

Enrichment, Summer 98

**Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire! The Revival Legacy of Minnie
F. Abrams of India**

BY GARY B. MCGEE

Rushing to the quarters of Minnie F. Abrams at 3:30 a.m. on June 29, 1905, the matron of a girls' dormitory at the Mukti Mission in India told her that one of the girls had suddenly awakened "with the fire coming down upon her."¹ Having prayed before going to sleep that she might receive the baptism in the Holy Ghost, the girl now screamed with fright as the others watched the flames. The matron related how she "saw the fire, and ran across the room for a pail of water, and was about to pour it on her when I discovered that she was not on fire." Becoming one of the most celebrated events of the great revival in India (1905-1907), this "case of the 'burning bush' " prompted confessions of sins and repentance.

Though few evangelicals and Pentecostals would recognize her name today, Christians in India and America hailed Minnie Abrams as a leader in revival and evangelism.

Born in Wisconsin in 1859, Abrams grew up in Mapleton, Minnesota. Desiring to become a teacher, she graduated from Mankato Normal School and then studied for 2 years at the University of Minnesota. Inspired by the life of Fidelia Fiske, an early 19th-century missionary educator, she committed her life to foreign missions.

In pursuit of her calling, Minnie moved to Illinois in 1885 to enroll in the first class of the Chicago Training School for City, Home, and Foreign Missions. Lucy Rider Meyer, a leading figure in the new Methodist deaconess movement, had founded the school to offer theological and practical training for young women.

PREPARATION FOR MISSION

While there, Minnie realized her need to live the "faith life" exemplified by J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, and others who trusted in God alone for their provisions. Living on half of her meager income in Chicago, she gave the rest to "help India." After graduation, the Minneapolis Branch of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society commissioned her as a Methodist "deaconess-missionary." She left for India in October 1887.

Arriving in Bombay, she immediately began working at a boarding

school designed to provide religious instruction for the daughters of church members. Her hope was to eventually "labor among their heathen friends." For Minnie and many other women missionaries, ministry in a foreign land centered on educational and charitable ministries.

Before long the protective walls around the compound seemed confining. Etched in her memory was her ride through the streets shortly after her ship reached port. On her way to the school, she saw masses of people living in heartbreaking conditions. Under the cover of night, she also made her way to opium dens and witnessed the emaciated bodies of people of all ages enslaved by their addictions.

"Oh, how my heart cried out," she recounted, "and how I longed to be able to bring the message of life to these people in all their darkness... Oh, how it stirred me on to learn the language in order that I might give out the message of life to at least as many as my voice would reach."

For the next 2 years Minnie tried to find time to learn the Marathi language while working as director of three schools. Leisure time hardly existed since, in addition to being housemother, teacher, physician, seamstress, and financial manager, she provided spiritual guidance for the children.

Minnie could not rest until she gained permission to engage in direct evangelism. Despite the presence of missionaries among the millions in Bombay, she knew "they couldn't reach the thousandth part of the people with the sound of the gospel." After 10 years of waiting, mission officials gave her permission to become a full-time evangelist. And when her colleague Florence Sterling married, Minnie continued preaching, accompanied only by native workers.

In 1898, the famous Indian Christian Pandita Ramabai invited Abrams to assist her in administering the Mukti (Salvation) Mission at Kedgaon, about 100 miles southeast of Bombay. Ramabai, a high caste Brahmin, had converted to Christianity in 1883. Having already established a school, she added a home for child-widows and developed a ministry to famine victims. Minnie flourished in this new environment since it afforded her the opportunity to train young women for ministry.

EVANGELISM IN THE LAST DAYS

The burden to evangelize the world weighed heavily on the minds of Ramabai, Abrams, and other radical evangelicals whose clocks ticked ever closer to the midnight hour when Christ would return.

Given the immensity of the mission task in India, the saints at the 1898 Keswick Convention in England responded to the personal appeal of Ramabai and earnestly prayed that God would raise up 200,000 Indian evangelists "to go up and down the land proclaiming the gospel of Christ." Indeed, many ardently prayed for a spiritual harvest on India's "stony ground." Mukti would play a pivotal role in preparing laborers for the harvest.

Before the end of the 19th century, the popularity of Wesleyan-holiness and Keswickian (Higher Life) teachings had promoted widespread interest in the baptism and gifts of the Spirit. In conferences for Indian college and university students in the mid-1890s, Robert P. Wilder, a Presbyterian and traveling secretary of the Indian YMCA, accentuated the Higher Life view of Spirit baptism. He challenged his hearers to seek for "power from on high" (Luke 24:49), the kind that provides "divine enablement for ministry distinctive from...regeneration."

Ramabai and Abrams joined with others in praying for the restoration of apostolic power. Minnie pleaded, "Oh God, in this coming revival I am a candidate for service. Whatever You need done, get me ready, please, to do it, and I will conform to all that You want me to do."

Hearing that R.A. Torrey and Charles Alexander had held crusades in Australia in 1903 and revival followed, Ramabai decided to send her daughter, Manoramabai, and Minnie to investigate. Arriving just as Torrey was leaving, they inquired about the causes of the revival—"finally we got to the bottom of it." The community of missionaries and believers at Mukti eagerly heard their reports which intensified their prayers for the promised end-times outpouring of the Spirit.

NEWS FROM WALES

When word of the Welsh revival (1904-1905) with its unusual spiritual phenomena and remarkable number of conversions reached India, revival began among tribal peoples in the Khassia Hills in March 1905. At stations staffed by Welsh Presbyterian missionaries, believers began confessing their sins in "prayer-storms"—hours spent in fervent and loud prayer that pushed aside the traditional order of worship. The "fire" fell in June at the Mukti Mission in South India.

Mission publications soon carried stories of unusual happenings across the subcontinent, including those of believers feeling the "burning" sensation of the "baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire." Revival encompassed a wide spectrum of Christians, from Anglicans,

Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians, to members of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, London Missionary Society, and the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations.

Along with confessions of sin and prayer storms, other uncommon events captured attention: visions of Jesus, angelic visitations, dreams, reception of the "burning" work of the Spirit (sometimes visible "tongues of fire"), writhing on the ground "unable to bear the burden of their sins," shaking, and dancing before the Lord to the playing of musical instruments. To these were added laughter, miraculous provisions of food, and young people prophesying.

Bewildered, missionaries sometimes reprimanded believers for "emotional excesses," only to see revival abruptly end at their mission stations. Others, however, moved beyond their ethnocentrism and were sympathetic to the cross-cultural differences in the makeup and worldview of Indian believers.

J.E. Robinson, a Methodist bishop, relating the events of a district conference in the fall of 1905 said: "So powerful was the manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit that it would not have surprised me had I seen tongues of fire descend upon the disciples present, or had I heard them 'speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.'" Within 6 months stories of believers speaking in tongues began to circulate before they learned that a Pentecostal movement had also begun in the United States.

Shortly after revival began at Mukti in 1905, Minnie Abrams began taking "praying bands" of young women with her to hold services at mission stations. News of her activities appeared in two major Christian newspapers in India, the *Bombay Guardian* and the *Christian Patriot*. The Methodist periodical *The Indian Witness* also tracked her ministry. In the spring of 1906, Minnie penned the first edition of her influential *Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire* to encourage believers to seek for the postconversionary experience of Spirit baptism for purity of life and power to evangelize.

VIEW FROM AMERICA

The Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California, that began in 1906 and triggered many subsequent revivals around the world is now considered the foremost revival of the century in terms of global impact. In looking back at the events that led up to it, eyewitness Frank Bartleman announced that the "revival was rocked in the cradle of little Wales... 'brought up' in India" and then became "full grown" at Azusa Street.

To the Pentecostal saints in America, news of speaking in tongues and the manifestations of the Spirit's gifts in India confirmed that what the Old Testament prophet Joel had foretold about the end-times outpouring of the Spirit (Joel 2:28,29) was being fulfilled simultaneously in other parts of the world. Indeed, if the predicted cloudburst was drenching America, they were heartened in knowing that the rain was falling on the other side of the world as well.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

While Pentecostal phenomena (e.g., visions, prophecy) had been present from the early months of the revival, occurrences of speaking in tongues came later. Incidents were reported 2 and 3 months subsequent to a conference at an Anglican mission station in Aurangabad where Abrams had been the featured speaker. One participant returned home to the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission orphanage at Manmad and gave his testimony. This led to a revival beginning there in June with one or two girls speaking in tongues.

The best known episode, however, took place in early July after several girls returned from Aurangabad to an Anglican boarding school in Bombay. Their accounts stirred the other students to prayer and confession of sins. Three or four spoke in tongues. One of them, a 9-year-old named Sarah, prayed in tongues, "pleading with God for [the conversion of] Libya."

Undoubtedly this event (and probably others) pressed Maud Wiest to editorialize in the September 1906 issue of the *India Alliance* (Christian and Missionary Alliance): "Some of the gifts which have been scarcely heard of in the church for many centuries are now being given by the Holy Ghost to simple, unlearned members of the body of Christ, and communities are being stirred and transformed by the wonderful grace of God. Healings, the gift of tongues, visions and dreams, discernment of spirits, the power to prophesy and to pray the prayer of faith, all have a place in the present revival."

Some have credited the Calcutta revival in January 1907 led by A.G. Garr, newly arrived from Azusa Street, as the "first general outpouring of the Spirit" in India. Nevertheless, speaking in tongues had already commenced in Manmad in the preceding June, Bombay in July, and at Mukti in December. After reading about the Los Angeles revival in the pages of the *Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles), Ramabai and Abrams acknowledged that "the deeper fullness of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost accompanied by the gift of tongues...had not yet been received" at Mukti and

encouraged believers to "tarry" anew (Luke 24:49).

Xenolalia (i.e., known tongues [languages] recognized by hearers) reportedly followed with some speaking for the first time in English, Kanarese, and Sanscrit. Glossolalia ("unknown" tongues) could also be heard. Several girls reported receiving the gift of interpretation and others that of healing.

Commenting on tongues 9 months later, Ramabai said they "were given for a sign for unbelievers among us, that they may see and hear of God's wonderful works and repent of their hardness of heart." Consequently, "the girls who have received...are not using them for delivering Scripture messages, except those who have received the gift of interpretation. They pray and praise God, and sometimes sing hymns unknown, and sometimes in known tongues."

For preaching, some exercised the gift of prophecy (preaching in one's own language) "so that they could give God's messages in very clear language, taught by the Holy Spirit. The believers and unbelievers were moved alike by these messages, and a deep spiritual work began in our midst." This explains why the second edition of Minnie's *Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire*, which refers to the restoration of tongues, makes no reference to their use for preaching. Instead, if spoken publicly, their value depended on someone present who either knew the language or had the gift of interpretation.

Given the international reputation of Ramabai and the respect accorded to Abrams, some observers accepted the phenomena at Mukti as genuine or politely restrained their comments. Others, however, sharply protested what appeared to be emotional excesses. In this respect they faced the same criticisms endured by American Pentecostals.

In response Ramabai lamented, "It is sad beyond all expression that God's children, who have been praying for years for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit,...should now, when God is beginning to answer their prayer, be so hasty in judging and picking their fellow Christians to pieces."

THE "PHILLIPUS" CLASS

Leaving India in 1908 with Manoramabai for a promotional tour in the United States, Abrams preached at many important centers of Pentecostal activity including Carrie Judd Montgomery's Home of Peace in Oakland, California, Upper Room Mission in Los Angeles, Stone Church in Chicago, the regional camp meeting at Homestead, Pennsylvania, and the headquarters of the Christian Workers Union in Massachusetts.

On her visits around the country, Minnie recruited six single women to accompany her back for frontline evangelism among unreached peoples in North India. Once again, she wanted to move beyond the constraint of institutional responsibilities and go to the "regions beyond" (2 Corinthians 10:16). Like other holiness and Pentecostal women ministers, she believed that the "promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4) gave them equal opportunity with men in preaching and evangelism. While visiting St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1910 before returning to India, she attended the national Laymen's Missionary Convention where she was disappointed to hear that "the evangelization of the world was a man's job." Notwithstanding, Minnie knew that the immensity of the global task of evangelism required women as well as men.

Recalling her move to the Mukti Mission, she said that the Lord "wanted me to have a little part in answering my own prayers in preparing some of these native women to go out and evangelize their own people. Then the great outpouring of the Spirit came upon us, and today we have 400 Spirit-filled young women, and they are saying, 'Here I am; send me,' and the Lord has opened their lips and He has filled their mouths with a testimony that cannot be gainsaid, and that testimony is backed by a daily self-crucified life."

Minnie returned to India with her new associates—"all baptized in the Spirit" and committed to evangelism: Edith Baugh, Blanche Cunningham, Lillian Doll, Minnie Houck, "Miss Bristol," and "Miss Dempster." Ramabai called them the "Phillipus Class" because "like the daughters of Philip, they are to be evangelists" (Acts 21:9). While two remained at Mukti, the others traveled north to the city of Uska Bazar near the border of Nepal. Other women from the United States, including Bernice Lee and Jennie Kirkland, joined them later. Minnie organized the endeavor as the Bezaleel Evangelistic Mission (Exodus 31:2,3), the only known Pentecostal women's missionary society. (Several members eventually joined or worked with the Assemblies of God.)

With North India especially resistant to the gospel message, intense opposition faced them. Added to this were the difficulties of travel, the heat, and other trying circumstances. The toll soon became evident on Abrams who eventually became ill with blackwater fever. Before leaving the States, she had a premonition that in 2 years her labors would be ended. Minnie died on December 2, 1912, 2 years to the day she had disembarked in Bombay on her return trip.

ONE LITTLE WOMAN

Reflecting back on her ministry, Minnie said, "I was only one little woman." Yet God used her to train hundreds of Indian women evangelists who, in turn, contributed to the proclamation of the gospel in that vast country. She recognized that God never intended revival to be an end in itself. Without its energies being invested in evangelism, the Great Commission would not be achieved. In line with this concern, her last book *Prayer Warfare* may have been the first Pentecostal exposition on intercessory prayer for the evangelization of the world in "signs and wonders."

Minnie's influence extended to South America when she sent a copy of *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire* to Willis and May Hoover, Methodist missionaries in Valparaiso, Chile. (May had been a schoolmate with Minnie at the Chicago Training School.) Minnie's account of the revival, striking claims about the baptism of fire, and report of miracles added to the tinder that sparked "Pentecostal Methodism" in that country.

This "one little woman" became a pioneer missionary evangelist by refusing to accept the status quo—the "men are preachers\women are teachers" mentality. Following her death a leading Protestant mission periodical paid tribute to "Minnie F. Abrams of India" as "a woman of unusual ability and force of character. When she realized a course of action to be right she followed it without questioning; she was also a woman of faith, and it was this rather than her strength of character and will, which enabled her to accomplish [her] work." Decades would pass before other Pentecostal missionaries would be so eulogized in the Protestant missionary movement.

ENDNOTE

1. Quoted material throughout the article was taken from primary sources. For more information on Minnie Abrams, see the Recommended Reading list.

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RECOMMENDED READING

By Minnie F. Abrams:

The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire, 2nd ed. Kedgaon, India: Mukti Mission Press, 1906.

"How the Recent Revival Was Brought About in India," *Latter Rain Evangel*, July 1909, 6-13.

About Minnie F. Abrams:

Helen S. Dyer. *Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith*, 2nd ed. London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.

Effie G. Lindsay. *Missionaries of the Minneapolis Branch of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. Minneapolis: By the Author, 1904.

"Minnie F. Abrams of India," *Missionary Review of the World* 26 (February 1913): 156.

Dana L. Robert. *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996.