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## CHAPTER 3

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“Fiery Sparks of Change”:

### A Comparison between First Wave Feminists of India and the U.S.

Shoba Sharad Rajgopal<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

The celebration of the centenary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2020 has seen the resurgence of interest in the struggles of the Suffragette/Suffragist movement. This article examines the representation of first wave feminism in the developing world, with a focus on the Indian Subcontinent, from a postcolonial feminist perspective. As such, it critiques the colonialist perspective regarding women’s movements of resistance in the developing world and links it to the critique of racism within the women’s movements in the West. It discusses early feminists from India such as Tarabai Shinde whose spirited exposé of the double standards women were subjected to appeared almost a century before Simone De Beauvoir’s landmark analysis and compares their movement to that of the suffragettes in the West. It argues too that, contrary to much of mainstream representation, Dalit feminism is a part not just of the current era of feminism but also of the first wave in India.

**Keywords:** Suffragists; Imperial feminism; White Woman’s Burden, Anti-colonial movements, Dalit feminism; Third World feminism.

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#### Introduction

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“I am most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of “women’s rights” with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feelings and propriety”(Queen Victoria, 1870, quoted in Chernock, 2019).

“She is headstrong, mannish, and full of the perfervid spirit that espouses lost causes” (M.E. Watts, Dewan of Travancore, to C.W.E. Cotton, Agent of Governor of Madras, 1929, quoted in Devika, 2019).

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I have juxtaposed the two quotes above, one from the reigning monarch of the British Empire which at the time encompassed India, the other from the *Dewan* or Prime Minister of one of the Kingdoms of the erstwhile British Raj, today a part of the southern state of Kerala. The key point both have in common is that the desire of certain misguided women to fight for their rights is against the norm, even “mannish,” in that it is against the sanctioned norms of civilized (British)

society. The quote from the Dewan expressed his disdain for the “headstrong” young woman, Lakshmi N. Menon who would eventually become one of the foremost politicians of her era, joining the cabinet of India’s first Prime Minister as a Minister of State and leading one of the nation’s famous women’s organizations, the All-India Women’s Conference. However, the quote from the British monarch implies not just a disdain for the suffragettes but even a fear, so much so that she would appeal to others to aid her in addressing the vexing problem caused by the threat. For, despite serving as Head of State in Britain from 1837 to 1901, Queen Victoria held traditional views about separate spheres for men and women and opposed women voting and running for public office. Any opposition to this norm needed to be stamped out as not just mad but wicked, and one whose folly appeared to threaten the crown. This being the case, it is interesting to look back at this tumultuous era and unravel the attitudes towards the demands of this movement in both parts of the world and examine it through a postcolonial feminist lens.

The celebration of the centenary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2020 has seen a resurgence of interest in the struggles of the Suffragettes/Suffragists in both the US and the UK. In Britain, the statue of the famous suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst erected in Manchester in 2018 illustrates this point. Sculptor Hazel Reeves had chosen to portray Pankhurst standing on a chair as she rallied a crowd. Helen Pankhurst, the great suffragette’s great-granddaughter, was among those who unveiled the statue on Friday, 100 years to the day after women got the vote for the first time in the UK (Pidd, 2018). Likewise, in the US it was the veteran suffragettes who started the ball rolling who have been honored with a statue in Central Park, NYC. But the feminist movement has come under much criticism in recent years, due to the marginalization of the role of women of color in the narratives on the movement. The story behind the first statue of suffragettes to grace Central Park is a case in point. That the statue is the first of actual women from U.S history is problematic, considering that the location has 23 statues of men, but the second is that it is the first to commemorate the warriors of women’s suffrage in the United States, and it has taken a century for that to happen. It features three women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pen in hand, holding the Declaration of Sentiments, with Susan B. Antony and Sojourner Truth gazing intently at her. Truth is represented making a point to which her white sisters are keenly listening. But what many are unaware of is the fact that Truth was not in the original design, which only featured Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, but following accusations of whitewashing, it was changed. That was when the sculptor Meredith Bergman added the imposing figure of the African American suffragette who had shocked audiences back in the day with her passionate denunciation of racism in her acclaimed speech, “Ain’t I a woman?”<sup>2</sup> The fact that this happened at this moment in time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is disappointing, considering that women of color had mounted a critique of western feminism for over a century, pointing out its marginalization of the contributions of women of color in the movement. It is all the more disturbing considering that women of color made up a large part of the first wave, contrary to how the media have represented it, as numerous organiza-

tions of women of color, predominantly African American, but also Native American, Asian American and Latina women had added to the diversity of the movement.

Why then did history continue to represent white women as the main figures of the first wave? Alas, instead of learning from their mistake, they repeated it with the second wave too, leading feminists of color to form their own organizations. It is a critique that has been leveled by various scholars over the past half a century, Anzaldúa (1981), hooks (1984), et al. Indeed, Black women recognize that historically, white women have been no less racist than white men, as seen in the women's branches of the KKK in the American South (Freedman, 2002). What is worse is that this innate racism is seen even in some renowned feminists of the second wave, such as Susan Brownmiller and Shulamith Firestone whose writings hark back to the old myth of the Black rapist disseminated in the Reconstruction era (Davis, 1981). As such, the famed sisterhood of struggle appears to have been more of a myth than a reality. This narrowly defined feminism led some feminists of the 1980s and 90s to resist defining themselves with the term 'feminist,' with Alice Walker's famous coinage of the term "womanist" for a Black feminist, stating, womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, 1983). This had been the case in many countries of the developing world as well in previous decades where we note a general hesitation by many women's rights activists to use the 'F-word.' Even while claiming that there is "No turning back," historian Estelle Freedman acknowledges that right from its origins through the social upheavals of the 1960s, the word 'feminist' had remained a pejorative term among most progressive reformers, suffragists, and socialists around the world. At the time universal adult suffrage was extended to women, few politically engaged women called themselves feminists. Within the international women's movement, participants debated whether the term humanist rather than feminist best applied to them (Freedman, 2002). Madhu Kishwar, the founding editor of one of India's famous women's rights journals, *Manushi*, is one of many, as she states in her landmark essay 'Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist' (Kishwar, 1999).

It is only today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the term 'feminist' is being embraced once more, as women of color demand their due as fellow warriors in the struggle, with the term intersectional feminist coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989). But this has not been an easy process, for, as Donna Haraway points out ironically, white western feminists had to "be forced kicking and screaming to notice" the non-innocence of the category 'women,' and that it was the critiques and analyses of different non-white feminists in the west that forced this 'discovery' upon us (Gedalof, 1999:7). It is important for me to name the perspective from which I construct my analysis, and that is as a postcolonial feminist theorist from the developing world who has been writing and teaching for over two decades in the U.S. As such, it has come to my notice that when people speak of feminism and the first wave of feminism, they mean the feminisms of the Global North as they do not seem to realize there are other branches of feminism in other parts of the world too. In fact, to quote the eminent Native American feminist Paula Gunn Allen, some feminisms may even pre-

date western feminism (Gunn Allen, 1986). The question is, do we only recognize feminism when it resembles the societies that we are familiar with, namely those of the Occident? Much critical writing by feminist scholars from the Global South has been tokenized in Western academia, with anthologies on feminist theories still being dominated by western issues, even if they claim to give ‘multicultural’ or ‘global’ perspectives on women’s studies. The implication is that there is uniformity or even agreement on what feminism means in these very diverse cultures of the world. Western feminism has therefore been subjected to much criticism from Postcolonial and Third World feminists, who resist the transcending of differences it entails and demand that feminists pay close attention to the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nation pertaining to their locations (Mohanty, 1991). What is needed today is the re-examination of the early days of feminist history by considering it from different perspectives. Scholars have already begun “queering” the history of the suffrage movement by deconstructing the dominant narrative that has focused on the stories of elite, white, upper-class suffragists (Rouse, 2020). I hope to add to this through my own analysis here of this complex movement in the developing world, through the study of powerful feminist activists and writers who defied the narrow gender norms of their own era.

This essay examines the representation of first wave feminism with the focus on the Indian Subcontinent, using the work of feminist theorists from those regions. Moreover, in addition to those theorists it uses activists whose work is not usually taken as falling within the ambit of feminism such as Dr. B.R Ambedkar and E.V Ramasamy, better known as Periyar, the founder of the Dravidian Movement in Tamilnadu. Gender has been a central issue in India since the colonial encounter, with a deep focus on women’s struggles, much of which was perceived by the colonial powers as evidence of the regressive nature of their culture. Much of what we know about other parts of the world and their cultures and histories are those of scholars or travelers from the Occident. Their studies are colored therefore by their own perspectives, with their own assumptions and prejudices. Edward Said had pointed this out in his landmark work on Orientalism, “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”), and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them.”) (Said, 1978: 43). In Geraldine Forbes’s essay on Indian feminism, published in an early issue of the *Women’s Studies International Forum*, she cites Miriam Schneir in her trenchant condemnation of Indian society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which mirrors that of many other western scholars, politicians, and writers, Winston Churchill, et al, who used the supposed lack of development and civilization prevalent in the Subcontinent as the rationale to continue to deny them independence. “No feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu *pardah* or out of the Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression” (Schneir, 1972, p. xiv).

Indeed, Schneir justified the focus on the western feminist tradition wherein only one version of feminism is deemed accurate. Forbes condemns Schneir’s Eurocentric perspective stating that,



on the contrary, feminism did exist in India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though the word was not used until decades later, and Indian women did write and speak about women's conditions, and formed organizations to secure desired changes, which eventually had an impact on the institutions of their society. Moreover, like their Western sisters, they had much success in the areas of suffrage, education, and legal and civil rights (Forbes, 1982). Yet they have had to brave criticism that they are a product of western capitalism, based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World. This salvo has been rejected by Maitrayee Chaudhuri, who states that ideas about women's rights and gender construction have always been debated in India, albeit differently (Chaudhuri, 2005). Ania Loomba has asserted that while feminism in South Asia was born partly out of the revolutionary zeal of the anticolonial freedom movement, it did not emerge as a force of radical change (Loomba and Lukose, 2005). Kumari Jayawardene from Sri Lanka has pointed out in her landmark book on Third World feminism that they do not operate from a point of direct resistance and immediate demands but tend to opt for gradual changes that result from their collaboration with male counterparts to improve the living standards of their communities. They have instead joined hands with nationalist resistance against colonialism and imperialism, with their main driving force being the burning desire to liberate subjugated and oppressed people (Jayawardene, 1986).

I add a caveat here to Jayawardene's point. How can the key imperative of a movement that has as its central credo the desire to liberate oppressed people especially in that era of revolution not be considered radical? The organizations that emerged in India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely, the Women's Indian Association (1917), the National Council of Women (1925), and the All-India Women's Conference (1927) had a sociopolitical agenda that incorporated a comprehensive reform of personal laws that included the contentious issues of child marriage and widow remarriage. How were these not radical in an era when women had very few rights at all, be it in the West or the East? Indeed, few Indian women revolutionaries were even mentioned in the histories compiled by most western historians. Thus, we have Madam Bhikaji Cama, a Parsi revolutionary from India who was exiled to Paris where she co-founded the Paris Indian Society. Together with other notable members of the movement for Indian sovereignty living in exile, Cama wrote, published and distributed revolutionary literature for the movement, including *Bande Mataram* (founded in response to the British ban on the patriotic poem) and later *Madan's Talwar* (in response to the execution of Madan Lal Dhingra). Albeit banned in India and Britain, she managed to send the weekly magazines to Indian revolutionaries (Bhola, 2016), but she is hardly even mentioned in mainstream analyses of the women's rights movement in India.

In this sense I would caution that concepts of radicalism and revolutionary be examined keeping in mind the era when they rose. The early feminists were also concerned with issues that are not usually perceived as part of much of the mainstream feminist agenda in the West, such as the impact of racism and colonization on gender relations. This is still the case with indigenous femi-

nists within Western settler societies who advocate self-determination and cultural survival as their key issues (Gunn Allen, 1986; Trask, 1993). In fact, these activists consider what they call "white feminism" as a facet of imperialism, as it imposes the western perspective while failing to recognize the adverse effects of imperialism and colonialism on indigenous and/or conquered peoples (Herr, 2014).

### "Imperial feminism" and "the White Woman's Burden"

The women's movement in India can be divided into two distinct phases, the pre-independence era and the post-independence era, the focus of this article being the former. In the pre-independence era, the Women's Movement began as a social reform movement in which western Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were imbibed by the Indian educated elite through the study of English and the contact with the West. This era of the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of various socio-religious reform movements in India, such as movements of caste reform, and the struggle for women's empowerment, through an outright ban on all traditions that held them back. This was also the era described by Antoinette Burton as 'Imperial Feminism' on the part of British feminists who expressed a concern for the desperate state of their Indian sisters. According to Burton, Victorian and Edwardian feminists such as Josephine Butler, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and Mary Carpenter believed that the native women of colonial India constituted a special white woman's burden, adding to the concept popularized by Rudyard Kipling of the white man's burden. Burton asserts that British feminists relied on images of an enslaved and primitive Oriental womanhood desperately in need of liberation at the hands of their emancipated British sisters. She argues that this unquestioning acceptance of Britain's imperial status and of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority created a set of imperial feminist ideologies, the legacy of which must be recognized and understood by contemporary feminists (Burton, 1994).

Interestingly, Black British scholars, Pratibha Parmar and Valeri Amos use the term imperial feminism to describe modern western liberal feminists as well. "The 'herstory' which white women use to trace the roots of women's oppression . . . is an imperial history rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods, a 'herstory' which suffers the same form of historical amnesia of white male historians, by ignoring the fundamental ways in which white women have benefited from the oppression of Black people" (Amos and Parmar, 2001:19). In her analysis of the writings of British women fiction writers of the Victorian era, Shampa Roy quotes a British missionary, Miss Hewlett, who, when asked what the biggest impediment was to progress in India, responded, "We would have to reply, the position of the women. They are socially degraded, treated as animals of a lower order than man, excluded from society and kept in grossest ignorance" (Roy, 2010: 61). Interestingly, the British women did not seem to link this degraded condition of women in the colonized world with their own condition in their own country, where they had very few rights themselves. In fact, that was the crux of first wave feminism in many of the western nations, an is-

sue that appears to have been forgotten by these zealous Christian missionaries, out to save the benighted heathen. In fact, most of them supported the colonial enterprise, using the woman condition to justify it. Interestingly, this rationale of the white man's burden to rescue his brown sisters in the Middle East can be seen even in fairly recent times in the so-called War on Terror that was unleashed upon Afghanistan and Iraq by the Bush administration and its allies.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the women's question was translated into a social reform movement which focused on rooting out social evils, partly in response to charges of Oriental barbarity by the colonial rulers. The social reform movement had its own paradox: on the one hand there was a preoccupation with western ideas to emulate, assimilate or reject; on the other hand, there was also the element of revivalism or a need to reassert and reinforce a cultural identity distinct from the British colonizers. Besides seeking reforms through legislation, education was seen as an important means of changing women's situation. There were periods of reluctance on the part of colonial rulers in intervening on debates regarding entrenched traditions for fear of reprisal, such as the abolition of *sati* in 1829, or raising the Age of Consent for Women in the 1890s, the second causing so much unrest that it led to the British government to rapidly backtrack in order to acquiesce to conservative sections of the native elite and abandon all attempts to initiate further social reform legislation in India until the child marriage restraint act of 1929 (Roy, 2010). Indeed, as Mary E. John points out, the contradictory colonial context created the discourses of modernity while simultaneously reinforcing tradition where it suited the colonial state to do so. The British law in fact deprived women of their right to inheritance, recognized even in religious law. On the issue of women's suffrage, Congress party leader Sarojini Naidu had already led a delegation of activists to request equal female suffrage in the next elections. She had utilized a tone of appeasement even with her own party, arguing that women voters and leaders would not usurp male authority, and that all Indians would be inspired by their nationalism and maternalism. Despite this mild tone, the British had still refused to grant women the right to vote and stand for elections on the same terms as men. This then was the contradictory stance of the British government, one that was replete with contradictions and manipulations, perhaps even more so than their prior efforts to justify their civilizing mission through the regulation of social reform (John, 2000).

It is interesting to note that many of the early Indian supporters of women's rights were men, unlike the situation in the West, where the suffragists were mainly women, except for a few powerful male allies like Frederick Douglass, Henry Stanton, John Stuart Mill, et al. Indeed, Raja Ram Mohan Roy is recognized as one of the early feminists and makers of modern India who historian Ramachandra Guha describes as "The first Liberal" for his principled stance on women's rights. Roy had argued that *sati* was not supported by the Hindu scriptures and had been added only vested interests and was nothing less than murder. Roy's efforts led to the abolition of the practice under Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck in 1829 (Guha, 2011). Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for the improvement in condition of widows, supported by lumi-



naries such as Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Tagore had in fact submitted a memorandum to the Legislative Council for the removal of legal disabilities of remarried Hindu widows and the establishment of girl’s schools in every suburb of Calcutta. Keshav Chandra Sen was instrumental in getting the Native Marriage Act passed in 1872, which forbade child marriage and polygamy, and encouraged both widow marriage and inter-caste marriages for those who declared that they did not belong to any recognized faith. Jyotiba Phule along with his wife Savitribai Phule spearheaded the movement towards ending caste- and gender-based discrimination and the emancipation from patriarchal social mores. Muslim theologians of the era too such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who later went on to become India’s first Minister of Education, supported women’s education as integral to a liberated postcolonial nation.

### Dalit and Anti-colonial Feminist Activism of the Pre-Independence Era

Among the most powerful male voices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that of EV Ramaswamy, known as *Periyar* (a sobriquet of respect in Tamil, for “great elder”), a philosopher and activist from Tamilnadu who founded the Self-Respect and Dravidar Kazhagam movements in 1925. Periyar vehemently condemned *Pennadimai* (slavery of woman) and *Pen Izhivu* (degradation of a woman) and pointed out that men were responsible for keeping women as decorated animals. He floated the idea that adorning women with costly dress and jewels is not better than giving them education, knowledge, and self-respect (Sithadharanan and Thirumal, 2018). He denounced patriarchy and its role in preventing women from having reproductive rights in no uncertain terms, a topic that continues to be highly contentious in the U.S today. This was in 1942 when feminists struggled to convince their nations of the importance of contraception, which was finally legalized in the U.S only in 1936. Periyar’s vision of the empowerment of women was codified into law by Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the country’s first Law Minister.

However, barring notable exceptions, most academic literature including anthologies on Ambedkar and Ambedkarism ignore the contributions of the great Dalit scholar and statesman who dominated Indian political discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the cause of women’s rights. One of the most important contributions of Dr. Ambedkar in relation to the elevation of the status of women in India was his initiative to draft and introduce the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1949. Being India’s first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, he thought it appropriate to liberate women from the bondage of slavery by reforming the Hindu social laws codified by Manu (Kumar, 2016). The Hindu Code Bill attempted to put an end to a variety of marriage systems prevailing in India and legalized only monogamous marriages and sought to confer on women the right to property as well. It is important to mention here that once again, this is a point that first wave feminists in the West had fought for as well, as prior to their activism, women across Europe and the U.S lost their property at the time of marriage.

In all these cases, we have powerful male voices raised to defend women's rights, and it worked to get their issues recognized, much as the powerful voice of Frederick Douglass helped get the attention of society in the US to recognize the demands articulated in "The Declaration of Sentiments" penned by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott at the Seneca Falls Convention. But what of the voices of Indian women, were they only represented by either the supposedly benign colonialist patriarchy or the Indian nationalist patriarchy? This is precisely why Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in response to the 1829 banning of *sati* by the British colonial powers in India is important, with her trenchant observation of the role played by white men in saving brown women from brown men (Spivak, 1989). British Indian history texts state that the British colonial authorities passed an act in 1829 prohibiting and abolishing the act of widow burning, condemning it as an inhumane crime against women. The British colonizers are thus collectively represented as the protectors, the saviors of Indian women from an oppressively patriarchal Hindu society. Moreover, by representing *sati* as a barbaric Oriental tradition, the British were able to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission, or in French territories as their "mission *civilisatrice*" in which white colonial administrators believed that they were rescuing Indian women from the reprehensible practices of a traditional Hindu patriarchal society.

This is extremely problematic, not because *sati* was not a horrific custom, because it definitely was, even if it was not as widely practiced across the country as claimed by the colonial authorities, but because it was not just the British government and western liberal feminists but even many Indian first wave feminists who opposed it, starting with Ram Mohan Roy, whose strong support for the ban is what gave the British administration the courage to go ahead with the ban (Guha, 2011). Further, it was not just certain wise and compassionate Indian male social reformers who opposed it, but many determined and courageous women too and it is disturbing that their resistance was not considered important enough to be noted by British historians of the era. Indeed, it is this representation of women's activism of the first wave in India as passive and subdued that feminist historiography calls into question (Sangari and Vaid, 1989), by focusing on women's collective responses to injustice. Kalpana Kannabiran focuses on the various unregistered incidents that defined women's resistance, giving it, for the first time, the image of insurgency and revolution. While many narratives of Hinduism in the colonial period focus on men's efforts at social and religious reform, Tarabai Shinde and other authors show that there was a growing subculture of resistance which was fashioned and nurtured by women, rarely spoken about, but radical and spontaneous (Kannabiran, 2009). Shinde herself has also been featured in Ramachandra Guha's work as one of "the makers of modern India," and described as a "subaltern feminist" for her spirited attacks on patriarchy. Her spirited exposé of the double standards that women were subjected to appeared almost a century before Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), one of the key feminist tracts for western feminist discourse. Titled *Stree Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Men and Women) in Marathi, Shinde's work was penned in response to the unfair treat-

ment of women and religious prejudice that permeated society. Published in 1882, it strikes one of the earliest notes of revolt, a defining moment in the paradigm of feminist insurgency as the first Indian feminist who minutely points out male hypocrisy and women’s secondary status in Indian society. Her essay was written in response to the article published in *Pune Vaibhav* which was based on the immorality of widows (Kale, 2014). Moreover, it bears a remarkable similarity to Mary Wollstonecraft’s pathbreaking work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1791), which tears into the many ways in which patriarchy ground women underfoot.

From all this we can see that from the end of the nineteenth century, in the years before independence, the two main issues women’s rights activists took up were political rights and the reform of personal laws. This is the time when women started forming their own organizations first at the local and then at the national level. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the period that saw the birth of three major organizations: Women’s India Association (WIA), National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women’s Conference (AIWC). All three organizations were formed between 1917 and 1927 after World War I, with the sole objective of involving women in civic and public life and the promotion of social, civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children (Forbes, 2000). Foremost of these was the WIA and the women’s journal, *Stri-Dharma*, whose title meant the sphere of women. The journal was launched by Margaret Cousins, an Irish suffragist who moved to India in 1915, and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who would later go on to serve as the editor of the magazine and the first woman legislator in British India. *Stri-Dharma* would serve as the platform of discussion for the women’s movement in India. Comparable to western women’s movements in its use of feminist terminology, the journal was published from January 1918 until August 1936 (Broome, 2012). Another important organization founded in this era was the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal*, the Great Circle of Indian Women, a semi-revolutionary group with branches across the Indian subcontinent, one of the very first of its kind. Its founder, Saraladevi Choudhuran hoped that this fledgling organization would help develop a sisterhood that could supply energetic Indian women ready to work to improve the status of women in their nation (Forbes, 1982).

During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women’s public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British colonizers. In the decades that followed, women showed active participation in freedom movement paving the way for some women only organizations. When Gandhi came on the political scene, he could draw in a large number of women to the political arena by giving a very broad meaning of *swaraj* and helping them find dignity in public life and a new place in the national mainstream. His views on many issues installed a new confidence among women and a consciousness that they could fight against oppression, even if he held some very regressive ideas on sexuality. As a result of his support and encouragement, many women joined the civil disobedience movement during the thirties. Interestingly, Gandhi’s

appeal went beyond ‘respectable’ women to even women who mainstream Indian society looked at askance, such as *devadasis*, who were seen as degraded sex workers. But Gandhi did not disdain them and spurn their determination to join the cause, an extraordinary perspective for an Indian politician of that era but welcomed them into the struggle. Despite this contagion of the movement through the presence of the devadasis, middle class women from respectable families were able to join the nationalist movement with the approval of their families. Nor was Gandhi the only politician to do so, for Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose too decided on inviting women volunteers to join the freedom struggle. Bose believed in overthrowing the colonial regime through armed resistance, and the women who joined his movement such as the renowned Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan served in the “Rani Jhansi Regiment” named after the woman considered infamous by the British colonizers, namely the warrior Queen Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

A remarkable feature of politics in the nascent Indian nation state is that women occupied key roles in it. Sarojini Naidu was elected the President of the Congress Party, while Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Lakshmi N. Menon and others occupied key roles in the government of the newly independent republic of India. If we compare this to the U.S one must note the stark difference as not even one woman’s name is associated with the Declaration of Independence whereas many women were involved in the very framing of the Indian Constitution, along with their male allies, Dr. Ambedkar, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and others. In fact, it is interesting to note the intersectional nature of the group of women involved with writing the Constitution and joining the government of the newly independent nation of India. They came from different classes, religions, and castes and different parts of the country too, from princesses like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and middle-class women like Ammu Swaminathan and Sarojini Naidu to working class women like Dakshayini Velayudhan, the first Dalit woman to be elected to the Constituent Assembly, and Begum Aizaz Rasul, the only Muslim woman member of the Constituent Assembly, who went on to become Minister for Social Welfare and Minorities. Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to be elected president of the *Indian National Congress*, which is tantamount to a major political party in the US nominating a woman as its leader in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is laudable considering that women in the US only won suffrage in 1920, and that too after a protracted battle against the US government for over 70 years. In India, on the contrary, Sarojini Naidu was appointed a state Governor soon after independence, serving as the Governor of United Provinces in Agra and Oudh from 1947 to 1949. A few years later in 1953 Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the sister of the first PM, became the first woman and the first Asian to be elected president of the *U.N General Assembly*. These women occupied key positions in the government at a time when women in much of the West were struggling to get a voice in the public sphere, let alone become state Governors.

Despite this fact, the early Indian feminists were strongly aware of the need for women to fight for their own rights instead of relying on the protection of male led governments. A women’s journal of the 1920s from the southern state of Kerala states this in no uncertain terms.



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“The work of intrepid struggle and sound bargaining to secure legitimate rights is the responsibility of women themselves. Any complacency on their part, induced by the hope that the government – which has displayed its conservatism in all affairs – will concede their rights and authority in full recognition of justice, and the mood of these times, would be most foolish. In all the countries of the world, women have won their freedom and rights only through agitation.... Open your eyes to the realities of the world, ascertain your needs, recognize your rights, and move to secure them.”

(*Editorial, Vanitakusumam 1927-28, Devika, 2019*).

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First wave feminists in India played important roles in the public sphere, laying the groundwork for women’s suffrage. In the time period of 1915-1918 Sarojini Naidu traveled to different regions in India to lecture on women’s rights, social welfare of women and nationalism, much as Susan B. Antony and Sojourner Truth did in their time in the U.S. But they did not stop with that. These early Indian feminists even challenged the very foundations of the postcolonial nation state as in 1928, when the women of the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC) demanded ‘new *sastras*’ (new scriptures) in response to the founder of the Hindu Mahasabha Madan Mohan Malaviya’s assertion that the age of marriage could not be raised due to the diktats of Hindu scriptures. This moment anticipated by several decades the demand of feminist historians not just for new histories but for a reinvention of the historical archive (Nair, 1996). It also connects to the rise of Dalit feminist activism of more recent times, and the links to the critiques of the doctrine of the great law giver of ancient India, Manu, namely the *Manusmriti* by India’s first Law Minister, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The late scholar Gail Omvedt clarifies that Ambedkar states that *Manusmriti* postulates that women are not worth being liberated and indeed have no right to enjoy freedom. One of the popular verses expresses that as a child, the woman should be protected by the father, in youth by her husband and in old age by her son; in short, she should not be independent at any point of time. Thus, *Manusmriti* remains a powerful symbol of Brahmanical patriarchy, and it is incorrect to consider the burning of the *Manusmriti* as symbolically important only for Dalits, as it is equally important for women. Further, recognizing *Manusmriti Dahan Divas* (the Day of Burning of Manusmriti) as the *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas* (Indian Women’s Liberation Day), underlines the special links between gender, caste and patriarchy within India and South Asia in general (Omvedt, 2003).

However, it is curious that, even in India, we do not learn in our schools and colleges that 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927 is commemorated in Dalit feminist circles as Indian Women’s Liberation Day, as that was the date when the Dalit leader, along with hundreds of his followers, gathered at Mahad in Maharashtra, and burned a copy of the *Manusmriti* (Rege, 2013: 45). *Manusmriti* or *Manuwadi* as it is popularly known, remains a highly contested term in India today, being the ideology legalized by Manu, the lawgiver of ancient India, due to its widely cited sexism and racism. It is interest-



ing to note that the proposal to celebrate this date as *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas* (BSM) or Indian Women's Liberation Day was forwarded by Dalit women activists who argued that Ambedkar's writings on women's empowerment had been neglected by political groups across the nation due to the Brahminical patriarchal hegemony within them. The eminent sociologist Sharmila Rege whose work focused primarily on the interrelatedness of casteism and patriarchy has pointed out that Dalit feminists emphasize Brahminical hegemony as the chief cause of the enslavement of women and *Manusmriti* as its legitimizing force. As such, the burning of the *Manusmriti* document is a significant symbolic act aimed at ending the interlinked slavery of both Dalits and women (Rege, 2013). The fact that this call has not been taken up by much of the mainstream feminist movement in India is a sad reflection on the caste divide within the movement which has only been increasing in recent times with the rise of the Far Right.

Among the most famous of the early feminists of India were the remarkable Maharashtrian activists Savitri Bai Phule and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, both of whom campaigned for women's education and against both sexism and casteism, and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy. I shall focus on Pandita Ramabai and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy as both women overcame remarkable obstacles of caste and creed in their crusade for women's empowerment, and moreover, charted these paths on their own, whereas the few Indian women who were active in social reform in that era did so only with the encouragement or, at least, the permission of their husbands. The *New York Times* in fact features her in an important article, "Overlooked No More: Pandita Ramabai, Indian Scholar, Feminist and Educator," acknowledging, "Since 1851, obituaries in *The New York Times* have been dominated by white men, we're adding the stories of remarkable people whose deaths went unreported in *The Times*" (Khan, 2018). This is a long overdue acknowledgement, as these new Obituaries focus on non-white people who have been largely overlooked in the western mainstream media. Historian Uma Chakravarti describes her in her biography, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, as the most controversial Indian woman of her times (Chakravarti, 1998). She was the rare woman who had learned Sanskrit, the ancient Hindu liturgical language reserved for Brahmin men, as well as the rare Brahmin to marry out of caste, and the rare widow who remained in public view, defying customs; as well as the rare Indian upper caste woman to decide on her own, to convert to Christianity, which in fact led to a lot of anger from her upper caste Hindu community. Pandita Ramabai was in fact given the very title of "Pandita" (scholar) due to her exceptional erudition and knowledge of Sanskrit texts, acquired from her unusual upbringing, her itinerant parents who dwelt in the forests of Maharashtra. Her most important published work, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, was written in English in the United States in 1887, when she was 29. It focused on the plight of Hindu widows — she called widowhood "the worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman's life" (Khan, 2018). It is important to note here that women from the upper castes and classes were often subjected to even greater prohibitions than those from the lower castes with regard to widowhood. Brahmin widows were banned from remarrying and considered

cursed, they were required to shave their heads, wear drab, coarse clothes and subsist on meager food. Ramabai returned to India in 1889, and using the proceeds from her book and lectures, raised funds to open the *Sharada Sadan* (Home of Learning) center in 1889 in Bombay, offering widowed women a refuge where they could study and learn skills like gardening, carpentry and sewing.

First wave Indian feminists belonged to all castes and religions and classes, from the highest caste of the country to the lowest. Thus, the opposite end of the spectrum from Pandita Ramabai was Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who overcame her status as the daughter of a *devadasi* or temple concubine to become the first woman to graduate from Medical College in 1907 and eventually became one of the most famous oncologists of her time, as well as a famous legislator and feminist. Her home state of Tamilnadu commemorated her 133<sup>rd</sup> birthday by declaring her date of birth, July 19<sup>th</sup> as Hospital Day. She was closely associated with the All-India Women’s Conference and the Women’s India Association and helped bring about legislation to abolish polygamy as well as child marriage and the *devadasi* system. Dr. Reddy pointed out that the *devadasi* system was ostensibly about the dedication of women to temple deities, tasked with passing on the baton of the art of dance to the next generation, but that they were often subjected to exploitation by upper caste men who used them as concubines and were trapped in the system. Dr. Reddy brought about the passage of the 1930 bill for the prevention of dedication of young girls as Devadasis by the Madras Presidency on 5 December 1947, but the mindset of traditional society was yet to change, even among the elite. At an event held to honor her, the speaker commended her work for her “fallen sisters”, or devadasis. Her powerful rebuke is legendary. “How dare you call them fallen sisters? Female chastity is impossible without male chastity. The men who exploited them were older and should be held responsible.” (Devika, 2020).

The courage and determination of these early Indian feminists must be respected, especially at a time when the nascent movement for women’s empowerment in both the personal and the political spheres was yet in its infancy. They had also dared to expose the flaws of their own society at a time when their own communities were deeply conscious of how they were perceived in the West and how that could be used against their independence. Their success lies in their courage in articulating their problems, but in a manner that would enable their own communities to support their endeavors while preventing their western counterparts from using the information gleaned to attack them. Yet another problem these early feminists faced was, how to represent their societies with their own indigenous cultures, their histories and literatures, as worthy of being studied in comparison with those from other parts of the developed world. For feminism means different things in different parts of the world, and even in different classes and castes of the same country, as in the Indian context, and one uniform does not fit all its myriad cultures. In this sense indeed, it makes more sense to refer to feminisms, thereby celebrating its richness and diversity, rather than to one over-arching umbrella of feminism, which is taken in the hegemonic sense as the norm. As the late great feminist Kamla Bhasin

puts it in her eloquent turn of phrase, “*Hum Bharat ki Nari hain, Phulnahin, Chingarihain!*” (We are the women of India. We are not flowers but sparks of change!) (Rajgopal, 2021). It is this multi-faceted face of feminism across the world that we must acknowledge and celebrate, rather than a narrow focus on the feminisms of the Global North during the centenary commemoration of women’s suffrage.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 2 The whitewashing permeates the well-known version of Sojourner Truth's speech as well. See the comparison of two speeches, ...”one transcribed by Marius Robinson, a journalist, who was in the audience at the Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851. And Gage's version is on the right, written 12 years later and published in 1863, The full text of each version follows the synopsis below so you can see the differences line by line. I have highlighted overt similarities between the two versions. While Frances Gage changed most of Sojourner's words and falsely attributed a southern slave dialect to Sojourner's 1863 version, it is clear the origin of Gage's speech comes from Sojourner's original 1851 speech.” See the comparison between the two speeches here as documentation: <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>.