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By

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Abstract

Constructing the "Eastern Woman": Asianist Ideologies and Activism in the Indian Women's Movement, 1900–1965

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This dissertation introduces an unexplored dimension to both histories of sub-continental Pan-Asianism and the women's rights movement in India, specifically in terms of introducing a link between the two. Thus far, scholarship about Indic Pan-Asianism tells us that the impetus to imagine and construct a continental civilizational identity came primarily out of the pens of nineteenth century Hindu middle and upper class men with cosmopolitan sensibilities. The question of female engagement in India with transnational issues and concerns has yet to be posed.

Outside of South Asia studies 'Pan-Asianism' is often understood as an ideology originating in Japan in the late nineteenth century that promoted the unity of the peoples of Asia. Proponents of it often argued for Asian countries to unite in cooperative defence against the growing imperialism of Western powers in the region. In addition to political justifications however, there were also religious and cultural arguments made for unity, as exemplified in the work of scholars such as Okakura Kakuzō Tenshin (1862-1913) who suggested that all Asian cultures were united on the deeper basis of shared "thought inheritances" that centred on a "love for the Ultimate and the Universal". I examine culturally grounded concepts of Asian civilizational unity prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India, often characterized contemporarily under the category of 'Asianism'. I have adopted this term from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in this dissertation in order to designate my interest in discourses to do with the *idea* of Asian unity expressed in India in the period between 1900 and 1965 rather than on 'Pan-Asianism' as a military, political or economic doctrine. My object, however, has been to investigate the lesser-known female interlocutors of this kind of imagination.

Using archival and print sources, I argue that educated middle and upper class Indian women who came of political age in the first two decades of the twentieth century were active rather than passive negotiators of cultural meaning about Asianness and Asian femininity. In chapter one, I make the argument that in the period between 1900 and 1920, Bengali thinkers and artists in and around the social milieu of the Tagore household created a hyperreal, imagined Asia that performed a number of important cultural labors. The notion of the

essentially spiritual character of Asian civilization was developed at this time and an attendant set of qualities such as subjectivity, interiority, selflessness, intuition, peace/passivity and moral beauty were given much discursive attention. The resilience of the spiritual Asia discourse, both in terms of theology as well as in terms of informing a pan-Asian aesthetic had implications for women's reform. On the one hand, it confined female reformers to seeing women as embodiments of Asia and its "inner" power, but on the other, it also opened up ways for them to claim civic agency and connectivity to women across national lines. In chapter two, I study the ways in which this kind of discursive engagement with an essentialized 'East' contributed to the creation of a uniquely inter-Asian 'frame of reference' for women's issues in India, inviting comparison between the status of women's rights in India and other Asian nations. Examining the *Indian Ladies Magazine* during its years of publication between 1901 and 1918, I argue that the Indian contributors to the magazine used the colonial trope of civilizational comparison and critique to advance their own cause. They argued for cultural sympathy rather than difference, specifically between Japan and India, and suggested modelling Indian higher education along Japanese lines in terms of curriculum development and institutional management. The third chapter of the dissertation highlights the transition from ideas about 'Oriental Sisterhood' to actual encounters between individual women and women's groups in India and their Southeast Asian counterparts. It suggests that the All-Asia Women's Conference held in Lahore in 1931 formed the model or blueprint for inter-Asian exchange and consensus making for key women's rights issues such as marriage, polygamy and divorce. In chapter four, I highlight the ways in which Indian women's rights activists physically travelled within Southeast Asia in the interwar period and developed common agendas, such as the abolition of polygamy and easy divorce. I focus here on providing a case study of one such individual activist - Shirin Fozdar, the Bombay-born founder of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), highlighting how her writings demonstrated a preoccupation with women's rights grounded in Bahá'í ideas of gender equality rather than secular liberal feminism. Using the social networks of international religious organizations I argue that Indian women were able to engage in collaboration and intellectual exchange with Southeast Asian women's groups. Finally, in the last chapter, I discuss how Fozdar promoted an inter-Asian discourse of bourgeois femininity using the Singaporean print media and was able to instigate cross-border organizing between Singaporean and other Asian women's groups in the years between 1952 and 1965.

Dedicated to Susmita and Kunal Basu in this world,

And Chabi Basu in the next.

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Last but not least, this dissertation is for my parents Kunal and Susmita Basu, who have been unfailing in their love, patience and belief in me throughout my life. There are truly no words to describe what they mean to me. Finally, it is for Chabi Basu, grandmother and friend, who didn't

get to see this dissertation before she passed on. I am grateful for her stories about her exceptional life as an activist for social equality and women's rights in the 1940s. Periodically, over the last few years she has visited me in dreams, where she promptly takes me to a shelf full of history books in our old house in Kolkata and points to it in silence. I hope I have read and seen what she wanted me to.

List of Illustrations

Introduction

"Asia is one by links of religion, fundamental custom, temperament, attitude to life, and, above all, by its ideal of women".

- Margaret Cousins,
The Awakening of Asian Womanhood, 1922

On the 30th of March 1928, one Madame Vallamalle, from the Tamil journal *Sinthamany*, arrived in the colonial port city of Saigon. The French Commissariat's report on Indians included a brief but telling description of her activities. Arriving by the "Compiegne" [1] from Madras, Mme. Vallamalle was on her way, it reported, to the ruins of Angkor, as a tourist and visitor. During her stay in Saigon, the journalist gave a few talks. The first of these occurred at the Pagoda of the Chettiars in front of an audience of roughly 500 people. The subject of these, the report states, was the "emancipation of women".[2] The report states that Mme Vallamalle made the argument that the modern woman should rise to the same level as a man – and that higher education would be indispensable for this end. She finished by inviting her audience to subscribe to *Sinthamany*, of which, she was the primary editor. The second address, delivered at the "Modern Cinema" on the 1st of May, was a repetition of the first, in front of an audience of roughly a hundred women. The third, on the 16th of May also followed the precedent of the first two addresses at the Mariamman temple. She left Saigon for Phnom Penh on the 1st of June (presumably to deliver further speeches) but returned on the 13th. Having recruited a hundred subscriptions to her journal, she finally embarked on the "Azay le Rideau" for Singapore on the 16th of June.

And here the Commissariat lost its interest in her. We do not learn more of her Angkor visit (with all its picturesque possibilities) or even the substance of her talks to members of the Indian diaspora in Vietnam. Instead, the report continues listing the names of Indian merchants (and sometimes their wives) passing through the port city of Saigon. Yet, the case of the seemingly insignificant "lady journalist" tells us of three important historical trajectories. First, it corroborates a now considerable scholarship on the inter-linkages of the colonial world, where South Asians crossed into the Indian Ocean world to pursue mercantile interests, civil service and labour. South Asian trade and diasporic networks in Southeast Asia also enabled Indian nationalists (particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to traverse the territorial confines of India and preach the gospel of national independence from the British, mobilizing and recruiting supporters and arms abroad. As Sugata Bose and others have argued, an ideology of Pan-Asian unity and universalism also emerged in the late nineteenth century that emphasized the civilizational links between India and the "East". Anti-colonial elites like Rabindranath Tagore embarked on journeys in parts of Asia looking for "different universalisms" than those of European variants, "tainted by the power of colonial empires".[3] Other thinkers sought to capture the pre-colonial trade and cultural ties of the Indian Ocean region by expounding the 'Greater India' thesis or the notion that Southeast Asia belonged in the cultural sphere of India.

[1] French for "countryside"
[2] "Greater India in Vietnam", *Service de la Surêté, Rapport Annuel de Commisariat Spécial Pour la Port de Saigon-Cholon* (Action Indienne: 1927-1928).
[3] Sugata Bose, "Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism," https:data//gold.ac.uk/23/53/Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism.pdf., 5.

That Madame Vallamalle was on her way to Angkor is suggestive of the fact that she was exposed to ideas about this 'Greater India', where the ancient Hindu and Buddhist ties between Cambodia and India, brought into stone relief, served as a source of South Asian scholarly admiration in the 1900s. Her trip further south to capture the Tamil diaspora readership reveals a canny awareness of a thriving vernacular public sphere in Indian Ocean port cities such as Saigon and Singapore. But the third and most telling aspect of her trip is the fact that the public speeches she made concerned women's emancipation (in the context of rising Indian nationalism). Evidently, there was an audience for these ideas as well, eliciting as many as five hundred people on the first occasion, and a 100 women in a subsequent meeting.[4]

This introduces a new and unexplored dimension to both histories of sub-continental Pan-Asianism and the women's rights movement in India, specifically in terms of introducing a link between the two. Madame Vallamalle's presence in Saigon as early as 1928 is only one example from a broader history of Indian women engaging with "Asia" in the first half of the twentieth century as a transnational platform from which to collect support for national causes. But could there also have been efforts to integrate (conceptually or strategically) with other Asians themselves? Thus far, scholarship about Indic Pan-Asianism tells us that the impetus to imagine and construct a continental civilizational identity came primarily out of the pens of men; of the nineteenth century Hindu middle and upper classes with cosmopolitan sensibilities. The question of female engagement in India with transnational issues and concerns has yet to be posed.

Defining Asianism

Not surprisingly scholars of Asianism have tended to focus predominantly on the figure of Rabindranath Tagore. Outside of South Asia studies 'Pan-Asianism' is often understood as an ideology originating in Japan in the late nineteenth century that promoted the unity of the peoples of Asia. Proponents of it often argued for Asian countries to unite in cooperative defence against the growing imperialism of Western powers in the region. In addition to political justifications however, there were also religious and cultural arguments made for unity, as exemplified in the work of scholars such as Okakura Kakuzō Tenshin (1862-1913) who suggested that all Asian cultures were united on the deeper basis of shared "thought inheritances" that centred on a "love for the Ultimate and the Universal".[5] But by the early 1930s right wing nationalist groups adopted the language of Asian brotherhood and promoted the "new order" of East Asia and the "Co-Prosperity Sphere". In popular understanding, this brought non-Japanese support for Pan-Asianism as an ideology swiftly to an end. By the conclusion of the Second World War countries targeted by Japan came to view the language of Asian fraternity as a ruse for more and more virulent forms of imperialism. What is often unknown outside the ambit of South and Southeast Asian studies is

[4] "Greater India in Vietnam".

[5] The most frequently quoted passage from his book *Ideals of the East* (first published in 1904) is as follows: "*ASIA is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life".*Okakura Kakuzō, *Ideals of the East: The Spirit of Japanese Art*. (Mineola, N.Y: Dover, 2005), 1.

that there were countries apart from Japan that did in fact engage with conceptions of Asian unity. And prior to the 1930s, many were informed by cultural and spiritual visions akin to those expressed in Okakura Tenshin's writing. Tagore was certainly an advocate of the latter kind, expressing the hope that Indians could participate in a "continental mind", recognizing their moral and spiritual affinity with other Asians.[6] Where he and other Indians sought to describe this vision of Asian universalism, they described their agenda as 'Asianist'. I too have adopted this term from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in this dissertation in order to designate my interest in discourses to do with the *idea* of Asian unity expressed in India in the period between 1900 and 1955 rather than on: a) Pan-Asianism as a military, political or economic doctrine (as exemplified most fully by Japan in the 1930s, or the militant inter-Asian political recruitment undertaken by the Indian Ghadr party); and b) the concrete expression of Asia invented by nineteenth century European geographers and cartographers. Bose argues that Tagore's Asianism in this period in India was about imagining an "abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being etched by colonial powers onto the physical and mental maps of the colonized, and thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity".[7] My object has been to find other, lesser known participants and interlocutors of this kind of imagination. Before outlining who these were and how they articulated their beliefs it will be useful here to provide a brief overview of Asianist thought in the subcontinent.

Ex Oriente Lux: The Light Comes from the East

The idea that Asia had a unique "voice" and a message that could grant humanity salvation was one that took hold among Indian and European intellectuals in the 1880s. Prior to this, the idea that a unified "East" or "Orient" existed among the Greeks, who called the lands eastwards from Hellas 'Asia' but they knew little about these until Alexander's conquests brought them reports of India. The word Asia may have derived from the Babylonian *asu,* meaning "to rise", and indicating the direction from which the sun rises.[8] In Roman times Hindu and Buddhist metaphysical thought reached Alexandria and the notion that the East was the fountainhead of higher wisdom gained in circulation as the Roman tag *ex oriente lux* "light comes from the east" suggests. This notion persisted in medieval Europe where Christians often imagined the Garden of Eden as farther in the east (beyond Palestine) somewhere in the vicinity of India. The age of exploration, which saw Europeans travelling in Asia and encountering its diversity, largely dispelled this kind of imagination.

It was in the nineteenth century however that the older image of the East as a source of higher wisdom returned to intellectual discourse. The British conquest of the Bengal delta in the eighteenth century paved the way for this, creating as it did the requirement for greater understanding of the customary law of the vast and alien subject Bengali population. Institutions such as the Asiatic Society (founded in 1784) and the College of Fort William (founded in 1800)

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[6] Indra Nath Choudhuri, "The Conflict between the Other Asia and the New Asia: Rabindranath Tagore, Liang Qichao and Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura and the Politics of Friendship and a Love Story." *Indian Literature* 60, no. 3 (293) (2016): 155.
[7] Sugata Bose, "Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism", 5.
[8] Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), 13.

were established to translate and publish Sanskrit texts, not only on the law, but on philosophy and religion as well. These translations, which included works such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* and the *Upanishads*, had a significant impact on European thinkers who had begun to question the legitimacy of Christian doctrines. Of these, the German Romantic poets and writers reacted most enthusiastically to ancient Indian texts, developing an idealized and mythical image of the distant east. Philosophers such as Schopenhauer also predicted that the influence of Sanskrit literature would penetrate into Europe and would "transform from top to bottom our science and our thought".[9]

The idea of Asia's spiritual magnitude increased its hold on the imaginations of Western intellectuals further in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This was due in part to the reach of the Theosophical Society. Founded in 1875 in New York by the Russian mystic Madame Blavatsky and the American Colonel Olcott, the Society promoted a faith composed of Hindu and Buddhist principles such as reincarnation. By 1884 they had recruited enough converts among Indian and British officials in India to establish over one hundred branches throughout the country. Paired with this was the rise of scholarly or pseudo-scholarly publications on Eastern religion. Edwin Arnold's retelling of the life of Gautama Buddha, entitled *The Light of Asia*, for example, sold more than half a million copies in 1879, with seventy odd re-printings in Britain. Arnold's preface called Buddhism "this great faith of Asia" and most importantly, described the Buddha's influence as extending over "the whole Eastern peninsula", creating a "magnificent empire of belief".[10] The most influential Indophile of the period was of course Oxford's professor of Sanskrit F. Max Muller who argued in *India: What Can it Teach Us*? that India was the site of deepest reflection on the problems of human life:

> And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe…may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India.[11]

As a result of exposure to Indian texts, European and American intellectuals in this period started expounding on the existence of a dichotomy between "Eastern" and "Western" civilization. Matthew Arnold conveyed the idea of the unwarlike, purely spiritual East in his 1862 poem on the Roman conquest of Palestine where "the East bow'd low before the blast/ In patient, deep disdain" content to plunge herself in thought as the legions thundered past.[12] Perhaps most famously, in 1889 Rudyard Kipling conceived of the chasm between civilizations in an often-cited slogan "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet".[13]

But the ''twain' did meet and most fervently so in the very construction of the idea of "the East". According to Stephen Hay, by 1900, the stage was set for leading intellectuals in India and Japan (the two "most Western-influenced societies in Asia") to give new impetus and meaning to

[9] Hay, 14.
[10] Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia, or The Great Renunciation* (London: J.R.Osgood & Co., 1879), ix-x.
[11] F. Max Mueller, *India: What Can It Teach Us?* (London: Longmans, Green, 1883), 6.

[12] Hay, 6.
[13] Kingsley Amis, *Rudyard Kipling and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 54.

this concept of a single Asian civilization articulated through the nineteenth century by European men of letters.[14] During the latter period a "genuine symbiosis" developed between British officials and upper caste Bengali Hindus due to the fact that the capital of British India remained in Bengal, in Calcutta, until it was finally shifted to Delhi after 1912.[15] As the British extended their military and political control into the interior of the subcontinent, setting up administrative offices, courts, hospitals and schools, Bengali Hindu men came to fill the positions of subordinate officials. The development of this professional class went hand in hand with English education and access to the translated Sanskrit writings that were being read by European intellectuals at the same time. This exposure to the ancient texts provoked many High caste Hindus to reform and recast their ancestral religion. The most notable example of this was Rammohan Roy, a Bengali Brahmin who between 1816 and 1820 published various Bengali, Hindi and English translations of the Upanishads, using them to argue against the prevailing Hindu system of idol worship, declaring that the real spirit of the "Hindoo scriptures" was "the declaration of the unity of God". He also adopted the East-West dichotomy of the time, arguing that with respect to "science, literature, or religion" the world was indebted, not to the Christian, but to "*our ancestors*, for the first dawn of knowledge, which sprang up in the East".[16] For Roy, the primary gift of Eastern religion was its empowering understanding of a personal God who was present in both the individual soul and the universe. He formulated a reformed Hinduism that rejected idol worship, the positioning of priests as necessary interceptors between gods and devotees and routine ritualistic practices for the lofty philosophy of the Upanishads. He encapsulated his ideas into one creed – the Brahmo Samaj (Society of Worshippers of One God) - which became a large and vigorous organization by the late nineteenth century, supported by eminent figures and families such as that of the Tagores (from 1843 onwards).

For Roy the Brahmo Samaj was the means of developing a form of Hindu-Christian synthesis. It accepted the ethical principles taught by Jesus without subscribing to doctrines of his divinity or savior-hood. Still, the religious superiority of Asia was fervently articulated, with the West seen as offering complementary but lesser knowledge in the form of ethics and expertise in the "mechanical arts". After Roy, the next leader of the Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) gave more coherence to the idea of a unified Asian spirituality. In "Asia's message to Europe", delivered in Kolkata in 1883, Sen felt that he stood to represent the "wants" of a "whole continent", emphatically stating that "As an Asiatic, representing a vast constituency, I feel as I never did feel, never can feel, as a mere Indian".[17] He argued the need to "vindicate" not just India, but Asia, in the face of European efforts to "exterminate our nationality" and "Europeanize all that is in the East".[18] In terms of what characterized this "East", for Sen it embodied firstly, the spirit of tolerance – of "unity of kinship and brotherhood". Then, it was a fountainhead of religion – "It is un-Asiatic not to know God" – as well as the source of knowledge that had informed diverse creeds across the world.[19] Importantly, for Sen, India lay at the heart of this intuitive and faithful Asia, casting its influence over the beliefs of the entire continent. Lastly, Sen talked about the complementarity of Asian and European civilization: "Europe the Lord has blessed thee with

[14] Hay, 14-16.
[15] Ibid., 16.
[16] Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman,*The English Works of Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1945), 71-72.
[17] Keshub Chunder Sen, *Lectures in India* (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publication Committee, 1954), 25.
[18] Ibid., 26.
[19] Ibid.

scholarship and science and philosophy, and with these thou art great among the nations of the earth. Add to these the faith and intuition and spirituality of Asia, and thou shalt be greater still".[20]

The four themes outlined by Sen were echoed by a number of other stalwart Indian figures. Swami Vivekananda, best known in the West at the time for representing Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, encouraged India to "conquer the world with its spirituality!" as without more aggressive promotion of its ideals global destruction was imminent.[21] In keeping with his interpretation of Hinduism as based on its medieval form, Vivekananda advanced the claim that Hinduism was one and the same as the essence of Eastern civilization and so he exhorted audiences in the United States and England in 1893-6 and 1898-1900 to listen to the "voice of Asia" which has been "the voice of religion".[22] While each was great in its own sphere, a synthesis of these two "voices" would be required, led by the East, to correct the extreme materialism of the West.

The motivation to vindicate "the East" was revitalized in the early twentieth century, as Michael Adas has argued, out of a climate of contestations. In the aftermath of WWI, Asian and African intellectuals mounted a concerted opposition to the presuppositions of the civilizing mission ideology that "undergirded the West's global hegemony".[23] This ideology, which emphasized a perceived gap between Western Europe's material development and that of the rest of the world, was absorbed and then turned on its head by colonized intellectuals. In the pre-World War I context, as Hays has demonstrated, exposure to the disillusionment and Orientophilia of late Victorian Western intellectuals meant that Indian thinkers such as Roy and Vivekananda formed the habit of pitting a highly essentialized spiritual 'East' against an equally essentialized materialistic 'West'. After the war, however, the discourse of Asian civilizational superiority was less the product of what Hays characterizes more benignly as the result of "British-Hindu symbiosis" but part of a project to delegitimize colonialism itself. Highlighting European savagery and incompetence in West and East Africa, the Middle East and Europe, intellectuals such as Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo Ghose questioned whether such a civilization was fit to govern the future of the rest of humanity. Tagore in particular, emerged in the war years as the most eloquent critic of the West, arguing for the necessity for colonized peoples not to endlessly emulate the West but to resurrect their own cultural values and resources. As Sugata Bose suggests, his many travels in the Indian Ocean arena in the 1920s and 30s: to Burma, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia as well as sojourns in Iraq and Iran may be seen as efforts to locate a "different universalism" than that offered by European liberal modernity, whose most pernicious gifts were seen to be territorial nationalism, jealous communitarian identities and global imperialism.[24]

Woman and Asia

[20] Ibid.
[21] Michael Adas, "Contested Hegemony: the Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology" in Prasenjit Duara (ed.), *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 87.
[22] Vivekananda, "The Work Before Us", *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), 277.
[23] Adas, 78.
[24] Bose, 2.

There is an important gap, however, in the above traditional trajectory of Asianist thought in India. And that is a discussion of how powerfully gendered the imaginations of a unified continent proved to be, as well as how women themselves participated in the construction of "the East". It can be argued that to search for female voices within this ideology is to look for a sub-set of contributions within a body of thought that is itself merely a footnote in Indian history. As Rustom Bharucha has suggested, "in India the belongingness to a larger imagined community called Asia does not exist. The few civilizational critics who have attempted to invoke Asia can scarcely be said to form a constituency".[25] From this perspective there is no discursive or political valency to Asianism. What then would be the value of excavating female engagements with a marginalized body of thought? Firstly, it is important to recognize that Bharucha's diagnostic may be overdrawn. While the civilizational critics he mentions might not have been numerous, their impacts were quite significant. The universalism versus nationalism problematic has in fact surfaced in the work of many key Indian thinkers (the list is too long to include here), from Iqbal to Radhakrishnan, Gandhi and of course Tagore, suggesting that the quest for more inclusive forms of identity has been vital to Indian self-construction. Tagore's Asianism also impacted the fields of education and art considerably during his lifetime, and beyond it. The Tagore household experimented with Japanese poetry, launched a novel art movement in Bengal through the collaboration of Tagore's cousins Gaganendranath and Abanindranath via exposure to Japanese art historian Okakura Kakuzo, and through him, his protégée artists Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso. His university, Shantiniketan (The Abode of Peace), was designed to be a world university, with particular emphasis on the artistic forms and traditions of Southeast and East Asia.

Of course the argument can be offered that Asianist ideas formed only the condensed reflection of a bigger beast – that of Orientalist categories of understanding. And according to scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Indian nationalists swallowed the latter's essentialisms hook, line and sinker. In fact, he argues that the reason that the "women's question" seemingly "disappeared" from the agenda of public debate at the close of the nineteenth century was because nationalist ideology perpetuated the stereotype that the East was spiritual while the West was material. It successfully situated the "women's question" in "an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state".[26] Women, in other words, came to embody the "spiritual essence of the national culture" and were consequently, imprisoned in this role. What were the costs to the movement for women's emancipation as a result? For Chatterjee, in conferring upon women the responsibility of representing the "spiritual" or inner domain of the nation, a new patriarchy evolved that bound them in a "new, and entirely legitimate, subordination".[27] What were the costs of this more precisely? Nationalist discourse created norms for women that were impossible to deviate from if bourgeois respectability was to be maintained. Ultimately, the "new woman" of the early twentieth century was to be systematically excluded from participation on a number of fronts, including: political agitation against the state for rights, horizontal ties with the masses, or women from subordinate classes and from fashioning an "autonomous subjectivity" outside of the hegemonic claims of male nationalist culture. Their role

[25] Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), xvi.
[26] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Fragments", *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 119.
[27] Ibid., 130.

was confined to the "home" and producing the normative ideals of the middle class conjugal family with its restrictions on sexual and civic freedom.

From this perspective it is possible to argue that the trope of the "Eastern woman" in the art, literature and reformist writing of the early twentieth century was simply an extension of the category of "Indian woman" or a product of the Hindu nationalist imagination. What, one can ask, is the value of excavating the contours of "Mother Asia" if she was functionally the same entity as "Mother India"?[28] Examining the contributions of Indian women to Asianist thought, it is possible to see the same set of Orientalist concepts - of Eastern women as passive, spiritual, artistic and nurturing - as outlined in male nationalist culture. Here, however, I offer up Richard G. Fox's thesis about "affirmative orientalisms" by way of an answer. Fox argues that effective cultural resistance can arise from confrontations "within an existing cultural hegemony" even though, importantly, "resistance never fully escapes that hegemony."[29] Clearly Orientalist discourses, as they evolved through the nineteenth century, tried to keep India subject by projecting false images: "Indian culture was otherworldly, passive, effeminate, and superstitious."[30] However this did not necessarily mean that resistance was impossible. The Gandhian vision, he argues, took all of those qualities and gave them a positive valence: "The Gandhian vision fantasized about a future India more humane, spiritual, egalitarian, and enlightened than the present".[31] Indeed Fox's central thesis is that "affirmative Orientalism" developed out of the conflicted intimacy between Indian nationalism and the colonial world system's cultural domination. Through the combined efforts of European nonconformists and occultists and Indian nationalists, Orientalist perspectives could be recast to affirm the potency of the subject group or population.

Overview of Chapters

In a similar vein, my own research on educated middle and upper class Indian women who came of political age in the first few decades of the twentieth century reveals that they were active rather than passive negotiators of cultural meaning about Asianness and Asian femininity. Instead of reading their statements about Asian women at face value, it is worth investigating if they were able to perform cultural labors for specific readerships precisely because they were "under the radar" so to speak. In other words, what if imagining the "Eastern woman" as aesthetic, spiritual and nurturing also enabled Indian women to achieve certain things? These could include: the ability to criticize Western imperialism and patriarchal nationalism and intimate alternative solutions to social problems in the process, to introduce comparative and transnational reference points for understanding women's issues, and finally, to share tactics for lobbying for reforms in precisely the "arena of political contest" with the colonial state that Chatterjee suggests was lacking. In Chapter One I argue that in the period between 1900 and 1920, Bengali thinkers and artists in and around the social milieu of the Tagore household created a hyper real, imagined Asia that had important implications for the construction of Eastern femininity. I examine the wealth of popular theological commentary that was produced in the popular publication the *Modern Review* in this period, where the reinterpretation of the Vedantic doctrine of Advaita (non-dualism) by way

[28] Manu Goswami (1998) and other historians such as Mrinalini Sinha (2006) have suggested that during the early nineteenth century the Indian woman was figured as "Mother India" and enshrined as the modern yet spiritual embodiment of the nation.
[29] Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 14.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 7.

of the ideas of the nineteenth century European philosopher Hegel became foundational to the notion of a unified Eastern spirituality. The discourse of Asian spiritual unity simultaneously engendered an Asianist aesthetic sensibility that strengthened a gendered imagination of the East as both spiritual and feminine.

In Chapter Two, my interest is in demonstrating how Japan came to be idealized by campaigners for women's higher education in India the early 1900s, leading up to World War I. This tendency to see Japan and India as coeval in terms of cultural affinity was first generated out of the essentializing perspectives of colonial travelogues, which classed Japan and India together but tended to generate a hierarchical schema of development between them. Examining the specific engagement of an Anglophone journal such as *The Indian Ladies Magazine* during its years of publication between 1901 and 1918, I argue that the Indian contributors to the magazine used the colonial trope of civilizational comparison and critique to advance their own cause. They argued for cultural sympathy rather than difference between Japan and India and suggested modelling Indian higher education along Japanese lines in terms of curriculum development and institutional management. Most importantly, it enabled them to shame the public into acknowledging that neither private sponsorship nor Government efforts to educate women at secondary and post-secondary levels were effective, without writing themselves out of the conversation as un-patriotic or unfeminine. This second chapter, therefore, lays out how Indian women used the discourse of Asian unity, not only to reanimate Orientalist conceptions of essential commonality, but to push for their own interest in playing more strident roles in public life by entering higher education.

The next three chapters leave the domain of pure discourse and establish how Asianist ideologies translated to actual meetings between women from different Asian countries in the years between 1930 and 1955. Chapter Three establishes how Margaret Cousins' vision of the spiritual potency of Asian women motivated her to organize the All-Asia Women's Conference in Lahore in 1931, which was designed to counter an heal an excessively masculinist and capitalist Western world order. It demonstrates how delegates employed various Orientalist discourses in order to gain leverage for demands such as the regulation of hours of women's work and wages, old age and maternity benefits, the prohibition of child labour, proper housing and medical inspection as well as equal standards for men and women in dealing with prostitution. Chapter Four presents the argument that a belief in Asian civilizational unity did not always have to arise from Western Orientalist perceptions in all cases. The founder of the SCW, Shirin Fozdar, followed a uniquely Bahá'í rationale for organizing and empowering women in Asia. Chapter Five also takes up the question of unifying concerns by arguing how the Singapore Council of Women continued the trope (as outlined in Chapter One) of comparing and contrasting the treatment of women across Asian countries to shame the Singaporean government into acceding to their demands for reform in the 1950s. The Council also stands as an exemplar of how Asian women's organizations often collaborated and shared information as well as lobbying tactics with one another across national borders in ways that have been completely overlooked in most histories of women's movements in the region.

Methodology

As mentioned earlier, assessing the contributions of Indian women to discourses of Asian unity in the twentieth century, can first and foremost, revitalize our understanding of the history of Asianism. These voices suggest that the imagination of Asia was not only the preserve of the Tagore circle or even of the realm of the imagination alone; thinking comparatively was one of the key ways Indian women within the fold of nationalist feminism could articulate their discontent with both Western imperialist narratives and nationalist expectations for them. There is now a rich literature about port cities across Asia, and how they were, in Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith's words, "quintessential sites of Asian cosmopolitanism".[32] My study of Indian female conceptions of the "East" aims to contribute to the latter, suggesting that imaginations of "unity", "womanhood", "civilisation" and "rights" transcended both geographical borders and the reach of pre-eminent Asian intellectuals and literary figures. However, the women I have studied do, for the most part, fall under the designation of "elite" and the sources I have used are predominantly in English, reflecting the concerns of an indigenous Anglophone public sphere. Here, I methodologically draw inspiration from the work of Fiona Paisley and Leila Rupp (in terms of their work on women from the global south in international conferences in the interwar period) and Su Lin Lewis, who has compellingly argued that "history from the middle" has important insights that are yet to be understood.[33] She writes that the late colonial era was an "age of opportunity for an expanding urban middle class" and the 1920s and 30s saw a marked increase in educational opportunities for women in Southeast Asian cities, resulting in a professional class of doctors, lawyers, journalists and civil servants.[34] Although my study is rooted in colonial Indian metropoles such as Calcutta and Madras, and predates this phenomenon, beginning as it does in the 1900s, it is still part of the same wave of feminine initiative and character. The Indian women I examine all write from the location of a nascent middle class or bourgeois society. They were, for the most part, wives or daughters of men who were increasingly attaining to positions within the British bureaucracy. Thus their demands for reform, as I have particularly argued in Chapters One and Two, are predominantly shaped by a Victorian conception of education and professional growth. Further, while there are undoubtedly vestiges of Asianist discourse to be found in Bengali, Hindi or Tamil publications for women in this period, I have examined English language publications to hone in specifically on the Asianist imaginations of an urban and educated strata of society.

This is because living in the era of prolific all-India publications (that even travelled overseas via colonial trade routes), educated middle and upper class Indian women who subscribed to Anglophone publications were the ones who were most likely to encounter Asianist rhetoric. As Mark Ravinder Frost has argued, through the latter half of the nineteenth century, and especially after 1900, the literati of Calcutta utilized the accelerated circulation of books, periodicals and correspondence that the imperial post facilitated to establish their cultural presence not just throughout India but across the wider Indian Ocean world.[35] With the advent of more rapid and

[32] Tim Harper and Sunil S. Amrith, "Sites of Asian Interaction: An Introduction," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 46, No.2 (March 2012):249.
[33] Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016), 11.
[34] Ibid., 12.
[35] Mark Ravinder Frost, That Great Ocean of Idealism: Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900-1920. (Singapore: Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper No 3, 2011), 2. http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/documents/working_papers/nscwps003.pdf.

frequent steamship passages, they began to make voyages to other port-cities within India as well as Southeast Asia that reinforced their taste for supranational intellectual sociability. The Indian Ocean provided the historical authority and the metaphorical language through which a new universalism was increasingly expressed. In the writings of prominent port-based intellectuals, Asian civilization "became an "ocean of idealism" through which, in the distant past as well as in their more immediate present, "waves", "currents" and "ripples" of Indian thought repeatedly washed up on distant "shores" and "beaches" to unite the region as one unified whole."[36] It is feasible then, to suggest that educated Indian women from different regions and language groups could contribute their own ideas of Asian civilizational unity, particularly via Anglophone publications like the *Modern Review*. [37] In this context, English can be seen not simply as a signature of privilege and the route to class divisions in cities. As Su Lin Lewis suggests, English language publications also served to "connect diverse communities and contributed to ideas of broad-based social justice, while also giving Asians an outlet to challenge the tenets of colonial rule".[38]

Significance

As Ellen Dubois has argued, scholarly literature on transnational feminism has tended thus far to relegate the phenomenon of "multiple, diverse and worldwide voices speaking on behalf of women's needs and rights" to our own era.[39] Historical international feminism – what Leila Rupp calls "the international first wave" - is now understood, with reason, as Euro-centric and hegemonic, perpetuating the "twin illusions of a universal "woman" and of third world female passivity, perpetually "in need of western rescue". However, there is a historical dimension, as she argues, to contemporary transnational feminism, and focusing on Asian and African historical actors and organizations is one way of correcting the view that feminist internationalism in the period prior to 1965 was a simple one-way move from imperial centre to colony and periphery. While Asian women internalized Orientalist discourses about the essential characteristics of the non-Western woman these were also, in Dubois's words, "surprisingly open to inversion and subversion".[40] Yet, in recent years there have been few follow-ups to Dubois's special issue on international feminism in 2009. Mrinalini Sinha's insightful *Specters of Mother India* demonstrated how Indian women used international arenas to reformulate Indian nationalism and highlight female citizenship.[41] This was the last work to examine the transnational component of historical Indian feminisms, highlighting how the global reception of an über Orientalist text such as *Mother India*, provoked the formation and articulation of Indian women's collective political identity in the 1920s. And while Sinha and Antoinette Burton have both shown the links between Indian women's associations and the Anglo-American suffragette movement, there have been no book-length historical studies of exchanges between Indian women and the global South and East.

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[36] Ibid., 3.

[37] While Tagore was a close friend of Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of the *Modern Review*, the persistent engagement with "Asiatic" themes in a journal such as this points to a larger scale, popular interest in cultivating Asian identity.

[38] Su Lin Lewis, 15.

[39] Ellen Dubois, and Katie Oliviero. "Circling the Globe: International Feminism Reconsidered, 1920 to 1975". *Women's Studies International Forum*. 32.1 (2009): 1-3.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*. (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).

Finally, as argued earlier, a project such as this one refuses to accord a totalizing hegemonic status to nationalist ideology in India. While an underlying "narrative of the nation"[42] does account for the origins of much Asianist prose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women, as I have attempted to show, still managed to disclose their wants and needs via the discourses available to them. Without knowledge of these strategies for assertion, we run the risk of overlooking how social change often occurs in complex societies: in purposely hidden and incremental flows.

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[42] Chatterjee, 138.

Chapter One

Imagining Asia: Ideas of the Continent as an Interconnected Political, Cultural and Spiritual Entity, 1900-1920

Figure 1: Heavenly Apsaras by Yoshio Katsuta, 1907; Printed in *Rupam*, 1921

On a particularly hot day in March 1917, a man named Arai Kanpo lay on his back on an unstable scaffold, staring up at a fresco quite unlike any other he had seen before in his life. It depicted an ancient world far removed from the present and brought him face to face, in his own words, with the "souls of the artists of two thousand years ago".[43] Kanpo was one of a team of Japanese art historians and artists who had come to Ajanta, India to copy and restore the historic Buddhist murals there. But working conditions were challenging, to say the least. Several hundred labourers had been hired by the state of Ellora to rebuild the ancient architectural structure. They trooped through dank and dark caves populated by bats. The stench was overpowering. Outside, a leopard was allegedly sleeping at the mouth of the cave. And a tiger's roar was sometimes heard at night. The same tiger, it was said, that had once attacked a local civil servant who had all but managed to escape with his life.[44] The quest to recapture a glorious Buddhist past was clearly not easy. But the Japanese team prevailed. They diligently made copies from morning to afternoon for three months, with barely one or two days of rest in all. *Kokka* (literally, "National Glory"), a journal founded by the Japanese art critic Okakura Kakuzō (1863-1913)[45], in 1890, had sponsored the trip and after the painters returned the mural copies were serialized, successfully making the journey from the shadowy recesses of twelfth century B.C., India to the electric glare of post-Meiji Japan.

What prompted this level of commitment? Kanpo himself attributed his dedication to the revival of Ajanta to "Buddha-virtue": the deep devotion and the high spirits with which artists of ancient times worked. The otherworldly motivation of their work was so powerful that it lasted into present times, and gave him succor to continue, even in the midst of trying conditions.[46] For scholars of South Asian history, however, the answer is rooted more broadly in the Bengal Renaissance and its ardent quest for alternatives to Western modernity in the early 1900s. In the case of Arai Kanpo, the coalition of two forces occasioned his presence in India –the nascent Indian nationalist movement for 'swadesh' or self-rule and Japanese efforts to thwart the loss of national identity in the aftermath of the Meiji regime's "open door" policy towards the West. Okakura, the prime mover of the Ajanta mural project, was critical of the early Meiji restoration in its drive towards total modernization. He became one of the principal founders of the Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1887 with the goal of re-educating the Japanese people to appreciate their own cultural heritage.In 1901 and 1902, he visited India where he met both the sage Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and the celebrated man of letters Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and a year later he published a book entitled *Ideals of the East* (1903), the first sentence of which, "Asia is one", became a celebrated mantra for pan-Asian solidarity for decades to come.[47] The friendship and shared vision between Okakura and Tagore gave rise to a period of artistic exchange between Bengal and Japan. Okakura brought his pupils Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso to work with the poet's brother, the artist Abanindranath Tagore.[48] Others followed subsequently, either to copy the Ajanta murals or to engage with the Tagore family and their social circle. This gave rise to Japanese painters experimenting with some Indian motifs and influences (see fig.1 and fig.2).

[43] Shigemi Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose," *Japan Review*, no. 21 (2009), 162.
[44] Ibid.
[45] He was reverentially known as "Tenshin" in Japan
[46] Inaga, 163.
[47] Ibid., 151.
[48] Ibid.

The Bengal School of Art led by Abanindranath, in turn, "aimed to create an 'oriental art' by assimilating different Asian cultures" (see for example Nandalal Bose's use of Japanese watercolor technique in fig.3).[49] This interesting and rich intersection of artistic milieus, however, waned considerably with the rise of Japan's imperialist ambitions in the 1930s. Attacks on China and the occupation of Manchuria undercut the dream of a unified Asian fraternity.

Figure 2: Yokoyama Taikan, Indo Shugojin (Indian Guardian Goddess) (1903). From Inaga, 2009.

Traditionally, this is where the story of India's cultural commitment to pan-Asianism ends. Until the early 2000s historians tended to see the transnational aspects of anti-imperial thought or movements as overshadowed by the exigencies of regional nationalisms. Pan-Asianism, Pan-Islamism, Internationalism and other affiliations beyond the territorial and imaginative confines of the nation were simply seen as footnotes in the grander scheme of national developments. However, in the past decade, much work has been done to establish the symbiotic relationship between transnational ideologies and the nation-state. Sugata Bose, for example, has argued that anti-colonial nationalism was in fact strengthened by its Universalist dimensions and extra-territorial affiliations.[50] Using the Indian Ocean arena as the key site of investigation, he demonstrated how networks of pilgrims, soldiers, patriots, commerce and labour fluidly moved between associations to an "interregional arena" as well as to a memorialized homeland. Further, studies of political transnational networks and initiatives for Asian unity have also come more stridently to the fore. Scholars such as Cemil Aydin, Erez Manela and Michael Adas among others, have compellingly positioned the "pan" movements as responses to the twin shock waves of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and the failure of the Allied Powers to extend their promise of 'self-determination' to the colonized peoples of the world after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.[51] The first of these events sparked a new sense of confidence as it dismantled the longstanding belief in the superiority of the "white races" and called attention to the technical and military prowess of an Asian power. The second catapulted the call for autonomy as well as solidarity among subject peoples, intensifying a ready sense of disillusionment in European leaders and in the morals of Western civilization after the unprecedented violence of the First World War.

Though less common, studies of pan-Asianism in terms of its cultural manifestations have also grown in the past few years. Here, Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné have suggested that in the early decades of the twentieth century, the world did not just see the rise of one kind of

[49] Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 1994,) 178.
[50] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 3.
[51] See Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press; 2007); Michael Adas. "Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology," *Journal of World History*, vol. 15, no. 1, (2004).

pan-Asianism, but a variety of "Asianisms".[52] That is, "discourses and ideologies claiming that Asia can be defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics."[53] Stolte and Fischer-Tiné have organized the large body of historical thought about continental unity that can be found in India into three competing discourses of Asia: 1) Asia as the Spiritual Antithesis of Europe; 2) Asia as India Magna (which celebrated India's past as a colonizer in Southeast Asia; and 3) "Young Asia" (a secular discourse in which Asia was positioned as a superior site of modernity than the West).[54] This categorization enables scholars to more deftly navigate between a panoply of interrelated but distinct ideas.

This chapter, however, will focus solely on the first of these discourses, examining the rise of notion of 'the East' as united by a shared spiritual identity in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Bengal. Asianism, of course, was not limited to Bengal; other parts of the subcontinent also developed substantive visions of continental unity in the twentieth century, particularly in the context of the Buddhist revivalist movement in South India and Sri Lanka as well as political efforts to link North India with Central Asia and Turkey (as exemplified in efforts to create the First Provisional Government of India in Afghanistan and the Khilafat movement). Nonetheless, starting with the Hindu reformer Keshub Chandra Sen's (1838-1884) postulate that it is "un-Asiatic not to know God", Bengal was the original site of the most resilient of Asianist discourses, one which permeated many, if not all of the others and that still plays out in contemporary India when nativist panegyrics of India's greatness are articulated.[55] It was primarily in nineteenth century Bengal that English educated intellectuals encountered the idea of the spiritual character of Asian civilization (as opposed to the materialist West) in the writings of orientalist scholars such as Max Mueller and William Jones. The Eur-American Theosophical Society, with its global reach and veneration of Asia as the spiritual antithesis as well as redeemer of Europe played its part in compounding this notion as did the Hindu reform movement under the leadership of Vivekananda. The latter called for a resuscitation of Vedic texts and the ideas therein about knowledge and liberation (as opposed to the extant focus on ritual practice). This contributed to the conviction that India was the fountainhead of lofty ideas about the soul's path to liberation and the intellectual epicentre of all Asiatic religious traditions.

Understandably, the East-West binary that thinkers of the time employed has been seen as clichéd and restrictive in many ways. Scholars of the early twentieth Indian nationalism have commented on the fact that the rhetoric of Eastern spirituality could not move beyond the epistemic confines of Western paradigms of civilization. This was a discourse born in reaction to the intensifying imperialist world order, coming from Eur-American dissenters from within as well as colonized subjects without. As Edward Said famously argued, European representations of Asia and Asians or 'Orientalism' was supported by the need to create and maintain colonial hegemony. The practice of collecting information about the Orient, whether positive or negative, contributed, among other things, to the creation of prejudices and generalizations that became the basis for laws to govern entire peoples. One of the core limitations of the spiritual Asia discourse then, is the problem of essentialization. Those who conjured visions of a peaceful and high-minded Asia in the nineteenth century presented a flattened picture of the diverse spectrum of human behavior that

[52]Carolien Stolte, and Harald Fischer-Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 54 (01), (2012): 65. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41428708.
[53] Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, 65.
[54] Ibid.,66.
[55] Keshub Chunder Sen, *Lectures in India* (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publication Committee, 1954), 25.

the actual history of the continent revealed, including aggression, conquest and warfare. Further, they elided the nuances of belief and practice that made peoples across the different countries of the 'Orient', from Egypt to Japan, unique. Most importantly however, the Orientalist discourse of a spiritual Asia placed Vedic religion at the core of the civilization. This discounted the impactful and often confrontational roles that other religio-philosophical systems played in the region. Not only that, Orientalist constructions of religion reified existing patterns of elite dominance within Indian society. That is, even in the Tagorean vision of Asia, Vedic notions of the self and God obscure the presence of Dalit or other marginalized indigenous belief systems.

Despite the validity of these criticisms, this chapter takes on the mission of locating creative agency in a terrain commonly viewed as structurally atrophied. In my view this is primarily because a species of academic purism tends to accompany discussions about any and all societal manifestos for change coming out of conditions of subjugation, especially if they are propositions of the bourgeois mainstream rather than those of the far Left (who are somehow envisioned as less prone to charges of Eurocentricism). While we should be attendant to the dangers of romanticizing the anti-colonial quest for alternative modernities there is an equivalent risk in casting them as inadequate because they cannot uniformly escape the intellectual parameters of Western paradigms. Chapter One thus makes the argument that in the period between 1900 and 1920, Bengali thinkers and artists in and around the social milieu of the Tagore household created a hyper real, imagined Asia that performed a number of important cultural labors that must be examined more closely. In Part A, I examine the wealth of popular theological writing that was produced in this period, where the reinterpretation of the Vedantic doctrine of Advaita (non-dualism) by way of the ideas of the nineteenth century European philosopher Hegel became foundational to the notion of a unified Eastern spirituality. While the thrust of this writing was clearly Orientalist in nature, casting a placid East in antithesis to an aggressively materialist West, I argue that the attendant valorizations of intuition and subjectivity, often summarized as an "inwardising will" represented a new way of addressing the problems of modern selfhood. The call for a return to faith-based thinking wasn't simply of Eur-American provenance but very much the co-creation of Indian and Western intelligentsias. Contemporary writing on religion was also not about mindlessly reproducing tropes about the spirituality and peacefulness of Asian peoples. Rather, the extensive meditations on what one could find through a process of "turning within" was animated by the global psychological wounds of high imperialism in the late nineteenth century and World War I. Inwardness was projected not simply as a static part of the Eastern "nature" but as a plausible route to exterior change, fixing problems of diplomacy, trade and inter-community relations.

In Part B, I posit a relationship between the above 'Hegelian-Advaita' discourse in theology and the artistic sensibilities of the public sphere in this period. The idea of Asian spirituality extended beyond the domain of religion into art criticism and commentary. Therefore, Indian thinkers on art at this time prioritized a set of qualities such as subjectivity, interiority, selflessness, intuition, peace/passivity and moral beauty. There were efforts here also to include 'other' Asian voices such as that of the Japanese poet, Yone Noguchi, presenting affinities between the Zen and Hindu Advaita worldviews. In general, commentators on Asian art wanted to redefine a set of fundamental relationships - between the practice of art and life, and between the individual self and nature – casting their formulations-in-progress as 'Eastern'. Part C distils the power of this unified Asianist aesthetic in terms of its power to launch a gendered imagination of the East as both spiritual and feminine. More importantly, it showcases the ways in which Anglophone

Bengali women reflected an Asianist aesthetic through their popular writing, absorbing the 'rasa' or flavour of the Bengal School and its fusion of Hindu, Zen and Islamicate visual elements. I conclude with the argument that the resilience of the spiritual Asia discourse, both in terms of theology as well as aesthetics, richly informed the mind sets of activists for women's reform. On the one hand, it confined them to seeing women as embodiments of Asia and its passive "inner" power, but on the other, it also opened up ways for them to claim civic agency and connectivity to women across national lines.

Before discussing the understanding of religion in early twentieth century Bengal, it is worth briefly explaining why the primary site of investigation for this chapter is a journal called the *Modern Review*. As Mark Ravinder Frost has argued, late nineteenth century Calcutta, like other colonial port-cities across British Asia, experienced a major expansion in Western-style, English-language education. The readership for Calcutta's English-language periodicals paled by comparison to the 23 vernacular journals that circulated in the same year. Nonetheless, the Indian English-language press was rapidly growing in importance and as Frost argues, the *Modern Review*, which first appeared in 1907, "quickly became something of a "New Yorker" for the Indian Ocean world."[56] After 1900, with the advent of more frequent and fast steamship passages, Bengalis began to travel to other port-cities that "reinforced their taste for supranational intellectual sociability."[57] They were also keen to utilize the accelerated circulation of books, periodicals and correspondence via the imperial post both within India as well as in the Indian Ocean arena. The journal's articles were frequently summarized or lifted wholesale by other periodicals across the region (this was an age before copyright) and the *Modern Review* as a whole became the model for similar *Reviews* in other Indian cities and in Ceylon.[58] In Calcutta, the *Modern Review* also appeared in Bengali as *Prabasi*. While Tagore was a close friend of Ramananda Chatterjee, the cosmopolitan and erudite Editor of the publication, Frost suggests that the persistent engagement with "Asiatic" themes in a journal such as this points to a "larger scale, popular interest in cultivating Asian identity."[59] I have thus chosen to focus on the writing and art published in this journal, to determine the precise nature of ideas about Asia held by the Bengali Anglophone intelligentsia. I also chose to focus on the two opening decades of the twentieth century – when Japan's triumph against a European power in 1905 first began to catalyze the dream of Asian unity in the subcontinent.

Figure 3: Nandalal Bose, Queen Kaikayi. reproduced in *Kokka* 223 (1908).

[56] Mark Ravinder Frost, "That Great Ocean of Idealism: Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900-1920," (Singapore: Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper No 3, 2011), 5. http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/documents/working_papers/nscwps003.pdf.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., 2.

A. Theological Writing and Privileging the Subjective, "Inwardising Will"

Advaita Vedanta In Dialogue

For early twentieth contributors to the *Modern Review*, the question of what "unified" the East as a civilization was often raised in theological discourse. The answer provided tended to be grounded in two factors: a shared valuation of "inwardness" as a superior mental goal and the elevation of "subjectivity" to the most effective means of cosmic realization. To a large extent, these can be classed as arguments of defence against the condescending tendency of European Orientalist scholars to trivialise Indian study of the self as navel gazing. At the same time there was also the undeniable conceptual influence of colonial education for this generation of men. As J.N. Mohanty writes, the philosophically dominant ideas flowing from Britain into Indian metropoles in the late nineteenth century were mostly Hegelian in origin.[60] An idealistic monism, "for which Reality is one and spiritual, manifesting itself in and through the world and history", prevailed in Oxford and then in Calcutta. In fact, Mohanty argued that the wilds of the University of Calcutta were "fertile ground" for neo-Hegelians.[61] Thinkers of the time could not fail to notice the close affinity between the Advaita Vedanta doctrine of Shankara (c. 700 C.E.) and Hegelian monism.

In essence, Hegel's appeal for early Vedantists lay in his acceptance of an "Absolute Spirit" or God at the base of actuality that operated as a universal consciousness involved in the project of creation. This view drew from Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism, which, as Steve Odin argues, posited that "a priori of prioris, the transcendental act underlying all acts, and the ultimate precondition for all experiential synthesis, is the "original unity of apperception", or unified self-consciousness, the "I think" which accompanies each act of experience".[62] However, this original unity of self-consciousness was not "your or my consciousness, but "consciousness in general", a transcendental, objective and impersonal consciousness, which is itself presupposed by the empirical, subjective and individual ego".[63] Odin goes on to argue that Hegel rejected this notion of the impersonal unity of self-consciousness as simply a logical principle (as in Kant's formulation). Instead, he transformed it into a supreme metaphysical category that "entirely creates and projects its own experiential contents, only to reabsorb them again as a self-mediated identity-in-difference". That is to say, in Hegel's conception the "Absolute" was the culminating product of its own dialectical process in which a self-motivated differentiated component of the latter would embark on cycles of "separation and return", encountering and sublating all abstract opposites, until it achieved knowledge of its own true nature. The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), for example, takes its reader though stages in the development of the Absolute, from differentiated 'consciousness', '*self*-consciousness [my italics]', 'Reason', and finally, 'Spirit'. Non-dualism, or a view of the world in which all in its essence was Spirit, provided a fitting analogy then to Hegelian monism. In fact, both Max Müller (the renowned German Orientalist scholar of India) and Vivekananda considered the Advaita (non-dualistic or monist) Vedanta of Shankara to

[60] J.N. Mohanty, ed., "Introduction", *Indian Philosophy* Volume 1 Second Edition by S.Radhakrishnan. (New Delhi : Oxford Books, 2008), xviii.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Steve Odin,"Sri Aurobindo and Hegel on the Involution-Evolution of Absolute Spirit," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 31, no. 2, (1981): 179.
[63] Ibid.

constitute the keystone of the entire Hindu tradition, promulgating as it did, the doctrine of the identity of the soul with God at its purest. Steve Odin argues that the influential twentieth century Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo "appropriated Hegel's notion of an Absolute Spirit and employed it to radically restructure the architectonic framework of the ancient Hindu Vedanta system in contemporary terms".[64]

Yet what Odin says of Aurobindo could be applied beyond him and across the first two generations of Indian thinkers who came of age in the early 1900s. Educated in colonial colleges and institutions where, as Gauri Viswanathan has argued persuasively, a scholastic agenda to create "native Englishmen" was in place, these generations of men were primed for cultural defensiveness.[65] In fact, as a gamut of scholars such as Lata Mani (in the context of the practice of bride immolation or Sati) or Partha Chatterjee have argued, the Indian bourgeois valuation of the space of religion in Indian society as "inner", beyond the reach as well as perceived understanding of the colonial apparatus was a common perception. This can also be ascertained from the prolific writing on theology in Anglophone publications such as the *Modern Review* in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The notion of a universal consciousness, resonant with Hegelian notions of the Absolute was therefore, both the product of the Britain-India cultural nexus that these young men were groomed out of, as well as a wellspring of legitimation for indigenous, ancient beliefs.

Yet while Indian thinkers of this period embraced the analogy between Advaita Vedanta and the notion of there being a universal consciousness, many departed from Hegel in terms of the nature of the developmental stages involved in returning to awareness of Spirit. India's foremost statesman and philosopher, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), for example, was influenced by Hegelian ideas at the Madras Christian College as well as the University of Calcutta. He popularized the idea of higher 'experience' en route to wholeness, often in theological discourses for the Modern Review (alongside his own published writings). As J.N. Mohanty argues, a salient feature of Radhakrishnan's interpretation of Indian philosophy was the emphasis on movement of thought from logical reasoning to spiritual intuition. Logical reasoning marks the progress from consciousness to self-consciousness, but self-consciousness is to be transcended by intuition, which he sometimes called super-consciousness.[66] For Radhakrishnan thought itself, over-prioritised by the materialistic West actually served as a barrier to super-consciousness:

> The absolute can never become an object of knowledge, for what is known is finite and relative. Our limited mind cannot go beyond the bounds of time, space and cause, nor can we explain these, since every attempt to explain them assumes them. Through thought, which is itself a part of the relative world, we cannot know the absolute self. Our relative experience is a waking dream. Science and logic are parts of it and products of it too. This failure of metaphysics is neither to be wept over nor to be laughed over, neither to be praised nor blamed, but understood. With a touching humility born of intellectual strength, a Plato, or a Nagarjuna, a Kant

[64] Ibid.
[65] Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest*: *Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
[66] Mohanty, xix.

> or a Samkara, declares that our thought deals with the relative, and has nothing to do with the absolute.[67]

In a similar vein to Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo comprehended the Absolute as an "effulgent "supra-mental" mode of awareness".[68] According to Odin, while Hegel conceived of the Absolute as "dialectical intellection", Aurobindo formulated it in in terms of "a radiant and ecstatic supramental awareness, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss", otherwise known in Sanskrit as "Sat-Chit-Ananda".[69] Reason alone was insufficient for grasping the "indivisible continuum of experiential immediacy existing anterior to or beyond the subject-object division of cognitional awareness".[70]

Refuting Negative Interpretations of Inwardness

In order to reach the "absolute" what was required was a process of deep submersion in the 'super conscious self". How exactly that was attainable? Although gradations of difference existed among philosophers in the bourgeois Hindu cultural fold within the first two decades of the 20th century,[71] taken as a whole, the theological discourses in the *Modern Review*, prioritized a set of beliefs in "inwardness", "subjectivity", "the inner life" – which in essence, spoke to a root conviction that turning within the Self (one of the key doctrines of Vedanta) was the key to God realization or "super-consciousness" in Hegelian terms. For thinkers such as Vivekananda or Aurobindo, this inward turn towards the self was no abstraction – it involved a concrete process of stages of meditation that enabled a person to cultivate silence that transcended the logical mind, ultimately enabling the discovery of the 'still small voice' within, which could also be termed 'atman' or soul.

But before defining "the inner life", there was a need to defend it. Taken as a whole, Indian theological writing in this period wrestled with the classic East-West dichotomy that proliferated in Western writing on religion. While the West was posited to be "energetic" and progress oriented, the East, was depicted as passive and mystical, forever searching for an escape from the demands of the 'real world'. As the economics professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar wrote:

> The globetrotters of the steam age begin their first lessons in Oriental lore with the dictum that "the East is East and the West is West". They therefore make it a point to find evidences of "Oriental Sun", "Oriental atmosphere", "Oriental superstition", "Oriental corruption" and "Oriental immorality".[72]

Another Bengali reviewer, one Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, wrote a scathing review of an American scholar who authored a book on Indian thought from the Vedic times, arguing

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[67] Ibid.,13.
[68] Odin, 180.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Particularly when it came to ideas of "maya" and its illusoriness.
[72] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "Kalidasa the Spirit of Asia,"*Modern Review*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, March 1916), 292.

(foreshadowing Edward Said), that unfair cultural representations formed the basis of political power:

> The offhand way in which the place, for example, of the Brahman and the caste system in society and of pantheism and transmigration in thought is determined here would be amusing, were it not for the fact that such imaginative studies are actually utilised today for what is called the cultural conquest of the East by the West.[73]

The same reviewer went on to provide an incisive analysis of how the 'passivity' of Indian philosophical thought was determined by Westerners to come out of its propensity to favour subjectivity over objectivity. He suggested that "an arrestation of the experience process" is what causes "a division of it into subject and object". But at that point self-consciousness arises and can be expressed in two ways, either as:

> a mediating opposition to object which resolves itself into action, a unity in difference where object and subject, determine each other and jointly get socialised or as an unmediated opposition which cannot become action, where the subject turns back upon itself and with the arrest of the socialising process becomes a solitary individual controlling mere ideas and contracting away to nothingness. The latter type of self-consciousness is called subjectivity and is said to be due to a persistent thwarting of individual experience.[74]

The reviewer felt that the American author was mistaken in understanding the process of the subject "turning back" on itself as simply one of negation. He presented the author's viewpoint as typifying the condescension and lack of understanding of Western studies of religion and philosophy. The author, one Ethel May Kitch of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, was characterized as the mouthpiece of general prejudice, serving to trivialize the intellectual vitality of Indian traditions of thought. According to her [as summarized by the reviewer] in India, "a fixed caste-system furnished the unyielding opposition against which the self was forced' and 'the result was the doctrine of illusion in the Vedanta system and the pessimism and negation of Buddhism. The trend of subjectivity was fatal and pre-determined as long as the Brahmanas were at the head of the caste and not aroused to self-consciousness."[75]

Yet subjectivity was not all about the rejection of life. What comes through clearly in writing on theological themes consistently is the fact of Indian bourgeois internalization of the admixture of Hegelian and Advaita views, as discussed above. In this conception of 'Spirit' when self-consciousness arises in the individual, the part that is 'objective' lives the identity-in-difference that Hegel talked about. It experiences here the three dimensional world as the truest reality – which, as Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo both specify, is what is labelled 'maya' or illusion in Hindu terms. The energetic objective self forgets its actual origins in a continuous

[73]Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, "The Origins of Subjectivity in Hindu Thought," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, October 1921), 185.
[74] Ibid., 186.
[75] Ibid.,185.

unified field of spiritual consciousness. It acts upon the world, enmeshed in its pleasures and requirements and is hence, a powerful force of creation. Yet, in order to transcend the cycle of "separation" and come to Spirit, a journey of "return" is required. It is this process that requires subjectivity, or as the Indian thinkers of the period articulated, an "inwardising will".[76] As the reviewer mentioned above put it, in Western philosophical thought "there is in fact a general disbelief in a continuous inwardising activity towards one's subjective being, in a specific method of realising subjective depths, in the reality of what may be called a subjectively spiritual will". [77]

Subjectivity, as our writers argued, implied for Westerners, a sense of removal from the world rather than an embrace of it at its very roots:

> The attention of the subject to itself – when it is not a preparation to spring upon the object again is regarded as only helpless perverse suicide of concrete experience. In the moral sphere, the rejection of a desire is indeed taken as willed but is conceived as a position suppression: rejection as disassociation, as a cutting of the root of desire, is hardly admitted to be voluntary.[78]

At the crux of the issue was the fact that representatives of Eastern religion and spirituality often felt that the sheer agency in embracing meditation or other inward routes towards self-realization was overlooked. All that was conceived of as "spiritual doing" like "prayer, self-surrender in worship and wanting to forgive or to love – would be taken as *no doing* [my italics] but as unique feelings merely".[79] Further, the achievements of Buddhistic and Hindu religious programmatic manuals for enlightenment were minimized by the belief that self-realization could only be achieved through "social or objective values", without recourse to the specific kinds of discipline that the manuals advocated. Flashes of 'insight' or return to Spirit could only emerge in the Western worldview via "a sort of artistic activity at its best from ever new depths of artistic insight, the energising of which however is left to accident, the luck of inspiration and is not believed to be controllable".[80] Our writers in general, felt that Euro-American scholars saw the world as divided into two distinct philosophies. In the words of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, the West took ownership of the "objective philosophy of energism and positivism" while the East stood for the "subjective metaphysics of Nirvanism and mysticism".[81] Crucially, while they didn't question the very binaries of worldly and spiritual, East and West, "inner" and "outer", the contributors to the *Modern Review* definitively sought to restore the intellectual depth and reputation of the philosophy that prioritized the "inner" path to wholeness.

Going Beyond "Inwardness" to Synthesis

One of the cardinal virtues of "inwardness" was that it yielded depth of insight. Many writers in the *Modern Review* echoed this very sentiment time and again, arguing that it was the very quality of detachment from the excitement of the objective world that brought human consciousness into cosmic awareness. Radhakrishnan suggested that while stillness is equated with stagnancy in the

[76] Ibid.
[77] Krishachandra Bhattacharya, 186.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 187.
[81] Sarkar, "Kalidasa the Spirit of Asia", 292.

Western world, "there can be no movement, if there were not immutability, since movement is only a degradation of the immutable".[82] This posited immutability, as in stillness, non-action, non-being even, as not only acceptable as a stage en route to self-realization, but the highest, original state from which existence itself sprang forth. Also, in what seems to be in today's parlance a defence of "right-brained" orientation, he argued for an appreciation of the so-called non-analytic proclivities of the Indian mind:

> We cannot reasonably say that the Indian people revelled in poetry and mythology, and spurned science and philosophy, though it is true that they were more intent on seeking the unity of things than emphasizing their sharpness and separation […] The speculative mind is more synthetic, while the scientific one is more analytic, if such a distinction be permitted. The former tends to create cosmic philosophies, which embrace in one comprehensive vision the origin of all things, the history of the ages and the dissolution and decay of the world. The latter is inclined to linger over the dull particulars of the world and miss the sense of oneness and wholeness.[83]

Of course not all contributors to the *Modern Review* felt exactly the same way. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, as we have seen, wrote about "energism" and "Nirvanism" as two dominant philosophies in the world. However, he did not neatly allocate one to each hemisphere of the globe as other writers did. Instead, in his view India was an "organic synthesis" of the two. Sarkar bristled against the tendency to cast the "East" as spiritual alone. Rather, he drew examples from Indian as well as Chinese and Japanese history to argue that the point was to achieve a fusion of philosophies, as had been achieved in the ancient past in Asia. He argued that India in particular, attained a well-adjusted system of "harmony and synthesis" in the Vikramadityan era which gave "the World, the Flesh, and the Devil" their due".[84] Such a civilization was the correct model to follow; one that recognized the secular, the worldly, and the positive, and that established the transcendental, "*not to the exclusion of*, but only *above*, as well as *in and through*, the civic, social and economic achievements [my italics]."[85]

Differences notwithstanding, all theologically minded contributors to the magazine agreed that the West desperately needed a dose of the inward and subjective orientation of the East. The often cited letters between the famous French public intellectual, Roman Rolland and Rabindranath Tagore were printed in the *Modern Review* periodically. In July 1919 as the Great War was ending Rolland sent a letter to Tagore that contained a copy of the "Declaration of Independence of Spirit", asking him to recruit signatories from India, Japan and China. While much has already been written about the correspondence between these two intellectuals, what is notable here is their mutual agreement on the idea that the two hemispheres – East and West – needed to come together in union to heal the ravages of the First World War. Rolland expressed his disquiet about how "thought has become as instrument of passions", bemoaning the role

[82] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "Introduction" in *Indian Philosophy* Volume 1 Second Edition ed., J.N. Mohanty (New Delhi : Oxford Books, 2008), 14.
[83]Radhakrishnan, 9.
[84] Sarkar, "Kalidasa and the Spirit of Asia", 291.
[85] Ibid.

intellectuals in Europe played in encouraging an ultra-nationalistic drive before and during the war:

> Let us realize the disasters which have resulted from the almost complete abdication of the intellect of the world and its voluntary enslavement to the forces let loose. The thinkers and artists had added a scourge which has tormented Europe in body and soul, an incalculable volume of poisonous hatred. They have searched every arsenal of their knowledge, their imagination, their ancient and modern precedents, historical, scientific, logical, poetical, for hate.[86]

Rolland's letter suggests a general disappointment in European intellectuals as "they have placed their knowledge, their reason, at the service of the governments." Instead, he opines that the "intellect of Asia" might offer a more humane vision of the world:

> I could wish that henceforth the intellect of Asia might take a more and more definite part in the manifestation of the thought of Europe. My dream will be that one day we may see the union of these two hemispheres of the Spirit.[87]

Of course this is a restatement of the idea of Asian spiritual prowess relative to Europe's inability to grasp the unity of all things, and Rolland thanked Tagore for "having contributed towards [this awareness] more than anyone else", particularly during his lectures in Tokyo in 1915. In response, Tagore wrote in his own letter below Rolland's that he saw the Declaration as a message of hope, and reprinted it in full for the readers. The pamphlet unsurprisingly, bemoaned the excesses of the First World War, but cast the way forward in undoubtedly Hegelian-Advaita terms as that of returning to the unity consciousness of "Spirit". The Declaration called for "fellow-workers of the Spirit, comrades scattered throughout the world and separated from one another" to re-establish their brotherhood of union and issued a reminder to move beyond particularism:

> The Spirit is the servant of none. We serve Truth alone, Truth that is free and frontierless, without confines, without prejudice of race or caste. It is for Humanity we labor, but for Humanity whole and entire.[88]

While calls for unity come after any war, there is one important factor to consider in this context – the fact that the contributors to the *Modern Review* kept suggesting that the "inwardising will" of the Eastern "hemispheric" consciousness was not only a panacea for psychological disconnectedness in humanity, but a future route to the better direction of the material forces in the world. That is to say, the articles published over two decades, and sprinkled throughout each issue, made the case that embracing methods of inner knowledge (and a return to faith-based thinking) would lead to better economics, governance, diplomacy and even trade. In what I term an editorial *politics of placement* the magazine positioned its literary, theological and political pieces in discrete conversation with one another spatially, through their conscious physical

[86] Romain Rolland, "Declaration of Independence of Spirit", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1919), 80.
[87] Ibid., 81.
[88] Ibid.

placement in each issue. For example, it seems hardly a coincidence that right beneath Tagore's correspondence with Rolland and the "Declaration of Independence of Spirit" appeared a short anonymous write up called "Wisdom from China", which highlighted the harmony and good governance that China enjoyed in its imperial age: "To harmonise great enemies/ we must possess that which far surpasses enmity […] To govern a kingdom, use righteousness,/ To conduct a war, use strategy./ To be a true world-ruler, be occupied with Inner Life".[89] The poet further argued that "self-control" was the essence of power. More than any specific species of Daoist or Confucian philosophy, it presented the Advaita view that the "inner" shaped the external aspects of life and not the other way around, as is commonly assumed:[90]

> The more restrictive the laws,
> The poorer the people.
> The more machinery used,
> The more trouble in a kingdom.
> The more clever and skilful the people,
> The more do they make artificial things.
> The more the laws are in evidence,
> The more do thieves and robbers abound.
>
> That is why the self-controlled man says: -
> If I act from Inner Life
> The people will become transformed in themselves.
> If I love stillness
> The people will become righteous in themselves.
> If I am occupied with Inner Life
> The people will become enriched in themselves.
> If I love the Inner Life
> The people will become pure in themselves.
>
> If the government is from the heart
> The people will be richer and richer
> If the government is full of restrictions
> The people will be poorer and poorer.
> Where troops dwell, there grow thorns and briers
> After great wars, there follow bad years.
> He who loves, bears fruit unceasingly,
> He does not dare to conquer by strength.
> He bears fruit, but not with assertiveness,
> He bears fruit but not with meanness,
> He bears fruit, but not to obtain it for himself,
> He bears fruit, but not to shew his strength.
> If a great kingdom only desires to unify and
> Nourish men,
> If a small kingdom only desire to enter in and

[89] "Wisdom from China," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1919), 82.
[90] Ibid.

> Serve men,
> Then the Master, in each case, shall obtain his
> Desire.
> He who is great ought to be lowly.

Below what seems to be this China-inspired poetic imagining (by most likely an Indian contributor), another article was included that moralized about the need for countries not to "leave God out":

> A very serious omission in the platform of the League of Nations as cabled from Paris is pointed out by two American "trade publications", namely, The American Lumberman of Chicago, and The Bean-Bag of St. Louie. The Bean-Bag says that "nowhere in the platform, nor, so far as reported, in the proceedings that led up to its promulgation is to be found any hint of official or public recognition of the fact, generally accepted by civilized humanity, of the existence of a Supreme Being who rules the destinies of nations, nor any petition for divine guidance in the most momentous crisis in the history of the world. The Lumberman questions whether it is a "trifling omission" or "mere bigotry to refer to it?" It says the founders of the American Republic relied upon the protection of Divine providence.[91]

While the short article seemed to be restating the point made by two "American trade publications", it begs the question as to why the Editor(s) thought it important to include it. If its placement proximate to the Rolland-Tagore exchange is considered then it can be seen as a move towards critiquing (as Rolland did) the apparent faithlessness of the West, even with regard to the League of Nations - the publicly perceived 'humane' by product of the War. The author took pains to remind the reader that even the most powerful moment in American history was not secular. The Gettysburg Address by Lincoln invoked the Divine and "In God we Trust" was "stamped on silver coinage during the darkest period of the Civil War by an Act of Congress".[92] Going clearly beyond a neutral retelling of facts gleaned from American publications, the author restated the salient themes of the Rolland-Tagore exchange:

> There must be something more potent than bayonets or battleships, needful as both are under present world conditions, as the ultimate authority. Back of the citizen is the state – using the term in its broad sense – and at the back of the state is, or will be, the League of Nations. Back of the League of Nations must be God, if it is to endure.[93]

[91] "God Left Out," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1919), 82.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

Further the author went on to make explicit the connection being established through the sequence of articles in the issue, saying that humanity can only become aware of its true identity with God through a return to the "still small voice within", or in other words, a deliberative choice to engage the subjective inner depths of their being:

> men don't listen to that still small voice within through which God constantly speaks to man, but prefer to be guided by selfish motives and greed. […]God cannot in reality be shut out.[94]

Similar incitements to apply the teachings of Advaita to real world issues abound in other issues of the *Modern Review* as well. For example, in an article entitled "Theism In Relation to Modern Problems of Life", the scholar and art critic Ajitkumar Chavrakavarty says that modern theism offers no place for an Absolute God.[95] Yet the clear advantage of embracing the vision of one super-consciousness uniting all is lost in the process. Embracing a "humanistic religion" he argues would mean operating from the base line knowledge that all "differentiated interests of life should be held together" as they are part of a vital and organic unity.[96] For example, the author argues that there is a "race problem" in the world as human beings continually try to diminish others and establish a "super race".[97] Operating from a basis of universal sympathy instead would establish the truth of interconnectedness, again, because "humanity is organic and cannot suffer any of its limbs to become weak".[98] Likewise, international relations would profit from being religiously rather than secularly determined: "there must be permanent institutions of various kinds to make hate impossible".[99] Understanding that Spirit connects all beings would similarly invalidate contests for power between the state and individuals, and between classes. Interestingly, Chakravarty argues that class conflict is a war that rages on in every time but the ideological schemes for redress proposed by thinkers thus far are all "materialistic" and therefore "flawed".[100] Possessive impulses must make room for creative ones. The prescription for social change, the commentators of the *Modern Review* wrote over and over again, lay firmly in embracing the Hegelian-Advaita conception of the world.

The power of the "inwardising will", however, was not meant to override the "outer" or material orientation attributed to the Western mind. Rather, the word "synthesis" recurs in many of these commentaries, gesturing to again, the deep Hegelian imbrication of this worldview. Commentators such as Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo, Tagore and less celebrated figures all called for an infusion of Eastern enlightenment (which made particular sense of course after witnessing the savage weaponry and warfare of WWI). However, while they stressed the positive aspects of a hemispheric consciousness that could detect humanity's unity with the Divine, the ultimate goal was synthesis – the balance of Eastern faith (antithesis) and Western reason (thesis). Yet, as we will see in the next section, synthesis remained a somewhat abstract ideal – what was much more immediate and deeply felt, was the need to vindicate the power of subjectivity and intuition. In its

[94] "God Left Out", 82.
[95] "Theism in Relation to Modern Problems of Life", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, March 1918), 244.
[96] Ibid., 248.
[97] Ibid., 247.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., 248.

focus on these aspects, the *Modern Review* almost elevated the "East" above its seemingly uncomprehending or plebeian counterpart in the Western mind. It did so, mostly through cultivating a theory of religion-based aesthetics, as we will see in the next section. And it is in the discourse of "Eastern art" that we see the project of gendering the two hemispheres into masculine and feminine taking hold of the colonial Anglophone imagination most vividly.

B. *Cultivating Intuition and the Transcendent Self: The Creation of an Eastern Aesthetic*

In September 1917, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty wrote, "the outward form is nothing, the inward idea is everything".[101] This single sentence captures the essence of the Bengal Art movement of the early twentieth century, about which much has already been written. Arguably, this was the first self-consciously nationalist school of art that "rejected academic illusionism" and developed technical and aesthetic modes from Mogul miniatures, Japanese water color wash techniques and Art Nouveau. As Ifthikar Dadi suggests, this Orientalist mode of painting was thematically tasked with the retrieval of Indian mythology and history.[102] Yet, it did so in a modernist idiom, embracing a flattened picture plane instead of the dimensionality of realism. While the Orientalist picturescapes of this school have been commented on extensively by art historians of this period, what is often glossed over is the creativity of the philosophical import and aesthetic of these works, and particularly, how they contributed to existing gendered discourses, not only of the nation, but of the "East" as a civilization.

Indian Art Criticism in the Early 1900s

Before discussing the representation of Indian art in the *Modern Review*, it is worth visiting the some key routes art criticism took at this juncture. Barring discussions of art in periods of antiquity, the Bengal School of Art was the best featured in terms of reviews in the *Modern Review* in the period between 1900 and 1920. This was due in no small part to the fact that Rabindranath Tagore's brother Abanindranath was its most renowned painter. But the leading theoretician behind the movement was E.B. Havell, who was appointed the principal of the Calcutta School of Art in 1896. Havell wrote many books about Indian art in his career, and he was most passionate about rehabilitating Indian art from the ignorant judgments of Eurocentric art critics. In his most renowned works, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908) and *Ideals of Indian Art* (1911), he pointed to the overt indifference of European art scholars towards Indian art,[103] and the egregious practice (English archaeologists were particularly guilty of this) of judging Indian works by the standards

[101] Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, "Art, Religion and Personality," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, September 1917), 280.

[102] Ifthikar Dadi, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 90, no. 4, (2008): 652.

[103] As Partha Mitter argues, the first "wholehearted partisan support for Indian art" [only] came in 1910, provoked by art scholar Sir George Birchwood's comparison of a Javanese Buddha displayed at the Royal Society of Art to a "boiled suet pudding": "The senseless similitude, by its immemorial fixed pose, is nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its thumbs, knees and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionate purity and serenity of soul". A number of English artists and intellectuals leapt to the defense of Indian art (recognizing it to be the butt of Birchwood's disdain) and published a letter in The Times in February 1910 that called for a more generous interpretation. According to Mitter, this letter marked a watershed in the Western valuation of Indian art, which was buoyed up further by the works of Havell. From *Much Maligned Monsters*:*A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 269.

of classical Europe. At the crux of Havell's assertions was the fact that the Western art-historians needed to focus on what he termed the 'Idea' rather than the form of Eastern art as a totality:

> Personally, I think that the scientific analysis of the Western art-historian is often very misleading. What art needs now, both in the East and in the West, is not analysis, but synthesis ; not a dissection of styles, methods, and principles, nor the determination of art-values by the Rontgen rays and the microscope, but a clear understanding of the great psychic currents and intellectual movements which have created the great art-schools in different epochs. and different countries; and, above all, a clearer conception of the art-philosophy upon which these schools were founded.[104]

By 'psychic currents' he meant Indian religion and philosophy and that these should be studied as the key forces that moulded not just Indian, but 'Asiatic art':

> It is only in the East that art still has a philosophy and still remains the great exponent of national faith and race traditions. In Indian idealism we shall find the key to the understanding, not only of all Asiatic art, but to that of the Christian art of the Middle Ages. For the original source of this idealism we must look much further back than the visible beginnings of Indian art, as we now know them from the relics of early Buddhist worship, which date from the first two centuries before Christ. We must fully understand that the motive forces which are behind all art-creation often exist in full strength long before art finds concrete, visible expression in literature and what we call the fine arts.[105]

Havell's focus on idealism belied his firm moorings in nineteenth century views about art. As the eminent art historian Partha Mitter suggests, there was a widespread anti-materialist movement in Britain led by intellectuals such as Ruskin and Morris, who advocated a return to the pre-Industrial past.[106] In some ways, India was seen as proximate to the Middle Ages in its embrace of the very spiritualism that Victorian capitalists seemed to have factored out of social and cultural life. His emphasis on 'ideals' also reflected the tendency of 19th century Idealists to position artistic ideas as anterior to technological achievement. They expressed a longstanding tradition of rejecting classical art's perceived fidelity to the representation of the material world. Instead, they saw the medieval period as one in which art was about accessing the ideal, metaphysical world that Plato had suggested exists in correspondence to every single object in the material world.[107] 19th century Idealists had Neo-Platonic undertones, which enabled them to position the material world as illusory; the latter was simply was a poor copy of a far more eternal and perfect prototype. Art, in this view, was to be examined for its ability to invoke that perfect and anterior metaphysical world.

[104] Ernest B. Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art* (London: J. Murray, 1911), 4.
[105] Ibid, 5.
[106] Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 272.
[107] Ibid.

For Havell all of this mapped neatly onto the analysis of Indian art. He saw not many, but just one 'idea' at the root of all the multifarious traditions:

> Indian art was conceived when that wonderful intuition flashed upon the Indian mind that the soul of man is eternal, and one with the Supreme Soul, the Lord and Cause of all things. It took upon itself organic expression in the Vedas and Upanishads, and though in succeeding centuries other thought centres were formed in Persia, China, and Arabia, the creative force generated from those great philosophical conceptions has not ceased to stimulate the whole art of Asia from that time to the present day.[108]

This was in essence a celebration of the Hegelian-Advaita worldview that we saw advanced in the previous section by theological writers of the time. Advaita or non-dual Indian philosophy was said to have originated during the Vedic age. Havell ran into a problem there in that there was not much art during the latter period. Nonetheless, he persisted in arguing that "the inspiration of Vedic thought" still permeated "the whole atmosphere of Indian life, as the originating impulse of Indian art and the influence which links together all its different historic phases".[109] Vedic art was powerful because it embodied the very "unity" of the Creator and Creation that Advaita posited, and for Havell and his followers, the inner life was the route to this realization. Havell, of course, was not alone in his ardour for Vedic art. As Mitter writes, another key figure loomed large over the contemporary Indian art world – one Ananda K. Coomaraswamy – who likewise argued that Indian art was the embodiment of Indian philosophy.[110] Of mixed Sri Lankan and German heritage, Coomaraswamy wrote prolifically on many aspects of Indian artistic tradition (predominantly for a Western audience, and an Anglophone reading public back in India). He linked the religious art of India to medieval Europe, advocating (also like Radhakrishnan) for the understanding of both traditions as intuition rather than intellect based. Coomaraswamy's work, like Havell's was reprinted in the *Modern Review* in the early 1900s. In the *Message of the East*, published in 1909, he wrote:

> What then is the message of the East? In its most universal form it is still that message that the West has for nineteen centuries ignored: the kingdom of God is within in you: Look within – Thou art the Buddha: Thou art that. As the message of the West has been one of diversity, analysis and the separate self, so the message of the East is one of the unity of all life, of synthesis, and the Universal Self.[111]

One has a distinct picture, when reading articles of these sorts in the *Modern Review* that this was a generation of Europeans and Indians jostling together in the same drawing room, selectively sifting through and echoing the same interconnected body of knowledge. As Mitter argues, Coomaraswamy and Havell were drawing from a broad range of philosophical currents: Neoplatonism, anti-industrialism and anti-capitalism led by thinkers such as William Morris. Alongside this was the widespread reaction by nineteenth century artists and art critics against the

[108] Havell, 6.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Mitter., 277.
[111] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Message of the East*. (Boston: Vedanta Centre, 1912), 12.

naturalistic art of the Renaissance due to its concern with realist representation.[112]Another influential socio-religious movement was Theosophy, which turned India into the home of the spiritual and advocated a return to the pre-industrial past. The Tagore circle at large contained quite a few Theosophists, such as the Irish émigrés to India, James and Margaret Cousins. Both played a sizeable role in the development of the Indian nationalist movement – Margaret through her work for Indian's women's associations (as we shall see in Chapter Three), and James, in a quieter key, through his writings on Indian culture. In the *Modern Review*, he was a frequent commentator on matters spiritual and artistic, inevitably weaving a connection between the two. In his own words, art is what drew Theosophists deeper into Indian contemporary culture. In his memoirs he commented on the fact that he was part of the formation of an Arts League at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in India (Adyar) in December 1915. However, early meetings tended to remain Eurocentric:

> The programmes of the Arts League were almost entirely Western at the beginning…The East ultimately arrived through the medium of painting. It began with a leading article by me on a report in New India of the young Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta…under the caption "The Art of the East"…[113]

Unsurprisingly, Cousins echoed Havell and Coomaraswamy in calling attention to the inner focus of this tradition in the reviews he published of the Bengal's Schools exhibitions. Like the latter, he also celebrated the creation of a truly 'national' school of Indian art, which drew inspiration from its pre-colonial, ancient and mythical history.

What we see in the period between 1907 (when the Bengal School was formed) and the late 1920s then, is a concerted effort on the part of the magazine to locate artistic genius in spiritual pursuit – and to characterize this process as resolutely "Eastern". Printing and reprinting the views of writers like those discussed above served to ingrain the message. Lesser known contributors often recycled the theories of better known art critics, often into other domains of analysis - such as for example, when one Ajit Kumar Chavrakarty restated Coomaraswamy's theory of *rasa* (literally, 'taste', or 'flavour') in Indian art in his "Thoughts on Poetry", where he argued that "poetry has to build up rasas" and that "reason and induction are more necessary to science; imagination and intuition are more necessary to poetry".[114] Coomaraswamy discussed *rasa* in four books: *Essays in National Idealism* (1909-1910), *The Mirror of Gesture* (1917), *The Dance of Shiva* (1918), and *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934). While his ideas on the subject developed through the course of time, his central contention in *The Dance of Shiva* was that *rasa* is the Indian conception of aesthetic 'taste' or 'flavour' – an experience a spectator undergoes when confronting any visual, literary or performing art.[115] Crucially, for Coomaraswamy, ancient Hindu theories of aesthetics were reformulated to express the regnant Advaita paradigm of the time. As Ed Crooks argues, for him "the actions of the characters or the surfaces of artworks are

[112] Mitter, 278; 280-282.
[113] James H. Cousins, and Margaret E. Cousins. *We Two Together.* (Ganesh & Co: Madras, 1950), 259.
[114] Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, "Thoughts on Poetry," *Modern Review* Vol. XXIII, No. 18 (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, June 1918), 619.
[115] Edward Crooks, "John Cage's Entanglement with the Ideas of Coomaraswamy" (PhD Diss., University of York, 2011), 176.

just colours; the real art work comes through the mind".[116] Further, the *rasa* of a work of art comes only through the spectator delving into their own inner being: "The tasting of rasa is only possible in those whose knowledge of true values is developed, who are pure, and who concentrate more on interior things than what occurs to the senses".[117] In the process of enjoying a work of art, the "content is transformed from sensual to ideal": "Ideal beauty is tasted. And in tasting the ideal, the absolute is also tasted".[118] The spectator's enjoyment of art in Coomaraswamy's lofty but somewhat vague theorization, is a mirror of the soul's "flash of pure understanding; intuition of the universality of the true self (atman)".[119] Crucially, for our purposes, it is the ideal of Indian art as purveyor of "unity consciousness" that diffused into the popular imagination through the *Modern Review*. Chavrakarty's diluted version of Coomaraswamy, as we have seen, resulted in the pronouncement that "science and philosophy seek to prove and establish certain truths; poetry seeks to establish none. If it can evoke Rasa, it is satisfied."[120] Similarly, the idea (popularized by both Havell and Coomaraswamy of the Indian artist as a sort of yogi in practice) found expression in the numerous reviews of the Bengal School of Art printed in the 1910s-1920s. Cousins, true to the theosophical appreciation of tradition over modernity, waxed lyrical on the School's propensity to draw from their own native forms and stay away from the commercial temptations of art:

> We feel sure, however, that our artists will remain proof against any wiles to draw them: from themselves. Their native spirituality, with its natural impressions in quiet tones and simple themes, is the most precious and abiding theme in human life, and they are not likely to desert it for the big-drum effect of other schools of Art.[121]

Likewise, the *Modern Review* included reviews by French art critics after the Bengal School's first exhibition in Paris in 1918 that compounded the binary posed between energy and passiveness, heightening the vision of the Eastern artist as the contemplative mystic:

> The fierce light, the agitation out of all proportion, and the ready sensuality – the only treasures that hasty tourists carry away – are absent from the well-regulated, charming and serious work of Abanindranath Tagore and his disciples. As a life devoted almost entirely to meditation, these artists have bought clearly before us a vision of a harmonious civilization, rallied sadly around ancient cults and legends.[122]

[116] Crooks, 178.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Chakravarty, 620.
[121] Cousins, 260.
[122] M. Hollebecque, trans. Pramila Choudhury, "The Artistic Awakening of India", *Modern Review*, Vol. 24, No.1-66, (July- December 1918), 397.

From Indian to 'Asiatic': Bringing Together Zen and Advaita

As we have seen above, Indian art became the site for a comparative discourse on civilizations in the *Modern Review* (among other similar Anglophone publications of course). This discourse confirmed the contours of the ideas already being promoted by erstwhile nationalist philosophers, theologians and thinkers (and Europeans searching for alternatives to Western modernity) on the value of Indian spirituality. An emphasis on going within to explore the deep recesses of the self was vital in order to access the Absolute in the Hegelian Advaita paradigm. An "inwardizing" will was similarly posited as germane to the production as well as appreciation of not only Indian, but Eastern art as a whole.

But where exactly did this impulse to subsume such a diverse range of artistic traditions under one overarching banner come from? The short answer to this question, as many scholars of both Indian art and nationalism have suggested is: Orientalism, albeit of the affirmative variety. This kind of Orientalism of course had its deep seated conceptual problems (as has been discussed in the introduction), yet in the scholarly attention to discursive limitations, certain sites of creative thought and experimentation with regard to creating a self-consciously Asianist aesthetic have been overlooked. For example, the obsessive concern of the Indian bourgeois with civilizational values didn't just facilitate defensive conversations with European thinkers. *The Modern Review* attempted to espouse a cosmopolitan worldview, and featured lengthy anthropological/ travel narratives about Burma, Japan and 'Java'. But more substantively, it gave ample physical space to the lengthy reflections of the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi (1875-1947) and even encouraged the amateur explorations of the spirit and form of Haiku made by contributors to the magazine. Together, these led to the development of a discourse of "Eastern" art and aesthetics, whose deeper philosophical points had both cogency and import.

The Inseparability of Art and Life

Historians of the subcontinent are generally aware of Yone Noguchi through his published correspondence with Rabindranath Tagore in the 1938. He first wrote a letter to the latter in February, 1915, before his well-publicized visit to Japan in 1916. Noguchi welcomed Tagore to Japan in 1916, in 1924 and again in 1927. However, when Japan attacked China in 1937, the two friends tested their intellectual engagement and wrote a series of letters to one another defending their opposing ideas about war and patriotism. Noguchi took a pro-Japan position in these, arguing that in the face of the corruption of the Kuomintang government Japan needed to intervene and establish "a great new world in the Asiatic continent"; it would be a "war of Asia for Asia".[123] Tagore naturally disagreed, forcefully expressing his disappointment at the imperialist expansion of an Asian power who he had held up as an example in previous decades. These letters have been commented on as an example of Tagore's political and philosophical critique of nationalism. However, in the process, Noguchi's contribution to the building of an Asianist aesthetic in India has been largely glossed over.

Well known as a bilingual poet, and in fact the first Japanese one to write in English, Noguchi was a professor of English at Keio University in Tokyo. But prior to his move back to Japan in 1905 he had travelled the world, and his work was celebrated in Western literary circles

[123] Anand Upendran, "Accessing the Tagore-Noguchi Letters", accessed June 25th 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/remembering-tagore-noguchi-letters/

until his passing. As Madoka Nagai Hori writes, Noguchi, "who learned about naturalism, mysticism, the maverick free spirit, and localism, was aligned with the trends of the time."[124] During his sojourn in America he wrote English poems under the influence of Poe's poetic theory and Whitman's style, with "ponderings from the Japanese tradition, incorporating Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) or Haiku and Zen Buddhism".[125] Noguchi was caught in the cross currents of several important movements in working their way through literature in the period prior to 1900 and just after. It was, for example, the period of literary Symbolism, with Modernism waiting impatiently in the wings. After the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and both before and after the First World War (1914–1918), the lure of an 'alternative' - the Orient and of non-Christian philosophy as such - was never stronger. Following Earl Miner's suggestion that Noguchi had a significant role to play in the introduction and interpretation of Japanese poetry to an English audience, Yoshinobu Hakutani argues that he was even responsible for giving voice to what would become the key tenets of Imagism. In his famous "Vorticism" essay, Ezra Pound "acknowledged for the first time in his career his indebtedness to the spirit of Japanese poetry in general and the technique of hokku in particular".[126]

Given his favourable reception in San Francisco and London, the question arises as to why Noguchi started publishing essays about Japanese art and poetry in India – which had thus far not featured on the cultural map for Japanese litterateurs. But here, it may be possible to argue for a nascent Asianism in Noguchi's intellectual repertoire. During his stay in London he encountered English poets such as W.B. Yeats, Arthur Symonds and Laurence Binyon, who were known to be interested in both social reform and non-western art forms. He also met some Indian English-language poets in London, such as Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose, and also India's "Nightingale" poetess, the soon-to-be Gandhian leader, Sarojini Naidu.[127] Given their common experience of Asians becoming first time English-language poets, and shared social circles, Noguchi's awareness of the political woes of Ireland and India increased. Alongside his connection to Tagore (and standing invitation from him to visit Santiniketan), these contacts in London might have prompted Noguchi's desire to share his views with an Indian audience. In fact, as Nagai Hori writes, Noguchi was "connected to the Indian literary arena as a contributor to some Indian magazines" from the 1910s.[128] And his relationship with India continued beyond this period: he received invitations and requests to do lecture tours from the 1920s. But it was not until 1935 that he finally decided to travel there.

His early entry into the arena of Indian literary magazines is most significant for our purposes. In terms of the *Modern Review*, Noguchi was given pride of place in several issues, where reprints of entire chapters from his seminal book, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* were inserted. But given that at the same issue, a roster of Indian art critics also expressed their views, using similar rhetoric, what emerges is a concerted effort on the part of the publication to create a

[124] Madoka Nagai Hori, "Yone Noguchi and India: Towards a Reappraisal of the International Conflict between R. Tagore and Y. Noguchi," *Changing Perceptions of Japan in South Asia in the New Asian Era: The State of Japanese Studies in India and Other SAARC Countries*, (2011): 121, http://doi.org/10.15055/00001234.
[125] Nagai Hori, 121.
[126] Yoshinobu Hakutani. "Richard Wright's Haiku, Zen, and the African 'Primal Outlook upon Life,'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 104, no. 4, (2007): 515.

[127] Nagai Hori, 122.
[128] Ibid.

standardized Asian view of art, where an actual voice from the 'Far East' could effectively serve as ballast to the cause. In fact, while Noguchi didn't address India or Indian topics in these reprinted chapters, it is worth bearing in mind that he was well aware of being an ambassador of the 'East'. *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* was first published by John Murray in 1914 in London under an imprint called "Wisdom of the East". It also carried a message of hope from the editors (one of whom appears to have been Indian by name) that the book would increase understanding between the two hemispheres:

> The object of the Editors of this series is a very definite one. They desire above all things that, in their humble way, these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West the old world of Thought and the new of Action. In this endeavour, and in their own sphere, they are but followers of the highest example in the land. They are confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour. L. CRANMER-BYNG. S. A. KAPADIA.[129]

The first chapter was reprinted two years later, in 1916 for the *Modern Review*. Here, Noguchi outlined what he felt were the central preoccupations of Japanese poetry, and in so doing, he also critiqued a number of different attitudes of Western poets. The key contention, (which would likely have been selected for its appeal to an Indian audience accustomed to the spiritual tenor of Coomaraswamy and the like), was that to *live* poetry was the main thing. Western poets, in his view, tended towards wordiness. And their logo centric intellectualism belied an inability to grasp the true intensity of life: "I come always to the conclusion that the English poets waste too much energy in " words, words, words," and make, doubtless with all good intentions, their inner meaning frustrate, at least less distinguished, simply from the reason that its full liberty to appear naked is denied."[130] Japanese hokku, instead, was presented as "the real poetry of action", entailing a narrowing of the distance between man and nature; the perceiver and the perceived.[131] He also felt that the fixation on symbols and metaphors lessened the spontaneity of a newly experienced sensation. He saw the over-reliance of the Victorians on flowery, figurative language as evidence of their actual detachment from life. In fact, he chastened Western poets for their lumbering quest for 'meaning', commitment to "Christianity, social reform, or what not" and the twin strangleholds of literary criticism and publication pressure.[132] All of this was to highlight the importance of "whimsy, not philosophy" and "emotion, not intellect" – a message that turned against intellectualism in the same way that Hegelian-Advaita promoted a cultivation of intuition over logic.[133]

[129] Title Page of Yone Noguchi, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* (London: John Murray, 1914).
[130] Yone Noguchi, "My Own Japanese Poetry,"*Modern Review* Vol. XX, No. 7-12 (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, September 1916), 245.
[131] Ibid., 245-7.
[132] Ibid., 249
[133] Ibid.

But more significantly, each of Noguchi's numerous publications in the *Modern Review* talked about the inseparability of poetry from life:

> Let the poets forget once and for all about publication. And let them live in poetry as the true poets of the old days used to live. Indeed to live in poetry is first and last. When one talks of the union of poetry and life I'm sure that it should be in action and practice, not in print. I have seen so many poets who only live between the covers, and die when the ink fades away.[134]

To illustrate what he meant further he used the example of the Basho Matsuo, who "gained moral strength from his rejection of all worldly luxuries" and who even rejected a paltry monetary gift from his students so he could continue living in "seishin, or pure poverty", unaffected by the fear of loss that accompanies monetary gain.[135] Noguchi seemed to relish telling the story of how Basho reacted when one of his students, Hokushi sent him a Hokku poem after his house caught on fire. Hokushi wrote:

> "It has burnt down:
> How serene the flowers in their falling!"[136]

That, Noguchi opined, was the real poetry in action. He was sure that Basho had commended his student for his attitude on life – the ability to keep his mind serene while watching his house burn to ashes. The moral of the story, of course, is not unlike Coomaraswamy's vision of the Indian artist in *Message of the East*, published just a few years before in the magazine in 1909:

> Modern practice considers technique alone. The art teacher who should teach also metaphysics and romance would soon be relieved of his position. But in the old days of pupil-discipleship, whether in East or West, the apprentice learnt not merely technique, but life in his master's workshop. In India, art and life have always, at least until modern times, been in close touch; and a community of culture which no longer exists in Europe or in India united artist and public in a common understanding. The great ends of life, the cultivation of the soul and the worship of god, have been the dominant note of the long continued rhythmic and disciplined life of the Indian people. […] In the great period of Indian art, not only did the conception of Great Yogi (Buddha) dominate the divine ideal, but the artist himself was to be a yogi. Not until the all that the word yoga (yoking, union) implies in Indian culture is understood, will the Western mind grasp the full significance of the message of the East.[137]

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[134] Noguchi, 249.
[135] Ibid., 250.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Message of the East* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1909), 9-10.

Accompanied by the Bengal School's paintings of pensive, contemplative figures, art criticism and theological writing that hinted at the uniqueness of Eastern ways, Noguchi's indictment to Western poets for grasping at the ornamentation of words would have fallen on ready Indian ears. What readers could not fail to notice were the affinities of Hokku, and Indian art, as described by Coomaraswamy above (and Havell, O.C. Ganguly and other commentators), in terms of the artist's rejection of the 'outer' shell of things for the ultimate goal of reaching union with the Absolute.

Self-identification with Nature and Loss of the Egoic Self

In a similar vein, Noguchi's insistence on the artist's relationship to nature would have resonated, at least at the level of language, with the Vedic ideal of self-realization. In a number of articles published in 1916, such as "The Colour of London as seen by a Japanese Poet" or "The Quiver Adorning Plum Blossom" and "A Japanese on Some English Poets" he brought home the message that silence and inaction could be valuable things:

> Japanese poetry, at least the old Japanese poetry, is different from Western poetry in the same way as silence is different from a voice, night from day; while avoiding the too close discussion of their relative merits, I can say that the latter always fails, naturally enough through being too active to properly value inaction, restfulness, or death; to speak shortly, the passive phase of Life and the World.[138]

In other words, the world was composed of a juxtaposition of active and passive elements, and the poet's excitement came from exploring the reverse: "Let me learn of death to truly live; let me be silent to truly sing".[139] Likewise, he reinforced the notion that the essence of life did not lie in the material things, it lay in nature:

> The real value is that of the moon, stars, and flowers, that of a bird and waterfall for the noisiest. If we do not sing so much of Life and the World it is not from the reason that we think their value negative, but from our thought that it would be better, in most cases, to leave them alone, and not to sing of them is the proof of our reverence toward them. Besides, to sing the stars and the flowers in Japan means to sing Life, since we human beings are not merely a part of Nature, but Nature itself. When our Japanese poetry is best, it is, let me say, a searchlight or flash of thought or passion cast on a moment of Life and Nature, which, by virtue of its intensity, leads us to the conception of the whole ; it is swift, discontinuous, an isolated piece.[140]

In another reprinted chapter called in "What Is a Hokku Poem?" he defined hokku[141] as a reflection of the Japanese ' "understanding of Nature" or, as an expression of "their longing or

[138] Noguchi, "My Own Japanese Poetry", 246.
[139] Ibid., 251.
[140] Ibid., 249.
[141] Noguchi preferred to use the older term for Haiku poetry. "Haiku originated as an opening part of a larger Japanese poem called renga. These haiku written as an opening stanza were known as ***hokku*** and over time writers began to

wonder or adoration toward Mother Nature" that is "never mystified by any cloud or mist like [the] Truth or Beauty of Keats' understanding."[142] There were references to an underlying 'Idea' (as in Havell's writing) in the form of religion as well: Noguchi argued that in Zen philosophy, nature is a mirror of the enlightened self; one can only see and hear things as they really are by making one's consciousness pure and clear. There was a strand of the Hegelian-Advaita emphasis on non-duality here as well. In the words of Yoshinobu Hakutani, "like Whitman, Noguchi believes in monism, and his ultimate goal in writing poetry is to achieve the ecstasies of the self in nature".[143] The Zen self, in the process of contemplation of nature, all but disappears, gaining a sense of the "of the whole" instead. This of course, corresponds to Havell's broad characterization of "all of Asiatic art":

> This idea of the artist identifying himself with Nature in all her moods is really the keynote of all Asiatic art, poetry, and music. The whole theory of the sacrificial rites expounded in the Brahmanas is based upon the assumed identity of the elements of the rite with the elements of the universe.[144]

Creating a 'Rasa' of the Orient

Alongside Noguchi's reflections on poetry, interestingly enough a number of faux-haikus were also printed in the *Modern Review* in the 1900-1920 period. These were clearly not meant to be authentic haikus, but reflected both the magazine's interest in creating an artistic continuum between India and Japan, as well as the longstanding Japonisme of Victorian Britain. One of the key suppliers of such poetry was an individual named E.E. Speight – who could have been one of the westerners in the Tagore social circle. Not much is known about them except for the fact that the majority of their work was published at the tail end of the war, between 1917 and 1920 and they betrayed a wistful nostalgia for old Japan. Ignoring Noguchi's indictment of 'words, words, words' and the propensity to use symbols, Speight only achieved a diluted imitation of the original Hokku. Yet, he/she did manage to convey a similar set of themes: the value of inner routes to peace; the beauty of nature; and the soul's quest for enlightenment. In "The Song of Uguisu", published in January 1918, and location-stamped with 'from Kanazawa, Japan', the poet offered an exoticized picture of a land of spiritualism:

> the uguisu is a shy bid of the warbler kind which haunts thickets and gardens in Japan in the springtime. One of its calls resembles a Buddhist invocation. "Why hast thou left thy realms to come and warble they delight among our thronged hours?
> Wilt thou fill our hearts with secret
> gladness, that our days may be as a dream?

write them as their own stand-alone poems. Haiku was given its current name by the Japanese writer Masaoka Shiki at the end of the 19th century."
"Haiku", Wikipedia, accessed June 25th 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiku.

[142] Noguchi, 246.

[143] Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Yone Noguchi's Poetry: From Whitman to Zen." *Comparative Literature Studies* 22, no. 1 (1985): 69. Accessed August 3, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40246517.

[144] Havell, *Ideals of Indian Art*, 8.

> Pass not by this abode; linger a whle, / for here is a safe retreat for thy devotions.
> peeee-chi! Peechi! Peechi!pichi!pichi!
>
> Did y'do it? Did y' do it! Did y' do it? The mocking call comes from across the
> rustling stream, from a wilderness/ embowering a lovely home.
> No, no, no! I did not do it. But the
> gardeners came, four brown men,
> full of laughter, and amid the strange tales they clipped the dense
> clusters of pine and maki trees, filling the garden with light.
> Ho! Ho! Ho! Kek-kyo! Then there is no
> hiding place for me to sing my sutra. Ye have ruined my hermitage.
> farewell! Farewell! Farewell![145]

Similarly, in other shorter pieces (more proximate to the required physical brevity of Hokku), such as "Cameos from Japan", "The Soul", "The Eternal Dream", "The Offering" and "Spring Maples", the concern with a world of nature, stillness and transcendence was expressed in the register of naturalist Victorian poetry, with a faint accent of the orient (as seen through the incorporation of somewhat strange onomatopoeic as well as Japanese linguistic sounds). At the same time, what is worthy of note is that Speight was not the only one producing faux-haikus. The *Modern Review* also featured short poems in English by Rabindranath Tagore (translated by himself), Sarojini Naidu and Harishchandra Chattopadhyay. These were not imitative of Hokku's formal aspects or of Japanese culture – however they continued to hone in (in relatively few words) on a 'single moment' in the interior journey of the soul in nature and in search of light and transformation. Such investments on the part of the Editor in showcasing poetry in an otherwise overtly political magazine, demonstrates perhaps the quest to legitimize the depth of the political endeavor of anti-colonialism. On their end, European contributors reveled in their Orientalist visions so much so that James Cousins even chided Sarojini Naidu in one of his reviews for dwelling too much on the material aspects of life – such as love and romance – instead of the esoteric:

> We are moved to wish that the poetess would turn her attention deliberately to some theme that would call out her own "Vedic heritage" of wisdom and song. We are pernickety persons, we lovers of poetry, and we are disturbed when the beloved shows herself worse than her best. For our comfort we hang on to poems like "The Pearl", which is as precious as its subject; to "Ashoka Blossoms" that defies analysis as the true lyric should; to "June Sunset" in its beautiful simplicity.[146]

What is also evident, and this is much more overt in the paintings of the Bengal School as we shall see below, is how the soul is figured as feminine in these kinds of reveries. Speight's poems are filled with Japanese women wandering in trances, evoking the visual feel of the paintings which

[145] E.E. Speight, "The Song of Uguisu", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, January 1918), 31.
[146] James Cousins. "The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, October 1917), 411.

served as the frontispieces of the magazine each month. "The Young Princess" is one such example, featuring a young woman who looked like "a fair nun who returns to the world of life" and her "earnestly listening" male companion, gliding ahead together on a boat:

> As the young princess pointed into the mist
> Whose secrets slowly unrolled, the
> Maiden who stood at the stern
> Poling them forward drank in their glad words with a deep delight.
> For it seemed to her that all this wonder
> Of love and awakening life had its
> Birth in her own untroubled heart, -
> And thus the world was thanking
> Her for something of which she had
> No memory. [147]

Conceptual Evasions within the Asianist Aesthetic

Clearly, the effort to create a cultural/civilizational continuum between India and other Asian countries could only occur by stringently evading questions of cultural difference. One of the key sources of this was the refusal of Zen to qualify the nature of the reality underlying nature where proponents of Hegelian Advaita saw the hand of a unifying cosmic intelligence. According to Hakutani, Noguchi wrote that "a haiku is not a representation of goodness, truth, or beauty; there is nothing particularly good, true, or beautiful about a frog's jumping into water. In Zen one is taught to annihilate one's thoughts or feelings before satori is attained: satori is the achievement of a state of mu, nothingness".[148] This, of course, is contested by the Hindu perception of Absolute Reality conversely as "full", perhaps embodied best in the lines of the epic Sanskrit poem *Meghadhutam*: "for in all things, emptiness is weakness and fullness is strength".[149] Relatedly, while Noguchi talked about the poet apprehending nature through the erasure of self, Indian theological writing, as we have seen, focused on the virtues of going deeper into that very self or subjectivity, albeit in order to ultimately reach the state of ultimate objectivity, *super*-selfhood or Hegelian 'super-consciousness'.

The bottom line, however, was that all Asian religions and art were presented as part of the same spectrum of beliefs, aspiring towards the same spiritual destination. And few efforts were made to address the points of divergence; affinities, instead, were paramount. For example, the scholar Ajit Kumar Chakravarty did acknowledge the transformations Buddhist sculpture underwent in its migration out of India, but this is swiftly followed by a return to the argument about spiritual continuity:

> The sculpture that succeeded the Gandhara School in India and that travelled to China and Japan, sought to evolve an evermore perfect image of the completeness of moral personality, the personality

[147] Speight, "The Young Princess", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, January 1918), 37.
[148] Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism." *Modern Philology* 90, no. 1 (1992): 60. Accessed August 3, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/438081.
[149] Kalidasa, trans. Srinivas Reddy, *Meghadhutam* (Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2017), 5.

> emancipated from all desires and passions, serene yet compassionate, free yet bound in sympathy to the mysteries of the world. It evolved the well known type of "Avalokiteshwar", the "Kwanyin" in Chinese and 'Kwannon' in Japanese and this type of sculpture reached in China and Japan reached its most triumphant expression.[...] Lao-tzu preached "wise passiveness" as Wordsworth called it. Indian art left Nature and moved into symbolism as it suits the metaphysical temperament of Indians better. However the essential conception of art "the true function of art is to beautify and purify the spirit" remained unchanged. The outward form is nothing; the inward idea is everything. The effort, therefore, of all Eastern artists is to suppress the material and to communicate the ineffable in life and in the universe.[150]

In the very same September 1917 issue, one W.W. Pearson wrote a short reflection entitled "On an Indian Image in Japan", where he romanticized finding "an old Indian image" in a "remote temple on the slopes of a mountain off the west coast of Japan. Sitting "cross-legged in lotus position with an 'inscrutable smile' on its face" the image spoke to him of the great truth of "the living unity of Asia, a unity which depends not upon outer circumstances or the power of temporal rulers, but upon the invisible bonds of spiritual kinship, bonds which no changes of outer environment can break and no apparent disunion can sever."[151]

As suggested earlier, the subtle editorial politics of article placement also contributed to the creation of an image of Eastern attitudinal unity. Yone Noguchi's article, "A Japanese on some English Poets" appeared in June 1916. The editors placed Benoy Kumar Sarkar's "Similarity between Indian and Chinese Religions" right after this in the same issue, and while no relationship between the two pieces of writing was explicitly made, a connection would have emerged nonetheless to the discerning reader. Noguchi's admonitions to the English poets for being incapable of appreciating silence and stillness paved the way for Sarkar's pronouncement that:

> the Chinese follower of Rita or Sanatana Tao thinks exactly like his Hindu fellowman. "Should his act disagree with that almighty Tao, a conflict must necessarily ensue, in which he as he immensely weaker party must inevitably succumb. Such meditations have led him into the path of philosophy – to the study and discovery of the characteristics of the Tao of the means of acquiring these for himself and of framing his conduct upon them.[152]

As suggested earlier, Sarkar as a socialist was no proponent of Eastern passivity, yet in his analysis of Indian and Chinese religion he interestingly saw monotheism as a uniting factor and used Chinese and Sankrit terms interchangeably. He argued that the Chinese were monotheists

[150] Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, "Art, Religion and Personality", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, September 1917), 280.
[151] W.W. Pearson. "On An Indian Image in Japan", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, September 1917), 260-261.
[152] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "Similarity between Indian and Chinese Religions", *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, June 1916),653-4 .

dedicated to "Ekam, the one supreme being".[153] And that the idea of the Chinese "Shang-I" or Supreme Ruler" was also found in the Rig Veda. The Chinese saw the Supreme Ruler as the supreme unifying personality: "He sitteth on his throne in the highest heaven and beholds the children of men; his thousand spies go forth to the world's end and bring reports of men's doings." Indian theism, in his view, was similarly constructed and could just as easily be called "Vedic-Shang-I".[154]

To sum up then, in the period between 1900 and 1920 we see the development of, to use Coomaraswamy's language, a kind of 'mood' or *rasa* of Easternness in *The Modern Review*. Drawing from a combination of art historical and theological writing, political analyses and reproductions of painting and literature, Asianism as an aesthetic dwelled in an exalted yearning and celebration of the human-divine connection. It also prioritized a set of qualities such as subjectivity, interiority, selflessness, intuition, peace/passivity and moral beauty. These would come to have important implications for the construction of femininity in this period and subsequently, for women's rights, as we shall see below.

C. Gendering the East

The East in Paintings

For historians of South Asia, the powerful relationship between the nation and gender is now well understood. Ashis Nandy, among others, has pointed out that the process of feminizing India and equating it to a mother figure was born out of male anxiety and the attempted inversion of colonial power and knowledge.[155] Tanika Sarkar argued that the contradictory image of the Mother as at once Goddess and "hapless, female victim" was mobilized in nationalist iconography, particularly in Bengal, in the wake of the partition proposed by the British government.[156] More recently, Sugata Bose has posited the idea that in the cultural context of late nineteenth century Bengal, the nationalist cult of the Mother "not surprisingly, emphasized the female principle as Shakti, or the source of strength".[157] For most analysts of the relationship between gender and nation, the story originates in the cultural crucible of late nineteenth century Bengal, starting with early idealizations of *Banga-mata* (or Mother Bengal) and extending later to *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). The Bengal School of Art is seen as having a crucial role to play in the feminization of the nation, given that its lead painter, Abanindranath Tagore, produced the first iconic image of Bharat Mata (which was reproduced in the *Modern Review* in 1909). Yet, in addition to Mother India, could there also have been an incipient 'Mother Asia' at the heart of these paintings?

As Shigemi Inaga has compellingly argued, Abanindranath and his followers were greatly influenced by Japanese art, inspired by the intensive interactions between members of the Tagore

[153] Ibid., 655-660.
[154] Sarkar, "Similarity between Indian and Chinese Religions", 654.
[155] Quoted in Sugata Bose, *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood* (India: Penguin Random House, 2017), 21. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[156] Quoted in Sugata Bose, 21. Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th Century Bengali Literature." *Economic and Political Weekly* 22, no. 47 (1987): 2011.
[157] Sugata Bose, 19-21.

circle and their Japanese guests. This exchange was facilitated, in a sense, by the very doctrine of Advaita; the key figure in this Indo-Japanese exchange, Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin), made non-dualism the theme of his first book in English, *The Ideals of the East* (1904). After quitting the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Inaga tells us that Okakura made his way to India, where in in 1901 and 1902 he encountered Vivekananda, who was already a legendary figure by that time. Vivekananda's declaration of the ultimate Truth of one-ness profoundly influenced Okakura, who formulated the famous slogan that "Asia is one" in its understanding of the unity of all life.[158] Subsequently, Okakura brought the painters Yokoyama Taikan, Hishida Shunso, and Arai Kanpo to India and the latter "provided technical and iconographic inspiration" to Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and other artists their fold.[159] Taikan and Shunso, prompted by Okakura, made several copies of historic scrolls representing the divinities of esoteric Buddhism in India, and in turn, the Indian artists learnt what Inaga terms the *Morotai* or "vague style" of water dripping painting technique that "was at its apogee" when Taikan and Shunso were in India, abandoning "strong colours and hard outlines" in favour of "light brushstrokes and delicate lines."[160] For prior historians of the Bengal School, however, the tendency has been to focus on Japanese influence solely in terms of technique. The iconic paintings of the School such as *Bharat Mata* (see Figure 4) and *Sati* (Figure 5) have undergone more analysis than the rest, and scholars have commented mostly on the cultural nationalist overtones of the School.

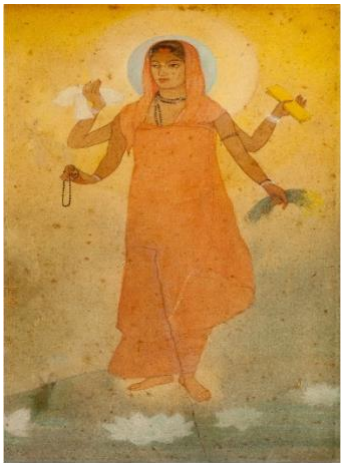

Figure 4: Abanindranath Tagore's iconic 'Mother India' or *Bharat Mata* painting, 1905. Rabindra Bharati Society Kolkata

Yet Inaga has underscored that there was a political investment in Asianism that also motivated this artistic exchange. Okakura's famous slogan "Asia is one", he argues, must be interpreted as a "manifesto articulating political aims and the desire for Indian independence in the particular socio-historical context of Bengali nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century."[161] Okakura had come to Calcutta to foster a pan-Asian alliance in resistance to increasing Western incursions into Japan. It was the convergence of interests between these two causes that created the "underlying cross cultural conditions which over-determined Abanindranath's creation of Mother India."[162] Following on from this point, it is possible to see the paintings produced by the School in the period between 1900 and 1920 as strongly reflective of the Asianist aesthetic discussed in Part B. Taken as a whole, they tend to celebrate lone figures (mostly female) who are lost in reveries of meditation or reflection. The combination of the wash technique, mythological or ancient themes and simplicity of compositional elements affirm the set of qualities that were cast, as we have seen, as quintessential Eastern: an inward turn of mind, the quest for transcendence of egoic selfhood, the rich potentiality of peace (in the form of stillness, silence and immutability) and just a hint of pre-Raphaelite melancholy (see Figures 4 and 5). The Asianist agenda comes through also in what is omitted. While there are paintings that clearly draw from Islamicate parts of the world (see the works of

[158] Shigemi Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose," *Japan Review*, no. 21 (2009): 150.
[159] Ibid., 163.
[160] Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 1994,) 178.
[161] Inaga, 154.
[162] Ibid, 153.

Abdur Rehman Chughtai as in Figure 6), Java and Burma (figure 7), Western, African and Latin American themes do not make an appearance. Clearly, the aesthetic world being invoked reflected the old European notion of the 'Orient', ranging from the Middle East all the way to Japan. Finally, the intended audience for these works seems to have been pre-selected with the Orient in mind as well. As O.C. Gangoly, lead connoisseur of the Indian art world[163] reported, the Bengal School actively circulated their works, primarily through monthly reproductions in the *Modern Review*, but also by distributing colour facsimiles of paintings to the Indian Society for Oriental Art and other venues. This contributed to the creation of a specialist as well as general public hungry for Eastern paintings.[164] As Gangoly suggests, on some occasions the Indian Society for Oriental Art exhibited the works of Tagore and his disciples in their newly acquired Hall. At the same time several exhibitions of other "outstanding works of art" were also frequently arranged:

> There was, for instance, a magnificent exhibition of Japanese colour prints held, at which not only did all the art-lovers of the city come but which was also crowded by the visits of Chinese and Japanese inhabitants of Calcutta who came to the show as a mark of honour to this remarkable display of Far-Eastern art. According to the report in a local daily newspaper every man and woman and child in Chinatown came, including babies in arms, and decrepit and lame old man on their crutches.[165]

Female Literary Engagement with an Asianist Aesthetic

Figure 5: Nandalal Bose, *Sati* (1907), on the practice of bride immolation. National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

A question that is rarely raised in discussions about political as well as cultural expressions of pan-Asianism in India in this period is: how, if at all, did women themselves contribute to it, aside from standing in as figurative representations of the East? One reason why female pan-Asianists are hard to come by, especially in the early 1900s period, is that there were very few Indian women were active politically speaking before the onset of what has been called the "Age of Associations" or the first mass movements under Gandhi in the 1920s. Women did produce literary texts as scholars such as Gail Minault and Geraldine Forbes have argued, but these tended to focus on aspects of female lived experience that male narratives tended to eschew and questions of social reform. Yet, it is also the case that scholarly analyses thus far have tended to focus on individual works and treatises by women in this period, and when employing that approach, even just in terms of the *Modern Review*, barely a couple of female names emerge: Sister Nivedita (about whom there is will be further discussion later), Sarojini Naidu and a handful of unknown Western contributors who wrote travelogues. Yet, particularly in the period between

[163] Also one of the founders of the Indian Society of Oriental Art and the illustrated quarterly journal called *Rupam.*

[164] O.C. Ganguly, "Indian Society of Oriental Art: Its Early Days*," Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Calcutta*, November (1961).

[165] Ibid.

1910 and 1920, the *Modern Review* also regularly featured short stories and novels in serialized form. These have escaped the notice of most commentators on the magazine, possibly because it is difficult to pinpoint what aspects of the cultural history of the period are animated in these somewhat dreamy and whimsical pieces. In tenor they approximate the genre of Victorian popular romance, without being quite as plot-driven.

Figure 6: 'The Resting Place' by Abdur Rahman Chughtai. c. 1927, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

Produced by a series of young Bengali women (their youth indicated by the "B.A." next to their name or the title of "Miss"), these stories appeared in the journal primarily in the years between 1916 and 1920. The most regular contributors were likely a set of sisters: Miss Seeta Chatterjee and Miss Santa Chatterjee and others such as Miss Svarna Kumari, Miss Bidyut Dutta and Sunalini Roy. Overarchingly, what unites these stories is their otherworldly, romantic character, and the preponderance of image over narrative strength. In terms of themes, most dwelt on the necessity for sacrifice in love, giving us a clue into the preoccupations of teenage girls at the cusp of Victorianism and Modernism. The protagonist in many of the stories is an ethereal "nymph" like character[166] who roams in ethereal natural landscapes (far removed in time and space from Bengal), falls in love with a young man and has to undergo some kind of act of renunciation in order to fulfil either him or the situation. To provide an example, in "The First Lotus" a beautiful woman called Light follows a young man in an enchanted natural paradise.[167] She is asked to choose two flowers – one white and pure, the other overpoweringly fragrant and red. She chooses the latter but the young man confesses to her that his wanderings will not cease until he finds the purest flower. She then sacrifices her own beauty. Staring into the water, she prays and a white flower is born from her reflection that the young man rejoices over, but in the process, Light loses her physical beauty. She passes the test of character, however, in her calm acceptance of sacrifice in the service of love. Similarly, in "The Lost Light" a woman in a mythical kingdom loses her eyesight whilst making the most beautiful tapestry the world has ever seen for an undeserving young prince.[168] In "When Loyalties Clash", an orphan has to turn away from the love of her life as her birth would diminish him in the eyes of society.[169] So on and so

Figure 7: A Burmese painting, *Domestic Felicity*, frontispiece for the *Modern Review*, November 1916.

[166] On a related note, Inaga discusses how Okakura saw the differences between the representations of the concept of divinity in the East and the West, noting that in contrast to the West, which idealizes the human form, the East tends toward the "non-man" in defining a "superhuman divinity." In the "airy style of beauty" of the Han-period images of Avalokitesvara, Okakura identified the influence of Indian idealism. From Shigemi Inaga, and Kevin Singleton. "Okakura Kakuzō and India: The Trajectory of Modern National Consciousness and Pan-Asian Ideology Across Borders." *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 24 (2012): 44. Accessed August 3, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42801040.

[167] Shanta Chatterjee, "The First Lotus" *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1918), 79.

[168] Seeta Chatterjee,"The Lost Light," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, March 1918), 266.

[169] Seeta Chatterjee, "When Loyalties Clash," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, September 1920), 248.

forth. From a thematic standpoint all of the ideals we see represented in the Bengal School of Art are revisited: solitude, silence, oneness with nature, and most importantly, feminine ennoblement through the renunciation of desire, moving towards unity with God. The storylines themselves seem like loose frames from which to hang the idealism.

Most saliently, they are also frames for images. In "The Drama of the Clouds" by Bidyut Dutta, the storyline is most spare. Instead, the author imagines two feminine clouds talking to one another about metaphysics and life. There are sage words exchanged, such as:

> There is no such word as 'strangers' in our dictionary […] The language of the clouds is the same everywhere – the song of the clouds is one sweet melody sung everywhere. The difference is only in the outer form. But we have the sense to look to the spirit – and there, in the spirit, no difference exists.[170]

But more so than the words, what the story provides is a series of evocative images. The author describes a young woman, her face "ivory-white" against the darkness of the clouds folding her hands in an attitude of prayer:

> Her eyelids close: her head is bent forward. Lower and lower it bends – slowly her whole body drops to the ground – her whole frame makes obeisance. She remains motionless – it seems as though she possesses no other life but that of prayer.

Similarly, the aesthetic sensibilities of the Bengal school are evoked in all the stories where descriptions abound of the "waning pale moon of early dawn", moonlit forests, swarms of black bees, skin that "glimmers like pearl", velvety dark skies, "mad dervish dances", thunder clouds and "white lotuses drenched with dew", always standing in stark contrast to backgrounds of mist, haze and subdued shade, like that of Japanese watercolor. The landscapes are ethereal, mythic and provided simply as backdrops to interior journeys. While reading it feels like we have entered an imagistic world that is a blend of pre-Raphaelite, Zen and Epic Hindu elements (the talking clouds invoke Kalidasa's epic poem *Meghadutam* for example). The Bengal School's deliberate spareness in terms of composition is also mirrored by the fact that the landscapes these women write about are only characterized by swathes of colour. Even when set in a recognizably Indian context, such as a Mughal court in "The Lost Light", the author provides only the briefest contextual detail: the ornamental frieze of a window, or a gilded jewellery box, but nowhere near the profusion of objects and animated worlds that characterize India in real life.

Of course it may be possible to raise the issue of authorial intention here. There have been countless debates on the value of using literary analysis in history such that addressing them here would exceed the scope of this present chapter.[171] In a nutshell, however, one can legitimately pose the question at the core of these, which is, does the analysis of literary works by these young women amount to establishing a cause-and-effect kind of explanation? Or, in other words, were these stories written with a conscious pan-Asian intent in mind? As there are no documented

[170] Bidyut Dutta. "The Drama of the Clouds," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, February 1917), 145.
[171] See Wendell V. Harris. "What Is Literary 'History?" *College English*, vol. 56, no. 4, (1994): 440-441 for a useful summary of these.

reflections available about why they published these works, such a conclusion would be implausible. However, I do believe there is further room in history to use interpretive practices that engage with form and style.[172] Literary works are often suggestive of broad cultural and psychological patterns at work in a society. Seen in the broader company of Asia-facing content in the *Modern Review,* this kind of literature at the very least indicates how deeply young educated women in this period internalized the values and the aesthetics they were presented with. As a generation, they absorbed wholesale the notion of spirituality and femininity being coeval– one of the key takeaways of the East-West discourse. The presence of this literature also highlights the editorial agenda of the journal: on the page where "The First Lotus" concludes, an article entitled "Idealists and Practical Men" outlined the wisdom of the Japanese Marquis Okuma's comments at a meeting of the Indo-Japanese Association: "will the future be peace or war? Will it be power or will? The sword and love must harmonize, and we must rely upon religion for this adjustment".[173] Practicality, he suggested, could not override idealism – the very thing that the East stood for.

D. Conclusion: Afterlives of the "Inner" Beyond Literature and Art

One can legitimately pose the question of how valuable Asianism was in the Bengali cultural sphere given the fact that disaffection with Japan began as early as the 1920s in most Asian countries. Even the *Modern Review,* which had posited Japan as the future of Asia since 1905, expressed its disappointment at Japan's territorial incursions. As Sudhindra Bose, a lecturer of political science at the University of Iowa wrote, "How long will one Asian country persist in betraying another?"[174] Rabindranath Tagore had already prefigured this wave of disaffection with Japan in his biting critique of nationalism in 1916, yet by the mid 1920's even the most hard line enthusiasts had to step back from the vision promoted by Havell, Okakura and others of Japan as the embodiment of Hegelian synthesis – bringing together East and West, the spiritual and the material, antiquity and the present. After the annexation of Korea in 1909, the country issued a famous list of Twenty-one Demands in 1915 that tried to pressure China into widespread concessions, including extended leases in Manchuria and the joint control of harbours, as well as coal and iron resources. In fact, during the First World War and a few years after, Japan's great surge forward in Asia prompted comparisons with the repression of the British government in India:

> There appears to be a parallel in one respect between the Japanese policy in Korea and the English policy in India. The government of the Mikado is occasionally administering rebuke to some of the participants in Korean outrages just as the government of the viceroy is doing to a few guilty of the bloody Amritsar massacre, for "exceeding", in the naive language of the London Daily Herald,

[172] As Eric Slauter has memorably put it, there currently exists a "trade deficit" between literary and historical scholarship […]: "Even as literary scholarship has become markedly more 'historical,'" Slauter writes, "it has apparently become less marketable to historians" from Justine S. Murison,"Anachronism, Literary Historicism, and Miraculous Plagues," *The William and Mary Quarterly* , Vol. 70, No. 4 (October 2013): 821.
[173] Anonymous, "Idealists and Practical Men," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, July 1918), 80.
[174] Sudhindra Bose. "Japan in Korea," *Modern Review* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, December 1920), 581.

> their "ration of frightfulness". But neither in Korea nor in India is there any serious condemnation by the responsible authorities of the frightfulness itself. […] The Japanese rule in Korea and the English rule in India have been and are based upon the sword of the ruler, the bayonets of a foreign army, rather than the consent of the ruled.[175]

Nonetheless, the primary tenets of Asianism as a cultural and aesthetic movement (which centred on the belief in the spiritual unity of the continent) continued to play out in Indian society well beyond the 1920s. One of the main domains in which it did was in discussions about women's rights and welfare. Owing to its Orientalist roots, it is no surprise that Western women were the foremost advocates of the twin pillars described in this chapter: 1) a late nineteenth century Hegelian-Advaita conception of religion formulated in Bengal; and 2) an aesthetic sensibility that prioritized subjectivity, passivism, femininity and spiritual union using aspects of 'oriental' traditions of art. Not surprisingly, all were readers or contributors to the *Modern Review* and circulated in the incestuous social worlds of Theosophy, Brahmoism, reform and aesthetics in Calcutta. While Partha Chatterjee has argued that the identification of women with the "inner" and spiritual domains of life limited their capacity to act politically, the works of women such as Sister Nivedita and Margaret Cousins show that it was precisely their belief in the high spiritual nature of the East and of Eastern women that mobilized them to push for rights on their behalf. That is, both justified the entry of Indian women into civic life *through* the spiritual rather than inspite of it.[176]

Okakura himself singled out Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), born as Elisabeth Margaret Noble, as of the most eminent English-speaking writers on Asia of his era. Nivedita was the closest foreign-born disciple of Swami Vivekānanda and a disciple of Ramakrishna. According to Shigemi Inaga, Nivedita was essentially Okakura's partner, correcting his manuscript and facilitating the publication of *The Ideals of the East*. What they shared was the advocacy of Asia as a cultural geography of united ideals. Transcending the Western emphasis on the "Particular"" and national distinctions, Nivedita lauded Okakura's vision of Asia, not as a political entity, but a metaphysical and spiritual domain. She wrote in the preface for *Ideals of the East* that the Advaita or non-dualist teachings of Hindu philosophy found their best expression in a continent depicted not "as the congeries of geographical fragments", but rather, as a "united, living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life".[177] This, of course, was a distinct move against European understandings of "Asia" as a name and sign. Instead, it was to be seen as an ideal intrinsically animating a living reality.

Although Nivedita is commemorated today as an ardent Indian nationalist who was implicated in the campaigns for swaraj (home rule) and swadeshi (local produce), she was also influential in terms of female education. Between 1899 and 1902 she worked on the school she had started in Calcutta that recruited about thirty girls. Vivekananda believed that women's education was key to the awakening of India and entrusted Nivedita with the task of creating a new national role and consciousness for Indian women. Subsequently, she wrote consistently on

[175] Sudhindra Bose, 582.
[176] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[177] Shigemi Inaga, and Kevin Singleton. "Okakura Kakuzō and India", 41.

the role of women in the evolving Indian state and in these writings, the same East-West distinction endured. In *The Present Position of Women* (1910) she argued that the world was divided into two ideals- the "progressive idea of the *civitas,* and the conservative idea of the *familias*."[178] Eastern women, of course, were dedicated to the propagation of the family while Western women were focused on acquiring the full rights of a citizen, culminating in complete political equality with men. However, what is noteworthy is that Nivedita, while celebrating both ideals, did not call for the maintenance of the binary. Instead, she saw that the 'woman of the East' had already embarked on a course of self-transformation that could only end with a "full measure of civic and intellectual personality".[179] She suggested that it was their very observable selflessness, cultivated through investment in family life that boded well for impactful and ethical contributions to civic life.

Similarly, as Chapter Three will elucidate in further detail, the Irish Theosophist Margaret Cousins saw Indian women as potential leaders of Asian Women as a whole given the centrality of spirituality to their character. Informed by the views of her husband art critic James Cousins, as well as her own experiences in India, Cousins wrote about "the inherent love of beauty" of Indian women in *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood* (1922). Here, among other stereotypes, she presented Asian women as aesthetically inclined yet argued that this sensibility had a "much deeper root than vanity", serving an invaluable asset to the nation as it drew forth rich art and craft traditions.[180] She also asserted the potential of female leaders in exercising 'soul force' in politics, as seen here in her paean to Sarojini Naidu:

> She brought to the West the message of India's spiritual culture, of its ideals of Ahimsa, tolerance, passive resistance, soul-force, and the worship of the Mother. She is the priestess of a new Gospel, a propagandist of the dignity, capability, poetry, purity and practicality of Indian womanhood and therefore of the whole Indian nation, for a 'nation rises only to the level of its women.[181]

Yet Cousins's Asianism extended well beyond the remit of paper and into life. Her views on Asian women ultimately culminated in her co-founding the Women's Indian Association (WIA) with fellow Theosophists Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa in 1917. This was a landmark step in the history of the women's movement in India, being the first association of its kind. She also edited the WIA's journal, *Stri Dharma*, which was the most influential national publication on women for almost two decades. In 1927, she co-founded the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), serving as its President in 1936. And perhaps most strikingly, she launched the first All-Asian Women's Conference, which met in Lahore in 1931, with the intention of unifying Asia through its women. Apart from the national impact of such works, Cousins's legacy touched the lives of individual Indian women who were well known for their contributions to the arts and to politics. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, a well-known social reformer and Gandhian activist during the Indian independence movement has written about how the world of theosophists and personal

[178] This was presented as a paper to the "Universal Races Congress" at London in 1910 and also published the same year in the *Modern Review*. See Gustav Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems: Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress, Held at the University of London, July 26-29, 1911* (London: P.S. King, 1911).
[179] Margaret Cousins, *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*. (Madras: Ganesh Books, 1922).
[180] Ibid., 22.
[181] Ibid., 124.

interactions with Margaret Cousins shaped her interests in art.[182] Post-independence she was known for being the driving force behind the renaissance of Indian handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre. Likewise, Rukimini Devi Arundale, the most important revivalist of Bharatanatyam, an Indian classical dance form, credited theosophists for her developing her view of art as a purveyor of moral beauty.[183] Much as the artists of the Bengal School attempted to do, she sought to highlight the more spiritual aspects of a dance form that had been sullied in its association with Devadasis or temple dancers (tainted by associations with flesh-trade). 'Mainstreaming' Bharat Natyam into bourgeois respectability, Arundale, like Havell and Coomaraswamy, chose to see the dancer as the medium of a Vedic philosophy of one-ness.

Thus, the emphasis on Asian civilizational unity that emerged out of cross-cultural currents of Bengal had a role to play in various aspects of national life in first two decades of the twentieth century as I have attempted to show in this chapter. Yet as the following chapters will demonstrate, their most important by product for Indian women was the concept of commensurability. This notion, replete with tensions between national and universal aspirations, played a decisive role in shaping Indian women's rights activism in the subsequent decades, promoting the idea that eastern femininity was unique in its spiritual orientation and that Asian feminist agendas were premised on different philosophical foundations than Western ones. Eastern women, therefore, could learn from each other more fruitfully than from others.

[182] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, *Inner Recesses: Outer Spaces.* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1986).
[183] George Arundale, Rukmiṇī Devī and Curuppumullagē Jinarājadāsa. *Theosophy As Beauty*. (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Pub. House, 1936), 2-7.

Chapter Two

"An Education of the Head, Hand and Heart": Idealizing Japan in Debates about Higher Education for Women in the Indian Ladies Magazine, 1900-1918.

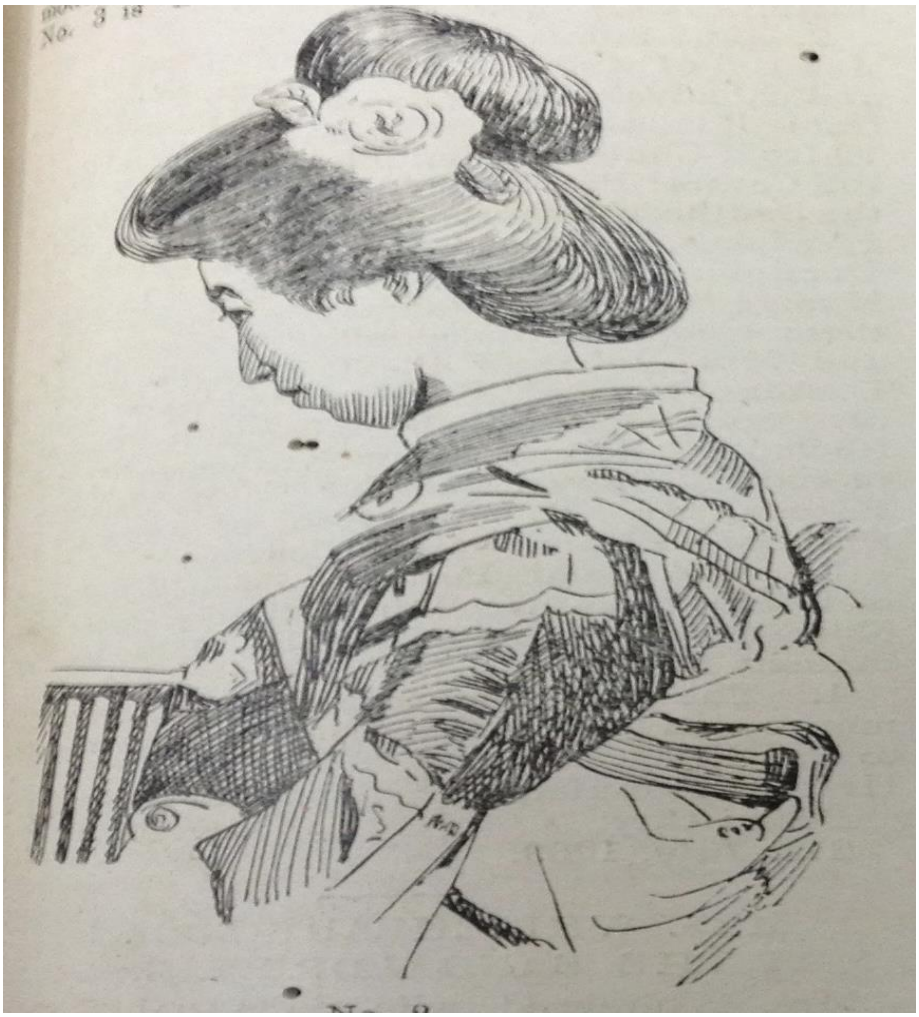

Figure 8: Close-up "Four Fashions of Hairdressing in Japan", *Indian Ladies Magazine*, July 1909.

"Where does civilization lie"? This is the question levelled unexpectedly at the reader in an otherwise unprepossessing article in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1909.[184] Published out of Madras for English-speaking Indian women, the magazine (referred to from now on as *ILM)* catered to the tastes and concerns of a burgeoning middle class Indian Anglophone population. In between a discussion of knots and combs and finely etched drawings of different kinds of hair arrangement in Japan, one can detect a thematic undercurrent that the British male author of the piece whispers in parenthesis: "Japan is progressing!"[185] We are told that married women fix their hair in a particular way, to distinguish themselves from 'misses' and that at the hair dressers it generally takes over thirty minutes to finish one hairstyle. But we are also informed that nowadays this practice is dying out. Young women increasingly prefer a new type of fashion that is "cheap and easy". The choice of schoolgirls and women employed in post offices, railway stations, firms and offices – the braided knot – is all the rage. Meanwhile men, the writer tells us, already abandoned their custom of wearing the hair long back in the "old, old days, 40 years ago". The emperor apparently told his people that the Americans and the Europeans and future allies in Europe all had cropped hair: "should we not follow them if we would be civilized?"[186] The writer reports that the "wise" people took the hint and followed his advice.

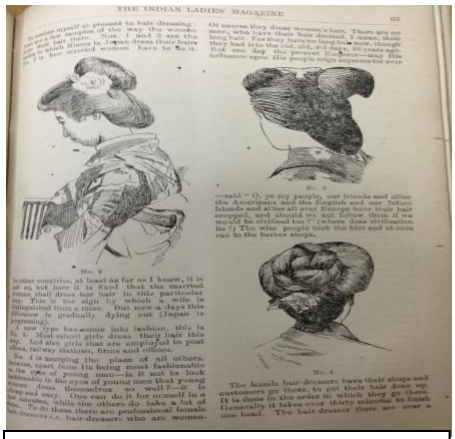

Figure 9. "Four Fashions of Hairdressing in Japan", *ILM*, August 1909.

At first glance, this discussion about Japanese hair and civilization might seem incongruous in a magazine for Indian women in the early 1900s. It is tempting to see this as a one-off piece of colonial ethnography, possibly even a peripheral nod to the rising public interest in Japan in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. However examining other issues of *ILM* between 1901 and 1918, it is clear that the curiosity towards the island nation was a longstanding one and that in the period before World War I, the "Indian ladies" that the magazine was addressed to were coming to see Japan as an exciting new exemplar of Asian civilization in the throes of modernization. If one moves beyond a national lens, Japan is more than simply present in these issues; it is ubiquitous. The very issue from 1909 referred to above, for example, presents a page-long illustration of "a Japanese Belle," a black and white ink drawing of a lady in full kimono, looking the reader squarely and somewhat impassively in the face, placed in the first few pages after the contents page (see Figure 10). Through the voluminous folds of her dress (attentively delineated in all its intricate patterns and layers) peeks out a small hand in which there is a fan, spread open, and showing the islands that make up her nation. Next to her, on the facing page is the third instalment of a travel memoir that chronicles an Englishwoman's "glimpses of a tour in Japan". Following this, in the same issue, we find the above story on hair dressing in Japan with

[184] S.R. Mallady, "Four Fashions of Hairdressing in Japan," *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol IX, No.2, (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, August 1909), 69.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

some detailed illustrations accompanying the article. In a volume that is barely 34 pages in length, it is significant that 10 pages (including photographs) are devoted to the description of Japanese customs and culture.

Other issues continue this preoccupation with Japan. Readers are told by way of a published excerpt from *The Madras Mail* that a fundraising concert for *ILM* was held in the city and that the evening's entertainment programme was inaugurated with a "pretty action song" during which the editor and a group of children (all Indian) were "all gracefully attired in Japanese dress".[187] It seems significant that this evocation of Japan occurs before the regular programme of enacting various tableaux from Hindu mythology and recitations of Victorian poetry and songs. In almost each issue of the magazine between 1909 and 1918, there are ethnographic, informative pieces on Japanese culture that include discussions about aspects of national dress such as 'obi,' 'tabis' and 'hakamas.' However, they are not limited to sartorial preoccupations. Colonial travel narratives about Japan also feature in these issues as do, most significantly, comparative assessments of Indian and Japanese female education.

Figure 10. Frontispiece, ILM, Vol IX, No.2, August 1909

The key question that arises here is: what accounts for this this preponderance of Japan-related content in a ladies magazine in early twentieth century India? Before answering that it may be useful here to first examine the nature and purpose of the magazine that featured this content. The *Indian Ladies Magazine* was published in Madras from 1901 to 1918 and from 1927 to 1938 by Kamala Satthianadhan and was one of the first periodicals to be edited by women in India. Published in English as opposed to vernacular Indian languages, it was designed to be read by both Indian and Western women, and had contributors from both of these groups. Satthianadhan's primary intention was to document and coordinate reforms for women and the first issue featured contributions from eminent women of the day like Annie Besant, Pandita Ramabai, the poet and politician Sarojini Naidu and Cornelia Sorabji. The magazine, published in monthly instalments by the Methodist Episcopal Press even drew the attention of the British media. The *London Times* for example wrote:

> We have received the first number of the Indian Ladies Magazine, a new periodical published in Madras. Its special characteristic is that it is written by Indian ladies, and its object is to promote in every way it can the social progress and culture of the women of India. The first number is bright and interesting and its range is most comprehensive, including reviews, articles on the Vedas and the History of Indian women, and practical recipes for cookery.[188]

[187] Anonymous, "The Concert in Aid of the Indian Ladies Magazine", *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol VII, (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, February 1917), 148.
[188] Padmini Sengupta, *The Portrait of an Indian Woman* (Calcutta: YMCA Pub. House, 1956), 41-44.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of myriad print publications for women in India, creating a collective identity that was previously unimaginable across local forms of connectedness.[189] *ILM*, therefore, was not alone in its existence. In fact there is a wealth of vernacular print publications for or by women in this period, particularly in Bengal, Madras, Bombay and the United Provinces that created a powerful participatory framework for elite and middle class women in the country. However, it is worth examining *ILM* in isolation for being one of the first all-India magazines that was in English and that actively sought to unite not only a spatially dispersed Indian readership, but a female one at large that figured both colonizer and colonized. In this context, the focus on Japan in the initial print run from 1901-1918 can be seen as more than incidental. Given the magazine's vested interest in pushing for reforms, and most specifically, for better secondary and higher education for girls and women, it was an important part of the feminine 'tool kit' for public persuasion in this period.

And the public did, in fact, require a lot of persuading. Both the conservative and liberal elements of Indian society were essentially resistant to recognizing the demands of Satthianadhan's generation of women – which centred on practicing the values of enlightened Victorian domesticity (in which women could be better "helpmeets" for their men via access to higher quality 'female appropriate' education). Women also appealed to the reading public in order to push the state into creating better provisions for primary, secondary and higher education. For reformers the slow-ness of the government to respond to growing needs for female literacy was the clearly problem that needed addressing. As they pointed out, the burden of educating Indian women had been carried squarely by various denominations of Christian missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[190] The Government of India pursued a policy of fiscal conservatism and non-intervention in social issues in these periods. Missionaries therefore took up the challenge of educating girls and women, primarily through *zenana* or private home instruction and later through schools. From the mid nineteenth century, as has been well chronicled by South Asia scholars, Indian male reformers began to encourage women's education and schools as part of a larger drive for social reform, and colleges were set up, primarily though contributions from the private sector rather than from the state.[191] There were difficulties of facing populations who didn't understand the advantages of educating women, the deficiency in the quality and availability of teachers and the rising cost of institution building. But the Government was forced to admit – first in 1904 and then in 1913 – that they had failed to adequately support education for girls.[192] In 1913, the Government of India asked local governments to submit schemes for the expansion of girls' education and the improvement of facilities for teacher training. But the local governments failed to account in detail in their proposals as to how to make improvements. Women's reformers of this time, therefore, perceived a sense of inertia in all parties involved to make good on the stated policy of offering 'grant-in-aid' to female schools.[193] Post-secondary education for women was also quite dismal in the 1900s. In 1902, there were 12 colleges for women – three each in Madras and Bengal and six in the United Provinces.[194] But as the Government Resolution on Education Policy (1913) reported, the system of education in these institutions was not related to

[189] Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 201), 1-28.
[190] Gauri Srivastava, *Women's Higher Education in the 19th Century* (New Delhi: Concept Pub. Co, 2000), 90.
[191] Ibid, 19.
[192] Y. B. Mathur, *Women's Education in India, 1813-1966* (London: Asia Pub. House, 1975), 56.
[193] Ibid, 57-59.
[194] Ibid, 52.

the practical and social needs of women; it was dominated by examinations and modelled after men's education, which didn't make sense given the lack of professional opportunities for women to enjoy after graduation.[195]

The Significance of Japan

For the handful of educated women at this juncture, campaigning for better funding and provision for women's education seemed the most logical step to promote. Anglo-Indian and Christian women led the ranks in terms of schooling, then Brahmins and other higher caste Hindus, Parsis, Jains and Muslim elites. This group was the precisely the readership that *ILM* catered to and could not have failed to notice the increasing prominence of Japanese topics and themes in the media after 1905. The victory of an Asian power against a European military giant during the Russo-Japanese war sent "shockwaves" through other Asian countries and colonies. It made the defeat of the West a realizable dream and vindicated anti-colonial visions of the revitalization of Asian influence and respect in the world.[196] It can be argued then that the appeal of Japan, articulated by Indian politicians and nationalists was so strong that it even trickled into the relatively depoliticized world of women's magazines. For example, the *Modern Review,* an English language publication aimed at a similarly bourgeois audience as *The Indian Ladies Magazine* published a regular flow of articles on the rise of Japan as a military and economic power in this same period. It is conceivable that women's magazines focused on the 'softer' ethnographic/ cultural dimensions of the new political incumbent in the "East"/ potential ally for India as envisioned by Indian nationalists. A further factor to consider is the strong influence of Western women on publications like *ILM.* While Satthianadhan founded the latter in 1901, the magazine received the patronage of wives of British government officials like Lady Benson. It stands to reason then that Victorian Japanophilia made its way into the content of the magazine. As suggested by many scholars, the turn of the century obsession with Japanese aesthetics (Japonisme) received a new boost from news of the 1905 war with Russia.[197]

Argument

Whilst it is clear that the *ILM* mirrored both the concerns of the nationalist Swadeshi[198] movement and Victorian Japonisme, I would like to argue that the inclusion of Japan-related cultural content in the years before WWI was part of a deliberative strategy on part of the magazine. Indian female contributors to Anglophone magazines made creative use of the discrete space of comparison and critique opened up by the example of another Asian country. In the early 1900s the example of Japan served as an important tool by which Indian women could distance themselves from the tutelage of European women. At the same time by the beginning of the First World War, presenting higher education in Japan as an appropriate synthesis of eastern values and modernity meant that they could offer counter arguments to conservative Indian positions against higher education for women in India. Many female writers countered the very essentialisms of

[195] Gauri Srivastava, 80.

[196] Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 91.

[197] Rosamund Bartlett, "Japonisme and Japanophobia: the Russo-Japanese War in Russian Cultural Consciousness," *The Russian Review* 67.1 (2008):15.

[198] Meaning 'Of One's Own'. A political movement in British India that encouraged domestic production and the boycott of foreign, especially British goods as a step toward home rule (1905-1917).

gender that Hindu nationalists were producing, arguing that Japan provided other ideals for Indian women to emulate than sacrifice and chastity that were still in line with 'Asiatic' values. These ideals included self-reliance, practicality and rationality alongside beauty and devotion. A transnational reference point or (view of the outside) presented Indian feminists of this period with an opportunity to voice their concerns with varied orthodoxies of public opinion. Thus, idealizing Japan offered a double band of protection, both from Western charges of being 'inferior' or 'backward' in a civilizational sense and that of being anti-patriotic Indians.

This argument in many ways goes against the grain of classic understandings of the women's movement in India. The nineteenth century in India is often categorized as the century of reform, where women's issues such as child marriage, polygamy, widow immolation, widow remarriage and female education came to assume central positions in national social movements. Much of the scholarship on this period, however, wrestles with Partha Chatterjee's well-known formulation that the 'woman question' was 'resolved' by the end of the nineteenth century through its patriarchal consignment by nationalists to a spiritual/inner domain of sovereignty and national culture, removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state.[199] This position has come under criticism, however, for discounting the agency of middle-class feminism and organized women's movements that continued well into the twentieth century. Scholars such as Himani Banerjee, for example, have pointed to the necessity of identifying dissent coming from women from different standpoints and "competing ideological strains and curricula" regarding women's education in particular, that went beyond the requirements of the Bengali, Hindu male elite imagination.[200] This chapter takes up that challenge by positing that Indian women writing about rights in the first decade of the twentieth century participated in a discourse of transnational Asian commonality in order to deftly articulate their opposition to both Victorian maternal imperialist[201] denunciations of Indian custom (with regard to women) as well as the feminizing and spiritualizing excesses of Indian nationalism. In their search for a more agentive middle-ground, many middle class Indian feminists turned to the example of Japan, particularly for its initiatives in the domain of higher education for women.

In particular, this chapter examines two key types of Indian feminist engagement with Japan. The first can be best understood as 'imperial exposure and absorption,' where aspects of Japanese culture and life were introduced to the Indian female population via the travel writing of British travellers to the island nation. Early twentieth century British travelogues tended to emphasize the infrastructural developments in Japan; its fast-paced transition from the 'Old Japan' of geishas and jin-rikshas to thriving urban centers crisscrossed with telegraph wires. The concern with Japan as a nexus of 'tradition and modernity' served as important leverage in imperialist arguments against Indian political demands for greater autonomy from Britain. Most significantly colonial commentators continually stressed the social and economic 'backwardness' of India and the comparative 'higher status' of women in Japan.

During the pre-war period, however, we see a very important reconfiguration of the relationship between British and Indian women, reflected in the mediating example of Japan.

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[199] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 116–34.

[200] Himani Bannerjee, "Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 43 (26 October 1991): 50-54.

[201] See Barbara N. Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945," *Women's Studies International Forum*. 13. (1990): 309-321.

While the victory of Japan in 1905 caused British travellers to reflect disapprovingly on relative Indian 'backwardness,' it served the opposite purpose within the Indian population on the whole, and as seen here, even among women. The critique of India and Indian nationalism was not met happily by an Indian female readership now more critical of colonial government. As a result, more articles written by Indian women dwelled on Japanese example as a positive incitement for change in India. The second theme this chapter focuses on then, is the idea of resistance. While *ILM* contributors absorbed colonial tropes about Japanese refinement of taste and efficiency – they argued for their easy applicability in India and attempted to bridge the very gap that colonial travelogues and ethnographies sought to place between Japan and India. Articles about Japan thus, often served as a rebuttal to Western feminists that sought to speak for Indian women or emphasize their 'backwardness,' emphasizing cultural 'sympathy' rather than hierarchical difference. In the third and final section of the chapter we examine the ways that resistance to both imperialist and Indian public opinion was articulated using the writing by and about three key contributors to *ILM* in this period: G.R. Joyser, Lilavati Singh and Kamala Satthianadhan.

A. Gardening and Government: Colonial Ethnographies of Japan for Indians

The preponderance of Japanese themes in a magazine for Indian ladies in 1909 is in part explicable by the worldwide interest in Japan, following its apparently unexpected victory against Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. As discussed earlier, this triumph of an Asian power over a forceful European military power was enthusiastically celebrated by societies under the yoke of colonial subjugation. A plethora of Western writers and journalists poured into Japan in this period, following the opening up of Japanese borders to global trade. And Euro-American commentators thrilled at the chance to mine a previously 'closed' culture, sharing its particularities and exoticism with the world.

Figure 11: Photograph included in Lady Benson's third published account of her travels in Tokyo, ILM, August 1909

Colonial female writers also displayed a significant interest in the workings of Japanese society and importantly, published their travelogues and commentary on this new 'upstart' nation in English language media beyond the metropolis to Anglophone literary spheres in the colony. As Antoinette Burton, Barbara Ramusack and Kumari Jayawardena have already demonstrated, Western women were predominantly complicit in the project of empire and hence, functioned as 'maternal imperialists' even as they wrote on themes of indigenous social uplift and women's rights in the colony.[202] What is less commented on, however, is the extent to which imperial travelogues,

[202] See Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule (*New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2011) and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007).

ethnographies and commentaries written by western women often served a dual function: that of familiarizing their Indian female readership with not only Anglo-American women's issues but alternative intra-colonial models of domesticity and civic participation for women, and then, that of hierarchizing them against each other in terms of most 'modernized' to least. With regard to Japan, Anglophone writing generally articulated two related tropes: that of the country's rapid and therefore admirable technological and infrastructural prowess at the turn of the century and its age-old aesthetic refinement, potentially under threat from industrialization. Both of these discourses, however, served as useful smokescreens for talking about India. For imperialist writers, Japan's advancement provided the opportune counterpoint to India's relative 'backwardness' and hence, the necessity of British imperial rule over it. Comparing the status of women in both countries particularly was an integral component of the case against granting greater political autonomy to Indians.

In Lady Benson's serialized account of Japan (published over 4 issues of *ILM*), the usual emphasis on Japanese modernization is fully in place. She describes Tokyo for example as "an enormous town" that is "nearly as big as London".[203] The wide streets are thick overhead with telegraph, telephone and electric tram wires that makes the "air look like a gigantic spider's web!" This striking image of a tentacled creature overlying the city evokes both the ominousness of the dark industrialized landscape as well as its potential to expand and knit together the city geographically. As in Canada, she then argues, the telephone and telegraph poles are made of gigantic pine trees that remain in their natural state. After taking an imagined aerial view of the city in which the houses are roofed with dark tiles and the inhabitants are clothed in dark purple, or black clothes such that the street crowd looks "even blacker than a Dublin or London street crowd" she opines that "in another 20 or 30 years there would be nothing Japanese-looking left in Tokio!" This type of comment evokes a common anxiety expressed in Western writing about Japan in this period in which the organicism of the Japanese landscape (and exceptionalism of its culture) risked being taken over by the imitation of the West.[204] "Already," she argues, the public buildings are being built and in Greek and French chateau style architecture and the dwelling houses are like "the ugliest and plainest of European houses, and with nearly as many storeys" that is illogical in a country so prone to earthquakes.[205] This dark imitation landscape counter-poses depictions of 'old Japan' as seen here during her visit to the Emperor's Palace:

> On the tops [of the Palace] of the sloping grass mounds that surround these moats grow the oldest and most gracefully fantastic of pine trees with branches sweeping to the ground in great bending curves. They are so gnarled and knotted, they look like antediluvian sentinels, keeping guard round the Palace. The moat used to be filled with thousands of lotus lilies, but alas! these have been cleared away.[206]

[203] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol IX, No.2, (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, August 1909), 49.
[204] See Carl Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
[205] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 49.
[206] Ibid.

This passage suggests that an older era of grace, yielding and even a slower temporality of stillness are being marginalized in favour of busy dark crowds. The time of lotuses (famously symbolic of eastern spirituality) and "antediluvian sentinels" is potentially ending, which provokes a sigh of regret from Benson. On a different serialized account she likewise counterposes the idyll of the natural forest in Ueno Park, Tokyo with the roar of arsenal machinery making guns and weapons for the defence of the nation: "alas! The smuts and smoke from the furnaces fell silently into the forest glades, bearing a death sentence to the trees and flowers there, for some of the noblest of the trees had already withered at the top, showing that the beautiful garden is doomed".[207]

Nonetheless, there is much that persists of old Japan that remains to celebrate. One of the key factors is its continuing natural beauty as well as cultural premium on aesthetic refinement. She begins one of the accounts of the trip, for example, by talking about the clear blue skies and paddy fields in the countryside and then describing an avenue she sees on the way from Tokyo to Nikko that is full of gigantic cryptomeria trees planted by pilgrims too poor to make other offerings to the shrine there. The avenue, which used to be 80 miles long, has now been cut short to 25 miles due to fire. However, what remains is "glorious," leading into the sacred temples and tombs of Nikko. This occasions her to comment that it would be a "splendid thing" if priests in India would similarly tell pilgrims to the numerous sacred pilgrimage sites to plant tamarind or Asoka trees along the roads: "How beautiful would be the approaches to Conjeevaram and Madura, and Tanjore and Trichonopoly, and Rameswaram in the south of India; and how beautiful would be the surroundings of Benares, and Hurdwar and Poori!"[208] Benson strives to communicate her awareness of Indian religious contexts and practices – a sort of insider status – and in doing so, tries to present her critique of Indian practices as well grounded. Japan provides the perfect model that India fails to live up to and that is not only because of the absence of cryptomeria trees but the rather, the absence of a public sensibility of practicality and good taste. She exhibits a typically colonial distrust of unruly Indian subjects in the observation that only Tamarind and Asoka trees would survive in India, given the "death-dealing knives" of rampaging goat herds who "swarm over the country" causing Municipal Councillors and forest officers to despair. In contrast, the route from Tokyo and Nikko, however, is perfectly pristine and as she repeatedly observes is naturally beautiful.

These kinds of speculations on the Japanese cultivation of natural beauty punctuate many of Benson's accounts in the serialized narrative of her trip. At the end of one of these accounts for example, she continues the comparison between Japan and India suggesting that "life could be made more beautiful in Madras, if the people would follow the example of the Tokio people and plant avenues of beautiful flowering trees, say laburnums, pagoda trees, flame of the forest and coral trees, and spend more of their life out of doors admiring the beauties of Nature".[209] For her it isn't simply that the Indians lack initiative in planting trees; they lack a public sensibility that is appreciative of nature:

> In Madras, avenues are planted it is true, but people seem to consider that it is mainly, if solely, for the benefit of their goats and cows. How beautiful the streets in Madras could be made if the people

[207] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol IX, No.2, (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, August 1909), 51.
[208] Ibid., 50.
[209] Ibid., 52.

> could be taught to respect the life and growth of trees and shrubs, and […] be taught to enjoy the beauties of foliage and flowers. One of the advantages of travel is picking up new ideas, and new methods.[210]

Madras has trees but these serve a practical function. In Benson's view Indians are so far from an intuitive appreciation of nature that they must be 'taught' to respect "the life and growth of trees" and it is clear that their respect for animal life doesn't constitute the kind of public sensibility she would like to see emerging. She also provides a moment of reflection that travel has the potential to introduce new ideas and methods and, (contrary to the implied inertia of Indians), the English not only learn various traditions from other nations, they surpass the latter in their reproductions:

> For Japan was introduced into England the country of chrysanthemums, and now there are more beautiful chrysanthemums to be seen in England than in Japan itself. From Japan was introduced the Rambler Roses. And now more beautiful specimens can be seen all over England, in labourer's cottages, and in the gardens of Lords and Ladies, than in Japan itself. [211]

The comparison here of course refers to a larger body of work in which colonial travellers to Japan evinced nationalistic sentiment even in their appreciation of Japanese life and cultural forms. Japan was to be admired but still, it was to be emphasized, behind Europe in the hierarchy of capabilities and refinement. However, the ultimate object of Benson's comparison is not England but India. It is telling that in this and other serialized accounts of her journey, she returns to comparison by the end of the narrative, wishing that Indians could learn from the Japanese:

> It would be delightful if from Japan could be introduced into India the love and culture of trees, and flowers and gardens, so that in some ten years hence, it could truly be said "Indians cultivate their flowering trees and shrubs and spend their leisure and holidays in admiring them just like the people of Japan.[212]

What stands out in these kinds of observations (which are plentiful in Benson's narratives) is an incipient notion of Japan as a possible model for India, in this case, in terms of horticultural practices, but later extended to other aspects of society. It is also possibly to read a more deep-seated critique here of an absence of vitality in terms of "picking up new ideas, and new methods" – perhaps the very benchmark of the "modern" mind? Unlike the English who adopted the Rambler Rose from the Japanese and even perfected it further, her statements imply that Indians fail to adapt and learn techniques from abroad. They must therefore be 'taught' how to love trees, and flowers and gardens.

[210] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 52.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid., 53.

From Gardens to Temples

Yet it soon becomes clear that it's not just gardens that Indians don't appreciate sufficiently. The contrast that Benson draws between the two countries is more transparently hierarchical when she describes, on another account of her the distinctions of Japanese temple art:

> Having passed through this building,
> Visitors find themselves in a huge courtyard
> Stone paved, all elaborately carved,
> all exquisitely painted, all in good repair
> and all full of most interesting details.
> It has truly been said of these buildings
> that "though there is gorgeousness, there
> is no gaudiness. The sobriety which is the keynote of
> Japanese taste, gives all the elaborate designs and
> bright colours its own chaste character.[213]

Benson employs the politics of citation here, legitimizing her narrative by way of quoting an English translation of "Professor K. Wadagaki of the Imperial University".[214] Quoting from a scholar, (and a Japanese one rather than a foreigner), constitutes a tactic to provide greater credibility to her claim of the sobriety of Japanese taste. It is clear that Benson is impressed by every aspect of design and the totality of its execution (indicated by her repetition of "all" as in "all elaborately painted, all in good repair"). On its own this kind of romanticized view of the refinement of Japanese artistic forms is typical of colonial ethnographies of Japan.[215] However, there is an additional potency to the statements when one reads them in light of her subsequent analysis of Indian temple art, which follows shortly after her description of Japanese "sobriety":

> It is impossible to convey any idea of the elaborate painting, carving, and designs in these temples. Visitors to Madura, Tanjore or Rameswaram can form no idea of them from thinking of the temples there. In Madura the most remarkable features of the temple are their size and colossal stone carvings of the pillars and figures on these the paint is daubed on, and is extraordinarily crude and elementary in application, while the temples themselves are dark, and kept in a state of disrepair and untidiness, not to say uncleanliness.[216]

It is perhaps not an overstatement to say that for Benson, taste equates to racial character and while the temple in Tokyo demonstrates the restrained and considered nature of the Japanese, the crudeness of the carvings in Madura points to a lack of precision in the Indian hand and mind. The paint is 'daubed on' and the temples are uncared for. There is ambition in the creation of "colossal" sized figures, but also a pretension to greatness that is unmerited.

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[213] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 50.
[214] Ibid.
[215] For an overview of these again see Carl Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
[216] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 50.

Overarchingly Benson's critique is predominantly rooted in the idea of care. Indians, as we have seen before, betray a lack of concern in the beauty of nature. They lack the ability to even artistically or architecturally render refinement and protect these 'lesser' creations from disrepair. Finally, it is not a great leap from here to argue that they lack the ability to care for themselves as proclaimed by the contemporary Indian nationalist 'Swadesh' or 'Self-Rule' movement:

> Since the advent of the British rule in India the care and keeping and management of the temples of India have been entirely Swadeshi. What has been the results? Can the English look to the efficiency of this entirely Swadeshi control, financially, and otherwise, as an exhibition and evidence of the fitness of Indians for the further control and management of other departments? For the good of the country it is to be sincerely hoped that any further control that may devolve upon Indians will be more to […] has been the up-keep and care bestowed on their temples![217]

In contrast, of course, the Japanese are full of initiative:

> The temples of the Shoguns (like everywhere else in Japan) are in perfect repair, and absolutely daintily clean, and fresh. The court yards contain well cares for and flourishing trees, of rarity and value. There is not a weed to be seen, not a stray piece of paper to be picked up, not a single plank, or hinge, or mat, or scroll that needs repair. As the temples are wooden structures, in a land of tense moisture, and great extremes of climate, this alone is a wonderful testimony to the efficiency and thoroughness of the Japanese guardianship of their temples.[218]

Temples to Governments

The guardianship of temples naturally leads the author to broach the question of national guardianship. Here Benson turns sporadically to history to continue assessing Japan's abilities to that of Britain and then India's political achievements in comparison to Japan's. When describing Ieyasu Tokugawa "one of the greatest generals, and altogether the greatest ruler that Japan has ever produced" she notes that he was born in A.D. 1542 "the same year as Akbar, the greatest Mogul Emperor of Northern India".[219] Benson implies gently that Ieyasu's rule cannot compare to the vitality of British achievement during his lifetime, which overlapped with the reigns of Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, and a portion of the reign of James I - "years that witnessed the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the Reformation, the life and writings of Shakespeare, and Spencer and Bacon, years which teemed with celebrated events, and celebrated personages".[220] Nonetheless, Ieyasu's initiative was significant. He built powerful strongholds, made new highways, established a system of posts, and promulgated new laws. Most importantly, she argues, he established order in Japan:

[217]Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 50.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan IV", *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol IX, No.3 (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, September 1909), 82.
[220] Ibid.

> It must be remembered that Japan in those days was completely shut off from the rest of the world. Japan was only discovered by the Portuguese in the year that Ieyasu was born […] Japan was during his early manhood in a state of utter anarchy and disarray. Each baron in his fastness was a law unto himself. It was the in the same condition as the Deccan of India of which we read. It is difficult to imagine a more deplorable condition than that of the unhappy provinces of the Deccan during the whole of the sixteenth century. The Kings seem to have had no occupation but war. Scarcely a year passed in which the villages were not subjected to rapine, and their fruits of industry blasted by wanton irruptions […] [221]

While the subject is Tokugawa history, Benson seemingly cannot help but bring up India, with the warring kings of the Deccan providing yet another example of the inefficacy of Indian rule. We return also to the idea that Indians are lacking in care, with wanton rulers who cruelly oppress their subjects. The obvious lesson is that the British government is more beneficial for or *caring* of native interests than indigenous ones:

> No Government, however tyrannical, could have inflicted anything like the wretched […] occasioned by these ceaseless devastations. So inestimable is the blessing conferred by a strong Government in India, in putting down internecine war, and giving repose and confidence back to the people.[222]

Interestingly, however, she returns to discussing Japan after this brief foray into Indian history by drawing an analogy between the British role in India and the beginning of effective Tokugawa rule in Japan: "It was just the task that England accomplished in India, that Ieyasu set himself to bring about in Japan".[223] This clearly establishes a civilizational hierarchy in which India is in the lowest position. While Ieyasu's rule lead to the "two and half centuries of unbroken peace" until Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853, no further mention is made of the initiatives by Moghul or Deccan rulers to quell internecine warfare. With the arrival of England, the story ends. Of course, Western influence is still positioned as the ultimate catalyst of change in Japan as Benson mentions that Perry's arrival led to the revolution of 1868 and the break up of Japanese feudalism and government. And Ieyasu's grandson, Iemitsu's policy of closing the door to the all foreigners for 150 years, was possibly a regressive step, freezing the culture in place (with mixed effects):

> "Old Japan" as we know it from the Dutch accounts, from art, from the stage, remained crystallized – the "Old Japan" of feudalism, of hara-kiri, of a society engaged in castes and officered red by spies and censors, the "Old Japan" of an ever increasing skill in lacquer and porcelain, of aristocratic punctilio, of supremely exquisite taste.[224]

[221] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan IV", 82.
[222] Ibid., 83.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid. She notes that this information is from "Things Japanese" by contemporary author B.H. Chamberlain.

Still, Japanese history, in Benson's account is a history of change, especially after the arrival of Ieyasu Tokugawa. India's political achievements in comparison are positioned as disorderly and ineffective, requiring proper tutelage and guardianship, just like its temples.

Women and the Country

The final and most salient domain for our purposes in which the civilizations discourse played out was in terms of assessments of the status of women's education in India. As Lata Mani has argued, the subject of reforms for women in Indian society was a crucial site for contestations between the British and Hindu elites for power in the nineteenth century.[225] Each claimed to be bettering the status of Indian women in order to bolster their claims to modernity. It is not surprising then that in interactions between British feminists in India and Indian women who took an interest in the "woman question," the treatment of women in Japan became a useful smokescreen through which to battle out the legitimacy of empire in India. As women's education became an index of national modernity, pointing to the deficiencies of it in India was a means of demonstrating the cultural backwardness of the country. In Benson's travelogue she makes it a point to visit a girls school in Japan where she observes in some detail the daily practices of the school. In addition to praising the efficiency they inculcated in girls, she commends the financial structuring of the school: "The fees paid by the girls in the "Industrial School" were uniform, e.g., 8 yen= Rs 6/a month. Contrast this with the fees paid by girls in Indian schools, and reflect!"[226] As usual, India is diminished in the comparison. She reports that after reading a report on a Hindu Girls School in a wealthy part of Madras, she determines that " a total income of Rs 300 a year for 126 girls which gibes an average fee of a little over 2 annas 4 pies a head per month […] I wonder what the Japanese would say to these figures?" What is the reason for this discrepancy in the amount of monthly and annual school payments? The answer, for Benson is clear:

> Why should Hindu girls not pay fees for their Education? The truth is that Hindus do not wish for, or value, Education for their women. There are of course a few, a very few exceptions, but they hardly influence in any way the vast majority. The education of Mahomedan women is practically nil.[227]

We return here to the idea of care, or India's lack of it, in this instance, for its female citizens. Benson argues that not only do Hindus and Muslims (in this case both are equivalent) not pay adequate fees; they don't take adequate interest in the quality of what is taught:

> We were much struck in Japan by the large size but cheap, light construction of the buildings erected for schools. It seemed to us as if the Japanese thought most of what went on *inside* the buildings, and of what was put inside the pupils' heads, than they did of the cost, and look, and lasting powers of the buildings themselves. In a few generations, when the whole population of Japan is educated and civilized, those people can then set to work and build elaborate

[225] See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2007).
[226] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 51.
[227] Ibid.

> school buildings, but what is needed now is the spread of learning, and the clearing away of ignorance and superstition and for that purpose light inexpensive buildings are all that the nation can afford, in addition to the enormous taxation imposed on the people for the Army, and the Navy, for Railroads, and Public buildings, for Engineering works, and the innumerable other works necessitated by modern civilization.[228]

Benson's description of Japan as catching up to the requirements of "modern civilization" and of India as lagging behind in "ignorance and superstition" was not a unique one of course. Other ethnographic articles and travel accounts of life in Japan also iterated these ideas. And in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* they seem to become more aggressive progressively in the tone of their comparison between Indian and Japanese women. For example, S.R. Mallady (ostensibly a British male commentator who wrote frequently in *ILM*) offers a detailed assessment of the lives of women in Hamamaten in 1909, where he finds women working in many occupations – as booking clerks at railway stations, subordinate clerks in every branch, in "the telephone exchange as exchange girls".[229] Asking these women questions, by being a "silly boy" as he terms himself, he also able to glean that they are quite contented with these jobs. From here however he turns his gaze to his intended readership back in India and issues a direct challenge to them:

> Daughters of India, when do you take up your long neglected tasks? When do you rise up after the interests of your country? When do you prove equal to the sisters going before you and prove true to the traditions they handed down to you? Shortly? But, why not now? Why not get up, right as you are, walk straight where you are wanted and take up the work in hand. Why do you not shun that ugly, unbecoming bashfulness and false modesty and walk to work by the side of your brother? Then you will have the floral crown adorn your head. You often complain that men restrained woman from undertaking bold enterprises. I grant it. If he did, he was inconsiderate. But just remember: did you never disobey man; did you never overrule him? And why not in this case? If you did it in a case of not much consequence, why not here in a case which is full of consequence for the country and for humanity?[230]

The impatience in his tone here is unmistakeable. And all the more impactful as it comes right after his descriptive article detailing all the ways in which Japanese women participate in public life. Conveniently of course, and in keeping with Victorian attributions of culture to racial character, the bashfulness and modesty of Indian women are presented as completely self-wrought. Without discussion of the colonial state, or even broader patriarchal social structures (here conflated together in the category of 'men'), the blame here for "neglecting" their tasks for the nation is placed squarely on the shoulders of the women themselves.

[228] Lady Benson, "Glimpses of a Tour in Japan III", 51.
[229] S.R. Mallady, "Occupations of Women in Japan", *Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol IX, No.1 (July 1909), 15.
[230] Ibid, 16.

B. Forming a Counter-Narrative

Thus far, I have discussed how early twentieth century travelogues by visitors from British India to Japan introduced a discourse of cultural comparison between the two nations. This material, from the perspective of empire studies is actually under analyzed. Investigations of colonial ethnography in India have usually focused on Indian mobilities in the West or colonial ethnographies of South Asia, hardly examining the inter-Asian contents of this genre. However, to conclude the conversation here would be misleading. Simultaneous to publications such as Lady Benson's in *ILM*, Indian contributors to the magazine not only read ethnographic materials but were attendant to the hierarchies implicit in them. In fact, in the period before World War I, we see an intensification of tensions between the Indian and European readers of the magazine, centring on the very notion of the civilizational 'backwardness' of India. Much of this tension derived from the increased presence of Indian civil servants in the British bureaucracy. The upper to middle class English educated wives of this native bourgeois class found themselves negotiating cultural differences with their English or European counterparts both in print and in person. And most interestingly, *ILM* in this period can be read as a dialogue between the English and Indian readers of the magazine on the intertwined issues of Indian culture and agendas for Home Rule.

The English readership of the magazine for example, demonstrated the tensions of 'contact zones' by pointing, among other things, to the absence of 'social chivalry' among Indians, particularly with regard to women.[231] Consider, for example, the "Letter to the Editor" written by an anonymous, self-titled "English woman" about the subject of "Social Intercourse".[232] Replying indignantly to a letter by "an Indian lady" who critiqued her original letter (published in an earlier issue that year), she railed against the "natural absence of social chivalry" of Indians towards women in the context of encounters between British families and Indian men.[233] Referring to the growing social interchange between British officials and a class of native elites, the writer indignantly argues that an Indian man has "all the Oriental's contempt of women and yet demands to be freely admitted to the society of English ladies for whom in his heart he has no respect".[234] This of course points to two long-standing stereotypes – that all "Orientals" share the same prejudice towards women and that English society is above this kind of gender prejudice. Thus, to enter English society without adhering to its assumed high standard of respect for women is to show an interloper's ill-informed ambition. The writer takes pains to state this even more explicitly by saying that when Indians "meet us Englishwomen publicly" they are especially disrespectful, because, as she states "we appear to them vastly emancipated and they may say to themselves: "*we* are not going to bring this about for our women folk". [235]

In addition to seeing Indian men as backwards in their misogyny, the writer further posits the blame for social tensions seemingly present between Indians and the British at social gatherings

[231] 'Contact Zones' as defined in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2010).
[232] "Letters to the Editor: Social Intercourse – III: An Englishwoman in India," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol XX (July 1910-June 1911), 316.
[233] Ibid., 317.
[234] Ibid., 316.
[235] Ibid.

unevenly on the Indian side. Here, just as in Lady Benson's accounts of Japan, the problem is presented as simply one of contrasting racial character. Whilst the Englishman, she argues, is "cold and reserved," he at the same time insists on the "sacred and solemn nature" of friendship. And in comparison, she suggests that Indians though warm and impulsive are suspicious and opportunistic, glibly trying to turn their social connections to the British to their material advantage. The natural solution to this impasse in social relations is for women of the two countries to act as bridge-makers:

> Naturally it is extremely difficult for these opposites to coalesce. I say that this approach of the two nations must come through the women of each. The harder and more practical austerities of the Englishman are softened through the Englishwoman; and her Indian sister through the common bond of womanhood, which above and beyond official and material considerations, can hold out to her the hand of fellowship.[236]

This appeal from "An Englishwoman in India" to Indian women ultimately ends with a call to them to "leaven" with "growing international sympathy" the "reserve" of the Englishwoman.[237] However this is far from a singular opinion piece. Read in the context of the broader dialogue between the Suffragette movement and Indian women's rights reformers in this period, it suggests a gap within a mentality that held "the common bond of womanhood" as the prime unifier among women of the world and the more variegated commitments of colonized women, necessarily attendant to the very "official and material considerations" the writer asks them to bypass.

The Indian Response

While *ILM* didn't publish a reply to the above piece it is clear that the agendas of the European and Indian readership of the magazine were different in the early 1900s. For the most part, Indian contributors offered a defensive evaluation of Hindu tradition and its treatment of women in the past as well as present. They often focused on re-assessing Indian cultural values ostensibly under attack by Western commentators. And a few, such as "An Indian Lady," for example, sought to rehabilitate the colonial view of Indian men as oppressive towards Indian women. For example in response to the charge levelled by "An Englishwoman in India" about the absence of "natural chivalry" among Indian men, "An Indian Lady" offers a plea to do away with the "evils" that oppress Indian women such as early marriage, seclusion and enforced widowhood. But at the same time, she takes pains to say that there is much to be thankful for, as "Indian men have not forgotten their chivalry".[238] She argues that Western understandings should not be imposed and that an Eastern ideal of chivalry is different from a Western one: "for instance, is it not chivalry that will not, among the higher castes, allow the women to work"?[239] She also seems to have "An Englishwoman" in mind by hoping that "innate chivalry" of "our men" will be awakened and that they will try to better the condition of their wives, mothers and sisters as a result. This is not only a rejection of the former's view that Indian men lack chivalry naturally and

[236] "Letters to the Editor", 318.
[237] "The Indian Woman", *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol XX (July 1910-June 1911), 129.
[238] Ibid, 131.
[239] Ibid.

are only able to mimic it to low standards, but an optimistic view overall of the changes that can be positively encouraged by appealing to morals, rather than vehemently critiquing members of Indian society.

Female contributors to *ILM* also wrote to redeem the status of Indian women, often referring to a mythical pantheon of women like Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti to attest to their glorious position in Indian antiquity. Some, like the aforementioned "Indian Lady," wrote about the custom of calling women "pativratas" or those who "keep the view to their husbands":

> Is this not a grand title? For after all is said and done, what greater duties has a woman than the dear duties of home? […] If we turn to the stories of our ancestors as we are ever doing, we find there standing in bold outline before us, the stories of the great Pativratas, women like Sita, Droupadi, Damayanti, Chandramati, and others.[240]

Articles such as "The True Indian" by a female writer named Indu-Mati Pal further rehabilitated *pativrata* by calling it a sign of the "genuine spirit" of "Oriental" philosophy.[241] Statements such as these were clearly responding to the critical views aired by the English contributors to *ILM* that attacked the submissive role of women in Indian society. But they also went one step further by figuring women into an overarching debate about the civilizational and spiritual underpinnings of East and West. For Pal, Indian civilization's greatest contribution is the "ideal of the individual" as "fair and tender but *not* weak".[242] It is to be inferred then that the very self-less quality of the Indian woman (embodied in her practice of *pativrata* or devotion to the husband) is the spiritual lesson for humanity at large. For Pal, materialism, and as she derisively puts it, the "Prussian gospel of power preached by Nitsche and Trietsche" may indeed be on the ascendant in the world.[243] This has led to the marginalization of Eastern philosophy, committed as it is in her view, to spiritual awakening. It might have also made the East "too good" while the rest of the world was "still uncivilized in the strictest sense of the word". In the face of Nietschean doctrines of the super man, eastern nations have certainly struggled at self-preservation. On the other hand, on a more positive note, she argues that they have also failed to exercise an "(unnatural) lust for world dominion".[244] "Asian man," she suggests, offered the "sublimest view of life" that the world was not ready to receive and appreciate. "He" correspondingly "consciously adopted a backsliding faith for the time being to show the West in its own language and with its own weapons, that brotherly guidance awaits the misguided".[245] In Pal's trajectory of world history, however, "Asia" is of course vindicated in the end:

> Who believes that, if this war ends the European peoples will not enter upon a career of daring any power to give a gun on their

[240] "The Indian Woman", 129.
[241] Indu-Mati Pal, "The True Indian", *Indian Ladies Magazine* XV, No.2 (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, October-December 1915), 38.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid.

> shoulders to kill some mother's darling boy? So then avarice of nations will end and Oriental philosophy will triumph.[246]

As Indu-Mati Pal's account shows, the "triumph" of the East is very much part of the defensive civilizations discourse of the period, concerned with re-appraising the culture of the colonized world. It is, after all, part and parcel of a broader essay in which she comments on the integral value of Indian music and food. However, it also indicates an important development in the discourse. Pal elaborates her trajectory of world history only to return to her original subject – the Indian woman - who embodies the very philosophy that will triumph at the end of history. This can be seen certainly as a means of affirming the Victorian and Hindu patriarchal rhetoric of the period that enshrined chastity and self-sacrifice as ideal virtues for women. Yet it can also be read as a means of inserting women into a kind of grand Hegelian narrative of modernity, where the antithesis and "avarice" of war will be followed by the synthesis of a world rebuilt along feminine values. That Indian women enact the very "spirit" of India, our "Mahadesh" or "great country" as she calls it is definite in her view. But they also personify the very essence of the future, the "Oriental philosophy" that she intuits that the world will come to seek after its near-devastation. This is due to the fact that they actually live on a regular basis, through practicing the roles of devoted wives, the values of selflessness and love that men (of any nation) can only aspire to:

> Where can you in all the world get the noble conception of wifehood, where the better-half of man is not an individual contracting to live with him on business terms, but so self-less and self-effacing, and so soluble as to permeate every pore of her partner and live *through him*? [247]

This "solubility" she points to is certainly an evocation of the ideal of the Victorian angel of the household, living only to nurture others. Yet in the context of a telos ending in "triumph," it may also suggest that Indian women possess a spiritual power that men would be wise to respect:

> It may be downright selfishness on part of the man, it may be a disgrace to the community that the husband should exploit the wife's virtue and be all-powerful. The ideal of the community may be a great blot on the civilisation of India; the ideal of the individual, the fair and tender but *not* weak, is sublime beyond imagination. The Indian woman is great as an individual, so is her class great, but let us not exploit her greatness.[248]

By "ideal of the community" Pal likely means the structures of social organization such as the caste system or perhaps even the family, that create conditions of unequal power since the subject of her overall attack is "Prussian gospels of power". India has no moral high ground in terms of the latter. However, privileging the "ideal of the individual," which stands for the "Oriental philosophy" of anti-materialism and selflessness[249] as "sublime" enables Pal to suggest

[246] "The True Indian", 38.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.
[249] With "ideal of the individual" understood as an ideal of high inner self-awareness rather than western individualism, with its selfish connotations.

the next logical step - which is to see the Indian woman on the whole as "great". It follows from this suggestion that gains in women's rights are imperative for this "great" category of person:

> The Indian woman is great but let us not exploit her greatness. Let her not be *so* great that she loses her self-respect, her pride without vanity, her honour without insolence. She must be emancipated more urgently than the slave or even the indentured labourer.[250]

With her 'greatness' being exploited by men, Pal argues that the Indian woman is oppressed by marriages that have become a form of "flesh bargain" and that the solemn duty of any man who would call themselves a "true Indian" would be to condemn forced marriages and move toward free choice for both men and women. This appeal to male rescue, further emphasized by images of men extending their hands to their "sisters" wrecked like the "Lusitania",[251] is ubiquitous in *ILM* this period. What is worth considering however, is that the oppression of Indian women is grounded in the notion of their untapped spiritual potency; a potency that may well be required by the world in the future at the end of cataclysmic wars. While this is hardly a radical feminist point, it does diverge from pure Bengali and Victorian notions of women as static repositories of virtue. Here, the association with feminine spirituality and the future, however subtle, is worth noting because it enables Pal and others like her, to delicately counter the arrogance of the magazine's Western female readership (often focused on the Indian woman predominantly as victim) as well as Hindu conservative claims that the drive for reforms for women was solely a product of Westernization and its "evils". Rather, she claims, reform is necessary to preserve the dignity of those who embody the very essence of tradition or "Oriental philosophy" most fully, as well as to pave the way for a uniquely non-Western, non-materialist future.

The Need for Other Examples

Instead of being purely defensive, the majority of writings published in the pre-war period also acknowledged the presence of a very real problem in Indian society – the lack of primary and secondary education for Indian women. The articles from the early years of *ILM* worked to incorporate education into the ideal of the *pativrata*, often commenting how the ancient pantheon of women were "fairly well educated" and shared in the duties and responsibilities of their husbands.[252] They tried to counter conservative Hindu opposition by arguing that education did not "mar" the character of a *patrivrata* but in fact, "enhanced her value".[253] Perhaps one of the most impassioned voices in *ILM* was that of "An Indian Lady," who we discussed earlier. Between 1903-1917 the anonymous writer wrote a series of articles about the necessity for high quality universities for women in India. Without proper higher education, she argued, the vast majority of women in the country were unable to be proper "helpmeets" to their husbands. As seen below, her writing demonstrates the key tensions women of this period – allaying public doubts that essential and virtuous Indian femininity itself was under threat - as well as the ever-present bogey of cultural alienation via undue Western influence:

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[250] "The True Indian", 39.
[251] A well-known ship that was known to have capsized
[252] "The True Indian", 39.
[253] Ibid.

> And here the question of higher education comes in. We hear people exclaiming against University educations for women. But why make a sweeping deduction? But, with regard to this education of Indian women, the world has two great fears. One is that education will make them unwomanly, and another is that it will make them too Westernized. An English gentleman writes thus: " a great many native thinkers in this country will hold the opinion that great changes had better never be attempted, and there is no doubt that anything like a universal change in the habits of Indian women of rank would be a serious affair from a social point of view. Much, for instance, of mistaken philanthropy has been uttered and printed on the marriage question in India, and I could explain some serious result which most certainly follow in the sudden alteration of the Hindu custom of forbidding the marriage of Hindu widows". This is a fairly extreme standpoint, but to balance it, there are many who think that reforms are absolutely necessary. And, I ask, why should we be afraid of such reforms? Would Columbus have discovered America if he had been afraid to cross the seas?[254]

What is interesting about "An Indian Lady's" response is the overture to opinions and examples "outside" the boundaries of India. She quotes an unknown "English gentleman" here to argue against but also refers to Columbus in promoting fearlessness in venturing into the unknown. Whilst the external references here are invoked in service of her argument, it is worth noting that for contributors to *ILM* in this period, there was more and more of a need to compare the situation of Indian women to those abroad. This was born of the realization that women in other parts of the world *were* in a better condition socially and politically and could be sources of emulation and learning. In another piece, for example, she writes that:

> There was never a time in the history of India when the need for educated and well trained women was so great as now. If they will set themselves patiently to learn the lessons of the experience of women in other lands and then bring trained intellects and disciplined wills to the service of their country, there is no limit to the service which they may render.[255]

For many *ILM* writers, women from other countries were spearheading changes that were too slow moving in India given the inefficiency of the government's 'grant-in-aid' system. It made sense therefore to assess their experiences and attempt to apply them in the Indian context. As a result, some writing (such as Indu-Mati Pal's) even betrayed a slight rebuke of the nationalist Swadeshi movement that called on Indians to reject the consumption of foreign products and culture (or even foreign wives), arguing that to be truly patriotic would first and foremost mean taking practical steps to improve conditions of life for Indian women and for the country itself:

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[254] "The Indian Woman", 130.

[255] "The Woman's Christian College, Madras", *Indian Ladies Magazine* XV, No.3 (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, January-March 1916), 157.

> He would be a true Indian who would that [help ill-fated Lusitania of Indian womanhood], not one who merely heralds the glory of the women of Hind. Indians who have married abroad have also shown greater patriotism, and have done more practical work for their homeland than the effeminate abuse of everything foreign.[256]

One could perhaps read this as a direct critique of Indian bourgeois men who offered resistance to "foreign" things. However, the contributors of *ILM* also took pains to showcase their own nationalist loyalties. The writings from this period demonstrate that whilst the Indian female contributors to *ILM* wanted desperately to improve the condition of Indian women (mainly, but not exclusively, with regard to their access to higher education), and were searching for precedents from other countries to draw upon, they were aware of the hazards of emulating British women in these efforts. Given the extensive conservative critique of the Victorian New Woman with her perceived "unfeminine" proclivities both in Britain and India, women's reformers were anxious to distance themselves from associations with suffragettes. They were also anxious not to be "denationalized," as seen in the opinion of this anonymous commentator:

> It is the fashion generally to compare Indian women with English women. But such a comparison can never be correct, for it must be remembered that both are the results of two distinct sets of environment and of two distinct sets of evolution. Why should the Indian woman take her education as the English does? There is the new woman development in England. Why be afraid of the same thing here? Besides, it must be remembered that the new woman phase is only one bad outcome among many good results. And the great end in view is worth the risk. Moreover if we pursue the education in the right way, there is no fear of the Indian woman being denationalized. Her own inherent dignity, her own national instinct will save her. At the same time, we cannot be too careful of such a point. As a writer says "Above all things, let Indian women be Indian women. They can seek no lovelier grace, no higher destiny to fulfil, in accordance with the special gifts and powers and needs of their temperaments, the highest intellectual, social and spiritual life that lies within their reach. [257]

The dilemma for these contributors was clearly then that in order to legitimize reforms for women, a comparative view was necessary to shame conservative public opinion into acknowledging the need for better education for women in India. However, holding English women up as examples could not be a productive option as Indian women were tiring of unfavourable comparisons with the latter. In addition, it offended their nascent critique of imperial civilizational hierarchies. A model of balance was required – one that would accommodate both a

[256] "The True Indian", 39.
[257] "The Indian Woman", 130.

drive for improvements over the status quo as well as mitigate Hindu/Victorian patriarchal anxieties of the Indian woman losing her "good" feminine character in the process of becoming educated.

Enter Japan

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the preponderance of articles about Japanese themes in *ILM* in the pre-war years, suggests that for the Indian readership, Japan came to occupy just such a position – as the quintessential example of 'balance' of Eastern and Western civilizational values. It became thus, perceived as a reasonable touchstone for changes to programmes of female education both at primary and higher levels. Many female contributors at this time reiterated classic Orientalist essentialisms about East and West, which saw the East as spiritual and the West as material. Japan, seen as firmly entrenched in the process of modernization, in the early 1900s began to emerge as the perfect "synthesis" of the two. "An Indian Lady" commented that "modern" India should, in similar fashion, move towards a dual culture.

> As a writer says "I for one would raise my voice in favour of equalizing Eastern and Western culture, and not letting either be predominant. Modern India should inherit equally- rather possess equally – the one by inheritance, the other by acquirement – a dual culture and all the vitalizing influences of East and West".[258]

ILM readers, therefore, were informed on a regular basis of the advancements made in Japan with regard to women's issues. As we will see in the next section, alongside ethnographic pieces about Japanese culture, observations by Indian women on Japan's universities for women were featured prominently, as were accounts of travels to Japan. Running through these was of course a typically colonial understanding of the position of women as reflective of the quality of a civilization:

> A learned English scholar writing about the recent prosperity of Japan wrote thus; "the family life of a country, and the position occupied by women are probably the best tests of its civilisation. In comparing nation with civilisation, we have no doubt in asserting that one of the most important forces in the progress of Society is the education that which the mothers convey to the children, and no nation can ever be great unless women rise to a high plane of thought and life, and kindle and foster similar ideas in the minds of the young.[259]

But, what is less obvious, is that the civilizational appraisal of Japan allowed for a concomitant critique of Indian society by comparison:

[258] "The Indian Woman", 131.
[259] Ibid., 132.

> If we examine ourselves in the light of the observations made above, we shall see on what a low grade we are. But we have not always been so. [260]

And with the comparison to Japan the urgency of the "plight" of the uneducated Indian woman, unable to access a "high plane of thought and life" could be stressed, without signifying a treacherous loyalty to either the foreign government or to British Suffragette "militants". By focusing on Japan, contributors to *ILM* could unreservedly push the Indian bourgeois public to recognize the crisis at the heart of their society. And the crisis could be framed as a lack of "modernity" or "illumination":

> The difference between an educated woman and an uneducated one is like the difference between a dark room, and one lighted by all the present-day means of illumination. We can bear dark rooms sometimes but can we, without an effort leave alone ignorant women?[261]

C. 'A People Whom We Know': Japan as the Appropriate Model for Indian Women's Education

It is worthwhile at this point to return to Lady Benson's account of travels to Japan. As discussed earlier in this chapter, for Benson, descriptions of Japan served to highlight to the magazine's readership how India lacked an equivalent public sensibility of good taste and practicality. This formed the basis for a critique of, among other things, the lack of higher education planning for women in India. Other colonial narratives also pointed to the gap or difference between the quality of life for women in India and in Japan. However, as we have seen above, readers and contributors to *ILM* were not necessarily in agreement with colonial evaluations of Indian culture and the position of women within it. When Japan was discussed, colonial commentary often hinged on establishing a near absolute hierarchical distance between the two countries. Similarly, for Indian conservative critics of reforms for women, there was an implicit rather than explicit notion of India's cultural distance in their constant promotion of a romanticized Indian exceptionalism along the lines of 'our women are like no other, and shouldn't be changed to be like any other.' For Indian contributors to *ILM*, then, a key means of dismantling both of these conceptions of cultural distance was to use literature about life in "eastern" countries to build an Asianist notion of civilizational continuity rather than difference. In addition, whilst the number was not great by any means, the early 1900s did see a number of Indian middle to upper middle class women travelling outside the nation to Southeast Asia and Japan in the service of various institutions and causes. These women, on their return, contributed to the pre-existing discourse of the commonality of Asian cultures, and most importantly, promoted the idea that Asian women could learn from each other in their respective struggles toward greater emancipation. In the period between 1900 and the First World War therefore, we see a number of consistent themes emerging in writing about Japan by Indian women. Focusing particularly on three contributors - G.R. Joyser, Lilavati Singh and Kamala Satthianadhan – we see that they first and foremost offered celebratory assessments

[260] G.R. Joyser, "The Duties of Women," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol XV (January-March 1916), 12.
[261] Ibid.,13.

of Japanese culture and life that exhibited none of the nostalgia for "Old Japan" (as we have seen earlier) or patronizing comparisons with Europe that Western accounts tended to opt for. They also controverted notions of India's backwardness in relation to Japan by significantly pushing an Asianist agenda - stressing the continuum of shared culture and social customs that they saw between the two. Finally, all three women positioned Japan as a an easily replicable model for reform for women's issues in India, isolating secondary and higher education in particular, as domains in which Japanese outlooks and strategies could translate easily to the Indian context.

I. Joyser and Japan's Greatness

Alongside the Editor, Kamala Satthianadhan, one of the key writers for *ILM* was a regular contributor named G.R. Joyser. Although her name is an Anglophone one, Joyser was in all likelihood an Indian Christian woman, or an Anglo-Indian. Consistently using the third person "we" when speaking of Indians, she didn't identify herself as someone of European ancestry or more importantly, as a person with a 'foreign' vantage point. Writing for *ILM* primarily about aspects of Indian culture and the position of Indian women in society, Joyser made clear her commitment to women's reform from the position of societal insider. Her writing was inflected with strong nationalist undertones and in the articles she wrote on Japan, she reflected a common bias held by of the period – that India was naturally the civilizational 'fountainhead' of all other Asian nations. In an article entitled "Education in Japan" for example, she summarizes the history of Japan exclusively in terms of it being the site of the culmination of Indic Buddhism:

> Formerly, only the Buddhists were in power in this country [India], Asoka and the other members of that race were great Emperors [….] The growth of Sankara slowly removed the influence of that sect in this country. But Buddhistic members had in the beginning gone out in various directions. Some went to China: some to Burma: and some to Ceylon. Many went to the Island of Japan, and settled there. In course of time their language and names became different. But then old Indian civilization was not forgotten [there]. Women acquired learning as before, and became learned.[262]

Following this quick, skewed introduction to Japan that established first and foremost, its debt to Indian Buddhism, she quickly highlights the commensurability of Japanese social stratifications to Indian ones:

> The Japanese are a people whom we know. They too have distinctions of caste such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Soodra. [263]

Of course the distinctions between the Samurai and other caste groups were gradually "softened" she says, by the West, and it is unclear whether or not she approves of this change. It is important to note here that Joyser doesn't provide a detailed comparison of caste in Japan and India. Instead, it is sufficient simply to state a general familiarity or knowledge of the country. This suggests that

[262] G.R. Joyser, "Education in Japan," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol XVII (Madras: Methodist Episcopal Press, August 1917), 37.
[263] Ibid.

the presentation of information was purely gestural in these types of articles. Her purpose is argumentative rather than plainly descriptive or informative and the article can be seen as a form of counter to accounts like that of Lady Benson's and others. Instead of Indians being uninterested in travel and learning, and thus completely unaware of Japanese culture, as Benson had suggested, Joyser argues instead for intimacy. The Japanese are not only a people Indians "know of" but a people whom they "know" in the sense of being able to relate to them via history and shared social custom. It is also, then, an appeal at the same time to the Indian (and potentially conservative) readership of the magazine not to discount the reforms undertaken in Japan as impracticable for Indian women.

Importantly, she boldly attributes almost all the recent achievements of the Japanese to the initiative of their women. The world has been praising Japan, she argues, for their victory in the war against Russia in 1905. But for Joyser, the success was primarily due to social rather than military reasons:

> Forgotten now that some years ago there was a remarkable war between the Japanese and that colossal power, Russia. Ever since the Japanese have been receiving the admiration of the world. And what was the cause of their greatness? After the conclusion of the war, a distinguished and respected Japanese noblewoman, marchioness Oyama, wrote a big book on the war between the Russians and the Japanese. She says there; "For the greatness which the Japanese have achieved today, women are the original cause. Women have become more educated, and extended their knowledge, and removed all the evils of society, and helped all the ways towards the elevation of the country.[264]

Quoting further from the Marchioness, Joyser elaborated on the ways in which Japanese women actually worked towards this 'elevation.' Citing that the information provided was held by Oyama to be "from direct experience," she argues that "thousands of soldiers" in the war were nursed by the "high class dames" of the country whose "natural instincts" had been developed by books and extensive schooling. Further, Joyser details the wartime efforts of Japanese women gifted in sculpture and painting who sent "ten thousand waistbands" to Japanese soldiers afflicted with cholera during the war. Women's war efforts, she argues, allowed for the country to operate efficiently and as one entity: "if women had been uneducated would all of these things happened and conduced to the greatness of Japan?"[265]

Of course education is key to feminine initiative and the promotion of national unity in Joyser's account. Citing another presumable authority on Japan, a "Mr. Stead" who wrote a book by the title of "Japan by the Japanese," she observes that the education of women has existed from the very beginning in Japan: "It never had a break {there} as it has among us".[266] Then, interestingly, she provides a page long list of literary works in Chinese and Japanese that the readership of *ILM* would certainly not have been familiar with. But this referencing of information about Japanese feminine agency is not without performative value. In purporting to 'inform' the

[264] G.R. Joyser, "Education in Japan", 38.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.

reader of the literary achievements of Asian women, Joyser is also creating a catalogue of her own that can be referenced again just as she cites Oyama and Stead in her own article. What this makes clear is that in the absence of first-hand information about Japanese women, there was power in citing and reciting tracts of information that would bolster the all-important argument that women were valued and occupied positions of respect in many Asian countries. She suggests for example that scholars held important positions in "China and Siam" and that scholastic institutions were "entirely manned by women" at {unspecified} junctures of time in the past.[267] This long history of feminine scholarly and literary achievement is now complemented by trade-schools and technical education initiatives for women that make them powerful contributors to the modern economy: "Women do not even waste a minute. Like mechanical apparatuses, they do set things at set times".[268]

These laudatory remarks about Japan enable Joyser to then prod the Indian readership of the magazine into some healthy self-criticism. Her article presents the idea that in Japan the education of women is part and parcel of its modernizing and enterprising spirit. This is very much in line with the arguments offered by European travellers like Lady Benson and S.R. Mallady. She bemoans the fact that despite being a demographically larger and agriculturally sustained nation, India has failed to develop innovations in agriculture (and therefore by implication in other domains such as women's rights) by now:

> Agriculture is the mainstay of India. Japan with all its host of islands would not equal in extent our Presidency in Madras. There are three hundred million subjects in India. Japan has but forty five millions. Some years ago Swamy Sadananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, returning from a visit to Japan, gave a lecture on the agricultural education prevailing there. If we think over the facts presented by him, we shall see to what depths we have fallen. The Japanese grow in one acre of their stony lands three times what we grow in the same extent of our fertile lands. But we have not only been quietly ignoring Art and Commerce, but we are living an inglorious hand-to-mouth life by our incompetence to manage even our Agriculture.[269]

However, where Joyser signals her departure from previous European voices published in *ILM* is in her relative optimism for the agency of Indian women in the future based on precedents in the distant past. Despite the focus on Japan throughout the article, she ends with a focus on the joint achievements of Indian women (including mythological characters assumed to have been real) in an unspecified 'ancient' period including the Buddhist and Vedic eras, and Japanese women in the Russo-Japanese war:

> Who helped Sankaracharya in his great task? An educated woman. Who helped the propagation of the Buddhistic faith? A few educated women. Who caused the greatness of Japan? Many high-souled mothers. It seems wrong for men to think that women are incapable

[267] G.R. Joyser, "Education in Japan", 39.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid., 40.

> of protecting themselves and hide away in darkness and ignorance. It cannot be said that mere physical strength is the sole protection of a person. Was it by that strength that Seeta protected herself from the terrific, vindictive, demoniacal strength of Ravana?[270]

While Joyser's account of history in both of these countries is factually circumspect, she demonstrates an overt will to construct a shared history of feminine achievement grounded in truths that, if invoked enough, could mobilize Indian society to follow the example of a people that it "knows". This, in other words, stands at odds with Mallady's denigrating assessment of Indian women as cowering in "ugly unbecoming bashfulness and modesty" in the shadow of their men. [271] For Joyser the example of Japan is an illuminating one. She provides it as a means for Indian women to assert their right to education without having to appeal to "great women who lived in the past". Understanding "facts" about the lives of Japanese women is a principal means of both inspiring women and helping them to overturn the assumptions of mental or physical inferiority being circulated around them:

> We have often heard of the great women who lived in the past. But the names of Sita, Savitry, and others, familiar to our ears from childhood, might evoke indifference as we grow up. Then other examples have to be presented.[272]

II. Encouraging Cultural Solidarity: Lilavati Singh and Saving the Far East for Christ

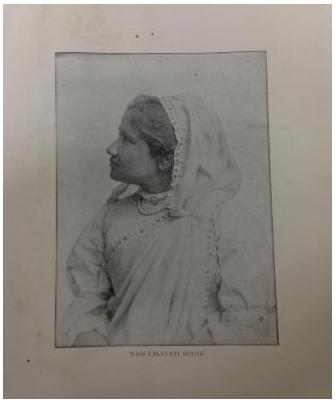


Figure 12: Photograph of Lilavati Singh, *ILM*, 1909.

A similar turn towards Japan as a model for social reform can be discerned in the example of Lilavati Singh, who was written about in a long biographic article in the July 1909 issue of *ILM*. Born in Gorakhpur, India in 1868, Singh was a Christian missionary who worked on Christian women's education throughout her life. Singh's biographer in *ILM* (who remained anonymous in the article) presented her life as poised between two ideological strands available to many Indian women in the early 1900s. One of these was a commitment to an increasingly internationalizing global Christian movement. The other represented growing national pride.[273] Interestingly, while the author of the article doesn't go so far as to discuss race at the outset, it is clear that Singh's life is presented as one in which the challenges of being Christian (with its imbrication in European social worlds) and authentically Indian at the same time were pronounced. In providing a sustained focus on this aspect of Singh's life – her attempts to navigate the European biases of the worlds she encountered through her commitment to Christian education - it is clear that the author

[270] G.R. Joyser, "Education in Japan", 41.
[271] S.R. Mallady, "Occupations of Women in Japan," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol IX, No.1 (August 1909), 15.
[272] G.R. Joyser, "Education in Japan", 37.
[273] Ludwig Frieder discusses this tension in his article about the World Missionary Conference in Tambaram in 1938. See "Mona Hensman: an Indian Woman at the World Missionary Conference in Tambaram (1938)," *Journal of World Christianity* 6.1 (2016): 123-147.

and possibly *ILM* itself was expressing some resistance to the existing narratives of women's unity transcending divides between the colonizer and colonized. This is indicated, for example, in the author's opening discussion about Singh's name, where she comments that as a third generation Christian, Singh was baptized as Ethel Raphael.[274] However, while her father retained his Christian name of Stephen Raphael, Singh opted for her original Rajput-Gurkha first name as well as surname on reaching adulthood. This reference to Singh's pride in her non-Christian name (read alongside other descriptions of her assertive choices in the face of racial and cultural tensions throughout the article) indicates that *ILM* sought to bring to the surface a phenomenon that its European readership often disparaged: that Indian women in this period were becoming aware of the need to establish culturally rooted identities alongside commitments to more universally framed causes like a world religion or women's welfare. It is in this context that the author's account of Singh's voyage to and impressions of Japan acquire more than mere anecdotal significance. It suggests that for Indian reformers concerned with women's education in the early 1900s, the necessity to branch out of European intellectual influence and find alternative sources of inspiration was starting to be deeply felt.

Influences in Early Life

At the outset of the biography the author informs us that as Singh was motherless as a child, the tutelage of Miss Isabella Thoburn at the Christian Girls School in Lucknow proved to be a very influential relationship. The article then highlights the benefic quality of this relationship between Thoburn and her pupil during her childhood only to follow it with accounts of tensions between Singh and her European colleagues later in life (both in Lucknow and abroad at missionary conferences). It is evident as a result that the key interest of the biographer is in showcasing the possibilities and limits of Singh's interracial interactions much more than other aspects of her life such as, for example, her changing personal interpretations of Christian doctrine.

The author takes pains to warmly capture the fact that Miss Thoburn opened up new intellectual 'worlds' for the young Indian Christian. We are told that after her mother's passing she was transferred to the school in Lucknow but it was not until 1882 that Miss Thoburn became an important part of her life. Singh wrote in 1882 that "it was during this year that I became acquainted with her. What a beautiful year it was to me. She taught us literature, and I can never forget how her enthusiasm for heroes and poets kindled a like enthusiasm in us".[275] The power of this guidance and friendship is emphasized through the early part of Singh's biography, suggesting the strong horizontal bonds that could emerge between Indian and European women via the mechanism of Christian schooling.[276] The primarily role the educator could play here was that of expanding the mental horizons of a native student with promise: "What a new world opened to me the day she gave us our first baby lesson in botany! I felt my heart and mind expanding as she told us leaves were to trees what our lungs are to us, and how we could find out the age of trees by the rings under the bark".[277] Miss Thoburn's "real, practical, quiet and beautiful Christian life" appealed even more than her words and Singh found that under her deep tutelage she developed not only an appreciation for Christian values, but an appreciation of her own heritage: "She made

[274]Anonymous, "Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol IX, No.1 (July 1909), 223.
[275] Ibid, 225.
[276] See Jane Haggis and Margaret Allen for more on this topic. "Imperial Emotions: Affective Communities of Mission in British Protestant Women's Missionary Publications C1880-1920," *Journal of Social History* (2008): 691-716.
[277] "Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 225.

me love India; she planted true patriotism in me, so that I gave up the foreign dress".[278] This representation of Miss Thoburn, mediated by the perspective of the author of the article of course, seems important. In highlighting the positive patriotic influence British teachers could have on their Indian pupils, the writer is seemingly steering clear of the conservative Hindu outlook of the nineteenth century in which all white women were seen as inculcating cultural betrayal in their Indian female pupils.

We next hear that early exposure to Miss Thoburn and Christian education also invigorated Singh's educational possibilities. While her family thought she should marry after obtaining her college entrance certificate (which, as the biographer points out, was a "remarkable achievement" in 1886 for a woman to pass in India) Miss Thoburn sparked her ambition for further career progression. Singh expressed a desire to acquire higher graduate degrees and also the awareness that she could never have been an efficient worker without the educational advantage that missionary schooling enabled her to have. Thoburn soon launched a college for Christian girls in Asia in Lucknow that Singh attended for some time before moving to Bethune College in Calcutta where she became exposed to the principles of the Brahmo Samaj movement through her female colleagues. Following this she decided to take up a life of Christian service and moved back to Lucknow to work as a teacher in Thoburn's school.

We are informed that it was in this period during her introduction to teaching that Singh navigated the tensions of racial inequality within empire, which can be seen as crucial to understanding her search for non-white solidarities in Christian organizations later in life. Her biographer focuses on this issue with some frankness. She writes that Singh was the only Indian teacher on the college staff – the "only Indian member of the missionary family".[279] And while the American missionaries welcomed her as their equal, this was not the case with the European and Eurasian teachers:

> the educated Indian Christian has not gained his rightful place in his own land even yet, and eighteen years ago it was a revolutionary thought that an Indian woman could equal a foreigner in ability and position.[280]

The complex social life of India was reflected in the college at Lucknow where the race question had always been one of "great perplexity": "it could not be ignored, it could not be settled in any direct way".[281] The author suggests that it was Miss Thoburn's love for Singh and confidence in her that helped her through this difficult period. Thus, within the first few pages of this account of Lilavati Singh's life, she is able to establish two things. Firstly that not all relationships between British and Indian women resulted in the abandonment of Indian culture and national feeling among Indian women as feared by nationalists. If anything, through the deep bonds of 'sisterhood,' the latter could feel emboldened to apply their skills towards working for their country. Second, we are also made to understand that the picture nonetheless was not fully

[278] Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 225.
[279] Ibid., 226.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid.

rosy; even within shared confessional organizations, Indian Christian women were encountering racist mentalities and hierarchies that made them feel like outsiders.

Going Abroad

Soon after graduating from college Singh made her first visit to America. The author tells us that "although she was away from India only a year, yet that period was full of new influences that made lasting impressions on life".[282] She spoke to large audiences of up to three hundred ministers. We are informed that she always appeared in her Indian costume and spoke in a "quiet and dignified manner" about higher education for the women of India. Not much more detail is provided about the America trip except that it marked Singh's first venture into foreign lands. After Miss Thoburn's death, Singh became a full missionary of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church and in 1902 she also became the vice-principal of a girls college in Lucknow. The other missionaries at the college had "little experience in India" and ostensibly Singh struggled here again with racial tensions: "The greatest care that brightened those dark months for Singh was the care of the garden in which she planted and arranged as she had seen Miss Thoburn do. Later she made some changes, and the beautiful rose arbour would remind the school girls for many years of Miss Singh".[283]

Japan

Instead of America it is Lilavati Singh's trip to Japan that becomes the centrepiece in the biographical sketch about her life. The author informs us that she was "deeply interested in the development of India," and especially in the growth of a "Christian Church of India" and that in the service of this goal, she had "carefully studied the problems and successes of other Asiatic countries, especially of Japan".[284] This was unsurprising given that "the influence of Japan has naturally been very great in arousing the political ambition of the people of India".[285] In 1907 an unexpected invitation came for Singh to go to Japan as the Indian delegate of the Young Women's Christian Association, to the Student's Christian Federation Conference at Tokyo. She was always interested in the Y.W.C.A and an active supporter of the Thoburn College branch of it but as she held no official connection to the organization was surprised at the invitation. The author comments proudly, "the Association made no mistake in choosing the woman, whom they thought, best represented the educated woman of India".[286]

For Singh the trip apparently served as a revelation of the strength of the global Christian student movement. With a membership of 113,000 students, including representatives from "all civilized nations" the Tokyo Conference was organized in order to promote the "evangelization of the world" and it brought home to Singh the actual international scale of the endeavour she was involved in:

> College men and women, demonstrating their oneness in Christ the influence of Christianity upon the educated classes, were gathered at the Tokyo Conference to discuss plans for the evangelization of the

[282] Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 227.
[283] Ibid., 228.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid.

> world. How suddenly the slow work, of saving India, became glorified, when viewed as a part of this worldwide movement.[287]

It was also, however, important in terms of making her specifically aware of the powerful role of "Orientals" in this global movement. Although the author does not provide details about the numbers of delegates from "Eastern nations" present she implies that there were enough vocal delegates from non-Western parts of the world that their power was noticed: "the prominence of the Oriental delegates at the Tokyo Conference was a revelation of the power of the East to the Orientals themselves, as well as to the Western delegates".[288] Citing an English secretary's comments to this effect as evidence, the writer notes that Singh was very prominent in the women's delegation and "made a strong impression on the Japanese".[289] It is clear from here on in the narrative that the writer intends to communicate the power of Singh's personality. We are told that she made friends with English, Swedish, and Dutch delegates and that as a result of those friendships and the understanding she showed of the problems of organizing Christian students' work in India she was elected chairman of the Women's Co-operating Committee. The author still indicates however that the most important factor in her election to this position was the effect that Singh had on the audience of Japanese women at the Conference:

> It was a gratification to the Conference leaders that Miss Singh so strongly impressed the Japanese. Looking upon the Indians as a subject race, the Japanese have hardly recognized them as their equals. While there were very intelligent Japanese women at the Conference, no woman made the impression that Miss Singh made. The Japanese women were especially delighted with her wonderful English and her powers as a speaker.[290]

While the Japanese were apparently surprised by the unexpected intelligence and articulacy of an Indian woman, the author suggests that Singh herself was unbiased by the racial hierarchies of the day, expressing a wholesome appreciation of aspects of Japanese life that she encountered:

> Miss Singh was charmed by the beauty of Japan, the cleanliness of the homes and streets; and the love of flowers shown by men, women and children; yet that which interested her most deeply was the independence of the Japanese shown in the indigenous character of all their work.[291]

Nonetheless, she was also attendant to the contemporary tendency of drawing comparisons between India and Japan. The writer informs us that while in Japan she spoke often of her great admiration for the Japanese women, yet there was a "touch of sadness" because she always bore her own country in mind:

> "It is all beautiful here," she said, "but like the mother who loves the sick, delicate, and unhappy child more than the beautiful and happy

[287] Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 228.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Ibid.

> ones, so the more I see of what the women of Japan have gained and accomplished, the more my heart aches with love for my own poor, beloved India and my own sisters there".[292]

Reflections

While the visit of an Indian Christian woman to Japan in 1907 and spare commentary about it is hardly the foundation for a broad political stance, it is important to note that it signifies two important discursive shifts – one away from the Hindu commentators that were reluctant to acknowledge the duress of Indian female illiteracy, and the other critical of the Euro-centrism of Christian organizations. Readers of *ILM* in this period would have noticed that the entire narrative of Lilavati Singh's life was focused primarily on the Conference in Tokyo. The openly appreciative assessment of Singh's life builds to this single event and concludes soon after. Whilst the narrative remains impressionistic, offering little by the way of factual information about Japan or Japanese women it does evoke the trope of comparison in order to shame the urban educated reader of *ILM* into the recognition of relative Indian illiteracy. Whilst doing so, however, it also refuses to pander to a dim European view of Indian women as stagnant. In fact, while bemoaning the condition of her "sisters" in her "poor" and "beloved" country, Singh is presented as ultimately optimistic about the future. In an address in Cincinnati in 1908, for example, she compared Japan and India in the following way:

> At first I was discouraged over India, for in Japan ninety one out of a hundred women are attending schools, while in India the percentage is seven out of a thousand. But when I stopped to think of the Ramabais, the Sorabjies, Miss Chuckerbutty, and scores of others, I took courage. These women can stand beside the women of any country and hold their own. And these have come out of a land cursed with child marriage, the zenana system, and other similar evils.[293]

While the numbers speak of dismal rates of literacy, Singh seems to have focused on the strength of character of a few of its stalwart women's rights reformers. Her enthusiasm goes far enough to even verge on cultural arrogance. There is an implication that when assessed on character, Indian women could be more powerful than their Japanese counterparts; they could be the leaders of the entire continent itself:

> Oh, the vast possibilities in the Indian mind and character! India is worth saving. And again, I repeat, India must be saved for her own sake, and for the sake of all she can do for Asia, and she must be saved through her women.[294]

Whilst the idea of leading Asia is not developed further, it is a recurrent theme juxtaposed alongside frequent mentions of the arrogance and exclusivity of Europeans in Christian organizations. During the Conference itself we are told that Singh pleaded "persistently" for the

[292] Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 228.
[293] Ibid., 229.
[294] Ibid.

larger recognition of Indian womens' work at Y.W.C.As, which had thus far been "ignored by consideration of [the] apparently greater efficiency of European and Eurasian workers".[295] Further, after her return from Japan to India, she was invited to spend a couple of months visiting Christian colleges and student conferences in Europe. Here the author says "having never come into close contact with Englishwomen in India, she [Singh] feared that the race prejudice so prominent there might prevent her from having any influence with British students".[296] They were, however, on the whole very impressed by her and she served, as the writer points out (possibly in a tongue in cheek manner) as a "revelation of what an Indian lady might be".[297] Most importantly, the link between Singh and Asian Christianity is reinforced again by the mention of her trip to Holland where a Dutch delegate reportedly said:

> Not at Edinburgh, not at Zeist, did I feel so strongly God's work in Asia, as through Miss Singh's words, which made us European Christians feel ashamed of our little faith. I still hear her vision of the future of Asia – the far East for Christ. She made me feel the prophetic truth of her words.[298]

Readers of ILM, then, were being confronted with the example of Japan, not only to incite greater national self-critique when it came to the "woman question," but in order to construct the spectre of a future in which Indian women would potentially lead the vanguard "for Christ" in the East.

III. Japan as an Appropriate Model for Change: The Invisible Disputations of an Indian Woman in Japan

The writer who engaged with the topic of female education most directly was none other than the Editor of the magazine, Kamala Satthianadhan. Between 1901 and 1917 the magazine printed a number of informative articles about Japan (a sampling of which have been highlighted thus far in this chapter). As we saw with Joyser and Singh, most of this writing attempted to bridge the very gap that colonial travelogues and ethnographies sought to place between Japan and India. Where in fact hierarchies were hinted at (as we saw in both writers above), Indian civilization and its women were positioned as ancient sources and potentially future harbingers of inspiration, standing above other Asians.

However, instead of establishing cultural connectedness as Joyser did, Satthianadhan's writing in *ILM* was more concerned with using Japan as a case study to argue for "learning by doing" or a form of education that would prepare Indian women to play more active roles in society. In stressing the combined practicality, dynamism and grace of female Japanese university students, her work countered the very essentialisms of gender that strict Hindu nationalists of the period were producing, suggesting that Japan provided ideals for Indian women to emulate that were still broadly in line with 'Asiatic' values.

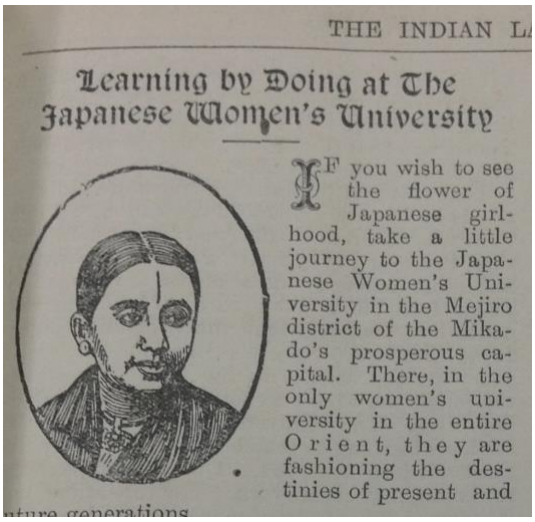
[295] Lilavati Singh (A Sketch)", 230.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Ibid.

Educational Perspectives of the Day

At this juncture it is worth revisiting the cultural world that Satthianadhan was writing within. As Meredith Borthwick has argued, during the second half of the nineteenth century *bhadralok* reformers in Bengal paid attention to the education of middle class women.[299] By 1900, and thus in the period that *ILM* was conceived, women's education was accepted by most reformist middle-class families. But the reigning idea was that women should be educated to make better housewives and mothers rather than to earn money or to enter the public sphere. For Borthwick the *bhadramahila* ("gentle-woman") ideal in Bengal was created to "suit the purpose of an elite under colonial rule, combining the self-sacrificing virtues of the ideal Hindu woman with the Victorian woman's ability to co-operate in the furtherance of her husband's career".[300] Victorian notions of womanhood, transmitted through the colonial connection, were adapted to existing values of devotion to the husband, respect for elders and household competence. Thus the early twentieth century upper middle class woman in India was supposed to embody Victorian chastity, cleanliness, orderliness, thrift and a respectable awareness of public affairs or the world of men.[301] This combination of the Victorian concept of the practical wife who could bolster the success of her husband and Hindu spousal devotion spread far beyond the ambit of Bengal. Affecting Indian upper-middle class women throughout the country, Victorian values gained currency in the late nineteenth century by the dissemination of large numbers of journals and manuals for and by women. Kamala Satthianadhan, as a member of the Indian Christian community, was well entrenched in an Anglophone world, and thus exposed to both Victorian values[302] and bourgeois Hindu expectations for women. Consequently much of her writing does echo the idea (shared in both cultures) of woman as the rightful "helpmeet" of man.

Whilst political 'conservatives' and 'progressives' were distinctly at odds about the need for women's education in the 19th century, as Dagmar Engels argues by 1900 most reformist middle-class families in India acknowledged the desirability of women's education.[303] Until 1900 only women from Brahmo or westernized Hindu families were educated, but after 1900 the orthodox Hindu middle class also came to accept female education. However, women were being educated to make better mothers and housewives rather than to earn money or participate in public social life. And prior labels of 'conservative' and 'progressive' became less distinct in meaning under the influence of Hindu revivalist and nationalist movements in the late nineteenth century and early 1900s. The new 'progressives' adopted the old 'conservative' view on female education, arguing that in the face of oppressive British rule, women's education should be about upholding the traditional values of Indian society rather than bringing about social change. In this context, women themselves were often caught between expressing solidarity with nationalist aims and frustration at the continuing lack of access to formal education as well professional opportunity.

[299] Meredith Borthwick *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 1984), 159.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.
[302] This is elaborated on in Padmini Sengupta's biography of her mother: "It was natural that the influence of the West in such a home as Kamala was born into was stronger than in other families who had not been converted to Christianity" in *The Portrait of an Indian Woman* (Calcutta: YMCA Pub. House, 1956), 15.
[303] Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah?: Women in Bengal 1890-1939* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.


THE INDIAN L

Learning by Doing at The Japanese Women's University

IF you wish to see the flower of Japanese girlhood, take a little journey to the Japanese Women's University in the Mejiro district of the Mikado's prosperous capital. There, in the only women's university in the entire Orient, they are fashioning the destinies of present and

Figure 13: The Editor's pictorial logo next to her account of the Women's University in Japan

Satthianadhan's exposition of higher education for women in Japan must be read in a new light then when understood in the context of the educational perspectives of the day. Instead of simply offering a neutral description of the workings of the Japanese Women's University in Tokyo, her work offers what I term "invisible disputations," using the example of Japan to allay worries and presumptions about female higher education without making visible or naming the sources of these attitudes. This method of argumentation masquerading as informative travelogue is, in my view, a key signifier of the creative agency of number of women writers in this period. By anticipating several attitudes about higher education for women from a colonial Indian readership and countering them with examples from a transnational context, she appears to be providing the female readership of the magazine with content that would enable them to critique contemporary patriarchal fears of higher learning whilst remaining anchored within the nationalist fold.

Figuring Japan

Of course one of the first questions to ask before moving forward is: why did Satthianadhan travel to Japan in the early 1900s when so few Indian women were known to make international voyages? The answer to this is somewhat difficult to provide given the fact that it is not clear whether or not she even physically travelled there in the first place. There is no mention of a visit in the key source of published information about Satthianadhan's life – a biography written by her daughter Padmini Sengupta.[304] This is unusual given that Satthianadhan's other international voyage to England is described at length. However, in *ILM* Satthianadhan indicates that her account of life in a women's university in Japan is from first-hand experience. An illustration of her own face is included next to the title and more importantly she describes her meeting with President Naruse (the founder of the university) and the experience of having lunch at the cafeteria there as a first person witness. What we do know for certain is that Satthianadhan's husband – Dr. Samuel Satthianadhan - died in 1906 after completing a trip that had taken him first to Japan and then to the United States.[305] The latter was the founder of *Christian Patriot,* an authoritative newspaper for progressive Indian Christians that was distinguished by its ecumenical and international perspective. He was in Japan for either an international missionary conference or Y.M.C.A. activity (of which he was one of the founding members in Madras in 1888). Satthianadhan then, ostensibly accompanied her husband on this visit to Japan in 1906, going alongside him in the capacity of a supportive spouse or as a fellow invitee of missionary organizations. Either way, the reasons or even the facts of her going aren't outlined and it is possible that her writing in *ILM* is based on the letters home that her husband sent her from Japan.

[304] Padmini Sengupta, 15.
[305] Frieder Ludwig, 126.

What is clear however is that Satthianadhan intended for the Indian readership to be convinced of the authenticity of her experience as a woman in Japan. In an article entitled "Learning by Doing at the Japanese Women's University" she addresses the reader directly in the colloquial second person "you"[306] and introduces them in a vivid visual style to the university in the "Mejiro district of the Mikado's prosperous capital" which is introduced as the "only" institution for higher education for women in "the entire Orient". [307] Whilst Lady Benson's travelogues were designed for a distant audience at home and bolstered with citations of Japanese scholars on local history or architecture, Satthianadhan adopts a strategy of imaginative inclusion. Her usage of "you" prompts the reader to believe that they are in fact the viewer instead of the scenes that she has seen and creates the illusion of participation:

> The first impression of the place remains with you. As you enter the main gate, at the right and the left stand neat, red brick buildings. The Japanese is afraid of the earthquake and does not believe in erecting sky-scrapers. He does not allow his buildings to tower. Instead he spreads them over a large area […][308]

She then launches into a romantic evocation of the natural beauty of the place, again involving the reader in the project of imagining it:

> The drives, sidewalks, pathways, pavements and alleys are all solidly built and neatly kept. The dwarf, slender plants and shrubbery alongside the roads and walks are pruned in the characteristic Japanese style. Cherry Blossom Avenue conspicuously attracts attention. You enjoy the fragrance wafted from across the fields. The young rice charms your gaze. Green and golden tracts of beans in cultivation delight your eyes. Merry laughter and sweet music, melodies from the playground, classroom, observatory, and gymnasium float to you on the wings of the summer breeze.[309]

It is possible to read this kind of visually focused imagery as part of a typical practice of claiming authority in colonial travel writing. Satthianadhan here is clearly offering enough stereotypical images of Japan (such as the fragrance of Cherry Blossoms or the overall prioritization of sensory response in a country primarily depicted as a stronghold of the senses) to signal its correspondence to the hyperreal *image* of Japan that readers would have already held at the time. For colonial readers travel to Japan was perhaps not so much about new information about the country but a confirmation of what was already known via print capitalism in the late nineteenth century.

A cursory reading of this article would conclude that her observations are attempts to replicate the generic conventions of travel writing. However, I see Satthianadhan's efforts to involve the reader as well as the aspects of school life she chooses to focus on as emanating out of a particularly disputational impulse. There is potentially a project here of subverting the

[306] This was not a common stylistic convention in other writing in *ILM.*
[307] Kamala Satthianadhan, "Learning by Doing at the Japanese Women's University," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol. XX (July 1910-June 1911), 107.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid.

interpretive dominance of the kind of white colonial gaze implicit even in writing published in *ILM* itself such as that of the Lady Benson's. This is first indicated in Satthianadhan's confident assertions for the reader to follow her, an Indian woman, in her observations, without the aid of legitimizing citations from knowledgeable others. Primarily, however, it is indicated in her agenda right at the outset to correct received ideas about "Oriental" women.

From the very beginning Satthianadhan associates girlishness and beauty with Japanese women outwardly. They have "quaint modes of dressing their hair" with colored ribbons.[310] They waft through the campus on the "wings of a summer breeze, bringing laughter and music". And those who adopt fully "foreign" attire in "tight-fitting, well-tailored, dainty Western garb" still manage to harmonize a variety of bright, live colors. The effect of such descriptions is to promote to the reader the well-known stereotype of Japan as a picturesque place and as a site of visual culture and aesthetics. Another effect, however, is to convey the centrality of activity to these women. The very live-ness or brightness of their clothing imparts animation and positivity, rather than the characteristic decadence and languor attributed to Oriental women in Victorian travelogues:

> Your first and last impression of the University
> is that it is a busy place – a place where they do things.
> There is nothing of the staid, Nirvanic quietude
> That is generally regarded as an essential characteristic of
> Oriental institutions.[311]

Not De-Nationalizing

Whilst recovering the reputation of 'Oriental' women from Western commentary is a clear objective, Satthianadhan's more immediate target of criticism is none other than the Indian middle class public. In her writing in *ILM* she first and foremost targets the idea (in circulation in that period) that women's education is de-nationalizing. It is possible, she implies, in her use of the example of Japanese education, to selectively adopt what is constructive from other parts of the world without losing a sense of national identity and values:

> The guiding principles in drawing up the curricula as well as adopting methods in education are said to be the following: The courses of studies are framed after consulting those adopted in foreign countries and at the same time bearing in mind the condition of the Japanese women and the present need of the nation.[312]

She also includes a list of the subjects taught at the university to emphasize how the curriculum prepares students to have an understanding of their own culture and history alongside those of Europe:

[310] Kamala Satthianadhan, "Learning by Doing at the Japanese Women's University," 107.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Kamala Satthianadhan, "The Women's University in Japan," *Indian Ladies Magazine* Vol. XVII (August 1917), 257.

> *Subjects taught.* – Ethics, Practical Ethics, Etiquette, Psychology, Pedagogies, Child Study, Physiology, Hygiene, Japanese Language and Literature, English Language and Literature, Chinese Language and Literature, Physics and Applied Chemistry, Botany, Zoology, Nature Study, Applied Natural History, Horticulture, Minerology, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Astronomy, Economics, Japanese History, European History, History of Civilization of Japan and of Foreign Countries, History of Art […][313]

Further down the list she also enumerates the 'practical' courses offered such as:

> Domestic Science, Kindergarten, Manual Training, Conversation, Sewing, Singing, Piano, Violin Organ, Koto, Halberd, Chanoy, Artificial Flowers, Floral Arrangement, Painting, Cooking, Physical Exercises and a few others.[314]

Listing these courses was a means of demonstrating the roundedness of women's education in Japan as opposed to the lack of options in India. However, Satthianadhan's reference to courses geared towards cultivating the domestic capabilities of women also points to her interest in countering another prevalent argument of the time: that women's education would lead to the masculinizing of Indian women.

Not De-Feminizing

Higher education for women in the late nineteenth century prompted predictable fears: "will the woman, who has obtained the B.A. degree, cook or scour plates?"[315] As Borthwick states, "it was feared that educated women would no longer be able to fulfil their natural role, which was still that of housewife, wife and mother". [316] Male criticisms of the stereotype of the new educated woman continued well into the 1920s, painting her as a pretentious blue stocking who was domestically incompetent as opposed to the "traditional" housewife. The debate over education centred on the "true" role of women in society. Starting in the 1870s, the argument persisted that female education would do more harm than good. For example, the *Indian Mirror* condemned Calcutta University for sanctioning a scheme of education that "tends to unsex women". In the 1880s the *New Dispensation* maintained constant opposition to university education for women, predicting the alienation of female graduates from broader society:

> What are we to do with them? Are they to cook, nurse, feed their children, attend to their husbands' wants, be good women in every respect? They might have done each and all of these without becoming graduates…Where then is the use of degrees for women, unless they be asked to unsex themselves and like men go to compete with them in the active duties of life.[317]

[313] Ibid, 256.
[314] Ibid, 257.
[315] Meredith Borthwick, 106.
[316] Ibid, 105.
[317] Ibid, 106.

In the face of the gradual extension of female education in the latter half of the 1800s these critical voices continued into the new century. For the minority of educated women like Satthianadhan the task was one of answering charges of domestic incompetence or even of obscenity. The most straightforward way to do this of course was to offer the example of the past, of bringing up the perceived righteousness of educated women in ancient India as seen for example in Joyser's assertions that "high-souled mothers" impacted the course of events in India or informed the works of philosophers like Shankaracharya. Satthianadhan, however, avoids bolstering her argument with such assumptions or references to mythological characters. She is also careful not to resort to championing the virtues of contemporary educated English or American women. Instead, in her articles about Japan Satthianadhan clearly offers an argument against the conservative view (both in England and in India) that educated women risked losing their connection to the household by way of the Japanese example. While she quotes from Ruskin[318] and primarily regurgitates the Victorian ideal of the rational and lettered housewife (as many writers in similarly Anglophone publications did at the time), she confines the actual examples of such women to the context of Japan.

She makes her case, for example, by presenting Japanese University women first as unquestionably feminine, and then, as embodying a gentle, nonthreatening form of rationality. We are told that the women are "shy slim […] maidens, diminutive in stature, tidy in attire, sweet, smiling, and unobtrusively gay".[319] She also dwells on the types of their beauty, the quaint modes of dressing their hair, and the styles of their brightly colored clothing. It is clear that she is concerned with communicating the girlish purity of the environment as opposed to the debauchery associated with the educated women by *bhadralok* commentators: "the countenances of the girls are genial, bright, and wreathed in smiles. There is a merry twinkle in their eyes. Their exuberant playfulness, their buoyant spirits, their innocent pranks, all lends a piquant beauty and fascination to the place".[320] Further, she notices that each student has a patch of ground allotted to her and is entrusted with the care of a limited number of plants in a conservatory. Going to university thus, is not only not a deterrent to feminine appearance and behaviour but an important influence in cultivating the best of both:

> The cultivation of the aesthetic nature of the pupils receives a great deal of attention. Every effort is made to create, develop, and direct a taste for the beautiful, the artistic and the harmonious. I was shown a few drawings, paintings and sketches, the work of the students, and I have never seen better amateur work. [321]

[318] Ruskin's discussion of the Victorian woman in his lecture 'Of Queens' Gardens" in 1864 is often seen as capturing the essence of Victorian bourgeois conceptions of the role of women in society: This, the home then, I believe to be, - will you not admit it to be, - the woman's true place and power? But do you not see that, to fulfil this, she must – as far as one can use such terms of a human creature – be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instructively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service – the true changefulness of woman. "Sesame & Lilies*," Second Lecture: Of Queens' Gardens* (New York: Maynard, 1896).

[319] Kamala Satthianadhan, "Learning by Doing", 107.

[320] Ibid.

[321] Ibid., 108.

Next, Satthianadhan answers anxieties about the pretention university education could generate in women. As Borthwick suggests, the bourgeois Indian male often idealized the 'traditional' housewife of the early nineteenth century as unlettered and unsophisticated, but skilled in her duties and simple hearted.[322] However Satthianadhan emphasizes that "in their eagerness for aesthetic culture" the University has not allowed "the practical side of education" to suffer.[323] In each of her articles about Japan she describes how the institution trains women to "do things"; things that they will need to put into practice in their later life. We are told, for example, that one of President Naruse's "queer notions" is to have a small bank on the premises that teaches pupils habits of economy and banking methods. Women work in dry goods stores on campus to become saleswomen and bookkeepers. They do "special drill exercises" with "graceful motions".[324] And, in addition to English and Japanese literature, pedagogy, music, art, physics chemistry and other sciences, they "raise, feed, and take care of the houses, cattle and poultry that the institution owns". [325] Students milk the dairy cows and produce dairy products using "the latest Western methods for sterilizing milk and bottles". Students wash their own clothes. The dormitories are kept "scrupulously clean". And so on and so forth. Never once does Satthianadhan invoke comparisons with Europe and America (where similar institutions for women were being established). Nor does she make explicit any critique of India by comparison.

The critique is there nonetheless, however unvoiced. One of the key factors Satthianadhan stresses in each of her accounts is the willingness of the Japanese public to endorse such institutions for women. In the face of contemporary encomiums to the virtues of the traditional Indian woman, she reminds her readership that:

> The Japanese people despite their Orientalism do not live in the past. They clearly cherish the memories of the days gone by; they are proud of what their forefathers did: they esteem and honour the past; but they are equally proud of their present. They take a lively interest in the affairs of today. They are living, working, and shaping their destinies in such a way that tomorrow, when it dawns, we will find them equal to its tasks. Thus it is that the Japanese Women's University is an intensely practical institution.[326]

She provides some details too about the financial handling of the University, which can be seen as a covert critique of both the lack of adequate private philanthropic zeal in funding women's educational institutions in India and public state endorsement. We are told that the fees for admission and tuition are "very small" but that the affairs of the school are managed "so efficiently and economically" that the income from these fees pays nearly all the expenses "without any gratuity or subsidy from the government". Further, Satthianadhan tells us that whatever deficit they have in costs is covered by voluntary donations:

> The Empress of Japan takes a lively interest in the institution. Only a short time ago Her Imperial Majesty donated a princely sum to the

[322] Meredith Borthwick, 105.
[323] "Learning by Doing", 108.
[324] Ibid, 109.
[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid., 108.

> University from her private purse. The ministers and high Government officers, educational authorities, and leading Japanese men and women, notably Count Okuma, Marquis Ito, and Minister Kobuta, the present head of education in Japan, support the institution with liberal personal subscriptions toward building and other expenses.[327]

While she doesn't say so in as many words, the implication to her Indian readership would have been clear: Japanese women are thriving because there is public support for their advancement. This is not the case in India. And the Government of India's officials were not known to donate "princely sums". But she avoids being as forthright as Lady Benson in her criticism. The latter's argument, if we go back to the beginning of this chapter, was essentially encapsulated in: "the truth is that Hindus do not wish for, or value, education for their women. There are of course a few, a very few exceptions, but they hardly influence in any way the vast majority. The education of Mahomedan women is practically nil". In five years, Satthianadhan points out, the board of trustees of the University estimates that another half million dollars will "be required to provide all the courses that the well-wishers of the institution believe out to be there".[328] Given that there were very few privately funded universities for women in India that could raise half a million dollars her assertions about Japanese support for women's education cannot but be an indictment for Indians. In every celebration of Japanese achievement there is a didactic tone:

> The education of the head, hand, and heart is simultaneously and conscientiously carried on. The future mothers, wives, sisters, friends and educators of Japan are being taught that all work is worthy and dignified. They are learning that a woman not only liveth as she thinketh, but also thinketh as she liveth; that education is the result of doing – not merely of learning to do. [329]

Self-Reliance and Individuation Eastern Style

Where Satthianadhan's discussion of Japan is most interesting is actually in terms of her reframing of women's higher education as important to creating fully rounded individuals. Yet the key point of distinction is that this is not necessarily individuation in the perceived Western sense of self-fulfilment. She provides a sort of summative statement about the University at the end of each article that puts forward the idea that the personal choices of women must be respected, and is, at this kind of Japanese institution:

> The fundamental aims of the University education are said to be the following: Women should be educated as (1) human beings, (2) as members of a community and the nation, (3) as women. The widespread tendency to regard women as machines, destined solely for service at home and for the propagation of the family is condemned. It is considered necessary to call forth women's

[327] "Learning by Doing at the Japanese Women's University," 109.
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.

> consciousness as personalities with infinite aspirations and longings.[330]

She argues that students are exposed to voluntary or optional studies and free to select what they want under the guidance of teachers. The "principle of self-help" is widely inculcated and students are taught mostly to rely on themselves. In fact, self-help is so important that different "self-training organizations" have been formed and led by the student body while the teachers simply stand as guides. [331]

Of course Satthianadhan justifies this focus on the self not through the language of Emersonian self-reliance or European discourses of individual rights – both of which would have disturbed conservative sensibilities as smacking of suffragette talk. Instead she positions womens' education as a route to nation building. She argues that education should aim at the all-round development of women in mind and body as to remind them that they are "members of the civic body and body politic, and as such they are related in an important manner to the nation, the prosperity or decay of which rests in a material degree on them". [332] This, of course, was the standard argument provided by women's rights reformers throughout the nationalist movement: to educate women would be to raise the quality of the nation. Yet Satthianadhan seems to push for a more covert form of female independence via this rationale. While she voices the standard plea for education creating good wives and mothers for the nation, she is also able to introduce the idea of women having "special missions" in life, using their own abilities and even choosing not to marry:

> In short the University aims to educate women in such a way that they shall come to realize their own special mission in life as free personal agents and as members of the Empire of Japan, and that as such, they shall be able to perform their service as wives and mothers in a larger sense and more efficient manner than hitherto. At the same time, the University has not overlooked the fact that there will always be women who owing to various reasons do not marry. To them the University gives opportunities for realizing their mission in life and for utilizing their own peculiar abilities. The University recognizes their spheres of activity as legitimate, and not existing on sufferance, and their lives as having an important mission for the nation and the community at large. [333]

All of this expression of self, again, is not couched in the language of individual rights but rather in religion, which Satthianadhan argues pointedly, is "in the East," about a "sympathetic relationship with all other forms of existence".[334] It seems that she locates her own Christian faith in the East rather than the West and in Orientalist style, seeing it as part of one original cluster of ideas about reality. Thus in the Japanese University, she argues, this drive for choices, missions and self-help is justifiable given that they are part of the Ultimate Reality of the Universe. And far

[330] Kamala Satthianadhan,"The Women's University in Japan", 237.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid., 238.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Ibid., 237.

from leading women into idle intellectualism, the teaching of morals at the University is based on religious principle, which she says, "in brief is expressed thus":

> As human beings as well as all animate and inanimate beings have affinities with the Ultimate Reality of the Universe, the source of all existence, that is known by the name of God, and as the relationship that is closest in the case of man, it is his highest duty, not only to come into sympathetic relationship with all other forms of existence, but also with this Ultimate Reality, this Absolute Being who is the embodiment of the true and, the good and the beautiful; to aspire after unity with this Being is the highest ideal which unifies man's mental and bodily activities, the source of his true spiritual life and consequently the basis of his moral life: morality without such a religious foundation is nothing but a mere formality.[335]

The example of Japan, therefore, serves as an important means of exposing Indian women to not only ideas for how to run universities for women efficiently, but of greater practicality (i.e., "learning by doing") and individuation, without raising the ire (or suspicions) of a predominantly conservative reading public. Satthianadhan's focus on it was also in line with the thinking of other educationists in this period. Like her, Professor D.K. Karve studied the Women's University in Tokyo and began the Indian Women's University in June 1916, which was informed by similar ideas of university education exclusively for women and with its own special curricula[336]. Thus, especially in her writing for *ILM* in 1917, Satthianadhan wrote from a perspective of certainty that the change that she was advocating for could very much be achieved in practice.

D. Conclusion

I hope what is evident from this rather lengthy examination of the writing of a number of female contributors to *ILM* is the fact that writing about Japan was a way for Indian women to write about other things that concerned them more directly. Firstly, it enabled them to resist colonial stereotypes and hierarchies, particularly those that sought to place a distance between the modernity of Japan and India, of Japanese women and Indian women as well as cast doubt on the ability of Indian women to rise above their subjugation in society. However, the influence of Orientalist scholarship was such that Indian women writing in this period did inherit the idea of civilizational continuity – that Japanese and Indian could be compared to one another because they came out of one civilizational matrix of shared social and religious paradigms. The Japanese were, as Joyser argued, "people we know". And thus, a notion (however fictional) of the commonality of the Asian feminine character could be constructed. And from there, real pedagogical and instructional approaches could be recommended.

It is of course worth asking how widespread this female interest in Japan really was and whether or not the imaginings of a few middle and upper class woman had any impact on the ground. It has not been within purview of this chapter to examine the extensive vernacular

[335] Kamala Satthianadhan,"The Women's University in Japan, 237.
[336] Y.B. Mathur,131.

women's periodicals that existed in the period before World War I, whether in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali or Tamil (let alone other popular languages). However, the evidence of engagement, if not with Japan, then with other 'Asias' exists, particularly for example in Urdu women's magazines that referred to the example of Muslim countries like Turkey and Iran. Shobna Nijhawan argues that periodicals published in the north Indian Hindi public sphere for and by women printed and reprinted international news on women's topics alongside national news. She mentions for example that certain periodicals (like *Madhuri*) had columns specifically designed to entertain women with a sampling of news from around the world with titles such as 'Russia's last female ruler,' 'London's female teachers,' and 'Occupations of Japanese Women.'[337] It also featured accounts of working women in Japan and of marriage and divorce practices in America and Europe. Working for an income, she suggests, was presented as a means of breaking a cycle of economic dependency on male family members.

In Bengal, Hariprabha Takeda, an Indian woman who married a Japanese migrant labourer in India, published her memoirs about her trip to Japan. *Bangamahilar Japan Jatra* (A Bengali lady's visit to Japan) was published in Bengali in 1915, three years after her original journey and offered reflections on contemporary Japanese society and culture. Takeda's domestic and somewhat everyday account of life in Japan from the perspective of a Bengali high caste woman can be seen as furthering the idea of cultural sympathy that we've discussed in this chapter. Going from Joyser's "a people whom we know" Takeda, in writing about her fond feelings for her mother-in-law and other family members fostered at length, a sense of the Japanese as "a people like us". She saw in her Japanese family the same respect to others, humility and devotion to elders as advocated by Indian joint families. And in terms of her study of women, she was appreciative of their mobility, describing how they go to work the land like their men and work in markets, stores, train stations, post-offices; they work "everywhere": "There is no constraint on them; they work together and alongside men, walk around; there are no restrictions or any concern about this". [338] Like the Anglophone writers described in this chapter she also pointed to humility and practicality as the ideal combination for girls' schooling and marvelled at the scope of subjects they could study. It is feasible to say that Japanese society served as a positive example for Indian women's education in her memoir – though it was not the only theme she addressed.

To return then to the question of impact, I believe that discursively, the invocation of Japanese precedent in women's education helped Indian women in a number of ways. It allowed them to communicate their interest in modernization. It prompted a search for Asian leadership in Christian organizations, and a focus on practical educational approaches not being offered fully in India at the time. Further, it enabled them to shame the public into acknowledging that neither private sponsorship nor Government efforts to educate women at secondary and post-secondary levels were effective, without writing themselves out of the conversation as un-patriotic or unfeminine.

In terms of outcomes on the ground, we have seen that Japan was crucial to reformers like D.K. Karve who modelled the Indian Women's University on the one in Tokyo. One can argue that it was writers like Satthianadhan who performed the cultural labor that was a necessary prequel to this step, familiarizing upper middle class readers to alternative approaches to education. In the

[337] Shobna Nijhawan,77.

[338] Hariprabha Takeda, *Bangamahilar Japan Jatra*, Manjurul Hoque (ed.,), (Calcutta: Sahitya Prakash, February 1999), 41;45-48.

period between 1900 and 1918, however, the discourse of Asian commonality remained essentially confined to paper. As we shall see in the next chapter, it was not until the 1920s and 30s, when women's educational reform was no longer pursued by lone pioneers but by an organized class of women[339] that meeting and organizing with their Asian counterparts became a real development.

[339] When the Government of India moved into dyarchy, allowing more native control over institutions.

Chapter Three

Consolidating the 'Great Asian Sisterhood': The All-Asia Women's Conference (1931)

Women who attended the 1st Asian Women's Conference.

Figure 14: Participants of the All-Asia Women's Conference, Lahore, 1931, *AAWC Report*

On the 19th of January 1931 a group of women shivered side by side under the facade of the monumental Town Hall building in Lahore (then in British India). They formed an unusual contingent, dressed predominantly in saris but also in sarongs, burqas, longyis, caps and furs. Waiting patiently for the flash of the camera, they must have known the significance of the picture they formed. They were representing 'Asia' and Asian women, coming together 'as one' to discuss common aims. Indeed, the All-Asia Women's Conference constituted a gathering that was "the first of its kind"[340] in the words of the Rani of Mandi, who was standing in on behalf of the chairwoman of the reception committee. The group picture above (Figure 6) was composed of more than 100 women. This included Indian participants who could register as private individuals, delegates, visitors as well as various representatives of foreign governments and women's organizations.[341] In total, 1200 people attended the conference over the course of six days.[342] Of course the most notable aspect of it - that the media, attendees and organizers continuously commented on - was the fact that for the first time on Indian soil, eighteen female delegates had arrived from five other 'Asian' countries: Afghanistan, Burma, Ceylon, Japan and Persia. More had been expected, from places like Java, Baluchistan, Nepal, Palestine, Russia and Syria (the delegates from this countries had confirmed their registration before the conference) but due to scheduling conflicts, visa problems and illness, had been forced to withdraw.

The enthusiasm of the organizers, however, was far from dampened. As the Secretary Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade said in the opening address, it was true that "the number of foreign delegates was small", but "it must not be forgotten that nearly all the great movements in History were inspired by a great idea".[343] It was hoped that an "All-Asia synthesis of culture and civilization" would find adequate expression through conferences and in due course of time, become a project of national importance. And the notion that it would be women rather than men who would form the vanguard of this 'synthesis' was seen as even more poignant. The founder of the conference, Irish suffragist and Theosophist Margaret Cousins (1878-1954), had first conceived of the idea of bringing together women from Asian countries in her role as an international representative of the Women's Indian Association (WIA). She envisioned that developing a spirit of "Asian Womanhood" would be particularly productive for Indian women – it would enable them to discuss topics of common concern which highlighted the cultural unity of the continent as well as discuss issues such as health and welfare, trafficking in women, labor rights and world peace from an international standpoint. Conference attendees shared her vision of what Mrs. Gunavardhane, a Sri Lankan speaker at one of the panel discussions, termed "great Asian sisterhood."[344] The "Asian" part of this was important, not just sisterhood, as the organizers expressed their unhappiness with the existing lack of horizontal connections between women who share cultural

[340] *All-Asian Women's Conference Report, first session, Lahore, Jan. 19-25, 1931* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1931), 22.
[341] Shobna Nijhawan,"International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment" *Journal of Women's History* 29 (3) (2017), 12.
[342] Ibid.
[343] *All-Asian Women's Conference*, ii.
[344] Ibid, 176.

affinities under the same essential "oriental culture":

> Unfortunately the circumstances of our political groupings make the women of Asia, who are the fundamental custodians of this oriental culture, practically unknown to one another. Thus, a Hindu woman knows nothing of the Chinese woman; the Burmese woman is ignorant of the conditions in which her Persian sisters live. Secluded within the geographical limits of our particular country, we only know of those who come to us. The Chinese woman knows more about Americans, the Javanese about the Dutch, and the Indians about the English, than we know of one another.[345]

It was in Lahore for the first time that they could articulate the desire to belong to a broader category than the nation. The first three objectives they sought were: "1. To promote the consciousness of unity amongst the women of Asia, as members of a common Oriental culture"; "2. To take stock of the qualities of Oriental civilization so as to preserve them for national and world service"; and "3. To review and seek remedies for the defects at present apparent in Oriental civilization." [346] In more concrete terms, from the 19th to the 25th of January the delegates of the conference formed resolutions on the equality of status for women in Asian countries through equal opportunities, equal education, the abolition of polygamy, equal rights of guardianship of children and rights of property, divorce and adult franchise.[347] They also articulated other demands such as the regulation of hours of women's work and wages, old age and maternity benefits, the prohibition of child labour, proper housing and medical inspection as well as equal standards for men and women in dealing with prostitution.

Assessing the Importance of AAWC

While contemporaries celebrated the All-Asia Women's Conference (henceforth referred to as AAWC) as a landmark event in women's history, twentieth century historians have tended to classify it more modestly as an unusual footnote in the story of the Indian women's movement. This is partly because the conference never convened like it promised, for a second time, and at a different Asian location. And post-conference bulletins did not chronicle how the Afghani, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Indian, Japanese, and Persian women activists pushed for conference resolutions to actually be implemented back in their respective national public spheres. Other limitations included the fact that the conference was still quite India-focused with most of the participants being from India or the subcontinent.

In recent years, however, growing scholarly interest in intersectional feminism(s) has prompted more enquiry into the strategies by which women of diverse class, race and socio-economic backgrounds have collaborated in the past. In this context, the AAWC has enjoyed some attention and been understood, as in Shobna Nijhawan's words, as a site of "South-South

[345] *All-Asian Women's Conference Report*, 2.
[346] Ibid, 170.
[347] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule (*New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2011), 152.

encounters". [348] Arguing against the assumption of "one-directional (West-East) vectors of feminist flows; women's organizations reaching out from presumed Western centers to - for the most part – colonized peripheries " she positions the AAWC as a case study of an emerging "non-western international feminist idiom" during the interwar period.[349] Likewise, Catherine Candy has suggested that the "mystical, non-rational, spiritualized feminist vision on which Cousins relied" may have formed the "secret strength" of non-European feminists on an international stage.[350] In addition to being a militant Irish suffragette, Cousins was a Theosophist who saw the world – and the West especially – as needing a dose of "the spirit of Asian womanhood to counter and heal an excessively masculinist, capitalist, Western world order".[351] She believed that Asian women could provide the world with an alternative basis of knowledge, empowerment and even "civilization" itself.

While both of these approaches to the AAWC are valuable in terms of recovering it from the peripheries of women's history as well as the study of Indian nationalism more generally, their focus is mainly on the "international" designs of the conference. The women involved, as we shall see later in this chapter, certainly saw Asian unity as a steppingstone to world unity and sisterhood. Yet, insufficient attention has been given to the 'Asia' component in 'All-Asia'. While earlier scholarship offered an insightful excavation of the multiplicity of discourses - feminist, immanentist, nationalist, modernist and orientalist - that speakers and organizers appropriated, there has been little sustained engagement with why all of these were subsumed under the conference's larger preoccupation with Asian unity. Why, for example, could it not have been called "International Women's Conference"?

Indeed this evokes the question that Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné ask about pan-Asianism broadly in "Imagining Asia in India": "Is the popularity of supranational frames of reference solely to be explained as an affirmation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the powerful West, or are there other motives to be found"?[352] I relate that question directly to the All-Asia Women's Conference here to ask: what did a particularly Asian frame of reference contribute to the reform agenda of educated upper class women in India in the 1930s? And the more pressing question, of course, is what impact ultimately did a transnationally framed conference have in the realms of national politics and culture? That is to say, was the impassioned claim of addressing real and oppressive global materialist forces ever lived up to via the implementation of concrete measures?

I attempt to answer the first of these questions by providing a detailed genealogy of Margaret Cousins's own engagement with Asianism. Comparing Cousins's early vision of the 'Awakening of Asian Womanhood' (as outlined in a publication of hers of the same title in 1922) with the published proceedings of the AAWC in 1931, I suggest that the conference was concerned

[348] Shobna Nijhawan, 12.
[349] Ibid., 13.
[350]Catherine Candy, "Mystical internationalism in Margaret Cousins's Feminist World," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (1) (2009): 29.
[351] Ibid.
[352] Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (01) (2012): 3.

not only with creating a distinct identity for Asian women vis-à-vis the West, but about marshaling that identity for entry into a future political and social space for women that could not be controlled by the imperial government or even the Indian nationalist movement. Comparing Cousins's early writing to the events that unfolded at the conference also demonstrates that her original Asianist vision was both promoted and complicated via performance on the ground and through the participation of the panelists selected for the daily sessions.

In the second part of the chapter, I address the issue of impacts by taking the unprecedented step of comparing the proceedings of AAWC with those of a similarly Asia focused conference later in time – the Asian Relations Conference of March 1947. The latter (which is much better known and more commonly studied than the AAWC) is often described as the brainchild of the then soon-to-be Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and a culmination of efforts towards Asian cooperation since the early 1920s.[353] The conference represented "the end of an era" and the "threshold of a new period in history" with over 200 delegates representing 28 Asian countries and attended by over 10,000 people at the Purana Qila (Old Fort) in New Delhi.[354] What is less written about is the fact that among other discussions about collective Asian concerns in a postwar world, the fifth of the round-table groups at the Asian Relations Conference dealt exclusively with the position of women in Asia. By comparing the proceedings of the AAWC to the ARC's two sessions about gender, I suggest that the impact of the former on the latter is notable in terms of constructing a replicable template for transnational information exchange and resolution drafting on women's issues. The more important legacy, however, of the All-Asia Women's Conference was that it called into being the practice of unifying the moral standpoints of the participants (despite their divergent ethnic and national backgrounds) and identified one or two subjects of liberal bourgeois concern (such as polygamy, for example) that delegates would rally around and actually lobby their governments to change. In sum, the second part of the chapter concerns itself with the afterlives of particular cultural labors; afterlives that would go on to haunt the agendas of national women's organizations in various parts of Southeast Asia in the 1950s as we shall see in chapter three.

A. Margaret Cousins and Mystic Asianism

To understand the implications of the All Asia Conference of 1931, it is necessary to take a closer look at the ideologies of its founder, Margaret Cousins. The latter was a leader of the militant wing of the Irish suffrage movement in Ireland and Britain. As a Theosophist (like her husband, the poet James Cousins), she was also committed to a "set of teachings which emphasized an immanentist and evolutionary vision of spirituality: the universe, seen and unseen, was One Life, which evolved to consciousness through a diversity of forms, governed by the mechanisms of karma and reincarnation". [355] After settling in India in 1917, Cousins led a full life in both the domains of

[353] Carolien Stolte, "'The Asiatic Hour': New Perspectives on the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, 1947", in ed. Nataša Mišković, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boškovska Leimgruber, *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi, Bandung, Belgrade* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 77.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 4.

Theosophy and feminism, conspicuously blending both by interpreting the victories of the women's movement in India as evidence of the spiritual potency of Indian women coming into timely expression on the international stage. As Joy Dixon has argued, she believed that national female "essences" were at work in the world, and which, had their transcendent role to play in world politics, moving the world to peace in divinely orchestrated timing: "as a theosophist-feminist, Cousins had imbibed a mission to speak on behalf of the body, the eastern, the spiritual and the feminine, and so increasingly dedicated herself to the service of the Indian middle class body".[356] After a career as a militant anti-colonial suffragette in Ireland she continued her quest for women's rights in the country of her adoption, founding the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 which proved to be seminal to the women's movement as it won suffrage for Indian women before women in any other part of the Empire.[357] By 1927 she had become even more crucial to the landscape of women's rights, forming the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) that led all the significant campaigns for social and educational reform, including the campaign that successfully forced the state to raise the age of child marriage.[358]

Given her intense involvement in the construction of Indian women as rights-bearing subjects between 1917 and 1927, it would be erroneous to categorize Cousins's approach to reform as apolitical. Yet, what is worth pointing out is that the occultist, futurist and mystical dimensions of her feminism were very pronounced in her Indian campaigns. In fact, as Candy has argued, the very entry of the spiritual into the political in Cousins's approach reflected the reconceptualization of the political that had underwritten much of the British suffragette movement and British Socialism since the 1890s.[359] Cousins's Irish past had also been highly spiritualized with her investment in discourses of 'Celtic Revival'. In fact her Anglo-Irish Theosophist mentor, Annie Besant (who would become the first President of the Indian National Congress in 1917), imbued her with a typically Theosophical race-based narrative; that of the Irish Celts reproducing a more just post-Teutonic world in alliance with Aryan Indians in the imminent future.[360]

Nevertheless, Cousins's writings through the 1920s and voice, when it appears, in the proceedings of the AAWC in 1931, conveys a certain prioritization of the mystical variety of Asianism over other kinds. It may be useful at this stage to remind ourselves of the different types of Asianist discourses that were in circulation in the period prior to Independence. What I term 'mystic Asianism' was predominantly rooted in a spiritual understanding of Asia or the 'Orient' as inherently transcendent, as a counterpoint to the materially advanced but inherently soulless West. From the late nineteenth century, a gamut of faith traditions (from the reformist Brahmo Samaj to Theosophy), embraced this binary with minor differences in the conception of how the ultimate civilizational 'synthesis' would be achieved. There were also other discourses of Asian unity. Stolte and Fischer-Tiné isolate "Greater India" or "Asia as India Magna" as another influential Asia-discourse that promoted the idea of India as a benign colonizer and harbinger of culture in the region in the 1920s.[361] There was also a third kind of Asianism in their view that had little to do with Tagore's romantic vision of the inherent spirituality of Asia. Focused on building "Young Asia" as a site of "superior modernity", intellectuals like Benoy Sarkar and diasporic

[356] Joy Dixon, 124.
[357] Catherine Candy, 31.
[358] Ibid.
[359] Joy Dixon, 121-152.
[360] Catherine Candy, 32.
[361] Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India", 82.

revolutionary Taraknath Das were proponents of a Pan-Asian movement that pushed for war against colonialism in politics and against orientalism in academic knowledge. Young Asia did not subscribe to the notion that Asian countries belonged to "one Asian civilization". They recommended nonetheless that Asians unite in a community in order to battle the intellectual and political domination of the West. [362]

To be clear, this was not the kind of political stance that women who attended AAWC promoted as they tended to uncritically perpetuated the Orientalist idea of civilizational difference and to positively value the more traditional aspects of 'Asian civilization'. One can, however, differentiate in their speeches between rhetoric that was more romantic/idealistic and therefore situated in the 'Mystic Asia' discourse and others that adopted what I call a more "strategic-essentialist" Asianism that, like Young Asia, focused on the practical need for cooperation. When comparing Cousins's writing in the 1920s to the proceedings of conference it is possible to see the interplay of these two Asianist discourses, with attendees at the conference often equalizing the balance in favour of strategic-essentialism. The comparison thus reveals the extent to which the Asianism of the All-Asia Conference was not just the brainchild of a lone Theosophist eccentric. Instead, the attendees engaged multiple discourses to construct the category of the liberal, bourgeois Asian female subject who shared not only the imagined community of a regional identity, but who belonged in an *imagined moral community* – which was the very lynchpin of this shared regional/civilizational identity. The sense of having common moral positions about social issues, even more so than cultural unity, I believe, would be replicated at the Asian Relations Conference, and beyond, even at National Councils for women in the post-independence era.

Conceptualizing "Eastern Womanhood" As Unified and Distinct

In 1922 Cousins published *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood* in which she discussed the cultural unity of Asian women and their need for an association that would bring them into contact with one another. She argued that this was because "[…] Asia is one by links of religion, fundamental custom, temperament, attitude to life, and, above all, by its ideal of women".[363] Asian civilization, in her view, imbued its women with a set of characteristics: "In nothing more than in the distinctive characteristics of eastern womanhood can it be seen that "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" in the sense of a complete uniformity of qualities." Trained by the same Orientalist knowledge categories that were shared by her British foremothers in India, such as Annie Besant or Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), Cousins relied on stereotypes of the time to explain this perceived uniformity. She explained that Eastern climates engendered passivity rather than boldness and a "shyness, modesty and timidity hard to find in women at present in other parts of the world".[364] Yet this shyness was not due to a lack of courage but rather an excess of what she called "self-consciousness and sex-consciousness".[365] Asians today identified the feminine too strongly and exclusively with her function of child bearing and "the atmosphere of awareness of sex is too tangible for psychological good health".[366] Yet for Cousins, the most important point to

[362] Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India", 88.
[363] Margaret E. Cousins, *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood* (Madras: Ganesh Books, 1922), 13.
[364] Ibid, 150.
[365] Ibid, 152.
[366] Ibid.

emphasize was that – all this was about to change. Asian women were at the brink of a movement for change. She felt that "a mighty wave of desire for freedom" was building up:

> From Palestine to Japan it displays itself. It whispers its presence amongst the Moslem women; it shouts of itself among the streets of Canton; and it wins its victory in South India. Everywhere there is a shaking off of shackles – and everywhere it is from within that the effort comes to get rid of them….It is not Westerners who are coming along and, from outside, striking off fetters. No! the women of Asia are, of their own initiative, and through their own growing surge of desire for self-expression, pressing against their barriers and breaking them down.[367]

Her enthusiasm drew mainly from the fact that some Indian women, in the states of Madras, Bombay, Travancore, Cochin and Jhalwar, had been granted the right to vote, generally based on ownership of property.[368] And owing to her experiences of living in India she was optimistic that "one day the women of India will lead the women of the East in all public movements as they are the first to get their hands on the helm of government." This was despite all of the achievements of 'other' Asians that she chronicled in *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*. Whilst acknowledging that Burmese women had been granted the right to vote in 1921, that Chinese suffragettes had been involved in militant activities and that Japanese women had started a branch of the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom, her focus was firmly on Indian female leadership. She also extended 'Asia' to the western point of Palestine, but failed to mention any Southeast Asian countries, or consider the history of non-British empires in the region.

This focus on Indian leadership was mainly because Cousins definitely subscribed to a combination of the "Asia as India Magna" and Mystic Asia discourse, identifying India, and then Indian women as the repositories of the spiritual consciousness of the continent. She was also particularly impressed by the women she saw operating in political platforms in the 1920s:

> The tradition of Indian law leaves women very free to take any position for which they show themselves capable. No political organizations are closed to women. They have at every stage of history, taken high positions in country's public service. Springing from their religious philosophy there is fundamentally a belief in sex equality, and this shows itself when critical periods demand it. This is shown in past ten years, in the movement for self-government. No one who was present can easily forget the sight of the platform at the Calcutta Congress of 1917 when three women leaders, Mrs. Annie Besant, President of the Congress, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, and Bibi Amman, mother of the Ali brothers and representative of the Muslim women, sat side by side, peeresses of such men-leaders

[367] Ibid, 12.
[368] Sumita Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a pan-Asian Feminist Organisation," *Women's History Review* 26 (3), (2017): 366.

> [also present] as Tilak, Gandhi and Tagore, and receiving equal honour with them.[369]

Consequently, from its inception the AAWC was to be different from other transnational women's conferences. It was designed to counter the perceived imperious approach of Anglo-American feminism in East Asia with its secular reform agenda (which derived, in the Cousins's Theosophical perspective from a deftly masked Christian system of values). The dream of a gathering of Asian women was born after a frustrating visit to Geneva in 1928 to lobby the League of Nations for more representation of Indian women.[370] It also followed her experience of participating in the Pan-Pacific Women's conference in Hawai'i in 1929. She noted the absence of "idealism" at the latter event, which was dominated by Australians, New Zealanders, Britons and Americans, and found that an Anglo-American sisterhood continually "spoke for" the Pacific region. Additionally, there was "nothing", in Cousins's view that "led": "no vision, no ascension, only efforts towards horizontal ameliorations in response to material necessity."[371] Discussing the practical problems of women was necessary but inadequate to her mind because they neglected to focus on "raising the quality of human life" on which the quality of organizational activity depended. In the words of her husband, James, Cousins longed for "a touch of the reverence, the humanitarianism, the grace and beauty of Indian womanhood" in the international community of women's associations.[372]

The Entry of Strategic-Essentialism

While the AAWC continued the celebration of mystical Asia in the panegyrics of its opening and closing ceremonies, what is evident from the proceedings is that the panellists also wanted to underline that what brought them together was shared anticolonial feeling arising from shared subjugation under Western governments. For example, during the second session of the conference, held on 20th January, the delegates discussed "Motherhood, Polygamy and Traffic in Women" and came to the conclusion that legislation was needed to suppress the "evil" of the latter two practices.[373] The delegates (mostly from India) but also including Lady Bandaranaike from Ceylon and Miss Daw Hta from Burma, concurred on the fact effective legislation was lacking, particularly with regard to the trafficking of women and children. After each delegate made a general presentation on how and why the latter spread in their country, they were able to draft a resolution on the subject. Mrs. Hamid Ali highlighted the fact that most of the relief work was being done by non-state actors:

> There is no disputing the fact that there is a huge amount of traffic in women and children going on in all parts of India. The Brothel Act is unfortunately not very comprehensive and not equally applicable to all provinces. Girls and boys are seduced or kidnapped from outlying villages, railway stations and fairs, etc., and kept in brothels. Of course, we are doing all we possibly can to counteract the evil. The Missionary Society at Rangoon has got a very good

[369] Margaret E. Cousins, 130.
[370] Catherine Candy, 30.
[371] James Cousins, and Margaret E. Cousins. *We Two Together*. (Ganesh & Co: Madras, 1950), 501.
[372] Ibid, 502.
[373] *AAWC Report*, 51.

> Rescue Home [….] In a modest sort of way I must admit, the constituencies of the Women's Conference are also doing their bit[….] I do hope effective legislation will be enacted to root out the evil. [374]

Dr. Muthulakhsmi Reddi (a prominent member of AIWC) also compounded the argument by saying that Indian reformers and social workers had to combat not only against "poverty and the ignorance of the masses" but also had to struggle with "inadequate and imperfect laws made by an alien Government observing strict religious neutrality even in matters concerning the moral and spiritual welfare of the innocent minor children". [375] Similarly, it was argued that after 150 years of British rule the extent of education in India was extremely low due to the fact that the Government was spending 6.95 crores of rupees on education in 1927, which was about 1/14th of its total revenue. Burma was supposed to be better, but even there the percentage of literacy among women was only 11.2. [376]

Further, in the "Session on Health, Education and Religion" on the 21st, Miss Oung from Burma informed the Conference that "although opium and alcohol, etc.," were forbidden by their religion and not manufactured or sold in Burma before the advent of the British government, licenses were now freely given. Although only the Chinese were technically allowed to purchase them, the drugs were freely available and in use by Burmese men and women.[377] Maya Dass from India reported that she had travelled 12,500 miles "in the interest of Temperance" from 1928 to 1929 and found that the condition of the labouring class in Assam, especially in the Tea plantations, was absolutely "pitiable":

> The women drugged their babies and left them in their damp hovel-like homes. The mothers spent a good part of the day in picking tea, for they were paid by bulk. One of my chairwomen said that Assam had been ruined by Opium. Some of the wealthy have lost all they had and some were too poor to buy nourishing food for the family. Of the one crore rupees gained by the Government as Excise Revenue, seventy-five lakhs were derived from Opium. [378]

The critique of the British government gained full steam in Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade's closing speech on 'Drink and Drugs', where she advocated decolonization as a cure to the opium problem that was afflicting them all:

> India thus stands before the world charged with the guilt of being the poison supplier of the world. Although this would seem so at a superficial glance, yet I want my sisters from other Asian countries to realize that the opium policy like all other vital questions that affect the welfare of this country is in the hands of an alien government, and I have not the least doubt in my mind, that as soon

[374] *AAWC Report*, 51.
[375] Ibid.
[376] Ibid., 63.
[377] Ibid., 68.
[378] Ibid., 75.

> as we acquire an effective and decisive voice in the management of the affairs of our own land, it would not be necessary for the League of Nations or any other extraneous agency to formulate the conventions for the eradication of this evil.[379]

She concluded her address with another "tale of woe" that was also the doing of the Government. Like opium, she argued that liquor production was the monopoly of the Government and as it was a source of "very large revenue", very little could be done to stop the consumption and its "evil consequences".[380] She outlined the moral of the story in no uncertain terms: "Any revenue which is based on the moral and physical degradation of a people is tainted and not worth having".[381] To all present the upshot of these discussions would also naturally have been that a government that does not care for the "moral and physical degradation of a people" is "tainted" too and not worth supporting.

B. Creating an Imagined Moral Community

As might be clear from the above examples, anti-colonial nationalism certainly fuelled much of the Asian unity that was spoken of at the conference. Yet what has not been commented upon is the fact that there was a concerted effort to create a unified field of moral judgement at AAWC as well – it was this, in my view, rather than anti-colonial politics itself or a belief in mystic Asian unity on its own – that created a sense of common agenda among the participants. An agenda that could be efficiently re-summoned at the Asian Relations Conference and formulated into resolutions that would be taken up at a later stage in history. The AAWC gave flesh literally to the liberal, educated and bourgeois female subject that was being created virtually in magazines like *The Indian Ladies Magazine* as we have seen in Chapter One. It was a sort of culmination of two decades of Anglophone and vernacular print media that asked Indian women to join global 'modernity' by espousing Victorian morals and attitudes, particularly by becoming educated wives. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, part of the political stance of the Indian contributors and readership was to deny the influence of British and American women and look instead towards Japan as an example for women's education (and also for the cultural synthesis of tradition and modernity). Thus the Victorian emphasis on thrift, charity, and self-control became reconfigured as a practical Japanese femininity that Indian women could safely emulate without betraying the then nascent Indian nationalist movement.

By the 1930s however, there was less need for the kind of "invisible disputations" Kamala Satthianadhan offered in her writing in the 1900s. One could very visibly dispute the colonial state as we have seen in the voices of the women above, given that public opinion in India was firmly committed to Gandhian nationalism by this time, which had plunged the country into a fervour of reform and anti-imperialism since the early 1920s and had also graduated from pushing for Home Rule to campaigning for *purna swaraj* or full independence. For women's rights activists in the 30's, the period of tutelage and dependence on Anglophone women's magazines or clubs and associations run by missionary and/or British women was over. The AIWC, which encouraged

[379] *AAWC Report*., 77.
[380] Ibid., 78.
[381] Ibid.

women to think in *national* rather than local/regional terms offered the entire movement a base of common actors, resources, processes and gradually, common aims, to work towards.

To return then, to the question posed by Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, initiatives like the AAWC can indeed be primarily explained as expressing a nationalist drive to assert the value of Indian culture and society by stressing its connection to a larger civilizational bloc. This process of aligning women's reform goals to larger geographic scales was already in place as suggested above, with the AIWC's calls for the national integration of women's concerns, invested with the notion that the broader the scale of a campaign the more impactful it could be. In this context Asia itself and its diversity of peoples, problems and conditions was simply a foil for the larger aim of defending Indian identity. As Mrinalini Sinha has compellingly argued, nationalist feminism in the interwar period instigated "the emergence of organized women as a force in the public realm", contributing to "a new national imagining of the individual citizen".[382] It did so by responding in "cascades" to global inputs. For example, the publication of *Mother India* by the American journalist Katherine Mayo in 1927 unleashed a controversy about the alleged "backwardness" of Hindus and therefore their unfitness for self-rule. Given that Mayo's principal charge against Hindu India was that its social mores and sexual practices were abhorrent and degenerate, Indian nationalist feminist organizations felt compelled to issue correctives and perform 'modern forwardness' instead. As Candy argues, the AAWC was itself in part a reaction to the negative effects of Mayo's book.[383]

Many parts of the proceedings of the conference do confirm this thesis – that Asianism was simply another vehicle for performing national defensiveness and pride. Consider, for example, the implications of the speeches given at the very first session of the conference, which focused on marriage. Here, one Mrs S.W. Ilangkoon of Ceylon opined:

> If there is one thing in which the East differs from the West it is the conception of family. The matriarchal system is of the essence of the East. In the West individuality has been carried on to a point that observers admit the family system has broken down. We see it in the worst form in the increase of divorce, in estrangements between husbands and wives; in the declining birth-rate, and the reluctance of men and women to take responsibilities of parenthood. In the face of these stern facts, it used to be the fashion in the West to disparage Eastern civilisation. Miss Mayo's "Mother India" is a notorious example of libels perpetrated on Eastern civilisation. The suggestion behind the book is the time honoured libel that the women of India are helpless chattels bought and sold, according to the whims of the masters, the men. Nobody who knows anything about the East could make such a stupid mistake. The women of the East have usually, not ventured to cross the seas, and have preferred to exert their

[382] Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire (*Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 14.
[383] Catherine Candy, 31.

> influence in shaping, influencing and directing the destinies of their husbands, sons and daughters over the sea of life.[384]

Ilangkoon's benevolent and domestically oriented Eastern women bear strong resemblances to the Angel of House enshrined in the Victorian literature of the 1880s and 90s in Britain, yet obviously it is part of the discursive agenda not to acknowledge the Tennysonian or Ruskinian influences on the Eastern woman. She even included a poem about her sense of the "ideal woman" with an aside that "it will apply equally to each Asian race or nation", celebrating those "whose lives are pure, clean and holy/ The women whom, our land and brethren bless, / Brave, earnest women helpful to each other/ with the finest scorn for all things low and mean".[385]

Creating Asianness

Moments like the above demonstrate that attendees of the AAWC felt as though they were besieged by external pressures and needed to hold on to the core elements of Asianness. As Ilangkoon argued, "unless the women of each Asian country work side by side with their men to preserve the national and moral qualities of their individual civilisations, it is not only possible but probable that every nation or race in the East will be wiped out in the near or distant future." [386] Yet, as Stolte and Fischer-Tine have asked, could there have been other motives as well to having a transnational frame of reference for the AAWC? My reading of the proceedings indicates that Asian unity was not just advocated but *created performatively* in this face-to-face meeting of Asian women in 1931. The social attitudes that participants cultivated towards one another in the sessions worked to build: 1) a culture of mutual support through gestures of consensus; 2) the impression of the existence of a bedrock of unilateral morals and immediate subjects of concern for all Asian women; and 3) 'natural' or pre-researched bodies of knowledge about specific Asian countries that were circulable.

It is worthwhile to note that the proceedings of the conference were published in the same year that it was held. This indicates that the organizers knew the importance of cluing in the rest of the country about what exactly occurred at each of the panels at this historic occasion. Yet, instead of just offering up direct copies of the speeches of various delegates the editors of the publication showcased the camaraderie and social exchanges of the attendees by discretely indicating in the text when women applauded a specific remark or engaged in laughter. This, though seemingly minor, has the effect of establishing to the reader which concepts were normative for the participants and the (strong) degree to which they overlapped in their reactions to presentations. Of course, there is bound to have been some fictionalizing in the print recreation of the conference months after it occurred. However, even the effort to showcase agreement is worthy of note. For example, in the first session, dedicated to "Marriage", Mrs R.S.S. Gunewardhane, another delegate from Ceylon was reported to have said that Ceylonese customs were the same as Hindu ones: "marriage was considered in her country a civil contract and women could retain their names even after getting married (*Cheers*)".[387] Similarly, when Ma Mya Shwe spoke about marriage in Burma she pointed out that: "Women of Burma had equal rights, and in their families, the father or mother was the head – whomsoever's will happened to be predominant.

[384] *AAWC Report,* 39.
[385] *AAWC Report*, 39.
[386] Ibid., 40.
[387] Ibid.

(Laughter). She said Burmese ladies were not hot house plants, but mostly led lives that were economically independent of their husbands."[388] If indeed these small reactions occurred at the points that they are said to have occurred in the proceedings, they reveal a small but essential point – that the attendees were performing a sense of agreement, predicated on the idea that they all had similar difficulties getting a patriarchal system to allow them to keep their maiden names or that contesting the power of men at home is somewhat comical.[389]

What is most interesting is that the proceedings also point to the possibility of tensions being activated in the course of the discussions that were ignored or mollified every time, creating the impression that participants were all on the same page. In the second session of the conference, which was on motherhood, polygamy and prostitution, Miss Feroz-ud-Din (the delegate representing Afghanistan) suggested that: "In Islam women were given the highest position, that there was no child marriage and that Islamic inheritance laws were the best in the world and that Islamic women had the right to divorce their husbands (Loud Cheers).[390] This statement was clearly a jibe at a prevalent Western stereotype of the oppression of Muslim women by Islam and applauded for its positivity, and possibly for its defiance. But right after her in the sequence of speakers, Rani Lakshmibai reportedly said that "Marriage to a Hindu is a sacrament – a Holy union for the performance of civil and religious duties. With a Hindu it is not merely a question of contract which can be broken at will."[391] This statement directly opposed the positivity with which Feroz-ud-Din endorsed divorce in Islam, but the attendees did not seem to have noted a divergence of views. The absence of a debate, argument and even the acknowledgment of a different opinion in the text of the panel indicates (if the text is to be trusted), that the atmosphere being produced was one of deliberate non-aggression. A similar moment of potential tension arose when Feroz-ud-Din denied the legitimacy of polygamy in Islam by quoting the Koran: "Marry more than one wife (in time of war) but maintain justice between the two – but it will not be possible to maintain justice, therefore marry one and only one wife" (Cheers)[…] It is a strictly prohibitive rule".[392] Soon after this, Lady Bandaranaike contradicted her by saying that in Ceylon polygamy was practised by Muslims only and "unfortunately to quite a great extent" because "it is allowed in their religion".[393] She further argued that divorce was also very usual among them and mutual consent in such cases was not considered a necessity. However nothing was made of these conflicting statements about the treatment of women in Islam. If anything, it looks like the speakers went out of their way to indicate mutual respect. For example, instead of simply arguing against the notion that Islam promotes polygamy (by reasoning that it isn't encouraged in the Koran), Feroz-ud-Din went further to offer a similar defence of Hinduism:

> It is wrong to similarly say that Hindu religion allows polygamy without rhyme or reason. It lays similar conditions on Hindus, e.g. if there are no issues or at least make issues. Then the Hindu Rishis have always laid great emphasis on the purity of character and life. They have themselves lived lives of saints, of absolute seclusion –

[388] Ibid., 45.
[389] *AAWC Report*, 45.
[390] Ibid., 42.
[391] Ibid., 43.
[392] Ibid., 46.
[393] Ibid., 49.

> away from women and temptation – and it is impossible to believe that they would have advocated polygamy. [394]

Her closing assessment that Hinduism was a religion that emphasized 'purity of character' was immediately lauded by Muthulakshmi Reddi:

> I am glad that Miss Feroz-ud-Din has put before you the Hindu customs of marriage regarding polygamy; I am very proud of it. In future the Asian conference will only have one delegate to represent each particular creed or province and three would represent India and all its communities. Miss Feroz-ud-Din has given us a lead in this matter and I congratulate her in being able to place before you so ably the Hindu idea of marriage.[395]

The net result of creating a basis of agreement was that conference goers perpetuated a sense of having common moral standpoints across issues. Whether or not they actually agreed on these prior to the conference, the social climate of the AAWC prompted a performance of consensus, referring subtly to the overarching notion of civilizational commonality that Cousins and others so poetically evoked. For example, through the discursive and affective strategies outlined above, the speakers invoked an impression of steadfast belief in the chastity of Asian women. For instance, Mrs. Ilangakoon (ever the vocal delegate) condensed what was apparently a unilaterally shared belief system during the polygamy session:

> The Burmese delegate, Miss Mya Shwe, has explained how the woman in Burma is all-powerful, and how their laws even allow a woman to divorce her husband, and to keep her own name after marriage. Under the joint-family system of polyandry, I should think, the women of Ceylon must have been even more powerful than their sisters of Burma, as they would have the opportunities of influencing and ruling so many families. But still, it cannot fail to have the tendency of demoralising the nation, and as one of the great Eastern ideals is purity – as those familiar with the great Indian epic poem of the Ramayana, where the sweet and pure Sita is the heroine, and other Eastern stories and poems of that standard, are well aware – we must try to wipe out these evils and establish purer and better laws and customs in all our Asian countries.[396]

Following her speech, speaker after speaker either denied the existence of polygamy in their country or decried its slipping into practice in the current era. Ma Mya Shaw weighed in on the issue tersely: "There is not much to talk about in regard to polygamy in Burma because although it is in existence, it only exists to a very small extent. The present day tendency is in favour of monogamy. Public opinion is so strong against polygamy that there is no need of passing any special laws at the present moment, (Cheers)." [397] The delegate representing Persia (though she

[394] Ibid., 47.
[395] *AAWC Report,* 47.
[396] Ibid., 59.
[397] Ibid., 45.

was actually India-born), Shirin Fozdar, opined that the Bahai Movement taught people the significance of marriage, the advantages and spirit of monogamy.[398] The Ceylonese delegates concurred that the Sinhalese were a monogamous race, apart from a few "remote and uncivilised Kandyan districts".[399] What attendance at the conference would have taught any woman sympathetic to the All-Asia cause then, is that polygamy was the most pressing concern of all Asian women, and carried the most troubling threat of disorder, even more than illiteracy, prostitution and the inequitable treatment of female labour. It was a threat as it affected the unit perceived to be most fundamental (for women of this class background); the unit of the family.

It is worth elaborating on the somewhat dominating focus on marriage, divorce and polygamy at this point. As scholars have pointed out since the 1980s, Indian women's organizations historically pushed for comprehensive legal reforms in the arena of 'personal law 'or laws based on religious affiliation in the domains of the 'personal' or pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption and maintenance. This was at the top of the agenda right after the agitation for the extension of the vote to propertied women in the 1920s and took full flight in the 1930's when the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) – the largest national women's organisation at the time – introduced several bills to the Assembly that focused on these issues. Alongside calls for reform in all the above categories, a bill for the prevention of polygamy was also introduced. While it would be still be a long journey to the achievement of legal reform in this arena (the Hindu Marriage Act for example was introduced well after Independence, in 1955), debates about the morality and viability of the changes proposed were rampant within the world of women's associations, albeit second to questions related to the role of women in the Freedom Movement. Given that the foreign delegates at the All-Asia Conference were also coming from similar middle or upper middle class backgrounds and invested in similar projects of decolonization and national (and feminist) reimagining, the domain of 'personal law' naturally prevailed in terms of discussion. Polygamy struck a sore nerve for all concerned. This was in part due to a long history of internalizing Victorian regulations of sexual behaviour. As many scholars have argued, colonial administrators were particularly effective at provoking Indian society into examining its sexual mores. By the end of the 19th century, promiscuity and prostitution were great sources of shame as 'respectability' movements helmed by both women and men instigated moral panic.[400] On the other hand, it was also an immediate concern for women at the conference as the proximate prospect of reforming personal laws on the whole, not just polygamy in exclusion, entailed the possibility of creating a new order of family in which women would be respected and honoured. Perhaps the discussion on polygamy was particularly prolonged as the institution reeked of the old, pre-modern world, with both the disturbing connotations of extramarital sex as well as dishonour for the respectable woman both in psychological and material senses (with female inheritance of property jeopardized by the arrival of second wives). It was also, clearly, a threat to

[398] Ibid., 41.
[399] *AAWC Report,* 46.
[400] See Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850*-1920 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 123. Also see Stephen Legg, "Stimulation, Segregation and Scandal: Geographies of Prostitution Regulation in British India, between Registration (1888) and Suppression (1923)" *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 6 (2012): 1459–1505. doi:10.1017/S0026749X11000503 for discussion on the effects of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864) which sought to identify and regulate prostitution. The latter created ripples of uproar from women reformers in particular, who advocated abstinence rather than acceptance of the 'flesh trade'.

national/cultural honour or reputation and therefore an effective rallying point for women who were committed, as I argue, to performing consensus.

Returning to the question of strategies, a final one was used by women at AAWC was one of citing old information about women in particular regions of Asia as newly discovered. Given the paucity of delegates in attendance from diverse parts of the continent, the Burmese delegate May Oung (also known as Daw Mya Sein) was asked to appear across multiple panels. Although as Chie Ikeya has shown, by 1931 it was a common perception in India that women in Burma and Southeast Asia had traditionally enjoyed 'high status', Indian participants did not tire of pointing out that they had recently learnt about how Burmese marriage laws were superior to Indian ones and how divorce was legal in Burma. Muthulakshmi Reddi even went so far as to say that India needed strong laws to prohibit polygamy and "in this respect Burman Law is much better and we should fight for effective legislation of similar nature". [401] Effectively, Burma became at AAWC what Japan was for *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in the 1900s– a go-to case study to highlight by comparison the lower position of Indian women. In fact it serves as a testament to the success of Kamala Satthianadhan and *ILM* in the previous decade of popularizing the idea of Japanese higher education for women that AAWC adopted as one of its Resolutions the need to "follow the precedent of Japan by enforcing free and compulsory education for every boy and girl as the fundamental necessity of progress" in Asia as a whole.[402] More than the learning itself, the act of referencing the benefits of sharing general information about countries was useful as it brought to the fore the idea that AAWC women desperately wanted a place to *create* Asianness. With Euro-American led international conferences such the International Alliance of Women, International Council of Women and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom sending continuous reminders of both imperial and patriarchal subjection, they were inspired to assert some kind of authority by imagining an Asian federation of the mind, composed of women who agreed about the sources and solutions of the key problems in their nations.

C. The Commitment to Asia: Afterlives of the AAWC

What the proceedings of the AAWC also demonstrate is how burning the need for an international frame of reference was, even among nationalist feminists who were within the fold of the nationalist movement rather than at odds with it. Indian feminists were happy to shuttle between mystic Asianist and strategic-essentialist discourses to build connections outside the nation because these connections often gave women's reform the leverage it needed. While Cousins listed the different kinds of attention the conference garnered as a public relations ploy, it is still significant to note the broad range of support it received, suggesting that women in other Asian countries were also looking for an international space of their own, untainted by Western imperialism. The organizers publicized the conference widely and the original invitation letter was translated into 40 languages and sent to some 250 influential people in 33 countries.[403] The conference Bulletin also suggested that it was translated and published in 12 Iranian newspapers as well as in Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria. At the national level, almost all Indian and

[401] *AAWC Report,* 47.
[402] Ibid, 142.
[403] *AAWC Report,* 12.

Burmese papers discussed the event "with comments of welcome and appreciation." [404] Notable Women's Associations said they would be involved. And eminent Indian and world leaders sent messages of support, including Rabindranath Tagore. One Madame Mastoore-e-Afsear, writing as the President of the Persian Patriotic Women's Association, said that their invitation served as a great source of hope in connection with the salvation and happiness of women of different eastern countries:

> It is quite natural that we have long been in need of such a union and as you, dear sisters, have succeeded in convening an important international conference of the women of the East…I will do my best to see that a Persian delegate attends the Conference…and I have had your letter published in the local press and in the Shafeke Sorkh, a well-known journal….Long live our union of the women of Asia'. [405]

Likewise, at the conference S. Lakhmibai Rajwade, the Organizing Secretary reported that the proposal to hold an All-Asian Women's Conference was originated by Margaret Cousins, who as Representative of the Women's Indian Association of Madras came into contact with other women's organizations during her world tour. The latter sent back messages of sympathy and co-operation. In one instance, her invitation to the conference inspired the following response from a Javanese correspondent: "There arises not only a warm response of welcome in us, but it also seems the result of our *own* desire."[406] Perhaps the most robust proof of the strength of this desire can be found in the fact that the few foreign delegates who actually attended the conference tended not to refract the political tensions their countries had embarked on with India. May Oung, for example, never once mentioned that there was growing anti-Indian sentiment in Burma since the 1920s in all her discussions about marriage and polygamy.[407] She failed to mention, for example, that a longstanding campaign for separation from India was revived during the Simon Commission as recently as 1927, and that it was clear that the majority of Burmese favoured the division of India and Burma.[408]

Legacy of AAWC at the Asian Relations Conference (1947)

By all accounts, despite the enthusiasm that the AAWC generated, it was not successful in implementing the resolutions it had put forward. The organizing secretary of the All-India Women's Conference and AAWC, Rajwade was keen to continue the work of the Committee after the first Conference, but found that there was little support from Indian colleagues who were mostly immersed in the civil disobedience movement. Cousins herself was imprisoned in December 1932. As Candy argues, Cousins tried valiantly to revive the All Asia conference with another Asian country serving as host in order to prove the project's truly All Asian character. But "Japan, China and Java were now preoccupied with world transformations of their own."[409] Further

[404] Ibid.
[405] *AAWC Report*, 13
[406] Ibid, 26.
[407] See T.A. Keenleyside, "Nationalist Indian Attitudes Towards Asia: A Troublesome Legacy for Post-Independence Indian Foreign Policy," *Pacific Affairs* (1984):221. Accessed August 5, 2021. doi:10.2307/2757594.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Catherine Candy, 32.

the desire for Asian unity was picked up by other organizations and AAWC was outflanked by the Oriental Women's Conference, an Arab-centered Alliance of Oriental Women. The Oriental Women's Conference had a much broader geographic vision and self-consciously Arab reach than the AAWC. [410]

The question that can be asked then, is where, if anywhere, could its impact be felt? The Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947 is perhaps the best place to look, given that it was also concerned like the AAWC with exchanging ideas on problems common to all Asian countries. And, as Stolte argues, the conference had its roots in interwar Asianist initiatives: "While the post-war world did have an impact on the discussions and the way they were interpreted by observers and the attending press, the rhetoric and semantic content of the discussions were much the same as the interwar years". [411] The inaugural addresses of this conference (which attracted over 10,000 visitors)[412] were heavily invested in the mystic Asia discourse. Sarojini Naidu, the President of the conference welcomed everyone to a "great gathering of the nations of Asia", invoking the idea of Asia as savior of the world: "we may have our own movements of freedom, but we have come here to take an indestructible pledge of the unity of Asia so that the world in ruin could be redeemed from sorrow, unhappiness, exploitation, misery, poverty, ignorance, disaster and death". [413]

The fifth of the round table groups at the conference was dedicated to the position of women and women's movements. Here, the older AAWC left its impression in terms of the composition of the group and the style in which the meetings were conducted. The female Indian members were almost all previous AAWC members, counting among them Lakshmibai Rajwade, Dhanvanti Rama Rao, Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. The delegates invited from other Asian countries also bore resemblance to those who had been invited in 1931, drawing from the All Ceylon Women's Conference Association, the Egyptian Feminist Union, the All-Indonesian Women's Congress and the Women's Association of Iran.[414] This was very deliberate as the ARC actively looked to revive the AAWC. The round table proposed a revival of AAWC as well as the formation of a Liaison Committee of Asian representatives. They also adopted the same format of speakers providing general outlines of the condition of women in their countries, followed by the joint making of resolutions.

Perhaps more significantly, echoes of the AAWC were distinguishable in the passion with which delegates talked again about marriage and polygamy. Although this time the roster of issues discussed was broader, and more attendant to the ills of colonialism (given that the conference was position at the juncture of decolonization for many countries) polygamy was still clearly controversial. And just as at AAWC the delegates spoke as if they were all united in opposition to it: "An Indian delegate observed that they were all opposed to polygamy and polyandry […] it was the general opinion of the Group that in the matter of obtaining divorce the same grounds should be conceded to both men and women".[415] Other familiar discourses also raised their heads, such as that of the relative freedom of Burmese women in comparison to other Asians (although this

[410] Ibid.
[411] Carolien Stolte, "'The Asiatic Hour", 79.
[412] Ibid.
[413] *Asian Relations Conference: Being a Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the Asian Relations Conference* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948), 28.
[414] Ibid, 219.
[415] Ibid.

time the delegate from China questioned the veracity of this).[416] The legacy of AAWC also continued in terms of attracting delegates to the conference who were undeterred from advocating Asian unity (reframed by Nehru as "One World") while the countries they represented entered politically fraught waters with India. In fact, at the Asian Relations Conference, the women of the round table remained optimistic about collaboration whilst male delegates from Burma, Ceylon and Malaya expressed their fears that British imperialism in their regions would be replaced by economic and demographic aggression from India and China.[417] The female delegates to the women's round table, however, never raised the topic of political contests potentially deflating women's agendas.

This points to the continuing desire in this period for Asian connectivity in framing women's issues. As the next chapter will demonstrate, this persisted into the 1950s in contexts as far afield from India as post-colonial Singapore. As the case study of AAWC's Persian delegate Shirin Fozdar will show, the social and cultural labors that Asian women undertook in conferences like the AAWC and ARC had long afterlives, far beyond their immediate contexts of activism.

[416] Ibid, 226.
[417] T.A. Keenleyside, 221.

Chapter Four

Shirin Fozdar and Bahá'í Feminism in Interwar India

Figure 15: Shirin Fozdar at the All-Asia Women's Conference in Lahore, 1931 (fourth from left)

The world's first suffragette, contrary to all expectations, was not a Western woman. This at least, was the claim that Shirin Fozdar, the representative of Iran at the All-Asia Woman's Conference of 1931 made proudly, both during the conference and at different public lectures throughout her life. In her view, the real person who was deserving of such a title was a young poet called Tahirih, sometimes known as Qurratu'l-Ayn, of Qazvin. An ardent follower of the Bab (the self-proclaimed Messiah of the Bahá'í faith), Tahirih was a path-breaker: she unveiled her face at her own initiative, vanquished men in debates about religion, and called for the immediate emancipation of women. Small wonder then that she was imprisoned, stoned and strangled to death.[418]

But where Tahirih's actions angered orthodox Muslim clerics in the Iran of 1852, in Lahore, in 1931, they inspired the tears and respect of a multi-ethnic group of women, all united under the banner of Asian female solidarity. As we saw in the previous chapter, the AAWC emphasized its status as "the first Asian Women's conference" with representatives of "the womanhood of Asia," working towards greater cooperation. The boundaries of this "Asia" however, were not narrowly defined along geographical or conceptual lines, incorporating India, China, Central Asia, Japan, Southeast Asian nations and also the Middle East. Fozdar, who was socialized as Indian by virtue of being born and raised in Bombay, was nonetheless asked to speak on "Women in Iran" due to her Iranian heritage. She was also the obvious choice as the delegate for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India (NSA) who received a telegram from the Guardian of the Bahá'í faith in Haifa, urging them to send a delegate to the AAWC in Lahore. She fulfilled this responsibility by raising awareness about Bahá'ísm – as a part of the history of Iranian women - in Lahore, and succeeded in making her mark personally at this conference. Her contributions to the panels were valued such that she was elected as the President of AAWC for the next conference planned for 1934 and chosen to represent the AAWC at the League of Nations in Geneva to bring up the subject of "Equality of Nationality" for women.[419]

At first glance, the relationship between Bahá'ísm, a spiritual movement originating out of nineteenth century Iran, and the Indian women's movement, is not obvious. Even less so is the link between the Bahá'í faith and an Asian conference for women. Yet, I suggest in this chapter that Fozdar's religious frame for her activism for women illustrates that historical actors and organizations from Asia concertedly chose conceptual frameworks and organizing strategies that often went beyond imitating Western feminisms. Fozdar's exposure to Bahá'ísm as a spiritual and political ideology meant that she imagined the women's movement as fundamentally universalist in orientation: as a result, structure, advocacy and membership were all thought of in terms of the largest possible units of inclusion - that is to say, in global terms. Her life betrays a fascinating scope of commitments: she toured the world three times over, taught untouchable students in Ahmedabad, spoke to rioting crowds during the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1941 at Gandhi's request, represented Asian women at the League of Nations, founded the Singapore Council of Women, was instrumental to the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961, moved to Thailand to set up a home for destitute girls and women, served as a pioneer of the Bahá'í faith in Southeast Asia, won

[418] Jiling Yang, "In Search of Martha Root: An American Baha'i Feminist and Peace Advocate in the Early Twentieth Century." (Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007), 72. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/wsi_theses/11
[419] Rose Ong, *Shirin Fozdar: Asia's Foremost Feminist* (Singapore: 2000), 17.

awards for her work for women in Vietnam and Cambodia, visited the United States and commented on the race problems of the South and finally, walked alongside Irish women in the "March for Peace" in 1974.

Yet within this broad commitment to universal human dignity, Bahá'ísm also facilitated a particular engagement with the notion of Asian resurgence and Asian 'sisterhood'. This was due in part to the Bahá'u'lláh's own prophecy for the ultimate power that Asian women would come to exercise in the world, alongside Bahá'í conceptions of gender that coalesced comfortably with the conservative social feminism of women's rights reformers in various parts of Asia. Fozdar's statement about Tahirih in Lahore to an Asian audience, therefore, was not merely anecdotal; it represented a reformulation of the perceived centre and periphery of imperial social relations. By telling the story of her martyrdom, Fozdar was suggesting that the call for women's liberation, and in fact human liberation at large, could come out of nineteenth century Iran, included in the conceptual bloc of "the East". Indeed, she made the argument implicitly that the 'first suffragette' could very well be the daughter of a mullah and the leader of a Muslim religious sect.[420]

It is when examining Fozdar's work outside the context of India however, that the full extent of her engagement with Asianism becomes evident. Her Asianism was grounded not so much in deliberations on the East-West civilizations discourse that we saw in Chapter One, but in the creation of actual multiracial platforms for women that would work to challenge national legislation, as well as to communicate lobbying tactics across national borders. Whilst Fozdar never characterized herself as an 'Asian' feminist (it was a label that was in fact generated by the Anglophone Singaporean press in the 1950s), I argue in Part I of this chapter that the cultural crucible within which Fozdar operated in India (in the interwar period) predisposed her to move towards a reform agenda grounded in Asian female respectability and solidarity. More importantly, however, her activism for women in India, combined with her experience of the Asian Women's Conference in Lahore, prepared her to pursue a *praxis* of Asianism after she moved to Singapore in 1952. Her trajectory as an activist was heavily coloured by the ideas about gender she absorbed whilst working in women's organizations in India as well as from exposure to Bahá'í writings and communities. Both of the social worlds of reform and religion (in which she was embedded in her early life) affirmed the existence of an east-west polarity in the world and saw the revival of feminine qualities as necessary to fostering world unity. Alongside this, the focus on Asia as a unified civilization at the AAWC in 1931 also introduced her to the notion of the 'natural' commensurability of bourgeois female values across the Asian continent. Thus, when she arrived in Singapore in 1952 as a Bahá'í 'pioneer', she was already confident that she could rally together the concerns of local women and began forming the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) almost immediately. This attests not only to her unique power of personality but also to a foundational understanding that a shared idiom of reform existed between cosmopolitan elites across newly independent Asian countries. This shared idiom is worth investigating, particularly given that scholarship about the women's movement in India has tended thus far to almost exclusively highlight the movement's intellectual indebtedness to Victorian liberal and evangelical discourses of rights and reason. What Fozdar's social exposures in the 1920s and 30s point to, however, is the fact that Indian bourgeois feminism was inflected with self-interested interpretations of

[420] Ong, 17. Before embracing the teachings of the Bab in 1844, Tahirih was allegedly a famous leader of the Shaykhi sect of Islam.

Orientalism (as we saw in chapter one) as well as adjacent ideas of gender equality from traditions such as Theosophy and Bahá'ísm.

In Chapter Four I argue that the National Feminist-Bahá'í cultural crucible within which Fozdar operated in her early life in India also had a significant role to play in shaping her actions in Singapore – a fact that historians in neither country have acknowledged thus far. Fozdar's Indian experiences enabled her to think of gender and rights in ways that were readily accessible to women of similar class and educational backgrounds in Singapore. As a result, she was able to translate approaches and tactics with relative ease in her new context. What she learned in India in the 1920s and 30s was that organizing for women's reform was most effective when smaller women's groups were 'federated' into larger national or international bodies. Likewise, her Indian experience imbued her with a conservative focus on 'women's uplift' rather than protest, as well as a deep-seated faith in lobbying for legislative reform as the principal route to achieving changes for women. During her leadership of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), Fozdar influenced the organization into following each of these three approaches. Further, drawing on Fozdar's Indian activism, the SCW adopted one of the essential strategies of Indian nationalist women's organizations: that of making the "woman question" a barometer for national 'modernity'. To highlight this it employed a strategy of comparative and Asia-centred 'transnational framing' for discussions about women's rights in Singapore. The primary site for this 'framing' was the Anglophone print media (in newspapers such as *The Straits Times, The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor,* and *The Malay Mail)* between 1952 and 1961. The comparative frame in turn enabled the SCW to build a rapport with other Asian women's groups and share lobbying tactics and campaign strategies with one another, particularly with regard to the subjects of polygamy and easy divorce. In its initial years the SCW distinguished itself as an organization by consistently baiting the media, using the example of other Asian nations. By 'naming and shaming' Singaporean social laxity towards polygamy, it worked up a frenetic campaign that also sought to embarrass the government internationally and thus provoke it into drafting legislative reforms. I argue in Part III that this transnational frame of reference, powered by a shared politics of Asian respectability, enabled the SCW to reach beyond Singapore and impact women's organizations in other parts of Asia such as Malaysia (then Malaya), Hong Kong and Indonesia.

It is worth iterating before moving forward, however, that Fozdar was never explicitly committed to Asianism as an ideology. Her writings do occasionally express traces of a belief in an East-West cultural polarity like many of her Indian reformist contemporaries. However, unlike the Indian contributors to the *Indian Ladies Magazine* (in chapter two) who were immersed in a defensive conversation with the English readership of the magazine, the emergent anticolonial "East" and its virtues was not the ultimate mobilising cause for Fozdar. She was, rather, a committed Universalist who, it might be more fitting to suggest, was an Asian feminist by action rather than by ideology. She saw herself as fighting for rights for women universally. Yet, the multi-ethnic Asian composition of the SCW and its exclusive investment in the issues facing Singaporean and Southeast Asian women indicates that Fozdar was at least Asia-centred in minor key. In my understanding, the reasons this practical preoccupation came into being merit study.

Before fleshing out the sources of Fozdar's activism here in chapter four, it is also worth briefly discussing how she figures in the histories of both India and Singapore. Thus far, the methodological nationalism of Indian women's history scholars has meant that transnational journeys, both intellectual and physical, have been relegated to the margins. Apart from appearing

sporadically in the AAWC archives in the 1930's, Fozdar seems to have left little trace on the history of the women's movement in India. In the public sphere her name is not readily recognized today, despite the fact that she was born in Bombay and was a well-known public speaker on women's issues from the 1920s through to the 1950s, alongside eminent contemporaries such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Sarojini Naidu. Her name doesn't feature in any book-length monograph or textbook and there have been no documentaries, or popular and academic publications in India on her work.

Conversely, for scholars of Singaporean history, Fozdar is a local figure – part of the pantheon of original national stalwarts. She is known to be the founder of the SCW. She is also associated with the drafting of the Women's Charter - which was passed in the Legislative Assembly in 1961 by the Peoples' Action Party - effectively outlawing polygamy for non-Muslims. The Charter caused big waves in Singaporean society as it provided certain fundamental rights for women to do with marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance and property rights. Neither Singaporean nor Indian scholars, however, have analysed the imbrication of Fozdar's early life in India with her career as an activist in Singapore in the 1950s and 60s. Fozdar's extensive engagement with India and Southeast Asia generally is not highlighted in histories of the Council – where her dynamism is commented on, without going far into the sources of it.[421] Rose Ong's *Shirin Fozdar: Asia's Foremost Feminist* is the only biography of her that exists and while it does class her as an "Asian feminist" it doesn't go into the intellectual content of her 'Asian-ness', providing instead a straight narrative of events in her life. What is lost is the understanding of the connections of Singapore's women's movement with those in India, Malaya, Indonesia, Hong Kong and China among other countries in terms of concepts of womanhood, strategies for action and actual collaboration. Similarly, the overweening focus of Indian historians on the co-optation of women's issues by the modernizing project of Indian nationalism has also prevented them from studying the transnational mental spaces of Indian feminist debates as well as the rich history of cultural encounters that occurred between women across national borders in the first half of the twentieth century. Fozdar's life provides only one example of the assemblage of diverse ideas and practices that activists undertook for women focused causes. There were other women who migrated from India to Singapore between the 1930s and 50s such as Vilasini Menon, E.V. Davies and Mrs. Paul Appaswamy whose interest in women's issues was animated by religious or spiritual networks (such as the YWCA) as well as by their encounters with women of other ethnic groups in the regions where they travelled.

This chapter, therefore, comes out of an effort to excavate what was gained by traversing national borders. More specifically, it examines the long-range impacts of feminist exposure to Asian inflected organizing in the interwar period, using Fozdar's life as a case study. Beginning with her exposure to a cultural crucible composed of religion, rights and reform in chapter four, we continue on next in chapter five to see how these initial ideas contributed to her initiatives and strategies for women's rights in post-colonial Singapore.

[421] See for example Mandakini Arora's *Small Steps, Giant Leaps: A History of Aware and the Women's Movement in Singapore* (Singapore: Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), 2007) for a description of Fozdar's role in the women's movement in Singapore.

A. Woman Orator In India: Bahá'í & National Feminist Conceptions of Gender

Growing up Bahá'í

Shirin, meaning "sweet" in Farsi, was born in Bombay of Iranian parents on March 1st 1905.[422] Her father, Mehraban Khodabux Behjat was a Zoroastrian from Yazd province in Iran who decided to immigrate to Bombay to better his prospects and to seek a larger community of co-religionists.[423] Although native to Iran, Zoroastrianism was suppressed during the Muslim conquest of Iran by A.D. 800 and large contingents of Zoroastrians left for India, where they were called Parsis, from the ancient name of their country "Parsa". Well before the twentieth century, Bombay's Parsi community was sizeable and well established. Once settled in Bombay, Mehraban became acquainted with a Bahá'í teacher, Mirza Mahram, and adopted Bahá'ísm as the most rational of all faiths. His wife, a Zoroastrian from his native Yazd province, also came to accept Bahá'í teachings.

Bahá'ísm was to be a foundational paradigm all through Fozdar's life. It was almost inevitably so given the devotion of her parents to the faith as well as her childhood exposure to its principal tenets. Her parents took her as a 10-month old child to Haifa and Acca in Palestine (where Bahá'í holy sites are located) and where, as Rose Ong writes, she was fortunate enough to encounter Abdu'l-Bahá,the son and authorized successor of the Bahá'u'lláh.[424] His daughter, who was given the title "The Greatest Holy Leaf," also met the Behjat family and years later Fozdar would be inspired by her to work on women's equality. On a trip a few years later, she even spent a week in Abdu'l-Bahá's residence, reciting prayers for him every morning. Bahá prophesized in one of his tablets to her parents that "pearls and jewels would flow from her".[425] This early pilgrimage experience would be revisited by the adult Fozdar and her family, adding to her sense of spiritual legitimacy or destiny as a social reformer.

In essence Bahá'ísm was a religion founded in 1863 by the Iranian noble, Bahá'u'lláh. It grew out of the messianic movement known as Babism (led by 'the wall' or 'the Bab' who was seen as the forerunner who announced the arrival of the Bahá'u'lláh). By the late nineteenth century, Bahá'ísm had become a world religion that promoted the unity of all people under one beneficent God.[426] Uniquely, the Bahá'u'lláh taught that all religions were essentially equal in purpose though distinct in terms of social practice. He also suggested that he was simply one prophet in a line of prophets sent by God such as Jesus and Mohammad (who were all to be venerated without prejudice by the faithful). What further distinguished the religion from others was that its founder upheld that a unified world order that ensured the prosperity of all nations, races, castes and classes was the ultimate destiny of humankind. In working towards that world order, extremes of wealth and poverty were to be eliminated and spiritual solutions to economic problems would have to be developed. Other goals included compulsory universal education, fostering religion in harmony with science, and working towards a sustainable balance between

[422] Daniel Chew, "Oral History Interview Transcript: Mrs. Shirin Fozdar. Communities of Singapore Project, 7th September 1984" in Singapore Council of Women Synopsis & Oral History Interview of Shirin Fozdar," *Jamshed and Parvati Fozdar Collection*, (Singapore: National Library), 269.
[423] Rose Ong, 3-4.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Ibid.
[426] Yang, 12.

nature and technology. In practice, these goals would be achieved through the establishment of a world federation based on collective security and justice for all as well as through the adoption of an international auxiliary language.[427]

As a teenager Fozdar decided that Bahá'ísm most completely and rationally addressed the needs of the world while incorporating the other religions as "progressive links in a never-ending chain of divine revelations."[428] While dedicated to the promotion of all of the above tenets, she was particularly drawn to the Bahá'u'lláh's injunction on gender equality. Bahá'í writings explicitly stated that until women were allowed to enjoy complete equality of opportunity in all spheres of life, humanity would not be able to live up to its potential; it could not "wing its way to heights of real attainment".[429] In more practical terms, they stated that girls were to be given preference over boys where educational opportunities were limited. This was because the mother was seen as the first educator in the early years of a child and this function was seen as being of the utmost importance by the central figures of the Bahá'í faith.[430] In marriages neither the husband nor wife would have the more dominant voice and "any apparent inequality between the capacities of women and men" was "due solely to the educational opportunities denied to women in past ages" rather than due to innate qualities.[431] The Bahá'u'lláh's son, Abdu'l-Bahá, also promoted gender equality arguing that: "He [God] has endowed both sexes with perfections and intelligence, given them physical members and organs of sense, without differentiation or distinction as to superiority; [...]. He has created them equal."[432] He further described the relationship with the help of a metaphor of the winged bird that Fozdar would echo many times in interviews: "Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized. When the two wings or parts become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of mankind will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary."[433]

The New Age will be Feminine

In addition to ideas of gender complementarity and equality, Fozdar grew up absorbing some notions of the spiritual potency of women. The authoritative Bahá'í writings and those of Bahá'í scholars in Fozdar's lifetime, for example, ascribed special qualities to women that would be conducive to future achievements for the world. They argued that women exhibited tendencies related to nurturance, responsibility for others, cooperative forms of human existence and violence-free ways of conflict resolution (which they had gained by experiencing subjugated positions in history). Furthermore Abdu'l-Bahá argued that:

> The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting -- force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual

[427] Yang, 12.
[428] Ong, 3-4.
[429] Oral History Interview Transcript, 254.
[430] Ibid.
[431] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by Abdu'l-Baha During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982 second edition), 61.
[432] Ibid, 470.
[433] Ibid.

> qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age, less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals -- or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.[434]

Considering these qualities, he also declared that, "a {the} real evidence of woman's superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of world peace". In this millenarian conception of the future women were figured as central protagonists. For Fozdar and other female Bahá'í activists, the prophecy about the crucial role of women in the future could not have been peripheral to their sense of purpose.

As we have seen in previous chapters, Victorian idealizations of feminine virtue were well in circulation in the twentieth century. It may be possible to argue, therefore, that Bahá'ísm simply offered a timely echo of this widespread set of beliefs (further promoted by the British Empire). The association between women and peace-building was of course most prominently articulated by organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) which assembled more than 1000 women in the wake of World War I to work out a plan to end war.[435] In the words of international suffragists like Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, women were thought to be inherently interested in the preservation of life due to their biological imperatives in the world:

> The solidarity of the world's motherhood, potential or otherwise, underlies all cleavages of nationality. Men have conflicting interests and ambitions. Women all the world over...have one passion and one vocation, and that is the creation and preservation of human life.[436]

However, whilst iterating previous essentialisms about women as preservers of life (and men, therefore, as its destroyers), Bahá'ísm also offered its own particular prophetic vision for women in the future, during a period of world awakening. As we saw in Chapter Three, Fozdar attended the All-Asia Women's Conference, which underscored the notion that Asia was composed of the totality of 'Eastern Civilization' (ranging from the Middle East to Japan) and that Asian women needed to collaborate between themselves to secure their status as complementary, spiritualized and equal counterparts to men. However, this message of Asian female unity did not come from the conference organizers alone. In 1931, for example, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India (NSA) received a telegram from the Guardian of the Bahá'í faith in Haifa, urging them to send a delegate to the All-Asia Women's Conference (AAWC) in Lahore. Fozdar was the obvious choice for NSA and they asked her to speak on "Women in Iran" – a topic that she was keen to speak on, being of Iranian heritage originally.[437] The impetus for Bahá'ís to think about women's issues from an Asian perspective came from the "the Greatest Holy Leaf" daughter of the Bahá'u'lláh who was very interested in observing the

[434] Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, J. E. Esslemont (ed.), (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), 156.
[435] Yang, 37.
[436] Quoted in Susan Zeiger, "She Didn't Raise Her Boy to Be a Slacker: Motherhood, Conscription, and the Culture of the First World War," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 1 (1996):10.
[437] Oral History Interview Transcript, 355.

progress of Asian women; one of his prophecies suggested that the new federated world government would see Asian women rising in prominence, supplanting men in positions of power around the globe.[438] As we know, Fozdar attended, however she highlighted her "dual representation: "one the country, and the other the religion".[439] She remarked years later that "it was really wonderful to see that the women of Asia, for the first time were all gathering together on a common platform".[440]

Rather than any self-conscious ideology of Asianism or Pan-Asianism, however, Fozdar's approach to women's rights involved the hard-nosed practice of inter-Asian solidarity, born perhaps as a default, out of her many experiences in collaborating within a predominantly bourgeois cosmopolitan public sphere in India. However, as I will outline further below, the combination of her Bahá'í conceptions of gender and bourgeois Indian sensibilities also produced a species of feminism that was eminently relatable to Singaporeans when she travelled there in the 1950s; it spoke to the values and interests of Singaporean and other Southeast Asian women with ease and enabled her to surpass linguistic and ethnic differences. Speaking the language of Bahá'ísm rather than the Victorian language of suffrage also enabled Fozdar to operate within the fold of indigenous loyalty during the peak of the Freedom movement in India as well as in early post-colonial Singapore. The ideas she advocated could be seen as deriving from a benignly religious Iranian 'Other', seen to be neither as politically polarizing as Islam, nor outside the familial fold of the Orientalist "East".

B. Bahá'ísm and National Feminism: Coalescing Ideas of Gender

In her college years (as self-reportedly the first Iranian woman to attend university in Bombay), Fozdar found that Bahá'ísm correlated better to women's rights activism than to Indian nationalism. As she explained, Gandhi's movement for Independence gave "a lot of impetus to women to come out {of their homes} as he wanted them to take part in politics and assist him in the fight" but this would not come to be until the 1930s.[441] Until then a vacuum existed in the public sphere for women that needed filling. Thus she became a pioneer of sorts as a college student in the 1920s, establishing, in her own words, a reputation as a "woman orator" for women's causes.[442] Her husband's appointment in the railways gave her access to a free train pass that she used to travel across India speaking about women's rights as well as "the Unity of Mankind," the "Eradication of Prejudices" and "Universal Education".[443]

Naturally, as a campaigner during the interwar period, Fozdar encountered various other women's organizations in the country. In the 1920s she started to work for the Women's Progressive Group and the Bombay Women's Council, becoming its President in 1925.[444] The Bombay Council was a provincial branch of the National Council of Women in India. There she

[438] Ong, 18.
[439] Oral History Interview Transcript, 353.
[440] Ibid.
[441] Ibid, 311.
[442] Ibid, 313.
[443] Ong, 15.
[444] Oral History Interview Transcript, 311.

encountered women from the Women's India Association (WIA) and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) all of which "reflected the differing orientations of their founders" and chronologies of foundation.[445] Yet there were enough overlaps in their constructs of Indian womanhood for Fozdar to play an active role in the national network of women's associations. This was primarily because both the Bahá'í and the formal women's movement prior to Independence pursued *social feminism*, which Geraldine Forbes defines as "an interest in women's rights combined with an acceptance of the traditional definition of womanhood that justified women's public role in terms of biological and psychological uniqueness".[446] In other words, while Bahá'ís believed in women's functional equality with men, they characterized men and women as complementary in their essences and in the roles they performed rather than exactly the same: "We admit that that biologically we are different from men, and therefore we cannot be equal in as far as brute force is concerned. But then we do our duty as a wife, a maker of the home and the bearer of the children".[447] The husband's role in turn, was to be faithful and provide for the family. As Fozdar put it, "each one has to do his own function and duty…each one has to respect the other and assist one another, but not compete […] if the woman gets less than her husband, she might want to be compete to be his equal in earning, thereby neglecting the home and the children, this is not allowed".[448] In her own life, despite the label of a "raging feminist" in Singapore, she made choices that adhered to Bahá'í conceptions of gender roles. After marriage, for example, she changed her Bachelor's degree from medicine to arts as her husband's family did not want two doctors in the household, and despite completing three years of study did not appear for the exam at the end, at their suggestion.[449]

For Bahá'ís of that period then, biological functions weren't just identifying markers for men and women; they formed the very basis of their respective claims to equality. Fozdar suggested that for the Bahá'u'lláh women were "more persuasive in tongue and intuitive" and could settle world problems by arbitration rather than violence and war. This was not just because of their social conditioning but their biology: "because, after all, he said, the mother knows how much time and labour it takes to rear a son to that age when he can become a father".[450] As we have seen in Chapter Two, Indian women writing in Anglophone journals during the First World War also regularly employed the trope of women being the instinctive preservers of life, bemoaning the loss of life on the battlefield. However, Fozdar tended to elaborate the functions of biological work to an additional level of importance. During her later years in Singapore she often proudly recalled her very first public lecture in 1922 at a Bahá'í convention in Karachi. Here, she laid out why the Bahá'ís believed that education should be universally available, irrespective of gender:

> He [the Bahá'u'lláh] says that part of our nature is natured, you can't change. He says if a tree bears bitter fruit, then supposing instead of water, you keep on watering it with honey, even then the bitter fruit

[445] Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers. *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington and Indianopolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 57.
[446] Geraldine Forbes, "Caged Tigers: First Wave Feminists in India,"' *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol 5, no 6. (1982): 238-239.
[447] Oral History Interview Transcript, 327.
[448] Ibid, 329.
[449] Ibid, 281.
[450] Ibid, 254.

> will be bitter. That is the nature of that tree, that it gives bitter fruit. So if you water it with honey instead of plain water, it is not going to change the taste of the fruit. But at the same time, he says, you can, by nurture, change to some extent the nature of the child by correct training. And that training he says, begins from the womb because what the mother thinks, what she eats, what company she keeps, what books she reads - all that has its effect on the upbringing of the child. And therefore a pregnant mother, must be careful during the months of her pregnancy.[451]

By signalling the importance of what the mother 'thinks' and eats etc., during pregnancy Fozdar recast the womb itself as an active rather than passive entity that was acted upon. The womb in itself could be the site for transformative instruction. And thus, while a woman might not have as strong a claim to power (through education) only for herself, as a vehicle for male or at least infantile potential, she had every right to demand equal treatment in society. Fozdar tended to emphasize this biological power quite viscerally by describing the agentive properties of the mother's bodily liquid:

> Also with the milk. When she's suckling the baby, even at that time she can educate the child, the milk, the kind of milk, if you are agitated, it has its effect on the milk. So you have to be very careful, how you feel at the time when you are nursing the baby. How much love you have for the baby. All that is very important. So he [the Bahá'u'lláh believed that the training of a child, does not begin after its birth and going to nursery school, it begins with the womb.[452]

Such a conception and argument for female equality was met with resonance and agreement generally during her time in India. Fozdar reported that the newspapers were often "full of praise" after her orations about women's rights.[453] Not surprisingly, this view of women as being biologically and socially different from men yet deserving of equal rights as citizens correlated well with the ideologies in circulation in the formal women's movement. This is firstly because many of the leading women's associations were formed by Theosophists who, like the Bahá'ís, believed that women of the East were repositories of spiritual force, and that men had forfeited the latter in their struggle for imperial power.[454] Gandhian nationalism also afforded women rights equal to those of men, arguing that woman "should labour under no legal disability not suffered by men" while maintaining that that the "female sex" was the "nobler of the two," being the "embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge".[455] Many English-educated, upper and middle class women by the late nineteenth century had begun to

[451] Oral History Interview Transcript, 57.
[452] Ibid.
[453] Ibid, 308.
[454] The foremost of these advocates was Annie Besant (1847-1933) who became the first woman leader of the Indian National Congress in 1917. Others included Margaret Cousins, the founder of the All-India Woman's Conference in 1927 and Dorothy Jignaradasa who formed the Women's India Association in 1917. Radha Kumar also discusses the mystical vision of motherhood propounded by national feminists such as Sarojini Naidu in *The History of Doing* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), 154.
[455] Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 76.

actively participate in political struggles against colonialism and the women that Shirin Fozdar encountered in women's circles, such as Sarojini Naidu and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur found her Bahá'í views easy to relate to, espousing as they themselves did, equal rights (such as female suffrage) and the stability of bourgeois family life through the rejection of abuses (such as widow burning (sati), child marriage and backward customs such as veiling, polygamy and concubinage) without radically unsettling spiritualist and nationalist projections of women as the embodiments of morality, tradition and the home. As mentioned earlier, the All-Asia Women's Conference of 1931, at which Fozdar spoke, gained her many lifelong supporters. Among the congratulatory messages and telegrams read at the opening of the conference, two telegrams from the Bahá'í Guardian and the Holy Leaf were read out loud, to Fozdar's delight. And after she spoke on the life and suffering of her childhood hero Tahirih, the Bahá'í martyr, many participants were moved to tears. The speech was well-received by all, including Sarojini Naidu, India's famous poetess and Mahatma Gandhi's close associate in the civil disobedience movement. Years later, Lilamani Naidu – daughter of Sarojini -- sent her mother's remarks on the Bahá'í faith to Shirin Fozdar. She had written that the founder of the Bahá'í faith "is undoubtedly one of the Great Seers of the Modern Age". Inspired by Fozdar's speech, she had mentioned that "the programme that he enjoined upon his followers" was singularly like "a prophecy of the ideal and dream that inspire the heart of youth with (the) quest for a brave new world, built upon equity, fellowship and peace".[456]

Strategies for Action

While Bahá'ísm clearly formed the bulwark of Fozdar's feminist agenda, the dominant approaches of Indian women's organizations (formed between 1910 and 1930) constituted other significant sources of influence on her work. As mentioned earlier, as a college student she ventured beyond Bahá'í circles, starting to work for the Bombay Women's Council, a provincial branch of the National Council of Women (NCWI) in India. The latter was in turn affiliated to the International Council of Women (ICW) that was formed earlier in 1925 with the aim of strengthening women's activities by "federating the various associations working for the improvement of the position of women and for social progress".[457] Fozdar suggested later in Singapore that she was very moved by the energy and selflessness of Indian women she met in the context of the freedom struggle in the 1930s and 40s:

> [It was] when the battle was very great for independence, that thousands of women came out, early morning they would start, 4 o'clock, going round and singing the songs on the road, and also later they carried on processions and used to fill the jail. The women took the real important part in the emancipation of their country and that is for independence. Some women leaders were underground workers and they indulged in violence also.[458]

As a Bahá'í committed to universalism and ultimately, a universal world order, she didn't express very pronounced views about the legitimacy of the Indian nationalist project. Nonetheless, given

[456] Ong, 23; Oral History Interview Transcript, 103.
[457] "Manifesto of National Council of Women in India, 1950," *Fozdar Family Collection*, Singapore National Archives (Microfilm NA 2044), 14.
[458] Oral History Interview Transcript, 311.

her commitment to the peaceful promotion of women's rights, joining the Bombay Women's Council seemed to be the right choice: "*But* [my emphasis] this Bombay Presidency Women's Council was not a militant body, but doing only social works at that time. So that is how I began [...] in the women's movement".[459] She suggested that it later became a sort of "stepping stone" for her, allowing her to "travel all around India delivering talks on women's rights and world governments and world peace".[460] It also gave her the occasion to evolve an overall approach to activism that she would adapt to the women's struggle in Singapore in the 1950s.

The Federating Principle

According to Fozdar, the Bombay Council had been formed by an Englishwoman called Miss Gaige and "several women from different races joined in" – this early exposure to working for women beyond racial lines may have been influential in her later success when working for the multiracial Singapore Council of Women. As such, the object of the Council was "the establishment of a permanent link between women's organizations in different provinces" and "to work together for the material and moral advancement of women".[461] It performed its own social welfare efforts and linked together women's associations in respective districts in the province, reporting to the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) in Delhi. The latter then acted as "an exchange for the social service ideas in India and receiving centre for what is sent from International Council of Women".[462] Started in Washington D.C. in 1888, the ICW was the first women's organization to work across national boundaries for the common cause of advocating human rights for women. The Bombay Council, therefore, felt itself to be working in concert with women, not just locally and nationally, but internationally as well. During Fozdar's years of activity it maintained links in India with the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene, The National Young Women's Christian Association, the All India Girl Guides Association and the Trained Nurses Association. In addition, the NCWI published a monthly bulletin that kept the provincial councils and headquarters informed about each other's activities. This bulletin contained surveys of work done in national councils all over the world.[463] This early exposure to a federative approach to women's issues dovetailed very well with the Bahá'í emphasis on perpetuating a united federated world government and thinking about human rights beyond national frames. It was one of the reasons why she chose to work for the Council rather than a gamut of more locally rooted women's groups:

> the NCWI being the only organisation in India recognised by and affiliated to the ICW has a great part to play in international relations. By its affiliation to ICW it realises that it forms part of a larger whole, women's problems being fundamentally the same everywhere.[464]

The Women's Uplift Approach

[459] Oral History Interview Transcript, 311-316.
[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid.
[462] Ibid.
[463] Ibid, 315.
[464] Ibid, 316.

Jana Everett has argued that prior to Independence the formal women's movement in India was characterized by a drive towards the "reform of social practices so as to enable women to play a more important and more constructive role in society".[465] This was certainly what the Bombay Council took as its primary goal, setting up orphanages and shelters for distressed women in the province. There was also a class bias involved as upper middle class 'respectable' women strove to 'uplift' working class women. As Geraldine Forbes has suggested, the NCWI adopted a philanthropic style modelled on that of English upper class ladies. As a result of its Anglicized culture, perceived closeness to the Raj, and high subscription fees, it failed to recruit enough members to become a "vital national organization".[466] Nonetheless, it continued to advise the government on welfare issues and pursued an agenda of "petition politics" rather than doing the hard work of visiting slums or villages. As Fozdar said in an interview later in her life, the Council consciously strove to "raise the status of working class women" and the urban poor by exposing them to the interventions of the educated and anglicized elites.[467] While her life took her beyond the Bombay Council (in the 1930s and 1940s she travelled to diverse parts of India primarily as a Bahá'í spokeswoman), she was still keenly aware of the social work that the Council continued to do in terms of the settlement of refugees, the assisting of orphans, the destitute, the disabled and the aged and the setting up of rescue homes (especially during the Noakhali riots of 1946). Over those two decades the Council also set up crèches for working mothers as well as literacy and industrial classes. According to Forbes, however, the Indian members of NCWI worked to be seen as "enlightened" by British officials in India and policy makers in England. Their main interest was not the working class per se but to ensure that India "measure up" to the minimum international standards of health and welfare.[468]

The "Women's Rights" Strategy

Exposure to the other major women's organization, the All-India Women's Conference, also meant that Fozdar understood the process of promoting women's rights primarily in terms of lobbying for legislation. In the early 1930s for example, during extensive negotiations over constitutional reforms and the civil disobedience movement, the AIWC cooperated with other women's organizations to demand a more radical extension of the franchise to women from the government.[469] By 1934, it began to lobby for a uniform civil code that would guarantee legal rights in marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance, regardless of religious affiliation. By the 1940s it had become the central authority on women's issues. Correspondingly, the AIWC amped up its outreach. In 1941, it established its own quarterly journal called Roshni and in 1946 set up a central office with permanent staff. As Forbes points out, two major tasks formed the cornerstone of their strategy in the 40's: publicity and propaganda on women's issues, and research to provide a database on women in India.[470] Fozdar, as her years in Singapore demonstrate, clearly took note. One other aspect that she could not have failed to observe was the AIWC's insistence that implementing new laws for all women, regardless of religion was the best way to alleviate their suffering. By the 1940s, however, there was palpable disappointment as it was clear that the gamut of Assembly bills introduced between 1937 and 1938 (such as the Hindu

[465] Everett, 82.
[466] Forbes, 77.
[467] Oral History Interview Transcript, 311.
[468] Forbes, 78.
[469] Ramusack, 58.
[470] Forbes, 82.

Women's Right to Property Bill, an amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, a bill to permit intercaste marriage, the Hindu Woman's Right to Divorce Bill, the Muslim Personal Law Bill and the Prevention of Polygamy Bill) were all benchmarked for 'another time' by the Indian National Congress in favour of more pressing reforms in other sectors.[471]

Her own Bombay Council, being in favour of slower, more conservative changes, took a more optimistic view of the situation. It pressed the government on the urgency of introducing a bill that provided for divorce and congratulated it as well for introducing a bill for the prevention of bigamous marriage among Hindus.[472] This was in keeping with the fact that the Council's relationship with the colonial government of India was a longstanding and respectful one – its opinion was solicited on civic and legislative matters (such as the Minimum Wage Bill and the Bill to amend the Marriage Act of 1872).[473] Nonetheless, through a combination of exposures to the National Councils and the AIWC, Fozdar gleaned the significance of campaigning for legal changes for women.

Intersecting with Indian Nationalism

Operating as an activist during the peak of the Independence movement in the 1930s and 40s meant that Fozdar gained exposure to the key political players on the national stage. As discussed above, a number of prominent female figures in the Indian Nationalist movement were familiar with Fozdar and her views on women as they met frequently on the conference circuit. However, by her own account, she was accommodated by the broader fold of the movement as well, particularly given that the worlds of politics and reform intersected so frequently, and in fact were not as separable as they had been in the nineteenth century. Just as with the women's movement, there were natural areas of overlap with the nationalist movement. Fozdar highlighted in oral interviews how the leaders she encountered were convinced of the 'rationality' of Bahá'í views. And in turn, Bahá'ís empathised with the burgeoning demands for self-government in India. In 1917 for example, the Bahá'í s of India held their three-day National Convention in Karachi (then in India) and invited Fozdar, still in her teens, to speak on "Universal Education" where she talked about the importance of educated mothers (as discussed earlier in this chapter). However, arriving there, she found the crowd to be dressed as Gandhians in the home spun cotton yarn called Khadi. Foreign cloth was shunned and was being burnt outright in the city. Although she had 'missed the memo' and was dressed in a Chinese silk "foreign sari", the crowds responded favourably to her: "the people didn't see that I was nervous and the next day the newspapers were very happy and gave a very wide publicity".[474] At the event itself, other Bahá'í s wore Khadi in solidarity with (or even as part of) the Indian nationalist movement.

This favourable relationship with Indian nationalism would continue. According to Rose Ong, when Mahatma Gandhi was jailed in 1932, Fozdar sent him books on Bahá'ísm, which he read and on the basis of which, he later conveyed to her that he agreed with Bahá'í tenets. When he left prison she went to meet him and he called her "daughter" and said that he was aware of how the early Babi and Bahá'í believers had been massacred in Persia in the last century, as well

[471] Forbes, 116.
[472] "Manifesto of National Council of Women in India", 17.
[473] Ibid.
[474] Oral History Interview Transcript, 57.

as how Tolstoy regarded Bahá'ísm as one of the "highest and purest of religious teachings".[475] In response she explained that the Bahá'u'lláh had prophesied that empire building would be over in the twentieth century and that every country would eventually achieve independence and then participate in a federated world government. Gandhi agreed that this would be the ideal situation in theory but felt insecure of how it would ever come to be in actuality. Nevertheless, his respect for Fozdar and her beliefs ensured that they stayed in touch over the next decade. When communal riots between Hindus and Muslims spread in Ahmedabad in 1941, Gandhi asked her to go to the city and to pacify the public by speaking to them about the socio-religious links between the two faiths – which she, as a Bahá'í, was specifically trained to see. Fozdar did in fact go and assisted by the chief activist of the Indian National Congress Mr. Morarji Desai (who became India's Prime Minister in the 1980s), spoke to university audiences and associations like the Rotary Club (where she gave 16 talks in one year). Fozdar also found synchrony between Gandhianism and Bahá'ísm when it came to the notion of dedicating one's life to service for the underprivileged. She took up his cause of working for the upliftment of untouchables after the riots, staying in Ahmedabad until 1946 and running a school for children of the Varghis (an untouchable tribe labelled 'criminal' by the British). Her house became known as the Bahá'í Centre and she recalled that news of it had spread such that the Ahmedabad Municipality changed the name of the district to Bahá'í Centre district.[476]

In addition to Gandhi, Shirin Fozdar found support from a wide range of Indians involved in the Independence movement as civic and religious leaders as well as heads of state from the 1920s to 1947 such that while she is relatively unknown in India today, her name was familiar in powerful political circles in this period as a result of her magnetic public speaking capacities. Morarji Desai remembered her from the days of the riots and said (according to her) that she was to be ushered into his presence at any time without prior appointment. When she met Rabindranath Tagore in Calcutta (en route to Burma) he was sufficiently impressed with her to invite her to visit his university at Shantiniketan. He also told her that he had met `Abdu'l-Bahá in Chicago in 1912 and had adopted his style of dress (the kaftan) as his own ever since. Others such as Ambalal Sarabhai Patel, B.R. Ambedkar, Dr. Munje, Vijaylaxmi Pandit and Professor K.T. Shah and Mohammed Ali Jinnah also all expressed their interest in her work. Fozdar herself felt that she actually became "friends" with a great many leaders of the movement, particularly while she ran the Bahá'í centre in Ahmedabad in the 1940s:

> So we tried our best, and many of the Indians who later became important after Independence were not all that important in those days and they were from Ahmedabad, some of them. So we became very great friends, one of them became Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, he was from Ahmedabad. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan he was President of India. All these chaps I knew them because of the social work that I was doing at that time. Later of course they became politically very important people. And still we were friends, and they knew the work I was doing and they appreciated […] Morarji Desai was more or less like an ascetic, but he was very strict. Strict means a man of integrity. But we were great friends. And he very

[475] Oral History Interview Transcript, 63.
[476] Ibid.

> much appreciated the kind of social work I was doing. And I liked him for his uprightness, he was a good man. And if I needed any help, he was always there to render help.[477]

It is not hard to see why there was a sort of 'mutual empathy' between these two movements. Firstly, the ideal of universalism in political and economic form (as propounded by the Bahá'u'lláh) had its appeal. Much postcolonial scholarship has outlined how the Indian National Congress and individuals within its fold predominantly articulated a Vedantic Hindu imaginary of nationhood that embraced "the many" as "One".[478] Within this broad religious framework, Advaita Vedanta with its special interplay of bourgeois nationalism, romanticism and orientalism, had particular appeal. The modern project of defining Hinduism in terms of Vedanta is associated with the likes of Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century and with later colonial and postcolonial Hindu revivalists like Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. By the time Fozdar was meeting with Indian nationalists in the 1920's and 30's, the doctrine of nondualism, or the 'ultimate unity of all reality', was seen as the veritable essence of Hinduism in the respectable or 'bhadra' public sphere. Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, among others mentioned above, were therefore sympathetic to a faith like Baháism, which seemed, unlike Christianity or Islam, to have no legacy of contention on the subcontinent and posited essential human unity as the cornerstone of all religions.

The second reason, as she indicated coyly at times in interviews, were her own considerable powers of persuasion. Fozdar was not unaware of the extent of her own attractiveness and charismatic leadership. When describing her initial public speaking ventures in the 1920s for example, she said that she had great success, first, because of her personality, and then because of what she had to say:

> When you have a good-looking person standing on a platform talking, then people are more attentive to a person [than] who just doesn't look so nice. So I was successful. God was kind to me in every way and I developed into a good speaker.[479]

She added also that Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (who was to become the Prime Minister of India 1962-67) became a friend and lifelong admirer of both Bahá'ísm and Fozdar from 1936 when the Ramakrishna Mission held a conference on world religions to celebrate their golden jubilee. She proudly reported that he said that she was "the best woman orator India had produced".[480] One has a sense that this confidence and ability to play simultaneously to contemporary norms of feminine nobility and beauty informed some of the attention she received from national leaders in India, and then subsequently in Singapore.

C. Conclusion

[477] Ibid.
[478] Brian Hatcher, "Bourgeois Vedanta: The Colonial Roots of Middle-Class Hinduism," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion.* 75 (2007): 298-323.
[479] Oral History Interview Transcript, 61.
[480] Ibid.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, Fozdar's life prior to Singapore is worthy of study for many reasons. First, examining the Indian component of her life enables us to see how active Bahái networks were in India in the interwar period and how they found resonance with the political and social values of both nationalists and national feminists in that period. This is an important trajectory that has for the most part been overlooked in histories of Indian nationalism or of women's rights. The latter tend to acknowledge the nexus between religion and legislative reform predominantly in the shape of Hindu and Muslim reform associations or at best, interwar Theosophy. In the same vein as Joy Dixon's work on the Victorian valorisation of "the divine feminine" or spirituality as a unique source of feminine power, Bahái conceptions of gender allowed for pioneers of the faith such as Fozdar to travel the length and breadth of India advocating for women's rights. [481] Whilst Bahái conceptions of gender, as I have shown above, were far from being secular-progressivist in nature, they allowed for an understanding of 'rights' that did not simply mimic the Euro-American liberal tradition. In this way, uncovering a history of Bahái activism in India also lends support to Saba Mahmood's now classic call to examine the "politics of piety" more closely, wherein she poses the valuable question: "how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?"[482] Whilst Baháism, as I have shown above, was not segregated entirely from liberal politics in the 19th and 20th centuries (and indeed may have in fact existed in a state of co-imbrication) it undoubtedly presents a view of gender and rights that draws from religious authority and has therefore, been eclipsed in broader discussions of women's history in India.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Fozdar's simultaneous participation in the social worlds of Bahái networks and National Feminist associations (alongside anti-colonial politics in general) enabled her to form a specific approach to women's rights. Coming of age at a time when women's organizations in India were calling for the national integration of women's concerns, she saw the value of aggregating local concerns and then passing them along to higher divisions within an organisation, even to international levels. She was also part of an English educated and broadly elite social world of women and hence, much of her activism was powered by a bourgeois politics of respectability in which the upper classes had to 'reform' the lower, and moral grievances such as prostitution and polygamy occupied considerable air time, above subsistence and labor issues. Finally, exposure to the conservative national feminism of her times enabled her to favour the path of legislative reform squarely over militant protest. Apart from her involvement in the All Asia Women's Conference, Fozdar did not imbue her work in India with an overt Asianist ideology. However, as we will see in the next chapter, she did adapt her learnings from the Indian context into the Singaporean one in the 1950s. And here, given the similarity of views and upbringing of the multi-ethnic colonial elites she encountered in the local associations, a practical species of Asianism emerged.

[481] Baha'is also endeavor to spread the Faith by moving into or traveling to areas where there are few Baha'is. This is known as "pioneering."Fozdar was not the only woman to do this. One of her older contemporaries was an American Bahái pioneer called Martha Root. From Yang, 15.

[482]Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

Chapter Five

Becoming an Asian Feminist Overseas (The Singapore Council of Women, 1952-65)

Figure 16: Inseparable friends, Shirin Fozdar (on the right) and Mrs. George Lee, President of the SCW.

Shirin Fozdar's move to Singapore in 1950 was prompted, first and foremost, as she recounted in many interviews, by the injunction of the Bahá'u'lláh for Bahá'ís to promote Bahá'ísm in the relatively untapped region of Southeast Asia. Accordingly, once her husband procured a medical job in Singapore, she moved with the rest of the family two months later. Almost immediately after arriving, she took note of the inferior status of women in Singaporean society and identified 'women's rights' as an issue of social and political concern that coincided with the Bahá'í mission to foster gender equality in society: "But as we mixed with the people, we found that the marriage laws and divorce laws were very funny, because men were free to marry as many wives as they liked among the Chinese, there was no limit to the number of wives".[483] What Fozdar found shocking was that legal wives in Malaya often lost their marital property to concubines or second wives:

> And so it was easy for these Chinese men to persuade girls to become their secondary wives because these girls would inherit the property of the man as his legal wives. […] And we found that among the Malays also, although they were allowed four wives, in order to make it easy for themselves, they divorced wives…they couldn't maintain four wives at the same time, so they would just keep on divorcing. And therefore divorce became a very easy thing among the Malays, with the result that about 60% of Malay marriages ended in divorce, and no proper action was given and no ground was really necessary for a divorce. There had been cases where the man would just go and inform the kadi that he wanted to divorce his wife and that was enough and in some cases the wife didn't even know she had been divorced. So, being a fighter from 1925 [in India], I thought we must do something in Singapore. So I organized the women of different races, invited them, the leading women of the communities to come and form a platform.[484]

Being, as she said, self-consciously a "fighter", Fozdar took steps almost immediately on arrival. The Singapore Council of Women (SCW) was conceived under her leadership in the 1950s and 1960s. And due to the reasons explored in Chapter Three, polygamy became the most triggering rallying point for middle class women of all race backgrounds in Singapore, representing as it did, a provocation to a colonial mindset of bourgeois respectability as well as a fillip to the ideal of the sacrosanct nuclear family unit. The success of the SCW, however, cannot be attributed solely to Fozdar's initiative, despite the local tendency to see her as a one-woman show that provoked the women's movement into being in Singapore. Before her arrival, Singapore had a strong culture of social welfare for women deriving from a tradition of reform by Western missionaries and wives

[483] Oral History Interview Transcript, 115.
She said that there had been a precedent that a British judge had allowed the secondary wives or concubines to be recognised as legal wives. It was called the 'Six Widows' case.
[484] Ibid., 115-117.

of colonial administrators in the mid-nineteenth century.[485] After the Japanese occupation, hundreds of local women came forward to help rebuild Singaporean society and began to form associations of their own. By 1952, the year SCW was formed, there were over thirty women's associations based on ethnic, religious, professional, recreational and community service interests.[486]

A. Application of Indian Experiences

One of the primary reasons why Fozdar was able to integrate and assume leadership so quickly, however, was that, as in India, the women's associations in Singapore operated out of a social feminist outlook. As Louise Edwards and Mina Roces have argued, for large parts of the twentieth century, Asian women activists on the whole disliked 'Western feminism' as it was branded as manly and unfeminine, anti-male and anti-family; it was seen to be counter to "Asian values".[487] This made sense in practical terms as Asian activists had to lobby male-dominated legislatures for juridical reform – which they saw as the main means of improving the status of women in society. Just as in India, therefore, women's public roles in Singapore were defined in terms of biological and psychological uniqueness. All through the 1950s Fozdar and the SCW worked to promote the image that Asian women simply wanted equal rights to men but biologically and in terms of social roles, they were complementary rather than the same as men. The image of Eastern women as repositories of spiritual force (as outlined during the AAWC conferences) that Western and Asian men had forfeited, also served to mitigate the accusations of rabid feminism that were aimed at SCW in the initial years of its foundation in the Singapore news media. In 1952 for example, Fozdar corrected a newspaper misquotation that stated that the women's movement wanted to flirt openly with men and conduct physical violence against them.[488] When Fozdar advocated the creation of a "tough girls club" in Singapore that would train members to use "Indian lathis to prevent physical assault", she made sure to add that the women would also be taught handicrafts, sewing and domestic science as they "didn't want to be brutal".[489] She also wrote later in her career that her struggle for equality was never meant to emasculate men and masculinise women:

> We must not attempt to force a unity that does not and cannot exist. Women's right to share in the government of the nation is their most sacred right because they are different from men, because they represent another aspect from men in the great scheme of national or of world planning. [490]

[485] Louise P. Edwards and Mina Roces (eds.) *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 76.
[486] For more on these see Phyllis Chew, "The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 25(1) (1994): 113.
113. The following were the most well known in the above categories. YWCA, Chinese Ladies Association (CLA), the Kamala Club, Girls' Sports Club, Singapore Inner Wheel Club and the Young Women's Muslim Association.
[487] Edwards and Roces, 1.
[488] "Mrs. Fozdar on Women", *Women's Rights*, 18th February 1952, Shirin Fozdar File, *Jamshed and Parvati Fozdar Collection* (Singapore: National Library), 35.
[489] "Tough Girls Club: Dignity is Best Defence", *Women's Rights*, 16th February 1953, SF File, 46.
[490] Grace Foo, "Shirin, the Gentle Freedom Fighter" *The Star,* September 8th, 1976, SF File, 176.

Differences

While a general idiom of social feminism was shared, what Fozdar introduced to Singapore women was the notion of linking women's organizations and networks as well as that of obtaining rights. With respect to the former, from the beginning, it was clear that there was a need in the 1950s for a woman's organization to work for women at the local, national and the international levels. The idea to form a council that would unite all women on a common platform was first introduced and abandoned at a meeting of Malay women at the British Council in October 1951. They were meeting to listen to Mrs. Sutan Shahrir, a women's rights activist from Indonesia who held up the inspiring model of the Indonesian Republic (which had given women the same rights as men): "Women in Asia at present show signs of progress generally and in Malaya women are beginning to take an interest in education and women's associations".[491] After outlining how Indonesian women were making remarkable contributions as cabinet ministers, members of parliament, the diplomatic corps and social service organizations, she argued that such change was possible in Malaya as well. The way to achieve it however was by uniting the associations and having a coordinating body that would give strength to their efforts for a better society. Among that audience composed of 70 women and 10 men were many women who would later become members of the SCW, including Shirin Fozdar of the United Nations Committee and Zahara bte. Noor Mohammed of the Malay Women's Welfare Association (MWWA). Finding Mrs. Shahrir's words to be completely in resonance with the Bahá'u'lláh's, Fozdar called a public meeting a month later to discuss the formation of such an organization. That an Indonesian feminist's advice was integral to the formation of SCW is evident from its continued repetition of her closing statement in letters to the Muslim Advisory Board and other bodies in subsequent years: "The progress of any society can only be judged by the position of the woman".[492]

Fozdar's distinction also lay in the emphasis she placed on going to the heart of the problems of Singaporean women – legal disabilities that handicapped their progress. The existing women's associations saw women's roles as supportive of men in society and sought to improve community life whilst the SCW was established with the idea of uniting the different women's groups and to fight for the advancement of rights, ultimately changing the nature of men-women relationships.[493] The commitment to 'rights' as agreed on by the United Nations, reflected the SCW's aspirations to embody the liberal internationalism of feminist organizations in the West as well as Fozdar's own experience of women's associations and their demands for legal reforms in India. Therefore, just as in Fozdar's Bombay experience, one of the first things it did was to seek affiliation with the International Council of Women (ICW). The SCW also maintained links with the National Council of Women in Great Britain, the National Council for Civil Liberties in London and the British Commonwealth League.

[491] "Education The Only Remedy" *Women's Rights*, 13th October 1951, SF File, 33

[492] Oral History Interview Transcript, 300.

[493] That she brought a novel perspective to women's issues is proved by the alarm that many women expressed about her views in the 1950s. Mrs Seow Peck Leng, founder of the Siglap Girls' Club in 1954, for example, said: "At that time, her ideas were too radical, even for me. But then without her, the women's rights movement would not have begun". From Phyllis Chew, 116.

But in practice, the idealized interest in the rights of women across the world translated to thinking about and referring to primarily Asian women, albeit even if the definition of Asian was very inclusive, encompassing the Middle East, as well as South and Southeast Asia. A focus on all of Asia was natural given the ethnic composition of the SCW. Its executive committee throughout the 1950s boasted seven Chinese, four Indians, two Malays, one Indonesian and one British member. This composition was not to change much in its years of existence and also reflected the racial mix of its total membership, the majority of which was Chinese, then Malay, Indian and Eurasian. Annual reports on the activities of the organization were given in Malay, Chinese and English.[494]

When SCW first began campaigning, there were a number of articles in the Anglophone newspapers expressing surprise that women's rights were required in Singapore; the assumption was that Singaporean women were already in possession of all the rights they needed.[495] The organization was resolved on reforming the "obsolete and oppressive marriage laws and to enact suitable legislation that would tend to the civil rights of women".[496] This legal emphasis clearly came through Fozdar's Indian experience, in which women's groups had graduated, as demonstrated above, from social welfare to unified legal action a decade before the Singaporeans. The first meeting of the SCW therefore, saw the drafting of a constitution that was modelled directly on the constitution of the National Council of Women in India.[497] Like the latter, the SCW declared itself to be a central organization that accepted other women's associations as affiliate members. Its four main objectives also bore similarity with the NCWI's aims: seeking to arrange affiliation with other groups, furthering the cultural, economic and moral status of women in Singapore, ensuring via legislation that justice could be meted out to all women and facilitating the understanding and cooperation between women of all races, religions and nationalities in Singapore.[498]

B. Conceiving a Comparative Asian Frame of Reference

As the Council developed in the 1950s, its prime objective was to make polygamy the symbol of injustices suffered by women in Singaporean society. However, in doing so, it also actively pursued a strategy of allying the concerns of Singaporean women with those of 'Asian' women more broadly. For Fozdar, this meant putting into practice at the SCW the lessons of the All-Asia Women's Conference in the 1930s. One of the primary approaches adopted at the latter had been to actively compare the conditions of life for women across countries in Asia (for subjects such as franchise for example) in order to draft resolutions for specific national governments. In 1951 this strategy was re-enacted in the SCW's legitimations for an anti-polygamy campaign using the legislative reforms taking place in India and China as viable examples. This, alongside Fozdar's participation in international conferences to represent Asian womanhood and travel to other Southeast Asian countries had the result of going beyond the SCW and inducing an Asian frame of reference for women's issues in Singapore's Anglophone print media in the 1950s and 1960s that persisted well beyond, into the 1980s.

[494] Phyllis Chew, 116.
[495] Ibid., 114.
[496] Ibid.,116.
[497] Ibid, 115.
[498] Ibid.,116.

In 1950, the People's Republic of China introduced a new set of marriage laws that prohibited polygamy, concubinage and arranged marriage. Monogamy, the freedom to choose marriage partners and the equality of status for both sexes were also enforced. In India, women's organizations as well as social reform organizations lobbied for similar legislation and this led to the passing of two historic bills – the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill and the Hindu Succession Bill in 1955.[499] This prohibited polygamy, established monogamous marriage for all Hindus and, as in China, allowed divorce by mutual consent.[500] Having already modelled their constitution on that of the National Council of India, the SCW took the precedents of India and China to heart in drafting the "Singapore Prevention of Bigamous Marriage Ordinance".[501] In fact, the Hindu Marriage Code was particularly useful given that one of Fozdar's colleagues at the NCWI, Mrs. Tarabai Premchand had been appointed to the Rau Committee by the government in 1944. The latter was the committee that was tasked with formulating a code of Hindu law.[502] Like their Indian organizational counterparts, the SCW decided to lobby for support and approached five groups: the Legislative Councillors, the British authorities, the Muslim community, the Chinese Community and Singaporean political parties.

The public debate that this Ordinance inspired was focused not just on the pros and cons of polygamy but direct comparisons with China. Fozdar herself provoked the Singaporean Chinese by evoking old notions of progress. In the letter she sent to the Chinese Advisory Board in 1954, she wrote that "while China was getting awakened under the leadership of men like Sun-Yat Sen" the Chinese in Singapore were not only oblivious to the reforms taking place in their country of origin but were adopting "a retrograde step which, in the annals of their history, was to brand them as a polygamous people".[503] She also compared Singapore unfavourably to China in the *Malay Mail*, writing that "Singapore can't adopt China's marriage laws without change" because the Chinese government's actions against immorality meant that divorce rate had fallen "tremendously" and prostitution was not known there. Adultery was a crime with punishments lasting up to 6 months in jail. In Singapore, there was no place to send the 'enticer' away. Also, not all women in Singapore earned their own living and were therefore dependent on their husbands unlike the women in China.[504]

Adapting marriage legislation from other Asian countries was not the only means of tying together Singaporean concerns with the entire region. While the content of 'Asian womanhood' remained vague, Fozdar's travels and the extensive coverage they received in English language

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[499] Ramusack, 60.

[500] Muslim women in India, however, remained under Qu'ranic injunctions which permitted a man to have four wives. The decision to allow Muslims to follow personal law was an effort to reconcile the 10 percent minority that stayed within India after the creation of Pakistan, Ramusack, 60.
The SCW would have observed this religiously specific application of the Hindu code; it could have enabled them to anticipate the resistance to abolishing polygamy in Malaya and set them on the course of petitioning the sultans for reforms that would restrict them in practice.

[501] Mrs. Fozdar asked Mr. Bezbaruah, the SCW's lawyer, to draft a marriage act in 1953. She told him while she was away in India until November she would consult the monogamous marriage bill of Bombay province and send him a copy to look through as he drafted the act. She also told him that she had already looked through the Hindu code.
"Letter to Mr. Bezboruah", 19th September 1953, Singapore Council of Women Minutes, *Jamshed and Parvati Fozdar Collection* (Singapore: National Library), 67.

[502] Forbes, 118.

[503] "Letter to Chinese Advisory Board," SCW Minutes, 442.

[504] *The Malay Mail,* Saturday July 9, 1955, SF File, 42.

newspapers all through Southeast Asia worked to give the construct of the 'Asian woman' solidity and coherence in the Anglophone public spheres of the countries she visited. What is often overlooked in assessments of her work is the large amount of time she spent away from Singapore, lecturing on the equality of women and the evils of polygamy. Though she was invited to speak on women's rights and colour prejudice by the US government in 1959 and spent nearly five months travelling in Europe in 1974, the bulk of her travels during her lifetime were in Southeast Asia, facilitated by her connection to the National Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'ís in India.

Her visit to Cambodia in 1954, for example, was sponsored by the Cambodian royal family, who had a keen interest in Bahá'ísm. She gave two talks on women and the Bahá'í faith there. Recognized to be a stalwart leader for women, Fozdar received Cambodia's first award of Sattrei Vatthana (National Women's Champion). In the spirit of interfaith understanding and harmony (one of the primary injunctions of Bahá'ísm) Fozdar also travelled to Vietnam. In Phnom Penh she was cordially received by the state's supreme Buddhist patriarch, the "Sangharaja", who, she commented in her newspaper article (published in both Vietnam and Singapore), spoke five languages, including English, revealing a cosmopolitan and enlightened mind.[505] They exchanged views on religion and how it could become more relevant to modern society. She also addressed small gatherings on "Women's Rights and the Bahá'í Faith" in Phnom Penh and Saigon, staying for two months until the arrival of her son and daughter-in-law to take up her position in May 1954.

As Ann Wee suggests, Fozdar had a flair for achieving publicity for the Council through her travels and making statements to the press that tended to unnerve more conservative elements of the population. Her most memorable effort was the time she stepped off the plane on her return from the Afro-Asian women's conference at Colombo and said, "Singapore is one big brothel".[506] This statement had already made the headlines in Colombo's leading papers and Singapore followed suit the next day. The conference had invited women from all Asian countries and she had gone as part of the Singaporean delegation. There was one day allocated to discussing prostitution and white slave traffic.[507] The Chinese delegation then had been so bold as to say that they had solved their prostitution problem but at this point Fozdar had interjected to say: "at our expense!" Many Chinese women, she reported, had come into Singapore and Malaya as "sing-song girls" and as temporary wives of Malay Regiment soldiers who were sent for training in Hong Kong. The result was that Singapore – which officially had no 'red light' area – was overrun with Chinese prostitutes.

The Singaporean press mulled over her words for a number of weeks after the statement was made and members of the State Assembly voiced their anger that Fozdar had insulted the prestige of Singapore abroad. Her meeting with the Chief Minister, Lim Yew Hock, was also covered by journalists. Apparently, when faced with an Australian report of prostitution in

[505] Shirin Fozdar, "My Trip to Cambodia", *Jame-Jamshed Weekly*, 4th April, 1954, SF File, 45.
[506] Oral History Interview Transcript, 121.
[507] This concern with white prostitution (which was definitely not a large scale phenomenon) was clearly a hangover from British rule. See Ashwini Tambe's work on the colonial government's paranoia about the miscegenation of races and the transportation of white prostitutes to the colonies (2005). That Fozdar and others did not comment on the irrelevance of and racist origins of this debate indicates their continuing absorption in this period of the values of imperial women's associations. Ashwini Tambe,"The Elusive Ingénue: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of European Prostitution in Colonial Bombay." *Gender & Society* 19, no. 2 (April 2005): 160–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204272781.

Singapore, he relented and agreed with her.[508] This is simply one incident of overwhelming media response to Fozdar's words and the power of using women's equality as a barometer of national progress. Knowing her propensity to make controversial statements, the English newspapers (mainly the *Singapore Free Press* and the *Straits Times*) carried versions of articles published on her in other Southeast Asian countries she had visited all through the 1950s to the late 1970s. By tracing her activities in the region they prompted the Singaporean reader to think of women's rights comparatively, on a more than local scale.

C. "Who's Afraid of Shirin Fozdar?": Baiting the Anglophone Press in Singapore from 1950-1965

Sometime in the early 1950s a Chinese theatre group in Singapore performed a play in which a married man told a friend of his that he was in love with another woman. The friend said: "Well then, why don't you marry her?" As we know, it was socially and legally acceptable at that time for a man to have many wives in Singapore. The man replied that he was afraid. "Afraid of who?" his friend asked. "Your wife? Your mother-in-law?" The man replied, "No, no, of course not. I'm afraid of Shirin Fozdar!" Fozdar was very fond of recounting this particular anecdote to journalists. With this pun on "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" she hinted at the efficacy of her life's work - which had been to mount a vehement and well-known campaign against polygamy and easy divorces in Singapore. Often, the story concluded with: "I was the watchdog. If there was anything in the newspapers which was contrary to our cause, I would write in".[509] What her statements also suggest is a keen awareness of the power of the press in shaping public opinion on women's issues. It is clear that "writing in" was an important tool in the arsenal of an activist, capable of integrating serious social questions into popular sensibilities.

Arguably, Fozdar's key accomplishments during her Singapore years were all in relation to the press. In just one decade she was able to introduce "women's rights" as a subject of controversy, bolster female readership, and promote the writing and consideration of gender as an important subject of news. Before her arrival on the scene, for instance, there was no "woman's supplement" in the Free Mercantile Advisor or "Page" in ST or even the printing of national dailies such as *Women's Rights*. Reportage related to women in the 1940's focused mainly on welfare issues. After the Japanese occupation, hundreds of local women came forward to help rebuild Singaporean society and began to form associations of their own yet articles on their activities were rarely more than descriptive. In fact, when the SCW first began campaigning, there were a number of articles in the Anglophone newspapers expressing surprise that women's rights were required in Singapore; the assumption was that Singaporean women were already in possession of all the rights they needed.[510] By contrast, Fozdar and members of the SCW introduced a new provocative tone, eliciting headlines like "Independence? You don't Deserve it Shirin Fozdar Tells Men", "Asian Women Want Equality - fight selfish males".[511] This prompted a whole slew of enraged responses from men, especially in the first three years of SCW's existence. Most surprisingly, ordinary housewives started writing in, with unexpected anger: "It's extremely funny,

[508] Oral History Interview Transcript, 122.
[509] Oral History Interview Transcript,117-121.
[510] Ibid., 129.
[511] "Mrs. Fozdar on Women", *Women's Rights*, 18th February 1952, SF File, 35.

isn't it, you superior males, secure that it just cannot happen to you? (polygamy)"[512] Other op-eds in the *Straits Times* and other English-language newspapers responded by characterizing the "movement for emancipation(whatever that means)" as "ill-conceived" and started by an "Indian lady" whose "Western ideas of restricting birth and womanhood" were not appropriate for Asians: "Asian women should focus on their innate value – being mothers, not try to emulate Western women".[513]

Why did she target the Anglophone Press?

Before understanding the impacts of such press "baiting" it may be worthwhile to briefly visit why Fozdar chose to play out a strategy of Asian comparisons in the Anglophone media. One explanation might be that her early experience of being a spokeswoman for the Bahá'í cause enabled her to understand lobbying for a particular cause in terms of lecture tours and generating awareness through print reportage. She even studied journalism for a year in London in 1935 while her husband was undertaking a Masters in tropical medicine with the explicit goal of "Writing for the Bahá'í faith and being a good speaker. …All this with one purpose". Further, going back to the power of personal charisma discussed in the previous chapter, barely two days after she landed in 1950, her husband approached the *Straits Times* to do a story on her. A whole half page article entitled "A Woman with a Message" emerged, alerting readers that "Shirin is Persian for sweet" and that she was "the most beautiful woman in India".[514]

Yet perhaps more practically, it was because she knew who would comprise her target audience. Unable to speak Tamil, Chinese or Malay, her intended audience was composed of cosmopolitan Asian elites and European expatriates, not diaspora Indian communities. And as a Bahá'í she dedicated in any case to move towards Universalist identity formation rather than localized, or what she saw as parochial, bases for community. English could become the international auxiliary language that Abdul Baha saw as fulfilling the communication demands of the future world federation. Her experiences with Gandhi and other eminent nationalist leaders might have also convinced her that in order to effect political change, connections to elite, mobile, cosmopolitan groups were more promising than cultivating ties to diaspora ethnic communities.

Finally, baiting the press seemed to be the most astute political move to make for an expatriate without local connections and leverage. According to Fozdar, all the political parties hoping to supplant British rule in the 1950s side-lined women's issues as they were worried about losing the votes of men. "Every other party was afraid that if they sided with women, men would not vet for them. On one occasion the SCW wrote to Stan Aubry the Labour Member in Parliament in Britain:

> and he raised this question in parliament but the minister in charge came out with the very lame excuse that as far as divorce laws were concerned ,the other colonies also had this problem so it was nothing new for Singapore.[515]

Yet in the face of inaction the strategy of being the "watchdog" proved most effective:

[512] Ibid.
[513] "Mrs. Fozdar on Women", SF File, 35..
[514] Oral History Interview Transcript, 363.
[515] Ibid., 124.

> And then we attacked that minister also and said in the papers that in terms of divorce numbers, Hollywood was 25% but in Singapore the divorce rate among Malays was 60%". So later after I had made that statement that we beat the Hollywood rate, people got very angry with me and some telephone calls were made threatening to kill me.[516]

Writing in to the papers was a form of combat in itself as polygamy was quite firmly entrenched in Malay as well as Chinese communities. Nonetheless, it was a strategy that achieved provocation without real blood and targeting the bourgeois Anglophone readership meant that Victorian values with regard to prostitution and polygamy (often seen in the same light) could be invoked productively:

> So many such bad practices were going on. But we had many men criticizing us, also women were against us, not all, but those who were secondary wives (worried they'd have no protection under monogamous marriage laws […]
> So it was a very tough fight for us and we carried on with our talk on the radio and our lectures and our letters in the newspapers.[517]

Comparisons with Other Asian Countries

After the SCW was first formed, journalists and members of the public often responded to statements which Fozdar or other members of SCW had made by writing articles and opinion pieces comparing the treatment of women in Singapore to that in other Asian countries such as Burma, India and Pakistan. By the mid-1950s women's issues were seen to be controversial enough to merit whole pages and at times, separate supplements of their own – indicating the growing popularity of the subject. They featured articles that commented on the SCW's activities, presented opposing viewpoints on the polygamy debate and included pieces on women's struggles elsewhere in Asia. Often written by supporters of the SCW or SCW members themselves, the articles took on a naming-and-shaming strategy. Just as Indian nationalists had commented on the relatively liberated status of Burmese women in Asia in the 1920s and 30s,[518] the Singaporean papers portrayed Burma as more advanced on a number of fronts, and not just with regard to polygamy – which proved to be just a starting point for more generic discussions on the 'status' of Singaporean women:

> How different is their position from that of women in Burma which for centuries has granted them an equality of status only recently acquired by women in the West. In Burma married women under civil contract share property equally with their husbands and in case of divorcee collect their full share. In Burma, no barrier of religion

[516] Ibid.
[517] Ibid, 119.
[518] Chie Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration," *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2005/2006): 51 – 81.

> or custom to recruitment of nurses (Malaya is short of nurses) and to establishment of women and child welfare clinics and day nurseries for mothers who go to work.[519]

India also served as a role model (albeit a more problematic one), presenting a picture of feminine advancement against great odds: "In India the granting of a vote is only the beginning of emancipation for 170 million women."[520] Descriptive pieces highlighted the dynamism of Jawaharlal Nehru, who approved of family planning and condemned the physical segregation of women. These were achievements in a society where child marriages continued to occur. Another piece, entitled, "The Barriers are Going: Emancipation of Indian Women", listed all the famous women in office in India, choosing to bring in a sobering note about the "social problems" still in existence only in one line at the end, signalling its underlying agenda to inspire Singapore with India's example.[521] Similarly, Pakistan too was depicted as troubled, but evolving in terms of its women's movement. An unflattering comparison to 'purdah' served to attack the patriarchal notion in circulation in Singapore that Malayan women had all the equality they needed: "In Pakistan, the recruitment of much needed doctors, nurses and administrators was made difficult by purdah, how longer much will Malaya tolerate the same situation?"[522] Noticeably, the untitled article was placed right next to an opinion piece entitled "Emancipation Nonsense" written by a Mr. Koh Bee Chye that argued "what Malaysian housewives really want is not more "equality" but a drop in the cost of living".[523] The juxtaposition of these pieces served to demonstrate to the reader that the issue at hand was the very will to recognize and fight for women's issues in Singapore. As the article lamented, "already, both in Pakistan and Indonesia have women banded together to fight what they consider injustices to their sex but there are few signs of any such development in Malaya".[524]

An alternative to bemoaning the backwardness of Malaya was to express enthusiasm for its relative success. The *Borneo Bulletin* commented on what it considered the adequate rate of change for "womenfolk of the east". This may well have been in reference to the SCW as the latter's stance was that it was fighting for women's rights in an Asian paradigm, not a Western individualist one. The writer, "Georgina", didn't seem to be aware of the irony of having a Western name while concluding that "the east can learn from the mistakes of the west". She held up the phenomenon of domestically minded career woman in a positive light – "They're Career Girls – but home ties are hard to break." [525] The result was, she concluded, that women "of the east" were becoming "emancipated" but the change was more gradual and "I doubt that it will ever be so complete" as "the East will be too wise to let it go further."[526] In a subtler note of self-congratulation, in November 1955 *The Weekender* (a Singapore paper) recounted the salacious story of the Pakistani Prime Minister's visit to Washington D.C. with his two wives. Taking up more than three quarters of the page with photographs of the two women included, the self-titled "Centaur" discussed the embarrassment that ensued when the Americans realized their guest had a young second wife. The man in question was the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Mohammad

[519] "Weaker Sex" *Singapore Free Press*, Monday March 10th, 1952, SF File, 36.
[520] Ibid.
[521] "The Barriers are Going: Emancipation of Indian Women" *Women's Rights*, 13th March 1956, SF File, 54.
[522] *Singapore Free Press*, Monday March 10th, 1952, SF File, 36.
[523] Ibid.
[524] Ibid.
[525] "They're Career Girls – but home ties are hard to break" *The Borneo Bulletin*, March 19th 1954, SF File, 48.
[526] Ibid.

Ali Bogra and his polygamous marriage caused a furore in his country, but clearly also provoked conversations in other newly independent nations.[527] Revelling in the apparent 'backwardness' of this custom, the writer weighed the pros and cons of polygamy generally, then moved on to a discussion of the practice of this among royalty in 'Siam', ending with a direct question to the reader: "And what do Malaya's women think of polygamy?" [528]

While many of the articles to do with the polygamy debate – which featured regularly throughout the 1950s and 1960s - were written by SCW members, not all were and the English newspapers showcased opinions which were in circulation in the Singaporean Anglophone public sphere as a result of the campaigns of SCW and other women's groups. The comparative frame of reference seems to have been completely absorbed by the end of the 1950s. In 1958, for example, as Singaporean newspapers trailed the activities of SCW members at international conferences they covered women's issues in Asia with just as much attention, gesturing to the commonality of women's struggle. One newspaper simply provided the headline "Women Fight a Long Way to Go" without specifying which women were involved and where, as it apparently didn't matter. The article reported on the trip of a Burmese educator named Daw Katherine Khin Khin, also an author, welfare officer and president of Burmese YWCA, as well as India's Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, termed a "legislator", to the opening of the eighth National Assembly of United Church Women at Denver, Colorado.[529] The implicit solidarity involved in reporting this small item of news was compounded on the same page by another, more obvious headline expressing solidarity for women's issues across Asia: "Our Women back HK Sisters in War on Concubinage".[530] The article covered an entire page.

The English-language press of Singapore, however, was not the only proponent of this comparative Asian frame of reference. Most English-language newspapers in Asian countries in turn, covered the visits of Shirin Fozdar, who, by the mid-1950s was not just labelled a Singaporean but an "Asian feminist and lecturer" and Singaporean papers often rehashed the contents of the visit from reports in other Asian dailies. Pakistan's *Evening Star*, for example, gave an extended account of her visit in 1956, highlighting her Asian brand of feminism. With the headline, "Pakistani Women Warned against Westernisation", the article went on to brand Fozdar a "prominent Malayan leader" who called on Pakistani women to "evolve a social order in keeping with the genius of the Pakistani nation".[531] Reportedly she suggested that the institution of polygamy was the biggest threat to happy family life "in the East" and that the countries in Asia could not afford to do away with 50 % of the population, comprising as it did, women. Tellingly, the newspaper isolated the comment "everything good in our civilization must be maintained" as the primary excerpt to use as a caption for the article.

[527] Sarah Ansari, "Polygamy, Purdah and Political Representation: Engendering Citizenship in 1950s Pakistan", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Nov., 2009): 1426-8. Accessed August 5, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40285018.
[528] "Polygamy is Better than Divorce", *The Weekender*, November 4th 1955, SF File, 52.
[529] "Women Fight: Long Way to Go" *Women's Rights*, 30 October 1958, SF File, 78.
[530] "Our Women back HK Sisters in War on Concubinage," *Women's Rights* SF File, 52.
[531] "Pakistani Women Warned against Westernisation," *Evening Star* 15 June 1956, SF File, 54.

D. Changes on the Ground: Cross-Border Organizing

Significantly, the SCW's Asian frame of reference did not merely affect the nature of discourse on women's issues in the Anglophone print media. It also translated to collaborations with a worldwide network of women's groups, giving particular support to those located in Asia through letters and telegrams.[532] When Perwari, the Indonesian Women's Association marched to the Indonesian Prime Minister's office demanding the abolition of polygamy and child marriages in December 1953, the SCW wrote to congratulate them:

> We wish to assure you that you have support of women of the world. God is also on your side. The U.N.O will also support your move as they are wedded to the charter for human rights, wherein women have been granted the same rights in marriage, divorce and other fields. [533]

Beyond telegrams and letters, the SCW itself served as a model for legislative reforms relating to women's issues for other Asian countries. In fact, it was often sought out in this role. This is what may have prompted Mrs. George Lee – Shirin Fozdar's second in command – to write that the latter's "fight" was responsible for "creating an awakening in women of neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia".[534] In February 1954, for example, the SCW received a letter from Moersahid Wongodirdjo – the Consul General for Indonesia in Singapore.[535] Wongodirdjo wrote that the authorities in Jakarta were interested in obtaining a copy of the Monogamous Marriage Bill that Fozdar had drafted for legislation in Singapore. The SCW's reciprocal admiration for the Indonesian women's movement was known, but more significantly, the organization provided a seemingly reasonable model for legislation, fitting both the demands of mainstream women's groups and governmental capacity. Wongodirdjo wrote that the authorities in Djakarta were interested in obtaining a copy of the Monogamous Marriage Bill that Fozdar had drafted for legislation for Singapore [itself modelled on the Hindu Marriage Bill and Chinese marriage laws]. After a meeting with her, he wrote again wanting a copy of her "point of views, reasons and arguments in support of the marriage draft bill which you have introduced in the legislative council for legislation".[536] These subsequently featured in the Indonesian Bill that came into being.

Similarly, the Hong Kong Council of Women also cultivated strong ties with the SCW. Mrs. R.T. Eng wrote to the Council in 1954 to ask for information on SCW's anti-polygamy

[532] SCW sent telegrams across the world in solidarity with women's causes throughout its career. When British women petitioned the House of Commons in March 1954 for "equal pay for equal work", it sent a telegram of support. When the United Nations Economic and Social Council sat to draft the convention on the status of women that year, the SCW alerted the local press and when Egyptian feminist Dora Shafik went on a hunger strike to procure the right to vote for her countrywomen, SCW wrote to President General Muhammad Neghuib requesting him to consider her demands. Nevertheless, it was able to offer more lasting support to neighboring Asian countries.
[533] Letter to Perwari, 26th December 1953, Minutes of SCW, 52.
[534] Mrs. George Lee, Letter "To Whomsoever it may Concern", Minutes of SCW, 250.
[535] Letter to Shirin Fozdar, Minutes of SCW, 90.
[536] Ibid, 91.

efforts:

> I am instructed by the Executive Committee of the Hong Kong Council of Women to write to you and ask if the enclosed newspaper report is correct? The report was published in Hong Kong newspapers on Monday the 25th of January.[537]

The letter established that multiple Hong Kong newspapers had written on the Singaporean Council's movements. The HKCW desired to know "more about the SCW's campaign to abolish polygamy and what has been done to date", assuming direct correlations between Singapore and their own situation and hence, trying to anticipate who their opponents were likely to be: "Are the women opposing the SCW legal wives? Or concubines?"[538] The correspondence and relationship between the two Councils endured such that when the Governor of Singapore, Sir Robert Black was transferred to Hong Kong in 1957, the SCW requested him to assist the Hong Kong Council of Women in their efforts to change the marriage laws. In 1958, during a lecture tour to attend the Southeast Asia Women's conference in Tokyo, Shirin Fozdar stopped in Hong Kong and spoke to women at the Hong Kong India club. The *South China Morning Post* reported, not without a little bemusement, that at another event, "women of the Indian community were urged by Mrs. Fozdar to help Chinese women in their fight against concubinage in a talk held by the Indian women's association at the Indonesian club". [539] This, if anything, was Asian internationalism in the flesh. It also made sense given her stated agenda prior to the tour to "unite women across Asia against polygamy".[540] Prior to the trip, the *Straits Times* reported that Mrs. Fozdar was starting an ethnic campaign to "awaken Chinese-speaking people" by meeting a group of teachers from six Chinese schools: "They discussed ways and means of encouraging other women to join them in their fight against polygamy".[541]

Seeing that Singapore had preserved many links with the Malayan Union in matters such as immigration, currency, university education and income tax, the SCW was also inspired to establish a Malayan Women's Council in the 1950s which would cater to the needs of women in both populations.[542] Many women living in the Malay Federation had also written to them asking for help as the marriage laws there were even more lax than in Singapore. In fact, Malay men who sought to avoid the stricter laws in Singapore often went across the border to Johore to be married. A petition was sent to the all the sultans of Malaya where instead of asking for the abolition of bigamous marriages, the SCW requested reforms that would restrict the customary practice of them. A series of talks was also undertaken by SCW members between 1955 and 1957 in the town halls of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Taiping and Muar. These efforts notwithstanding, the SCW was unable to make headway in Malaya. The women's groups in the 1950s such as National Association of Women's Institutes and the YWCA (Malaya branch) tended to focus more on women's roles in the home and on social welfare. Fozdar's sights were described as "set very high"

[537] "Letter to Shirin Fozdar," Minutes of SCW, 82.
[538] Ibid.
[539] "Problems Posed by Marriage Laws: Positions in Singapore" *South China Morning Post*, 16th August 1958, SF File, 76.
[540] "Mrs. Fozdar Will Hit Out: An Indiscriminate Production of Children, she says" 28 July 1958, SF File, 76.
[541] Ibid.
[542] Singapore existed as a separate state ruled by Britain as part of the Straits Settlements until 1959 – when it gained self-governance. It became one of the 14 states of Malaysia for a brief period between 1963-65 before becoming independent.

and her programme for a Malayan Women's council was seen to be "as fully revolutionary in its way as that of the most extreme nationalist".[543]

The activities of the SCW did, however, put pressure on the Muslim Advisory Board in Malaysia. The Board eventually agreed to the provision of the Muslim Ordinance that became the law in 1957.[544] Pressured too by the rising demands of Muslim women, the MAB finally considered the establishment of a Syariah Court where all disputed divorces could be tried and a bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly in November 1955. It was in the setting up of this Syariah Court that the SCW had to use its international connections with other women's groups. Although the Fozdar files do not confirm whether or not the connection yielded a concrete result, the minutes of the SCW meeting held on 19th March 1958 put on record that at the Afro-Asian Solidarity conference Fozdar and the SCW secretary Mrs. George Lee attended, the Pakistani delegates had shown a "great willingness to assist us" by procuring a Muslim judge for the Syariah Court in Singapore.[545] They had reached this conclusion after Fozdar had discussed the issue of easy divorces in Malaya and how it was difficult to find a presiding judge at the conference that would curtail them.[546] Based on their interaction, the SCW decided to write to the Chief Secretary of Singapore informing him of the offer from the Pakistani delegates to find a Pakistani Judge for the Singapore Court. Unfortunately, it seems like nothing was heard in reply except a formal acknowledgement of their letter. Yet the very fact that such logistical aid was both sought out and offered at these international women's conferences [formed in the context of the anti-colonial and non-aligned movement of the 1950s and 1960s] is revealing of a deliberative culture of inter-Asian support that is missing in existing accounts of the Singapore women's movement.

Finally, the SCW also saw the importance of going beyond forming connections with women's groups in the region to practically supporting foreign Asian women living in Singapore. Concerned about the problem of girls from Hong Kong and China being sold to brothel owners without their knowledge or against their will, it first tried to redress the problem through its long held strategy of creating publicity. As outlined above, at international women's conferences in Colombo and Tokyo in 1958 Fozdar highlighted the problem of transnational prostitution. But the SCW also proposed the concrete step of establishing a center where women who wished to be rehabilitated could be taught useful skills that would enable them to earn livelihoods alternatively. The center could not ultimately be established due to the lack of government financial support. Notwithstanding this, the SCW's original suggestion that social welfare be directed at the rehabilitation of prostitutes was taken on board. In November 1959, a Women and Girls Advisory Committee was established by the government to suppress brothels and racketeers. In 1960, a Women and Girls Welfare section was added to the Social Welfare department. Finally, the Women's Charter of 1961, based significantly on the demands of the SCW, also included increased penalties for injuries to women and girls.[547]

[543] Quoted in Phyllis Chew, 128.
[544] Phyllis Chew, 128.
[545] Minutes of SCW, 19th March 1958, 322.
[546] Ibid.
[547] Phyllis Chew, 137.

E. Conclusion

By the end of the 1950s, women's rights were seen as an index of national progress. Credit for this, at least in part, must be due to the SCW as without their frantic media campaign, the anti-polygamy movement and marriage law reform in general would not have assumed the importance that it did in the public sphere. The consensus among Singaporean scholars remains that Shirin Fozdar's leadership was vital to stoking the ambition of the SCW, which in turn was instrumental to raising public awareness such that when the People's Action Party campaigned for self-government in 1959, a major item on its agenda was "one man, one wife" – the motto of SCW's anti-polygamy campaign since 1951.[548] When PAP won the election, the Women's Charter was instituted and monogamy was the law for all non-Muslims. This also allowed a divorced wife to be entitled to half the share of the property even if she didn't contribute monetarily to the marriage and to appeal for a court injunction protecting her and her children from an abusive husband.

Another recent interpretation of the women's movement, however, accords little significance to the English-educated women's efforts in the run up to the 1959 election. In Ann Wee's view, the PAP was fervently interested in appealing to the Chinese-educated voter and hence, strove to direct the Communist zeal (which saw polygamy as part of the decadence of old China) into nationalism. The Women's Charter, she argues, was a response to a "passionately puritanical zeal" to abolish backward customs: "At a far remove indeed, but perhaps the Women's Charter owed less to Mrs. Fozdar and more to Chairman Mao".[549] While undoubtedly vernacular Chinese agitation had a role to play in changing public opinion, Wee's assessment is still unduly parsimonious towards the contribution of the Anglophone elites, who no doubt added fuel to the fire. It overlooks Shirin Fozdar's consistent relationship with political power: she lobbied her cause to Chief Ministers Lim Kew Hock and David Marshall and even with PAP leaders Lee Kuan Yew and Toh Chin Chye in the 1960s. Further, the anti-polygamy campaign was socially important, reaching its target of raising consciousness, even if just among the English-educated in Singapore through protracted discussions about polygamy and the Syariah Court in the public sphere.

What both interpretations leave out, however, is the wide-ranging origin and impact of the ideas that underlay the SCW and that went beyond Singapore and the Women's Charter. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, Shirin Fozdar's Bahá'í perspectives on gender equality coalesced with the social feminism of the formal Indian women's movement, countering the notion that for Indian feminists, women's rights activism was derived solely through European intellectual precedent and example. In this chapter I highlighted the deep imbrication of Indian and Singaporean discourses about womanhood as well as exchanges and collaborations between the SCW and other Asian women's groups, showing how the Women's Charter owes much to various articulations of women's rights in the region instead of just Singapore. It obtains its anti-polygamy injunction at least in part from considerations of the Indian and Chinese marriage bills and in turn inspired anti-polygamy bills and resolutions in Indonesia and Hong Kong.

Examining her life also leads to the understanding that the "woman question" was an entry point into transnational thinking in India in the interwar period and then in post-colonial Singapore,

[548] Ann Wee, "The Women's Charter, 1961: Where We Were Coming From and How We Got There" *Singapore Women's Charter: Roles, Responsibilities and Rights in Marriage* (ed.) Theresa Devasahayam (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing), 70.
[549] Ibid.

a country known for its drive to distinction (as well as political and economic isolationism in Asia, especially in the 1960's). Fozdar's odd blend of Bahái essentialist beliefs about women and experience of conservative Indian feminism created a platform that worked remarkably well to unite middle and upper middle class Singaporean women. Together with the SCW, she was able to fashion a consistent Asian feminine subject: one who guarded with "proper vigilance" against the alleged extremes of Western feminisms but still managed to offer occasional disruptions to traditional male authority in Malaya (as seen in the energy of the newspaper shaming campaigns). And, perhaps most importantly, in addition to being domestically oriented, respectable and spiritual, this subject was fashioned to see herself as part of a natural Asian sisterhood, transcending borders of territory and culture.

CONCLUSION

It may be confusing to end the story of the story of Asianist ideology and Indian women's activism in Southeast Asia as early as 1965. Didn't women continue to engage ideas of "Asia" and "Asian unity"? As we have seen, Shirin Fozdar and the SCW continued to blaze through the Singaporean public sphere demanding better marriage divorce and laws for women well into the late 1960s. In the early twentieth century, as I have shown in Chapters One and Two, Asianist discourse focused on the alleged equivalency of Indian and "Eastern" civilizations more broadly, as a way of enhancing the ambition of the women's movement through cultural linkages. In the 1920s and 30s, Japan flexed its military muscle and perpetuated the view that "Asia should be ruled by the *Showa* (enlightened peace) monarchy of Hirohito rather than by Europeans or Asians themselves".[550] And its conquest of Manchuria (1931) and Jehol (1933) further served to undermine the high-minded ideal of a unified continent.

Nonetheless, in terms of the story of women's organisations in India and Malaya, while Japan faded as a prime model for change in Fozdar's era, Asianism itself was not out of the picture quite yet. In March 1947, newly liberated countries gathered in New Delhi for the Asian Relations Conference where they pledged to build economic, political, and cultural cooperation between nations.[551] Here, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru invoked the notion of the civilizational unity of Asia by calling the conference an "expression of that deeper urge of the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted in spite of the isolationism which grew up during the years of European domination".[552] Rendering the 'mystic asia' discourse in its totality, Gandhi said the following during the course of his address to the concluding session of the Conference:

> The first of these wise men was Zoroaster. He belonged to the East. He was followed by Buddha who belonged to the East-India. Who followed Buddha? Jesus, who came from the East. Before Jesus was Moses who belonged to Palestine though he was born in Egypt. After Jesus came Mohammad. I omit any reference to Krishna and Rama and other lights. I do not call them lesser lights, but they are less known to the literary world. All the same I do not know a single person in the world to match these men to Asia. And then what happened? Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West. I am sorry to say that. I would not talk any further...What I want you to understand is the message of Asia. It is not to be learnt through the Western spectacles or by the West, it must be the message of love and the message of truth...In this age of democracy, in this age of awakening of the poorest of the poor, you can redeliver this message with the greatest emphasis. You will complete the conquest

[550] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 26.
[551] Ibid, xvi.
[552] Quoted in *Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March-April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948), 23.

> of the West not through vengeance because you have been exploited, but with real understanding. I am sanguine if all of you put your hearts together..not merely heads..to understand the secret of the message these wise men of the East have left to us, and if we really become worthy of that great message, the conquest of the West will be completed. This conquest will be loved by the West itself. The West today is pining for wisdom. It is despairing of a multiplication of the atom bombs, because atom bombs mean utter destruction not merely of the West but of the whole world, as if the prophecy of the Bible is going to be fulfilled and there is to be a perfect deluge. It is up to you to tell the world of its wickedness and sin...That is the heritage your teachers and my teachers have taught Asia.[553]

At the cusp of Independence, India was thus cast as the fountainhead of the great 'message of the East'; a message of toleration and peace. However, as Sinderpal Singh argues in an article about Nehru and Pan-Asianness, Nehru's own representation of Indian state identity shifted over time: "It swung from a stance of anti-colonialism based on humanitarian and civilisational norms, to a stance of anti-imperialism based on principles of self-sufficiency, non-alignment and autonomy from great-power interference".[554] By the mid 1950's the writing was on the wall for the civilizations based Asianist discourse. After the Asian Relations Conference and in the wake of a new bipolar Cold War, the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, in Vijay Prashad's words, "dreamt of a new world", amassing as "the Third World", ready to overthrow their colonial rulers.[555] As a part of this Third World project, Afro-Asian meetings took place in Bandung and Cairo (1955 and 1961 respectively), the Non-Aligned Movement was formulated in Belgrade in 1961, and the Tricontinental Conference in Havana rehearsed the major arguments to be made by these nations to the UN. At Bandung, twenty nine Afro-Asian countries gathered to signal their rejection of the bipolar world. The agenda from this point on was clear. The Third World would be united on the basis of a shared political commitment to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, not from any essentialist notion of shared culture or civilizational continuity. In Bandung, Indonesia's President, Sukarno, for example, exhorted the nations present with the following: "Let us remember that the stature of all mankind is diminished so long as nations or parts of nations are unfree. […] And let us remember, Sisters and Brothers, for the sake of all that, we Asians and Africans must be united".[556]

What did this mean in particular for the 'Sisters'? In the wake of Non-Alignment and the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement, the first Asian-African Conference on Women was held in Colombo in 1958, and the first Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo in 1961. Fozdar, as we know, attended the meeting in Colombo and talked about prostitution in Southeast Asia. However, there's little mention of Singapore or Malayan representatives at the Cairo conference. There, as Shobna Nijhawan has argued, Indian socialist feminists like Rameshwari Nehru crafted a coherent agenda for women within the context of a Third World critique of imperialism. The Indian

[553] Ibid.
[554] Sinderpal Singh "From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, 'Indianness' and 'Pan-Asian-ness'," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34:1, (2011): 55.
[555] Prashad, xv.
[556] Quoted in Prashad, xvii.

contributors to the Afro-Asian Solidarity movement prioritised political unity (over cultural and civilizational arguments as outlined above) and also promoted, in line with Nehruvian thought, socialistic views of social change.[557] Hence, there was an overarching emphasis on the redistribution of the world's resources and labor power.[558] Those who attended also emphasized the enormous contribution of women to the birth of newly liberated nations, offering an implicit critique of the nation's inability to redress the debt and make good on their promises, providing, alongside the franchise, policies that allowed women the freedom to marry, the right to work and drastic measures against the practice of polygamy. [559] Fozdar and the SCW attended these gatherings, and approved of their increasing reliance on the UN as an international body who could address their demands and create institutional platforms. Fozdar went to the UN's first conference on women in 1975 in Mexico City, during the International Year for Women.[560] Nonetheless, in the face of an era of assertively anticolonial national feminism, the SCW's slightly more conservative, bourgeois, and religiously inflected agenda had already taken a back seat in international conferences from the mid-1960s. In the 1970's Fozdar had moved away from activism in Singapore to Thailand and was firmly ensconced in Bahá'í pioneer work as well as in setting up a home for destitute girls.

As we have seen, despite occasional lip service to the notion of Asian civilizational unity, during the era of decolonization Asian unity was conceived mostly along political, expedient lines. Yet in the 1970s even this political species of Asianism would fade alongside the demise of the Third World agenda itself. According to Prashad, the class character of Third World leadership (once colonial overthrow had been achieved through liberation movements) "constrained its horizons, even as it inflamed possibilities in its societies".[561] Without a "genuine social revolution" in his view, Third World leadership began to rely on landed and mercantile classes. The result was an era of interventions by the IMF and World Bank in how new states were run, disavowal of the goals of socialism and elites who saw themselves as removed from the project of social solidarity. Understandably, Asianism as a vision too came to halt in this era. While the regional intergovernmental organization ASEAN can be seen as the contemporary face of Pan-Asianism, this would be an overstatement. Since its founding in 1967, ASEAN has often showcased the specialties of Asian societies via their committee on Culture and Information (COCI). However, it is known to primarily dwell on issues of trade. Cultural initiatives are geared towards the promotion of 'cooperation' and not premised on deep historical linkages.

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[557] At Cairo Rameshwari Nehru represented Nehru's foreign policy in its entirety: "We believe in the principle of the well-known Pancha Sheel of mutual respect and equality, freedom and peaceful co-existence in national and international affairs. We stand for self-determination and non-interference in other people's countries. We are against 1) imperialism of varieties-subtle or gross, political or economic, 2) racial discrimination, 3) colonialism, 4) military pacts, and 5) above all and most of all, against nuclear weapons and the armaments race." From Om Prakash Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru: Patriot and Internationalist* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1986), 53.
[558] Prashad, xvii.
[559] Ibid, 58.
[560] Rose Ong, 3.
[561] Prashad, 14.

What then, is the value of studying a historical discourse that has so evidently faded out of political and cultural circulation in the world for the past fifty odd years? And, was it ever really that relevant, given that the nationalist movement subsumed most of the particular hopes and dreams Indian reformers and activists had for women? The answer to the second question is quite clear cut to my mind. What this study has established is how resourceful Indian women have historically been in term of invoking the powers of the comparison, and of pursuing their own objectives (and that the two are related). As I endeavoured to show in Chapter One, the opening decades of the twentieth century were crucial to creation of a correlation between 'Asianness' and femininity. As seen in the popular publication the *Modern Review*, theological writing that was produced in this period valorized the qualities of intuition and subjectivity as they represented new ways of addressing the problems of modern selfhood. In tandem, an Asianist aesthetic sensibility emerged among the Bengali intelligentsia that presented affinities between the Zen and Hindu Advaita worldviews and artistic traditions. Upper middle class Indian women not only read the journal, but contributed to the development of this aesthetic through popular fiction. And as a result of prolonged exposure to the notion of a 'mystic Asia', early calls for reform were justified on the basis of the spiritual nobility of 'Asian womanhood'.

By the 1920s, Indian women were even more instrumental in their use of the mystic Asia discourse. In Chapter Two I demonstrated how they participated in a discourse of transnational Asian commonality in order to deftly articulate their opposition to both Victorian maternal imperialist denunciations of Indian custom (with regard to women) as well as the feminizing and spiritualizing excesses of Indian nationalism. For Indian contributors to the *Indian Ladies Magazine*, a key means of dismantling both of these conceptions was to use literature about life in "eastern" countries (predominantly Japan), to craft a notion of civilizational continuity rather than difference. The example of Japan served as an important means of exposing bourgeois English educated Indian women to not only ideas for higher education for women or how to run universities efficiently, but of greater practicality (i.e., "learning by doing") and individuation, without raising the ire (or suspicions) of a predominantly conservative reading public. Regular contributor and sometimes Editor, Kamala Satthianadhan also used a method of argumentation, or what I call *invisible disputations*, masquerading reform commentary as informative travelogue about Japan. By anticipating several attitudes about higher education for women from a colonial Indian readership and countering them with examples from a transnational context deemed to be civilizationally close to India, she provided the female readership of the magazine with the tools - the rhetorical strategies and comparative examples - that would enable them to more formidably critique contemporary patriarchal fears of higher learning.

Likewise, in Chapter Three, I argued that intra-Asian comparisons served not only to add fuel to demands for women's reform in their respective countries, but to build a sense of community between women on an international platform. The social attitudes that participants of the All Asian Women's Conference of 1931 cultivated towards one another in the sessions worked to build: 1) a culture of mutual support through performative gestures of consensus that worked deliberately to override potential tensions between participants; 2) the impression of the existence of a bedrock of unilateral morals and immediate subjects of concern for all Asian women; and 3) 'natural' or pre-researched bodies of knowledge about the condition of women in specific Asian countries. The performance of an *imagined moral community* referred subtly to the overarching notion of Asian civilizational unity that Margaret Cousins, the founder of the WIA and the Conference, poetically evoked at the beginning. The second part of the chapter concerned itself

with the afterlives of these cultural labors; afterlives that would emerge in part at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947 in the session on women, and even beyond, at various National Councils for women in Southeast Asia in the post-independence era.

In the fourth chapter I departed from an expected focus on Indian nationalist feminists such as Rameshwari Nehru or Vijayalakshmi Pandit who were emissaries of newly independent India to international conferences and examined the Asianist praxis of an unusual and under examined Bahá'í figure, Shirin Fozdar. The emphasis of Indian women's organizations on juridical rights are often seen to derive from contacts and exposure to Western liberal feminist ideas, right from the First Wave of international feminism to the Third, anticipating the UN legislation on women's rights (CEDAW of 1979). Yet Indian feminisms didn't have to constitute only a rethinking of a Western idea, though that certainly featured in the process. They also involved a rethinking of alternative strategies and positions. Shirin Fozdar's exposure to Bahá'ísm as a spiritual and political ideology meant that she imagined the women's movement as fundamentally transnational in orientation: structure, advocacy and membership were all thought of in global terms. More particularly, it was the unique blend of her spiritual commitment to the Bahá'u'lláh and participation in the Indian national women's movement (which had its own international contacts and influences) as well as proximity to Gandhian nationalism that shaped her tactical approach to women's issues. In Chapter Five I suggested that the combination of her experiences in India and Singapore led to a new approach for SCW that involved fostering: a) a new Asian frame of reference for women's issues in post-WWII Singapore; and b) cross-border organizing between Singaporean and other Asian women's groups in the years between 1952 and 1965.

The above, in my view, contradicts Partha Chatterjee's now well-known thesis that nationalism resolved the 'woman question' that had been raised by reformers in the 19th century by creating a public/private sphere binary and by relegating women to the latter.[562] Further, he argued that by the end of the 19th century, there was a "seeming absence of any autonomous struggle by women themselves for equality and freedom".[563] Yet this study has shown that Indian women who cast themselves as reformers manipulated discourses precisely for the purposes of swaying mainstream opinion towards the formulation of policies that would ultimately grant them equality and freedom. For instance, comparisons with Japan enabled Anglophone middle class woman to fight covertly and discursively for the right to higher education along similar lines; for a woman's university that presented little threat to contemporary understandings of gender roles. In fact the 'Greater India' thesis as formulated by Kalidas Nag and others, drew from Orientalist scholarship on India that pinned India as the foundation of all Southeast Asian cultures. The fact that women of the early twentieth century participated in this discourse of Asian commonality doesn't just show their mental debt to Orientalism (as scholars of 'derivative histories' might conclude). A closer look at their voices demonstrates that they were focused on spinning Orientalist tropes to their advantage: transforming passivity to inherent peacefulness, religiosity to a notion of greater feminine spiritual consciousness, motherhood to moral and educational mentorship of society. And they also registered tensions against the nationalist movement and

[562] See Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16/4 (1989): 622–33.
[563] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women*, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), 250.

native orthodoxy, whilst attempting to stay within the fold. Discourse also translated to actions. Using the critical shaming power of comparison, invoking the Japanese precedent in women's higher education helped Indian women in a number of ways. It allowed them to communicate their interest in modernization. It prompted a search for Asian leadership in Christian organizations, and a focus on practical educational approaches not being offered fully in India at the time. Further, it enabled them to shame the public into acknowledging that neither private sponsorship nor Government efforts to educate women at secondary and post-secondary levels were effective, without writing themselves out of the conversation as un-patriotic or unfeminine. Likewise the All Asia Women's Conference proved to be a site in which women created a conference format for building consensus among 'women of the East' that would be replicated in Delhi in 1947 and then even in the Singapore Council of Women in the 1950s. The latter consistently used information from India and China whilst drafting the Singaporean Marriage Bill and then played a role in inspiring Bills in other parts of Southeast Asia.

No doubt as many keen readers will observe, the story of Asianism presented here is far from complete. A number of key 'Asias' are missing that I have not been able to engage in the scope of this dissertation that merit inclusion in a much longer monograph on this subject. Firstly, women's contributions to Islamicate rather than only Hindu notions of Asian unity would enrich the story of Asianism significantly. How did women in Muslim cultural spheres the early twentieth century write about Pan-Asianism? Would that Asia encompass Central Asia and the Middle East? How would they have written about 'sisterhood' in the context of political projects such as the Khilafat movement in the 1920s? What cultural, civilizational aspects would be foregrounded here? Likewise, communist and socialist conceptions of Asian unity deserve to be explored, with the participation of Indian women in a communist movement originating in Tashkent or in the socialist international organizations.[564] What kinds of 'Asianness' were foregrounded here? Did this imagination venture beyond the political and economic into the cultural? Finally, my focus on international exchanges and platforms has somewhat obscured vernacular writing on Asian-ness in the early twentieth century. In the fullest form of this current study, it would be interesting to compare how the North Indian Bengali, Hindi and Urdu public spheres cast the "Eastern woman" as compared to the writings of Anglophone women in these same contexts. Would works in the vernacular emerge from a different class and gender consciousness? Would they advocate for a different kind of 'Asia'?

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These questions notwithstanding, my aim in this initial foray has been to take up, as mentioned in the Introduction, Joan Scott's call for the writing of histories that showcase the contributions of Asian and African actors to international feminism. The chapters above heed that call by showcasing the role that an Asia oriented imagination (and networking) played in the national Indian and Singaporean women's movements. They are also a response to what Padma Anagol wisely terms the "dominant paradigm" that has overshadowed Indian gender and women's history, namely the overweening focus on excavating the contours of patriarchy.[565] This paradigm, encapsulated best perhaps in subaltern histories (in for example, Gayatri Spivak's famous assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak") has tended to deconstruct every possible

[564] See Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2019) for a sense of the kind of women who upheld an internationalist communist agendas.
[565] Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850*-1920 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 226.

expression of agency by Indian women as derivative and thus flawed.[566] By contrast, Anagol in her study of 19th century Maharashtrian feminism has argued that:

> Women conducted searches in their own country's traditions for the means to achieve gender justice and *selectively choose* [my emphasis] from the scrambled discourses of modernity. It is this feature of selection, amalgamation and negotiation that gives Indian feminism of the nineteenth century its uniqueness.

The fundamental finding of my study is the fact of the persistence of this habit of 'selection, amalgamation and negotiation' well into the twentieth century. Further, it has deepened the meaning of the much contested word "agency" in my mind. Instead of seeing agency only as resistance or as resistance as true only its 'purest' form, i.e., removed from the logics of patriarchy and imperialism altogether, I have come to accept that agency must be explored "within the grammar of concepts within which it resides".[567] That is to say, while this study does conform to the "tendency" Saba Mahmood ascribes to feminist scholarship from the 1970's onwards of looking for expressions or moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to patriarchal domination, it also underscores the necessity of understanding agency more relationally, as quiet instances of assertion, wrangled out of existing discourses and situations.[568] Even so it remains ever mixed, never altogether free of elements of control. And may not even appear in the guise of protest or resistance.

To return now to the first question I raised, what would be the value of understanding Asianist ideologies and activism in the history of the Indian women's movement today? Here again, I find resonance in Mahmood and her formulation that feminism itself has a tension within it, "attributable to its dual character as both an *analytical* and *politically prescriptive* project". [569] The emphasis on women's resistance in relations of domination and naturalization of freedom as a social ideal are not analytical oversights. There is a prerogative built into feminist scholarship (that she argues at times unproductively rejects alternative trajectories to ethics that are more grounded in conventional piety and less interested in freedom). The prerogative, traditionally, however, remains to search for *prescriptions* for changing the subordinated status of women. In the last ten years, writing on the contemporary women's movement in India has oscillated between despair and hopefulness. Newspapers abound with horrific accounts of gender and caste based sexual violence. Equality in social, political and economic terms, is still far from being achieved. However, there are recurrent moments of remarkable "agency": in 2012 national public outcry and women's campaigns against the gang rape on a bus of a young student in Delhi led to reforms to India's rape laws[570]; in 2020 in a completely unprecedented move, thousands of Muslim women stood for 100 days in Shaheenbagh in protest of the government's proposals to introduce a National Popular Register and National Register of Citizens (actions that would further alienate religious

[566] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1988): 271–313.
[567] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 34.
[568] Mahmood says feminists have sought to understand how women subvert "the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices" and "redeploy" them for their own "interests and agendas", 6.
[569] Ibid, 10.
[570]See "How Nirbhaya Case Changed Rape Laws in India," *Times of India*, Accessed December 19, 2019, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-nirbhaya-case-changed-rape-laws-inindia/articleshow/72868366.cms.

minorities in the country).[571] In this era of mobilization, the lessons of Asianist organizing remain pertinent. On the negative end, there is much to learn about the occlusions, exclusions and biases (such as that of upper class Anglophone women over women of other backgrounds, or the foregrounding of India over other countries). On the other, there is value for the present day in determining how women shared information across national borders and evolved lobbying tactics that successfully swayed public opinion. Most importantly, (and I am cognizant of writing this while a pandemic rages on the planet), there are lessons here for how to appreciate incremental victories (or incremental agency?) while there are enormous constraints, patriarchal, imperial, national or otherwise at work in the world.

[571] See Mani Shankar Aiyer, "Women Who Lead: Requiem for Shaheen Bagh", *The Telegraph Online*, Accessed April 19th 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/shaheen-bagh-women-who-lead/cid/1766340.

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