Imperialist Barriers:

Indian Women’s Contributions to the British Suffrage Movement

Alexandra Viencek

HIST 498

Dr. Alexander Bay

May 2022
Introduction

With India often being called the “Jewel in the Crown” of the British empire, it only made sense for British feminists to utilize Indian women in the British suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for their own benefits. The utilization of Indian women stemmed from the prominent imperialist beliefs deeply embedded in British culture. Imperialism, the dominant ideology of Western civilizations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was the basis for the British Empire, which subjugated countries such as India. This power can be seen in the global phenomenon of the British suffrage movement, specifically through the encouragement of Indian women by British suffragettes to participate in activism. As a result of this hegemony, Western culture expanded to the far regions of India, resulting in Indian women being exposed to Western feminist thinking and being inspired to fight for their rights. With the aid of British suffragettes, Indian women began to fight for suffrage in their own country, but their involvement did not start there.

The roles played by Indian women in the British suffrage movement have rarely been addressed. This thesis explores the involvement of Indian women in the movement and what role imperialist values played in their participation. Many Indian women played a significant role in the British suffrage movement and this earned the strong support of British feminists for Indian female enfranchisement, but the limitations they faced due to their race have yet to be explored. This thesis argues that while Indian women were highly encouraged to partake in the British suffrage movement, their voices were suppressed due to their subordination in an imperialist world. They were utilized as representatives of those who needed British women’s help in becoming more civilized. Their participation in the British suffrage movement was not to advance the Indian suffrage movement, but to aid the British women’s campaign.
Nineteenth and early twentieth-century Great Britain was a time of social movements and new ideologies that would globally change ways of life. One such change was the women’s suffrage movement in Great Britain. Women in Great Britain were not explicitly banned from voting until a Reform Act was passed in 1832, solidifying their exclusion from voting, which resulted in the movement gaining momentum around 1850 and becoming a national movement in the 1870s with the formation of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Women’s suffrage groups relied heavily on protests, hunger strikes, and more militant demonstrations to fight for rights. It was not until 1918 when British women gained suffrage.

The development of more suffrage groups championed the suffrage campaign into a national movement. 1903 saw the formation of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), which specialized in highly visible publicity campaigns such as parades, which energized all dimensions of the suffrage movement. The WSPU, which was tightly controlled by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, practiced tactics such as hunger strikes, stone-throwing, window-smashing, and arson, which was largely due to the lack of government action. However, the movement was not solely led by violent demonstrations. Contrasting the violent tactics of Pankhurst and the WSPU were the NUWSS and Millicent Fawcett’s leadership. She and the NUWSS had more peaceful approaches to advocate for women’s suffrage, including, but not limited to, petitions, rallies, and publications.

The militant actions of the WSPU attracted a great deal of attention to the campaign, increasing not only its popularity, but also notoriety amongst many elite members of society, including women. These elite members believed that women did not need to be able to vote because they were already equal in different spheres. With the growth of the suffrage movement,
the social cause turned into a global event; having already kickstarted in the United States, the
growth of international socialism, the First World War, and the implementation of new
imperialist ideologies contributed to the idea of a new womanhood that broke free from previous
constraints. By utilizing ingrained imperialist ideologies, the movement grew into a global
phenomenon.

New Imperialism was the basis for the British Empire, which subjugated many countries,
including India. In comparison to Old Imperialism, which is associated with European conquests
during the 15th-18th centuries and focused on gaining trading posts throughout the world to gain
riches in natural resources, New Imperialism gained its impetus from economic, military,
political, humanitarian, and religious reasons, as well as from the development and acceptance of
the new theory, Social Darwinism—as coined by Herbert Spencer in his work *Principles of
Biology* (1865), which theorized that Charles Darwin’s law of natural selection and survival of
the fittest applies to people—and advances in technology.¹ This would morph into a racialized
theory, claiming that white people were the best fit for survival due to their more civilized
lifestyle. Therefore, they would become deeply embedded in imperialist ideology by claiming
that these theories support colonization. Due to technological advancements, it became necessary
for industrialized European nations to expand their markets globally to sell products they could
not sell domestically; they needed cheap labor and a steady supply of raw materials. In order for
the industrial economy to work effectively, direct control of regions in Asia and
Africa—establishing colonies—became essential.²

The British gained control of India in 1763 after defeating the French in the Seven Years’
War. The British controlled India through the British East India Company until 1857 when an

²Stephen Ocheni and Basil C. Nwankwo, *Analysis of Colonialism and its Impact in Africa*, Canadian Academy of
Oriental and Occidental Culture (2012), 47.
uprising led by native soldiers known as the Sepoy Mutiny transpired. This mutiny led the 
British to implement direct government control, introduce social reforms, advocate education, 
and promote technology. Britain profited greatly from India, which would become known as the 
“Crown Jewel of the British Empire.”

To garner support amongst British citizens for colonization, there was a promotion of the belief that Europe should civilize the people of colonized countries. According to this view, non-whites would receive the blessings of Western civilization, including politics, sciences, and social and religious beliefs. To perfectly summarize the ideologies that spread among British citizens, Rudyard Kipling expresses in his famous poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” this mission in which he prodded Europeans to take up their moral obligation to civilize the uncivilized.³

As a result of British dominance, India was exposed to Western culture, including the women’s suffrage movement. Due to colonialism, many Indian women were exposed to Western feminist thinking. Indian women began to fight for suffrage in their own country with the help of British suffragettes. This resulted in a movement rooted in civil disobedience heavily supported by the nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. These two movements worked hand-in-hand to reach Indian independence and female suffrage in 1947. There were some Indian women involved in the cause throughout the movement, but they were usually not included in important conversations. Imperialist ideals reduced them to oriental objects, depicted as victims in need of saving by whites. The white women in the suffrage movement used Indian women to make their campaign seem more agreeable, especially for British politicians and men in general. Aimed at both a domestic and international audience, British feminists coined the term, ‘white women’s burden,’ influenced by Kipling, arguing that it was the white woman’s job to save them

³ Rudyard Kipling, The White Man’s Burden, McClure’s Magazine (1899).
from their Oriental shackles. Therefore, Indian women were encouraged to express their advocacy for British women’s suffrage. However, rather than using this opportunity to highlight the needs of Indian women, British suffragettes deployed them to suit a British agenda.

Historians have agreed that Indian suffragettes and their roles in the British suffrage movement were significantly affected by imperialist beliefs, such as the ‘white woman’s burden.’ Yet they do address different aspects and perspectives of their involvement. Antoinette Burton takes an approach that focuses on the British feminist viewpoint and addresses how Indian women played a role at the expense of white women. Others, such as Rehana Ahmed and Sumita Mukherjee, focus on the perceptions of Indian women and examine how their participation progressed the movement.

In *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Antoinette Burton examines the links between imperialism, specifically in India, and the rise of the British suffrage movement. Rather than a historical coincidence, she argues that the feminist movement was indelibly affected by New Imperialism.\(^4\) The language and mindset of British imperialism played an essential role in the feminist movement. Burton suggests that British feminists were imbued with an imperialist consciousness of racial hierarchy, which claimed the superiority of white women as morally pure and nurturing—that it was the responsibility of these white women to be mothers to all races. The existence of the feminist movement, according to Burton, depended on the racialized construct of the colonized “other;” “… acknowledging the impact of empire on the British women’s movement is one of the most urgent projects of late-twentieth-century western feminism.”\(^5\) This movement could be termed liberal bourgeois feminism; its premise is compatible with an imperial ethos and structured

---


\(^5\) Ibid, 211.
around the belief of having a moral responsibility to the Oriental "other." The British empire, according to Burton, was an integral and enabling part of the woman question, a phrase referring to the problems surrounding women’s suffrage and their changing societal roles, because it was a fact of life and was an organizing principle of Victorian society; it affected a sense of national and racial supremacy.

Burton uses the term “white woman’s burden” when addressing the role of Indian women in the suffrage movement. Indian women were not seen as equals, but as victims that needed saving. There was a hegemonic belief that British influence would improve Indian life. Throughout her work, Burton clarifies that modern western feminism was influenced by imperial assumptions of the day. It revolved around the maternal gaze, which thought that it was their duty as mothers to all races to improve and save Oriental civilians, specifically Indians. Burton emphasizes that one of the movement's primary goals was to maintain and strengthen the British empire. She highlights the part women played in creating and sustaining the British empire, disguised as a feminist project of the “white woman’s burden” to save Indian women.

In Burdens of History, Antoinette Burton focuses on analyzing the feminists’ use of imperialistic and nationalistic language, which characterizes British feminism. Burton discusses specific tropes such as the phrase “Indian womanhood,” or the idea of women as purifying and civilizing agents, as well as the themes of mother- and sisterhood. Burton often steps aside from the historical context to discuss current debates in the fields of history and gender studies over the subject; she also calls attention to the ongoing influences of racial and nationalist ideologies on today’s feminist movements. Burton examines numerous feminist writings, such as the

---

6 Ibid, 65.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid, 70.
10 Ibid.
periodical *The Englishwoman’s Review*, to find evidence of their imperialist assumptions about Indian women. She concludes by noting the ambiguities of British women’s ideas of worldwide sisterhood when they clung to the belief that they should advocate for the emancipation of women worldwide.

Burton’s work is soundly based on archival research. Its focus is centrally on British domestic history and the functions the British empire, India, and Indian women performed in a domestic discourse about power, gender, and public life. While it offers an entry point for understanding the complexities of the suffrage movement and its imperialistic influence, *Burdens of History* does not serve as a tell-all story. To better understand the implications of British feminist discourse on Indian women, one must turn to the histories of South Asian women. *Burdens of History* assumes that Indian women lived the same lives as British women. There was not one Indian woman, but many, and the variety of lives Burton lacks in emphasizing is fundamental to a proper historical understanding of the movement, which is not provided with only a domestic western discourse.

Sumita Mukherjee’s *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* is a narrative that illustrates how inaccurate depictions of the British feminist movement are, especially in pop culture media such as the film *Suffragette*, which paints the British suffrage movement as made up solely of white women. Mukherjee’s objective is to reconstruct the transnational suffrage movement of the early twentieth century by placing Indian suffragettes at the center. Based on archival research, Mukherjee describes Indian women whose activism centered around the push for the vote. She first focuses on them as imperial subjects negotiating

---

11 Ibid, 19.
their ‘regional’ identities and then as ‘citizens of the empire’ positioning themselves within the Commonwealth and engaging in movements and organizations. While these women were a part of the suffrage movement, she clarifies that there was a conscious attempt to dissociate themselves from western feminist movements. She declines to call them “feminists” since many explicitly abjured the term for its divisive and western connotations. Instead, she calls them suffragettes because the issue’s centrality offers a specificity that “feminist” does not and because “their actions and purpose were radical for the time.” They did not want to be labeled the same term as the white women in the movement because “Imperial feminism promoted a form of moral and pure imperialism using the stereotype of ‘enslaved’ Indian women.”

Mukherjee is not attempting to lionize these women; she takes a critical approach. For example, Mukherjee discusses how the Indian suffragettes disassociated themselves from particular social issues such as marginalization. They mainly consisted of urban women who claimed to represent all Indian women. Indian suffragettes assumed the position of a “monolithic Indian identity that was unwilling to recognize the complexities of the ways in which women could be disenfranchised in India.” She concludes that these women “were not saints, but they exhibited huge bravery in times of fierce imperial repression.” The foremost aspect of Mukherjee’s work is its nonpartisanship. Indian Suffragettes interweaves local, regional, and national initiatives over several decades and across the subcontinent and mentions suffrage activity outside of Britain. Throughout her work, Mukherjee notes the diverse identities of Indian suffragettes, but she does not dwell on them. As a result, Indian Suffragettes helps to understand the complexities of the movement. It differs from Burton’s Burdens of History in that it reframes

14 Ibid, 25.
15 Ibid, 4.
16 Ibid, 29.
17 Ibid, 153.
18 Ibid, 252.
the Indian women that contributed to the suffrage movement, viewing them as social and political activists. It brings out facets of the women’s movement that have been unexplored and critically appraises the involvement of Indian women.

*South Asian Resistances in Britain, 1858-1947*, also by Sumita Mukherjee and Rehana Ahmed, is similar to *Indian Suffragettes*, except it offers an alternative approach to British history by exploring the multiple ways in which South Asians in Britain engaged in activism. It addresses a wide variety of resistances, focusing on resistance against imperialism under Queen Victoria's reign up until the turmoil of World War II and the Partition in 1947. Ahmed and Mukherjee address resistances against the empire and investigate how South Asians in Britain such as Sophia Duleep Singh came together to advocate for women’s suffrage, thereby complicating the previous conceptions of the suffrage movement. *South Asian Resistances in Britain* expands the perspectives used in studying the subject by analyzing the roles prominent Indian women in the British suffrage movement played.

Ahmed and Mukherjee argue in favor of connecting colonial and postcolonial South Asian resistances in Britain throughout their work, but it is limited in portraying this when specifically discussing Indian suffragettes in the British suffrage movement since it only dedicates a brief chapter to this subject.¹⁹ What separates *South Asian Resistances in Britain* from *Indian Suffragettes* is that it analyzes the Indian suffragettes that participated specifically in the British suffrage movement. While it would have been a stronger collection of essays if they reduced the book's scope and included more on the nineteenth century, *South Asian Resistances in Britain* still assiduously expresses the views of Indian women by portraying them as more than victims.

Antoinette Burton’s *Burdens of History* provides insight into the motives behind white feminists heavily influenced by this imperial mentality and motive to use Indian women in their suffrage efforts, such as by using the term “white woman’s burden” to gain the vote. While it is not strong in providing a perspective of the Indian women who participated in the British suffrage movement, it does bring a sense of consciousness as to the complexity of the movement. This research utilizes Burton’s *Burdens of History* to include the standpoints and motives behind the “white woman’s burden” and the overall involvement Indian women played at the expense of the white feminists in Britain.

Sumita Mukherjee’s *Indian Suffragettes* will help provide an understanding of the multifaceted ways Indian women participated in the British suffrage movement. While this research will focus on their role in Britain, it is essential to note how the parts Indian women played there affected what they did in other countries, and *Indian Suffragettes* provides just that. Mukherjee’s work places Indian women at the center of the suffrage movement and explains how they used their platform effectively and ineffectively. This paper uses Mukherjee’s *Indian Suffragettes* and *South Asian Resistances* to gain the viewpoint of Indian suffragettes on how they participated and the pivotal work they contributed in the British suffrage movement.

With these works, it is more plausible to assess the causes and effects of imperialist motives on Indian women’s involvement in the British suffrage movement. While there is a general agreement that Indian women’s immersion in the British suffrage movement was immensely influential for the British suffrage movement, more perspectives need to be researched to gain a more in-depth understanding of the subject, which is what this thesis will provide.
This thesis will be divided into three sections. The first section will discuss the white woman’s burden and the reasoning behind why white women aimed their sentiments and philanthropy toward Indian women. This section supports the argument by stating that British suffragettes wanted to use their social standings as white women to advocate for Indian women’s liberty, with their motives tied to imperialist beliefs to strengthen their cause. It argues that rather than providing equal representation for Indian women in the movement, white suffragettes were more concerned about imperial interventions into Indian women’s lives. They advocated that gaining suffrage was necessary to strengthen the imperial cause.

The second section will focus on how Indian women were seen in the British suffrage movement, specifically through periodicals, and what specific roles they played in it, such as through membership in feminist societies. It supports the overall argument by emphasizing that despite Indian women’s participation in the movement, British feminists stripped them of their foreignness by culturally appropriating them and making assumptions about their motives for suffrage that paralleled their own, which silenced them. Also, Indian women were heavily influenced by British cultural norms, resulting in much of their advocacy mirroring British women, appropriating them further.

The final section will discuss individual Indian suffragettes. This section supports the overall argument by highlighting Indian suffragettes and their involvement in the movement. This will showcase that Indian women played a prominent role in the movement, yet also reveal that those who participated were highly educated, elite women, proving that their participation was rooted in elitism. Despite their elite status, many of these Indian women were still viewed as inferior to British women.
Section I—The White Woman’s Burden

Nationalist and imperialist motives and beliefs laid the foundation for the British suffrage movement. With deeply embedded assumptions of national and racial superiority, British feminists exploited Indian women to serve their cause. Relying on Christian principles, such as the missionary work of civilizing other cultures, British women claimed they were needed to spread such ethics due to their moral superiority. Therefore, British feminists drew upon the poem “The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling and coined the term “white woman’s burden” as their civilizing mission to build their legitimacy for suffrage.\(^{20}\) The instinctive morality of women was linked to their maternal functions. In keeping with Victorian sexual ideology, femaleness in feminist terms meant not inferiority, but a moral superiority that justified participation in the political sphere. By imperializing the discourse of their sex, British feminists believed it was their moral and civic duty to be mothers to women of other races. To push their agenda, these women argued that they could not be fit to properly help these other women until they gained the right to vote.

Several aspects of the British suffrage movement suggest that feminism was fueled by imperialism. It centered around the idea of a moral responsibility, as these women saw that the “agent of civilization” was women themselves and they felt they had a special responsibility toward Indian women.\(^{21}\) They both were grounded in the idea of superiority, as the exercise of women’s moral attributes was considered crucial to the social improvement of the country. They were also preoccupied with race preservation, purity, and motherhood, and this was, as stated by Antoinette Burton, “in part because it had to be.”\(^{22}\) Anti-suffragists feared that with women being

---


\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 2.
out of the home to advocate for the cause, they would neglect their domestic duties, leading to the nation collapsing from within. These women had to ensure they would not neglect their responsibilities and claimed that they were worried the attacks against female emancipation would weaken the white race, so they had to adopt imperial ideologies into the agenda to obtain political standing.

Victorian social reform and philanthropy were steeped in racial metaphors and civilizing tropes, including discourses of Social Darwinism. As Britain became an empire, British women’s rights movements reached many triumphs, including university education for women, municipal suffrage, and marriage-law reform. They allied women’s political emancipation with the health and well-being of the empire as they claimed they were saviors of the nation, the race, and the empire. Burton states that British feminists claimed their emancipation was necessary because it was “nothing less than the embodiment of Britain’s national self-interest and the fulfillment of its historical destiny.”

Therefore, the relationship between the two was capitalized by them to legitimize the women’s movement as a world-historical force and an extension of their worldwide civilizing mission.

The Indian women helped serve the cause of the British feminists. As stated by Antoinette Burton, they served as a foil against which British feminists could “gauge their own progress...they collaborated in the ideological work of empire, reproducing the moral discourse of imperialism and embedding feminist ideology within it.”

British women did not view Indian women as equals, but as colonial subjects who needed saving. If these white feminists could depict Indian subordination, they could champion their cause and relegate them to the “not yet fit to rule themselves” category. At the same time, if they liberalized Indian women, it would

---

23 Ibid, 6.
24 Ibid, 1.
showcase that western culture was superior in terms of their attitude towards women. Therefore, the movement became dependent on this contradiction: it prioritized the emancipation of white women yet made their emancipation dependent on the colonizing and appropriating of Indian women.

British feminists felt a special responsibility towards Indian women because India was important to the British empire as their “Jewel in the Crown.” Their arguments for recognition as imperial citizens were predicated on the imagery of Indian women, as they were seen as helpless victims that lived in uncivilized conditions. According to the British feminists, such backward conditions included child marriage, the treatment of widows, the practice of sati, the Hindu practice of a widow willingly burning herself above her husband’s grave, and the use of the zenana, the living situations that separated men and women. The “condition” of the Indian women made votes for British women an imperial necessity and this necessity would solidify the empire’s continued prosperity.

British women relied on Indian women’s degradation of Indian home life, yet British women blamed it on themselves, claiming they could not help and took up the burden, further solidifying the need for suffrage. They claimed that Indian women were degraded due to the apparent backwardness of Indian culture and religious practices, such as sati and child marriage. For example, in 1839, British feminist Priscilla Chapman wrote *Hindoo Female Education* to describe and inform others of the degradation of Indian women and discuss the efforts of British women to offer them education. This book was published a few decades before the official beginning of the British suffrage movement, showing that Indian women were a concern for British women even before the movement. Chapman writes in the Preface, “The most limited insight into the state of the Hindoo Female population, brings to view so much misery and
wretchedness, this it is impossible for the Christian mind not to feel impatient that the moral condition of the many millions of females existing in our dominions in the east, should be well understood, that they may promptly receive their share of sympathy for those possessing the means of ministering to their necessities.”

Another example is the poem *The Zenana* by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L). Titled after the living situation used to separate the men and women in a family, L.E.L writes a long poem describing the degradation of Indian women, using the zenana as the symbol of their degradation. For example, L.E.L writes about child marriage and polygamy, writing:

She's very young, and childhood's days  
With all their old remembered ways,  
The empire of her heart contest  
With love, that is so new a guest…  
But he, the warrior and the chief,  
His hours of happiness are brief;  
And he must leave Nadira's side  
To woo and win a ruder bride.  

Through works such as these, British feminists were able to justify the necessity of women’s suffrage. British feminists claimed that if they had received suffrage years prior, they could have had the power to save these Indian women from the degradation they faced and be able to properly educate them.

The idea of the Indian woman was a motif in feminist literature, proving that referencing them was more than a stylistic preference. It authorized British feminists and their movements as agents of the continued progress of Western civilizations. The immediate action required in the movement was not the liberation of the suffering Eastern women, but the emancipation of British women. Indian women were merely instrumental in proving the fundamental role of female

---

emancipation in advancing the cause of civilization. For example, feminist Mary Carpenter, who resided in India for six months, wrote in an account of India which included the potential of Indian women for self-improvement through education. She claimed that many Indian women needed to be freed from the confines of the zenana, deprived by their countrymen of “those who might have called out their highest powers, and to whose pure enjoyments they might have imparted the highest zest.” In this account, Carpenter claimed that the zenana, along with child marriage and enforced widowhood, was the totality of Eastern women’s experiences and their identity as women. Some British feminists believed that Indian women were not as powerless as they were made out to be. British feminist Emily Pfeiffer claimed that they had just as much power within the walls of the zenana as any Englishwoman did inside her home. She stated that in India, “women are all-powerful, even as they are here (Great Britain).”

The campaign that sparked such sentiments towards Indian women was the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act in India during the 1860s. The Contagious Diseases Act authorized the detainment and medical examination of women designated by local authorities to be prostitutes. Led by Josephine Butler, the movement against the acts is considered the best organized and the most prominent feminist reform movement for Indian women. These British feminists considered these acts a violation of personal liberty and a sense of humiliation for the impacted women. According to Antoinette Burton, these British feminists “railed against the exploitation of their Indian sisters at the hands of their regulationists and made the liberation of Indian women from organized prostitution their main objective of the years.” Most repealers did not view the cause of Indian women as an end in and of itself, but instead as a means of

28 Ibid, 71.
30 Ibid.
ensuring the well-being of Great Britain. To these repealers, their country’s health was more important than the health of Indian women. Since the British government ruled in India, feminists believed their women faced similar battles; they claimed that the British government besieged Indian women, so British feminists had to fight to improve Indian women’s lives.

Feminists began to offer support for the imperial cause by dedicating their philanthropic activity to colonized peoples, as they viewed the imperial empire as an opportunity for English women to exercise their benevolence on a more global scale. This allied the feminist cause to the imperial one by making them mutually dependent. Despite this, they had little to no direct contact with Indian women. They would use accounts from agents sent to India to observe the conditions of Indian women, which resulted in them constructing an image of Indian women that portrayed the hierarchical relationship between English and Indian women.

These British feminists believed that women were representative of civilization and social improvement and that how a woman acted or was treated represented the supremacy or inferiority of the country. Feminists such as Katharine Bushnell and Elizabeth Andrew strongly believed in these sentiments as they attempted to dispel some of the myths of Indian women made by English feminists. They blamed the degradation of Indian women on the backwardness of Indian culture and practices, further implying that Indian culture needed to be “cleaned up” by feminist reformers to help convey the country in the same light as Great Britain. In direct response to Indian women’s apparent sentiments towards the Contagious Disease Acts, Bushnell and Andrew stated in the periodical *The Dawn* that “the resistance is, in itself, proof of the imperishable dignity of woman’s nature, to be found alike in the untutored slave of the Orient and in the freer representative of the Western world.”

The strong belief in the white woman’s burden and the advocacy to save Indian women led British feminists to recruit Indian women to

---

31 Ibid, 6.
participate in the movement in Great Britain and start their campaigns in India. While this thesis
will not address the suffrage movement in India, it is important to note that the movement in
India was a direct result of white feminists’ involvement in India, encouraging them to advocate
for the same kinds of liberations they were advocating for themselves. Indian women who chose
to aid the suffrage movement in India also held an essential role in the British movement,
participating in many ways that would aid the suffrage cause.
Section II—Indian Women’s Contributions

As a direct result of British feminists’ sentiments towards Indian female enfranchisement, Indian women significantly contributed to the British suffrage movement, advocating for both British and Indian women’s suffrage. Still, despite their prominent involvement in the movement, British feminists culturally appropriated them and made assumptions of their motives for suffrage, ones that paralleled their own motives for enfranchisement. However, there were still many Indian suffragettes that voiced their sentiments about what enfranchisement meant to them, sometimes going against British feminists’ perspective.

Indian women participated in the British suffrage movement in several ways, the main one being their membership and participation in events hosted by feminist leagues. For example, in 1913, the Church League for Women’s Suffrage held a meeting in Brighton. In a photograph (Figure 1) taken by Muriel Darton, there are pictured two Indian women in the group.32 One of these women is Doctor Susila Anita Bonnerjee, the Secretary of the Ealing Branch of the Church League for Women’s Suffrage, and the other is presumed to be either her sister Nellie (Nalini) Blair or her sister-in-law Amiya (Kitty). A handful of Indian women held positions in leagues such as Lolita Roy who was the London Indian Union Society president, and Herabai Tata who was the Honorary Secretary of the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) in Bombay (both will be further discussed later).

Through their membership and participation in women’s societies and associations, Indian women would also hand out periodicals, pamphlets, etc. This can be seen in Figure 2 with Indian suffragette Princess Sophia Duleep Singh (subject of a later section), a prominent member

of the Women’s Tax Resistance League, handing out pamphlets of the feminist periodical *The Suffragette* outside of Hampton Court.\(^{33}\) Indian women would also participate in events such as protests and fairs, such as the Women’s Coronation Procession and the International Suffrage Fair.

The Women’s Coronation Procession, organized by the WSPU, was a suffragette march through London held on 17 June 1911, right before King George V’s coronation, demanding women’s suffrage in the coronation year. This march aimed to highlight the global campaign for votes for women and did so by featuring delegations from other countries and from across the British Empire. Of the hundreds of women participating in the protest, there was a section of the procession represented by Indian women.

The small Indian contingent (as shown in Figure 3) was organized by British suffragettes Jane Fisher Unwin and Annie Besant, who were huge advocates for Indian self-rule; in which they spent weeks leading up to the procession contacting Indian women to help them organize the decorations and the collection of subscriptions for the elephant banner.\(^{34}\) The Indian delegation recruited Indian women in Britain, including Lolita Roy and her daughters Leilavanti Mukerjea, Mirvati, and Hirvati. It also recruited visitors from India, including the Maharani and Gaekwar of Baroda, the Maharaja of the Baroda State in India. The Indian procession was part of the ‘Imperial Contingent’ and intended to show the strength of support for women’s suffrage throughout the Empire.

Indian women also played a role in the International Suffrage Fair in November 1912. The fair, organized by the WFL, was intended to raise funds for the campaign and inform others


about the progress of female suffrage worldwide.\textsuperscript{35} Suffragettes dressed in national costumes and manned stalls that sold goods representing different nations. Stalls were arranged according to whether the country provided women the right to vote. The fair also included a program of entertainment, such as demonstrations of national dance, which Ruby Ginner choreographed, and it also included a speech on female suffrage in India given by Ramdulari Dube.\textsuperscript{36}

While Dube was allowed to speak at the fair, the speech was heavily influenced by British women’s sentiments towards Indian women’s suffrage. In her speech, the Indian suffrage cause that Dube addressed mirrored the British women’s campaign regarding what it means to be an enfranchised woman. She “paid tribute to the devotion to their homes of western suffragists” and declared that the “political and social advancement of British women would be a help and encouragement to women in India.”\textsuperscript{37} They advocated for very Anglocentric policies and went against traditional Indian customs, such as sati. Besides Dube’s appearance at the fair, India was also represented at the fair by British women dressed in Indian garb to illustrate that the country did not provide suffrage. One of these women was Ruby Ginner.

Ruby Ginner played a prominent role in the International Suffrage Fair. She choreographed the Dances of All Nations, which was performed daily, and she even performed an Indian nautch dance at the fair (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{38} In response to her performances and choreography, the feminist periodical \textit{Vote} noted Ginner’s contribution to the fair’s success by

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
noting “her own remarkable dancing and the enthusiasm she inspires in her admirable band of dancers emphasized the outstanding feature of the fair – internationalism.”

Indian women appeared in many feminist periodicals at the time, including *The Englishwoman’s Review*, the *Women’s Suffrage Journal*, and *Votes for Women*. Within the first two years of *The Englishwoman’s Review* publication, the periodical presented articles on Indian women. Such articles addressed the zenana and remarked that the most enlightened Indian women were those that married Christian converts. The *Women’s Suffrage Journal* reprinted excerpts from newspapers such as the *Indian Daily News* or the *Madras Mail* rather than writing their own articles. *The Women’s Penny Paper* was considered the “most vigorous feminist paper of its time…” as it addressed suffrage, temperance, sex work, women in the professions, etc. It also included a wide variety of pieces on Indian women in which they would occasionally interview Indian women, being one of the few periodicals that would include first-hand accounts. *Votes for Women* provided a more militant feminist concern for Indian women and imperial matters. In one article, British feminist Billington-Greig stated that “England was the storm-centre of the international women’s movement and that British feminists should fight their own sex equality battles first, so they could aid women of other nations in doing the same.”

Another example is from the periodical *Vote*, in an article discussing the philanthropy of British feminists and their support of Indian women, focusing on the recent decision on the Government of India Bill, which excluded women from voting. It stated that the Government of India Bill was “absurd” and that it showed a “…crippling of the national good when a dual

---

41 Ibid, 10.
aspect was everywhere the order of Nature, and organised comradeship between men and women was the keynote of life.”

The article mentioned the works of an Indian suffragette, Sarojini Naidu. However, for the most part, the actual voices of Indian women were muted.

This attention represents an objectification of the Oriental woman by British feminists as it was a very popular topic amongst British feminists. As stated by Chapman, “…the position of Indian women had become so formulaic…there is some danger of the public becoming wearied by it.” The voices of Indian women only appeared occasionally, and when they did, they were most likely not spoken in English, so they could have easily been misinterpreted. British women would make assumptions about Indian women, believing that they shared the same concerns as their British counterparts. They believed that their common gender gave them an understanding of Indian women, transcending national and racial boundaries. They would shame anti-suffragists into conceding that women’s suffrage was the outgrowth of English civil liberty and that their failure to grant it proved barbaric, claiming that they were like their colonized countries because of their treatment of women. As stated by Antoinette Burton, their concern for Indian women was “part of a complex of cultural assumptions which…dictated a ‘white woman’s burden’ that was as natural to them as the empire itself appeared to be.”

Such articles stripped Indian women of their foreignness and silenced them, domesticating them for a British feminist audience. The article from The Vote never quotes Naidu directly, but instead claims that she “paid a warm tribute of gratitude and affection to those Englishwomen who were helping them in their struggle for political equality,” further proving

---

43 Burton, The White Woman’s Burden, 10.
44 Ibid, 9.
45 Burton, The White Woman’s Burden, 12.
British feminists assumed Indian women welcomed their aid and that Indian motives for suffrage paralleled their own.46

British feminists spread the belief that getting the vote was seen as a symbol of emancipation, and they stated that they were ‘in touch with the new outlook of Indian women’ and in support of self-government within the empire. British feminists claimed they wanted women to be treated as people as they were in other governments across the empire. The British movement inspired the demands for female enfranchisement in India and was considered a “universal awakening of women.” *The Tribune* stated that “Indian women are no less intelligent and deserving than British women.”47

Many Indian women made clear that they did not want a militant movement that paralleled the British movement. They believed that the principle of allowing women to vote, along with the same terms as men, would only enfranchise a small number of women since so few possessed the required property qualifications. Some Indian women, such as Naidu, were reluctant to describe themselves as feminists and wanted to separate their cause from British feminists. Naidu stated that “Indian women did not face obstacles to public work from Indian men…Englishwomen are crying out for the vote; if ours wanted it, they would get it.”48 Naidu claimed that their main justification for the vote was the pursuit of human rights, which reassured male delegates about maintaining separate spheres for Indian men and women. Others, such as Sarabhai, reassured that Indian women would not imitate the struggle that Englishwomen waged for the franchise, claiming that Indian women would not commit the same mistakes as their

---

47 Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes*, 42.
48 Ibid, 40.
British counterparts. These women did not wish to stand antagonistic towards men and even congratulated them for supporting the principle of sex equality while men in the west were not.

From these sentiments, British suffragettes were concerned that Indian women were not showing any initiative, further supporting the mentality of the “white woman’s burden.” British suffragettes such as Cousins and Besant claimed that Indian women needed the vote more than English women because it would be a dishonor to ‘stigmatise’ Indian women as ‘more backward than even the outcasts.’

In response to comments such as this, Indian suffragette Cornelia Sorabji stated in *The Common Cause* that English women should not be advocating for Indian female suffrage because “Indian women were yet to gain the status that English suffragettes had when they began their fight.” She claimed that issues such as education were more pressing than the vote, and Indian women should be understood in the ‘vernacular’ rather than as part of a universal womanhood. Sorabji demonstrated how opposition discourse often brought in progressive arguments favoring other pressing national and social concerns.

Many Indian women that participated in the British suffrage movement advocated with these sentiments in mind, which will be discussed in the next section. Since these sentiments were a direct contrast to how British feminists went about their cause, British feminists did not take such Indian women seriously. They believed that these Indian women were not as serious about the cause, naïve, and needed guidance. Still, few Indian women fully embraced the British methods and were heavily involved in events such as violent protests and hunger strikes. And while these Indian women were still not fully seen as equals in the eyes of British feminists, they were regarded as closer to equals than those that chose more civil methods.

---

49 Ibid, 51.
50 Ibid, 50.
Section III—Indian Women: The Hindrances and Exceptions

Indian women directly and indirectly contributed to the British suffrage movement in several ways. Rukhmabai, the first practicing female doctor in colonial India contributed through a legal case, to the enactment of the Age of Consent Act in 1891. Rukhmabai was one of the many girls in India that took part in the tradition of child marriage, and after twelve years, her husband sought restitution of conjugal rights, resulting in a trial.

Rukhmabai wrote articles under the pseudonym ‘A Hindu Lady’ after the trial about issues such as child marriage and the status of women in general from a feminist lens. In one article, she wrote that “‘A Hindu Lady’…is amply justified in urging that this monstrous tyranny of custom (child marriage) tells more upon Hindu women than upon men…The men of a nation will be mostly what the women will make them. In their own interests, therefore, should our Hindu friends free their women from social thraldom.” These articles produced a significant amount of coverage from people across the empire. In Great Britain, her works were utilized by the British suffrage movement, in which many feminist periodicals covered such topics, as mentioned in Section I. Eventually, Rukhmabai wrote to Queen Victoria after the marriage was affirmed, as the Queen overruled the court’s verdict, dissolving the marriage. The case would lead to the advocacy and the eventual implementation of the Age of Consent Act in 1891, which made child marriages illegal throughout the British Empire.

Another Indian contributor was Pandita Ramabai, a scholar and educator that broke nearly every rule that confined a Hindu woman. When women were expected to never be heard, Ramabai was an outspoken advocate of women’s education and participation in public affairs. She would go on to found the Arya Women’s Association in western India to promote education

and empowerment. After spending years in England, she would go on to write one of her most important works, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* in 1887, which focuses on the plight of Hindu women, in which she called widowhood “the worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman’s life.”\(^{52}\) Prohibited from remarrying, widows were considered cursed, in which they shaved their heads, wore coarse clothing, and were subject to physical and sexual abuse. While much of her accounts and travels took place in the United States, her works reached British feminists. They would use her works critiquing the Hindu patriarchy in their many periodicals to expose their readers to the reality of a Hindu woman’s life.

There were some Indian women that were directly outspoken against the British suffrage movement and the British suffragettes. One such woman was Cornelia Sorabji, who shared an undeterred opposition to orthodox Hindu attitudes towards child marriage and widows. Being the first woman to study law at Oxford University, Sorabji was a huge advocate for India’s independence from British rule, drawing parallels between women’s rights and the capacity for self-governance. This advocacy is evident in her interview with *The Common Cause*, mentioned in Section II, in which she stated that English women should not be advocating for Indian female suffrage since they were not yet equal to the status of English suffragettes.\(^{53}\) One of the most significant Indian women’s rights and independence activists was Sarojini Naidu, a poet and politician. Often known as ‘The Nightingale of India,’ Naidu wrote many poems and would eventually become the second woman president of the Indian National Congress and the first woman Governor of an Indian state after independence.\(^{54}\) When she was exposed to the British suffrage movement, she quickly became a campaigner and activist, deeply involved with the

---

\(^{53}\) Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes*, 46.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid, 40.
Indian national movement, and worked alongside the nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. She traveled all over India and delivered speeches on issues such as women’s emancipation and nationalism, and she helped found the Women’s India Association with British feminist Annie Besant. She also traveled extensively throughout the British empire, especially in Great Britain, as the representative of the Indian Nationalist struggle. While she was at the forefront of the suffrage movement in India, she still addressed the Englishwoman’s cause, contrasting it to reveal how the Indian suffrage cause was more civil.

Lolita Roy was an Indian social reformer and suffragist who played an active role in Britain and India's women’s suffrage campaigns. She was described in *The Vote* in 1911 as “one of the most emancipated of Indian women.” She was president of the London Indian Union Society, which helped support Indian university students in London, and a member of the committee of the National Indian Association (founded by British suffragist Mary Carpenter in 1870). In 1909, she helped found the Indian Women’s Education Association, which sought to raise funds to bring Indian women to Britain to train as teachers. Roy was one of the few Indian women present at the Women’s Coronation Procession (See Section II), in which she helped gather the small Indian contingent. Writing of their presence at the march many years later, Indian politician Sushama Sen recalled that “…In those days there were few Indian women in London…It (the march) was a great experience for me, at the same time it was a novel sight for a single Indian woman amidst the procession, and I was the subject of public gaze.” She also organized events such as ‘Ladies Day,’ which helped raise money for the suffrage cause. Roy was also an active advocate for women’s rights in India, where she petitioned the British

---

55 Ibid, 41.
government, took part in a deputation to the secretary of state for India, and publicly spoke in support of the campaign.

Dorothy Jinarajadasa was another Indian woman who participated in the suffrage movements in Britain and India. She was involved in the Mussoorie Suffrage Society, which discussed the ways British women living in India could possess a voice in the political process. The society argued that enfranchised British women would have the power to improve educational and medical services for Indian women and they were primarily concerned with Indian women’s rights rather than British women in India. Jinarajadasa was involved in the British suffrage movement before her involvement with the Indian women’s movement, helping found the WIA alongside Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins. She was one of the many Indian women who participated in the movements that outspokenly disagreed with both movements' methods. She suggested not using militant measures of protest, advocating for more civil methods which directly opposed the methods used in Britain. She worked alongside many suffragists in both England and India to extend the vote to women, and while their efforts were initially unsuccessful, they received wide attention, reaching the English press and making appearances in English feminist periodicals.

Dr. Susila Anita Bonnerjee was another noteworthy member of the British suffrage movement. Spending her youth in London to gain an education, Bonnerjee was exposed to the British suffrage ideologies and aspired to become a doctor and open her own practice when she returned to India. However, her family was unsupportive, and so she returned to England. She became the Secretary of the Ealing Branch of the Church League for Women’s Suffrage (CLWS), which was much more supportive of militant tactics than the NUWSS. Despite being able to hold a position in the suffrage movement, her nationality prevented her from entering a
partnership with other medical women, and she never succeeded in establishing her medical practice.

One of the most prominent Indian women that participated in the British suffrage movement was Herabai and Mithan Tata. They initially started their advocacy for suffrage in India. They became notorious among campaigning groups and made their presence felt, engaging well with a range of British people, and asserting their right to debate with these people as British imperial subjects. They urged English feminists specifically to implore the imperial council to enfranchise Indian women, resulting in many English women supporting the extension of the franchise to Indian women. However, there were groups like the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland that declined to continue their direct involvement in the Indian suffrage cause since the council believed it was beyond their scope to comment on legislative measures in India, as the matter became less immediate to British suffragists.

British women asserted their ideas about imperial responsibility and only engaged with a select group of elite Indian women in Britain, including the Tatas, who felt compelled to air their demands in Britain rather than in India. The Tatas traveled to Britain in 1919 to speak to and win support from British women’s organizations and suffragettes for the Indian cause. They worked with British suffragists Millicent Fawcett and Eleanor Rathbone, who were heavily involved in the Indian suffrage movement. Antoinette Burton points out how British suffragettes’ involvement with India was a part of a British feminist agenda, as they were keen to give the impression of an imperial sisterhood, and these women assumed dominance by depicting Indians as their weaker counterparts. Yet the presence of Indian women alone in these activities contradicts the idea that Indian women lacked agency. Herabai became the Honorary Secretary of the WIA and would send her daughter, Mithan, as a representative to Britain to present their
cause for women’s enfranchisement. They gained a significant amount of support in Britain from organizations such as the Mother’s Meeting of Finsbury, the Social and Political Union of Bedford College, and the Council of the Women’s International League.

They referred back to British history in their argument for the vote, stating that “the government ought not to commit the same mistake as was made in England at the time of the Reform Bill of 1832…of excluding women from political life, which led to the very bitterness and disparity between men and women. We in India are now in the happy position of being able to start our political education on terms of equality.”

Mithan even drew comparisons between the Indian and British female suffrage movements in the periodical *Stri Dharma*, stating that “we have seen that it has taken English women more than 80 years of bitter agitation to get their rights. If we call ourselves rational beings, we ought to beware and not make the same mistake…”. The suffragette movement in India did not descend into violence and was more unified, but still faced opposition. The Tatas were criticized for enlisting the help of British feminists, such as Mrs. Chapman Catt, president of the International Women Suffrage Alliance, and for modeling the Indian fight on that in Britain.

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, one of the most essential Indian women who participated in the British suffrage movement, started participating by regularly promoting and selling the feminist periodical, *The Suffragette*, outside Hampton Court. Becoming a very prominent figure in the movement, she would become involved in several major events and took many actions against anti-suffragists. For example, she defaced her 1911 census (Figure 5), ‘no vote, no census,’ in which she responded, “as women do not count, they refuse to be counted, and I have a conscientious object to filling in this form.”

---

59 Ibid, 114.
in the Women’s Tax Resistance League, which consisted of thousands of suffragettes that would refuse to pay until they were granted suffrage. Duleep Singh was prosecuted for refusing to pay taxes and had her belongings confiscated and sold at auctions. As a result of being indicted multiple times, she was sent to trial, where she famously stated that “when the women of England are enfranchised, and the state acknowledges me as a citizen I shall, of course, pay my share willingly to its upkeep.”

This trial, along with her social standing as the daughter of the Maharajah Duleep Singh, who was exiled to England after Punjab, a state in India, was annexed in 1849, and as the goddaughter of Queen Victoria, she gained much publicity in newspapers such as Daily Mail. Such articles caused substantial controversy that initiated an uproar amongst elite anti-suffragists. Sir William Corrington telegraphed Lord Crewe in direct response to her article in Daily Mail (Figure 6), asking if “there is anything to be done to stop her.” Such controversy amongst the elite further demonstrates how prominent the movement was. With this specific matter surrounding an Indian woman, it becomes even more evident that the British suffrage movement was diverse.

In many ways, Duleep Singh was the exception for Indian women that contributed to the movement because she had a high status to voice from. Due to her royal and affluent background, the authorities treated her well compared to many Indian and white counterparts. In Sir William Corrington’s telegram to Lord Crewe, it is stated that these men could not do

---

61 Anand, Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary, 255.
anything about the publicity she created because she was under the legal protection of the royal family. So, it was up to King George V to punish her for her involvement in the suffrage movement, but he never reprimanded her for such actions. And she even received backlash from some of her white counterparts, such as British suffragette Hilary Frances, who pointed out the evidence of class discrimination in the judiciary’s response to tax resisters. She stated that “little was done about Duleep Singh’s refusal to pay her licenses whereas Miss Andrews of Ipswich was imprisoned for a week for refusing to pay one dog license.”

Another instance was when she participated in a protest held by the WFL outside the Parliament building. This protest became extremely violent and led to multiple injuries and deaths due to police brutality. Despite Duleep Singh helping lead the protest and being deeply embedded in the chaos, she left with only a few bruises. She even wrote a note stating that a policeman was “unnecessarily and brutally rough…but she did not find that in her case, the police were rougher than necessary.” And while she was arrested with some of her counterparts, she was bailed out the next day as opposed to other women who were there for days and weeks on end. It is possible that the authorities did not target her as much because of her close connections to the British royal family. In many instances, such as the protest, it seemed as though her class and wealth superseded her race and gender.

Her involvement in the movement reveals the elitism in Indian involvement in the British suffrage movement. Only educated, wealthy Indian women who could converse and socialize with British social reformers were well received in the British movement. Due to Duleep Singh’s

65 Rehana Ahmed and Sumita Mukherjee, South Asian Resistance in Britain, 1858-1947, Continuum (2011).
66 Anand, Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary, 255.
status, she could raise the profile of the cause, and her ability to pay taxes, as a product of her aristocratic wealth, highlighted the arguments of the Women’s Tax Resistance League.

Rather than providing equal representation for Indian women in the movement, British suffragettes were more concerned about imperial intervention into Indian women’s lives. British suffragettes claimed to uplift Indian women, but instead asserted their ideas about imperial responsibility and only interacted with a select few elite Indian women. Additionally, even Indian women heavily involved and highly educated, such as the Tatas, Naidu, and Dr. Bonnerjee, were not taken seriously. When these Indian women wished to address their enfranchisement, they felt compelled to express their demands in Britain rather than India because they knew British feminists would see this as a cry for help and would be willing to aid them due to their deeply engrained imperialist belief that British women needed to help civilize Indian women.⁶⁷

---

Conclusion

It is important to examine Indian women’s contributions to the British suffrage movement because it enhances the complexities of the movement and emphasizes the deeply rooted imperialist principles of British feminists. While Indian women were encouraged to participate in the movement, their voices were suppressed and subjugated due to their inferiority in a society deeply rooted in imperialism. They were used as mere pawns by British suffragettes as a means to an end—to aid British women in acquiring suffrage. When discussing the British suffrage movement, it is important to realize that many scholars focus on the Eurocentric definition of being an enfranchised woman. And the British movement was centered around nationalist and imperialist motives, creating a movement that advocates for the uplifting of white women while simultaneously belittling women of other races—in this case, Indian women.

With the perspective this thesis enhances, it is more than evident that there is an Anglocentric connotation of what it means to be a liberated woman. British feminists wanted Indian women to have a congruent freedom as they campaigned for themselves, showing that they viewed their concept of liberation as superior. Realizing that there exist various forms of freedom for women all over the world, based on the culture and politics of their country, is an important aspect of history that can not be excluded from scholarly discussion.

The impact of foreign domination is a prominent factor in women’s subordination. Recognizing this link gives people in the west a framework for understanding modern women’s struggles in ex-colonial and neo-colonial countries. It helps explain why third-world feminists have a different view of women’s oppression. Moreover, seeing how included yet invalidated Indian women were in the British suffrage movement reveals how society needs to broaden its
search for knowledge, steering away from an Anglocentric lens and finding inspiring figures from all parts of the world.
Index

Figure 1 ........................

Figure 2 ........................

Figure 3 ........................
Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6
Bibliography


Photograph of Sophia Duleep Singh selling The Suffragette, photograph, c. 1913. From The British Library: Votes for Women.
