

HIMSELF

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A HINDU LADY

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The Autobiography of a Hindu Lady

TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED
BY KATHERINE VAN AKIN GATEL
FROM A BOOK
WRITTEN IN THE MARATHI LANGUAGE
BY MRS. RAMABAI RANADE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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GATES
HIMSELF

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FIRST EDITION

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To
my husband and his father
through whom I was introduced to
the India they loved

KEY TO PRONUNCIATION OF MARATHI VOWELS

- ã as u in but
- â — ah, as in father
- ī as in Jim
- ī — ee — as in seen
- û as oo in took
- ũ as oo in poor
- ē as ay in lay
- V and W are pronounced alike
in Marathi

PREFACE

This is a true story of real people. They lived in Western India during the last quarter of the last century. The original story was first published in 1910 at Poona, India, by the Seva Sadan Society, with whose early days the author of the book, Mrs. Ramabai Ranade, was closely associated. Overwhelmed by grief at the death of her famous husband, Mrs. Ramabai¹ Ranade² found relief for her sorrow in telling friends of the happiness of their life together. One friend suggested to her that these reminiscences would interest other people and that the writing of them would solace the writer. Mrs. Ranade acknowledged this suggestion by dedicating her volume to her friend, Shrimati Soubhayavati Sakhutai Vidvas.

The choice of a title for this English version was not difficult. There is a custom in Western India in accordance with which, a wife, instead of referring to her husband by his given name, will use merely the third person plural form of the pronoun. Instead of this, Mrs. Ranade, in referring to her husband, has invariably used the Sanskrit reflexive pronoun. Consequently, 'Himself' seems the most important part of her story, as he was of her life.

The second part of the title is equally understandable to the Oriental mind. No Indian wife could

¹ Bai is the termination for every woman's name, and signifies Mrs. or Miss.

² Pronounced 'Rah-nah-day.'

write about herself without revealing how completely she is the reflection of her 'lord and guru,' and how dependent upon his attitude toward her is her happiness. No price is too great to pay for his continued favor. Therefore, the title of 'Himself: the Autobiography of a Hindu Lady' is both technically and psychologically correct.

The translation of this book was undertaken at the suggestion of Dr. Nicol Macnicol of Edinburgh, Scotland. A lifelong and sincere friend of India, he has written extensively, endeavoring to interpret the Oriental mind and character. He is a student of the philosophy and literature of the East and his volume called 'Psalms of the Maratha Saints' has won for him a high place in the esteem and affection of India. I am indebted to him for his encouragement in this venture and for his help in securing permission from the Seva Sadan Society to publish this volume.

I wish also to acknowledge my indebtedness to the Seva Sadan Society of Poona, which through its officers has so graciously granted me permission to translate and publish this story. They have been generous in their confidence in me, asking merely that I "do full justice to the memory of our illustrious lady" with whom the story deals.

I wish also to express my appreciation for the help given me by the Rev. J. F. Edwards of Poona, and Dr. Edward Fairbank formerly of Vadala, India. They have encouraged me and given help about problems which have been difficult to solve at this distance from India.

Terminations for Marathi names are confusing. The term *Bai* is added to any woman's name and signifies Mrs. or Miss ; while *Rao* or *Ji*, and *Pant*, meaning Mr. are used in the same way for men's names. In addition, practically every human relationship has its own designation which, in many cases, is used in place of the given name. For instance, *Sasu* means mother-in-law and in the case of Himself's step mother, they have used the additional name for older sister, making her name *Taisasubai*. In the case of Himself's sister, she is 'Durgi' to all the others but to the author she is always 'Wansa' or sister-in-law.

The original plan for the book involved the publication of a complete translation, and that work was completed first. Later circumstances have made it seem wiser to publish a condensed version, omitting geographical and historical references not easily understood outside of India.

Mrs. Ranade's own story is, therefore, taken from the slightly fuller account contained in the complete translation. A few sections which refer to others rather than to herself, have been deleted. The only liberty the adaption required was in arrangement of material, and in clarifying incidents for Western readers by the insertion of an occasional paragraph. This has been done by crediting to the original author, certain explanatory sentences which are not in the original text but which are entirely in character with it. Writing for Indian readers, Mrs. Ranade could assume their understanding of customs which the Occidental reader does not know. I trust that the desire to explain the

joint family system and other Hindu ideas to those unfamiliar with them, as is done at the opening of Chapter III, and Chapter VIII, justifies the means used.

The story, therefore, is based on a complete, literal translation and includes the incidents and attitudes gathered from it. It is given to the English speaking public with the hope that it may help the West sympathetically to study and understand the beauty of the ideals of the Hindu woman in her home, of her selflessness and tact, and of the sincerity of her attitude toward the one whom she has been taught to make the object of her worship.

The period covered by the story is the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In Western India, during the years between 1870 and 1900, when the seeds of the nationalism now so well developed under Congress leadership were first germinating, there were several notable figures whose ability, integrity and statesmanship guided the forces which were molding history. They were the product of an English University system transplanted on foreign soil where it produced results which were startling to those who had supposed that the mentality of the Oriental was greatly inferior to that of the Occidental.

This period may well be called the Renaissance of India, marking the beginning, as it did, of great religious and social reforms, of awakened interest in the great languages and the fine arts of the Motherland. These movements came to life later in Maharashtra than in Bengal, perhaps, but were stamped by the same highmindedness and fervor as that displayed in other parts of India. The history of the period and the biographies of its leaders leave one with a keen appreciation of the fact that they were men of

culture and dignity, gentlemen of the same sort as the British statesmen by whose sides they worked.

Towering above the rank and file of these leaders, and acknowledged throughout India as scholar, judge, patriot and social reformer, Mr. Justice Madhavrao Govind Ranade was the forerunner and guide for such great patriots as G. K. Gokhale, and Sir Narayan Chandavakar. Gokhale called him his 'Guru,' would never sit down in his presence and held him in an almost religious reverence. The story of his amazing career is given us by James Kellock in his volume named 'Mahadev Govind Ranade.'

The story in this volume which Mrs. Ramabai Ranade has given us is unique in Marathi literature. It is one of the few books written by an Indian woman and its value is enhanced by the fact that she stood at the opening of a period and acted as a pioneer in the movement for the emancipation of women which has now reached an advanced stage.

After the death of her revered husband, Mrs. Ranade was prone to retire in accordance with the custom which demands that a Hindu widow, shorn of her ornaments and dedicated to service in the home, shall drag out her days in woe until she can secure release from this life. Friends who understood her and realized what she still had to give to Society, urged her to take an interest in the less fortunate women of her land. She began in a simple way working with the women in the jails, in whom she became interested and for whose service she soon secured the cooperation of some of her friends. The story of how, from this beginning, there grew up the organization of the Seva Sadan Society for the service of women, is not for this book to tell. To appreciate the value of that Society, founded by B. M. Malabari and developed under the leadership of Mrs. Ranade and Mr. G. K. Devadhar, one needs only visit the headquarters in Poona. There one finds splendid schools for girls, ranging from kindergarten through High School; a train-

ing school for teachers ; housework done under skilled supervision ; home surroundings for girls studying nursing and medicine in neighboring institutions ; and recently, in cooperation with the Bombay Presidency Infant Welfare Society, there has been opened a training school for district nurses, who are sent into the homes to spread the gospel of health.

The Seva Sadan has, therefore, pioneered in this field seeking the uplift of India by encouraging its women to serve in social, education and medical ways. Just how radical such activities seemed to the orthodox Hindu of those days is revealed by the story which Mrs. Ranade has so graphically told. In view of the present services for India being given by its educated woman, it is difficult to believe that the incidents recounted so vividly in this story happened less than fifty years ago.

HINDU WIDOWS

The aspects of the Hindu system which the story brings out, aside from the general atmosphere of the home, are three. To those who do not know India, the reference to 'widows' needs some clarification. According to the custom, a child must be married before the age of puberty. The actual wedding ceremony may occur at any time after the birth of the two children. But the bride does not usually go to the home of her husband until she is old enough to begin to take an interest in the housework. Meantime, if her husband dies before she is old enough to understand what a husband is, she becomes in very fact a widow and as a punishment for the sin which was responsible for the death of her husband, she must forever remain a widow. Those who lived in Mr. Ranade's home were indeed fortunate in having so kindly a head to their house ! The general picture of widowhood in India is not such a pleasant one.

CHILDREN

The fact that Mrs. Ranade bore no children of her own, as she states in the final chapter, seems inconsistent with the story of the children she has with her on tour and in her own home. Under the joint family system, however, Himself's step-brothers, and their wives made part of the so-called 'Poona family.' Their children took the place for Mr. and Mrs. Ranade of the family which they did not have.

PURIFICATION

The attitude of the Hindu toward things which are unclean is difficult for a foreigner to understand. Some ideas of this are revealed in the chapter about the Poona tea-party, where tea served by foreigners and probably prepared by low caste servants, roused such a long drawn-out dispute. The reference in Chapter XV to the meat market, is also illuminating, since a Hindu is necessarily a vegetarian and any contact with meat is revolting to the caste people. The purification ceremonies which are required of those who have in any way 'broken caste,' indicate what a difficult problem Hinduism faces as she tries to adjust to present-day conditions.

BHAKTI

In the matter of Mr. Ranade's religious outlook, little can be said in this article. Anyone interested may find an interesting discussion of this in Mr. Kellock's *Life of Ranade*. At this point, one can only briefly say that the path of Bhakti is given as one of the ways for the Hindu to find release from the wheel of existence. This method is the one of worship and has produced during the centuries a splendid line of thinkers and poets who have enriched the teachings and the literature available for the

common people. Tukaram, Namdev, Kabir, Mirabai · only a few of the names of loved poets who have greatly influenced devotees in all lines of life. Some of these are now available in English translations. The two poems in this book are quoted in Mrs. Ranade's story, one at the opening and one at the end. They are published in English for the first time here.

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“Thy form in its beauty before me,
My weakness upheld by Thy strength,
My being enriched by the praises I sing,
I shall grow holy.

“There is nothing in me, O my Lord,
My offerings merit no gift,
But with uplifted eyes, I cling to Thy feet,
Believing in Thee.

“Thy devotees aid me with songs,
Meditation keeps me near Thee ;
My days slip away with Thee in my heart
As I pray.

“Tuka says, ‘O Narayana,
I will fill my mind with Thy name.’ ”
— Tukaram