

Introduction

Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and the Global Public Sphere

‘Indian women are taking a lead in the councils of the world,’ announced the British feminist Grace Lankester in a report on the 1946 meeting of the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC). Indeed, although India was not yet independent, a small number of Indian women created a notable presence on the world stage. Amongst them, Amrit Kaur had led India’s delegation to the United Nations Economic and Social Conference (UNESCO) in 1945 and 1946 and would later be elected President of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Kaur’s colleague Hansa Mehta was one of seven women on the United Nations (UN) Sub-Commission on the Status of Women in early 1946 and would represent India on the Commission on Human Rights between 1947 and 1952. The Indian woman with the highest international profile at this point was Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the only woman to lead a national delegation at the First Session of the UN General Assembly. It was Pandit’s campaign against the Union of South Africa’s race policy at the UN in late 1946 that announced soon-to-be-independent India’s aspiring leadership on the international stage. As Lankester observed, these women’s achievements marked India out: ‘Compare this record with British women’s representation on International bodies,’ she remarked.¹

The prominence of Indian women on the international stage in 1946 reflects a historical process that has largely gone unnoticed. For over two decades, women associated with the anti-colonial movement had been internationally active in global civil society. They had forged supportive transnational networks, engaged with public opinion and established connections to international institutions.² Through these activities, they gained widespread recognition in ways that legitimised the Indian nationalist cause and bolstered the credibility of the emerging postcolonial state. Beyond this set of nationalist achievements, women’s international activism had global significance. By contributing to wide-ranging debates about the future of the world, they shaped the language and practice of liberal internationalism, including the discourse of women’s rights. AIWC leaders were at the forefront of these efforts. Having secured allies in the international

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women's movement, in 1937, the organisation circumvented imperial influence to become a 'correspondent member' at the League of Nations. Meanwhile, they sought solidarity and influence elsewhere. Attempts were made to establish a new pan-Asian framework for women's activism. At the same time, activists set their sights on the United States of America. Indian women's appointments at the UN in 1946 were testament to the impact of these activities.

Women's international activism was connected to momentous local and global developments. In India, the anti-colonial movement gathered pace after the First World War, reinvigorated by the leadership of M. K. Gandhi, the influence of revolutionary figures and the harnessing of mass discontent. During these tumultuous decades, the imperial order was palpably in crisis. The First World War significantly dented European prestige just as 'Wilsonian' ideas about self-determination were gaining influence. Meanwhile, the success of the Bolshevik revolution raised the possibility of a radical alternative. During the next global conflict a generation later, European power in Asia faced near-complete collapse, a state from which it never recovered. Yet there was nothing inevitable about the collapse of British rule in India. While imperial governments made vague commitments to self-determination at an indefinite point in the future (or not at all as imperial 'die-hards' would have it), it fell to anti-colonial actors to insist – often violently – on colonial freedoms. The activities described in this book constitute a specific, politically liberal element within this heterogeneous history.

Until recently, narratives of Indian anti-colonialism were dominated by accounts of its nation-bounded and territorial forms. This was due to many factors, including a conventional preference for 'methodological nationalism'. However, in Subaltern Studies scholarship, it reflected a specific proposition. The focus on nationalism's specifically non-Westernised, 'authentic' forms not only illuminated previously neglected historical agency, it was contended, but actually served to disrupt the epistemological legacies of colonialism.³ In contrast to the nationalism of the 'Westernised' elite, particularistic cultural nationalisms represented a distinct historical path that rescued the marginalised non-West from its customary position as 'a footnote' in a Eurocentric global narrative.⁴ The focus on 'the fragment' was thus a means of de-centring or 'provincializing Europe'.⁵

However, the last decade or so has seen a resurgence of scholarly interest in the global and transnational dimensions of Indian anti-colonialism. The sovereign nation-state was not the inevitable outcome of decolonisation.⁶ Nor was opposition to colonial rule confined to the spatial or imaginative limits of 'the nation'. Accordingly, the historiography of anti-colonial struggle now includes studies of multiple cosmopolitanisms, including leftist, revolutionary

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and pan-religious movements, that emerged alongside and in conversation with territorial nationalisms.⁷ Intertwined with this historiography is the project of disrupting a binary logic that aligns cosmopolitanism with Western imperialism and local particularism with the (authentic) ‘non-West’.⁸ As Kris Manjappa argues, such rigid categorisation not only obscures the global and transnational historical agency of the colonised but also replicates essentialist imperial assertions about colonial ‘difference’.⁹ Relaxing our definition of cosmopolitanism to include modes of thinking or acting globally that ran counter to imperial projects opens up new possibilities. Rather than being bland, deterritorialised and exploitative, cosmopolitanisms can be nationalist, ‘local’ and rooted in a sense of place.¹⁰ There are wider implications here too: cosmopolitan anti-colonial histories potentially provide a ‘usable past’ for subversive movements in the globalised present.¹¹

The women we encounter in this book contributed a distinct strand of cosmopolitan-nationalism to the messy and indeterminate processes of decolonisation. This account impacts on the dominant conception of Indian nationalism, which holds that women played purely supporting or symbolic roles in the shadows of their better-known male colleagues.¹² It is widely recognised that – within specific, gendered constraints – M. K. Gandhi encouraged the participation of women in nationalist campaigns.¹³ However, the independent agency of women within the movement, especially in the international context, is less well understood.¹⁴ It is the contention of this book that, although the limits placed on women’s activism were real, women creatively reinterpreted the roles imagined for them independently of, and sometimes in opposition to, male leaders. In addition, examining Indian women’s international activities challenges prevailing assumptions about historical agency in a global context. In histories of liberal internationalism, Indian (and other non-Western) women are generally viewed as passive subordinates in a dominant narrative centred elsewhere.¹⁵ This book presents an alternative view. Anti-colonial women brought distinct perspectives to transnational conversations about rights, women’s welfare and international cooperation. In doing so, they shaped the trajectory of those histories in a global context.

Women, ‘the woman question’ and nationalism

Indian women’s international careers were framed by the politically freighted issue of ‘the woman question’. From the nineteenth century onwards, imperialist accounts charged Indian society with the barbaric oppression of Indian women,

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which, in turn, purportedly justified the ‘civilising’ framework of imperial rule. ‘The woman question’ thus became part of the discursive terrain upon which nationalism clashed with imperialism. Indian nationalist discourse countered imperialist allegations with depictions of women, drawn from an imagined ancient golden age, as chaste, self-sacrificing and empowered.¹⁶ Further, nationalists resisted the intrusion of Western discourse by assigning ‘the woman question’ to the private realm of ‘culture’. In this way, ‘Indian womanhood’ came to symbolise the nation’s authentic ‘inner’ self.¹⁷

Nationalist ideas about women developed in conversation with both conservative and ‘progressive’ opinion. While orthodox communities laid claim to customary ‘traditions’, including *sati* and child marriage, reformers opposed them as superstitious representations of a degraded society. Religious reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj promoted women’s education, which it viewed as central to societal regeneration. These ideas fed into the nationalist challenge to the civilising claims of imperialism and produced a new feminine ideal amongst the emerging, nationalist middle classes. Confronting imperialist accusations of ‘backwardness’, the new woman was to be educated. However, unlike the Westernised or Western woman, her education should be specifically focussed on developing the ‘womanly’ virtues of self-sacrifice and chastity and on her training as a wife and mother to nationalist men.¹⁸ This new feminine ideal brought a specific set of patriarchal constraints. Nevertheless, within these limits, women’s education provided opportunities for engaging with public life.¹⁹

The legacy of nineteenth-century reform movements is reflected in the emergence of a vibrant women’s movement, which, by the end of the 1920s, was leading the agenda on ‘the woman question’. Three all-India women’s organisations were founded between 1917 and 1927 – the AIWC, the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) – which worked together alongside numerous local organisations to promote social reform, women’s welfare and political rights. Structured according to the conventions of bourgeois civil society, the membership of the new women’s organisations comprised second-generation reformers. As such, these daughters of educated mothers and reform-minded fathers represented an elite, predominantly urban, middle-class milieu. The women’s movement was infused with the ethos of social reform that aligned to gendered expectations within middle-class society, being directed towards ‘feminine’ or ‘private sphere’ issues such as women’s education, the reform of marriage, and health. These issues provided a framework for women’s participation in public life, representing a specifically gendered form of aspirational citizenship in a colonial context where formal citizenship was denied.

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As elsewhere in the world, women's organisations were dominated by educated elite figures who claimed to speak on behalf of all women, constructing a purportedly universal imagining of citizenship that was, in fact, exclusive in terms of class and caste. Because of this, women reformers were out of touch with the women whose lives they sought to improve, as Sanjam Ahluwalia's study of the elite-led Indian birth control movement illustrates.²⁰ Furthermore, universalist conceptions of citizenship had specific implications in terms of religion. Despite a nominal commitment to inclusion, and notwithstanding the leadership of Shareefah Hamid Ali and others in the AIWC, Muslim women were under-represented in the all-India movement. Women's organisations were committedly opposed to communal politics, which they understood as a threat to social reform, but this could result in insensitivity to minority perspectives and many Muslim women gravitated towards separate organisations.²¹ As such, the all-India organisations were open to accusations of high-caste Hindu domination and were ill-equipped to withstand the communalisation of politics in the 1930s. It is important to acknowledge these substantial limitations, even as we recognise women's achievements in a national and international context.

Officially, the all-India organisations were non-political and the women's movement included British women with strong connections to the imperial establishment. However, women with links to the Indian National Congress came to dominate the all-India movement, especially the AIWC, which they sought to align with mainstream nationalism. Despite this, the relationship between women nationalists and their male colleagues was not uncomplicated. Jawaharlal Nehru's insistence that women's emancipation was contingent on national freedom, for example, implied that, in practice, the reform agenda could be deferred.²² Women activists, by contrast, sought to address women's issues, including political rights, in the immediate term. Although some dismissed this form of activism as a distraction, it nevertheless contributed to nationalist legitimacy and, with retrospect, can be seen to have facilitated the wider anti-colonial project.

Women's civil society provided access to international networks, including transnational women's organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAWSEC). While relations with Western women's organisations were asymmetrically structured, reflecting the inequalities of the imperial order, anti-colonial women appropriated these networks in order to undermine imperial hierarchies and secure allies for the movement for independence. Their self-presentation as educated, expert women had important

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symbolic value as it served to delegitimise the imperial claim that India was not yet ready to rule itself. Further, European allies facilitated and promoted their claims to a wider audience. Anti-colonial women were also able to operate beyond women's networks. When Shareefah Hamid Ali travelled to Geneva in 1933, she combined her activities as a member of the AIWC with an appearance at a conference promoting Indian independence alongside the Congress leader Subhas Chandra Bose. During a tour of the United States in 1945, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit operated in liberal civil society, not so much as a representative of women but as the 'sole spokesman' for India. It was through such below-state-level connections that anti-colonial women emerged as international actors in the global process of decolonisation.

As India transitioned to independence after the Second World War, Indian women made important contributions to efforts to secure gender equality through the UN. This work and the relatively high number of Indian women appointed to international roles seemed to represent modern India's commitment to women's rights. Certainly, this was a line intentionally promoted by the Indian state, including by its women representatives. However, the claim is problematic. Indeed, the link between elite political representation and societal female empowerment is notoriously weak and the elevation of a small number of elite women masked widespread social disabilities in India. This was confirmed by the *Toward Equality* (1974) report commissioned in India in response to the UN's landmark international survey, which stated that 'the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution'.²³ Women leaders were not, on the whole, complacent about this dichotomy. Yet, in attempting to introduce social reform legislation, they faced significant opposition, as Maitrayee Chaudhuri reminds us.²⁴ The effects of their activism can thus be found most notably in the history of ideas and practices, rather than in social change.

Being 'citizens of everywhere': cosmopolitan-nationalism in the global public sphere

Women's international activism was spearheaded by nationalist figures who were cosmopolitan in outlook and practice. To some extent, global belonging was informed by personal feelings of interconnectedness produced by the globalising conditions of late imperial capitalism. With the pronounced expansion of shipping at the end of the nineteenth century, long-range travel was fairly commonplace for elite international actors, even before their careers demanded it of them.

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When the future nationalist leader Sarojini Naidu travelled to Britain in the 1890s, information was conveyed fairly efficiently round the world by steamship or, quicker still, by telegraph. By 1929, these connections were immediate. That year, Naidu made the first radio broadcast between America and India, which she celebrated as ‘a triumph of scientific skill that defies the barrier of time, defeats the challenge of space and strives to interlink in an ethereal yet enduring bond of instant communication’.²⁵ Yet interconnectedness also engendered a sense of peril and responsibility. Two world wars demonstrated that conflicts in Europe quickly spread elsewhere, stripping the colonies of resources and placing them in the path of advancing armies. ‘We cannot afford not to look beyond our borders,’ urged Amrit Kaur in 1942.²⁶ Mobile, connected, globally conscious women were, therefore, ‘citizens of everywhere’ in the ‘cultural, imaginative, and affective’ sense identified by Sukanya Bannerjee in another context.²⁷

Cosmopolitan-nationalism brought political meaning to this global consciousness. The women we encounter in this book understood that their lives were structured by a global imperial order underwritten by universalist theories about ‘humanity’ that justified European political and economic domination. Their efforts to promote the cause of Indian freedom were similarly global in scope. Cosmopolitan-nationalism was derived from universalist notions inherited from a number of traditions. On the one hand was the concept of ‘brotherhood’ found in Hindu reformism, Islam and Christianity. On the other was the cosmopolitan influence of Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, who found popularity with Indian nationalists in the nineteenth century. Mazzini’s concept of ‘special national mission’ for ‘the global good’ was frequently echoed by anti-colonial women in internationalist circles. In this context, cosmopolitan-nationalist claims-making was asserted in the language and practice of liberal citizenship. That is to say, anti-colonial women asserted their right to representation and organised according to democratic civil society conventions. For women influenced by the history of social reform, citizenship was also associated with the ideal of service, which they sought to realise through their involvement with the ‘social work’ of the League of Nations.

The context for these assertions of cosmopolitan-nationalism is captured by the concept of the global public sphere, a below-state-level arena for public activism produced by the globalising processes of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries.²⁸ It functioned as a space for the transnational expression of public opinion through the international media (print and, by the 1930s, radio and cinema) and through a dense web of civil society networks. Local print cultures became progressively more connected in the early twentieth century

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as newspapers, books and periodicals across seven continents not only reported on events in far-flung locations but also translated and reprinted verbatim published material from elsewhere in the world.²⁹ Part of this globalising culture of knowledge transfer was generated by civil society actors, including international women's organisations, who disseminated news from around the world to local and national branches through specialist publications. From their inception, Indian women's organisations functioned as a cog in this transnational system of knowledge exchange, sending reports of their activities to international affiliates and themselves including news from elsewhere in their mouthpiece publications. Added to these regular transnational circuits were rarer international tours during which spokeswomen took part in public events in Europe, Africa and America (and were reported in the international media as doing so). Such tours were facilitated by transnational civil society contacts drawn from personal connections and affiliate organisations, including globally networked women's umbrella groups such as the WILPF. Women did not only utilise existing networks but also purposefully fostered new connections as part of a calculated effort to extend their influence and shape international agendas.

A further element of the twentieth-century global public sphere was the framework of world governance centred on the League of Nations and, later, the UN. In the interwar period, Geneva became a global hub for transnational organisations, many of which established permanent headquarters in the city. In the post-Second World War era, the centre of gravity shifted first to San Francisco (for the Conference on International Organisation) and finally to New York, the permanent home of the UN headquarters. Although established with international security in mind, these institutions functioned as much as arenas for civil society activism as they did for state-level diplomacy. Non-state actors – activists and experts – were central to the 'technical work' of world governance, and it was predominantly in this area that anti-colonial women intervened.³⁰

While the global public sphere was certainly not 'global' in any geographical sense (its centre of gravity was weighted towards the West and it was dominated by the mobile, educated middle and upper classes), it was nevertheless conceived by anti-colonial actors as a viable arena for debating a global future. Anti-colonial women found that assertions of the European right to rule seeped into the liberal international arena at all levels. British women's organisations presumed to speak on behalf of their colonised 'sisters'; the League of Nations administered mandates according to the principle of 'tutelage'; Indian representation at world governance institutions was controlled by the imperial authorities; and Western

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claims of superiority – juxtaposed with depictions of the degraded state of Indian society – were drip-fed into the Western popular imagination. Anti-colonial women operating in the international arena challenged and, in some contexts, actually upended these arrangements.

Ideas in motion

This is a book about the political imagination and how ideas and practices developed in one context can acquire new meanings in another. In appropriating liberal ideas and practices to promote anti-colonial goals in the global public sphere, cosmopolitan women became authors in the evolving global history of liberal internationalism. Although liberalism in the imperial context is strongly associated with European intrusion, liberal ideas about fundamental rights and democratic representation nevertheless proved politically useful in the Indian struggle for independence.³¹ Anti-colonial applications of liberal ideas and practices did not simply represent the derivative imitation of Eurocentric knowledge or the redirection of Western ideas back on the project of empire. Rather, they constituted a more complex process of creative ‘re-authoring’ according to contingent historical conditions and political goals.³²

To link liberal ideology to the anti-colonial movement is not to overlook the role played by liberal concepts in legitimising the project of British imperialism as a modernising mission. Indeed, imperial ideas about rights and representation were tied to a racist theory of progress that maintained European dominance according to perceived levels of civilisation and consigned the colonised to the ‘waiting room of history’.³³ Meanwhile, the Indian independence movement is characterised by the markedly non-liberal methods of civil disobedience and revolutionary violence. Against this backdrop, Indian liberalism, such as it is deemed theoretically possible, is commonly viewed as the preserve of moderates who remained loyal to the idea of empire or is otherwise portrayed as a ‘derivative’ imitation of Western ideas.³⁴ In reality, however, neither liberalism nor anti-colonialism can be so neatly defined. Ideas are constantly in motion, evolving in conversation with distinct local conditions and, especially in the interconnected modern era, across borders. Just as the communist M.N. Roy contributed new ideas and practices to Marxism, Indian activists who engaged with the questions of rights and representation brought new meanings to the global liberal tradition. Even in the turbulent pre-independence decades, which saw violent unrest and widespread civil disobedience, liberal democratic ideas

informed anti-colonial politics. But such documents as the Indian National Congress Resolution on Fundamental Rights (1931) and, later, the Constitution of India (1950) were not straightforward facsimiles of ideas imported from elsewhere.³⁵ Rather, India's 'peculiar route to democracy' was the product of dialogues between globally circulating and indigenous ideological currents in the context of distinct historical conditions.³⁶

The international activism examined in this book provides a lens for examining how women anti-colonial actors appropriated and re-authored ideas about rights and representation beyond the borders of India. Their engagement with interwar internationalism was not simply an appropriation of 'Wilsonian' or other Western ideas about international cooperation for political ends. Rather, it was a process of refashioning Indian ideological traditions for a new global context. By bringing ideas about political self-hood to bear on transnational conversations, women not only promoted the anti-colonial cause but also contributed to the evolution of political discourse more widely. Their insistence on independent Indian representation in the global public sphere brought new interpretations to the concept of universal rights, partially transforming liberal internationalism from an agent of imperialism to an agent of decolonisation.³⁷

By maintaining transnational conversations with civil society interlocutors through correspondence and in person, anti-colonial women defied imperialist assertions and influenced the way Western actors thought about imperial rule.³⁸ Building on these achievements through their involvement with the UN after the Second World War, Indian women contributed distinct anti-colonial perspectives to transnational conversations about human rights. Similarly, 'feminism' was not a ready-made set of ideas produced in the West and exported elsewhere. It is well known that the project of ameliorating women's status in society has always been heterogeneous, broadly construed and subject to multiple visions.³⁹ In view of this, the approach of the women encountered in this book represents a discrete intervention that shaped the trajectory of feminism in a global context. It is true that subsequent developments, from the proliferation of neo-imperialist development economics to 'regime-change' geopolitics, have laid bare the limitations of liberal internationalism in addressing the legacies of the imperial period.⁴⁰ It is also true that universalist rhetoric all too often provides cover for political, social and economic inequalities, as it did in the imperial context. But women's deployment of liberal concepts to undermine the imperial order reminds us that ideas are pliable and can be refashioned in the pursuit of multiple goals.