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The Mukti Revival and Pentecostal Historiography

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With Allan Anderson’s narrative of a ‘global origin’ of the Pentecostal movement, another revival has gained popularity among historians beside early Pentecostal awakenings in the US: The Mukti Revival among the child widows of Pandita Ramabai’s Mukti Mission in South India. Not only do the sources speak of a manifestation of speaking in tongues at that very place in 1907, the Mukti Revival also started as early as in the summer of 1905 – almost one year before the famous Azusa Street Revival took place in April 1906. Unlike other authors dealing with this Indian awakening (such as Gary McGee or Stanley Burgess), Anderson argues strictly historically: For him, “Pentecostalism was not seen as a distinct form of Christianity at least until a decade *after* the revival and missionary movements in which it was entwined”,¹ such as the Azusa Street or the Mukti Revival; “it is a series of movements that took several years and several different formative ideas and events to emerge.”²

In my view, this new understanding of the emerging Pentecostal movement gets rid of a couple of problems connected to the classical way of narrating the birth of global Pentecostalism: In the past, constructing a certain revival as an early Pentecostal awakening both implicated that there had been substantially a ‘thing’ called Pentecostalism at the beginning of the 20th century, justifying the decision to take this revival as a ‘birthplace’ of global Pentecostalism. Moreover, it required the sources to give testimony of ‘what has really happened’, enabling to evaluate the historical *similarity* to Pentecostal revivals in other parts of the world.

However, a close study of the source material concerning the Mukti Revival shows that at no time

there has been a common understanding of what ,really‘ happened at Mukti. What we can see is a set of different *interpretations* of the events leading to different narratives of the revival – a set of stories competing with each other to establish a sort of knowledge that would later be called the ‘historical reality’ of the Mukti Revival. In the following, I will try to sketch the *emergence of this knowledge* represented by the source material by tracing the different narratives about this awakening that will finally lead us to the Pentecostal story of the Mukti Revival.

1. The Nationalistic Narrative

The first (and most precarious) narrative is told by the earliest document concerning the Mukti Revival. In October 1905, an article was published in the *Mukti Prayer Bell* by Pandita Ramabai, giving an account of the spiritual outpourings that had begun in June. Here, we are told the story of “J— B—“ receiving the Holy Spirit on June 29th. The next day, this was followed by “the Spirit of God [falling] on those praying people with such power, that it was impossible for them to keep silent.”³

After the quotations of several testimonies by Western missionaries regarding this “marvellous Pentecost”⁴, Ramabai finally comes to her special interpretation of this “memorable”⁵ event: “The Indian Church of to-day is like the Church of Sardis and Laodicea. The preachers, Bible Women, and Pastors must do so much work. The children in school, must do so much work. That is the rule we have made.”⁶ This description of the current state of Indian Christianity is faced with some kind of program to free the Indian Church from lethargy and Western missionaries: “Let the revival come to Indians so as to suit their nature and feelings. God has made them, He knows their nature.”⁷ However, this nature is emphatically confronted with the Western way by making clear that the Indian Revival “may not conform with the ways of Western people and their lifelong training.”⁸ Therefore, Ramabai pleads for a backsliding from Western style and paternalism.

The nationalistic narrative of the Mukti Revival is precarious in a twofold way: Firstly, the fact that the revival was exclusively negotiated within the marginal discourse of Western Holiness missionaries is responsible for the virtual non-existence of the Mukti Revival as a historical fact within the ‘sleeping’ Indian Church. Secondly, the hegemonic conceptions of the colonial discourse lead to an abrupt intervention of the discursive ‘police’ as well as to a ‘happy end’ of the narrative; in January 1906, in the same journal, a letter was published in which Ramabai humbly acknowledged the superiority of the colonial worldview and completely upturned her charges regarding Western paternalism: “English officials and English soldiers”⁹ are now to “be used of God”¹⁰ to Christianize the conquered continent. It is not until September 1907 that Pandita Ramabai

speaks again on revival in her daughter's magazine, thus trying to establish her vision of an Indian awakening once more.¹¹ We don't know of any reaction of the missionary discourse to these new pleadings for a renewed national Church, but it is the last known document from Ramabai about the Mukti Revival written for a broader public.¹² Obviously, the nationalistic narrative was not the one to survive in a colonial context.

2. The Higher Life Version

The story of the Mukti Revival in the tradition of the Higher Life and Keswick Movement can primarily be found in the immediate environment of the Mukti Mission as well as in articles of the former Holiness magazine *Word and Work* (already referring to the Pentecostal movement at that time). Here, the spiritual events at Mukti are interpreted as a direct outcome of the Welsh Revival in 1904, with a special appreciation of Pandita Ramabai's visit to Keswick in 1898. Most notably, Ramabai's personal friend, the biographer and former missionary of India Helen Dyer (1851-1919) is responsible for a detailed and carefully drawn picture of an Indian Holiness revival, starting with the Kashi Hills Revival in the northeast (initiated by Welsh missionaries) and from there on spreading to Mukti and various other places all over India.¹³

Besides the testimonies of Dyer, Ramabai and her daughter Manorama, it is above all the early work of Minnie Abrams that sketches a systematic Holiness theology of the Mukti Revival. In her influential book *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire* with a prefacing report about the revival, the author interprets Spirit baptism in terms of a second blessing, when "He will cleanse through the blood, empower by the Holy Ghost, and purify us from that wicked inner nature that makes us sin."¹⁴ Though appreciating prayer as the key gift of the Spirit, Abrams concludes insistently: "[T]his fruit of the Spirit, LOVE, is greater than the gifts of the Spirit. [L]ove [...] is the highest form of Pentecostal power [...]. This love is the fire of the Holy Ghost."¹⁵

3. Shifts and Confusions

The Holiness narrative lost its stability when rumors of tongues speech at Mukti came up in the spring of 1907, starting with an article in Seymour's *Apostolic Faith* by Ramabai's personal friend and leader of the *Boys' Christian Home* in Dhond, Albert Norton, who wrote about one of his visits to Mukti in March, when several girls were praying "in other languages, which none of us at Kedgaon understood."¹⁶ Beside the gift tongues, another novelty is introduced into the discourse – the doctrine of Parham's initial evidence, as Norton puts it: "Those speaking in tongues gave evidence that their souls were flooded with blessing from God."¹⁷

These new developments are responsible for a certain ‘drift’ towards a more gift-centered theology of the Spirit at Mukti. At the end of 1906, Minnie Abrams had already noticed in the second edition of her book that during the Azusa Street Revival, *prophecy* was the “gift most needed”¹⁸. Here, she speaks of the gifts as essential as the fruits of the Spirit for the “full Pentecostal baptism of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁹ In September 1907, Pandita Ramabai similarly notes: „The gift of prophecy was also given to many of the praying girls, so that they could give God’s messages in very clear language, taught by the Holy Spirit“²⁰.

Yet it is Abrams alone who is liable for a subtle change of the interpretation of what happened at Mukti. While in her 1906 book she illustrates the practice of the gifts of the Spirit with Acts 5:12-15 (signs and wonders), 8:4-8 (exorcism and healing), 8:14-17 (baptism of the Holy Ghost) [and other similar passages], Abrams entirely drops these passages under the impression of the recent Spiritual outburst at Mukti in 1907: Although ensuring that „Mukti has not changed her doctrines at all“, ²¹ her article *A New Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Mukti* from July 1907 now refers to Acts 1:4-8, 2:1-4, 10:44-46 (and some others) – *all of them* covering the speaking in tongues!²²

4. The Pentecostal Narrative

It is not until Norton’s report of his visit to Mukti early in 1907 that the upcoming Pentecostal movement became aware of the Mukti Revival. At first, the Pentecostal story is characterized by building on the Higher Life narrative, but nevertheless dismisses certain concepts of theological inconvenience: First and foremost, it is in Seymour’s *Apostolic Faith* where we find the testimonies of Pandita Ramabai and Minnie Abrams being cut by passages contrary to Parham’s initial evidence doctrine.²³ Additionally, the magazine implements the strategy of freeing the Mukti Revival from its historical and personal ‘burdens’ by leaving the direct historical and theological contexts of the awakenings completely unmentioned. In the late summer of 1907, the Mukti Revival is presented together with some news of the Calcutta Revival conducted by Azusa missionaries Alfred and Lillian Garr as “The Work in India”.²⁴ In the next issue, this is followed by Max Wood Moorhead’s assumption that the Mukti Revival was the direct *consequence* of the Azusa Street Revival,²⁵ while (as he states in late 1908) the Indian Pentecost began in Calcutta with the arrival of the aforementioned Azusa missionaries in March 1907²⁶ – a narrative obviously (if not intentionally) triggered by the strategy of decontextualizing the Mukti Revival!

Meanwhile, the magazines of British Pentecostal Alexander Boddy and William H. Piper, head of the Stone Church in Chicago, (both rejecting the initial evidence doctrine!) embark on an even more subtle strategy to include the Mukti Revival into their own narratives: While in Boddy’s *Confidence*

the focus is solely laid on the 'pure facts' of Spirit baptism, Piper's *Latter Rain Evangel* focuses solely on the main characters of the awakening – Pandita Ramabai and Minnie Abrams. Starting with Ramabai's personal friend and supporter of the Mukti Mission in England, Canada and the US (Rachael Nalder) Ramabai is introduced to Chicago's Pentecostals during one of Nalder's promotional tours for the mission in 1908/09: In her lectures at the *Stone Church*, Nalder not only presents the Mukti Revival as the peak of Ramabai's career as a spiritual visionary and social activist, but she completely separates the revival from its direct historical background.

After Nalder's departure from Chicago (probably early in 1909), it is no other than Minnie Abrams who continues the story of the Mukti Revival as a Pentecostal awakening. On her promotional tour for the mission through England and the US from late 1908 to 1910, she spent some time at the centers of early Pentecostalism, including Carrie Judd Montgomery's *Home of Peace* (Oakland) or Elmer K. Fisher's *Upper Room Mission* in LA.

Yet a new home she had obviously found in Piper's Stone Church, where she took over the role as a Mukti chronicler from her predecessor Nalder. Like Nalder, she separates the events at Mukti from their historical background and links the revival with the (in her eyes) key figure responsible for the awakening – herself. The first lecture at the Stone Church in May 1909 is entitled *How the Recent Revival Was Brought About in India*, introducing Abrams as the one who foresaw a great awakening in India:

“I found myself praising God and saying, ‘Oh God, I praise Thee for this marvelous out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Indian church, and for these thousands of heathen who are turning to Christ.’ [...] I said, ‘What am I saying? There is no revival, there is no out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, no one is turning to Christ. What do these words mean?’“²⁷

To fulfill this vision, „He [...] sent me to Mukti to help to get [the] workers ready.“²⁸ Spending some time in solitude because of a temporary illness, Abrams “rested under the mountain-side in a quiet place and pleaded the precious promises of God, especially those in the sixteenth chapter of John“²⁹. By mentioning John 16 together with her temporary absence from Mukti, Abrams shows a remarkable understanding of her own role in the revival, as we read in 16,7f.: “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” And indeed – having received the divine mission to return to Mukti, Miss Abrams “began to tell [the girls in Mukti] what the Holy Ghost did in people in whom He had the right of way”. The next morning, the memorable event takes its course in the form of a ‘legend’ which can initially be found in the second edition of Abrams' book *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost*

and Fire and which – with a certain pleasure – has been handed down ever since:

“At three o’clock in the morning the Lord awoke [one of the girls] with the fire coming down upon her. It was a wonderful time. She cried out in fright. [...] The young women sleeping on either side of her, sprung up and saw the fire. One of them ran across the room, picked up a pail of water and brought it to dash upon this young woman, when she discovered she wasn’t on fire. It was a case of the ‘burning bush’ over again.”³⁰

Finally, the author closes her presentation with a statement ensuring her deepest affiliation with the audience of the Stone Church: “We are called Pentecostal people, and we are.”³¹ Given that this ‘We’ includes not only Abrams herself, but also the girls and women at Mukti, this attribution can be seen as the first and most concrete textual attempt to include the Mukti Revival into the Pentecostal movement. In fact, the strategy attained success in early 1911, when Abrams who had just returned to India was celebrated by Piper’s magazine as one of “Our Recent Outgoing Missionaries”³².

5. Conclusion

The thesis of Pentecostal pioneers essentially ‘inventing’ the Mukti Revival as a birthplace of modern Pentecostalism by establishing the knowledge about its nature within the discourse leads to three conclusions:

1. The Mukti Revival, as an event of historical essence, is itself a direct consequence of the discourse about the newly invented object of *Pentecostalism*. As could be demonstrated, the Pentecostal narrative of the revival at Mukti was not a ‘historical sequence’ right from the start, but a result of a negotiation process that lasted for years and was shaped by different theological strategies, personal interests and power relations. Thereby, the discursive supremacy of the Pentecostal narrative (with Ramabai and Dyer running dry) led to a version of the Mukti Revival that was finally fixed as historical reality by Pentecostal historiographers.
2. The colonial context must be seen as a vital precondition for the Mukti Revival to be able to gain its historical character. Not only did the ‘police’ of the colonial discourse force Pandita Ramabai to correct her ideas of an awakening national church and to finally fall silent, but it was also able to boost an event that was completely on the margins of contemporary Indian society: The dominance of Western interpreters of history in colonial India managed to establish the awakening as a historical fact despite the silence within Indian society.
3. The work of Pentecostal *historiographers* is therefore essential for the character of the Mukti Revival as a historical event. In fact, in trying to prove this awakening being somehow a part of

early Pentecostal history, historiographers follow the steps of the many sources constructing the Mukti Revival as a birthplace of global Pentecostalism – by simultaneously ,forgetting‘ those alternative narratives about the ,other‘ historical reality of this event.

But how can we prevent this inequity of remembrance? Perhaps not by telling the story of what has ,really‘ happened, but by revealing all the narratives trying to establish a ,genuine‘ version of historical reality. Instead of proving that the Mukti Revival shares a big part in early Pentecostalism, it could be interesting (as I have tried to show) to make transparent the emergence of the discursive concept of a global Pentecostal awakening that later led to a certain story *called* Pentecostal history.

Yet it is true – this ,other‘ form of historiography is certainly unable to tell us something about who we *are*, as it cannot answer the question of how we *became* – for instance as adherents of a global Pentecostal movement. What it can do, is tell us how we *think* – by uncovering the principles of the construction of our identity in history, a project that is (of course!) not only a historiographical but also a philosophical one.

- 1 Anderson, *Spreading Fires*, p. 4 (emphasis mine).
- 2 Anderson, *Spreading Fires*, p. 4.
- 3 Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, "More Surprises." *Mukti Prayer Bell* (October 1905), pp. 5-19, here p. 7.
- 4 Pandita Ramabai, "More Surprises," p. 9.
- 5 Pandita Ramabai, "More Surprises," p. 6.
- 6 Pandita Ramabai, "More Surprises," p. 18.
- 7 Pandita Ramabai, "More Surprises," p. 18.
- 8 Pandita Ramabai, "More Surprises," p. 18.
- 9 Pandita Ramabai, "A Letter from Pandita Ramabai," p. 4.
- 10 Pandita Ramabai, "A Letter from Pandita Ramabai," p. 4.
- 11 See Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, "Showers of Blessing." *Mukti Prayer Bell* (September 1907), pp. 3-13.
- 12 In 1909, an excerpt of a personal letter of Rambai was published, where she drops some unspecific lines on "the Holy Ghost revival" in Mukti. Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, "From Ramabai." *The Pentecost* 1/7 (June 1909), p. 9.
- 13 See Helen S. Dyer, *Revival in India. Years of the Right Hand of the Most High* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1907).
- 14 Minnie F. Abrams, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire. Matt. 3:11. Second Edition* (Kedgaon: Mukti Mission Press, 1906), p. 28.
- 15 Abrams, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, p. 67.
- 16 Albert Norton, "Natives in India Speak in Tongues." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/7 (April 1907), p. 2.
- 17 Norton, "Natives in India Speak in Tongues," p. 2. The Text has been slightly changed here by the editors of the *AF*, as we read in the original letter published in *Word and Work*: "Besides, the speaking in tongues was the distinguishing mark, of which more is said than of any other sign at Pentecost and in Apostolic times, as related in Acts 2; 10:44-46; 19:6." (Albert Norton, "Tongues in India." *Word and Work* 29/6 (June 1907), pp. 174-175, here p. 175.)
- 18 Abrams, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, p. 70.
- 19 Abrams, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, p. 67.
- 20 Pandita Ramabai, "Showers of Blessing," p. 5.
- 21 Abrams, "A New Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Mukti," p. 4.
- 22 We do not know whether the accordance of Abrams' passages with most of them being quoted by the first issue of Seymour's *Apostolic Faith* did happen coincidentally or not. See [William J. Seymour], "Pentecost Has Come. Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/1 (September 1906), p. 1.
- 23 See Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, "From the Bible School in Mukti, India." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/12 (January 1908), p. 1; [Minnie F. Abrams], "Manifestations of the Spirit in India." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/9 (June-September 1907), p. 4.
- 24 [William J. Seymour], "The Work in India." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/9 (June-September 1907), p. 1.
- 25 See Max Wood Moorhead, "Pentecost in Mukti, India." *The Apostolic Faith* 1/10 (September 1907), p. 4. See also Alfred G. Garr and Lillian Garr, "The Work Spreads to India." In Bennett F. Lawrence, *The Apostolic Faith Restored* (St. Louis: Gospel Publishing House, 1916), pp. 96-105.
- 26 See Gary B. McGee, "'Latter Rain' Falling in the East. Early-Twentieth-Century Pentecostalism in India and the Debate over Speaking in Tongues." *Church History* 68/3 (1999), pp. 648-665, here p. 661.
- 27 Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India," p. 6.
- 28 Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India," p. 8.
- 29 Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India," p. 9.
- 30 Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India," p. 9.
- 31 Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India," p. 13.
- 32 Minnie F. Abrams, "Word From Our Recent Outgoing Missionaries." *The Latter Rain Evangel* 3/4 (January 1911), pp. 12-13, here p. 12.