officer appointed as Assistant Resident of Jepara, Mevrouw Ovink-Soer. Mevrouw was "highly cultured, had published a number of magazine articles," and later wrote a book entitled *Women's Life in a (Javanese) Village*. She was also a fervent socialist and fervent feminist.<sup>5</sup> One account says that the Dutch people who supported her desire to be educated and to search for new kind of education for herself were proponents of the then new colonial policy called "Ethical Policy" that emphasized<sup>6</sup>

increased education of the Indonesians, fuller participation by them in their own local government as civil servants, efforts to raise the peasants' standard of living through agricultural improvements and the promotion of indigenous handicrafts.

Her father, a Javanese official serving the Dutch colonial government as a local administrative head on the north coast of Java, introduced her and her sisters to the reality of life for the people whom he governed, to the world beyond the then Dutch East Indies, besides exploring the intricacies of their own rich cultural

heritage. He took his daughters to meet the villagers during times of crisis and celebration.<sup>7</sup>

She obtained a scholarship to study in Holland, a desire she worked to achieve for quite some time, but family pressure led her to ultimately reject it. She did not want marry but she consented to be the fourth wife of the Regent of Rembang, Raden Adipati Joyodiningrat, a man twenty-five years her senior. She died on 17 September 1904 after giving birth to a child a year after her marriage. She passed away at the young age of twenty-five. Prior to her death, Kartini founded a school for young girls.

## Kartini as a Feminist

In 1903, Kartini obtained permission to open in her own home in Rembang the first ever all-girls school, for daughters of Javanese officials. She created her own syllabus and system of instruction. The school aimed at the "character development of young women, while at the same time providing them with practical vocational training and general education in art, literature and science."<sup>8</sup> It was also a school that was both Western and Indonesian. By 1904, the school had one hundred twenty students.<sup>9</sup>

Kartini realized that the education she obtained that widened her choices in life



should also be enjoyed as a right by all of her people. Influenced by Dutch feminists, Kartini wrote passionately for the improvement of education, public health, economic welfare, and traditional arts in her country.

She wrote in January 1903 a memorandum about education entitled *Give The Javanese Education!* addressed to an official of the Dutch Ministry of Justice.<sup>10</sup> She emphasized the need to educate the women for the development of society. She wrote:

Who could deny that the woman has a great task to perform in the moral development of society? It is she, precisely she, who is the one to do this; she can contribute much, if not most, to ensure the improvement of the moral standards of society. Nature herself has appointed her to this task. As mother, she is the first educator; at her knee the child first learns to feel, to think, to speak; and in most cases, this initial nurturing influences the rest of its life. It is the hand of the mother which first plants the germ of virtue or wickedness in the heart of the individual where it usually remains for the rest of the person's life. Not without reason is it said that a knowledge of right and wrong is imbibed with a mother's milk. But how can Javanese mothers now educate their children if they themselves are uneducated? The education and development of the Javanese people can never adequately advance if women are excluded, if they are not given a role to play in this.

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Really, an important factor in the uplifting of the population will be the progress of the Javanese woman! Therefore it should be the first task of the Government to raise the moral awareness of the Javanese woman, to educate her, to instruct her, to make of her a capable, wise mother and nurturer!

She further wrote about the need for the formal education of the girls of the noble class:

If the nobility knew that the Government desired that its daughters be more highly cultured than, initially, it may not send its daughters from personal conviction, but it would nevertheless send them on their own volition. The nobility must be encouraged in this direction. What does it matter with what motives their daughters are sent to school? The issue is that they are sent to school!

She pointed out that given the resources and the Javanese population of twenty-seven million, educational policy should first be directed to elite women who could then open schools for the rest of the "masses."<sup>11</sup> She wrote:

In the meantime provide education, instruction, for the daughters of the nobility; the civilizing influence has to flow from here to the people; develop them into capable, wise, fine mothers and they will vigorously spread enlightenment amongst the people. They will pass on their refinement and education to their children: to their daughters, who in their turn will become mothers; to their sons who will be called upon to help safeguard the welfare of the people. And as persons

of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment they will in many different ways be of assistance to their people and to their society.

She also explained that the purpose of formal education is not merely to learn the Dutch language. She argued

that knowledge of the Dutch language by itself does not represent cultural refinement, that being civilized consists of something more than simply speaking Dutch, or superficially adopting Dutch manners, and even less in wearing Dutch clothes. Knowledge of Dutch language is the key which can unlock the treasure houses of Western civilization and knowledge; one has to exert oneself to appropriate some of that treasure for oneself.

She criticized the Javanese culture's hierarchical nature, where younger siblings had to serve older ones and where norms dictated elaborate rituals of hierarchy.<sup>12</sup>

She also criticized the nobility by writing thus:

To date more or less the only advantage has been to ensure law and order and the regular receipt of revenue. The State and the nobility have benefited from this but what have the people themselves gained? What benefit have the people had from their highly revered nobles who the Government uses to rule them? To date, nothing, or very little; more likely they have been disadvantaged on those occasions when the nobility has abused its power, which is still not a rare occurrence.

This must change, the nobility must earn the reverence of the people, be worthy of it, and this will be of inestimable benefit to the people.

Kartini wrote many letters that were later published in Holland in 1911 in a book entitled *Through Darkness into Light*, and became a bestseller. It had four editions until 1923.<sup>13</sup>

She also wrote about her own Javanese society and the suffering of the rural poor, and the practice of polygamy.

### Legacy

Overall, she wanted to alter the relations between Indonesians and the Dutch a decade before the flowering of the nationalist movement. Thus, the desire to modernize her country and access the language of knowledge could be interpreted as a "nationalist" move.<sup>14</sup>

In her preface in the 1960s book *Letters of a Javanese Princess*, a collection of Kartini's letters, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote:

I am delighted to gain the insight which these letters offer. One little remark in one of the letters is something I think we might all remember. Kartini says: "We feel that the kernel of all religion is good and beautiful. But, O ye peoples, what have you made of it?" Instead of drawing us together, religion has often forced us apart and even this young girl realized that it should be a unifying force.

The girl who wrote these letters happened to have a father who, as she says, was liberal and had a tremendous

understanding of the longings of the hearts of the young Javanese. He allowed his daughters to go to a foreign school until they were twelve and then they had to return to the cloistered home life, but among themselves there was a freedom of communication and a closeness, which did not exist in many of the Javanese families of the day.

In present-day Indonesia, Hari Ibu Kartini or Kartini Day is seen as an "important event in the school calendar, often providing the setting in which students can explore Indonesian history, the roles of women in society, families and the rich cultural diversity of Indonesia....[and p]erhaps most importantly, it is for educators seeking to nurture the independence and self esteem of children in their care."<sup>15</sup>

Kartini lived a short life of twenty-five years and yet she left a legacy that supported the rights of Indonesian women in particular, and national identity in general. In the context of the remaining many challenges facing Indonesian women today, Kartini provides an inspiration to the continuing effort to overcome them.

<http://bebeth009.blogspot.com/2005/04/raden-ajeng-kartini-are-we-really-free.html>

<sup>4</sup> Natih, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Hilda Geertz, editor, *Letters of a Javanese Princess – Rada Adjeng Kartini* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1964), page 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Natih, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz, op cit., page 23.

<sup>9</sup> Jayawardena, op. cit., page 145.

<sup>10</sup> In *Letters from Kartini: An Indonesian Feminist 1900-1904*, translated by Joost Coté (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> "Southeast Asian Politics, Non-fiction, Javanese Education," Women in World History, available in [www.chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/114.html](http://www.chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/114.html)

<sup>12</sup> Southeast Asian Politics, Non-fiction, Javanese Education, ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, op cit., page 23.

<sup>14</sup> "Southeast Asian Politics, Non-fiction, Javanese Education," op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Natih, op. cit.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Susan J. Natih, "Kartini, her life and letters," *The Jakarta Post*, 21 April 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Limited, 1994), page 141.

<sup>3</sup> Bebeth, "Raden Ajeng Kartini, Are We Really Free?," Just About Anything, 21 April 2005,

## B. R. Ambedkar: An Indefatigable Defender of Human Rights

Joseph Benjamin

**B**himrao Ramji Ambedkar was born as the fourteenth child of Mahar parents, Ramji and Bhimabai, on 14 April 1891 at Mhow, in present-day State of Madhya Pradesh. The Mahars are considered low-caste and treated as untouchables (Dalits) by higher-caste Hindus. They are mainly found in the State of Maharashtra.

The father and grandfather of Ambedkar served in the army and were of well-to-do family. But the stigma of being members of Mahar community caused their social oppression in a caste-ridden society.

Ambedkar had a bitter taste of discriminatory treatment due his caste at an early age. He and his brother had to carry gunny bags to sit on inside the classroom because they were not allowed to sit on classroom chairs. They were denied drinking water facilities, and excluded from games and mixing with other children. Even teachers would not check their notebooks for fear of "pollution." Thus sowed the seeds of discontentment about the Hindu social system in the life of Ambedkar.

He did his early education in Satara in Maharashtra State and then moved on to Bombay. In 1912, he passed his B. A. examination with distinction from the prestigious Elphinstone College with the scholarship and encouragement from the Maharaja of Baroda State. In

1913, with a condition that he would serve the Baroda State for ten years, he was chosen by Maharaja of Baroda State for higher studies at Columbia University in the USA. This was followed with a trans-Atlantic shift to the United Kingdom where he studied at the University of London. While studying abroad, he mixed with students of various nationalities and races, which was an eye-opener for him.

He joined the Union Cabinet of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru during the 1946-1951 period. He resigned on 27 September 1951 to protest the deferment of the discussion in the parliament of the Hindu Code Bill supposedly due to the coming 1952 elections. Ambedkar saw the Bill as a very important reform of Hindu law, with reform proposals on marriage, divorce, and monogamy.

Despite failing health, he plodded on with his advocacy for the cause of the Dalits. He came to Nagpur in October 1956 for his conversion to Buddhism and a couple of months thereafter on 8 December 1956 breathed his last.

### **Ambedkar's Movement for Human Rights**

During the last decade of the 19th century, many Indian leaders born among the lower castes like Narayan Guru (1854-1928), Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), and Ramaswamy

Naicker (1879-1973) launched massive struggles for the dignity of Dalits throughout India. Ambedkar was the most towering figure among these Dalit leaders.

In 1917 he joined the Baroda State Service after returning from his studies in the USA and the United Kingdom, as part of the terms of his scholarship agreement. He worked in the city of Baroda, the place of the ruling family of Gaikwad, which financed his studies abroad. He worked as secretary in the defense office of the Maharaja of Baroda State.

However, despite his foreign education, he had to endure insults while at work due to his low caste origin. He was a victim of the cruel dalit discrimination. He suffered the ignominy of having document files hurled by peons at his face.<sup>1</sup>

He suffered the humiliating experience of not being served drinking water during official functions. At the officer's club, he had to sit in a corner and keep his distance from the other members belonging to higher castes. He also had difficulties in finding a rented house, as he was not allotted government bungalow. He stayed in an inn owned by Parsis (members of Zoroastrian religion). One morning, as he was getting ready to go to work, a dozen Parsis, all wielding sticks, rushed up to his room screaming that he had polluted the inn and insisted on his



immediate departure. He begged them to let him stay for a week longer since he hoped to get his government bungalow by then. But they were obdurate. If they found him at the inn that evening, they said God help him. After spending much of the day in a public garden, Ambedkar, in utter frustration and disgust, left for Bombay by the 9 pm train.

These scorching incidents goaded Ambedkar to work for the protection of dalit rights and upliftment of the status of the Dalits. In 1924, he started legal practice in Bombay and founded the *Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha* (Depressed Class Institute) to uplift the Dalits. Henceforth, he started his movement and took the cause of the Dalits. He roused the dalit consciousness to fight for the eradication of dalit discrimination; to claim equality of treatment, status and opportunity; to equally enjoy all rights — civil, political, social and economic — and respect for the dignity of persons. He was considered a crusader for the human rights of the Dalits in India.<sup>2</sup>

The Hindu religious belief that "All human beings are not born equal" creates caste-based discrimination against the Dalits that leads to various forms of violence against them including public humiliation, torture, rape, beating and killing. Reacting to the values of Hinduism, Rabindranath Gore wrote,

We do not value Hinduism, we value human dignity... We want equal rights in the society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or if necessary by kicking

away this worthless Hindu identity.<sup>3</sup>

Ambedkar was a great supporter of women's liberation. He blamed the *varna* system, which has not only subjugated Dalits but also women. He questioned *Manu Smriti* (Laws of Manu), the law book (*Dharam-Shastra*) of Brahminic Hinduism and attributed to Manu, the legendary first man and lawgiver. *Manu Smriti* prescribed the Dharma of each Hindu, stating the obligations attached to his or her social class and stage of life. It was hostile to the interest of lower caste people and women. It prohibited re-marriage of widows. He felt that *Manu Smriti* was solely responsible for the downfall of Hindu women. He encouraged the Dalits to embrace Buddhism to liberate their own selves from Hindu subjugation. Hence he fought for the right to choose ones' faith. After embracing Buddhism, Ambedkar said, "[U]nfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable... I solemnly assure you I will not die as a Hindu." He practiced what he advocated and became a Buddhist in 1956.

He also wrote about the French revolution ideas of fraternity, liberty and equality. He thought that the French and Russian revolutions failed to realize all three ideas. He believed that they could not all be realized except through the way of the Buddha.<sup>4</sup>

### Means and Ends for Struggle

He adopted various means to safeguard dalit rights. Ambedkar launched a movement against dalit discrimination by creating public opinion through his writings in several periodicals

such as *Mook Nayak*, *Vahishkrit Bharat*, and *Equality Janta*, which he started for the protection of dalit rights.

He also launched numerous movements. One of the memorable struggles of the Dalits was the Vaikom Satyagraha in Travancore in Maharashtra,<sup>5</sup> which asserted the right of the Dalits to worship in Hindu temples without hindrance. Another very significant movement was Mahad March<sup>6</sup> to assert the rights of Dalits to take water from public watering places. Ambedkar organized the Dalit rally to assert their legal right to take water from the Chowdar tank. The Chowdar tank of Mahad was made a public tank in 1869. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution to the effect that the Dalits be allowed to use all public watering places. The Mahad Municipality passed a resolution on 5 January 1927 to the effect that the Municipality had no objection to allowing the Dalits to use the tank. But the higher castes were hesitant in allowing the Dalits to use the tank. Soon after this resolution was passed a conference of the Dalits of the Colaba district was held for two days. Ambedkar also convened a conference on 18-20 March 1927 on this issue. On 20 March 1927, the conference exhorted the Dalits to go to the Chowdar Tank and exercise their right to take water from it. The Hindus who had exhorted them to be bold instantly realized that this was a bombshell and immediately ran away. But the electrified Dalits led by Ambedkar marched in a procession through the main streets and for the first time drank the water from Chowdar tank.

Another temple entry movement took place at the Kalaram temple at Nasik in Maharashtra State. On 13 October 1935, at a conference convened on the issue, Ambedkar recounted the experience of the depressed classes and the immense sacrifices made by them to secure minimum human rights under the aegis of Hinduism.<sup>7</sup>

Ambedkar fought for the rights of workers and peasants. In the late 1920s and especially in the 1930s when he had formed his Independent Labour Party, he took up the cause of tenants (from both the dalit Mahars and the caste Hindu Kunbis) in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. With the support of radicals then in the Congress Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party organized a huge march of 20,000 peasants to Mumbai in 1938, the largest pre-independence peasant mobilization in the region. In the same year, Ambedkar joined with the Communists to organize a strike of Mumbai textile workers in protest against a bill about to be introduced by the British Government to curtail labor strikes.<sup>8</sup> Ambedkar took the lead in condemning the bill in the assembly and argued that the right to strike was simply another name for the right to freedom of assembly.

### British Raj and Protection for Dalits

The demand for safeguards and protection of Scheduled Castes (earlier called Depressed Class) has a long history dating to Montague-Chelmsford Reform of 1919 during the British Raj period. Ambedkar had been closely involved in the struggle to give Scheduled Caste people solid statutory safeguard. He

was a delegate at the Round Table Conference in London, where he asked for separate electorate for the Dalits. It is not a surprise that subsequently Ambedkar saw to it that the welfare of the Scheduled Caste people were guaranteed in the 1949 Constitution of India in the form of reservation in legislative, employment and educational fields.

Ambedkar was a great champion of the dalit cause because he succeeded in turning the depressed class movement into a revolutionary movement throughout India. Today India has witnessed the oppressed classes walking on the streets of cities and villages with confidence and poise, of course many despicable acts of discrimination and violence against the dalits still occur. Yet the juggernaut of equality is rolling on remorselessly and forcefully.

### Conclusion

Ambedkar is India's foremost human rights activist during the 20th century. He is an emancipator, scholar, extraordinary social reformer and a true champion of human rights.<sup>9</sup> It can be said that he is one of the highly regarded Indians whose emancipation and empowering role for oppressed groups that cut against the gender divide has inspired subaltern groups all over the world. All should try to take inspiration from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's life and work for the creation of a just and gender-neutral world.

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# Matsumoto Jiichiro – Peacemaker?

Ian Neary

**M**atsumoto Jiichiro (1867-1966) was one of, if not the, most important human rights activist in Japan in the twentieth century. His main contribution to that movement was as leader of the Buraku liberation movement. He was born and brought up within a household in a Buraku community located to the east of Fukuoka and he retained links with that community throughout his life. After experiencing discrimination at upper primary school he moved to continue his education first in Kyoto and then Tokyo but returned to Fukuoka to attend the medical prior to conscription. He was not required for military service and instead left Japan soon after his twenty-first birthday to spend three years in north China. Returning from there in 1910 he started to work in a building business that had been set up by his brothers. This was turned into a legal corporation in 1916 and it was to grow into a major construction company over the next decades generating profits that would support not only organized opposition to discrimination but also other causes of the socialist left.

## Anti-discrimination Movement

Activists founded the Suiheisha (National Leveler's Association) to encourage the Burakumin to overcome discrimination 'by

our own efforts'. It was initially based in the Kansai region but when the leadership sought to establish a branch in Kyushu it was Matsumoto to whom they turned for support. Soon after the Kyushu Suiheisha was created Matsumoto was selected as chairman of the national organization and he continued in that role until the movement was forced to disband in 1942. When the movement was re-constructed in the post war era, known as the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) from 1955, he was its unchallenged leader until his death. In practically all of the speeches that he made in the post war period, whether in Japan or overseas, he would talk of the need to oppose discrimination against Burakumin within Japan and seek to establish broad respect for human rights there and across the world.

However this was not his only contribution to the development of progressive causes in Japan. In 1936 he was elected to the Japanese parliament where he continued to serve throughout the war years until 1945. His construction company prospered through the war years and into the occupation. He was a founding member of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in November 1945 and following his election in 1947 he became deputy speaker of the House of Councillors until his removal

from politics by a purge order in 1949. Nevertheless he resumed his political career in 1953 and was re-elected three times, on each occasion increasing his number of votes.

Meanwhile in 1953 he visited Beijing for the first time and on his return was elected as chairman of the Japan China Friendship Association (*Nitchu Kyokai*) another role that he continued to perform until his death. All of this is relatively well known and documented in the various biographies and memoirs about his life. However in this short article I want to comment on another dimension of his activity that has attracted rather less attention: his involvement in the international peace movement.

## International Peace Movement

His purge from politics in 1949 was said to be because of his links with the wartime regime in the early 1940s but a more likely explanation is that it was because he was a prominent and vociferous critic of the emperor and emperor system. In May 1952, about nine months after the purge order was lifted, he was invited to Beijing to attend a preparatory meeting to organize the Asia Pacific Peace conference. However the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) refused to give him a passport. Preparations

continued in Japan to send representatives and a delegation of sixty was selected with Matsumoto as its leader. Once again the MFA refused to allow him to go despite him launching a legal appeal against their decision. He nevertheless sent a message to the conference held in October 1952 which was broadcast by radio back to Japan and he was selected one of the eleven vice presidents of the Peace Liaison Committee of the Asia Pacific region. In October 1952 Jean Lafitte of the World Peace Council invited him to a conference in Vienna – another event he was not allowed to attend.

He was allowed to attend a meeting of Asian socialists in Rangoon in January 1953 representing the Left Wing of the Japan Socialist Party. After this he went on to India, Europe – meeting Jean Lafitte in Prague – and finally ending up in Beijing at the end of February 1953. In most of the countries he visited on this trip he contacted local representatives of the peace movement. The following year he visited China again, this time to attend the fifth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and while he was there he met Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India spending a night at the theatre with him. From there he went on to visit Moscow, Helsinki and finally Stockholm where he was one of the four Japanese delegates at a meeting of the World Peace Council. He made a speech there in which he talked of the campaigns against nuclear weapons in Japan, protests about Buraku discrimination

and the need to promote friendship with China.

In 1954 Nehru and Zhou En-lai announced their Five Principles of Co-existence as Nehru led India from a position of western oriented neutralism to one independent of both Cold War blocs. The development of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was further consolidated at the Bandung conference held in April 1955 that Matsumoto attended as an observer. It is clear from the speeches he made at this time that he would have liked Japan to become an active member of the NAM even if, or perhaps precisely because, this would have meant Japan would have had to break its links with the USA.

Later, in June that year, Matsumoto was a delegate at the World Assembly for Peace in Stockholm that heard speeches from leaders of the European peace movement including Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. He was a member of a 'sub-commission' on Asia that welcomed the news about 'the growing efforts of the Japanese people to get their country to conduct an independent policy of peace and re-establish relations with all countries.' This should, they concluded 'be held as a positive contribution to peaceful coexistence.'

### Japanese Peace Movement

In September 1955 Matsumoto became a member of the Japanese committee of the movement to abolish nuclear weapons (*Gensuibaku Kinshi Nihon Kyogikai*) and in April the following year he spoke at the

movement's conference. This probably explains the invitation that came in 1957 for him to visit Australia to attend a National Conference for Peace and to make a series of speeches in various cities there in support of the campaign against nuclear weapons. After spending a month in Australia he went on to New Zealand to talk at a number of meetings organized by the peace movement there. Just as he was leaving he was interviewed for a newspaper article. He took this opportunity to re-affirm his republicanism, 'there is a prospect within our time of the end of the Emperor system', of his, and the Japanese people's opposition to the development of nuclear weapons. He warns about the current Prime Minister, Kishi Nobusuke, who was about to visit the country saying that, 'He is not a suitable leader to improve relations with New Zealand and Australia.'

As it turned out this was the last contribution he made to the international peace movement although he continued to give it his support within Japan becoming a member of the Japan Peace Council in July 1959. By this point he was 73 and suffering from high blood pressure. His doctors advised him against foreign travel. Nevertheless he gave his full endorsement to the campaigns against the renewal of the Security Treaty with the USA and the presence of US bases on Japanese soil.

Meanwhile the BLL in the 1950s had embarked on campaigns against instances of

(Continued on page 15)



## Normalization of Aceh: Impossible Without Truth-telling\* Part 2

Amiruddin al Rahab

Compromises in addressing human rights violations committed during the past regime in Aceh are based on a hoped-for “new future” perspective, rather than on the principle of accountability. Compromises are allowed as long as the human rights violations victims are not left out and human rights violations are not justified. In human rights terms, this is known as transitional justice.

Ruti Teitel (2004) explains that transitional justice is basically a normative change that rearranges the social system and the legal and political structures at the same time. Therefore, transitional justice should include constitutional change (governing norms), legal sanctions, reparation for victims, restoration of reputation, and reconstruction of history. The change in legal norms aims to encourage political or power management change. Old mechanisms are usually being reformed to achieve justice. Truth-telling as a tool to achieve justice and to show the responsibility of the state (government) for violence that happened in the past is a form of this new mechanism.

In the light of this theory, transitional justice is not merely about meting out punishment to individuals found responsible for the violence, but more on finding and revealing the sources of fear, sense of insecurity, and injustice.

The 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding

(Helsinki MoU) and the Law No. 11 Year 2006 on Aceh Governance (UU PA) are forms of normative legal changes that provide the basis for the political authority in Aceh to encourage further normative changes to achieve justice for the Acehnese. The establishment of a Human Rights Court and a Truth Commission are initial measures in the search for the sources of fear and sense of insecurity, and also sources of normative basis for restoring reputations and providing reparation to the victims.

### Defining the Truth: Understanding History

To understand the truth about the past human rights violations in Aceh, one has to analyze the situation of Aceh as a Military Operation District (daerah operasi militer or DOM). During the DOM era, the government of Aceh became an extension of the military establishment. This turned the DOM regime into an institution with dual character: political and military. Its political character consisted of being an institution under the control of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ABRI) that made political decisions, while in implementing these political decisions it assumed a military character. ABRI was the main political force in Aceh during the DOM era, and human rights violations did not constitute mere abuses but the means by which to maintain the DOM regime itself.

Under this situation, how much negative impact did the militarization of Aceh during the DOM era cause? Only by understanding these negative impacts that the healing and the rearrangement of political and cultural structures in Aceh can be mapped out. Without understanding these negative impacts, the rehabilitation programs being carried out by provincial government (Badan Pelaksana Harian Reintegrasi-Damai Aceh or BRA) become artificial in the context of the still remaining militarized social structure of Aceh.

Therefore, understanding the truth about the human rights violations during the DOM era means understanding how the military regime worked in Aceh. It also means showing how the Acehnese people were organized and shaped by the political system of the military regime. The change of the political system in Aceh by virtue of the Helsinki MoU and UU PA is aimed at reducing the negative impacts of the military regime and creating possibilities for a new and demilitarized Acehnese society.

### Roles of Religious Leaders in the Transition

Major General Supiadin AS, the Chief of the Aceh Military Command (KODAM), asked the *ulamas* to take an active role in urging the children of the victims of conflict not to remain vengeful. Major General Supiadin AS asked the *ulamas* to use “religious activities such as Koran readings, religious

lectures and preaching" (*Serambi Indonesia*, 9 May 2007) to prevent vengeance from breeding.

Unfortunately this appeal retained the *ulamas'* traditional role during the conflict as political messengers of the military. Politically, the political messengers are called collaborators, agents who always support government policies. (Tim Kell, 1995) This role was confirmed when the *ulamas* organized the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) in 1975, which was seen "as a means of mobilizing Muslim support for the government's development policies" or as described by the Religious Minister at that time, the function of the *ulamas* was "to translate government policy into a language that the *ummah* (Muslim community) understands." One author sees the MUI performing a security role in the 1980s by "assisting the army in its counterinsurgency campaign against Achenese rebels."

In late 1990s, the standardization of the village governance structure and the devolution of power down to the village level resulted in the loss of the social legitimacy of the *ulamas*.

In order for Major General Supiadin's appeal to become meaningful and productive, all *ulamas* throughout Aceh should transform themselves from their traditional role as collaborators to that of reformers. And to assume this latter role, the *ulamas* have to keep distance from government power, become guardians and agents of truth, and fight for the social, economic, civil and political rights of the victims of past violence. This will eventually

restore the social legitimacy of the *ulamas*.

### Truth and Justice

The Helsinki MoU (Chapter 2, Article 3) and UU PA (Chapter 2 29) provide for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to find out the truth about the violence of the past through the testimonies of affected people and the gathering of other information. Will this commission be able to bring out the truth and lead to reconciliation among, and justice for, the parties concerned? Will vengeance among the aggrieved disappear?

Martha Minow (1998) argues that vengeance melts away if there is a process of "restoring dignity to victims" and not merely by having "prosecutions and amnesties." Some steps are needed such as the following:

Commission of inquiry into the facts; opening access to secret police files; removing prior political and military officials and civil servants from their post and from the rolls for public benefits; publicizing the names of offenders and names of victims; securing reparations and apologies for victims; devising and making available appropriate therapeutic services for any person affected by the horrors, devising art and memorials to mark what happened to honor the victims and to communicate the aspiration of "never again"; and advancing public educational programs to convey what happened and to strengthen participatory democracy and human rights.

Based on these requirements, truth means acknowledgment of all the bitter experiences faced by the victims through a clear and proven mechanism. Acknowledging the truth about the victims' experiences becomes the foremost step toward restoring the dignity of the victims and their families.

Another author suggests the "survivors' justice approach" which focuses on reconciliation to remove vengeance. (Mahmood Mamdani, 2001) Reconciliation means those who survived the armed conflict and violence strive to build themselves up along with other groups. The blame is not on individuals but on the system that opens the possibility for inhuman wrongdoings to occur. The key steps are the acknowledgment of all the victims' experiences and immediate changes to all institutions that contributed to the past violence. These steps are aimed at preventing the bad experiences of the past from happening again.

The problem of post-conflict vengeance is indeed a collective problem, not a problem of the individual. Violence in a conflict is a collective experience that accumulates over time. There should be no space for forgetting, rather a space for remembering and transforming the memory into something productive - a space for healing. Healing in the context of collective memory surely cannot be achieved through religious activities such as Quran reading or moral preaching, but through materialization of justice. Al-Quran provides a principle: "O ye who believe! Be ye staunch in Justice, witness for Allah, even though against yourself" (QS al-Nisa 4:135).

This principle should become the guide in healing the wounds of the victims to regain their dignity.

### Conclusion

The normalization of Aceh will hit a dead end if truth-telling is not done soon. Prolonging the abnormal condition will only give room for instability to appear within each party involved. The worst impacts of this prolonged abnormality are: first, a crystallization of the apathy and skepticism of the people toward the new elites

and government; second, provision of legitimacy to the growth of the anti-peace forces that will manipulate the situation and agitate the people towards violence.

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### Endnote

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*(Continued from page 12)*

discrimination against Burakumin trying to link these protests to demands that the state accept its responsibility for the poverty in which most Buraku families lived. These demands were backed by the JSP but only in 1960 did the government concede that they should investigate to see what might be done. A report based on these investigations was published in 1965 and suggested that the state not only intervene to improve the physical environment of the Burakumin but also provide assistance to enable them to develop their living and education standards. While Matsumoto broadly welcomed the report's recommendations he was worried that the improvement schemes might undermine the Buraku communities' self-reliance that the Suiheisha had sought to encourage.

### Two Concluding Questions

We know quite a lot about the contribution that Matsumoto

made to the Buraku liberation movement thanks to the extensive coverage of most aspects of his life in publications produced by the BLL. There is however relatively little about his involvement in the peace movement despite that fact that he was a member of several of the key committees within Japan and seems to have played a relatively high profile role in international conferences in the mid 1950s. I wonder if there is more detailed evidence about what he did sleeping in the archives of the Australian or Japanese peace movement?

Another aspect of his life that remains unexplored is the period between 1942 and 1945 when he continued to be active as a politician and took part in the government of wartime Japan both at the national and local levels. He never talked about this time frankly or transparently. This is understandable. He tried to reinvent himself in the 1950s as an advocate of peace and critic of government both at home

and abroad. It would have undermined his credentials if he had been too open about what he did in the war. What is perhaps less easy to understand is why in the twenty-first century there remains so little written about this period in his life. Matsumoto was, like all of us a complicated person, and one who lived in difficult and confusing times. Would it not add to our understanding of both the period and the person if more light were shone on those aspects of his life that create difficulties for those of us who would praise him?

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# HURIGHTS OSAKA Calendar

HURIGHTS OSAKA has published the 2009 edition of the annual publication *Asia-Pacific Human Rights Review* (in Japanese language). This edition has the theme "Cross-border Marriage from Women's Human Rights Perspective," focusing on marriages between men from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan with women from developing countries, including China, the Philippines and Vietnam. Academics researching the issues of cross-border marriage and migration, and NGO workers working on the rights of female migrants wrote the articles. The second part of the publication contains articles related to the recent developments in human rights activities in the Asia-Pacific region.



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**HURIGHTS OSAKA**, inspired by the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formally opened in December 1994. It has the following goals: 1) to promote human rights in the Asia-Pacific region; 2) to convey Asia-Pacific perspectives on human rights to the international community; 3) to ensure inclusion of human rights principles in Japanese international cooperative activities; and 4) to raise human rights awareness among the people in Japan in meeting its growing internationalization. In order to achieve these goals, HURIGHTS OSAKA has activities such as Information Handling, Research and Study, Education and Training, Publications, and Consultancy Services.

**FOCUS Asia-Pacific** is designed to highlight significant issues and activities relating to human rights in the Asia-Pacific. Relevant information and articles can be sent to HURIGHTS OSAKA for inclusion in the next editions of the newsletter.

FOCUS Asia-Pacific is edited by Osamu Shiraishi, Director of HURIGHTS OSAKA.

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