

Chapter 10

GRADUAL CHANGE OF MIND

THE time when I joined the Free Church Institution was a most stirring one. Everywhere throughout India a spirit of religious inquiry had been awakened. In Bombay such inquiries had led to the formation of a society for religious and social reform, called the *Paramhans Mandali or Sabhâ*. ... An act of the Indian Legislature was passed at this time, of which the *Calcutta Review* spoke in such emphatic terms:- "The year 1850 has been distinguished above all others in the annals of British India by the establishment of the principle of religious liberty throughout the whole country." The following extract from the judgment of a Judge of the Supreme Court of Madras shows the importance of this measure. "This Act," said Sir Willian Burton, "has been passed, not to encourage a change from one religion to another, but to secure liberty of conscience and equal rights to all. Some of the people of this country may be insensible of the benefit now conferred upon them; some of them maybe furious against it; but let me tell them, and tell them solemnly, that this Act of 1850 is the Great Charter of religious freedom, which declares that the rights of all classes shall be equally respected, and which says, 'Do as your conscience bids you; you will not forfeit any of your rights by following the dictates of your conscience, whether you turn to the right hand or to the left.' ... according to it no man's rights can be hurt by a change of religion."

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Soon after I joined the Free Church Institution, I became seriously impressed by the instruction I received. I find recorded among my papers a vow that I made, not to worship "stocks and stones," but the Supreme Creator of the Universe. I solemnly declared, in the name of the Supreme Spirit who is the great creator of the world and its enlightener, that I should never, even to save my life, commit certain sins. I wrote, "May God help me to keep this vow! If I should do any of these things, I shall incur the guilt of the slaughter of a hundred cows, and shall deserve to be doomed to hell by its ruler, King Yama." The evils abjured were the following:- lying, theft, uncleanness, *Idvanyâ*, i.e. impure love songs, dances, indecent theatricals, impure talk &c. I added, "If ever I commit any of these sins I shall repent and ask Thee, O God, to pardon me; for man cannot succeed in his endeavours without Thy grace." I believe this is the first written statement I ever made about my moral conduct. ...there is a remark which I wrote across it in English some eight years afterwards, ..:- "I found it necessary to make this resolution when I began to understand the pure morality of the Christian Scriptures."

After I had joined the class taught by Mr. Narayan Sheshadri, the dislike I felt to him on account of his [Christian] religion began to diminish gradually. After the closing of the school, I used to accompany him as we had to go to our homes by the same road. When the people saw me walking with him they used to declare that I was certain one-day to become a Christian like him; but I did not mind this. Mr. Narayan had opened a private class at his house, which I attended.... Sometimes he would ask me in jest if I would drink coffee or tea with him, but I never consented to do so...

The spiritual instruction which was communicated in the Institution was of a very decided kind. Except in the mathematical and purely scientific classes, there was

continually some reference to religion, and the remarks made were always very impressive. Besides the morning and evening addresses, the Bible or some other religious book was daily taught for a full hour. I myself was permitted to teach a Bible class, and it proved of great service to me. The old instructions which I received came back to me vividly. I was not a careless teacher. I used to study the lesson that was to be taught in the class very earnestly at home. I got the boys to learn Scripture verses by heart, to draw up questions on the lessons taught and sometimes to write short essays. Of course all the pupils did not show the same interest in their religious lessons. Sometimes I would teach with earnestness that they would ask me, "If you believe these things, why do you not make an open profession of them?" Sometimes God would give me such light when expounding the Divine Word that I was almost in an ecstasy, and my eyes would fill with tears. Such was the case one day when I was enlarging on the words of Jesus Christ, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." The boys sat very still, and with great seriousness again asked me why I did not become a Christian. This thing happened in 1851. The religious element that pervaded the whole school was very powerful; and very naturally the minds of the students were soon imbued with Christian sentiments.

I may mention some other agencies that were at work in the same direction. A good many Mohammadan hawkers used to go from door to door for the sale of books. They sold religious publications very cheap...I bought a large number of publications from these men, and read them very carefully.

Some religious newspapers also contributed greatly to my enlightenment. The *Dnyânodaya*, an Anglo-vernacular paper, published by the American Mission, I read regularly for years. I read also the *Prabhâkar*, a Marathi weekly newspaper,...I found in it an account of the conversion of Mr. Narayan Sheshadri...The *Dnyânodaya* convinced me of the truth of Christianity and the futility of the claims of the Shastras to divine inspiration; the *Prabhâkar* destroyed my religious reverences for the Brahmins; and the *Dnyânprakâsh* had preserved me from falling into the quagmire of atheism. I used to send contributions to all these papers, and they were very kindly inserted.

There were religious lectures delivered in those days both by Hindus and Christians, and they proved most useful in my religious inquiries. I was in the habit of hearing from an early age discourses in the temples and at private dwellings addressed to the Hindus, but it was in Bombay that I heard for the first time controversial lectures delivered by learned Hindus. They discussed the claims of Christianity, and defended Hinduism from the attacks of the missionaries...I regularly attended these lectures, and reported them in the *Dnyânodaya* with a criticism on the principal points. The lecturer and his friends knew that I was the writer of the articles in the *Dnyânodaya*, but they did not in any way show resentment. The lectures continued to be delivered for a full year, and my contributions to the *Dnyânodaya* regarding them were in all twenty-five.

There were other lectures delivered in English which were attended by the natives of education and position and influential Europeans, and these proved of great service to me and my friends. One lecturer was the accomplished missionary Dr. Wilson, and he gave a fund of valuable information on natural and revealed religion. After the conclusion of the lecture he used to invite a few of his auditors to his apartments

upstairs, where there was tea for all who would partake of it. The conversation was on matters of social and religious improvement... Such gatherings contributed not only to deepen the impression wrought by the lectures, but to bridge over the gulf which separated Natives from Europeans. The students were in no way afraid to visit the missionaries. We walked into their houses without the least hesitation or fear. ... At that time it was not chiefly the rich and the learned that listened to the lectures, but the poorest and humblest of Hindu society, whom even I refused to come into close contact with, for dread of pollution. I did not sit on the same bench with them, but stood at a distance like a proud Pharisee!

My chief friends at this time were earnest men...We discussed social and religious matters, the Bible frequently engaging our earnest attention. These friends did not all embrace Christianity, yet they were secret believers. One of them used to put off his sacred thread which he wore across his shoulders, every time he prayed privately at home. A young Parsi gentleman read the Bible regularly at home with his family...[And] one gentleman came regularly to the Sunday Marathi service in the Free Church with his young son.