ABSTRACT

British Women’s Views of Twentieth-Century India: An Examination of Obstacles to Cross-Cultural Understandings

by Dharitri Bhattacharjee

Many British women went to India during the nineteenth and twentieth century. They were either part of the imperial community or they were activities, reformers, doctors and missionaries and worked outside the imperial hierarchy. The stories that they left behind of their experiences in India are fascinating. This thesis will focus on five twentieth-century British women in India and create an image of India through their writings. The British women’s interest in India benefited India in many ways but their interaction with Indians also portrayed a complicated story of cross-cultural interactions and the limitations they faced in reaching out to India and Indians. This thesis will also endeavor to examine the nature of limitations to cross-cultural interactions and if at all they can be circumvented, and if so, how.
British Women’s Views of Twentieth-Century India: An
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Introduction

The history of twentieth-century colonial India is a complicated yet fascinating one. Within the span of half a century the British rose to the heights of imperialism and almost during the same time reversed the process by releasing India from its imperialistic shackles in 1947. The cataclysmic nature of these events during the first half of the twentieth century attracted many western scholars to write about the British Empire in India and on Indian independence. What stands out in all their accounts is the ‘maleness’ of the histories that have been told. Starting from bills that were passed, the reforms that were initiated by the governor-generals and the viceroys, British women as a source for the history of this period and as a component of this history are hardly visible or audible.

At this point it is important to understand the two roles that women can play in history-writing. In one such role, their experiences can be narrated as products of history and in the other role, as historians, they can re-write history in a new light. The presence of women in either of these roles can help present a more complete view of twentieth-century colonial India. This essay will attempt to reinstate British women in these dual roles, placing more emphasis on British women as sources of history, than as subjects/players of history. More specifically, this paper will attempt to construct an image of India, from 1900-1947 through the writings of British women living in India.

An immense amount of archival material is available narrating British women’s view of twentieth-century India. Many British women traveled to India during the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. They came as scholars (mostly anthropologists), as journalists, as missionaries and as relatives of administrative officials. Depending on their level of engagement in India they all left some account of their experience in India. Though the records might not explicitly exhibit their views on Indian politics or society, glimpses of both are evident. Apart from the adventure of seeing India through western eyes, the fact that many women left documents on Indian politics, their experiences of India’s nationalist struggle, of the pre-Independence riots, of Indian political leaders also mark the advancement of women in traditionally “male domains.” So this paper will also seek to discover if women’s writing on purely male domains such as politics brings forth a new picture and if so, what it is?
In fact, the sheer breadth of Indian life documented in the accounts of British women proves the urgency of valuing women as sources of history. The accounts left by women not only cover almost all aspects of Indian life, they also present a rich fabric of opinions pertaining to India which varied from person to person. Apart from being British, the women who left their accounts of India, be it in the form of letters or diaries or interviews, had very little in common with each other. Their identities as English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish women for instance made for some kind of difference. Also, some of them were in India due to compulsion, some by choice. Some British women were aloof and maintained distance from India and Indians, whereas other British women not only interacted with Indians but also worked hard for Indian reforms. Therefore, this essay will examine how these women from different age groups, diverse social backgrounds, having different political affiliations, and different social positions viewed twentieth-century India. Both similarities and differences in their observations of India will be described.

Unlike the stereotypical “memsahibs” who were viewed as vain and snobbish, and insular because they lived within the four walls of their British bungalows and hardly interacted with Indians, the women of this study not only established great friendships with Indians, but for the most part, embraced activities which took them outside the privacy of their homes. Whereas the records of memsahibs would also add in some ways to our knowledge about British lives in India, it would fall short of a British view of India because of those women’s geographical constraints and their lack of willingness to engage with Indian culture. Thankfully, the intended subjects of study for this essay here not only reflect the lives of British women in India but also qualify as good sources for the British view of India.

Apart from creating an image of twentieth-century India through British women’s accounts, this study has a second objective. This essay will endeavor to examine what prevents an individual from one culture understanding another. Thus, it will contribute to an existing debate about how western feminists writing on issues concerning women in other countries, be it circumcision or veiling, not only single out a “practice” for criticism, relegating related social norms to the background, but, in doing so, often find it difficult to achieve anything they deem worthwhile for their sisters.
Revisionist works by Third-World feminists active in the United States point out how it is the de-contextualized analysis of these practices and lack of an understanding of grassroots realities that prevent western feminists from understanding Third World women.¹ Such understanding is essential for achieving anything worthwhile for them.

Finally, in line with this feminist debate, this essay will address the issue of what might be called “cultural bottlenecks.” In order to do this in the Indian context, as British women’s constructions of different aspects of twentieth-century India are presented, conclusions about the interaction between cultures will be drawn. This essay will study cultural bottlenecks, how those instances were viewed at the time, how historians have viewed them over the years and most importantly what factors made for such bottlenecks amongst women who were in India by choice and incidentally were more versed with Indian culture than any other British women of their times. Were these bottlenecks inevitable or could they have been avoided or cleared away?
**Historiography**

A number of scholars have written on the British Empire. Issues of images created and of cultural blocks faced have not been very popular topics traditionally, but in the last decade of the twentieth century admirable work has been done in these directions. British women who lived in India, or were related in some manner to the working of British India also found their ways into historical works. This was the result of the feminist movement and the urgency it popularized, to study women in history, without which a study of history is incomplete.

Initially, and it still continues to be, it was the everyday lives and activities of British women in nineteenth-and twentieth-century India that was considered important, and, of course fascinating. Most of these women used to be part of the imperial community, with a father or, more usually, a husband, in imperial service in India. What followed next were analytical works on the lives of British women and on their writings and their activities outside the household, pertaining to India. Questions about their racial attitudes and feminist assumptions came to be researched. Also, women outside the imperial community, whose lives were not considered worthy of record by contemporary chroniclers and even by themselves, came to be included in history-writing. These were gradual processes and had to do with larger belief systems and movements, beyond the confines of India and Britain. There is no specified time line for this development, but what follows is an analysis of the historiography pertaining to British women in twentieth-century India.

Comparatively, most of the existing history writing on women is about the experiences and activities of women in the nineteenth century. However, primary and secondary materials by/on twentieth-century British women offer immense variety, thus encouraging further historical work on the subject. The historiography of British women in twentieth-century India comprises many thematic texts, biographies, collections of essays, collections of primary source materials, travel writing, accounts of religious missionaries and of children in British India. For the purposes of understanding the texts and what they offer, we will study them by categories. However, it is important to keep in mind that the categories are mere approaches to understanding the multi-faceted topic of images of India by British women and the cultural blocks that emerged. All of them offer
great insights as they arise from alternative visions on of Imperial studies. Not all focus on the twentieth-century, nor always on India. Where women come in, they are treated as travelers, or as religious missionaries, or as feminists. Not all these works, however, are solely focused on women. What brings these works together is their approaches and the questions they have asked, both of which, can be extrapolated or applied in other important contexts about British women in twentieth-century India.

Antoinette Burton’s *Burdens of History* (1994) and Kumari Jayawardena’s *The White Women’s Other Burden* (1995) are very significant works that deal with British women in India. Burton defines “imperial feminism” in her book and shows how British feminists in England were caught up in a dilemma about advocating feminism in India. They realized that their position was a creation of the British Empire and that imperialism was what guided the Empire. Burton’s analysis of the role that this positioning plays in feminist efforts is very important. The women that Burton discusses thought of Indian women as women in need of salvation. These are the same women whom Jayawardena chooses to study in her book. She defines the concept of “other burden” as the willingness to assume a “different voice” in British India and help Indian men and women with education and medical care. She goes a step ahead of Burton, however, and shows how European women, despite colonialism, contributed to the cause of Indian women’s liberation. She tries to explore the white women’s response to the challenges posed by imperialism as opposed to feminism and tries to assume an “Asian feminist gaze” in analyzing it. Though she does not come to any specific conclusion her research remains pertinent.

Less historical, but more widely read, are Pat Barr’s works *The Memsahibs* (1976) and *The Dust in the Balance* (1989). Both these books are similar to Burton and Jayawardena only in terms of the fact that the women Barr discuses were all activists and very prominent in the public spheres. Barr has successfully dispelled the notion that all wives of British officers only played tennis and attended parties, as Kipling had described them. However, as much as the book draws on primary sources, it lacks analysis. What is most disturbing is that in spite of the varied sources available, Barr does not make a point about women’s importance as sources of history and only reiterates how British women accepted their secondary position within the Empire. In *The Dust in the
Balance she writes, “Some of the women...did not notice the imbalance, others noticed but did not mind; a few minded, but could do little about it.” In contrast, Jayawardena, in her book had shown how her women tried to rectify their subordinate positions within the Empire. Mary Procida’s Married to the Empire (2002) is another very significant work that deals with only the “official community” as Barr does, and mostly with Anglo-Indian women. The women that Burton and Jayawardena talks about are out of Procida’s scope. She discusses how marriage as an institution became the sole signifier of a women’s identity in British-India and how with the collapse of the Empire these women received a rude awakening. The women Procida discusses owed their status in society and their lifestyles to the Empire. With the Empire gone they lost their place in society and more importantly, their identity.

MacMillan in Women of the Raj (1988) is straightforward in pointing out that she would focus only on the privileged “ordinary memsahibs” and not the “out-of-the-ordinary” British women. The book is a description of the India these women saw; it draws on excellent sources and creates wonderful images. However, as can be concluded, the position of the women in her book naturally limits the book in terms of analyzing the interaction between the two cultures because the “ordinary memsahibs” had little of it. Margaret Stroebel’s European Women and the Second British Empire (1991) does not use women as sources to write about India. It is more a description of western women’s lives in India, which fascinating as it might be, is not the main focus of this paper. What is made evident from this book is a key question for future historians: how the colonized people can redress the imbalance, being written about by European women and having no scope to write about them or negotiate the ways in which they are presented.

Whether describing the official community or otherwise, the books discussed above all draw on sources such as diaries, letters and autobiographies that belonged to British/European women. Phyllis Lassner in Colonial Strangers (2004) discusses works of fiction by western women and makes a brilliant attempt to stress their importance in creating an image of India. However, her reliance on a single author, Rumer Godden, does not render it a very good source for understanding India in the twentieth century though certain glimpses encourage further enquiry. Along similar lines, there is Benita Parry’s Delusions and Discoveries (1972). She tries to construct an image
of India through fictional works and includes Flora Annie Steel and a few other women. The images she draws are all distinct but there is no comparison between the sources she uses.

Some articles by prominent historians have also contributed immensely to understanding British women in India. Barbara Ramusack’s article “Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies” in Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Stroebel’s edited work, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (1992) is aimed at correcting the bias that has been shown towards memsahibs and missionaries. However, the article is, not surprisingly, focused on their activities and how they evolved as “cultural missionaries” and “maternal imperialists.” It is not possible to view a larger picture of India through the writings of women in these groups alone. Janaki Nair’s article, “Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian Womanhood in Englishwomen's Writings,” in Catherine Hall’s *Cultures of Empire* (2000), given its focus on the *zenanas*, does not really help in building an overall image of India, including western women’s break into areas that are “masculine” unlike the *zenanas*, though it is a significant contribution.

Books on travel accounts have also contributed greatly to this area of research. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992) is a brilliant expose of how the imperial-minded travelers ignored indigenous populations in their writings. Most of them did not acknowledge the colonized people and almost all perceived imperialism as beneficial. Though Pratt does not focus on India per say, Indira Ghose’s *Women Travelers in India* (1998) carries forward Pratt’s work but weaves into it the concept of complex female subjectivity. By focusing on women travelers alone, unlike Pratt, she is able to explore issues at the heart of this “subjectivity,” like race and gender.

The work of religious missionaries, though not dealt with specifically by the above authors are also worthy of research as they were initially the only British presence in India that operated outside the imperial political field. That they worked to support the imperial ideology is another matter, however. Jeffrey Cox’s article, “Independent English women in Delhi and Lahore, 1860-1947” in *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in Honor of R K Webb* (1992) shows how women missionaries took over the male Cambridge Mission in Delhi and moved beyond their
designated *zenana* work to opening schools and providing medical care. Women assumed visible positions of responsible authority in India, that outran those available in England. Anna Johnstone’s *Missionary Writing and Empire 1800-1860* (2003) is another excellent book that draws on a plethora of information that missionary accounts can reveal. She describes the ambiguous positions of missionaries caught between imperial and religious interests, and how they operated from such positions.

Collections of essays and primary sources have been put together to describe various aspects of imperialism. *Western Women and Imperialism* edited by Margaret Stroebel and Nupur Chaudhuri (1992) and *Cultures of Empire* edited by Catherine Hall explore a variety of areas. But there is no focus on the twentieth century, nor on a specific class of British women. There is also a lack of primary sources in the articles which deprive us of accounts for creating an image of India. In contrast, Charles Allen’s *Plain Tales of the Raj* (1975), Ian Fleming’s *Last Children of the Raj* (2004) and Indira Ghose’s *Memsahibs Abroad* (1998) are brilliant collections of primary source materials, but sadly they lack in analysis.

The description above, of books, collections and articles shows that very few works have actually tried to create an image of twentieth-century India from British women’s writings. Issues such as cultural limitations have also not been raised. There is no answer to questions about the ways in which a better relationship across cultural boundaries was or was not achieved. Most importantly, the majority of these works do not focus on twentieth-century India. Be it *Burdens of History, Memsahibs, Women of the Raj, European Women and the Second British Empire, Imperial Eyes, Women Travelers in India, Memsahibs Abroad*, most of them do not even deal with twentieth-century India or if so, only slightly. *Imperial Eyes* does not even focus on women.

The ones that focus on women are neither inclusive nor comparative. Either it is the ordinary memsahibs as in *Women of the Raj* or Anglo-Indian women from the official community as in * Married to the Empire*. Considering that British feminists and activists were the only ones who made a place for themselves in “politics,” few works discuss them. Barr, in both her books, and MacMillan only deal with the memsahibs and women from the official community, who made the best of their lives in India but did not chose to be there. Burton, whose analysis is otherwise good, still does
not include women who had first-hand experience in India. The use of source material in these works is also problematic. Cox discusses missionary women in Delhi, but all he uses is reports from the Cambridge Mission Society. A personal record of these missionaries is not available. Lassner and Parry rely solely on works of fiction and though there is no denying that they can be useful sources, the lack of more such sources and comparative data does not make for a strong case. Thus, the problems are many. If a certain scholar discusses the twentieth century, then the focus is not on women, if another scholar discusses women in the twentieth century the focus is only on one class or category of western women. If there is an attempt to discuss all western women, then the focus shifts from India to all colonies. Circumventing these obstacles in one concerted research work is the purpose of this essay.
Bibliographical Sketches

There were many British women active in twentieth-century India but the works of only five British women, namely, Annie Wood Besant, Margaret Noble, Eleanor Rathbone, Margaret Cousins and Madeline Slade have been chosen as sources for this essay, as they were some of the most prominent women, marking themselves in India’s socio-political life. However, before discussing these women as sources and analyzing their images of India, a quick look at their lives is essential. It is in the story of their lives that their reasons for coming to India and the nature of their engagement in India will be found. Many of the views they held about India had to do with their background and so a short account of their respective biographies will enable an understanding of the broader questions that the essay wishes to explore. The respective biographies will be discussed in order of seniority. In spite of all the differences they had, what was common to all of them was their activities in the Indian public sphere and their voluntary interest in Indian affairs.

Annie Wood was born on 1st October 1847 to London, middle-class parents. Annie was Irish on her mother’s side. Her father was born to an Irish mother and an English father and that made Wood one quarter English. Because of her father’s early death she was raised by her mother’s friend. Though financially not very well off, her mother’s friend ensured Wood a good education and the young girl turned into a cautious and intelligent young woman. Wood was also very strong and independent-minded, a bit too independent for her times. Not without reason Anne Taylor, one of Wood’s many biographers calls it “an alternative childhood.” In 1867 Annie Wood married Frank Besant, a clergymen, and they had two children. However, Wood’s (henceforth, Besant) increasingly anti-religious views led to a legal separation in 1873. Twenty years after her separation, Besant went to India for the first time. Before she went to India, she was actively engaged in social and political reforms in England. She was a socialist, an active member of the Fabian Society. Besant advocated worker’s rights, women’s rights, birth control, and better work conditions for women in factories. She was also editor of a weekly called the National Reformer along with Charles Bradlaugh, a friend who left an indelible impression on Besant, especially in her political life.
Annie Besant in the 1870s
Besant in 1897 in Adyar, India.
A quest for spiritual peace had always haunted Besant, and she read widely to find inner peace. It was A.P.Sinnett’s book on theosophy that led her, as she explained it, to “study carefully any works throwing light on the matter.” Besant’s introduction to the Theosophical Society brought peace to her. The Theosophical Society founded by Madame Blavatsky in 1875 was based on Hindu ideas of karma and reincarnation. As its member, Besant’s vocation was to spread theosophical ideas to the world, most of all in India. Besant came to India for the first time in 1893 and, though she shuttled between England and India, the latter was to be her home for the rest of her life. She channeled all her energies to working in India. Adyar in Southern India became her domain for all kinds of activities. She translated the Bhagavadgita, a religious Indian text, into English in 1895 after having started to learn Sanskrit in 1893. She also founded Central Hindu College for boys in Benaras in 1895. The boys were taught the ancient scriptures and also made aware of their political responsibilities as sons of colonized India.

Theosophy brought Besant to India but nationalist propaganda caught her imagination. After she was elected as President of the Theosophical Society, she went to a meeting of the nationalist movement where she was greeted with cries of “Bande Mataram,” which meant “Mother I bow to thee.” After this meeting, Besant became vocal about her involvement with the India National Congress. In 1913 she joined the Indian National Congress and was also responsible for starting the Home Rule League in 1916. As she faced adulation for some of her actions, she was also a much criticized figure. Even so, Besant never gave up and continued to live in India. She died in Adyar in 1933 at the age of 86.

Born in Tyrone, Ireland in 1867, Margaret Elizabeth Noble grew up in Ireland but went to Halifax College in England for her education with her sister Mary. In 1884 she graduated from Halifax. She took up teaching, first at Keswick and then at Wrexham. Wrexham was a mining center and apart from teaching she also rendered social service. She had developed an interest in music and natural sciences. Noble was also a member of “Free Ireland,” an Irish revolutionary organization. She learned during this period that each country had to chalk out different paths for independence based on its own conditions and this knowledge helped her immensely in understanding the national movement in India.
Noble heard Swami Vivekananda, reverently known as Swamiji, speak in London in 1895, and by the time she heard him again in 1896, she had decided to come to India as Swamiji’s disciple. Swamiji was an Indian monk and a spiritual leader. As opposed to the western notion of service to humanity as the goal of an individual, Swamiji put forth the emancipation of the soul as the goal for human beings. Noble had already begun to question some Christian dogmas and how it answered questions on the “soul” and the “inner-self,” and Swamiji’s speech promised a way out of her spiritual dilemma. Noble came to India in 1898 and was soon named Nivedita, meaning, dedicated to God, by Swamiji. She spent thirteen years in India working for social reforms, for Bengali women of all castes and especially for the Indian National Movement. Noble died in Darjeeling, India in 1911 and left a reputation for an unparalleled legacy of selfless love for India.
Eleanor Florence Rathbone was born in 1872 in Liverpool. From a very young age she found herself involved in social issues, like her father, William Rathbone. She attended Sommerville College, Oxford, after which she started working alongside her father to investigate social and industrial conditions in Liverpool until his death in 1902. From then on, Rathbone continued fighting for those she viewed as oppressed. From 1918 onwards, Rathbone argued for a system of family allowances that would be paid directly to mothers. She also opposed violent repression of rebellion in Ireland. In 1929 Rathbone entered parliament as an independent MP for the Combined English Universities. One of her first speeches was about clitoridectomy in Kenya. Rathbone realized the nature of Nazi Germany and in the 1930s joined the British Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi Council to support human rights. In 1936 she began to warn about a Nazi threat to Czechoslovakia. It is clear that her only agenda was raising her voice against all forms of oppression be it within England or elsewhere.
In view of her political activities, it is not surprising that after fifty years of an active life, Rathbone’s interest in India was spurred by her reading of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* in 1927. She was especially tormented by the fact of child marriage in India and from then on continued to work for women’s rights in India. Apart from writing on child marriage, she also tried to garner support for reforms in India by arranging conferences, initiating contacts with prominent Indian women and women’s organizations and speaking in the British Parliament on social problems that India faced. The first conference that she organized in Caxton Hall in 1929 was intended to be a platform for discussing child marriage in India. However, it was severely criticized by Indian women and also some British women because the conference did not include any Indian women and most of the British speakers had not visited India, including
Rathbone visited India in 1931 when she acquainted herself with many Indian women in order to fight the custom of child marriage more effectively. Rathbone remained interested in the affairs of Indian women till her death in 1946, but after 1935 she stopped working actively on their behalf. Rathbone’s active years of involvement with the rights and status of Indian women forwarded the cause of Indian women before the British people to a very great extent. Rathbone never stayed in India like Besant or Noble, but the degree to which she mobilized the campaign against child marriage and the incessant manner of her agitation for the abolition of the cause in the British Parliament, makes it important to include her in this study.

Margaret Cousins was born in 1878 at Boyle in Western Ireland. Cousins realized while she was quite young that men and women did not enjoy the same right. For instance, she was especially annoyed by the fact that women did not have the right to vote as men had. In 1908 along with her husband and some other friends she founded the Women’s Franchise League in Ireland with the intention of demanding suffrage for women. Cousins also traveled to England to fight for women’s suffrage rights but was unfortunately arrested. When she came back to Ireland, she was arrested again as the Irish Government did not approve of her actions. Frustrated with her foiled attempts to make a difference, she accompanied her husband James to India in 1915 when he was offered a journalist’s position in Madras.

Cousins’ contribution in introducing Indian women to public life is praiseworthy. She founded the Weaker Sex Improvement Society in 1916. Her organization provided a model for yet another organization, the Women’s Indian Association (WIA henceforth), founded in 1917, which played a very important role in emancipating Indian women during the twentieth-century. In 1923 as part of WIA she visited homes and preached to Indian women the necessity to cast their votes. Cousins played a very important role in organizing the All India Women’s Conference in 1926 which was the first of its kind. She worked closely with Annie Besant, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and also Mahatma Gandhi, having gone to prison for supporting his cause. Cousins was also the first woman to become a magistrate in India in 1922. In 1943 Cousins began to withdraw from public life because she felt that Indian women could
carry forward their own struggle. Soon after, she had a stroke and remained disabled till she died in 1954 in Madras.

Margaret Cousins with her husband.

Cousins participating in the Indian political scene. She is dressed in a sari.
Madeline Slade was born on 22 November 1892 to a rich English family and led a very comfortable life. But by her own admission she had grown tired of her affluence and would often let her mind wander along spiritual pathways. “there was something which every now and then wafted me far away. It would come at quiet moments, and always through the voice of Nature, the singing of a bird, the sound of the trees.”\(^{18}\) Slade happened to hear Beethoven’s Sonata Opus 31 No. 2 on the pianola her father bought and her “very being was stirred” from the very first moment.\(^{19}\) Beethoven’s music seems to have given her inner quest some rest as the music soothed her. It was because of Beethoven that Slade learned about Romain Roland, who had authored *Jean Christoffe*, a novel that was based on Beethoven’s life. Slade met Roland, without appointment, while he was visiting London, and they became friends from then on. Romain Roland’s other book, on Mohandas Gandhi, introduced Slade to her *Bapu*, whom Romain Roland referred to as “another Jesus Christ.”\(^{20}\)
Slade with Gandhi in London in 1931.
Slade finished the book in one day and soon enough decided that she wanted to work with Gandhi in his ashram at Sabarmati, in western India. She established correspondence with Gandhi and was welcomed by him. It was Gandhi who named her Mira Behn, a name which came to be adored in nationalist and Gandhian circles. The hardships under which Slade operated in India call for appreciation. For more than 25 years while she was in India, she had malaria once every year. The weather did not suit her and the long hours of work she had to put in while spinning and carding cotton, cleaning latrines took a toll on her. But she continued without any complaint solely due to her devotion to Gandhi.\(^{21}\)

Soon Slade was able to assume the role of instructing others about Gandhian ideals. Slade recounts in her book how her travels took her all over India. She went to Calcutta, to the North West Frontier Province, and, she worked in other ashrams in Delhi and Rajasthan. Not just within India, Slade also contributed towards the spread of Gandhi’s teachings outside India. She made trips to the United States and United Kingdom to talk about Gandhi’s methods like satyagraha and non-violence.\(^{22}\) Also, out of her own initiative, in the 1940s Slade founded Bapu Gram, Kisan Gram and Gopal Ashram in Pashulok, all of which were in the Himalayas in northern India, far from Gandhi’s core area of influence, western India (Gram meaning village, Ashram - Religious/Spiritual sanctuary).\(^{23}\) Though working away from Gandhi, she remained very close to him all his life. Slade was away in Pashulok when Gandhi was shot. She did not rush to Delhi on hearing the news. Instead, she immersed herself in more work. Slade continued to live in India until 1957, but then went to Austria leaving behind a legacy of continued service to India, the quality of which few Indians could parallel.

Though none of these women were born in the twentieth century, they were all involved with twentieth-century India in different capacities. Their interaction with India happened at different times in their lives. For Annie Wood Besant, born in 1847, India appealed to her only after she was 50, whereas for Madeline Slade it was in her late twenties that she learned about Gandhi and India and moved there soon after. Also, they were active in Indian politics at different times. Margaret Noble was active in India till 1911 when she died, whereas Margaret Cousins and Madeline Slade came to India in 1915 and 1925 respectively. Their years in India dictated to a great extent the
images they created in their writings. If Noble witnessed the repercussions of the partition of Bengal in 1907, Slade was more involved with Quit India in 1942. Rathbone, for her part knew about the constitutional reforms and how they involved Indian women. The associations these women maintained had an impact on the images they sketched. If Slade knew more about Sabarmati Ashram and national politics in Gujarat, Noble knew more about the national movement in Calcutta. Cousins worked in South India, and Besant shuttled between Adyar in the south and Benares in the north.

Yet another factor that made the women’s accounts different was the number of years each stayed in India. Rathbone was the only woman whose association with India was not based on an extended stay. She visited India in 1931 after being severely criticized for fighting for reforms in India without having visited the country. In contrast to Rathbone, Noble and Besant made India their home and died there. Cousins and Slade, stayed in India for considerable periods but left it during their last days. So, whereas Rathbone only knew about Indian women and their suffrage rights and was actively involved for the first five years, all the other British women had diverse experiences in India ranging from Indian weddings, to high politics, to women’s rallies to the insensitivity of the British government. They met Indian politicians, reformers and philosophers. In general, a broader spectrum of Indian life unfolded before them. Fortunately, when all their images are pieced together, a vibrant and multi-faceted India emerges.
Images of India

The significant roles that each of these women played ensured to a great degree the authenticity and richness of the images they produced. They were among the most prominent British women in twentieth-century India, all endowed with great intelligence, sincerity and unique vantage points. Besant’s role is applauded even today for her contribution to India’s freedom struggle and her fearless stand in negotiating that freedom with the British. Noble and Slade remain significant because their journeys to India were made solely because of Swami Vivekanda and Gandhi respectively. They were the closest any British woman ever was to these two great philosophers. Vivekanda and Gandhi represented India’s core in philosophy, and the fact that both Noble and Slade found spiritual salvation in India, the land of these two gurus gave them unique vantage points. Rathbone’s ideas and action offered a closer look at a Victorian feminist’s understanding of social issues in India, especially those concerning women. Cousins, was applauded for maintaining her own individuality as a British woman and yet balancing that with her role as a friend of India. As historian Barba N. Ramusack wrote, Cousins assumed importance because she was able to establish relationships with Indians on the basis of “love, equality and respect.”

Not surprisingly, as fascinating as were the lives of these women, so were their views on India. These images that have been preserved in their writings are either in the form of books, manuscripts, letters or speeches. Annie Besant produced an immense amount of literature on the freedom struggle and an equally good number on theosophy. Besant’s autobiography, her India and the Empire (1914), India, Bond or Free? (1926), Wake Up, India (1913) and How India Wrought her Freedom (1915) are some of her most important works that reflect her political views on India. Margaret Noble’s most famous work The Web of Indian Life published in 1918 is a detailed study of India she made during her years in India. Noble’s book The Master As I Saw Him published in 1993 is her tribute to Vivekananda and how his teachings made a difference in her life and in the lives of millions, within and outside India. The first article that Eleanor Rathbone wrote on India was “Has Katherine Mayo Slandered ‘Mother India’?” (1929). She wrote this piece after she read Mayo’s Mother India. Following this she published two more works on the issue of child marriage, “Child Marriage in India:1931,” in 1931 and “The
Indian Minotaur: An Object Lesson from the Past to the Future,” in 1934. The use of the word “minotaur” in the title reflects how imperative Rathbone considered it to end the evil that child marriage symbolized.

Madeline Slade authored many papers and many letters, especially addressed to Gandhi. This essay will look at her most important autobiographical work A Spirit’s Pilgrimage, published in 1960. Krishna Murti Gupta’s biography, Mira behn: Gandhi’s Daughter Disciple includes some of Slade’s letters, speeches and interviews and is another very important source, especially because Gupta had a very close relationship with Slade. For Margaret Cousins, the most important work is Indian Womanhood Today published in 1941. This book was an elaboration of one particular chapter in Cousin’s earlier publication The Awakening of Asian Womanhood published in 1922. Cousins came to India as a feminist and the titles of her books make her vocation clear. However, in The Music of Orient and Occident. Essays towards Mutual Understanding, published in 1935, Cousins shows that she also had a strong inclination towards aspects of Indian culture such as music and painting.

The works of all five British women demonstrate that they had their distinct agendas in India. It is true that they were connected with India voluntarily and they strove to contribute to India in a positive way, yet, they had different ways in which they reached out to India. The challenge this poses to presenting varied images of India were many. To begin with, while writing on the same topic these women did not necessarily agree with each other. Be it the ways in which they addressed the issues or the solutions they offered, the women usually had different perspectives on it. In fact, every single unit that contributed towards the larger image of India, was not presented in a similar fashion by any of these women. They chose to write about topics that they found appealing. They focused on some aspects and ignored some others. Whereas some accounts are detailed, others are not. This meant that not all units that made up the larger picture of India had contributions from all women. For instance Rathbone, while working for Indian women’s suffrage, did not leave her impressions about the caste system. Slade talked about the caste system and worked for its abolition, but did not involve herself in any women’s movement or even speak on it at length.
Considering that the twentieth century saw, both the rise and fall of the British Empire in India, it would be interesting to see what British women thought about an independent India? Did all of them support the cause? Did they support it unconditionally? What did “free India” mean to them? How did these women perceive the concept of “free India?” As early as 1915 Besant published *How India Wrought Her Freedom* documenting in it the story of the National Congress as told from official records. The book was meant to prove India’s fitness for Home Rule. In 1916 Besant wrote to her friend Esther Bright, “The whole spirit of India has changed, instead of begging for favors they demand rights.”

Though India had problems of literacy and communalism, Noble saw great potential in the Indian national movement and gave it her full support. Noble had realized in the course of delivering lectures abroad that India’s political subjugation prevented the delivery of India’s message to the world. She almost took it upon her to make India free. In fact, so urgent an issue was India’s freedom to Noble that she wrote to Miss McLeod, a British friend, saying that it was more important to inform national consciousness than to work for women.

Margaret Cousins also felt the same way. In 1922 in *The Awakening of Asian Womenhood* she announced that India was fit for political freedom, even if one goes by the level of the emancipation of its women or the level of education its people had received. She reiterated her conviction in *Indian Womenhood Today* in 1941. In fact, she argued, citing the level of reform that was needed to educate India, that only a politically free country could grapple with the problems that India was faced with. Slade’s support for India’s freedom was more pronounced in her action than in her words. In 1934 during her trip to United States, Slade lectured at Harvard University, Church of Redeemer in Newark, Carnegie Hall and the New History Society and even met the President’s wife, Mrs Roosevelt to discuss India’s national cause.

Perhaps the most skeptical of all these women was Eleanor Rathbone. When Rathbone first became involved in Indian affairs in the late 1920s she had not considered the devolution of power to Indians even a remote possibility. However, writing in 1934 about the problem of child marriage in India, she warned the Indians that “they will have to encounter just as much risk of odium as the present government.” In this context it is important to understand that with time she had at least begun to
acknowledge free India as inevitable. Rathbone did not support the cause as it did not seem urgent to her, but to Besant, Noble, Cousins and Slade unconditional freedom for India was a goal that needed to be achieved urgently.

These British women not only envisioned a free India but some also had ideas about how that freedom was to be achieved. Rathbone, not surprisingly, did not contribute towards this recipe for freedom, but neither did Cousins. Cousins came to India as a feminist and though she did participate in politics, she did so in order to aid women. She believed that India needed freedom, and she wanted Indian women to occupy a respectable position in free India but chalking out the path for India’s freedom was not her priority. However, from her books on Indian women it can be surmised that she probably did approve of agitation, reforms and demands as a means to earn freedom.

Besant, Noble and Slade had different suggestions for India but agreed on how freedom could mostly expeditiously be achieved. They all felt that in order to attain self-government, the villages would have to be involved in the national movement. Besant believed that the main strength of the national movement would lie in its ability to integrate the majority Indian population that lived in rural areas. In the 32nd annual meeting of the Indian National Congress, held in Kolkata, where she was elected President she asked India to have regard for its ancient institutions, like the village council and the panchayats (local administrative councils). In an interview conducted by Rosetta Spalt, an architect from Vienna and a supporter of Gandhi, Madeline Slade said that India’s strength lay “in the villages, in a decentralized, self-reliant economy.” Noble also felt that villages in India were the key to the Indian community life. She visualized India evolving based on the village system.

Though Besant was all for including the voice of the rural population in the nationalist struggle for freedom, she did not view the majority as having any leadership capabilities. Leadership, she thought, should be reserved for the educated elites. She advocated equality in the lowest levels only. Thereafter, election to the higher tiers of government would be restricted by age, experience and education. Besant wanted the majority/proletariat to accept being governed like children. Like Besant, Noble and Slade also elaborated on other ways to secure freedom for India. Noble considered freedom so important to India that she justified the use of extremist methods.
in nationalist agitation. As a worshipper of Kali, the Indian Goddess who stands for the use of violence in the fight against evil, she had no qualms about it.\textsuperscript{37} At the same time she thought that violence amongst Indians would make freedom hard to achieve. Noble pointed out how violence and nation building did not go together and also how Europeans in spite of “mutual jealousy and ill-will…scrupulously hide these internal sores from the eyes of the foreigners; that is how they present a united front.”\textsuperscript{38} Noble felt that Indians themselves did not know what strengths lay in their diversity and that they were not using their diversity to their own advantage. India needed “self-organization, not regeneration.”\textsuperscript{39} Slade had two specific solutions for how India should achieve her freedom; both were inspired by Gandhi’s ideals. First, she wrote in the weekly \textit{Young India} on May, 1930, “If our boycott of foreign cloth is to be successful, we can have no half-way house.” She also warned Indians about fake \textit{khadi} so that in boycotting foreign cloth and accepting \textit{khadi} cloth, no effort was spared.\textsuperscript{40}

From the above discussion it naturally follows that these British women did not have the highest regard for the British Government. Over time, the involvement of these British women with India changed the dynamics of their relationship with the British and they began to view British rule in India with sarcasm. Besant’s advocacy for Indian independence made it evident that she was not in favor of British rule in India. But her stand against the British was unique in two ways. First, she wanted a self-governing Indian nation within the British Empire.\textsuperscript{41} Second, she sincerely believed that giving India freedom was in Britain’s best interests.\textsuperscript{42} Besant deplored the destruction of ancient and indigenous forms of government by the British, particularly the land tenure system which had allowed an effective form of local democracy. In 1910 a veteran theosophist was turned out of a first class compartment by a British man and, based on that incident, Besant mounted an indictment against the Raj and accused it of being racially prejudiced.\textsuperscript{43} From her writings it is clear that race remained a prominent concern especially with the “lower types of Englishmen.” As editor of \textit{New India} she was often hypercritical of the Raj and the titles of her articles were often cause for grave concern to the British administration.\textsuperscript{44} Besant wrote in \textit{India Bond or Free?} in 1926, “Some nonsense had been uttered to the effect that India’s loyalty to British Rule should be ‘unconditional,’ and this I denied.”\textsuperscript{45}
Like Besant, Rathbone, Cousins and Slade, found the British incapable of ruling India. In “Child Marriage in India: 1931,” Rathbone criticized the British Government for not taking strong action against child marriage, when it had been proved that the “practice” was “inconsistent with individual safety.” Rathbone voiced her opinion that raising the age of consent from 10 to 12 in 1891 was not “enough” as a girl was as unfit for marriage at 12 as she would be at 10. The act that was supposed to deal with the evil of child marriage was the Sarda Act. Rathbone pointed out how the Government did nothing to turn public opinion in favor of the Act and also how the Act merely stood against solemnization of child marriage but did not declare it illegal. Rathbone showed how these actions could only be interpreted as lack of concern for the welfare of Indian women, and the Indian nation at large. Rathbone asked, “Did they cudgel their brains for the means of overcoming the difficulty? Have they even attempted to lead opinion instead of following it? Have the sufferings of these innumerable victims of a cruel custom lain heavily on their hearts? Or just because the victims are hidden from sight, have they been totally forgotten?”

In a similar vein Cousins asserted that there were not just ethical reasons, but practical ones as well for not supporting British rule in India. Cousins forwarded statistics that showed how the number of schools available to the Indians had dwindled drastically since 1838. To this Cousins added the fact that English was made the medium of instruction and that not only kept many Indians illiterate but specifically affected education for girls as English was only helpful for waged women, and most Indian women had no opportunity for that. All this naturally made the British responsible for illiteracy in India. Slade further proved her conviction about British incapacity to rule India when she told Mr Laithwaite, Lord Linlithgow’s secretary in 1942, “If things go on as they are going, peasants of Orissa will garland the Japanese when they land…the people with whom you associate and from whom you hear things, are out of touch with the masses as you are.” Thus, it was with their progressive interaction with Indians and Indian culture that the ethical and practical flaws in British rule over India became evident to these British women.

It is clear then that the British women wanted freedom for India, and they did not favor British rule over India. Also, the methods suggested by these women for the
attainment of freedom suggest that they wanted India to revive its indigenous self and not to ape British culture to attain freedom. The issue of the “westernization” of India is yet another topic on which the British women voiced their opinion. “Let her have freedom to develop on her own lines and she will again rival her ancient glory, and even excel it in the future.” Through these words, Besant made her stand against westernization very clear. Besant thought the boys at Central Hindu College needed a curriculum that would educate them on ancient Indian scriptures, so that they would emerge as thorough Aryan gentlemen. Slade, on her part, depicted in her article, “Cultural Conquest,” published in *Harijan* in October, 1946 the sad picture of Indians dressing like Englishmen and addressing each other as Mr and Miss, completely bereft of their own cultural traditions. She found it strange that each of these men, were “trying to look more English than the other.” In fact, so that she would make sense, she pointed out how no self respecting Italian or Frenchman would like anything apart from Signor or Monsieur. She ended, “Is it not time that these unsuitable customs in speech, dress and mode of living, quit India along with the Raj they represent?”

Noble, also had great faith in India’s own capability to restore unity and strength to itself, and she did not consider British rule imperative for the growth of India as a modern nation. “We say we have civilized them. That depends on our definition of the word. If civilization means Europeanizing them, then we have had some measures of success. If it has the meaning I prefer to give the word- the permeating of a great mass of human beings with an idea –we have hardly so much to lay to our credit.” Noble disapproved of the growing westernization of India, especially the fact that the Congressmen dressed like Europeans and housewives gave up Indian utensils and wares to adopt western products. Noble was aware that adopting western customs was not necessarily accepting British imperial rule, but she advocated that Indians retain their Indianness as it would strengthen their fight against the British. Referring to Indian women she said, “We want to give girls their own color. We do not want pale imitations of American or English women.”

As important as it was to curb the westernization of India, for all these women it was equally or perhaps more important to initiate social reforms in the country. As was pointed out by Noble, Indians needed to bring about unity amongst themselves
before they could fight against the British. They believed caste and religion to be two important factors that divided the Indians. Slade described at length the piteous conditions of the untouchables in India. She also created images of villages of untouchables where the hygiene levels shocked her.\textsuperscript{56} Cousins added a different facet to the issue of the caste system when she pointed out that oppression among higher castes was most rampant, except that the oppression was directed against the women within the caste. Surprisingly, as she pointed out, it was usually the women from higher castes and better-off families who stayed behind in \textit{zenana}s and received no education.\textsuperscript{57} Besant, added yet another facet to the critique of the caste system in India. Like Slade and Cousins, Besant thought that “increased sensitivity” towards lower caste people was needed.\textsuperscript{58} However, she did not support the abolition of the caste system altogether. Though Besant herself had not experienced anything like a caste system in her country of birth, Besant came to believe that the caste system lay at the heart of the Indian polity and that no lover of India would ever attack it.\textsuperscript{59}

Like caste, the religious backgrounds of Indians also created divisions within Indian society. Religion became a burning issue towards the close of independence, and there were polemical debates about how far back did the roots of religious communalism go. In simpler terms, was there antagonism between different religious communities before partition and if so, till when in the twentieth century do these date back? Noble provided a nuanced view of this issue. In Noble’s writings it is not clear how strongly she believed religious communalism to be rooted in India, but she lectured the Muslims on trying to integrate themselves into Indian society instead of going back to “Arabia,”\textsuperscript{60} proving that she was aware that the issues such as communalism lay at the heart of the Partition of India and had deep seated manifestations at least in some regions.\textsuperscript{61} This was, however, only one side of the story. Noble’s accounts also showed how the \textit{Mussalman} families in Bengal turned with horror from eating beef which is also forbidden in Hindu custom and how Hindu and Muslim women had the same notions of being a wife and a mother.\textsuperscript{62} This proves that Noble believed that at the local level instances of mutual love and trust between members of different religious communities, would not be hard to find. Noble’s account shows how in high
politics the notion of divided India was not inconceivable but in the daily life of the nation, antagonism over religious belief was over-rated.

At this point Slade’s account and insight assumes great significance. She reported how the British had always used “divide and rule” to maintain their power over India. With freedom of Indian becoming a certainty, the British could only hope to maintain their hold over the subcontinent by dividing the country. So when Jinnah tried in 1944 to bridge the gap between the Indian Congress and Muslim League, Slade explained: “there was serious alarm in British circles; and to offset the possible achievement of Hindu-Muslim solidarity, the bogies of the Depressed Classes and the Princes were immediately displayed again with fresh vigor.”

Apart from caste and religion, there were two other areas that these British women commented on. They were issues of social reform: child marriage and education. When Rathbone read Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* in 1927 she was so agitated by the contents of the book that she deemed it urgent for her to do something to end child marriage in India. In 1929 she wrote a book, *Has Katherine Mayo Slandered Mother India?* As Rathbone put it, it was only natural for an Indian man to protest against the book in the manner in which he did because “He knows that there is much in western life that is hateful and despicable and much in his own people that is lovable and admirable.” But Rathbone was firm on one point. As much as *Mother India* might have hurt the sentiments of the “race conscious, educated, articulate Hindu” what was more important was the “millions of tortured bodies and wasted lives,” and Rathbone would spare no effort to reform India on the matter. Rathbone explained how the evil was further perpetuated by the “reluctance of the victims to complain.” She also believed that instilling ideas about service to the husband, in young brides, made them accept harsh experiences uncomplainingly.

Besant also found child marriage in India a degrading custom. In fact, she pointed out how in the ancient vaidik days, initial days after Aryan settlement, marriages would take place only between people of marriageable age. She said, “The future of India as a nation depends on its abolition of child marriage.” In contrast, Noble approached the issue of child marriage uncritically. In *The Web of Indian Life* Noble dedicated a chapter to marriage and wifehood. In this chapter, “Of the Hindu Woman as Wife,” she
drew a beautiful picture of marriage, of what it meant to be a bride, of her wonderful new life after marriage, and of her sanctified relationship with her husband. Noble also mentioned how child brides were pampered by everyone. She did not raise questions about how such marriages were physically harmful for young brides.

As the abolition of child marriage was deemed necessary by most British women, so was the propagation of education among all Indians important. Besant showed how the problem of illiteracy in India was rendered more hopeless by huge numbers. The illiterate population was so great in number, Besant felt, that the British government alone would not be able to bring in successful reforms in India, as had happened in Germany and England. The degree of difficulty was exacerbated by inadequate efforts undertaken by the British in this direction. Rathbone pointed out how the British government had been “inefficient” and had failed to spread literacy in India. They had conveniently placed education as a “transferred subject” and hence whatever was to be done would have to be done by the Indians themselves. It seems Noble must have anticipated this for she said in early 1900 in one of her writings, that pertaining to education what would help India most would be “self-help.” Cousins, however, favored some western education, provided it did not replace the Indian system of education.

In *Wake Up, India*, Besant talked about two types of educations, mass education and education for women. By education for women, she meant only higher caste women, where as mass education in her proposals included women in villages. For both these types of education Besant offered meticulous guidelines, be it with regard to its functioning or its goals. For instance, Besant ascribed to the *panachayat* (local councils) a very important position in this endeavor and laid down guidelines on how education for higher castes should include arts, science, and also physical education. Besant believed in the need to popularize the thirst for knowledge in India. Rathbone corroborated Besant’s concern about creating a demand for education in rural areas. The education for girls in villages was for the most part poor, Rathbone learned from Begun Saheb of Bhopal, an activist for women.

Though not the only reason, these British women believed that lack of education denied many opportunities to women which in turn contributed towards an oppressed status for Indian women in general. Just as with the caste system, education
and child marriage, reforms were advocated for Indian women as well. Besant viewed women as capable of wielding political power and hence advocated that they be equally represented in legislatures. Noble, on the other hand commented, “In the time to come it will be said that this generation was the turning point in the history of women.” She cited the instance of the Rani (queen) of Jhansi and her fight against the British during the 1857 revolts and considered her to be symbolic of the potential of Indian women. It is no wonder she encouraged women to take part in national politics.

Whereas neither Besant nor Noble, specifically demanded reforms for Indian women, Rathbone did. Rathbone’s writings on Indian women did not address so much the potential they had or the roles they were playing, but the reforms that were needed to enhance their lives. “There is much vague talk about ‘self-government’ for India…. But is there anything in the past record either of the Princes or of the mass of Indian men of the better-to-do-classes, who will be the chief recipients of the political power, that assures us that here are people to whom we may safely entrust the future of the women of India, confident that they will do their utmost to rescue women from the frightful evils that oppress them.” Thus, Rathbone appealed to the morals of the British people, and told them, “the time to act is now, while the Constitution of India is being rebuilt from its foundations. I suggest that all who share this view should give effect to it through all the usual means of Parliamentary pressure – by individual letters and resolutions from all kinds of organized bodies.” Rathbone made it clear how imperative reforms were for Indian women. Rathbone added a section in Indian Minotaur to address many social conditions in India affecting women. She raised questions in her book about purdah, widowhood, especially child widows, medical facilities available for women, and education for girls.

Of the five women, only Cousins worked continuously for Indian women during her years in India. She elaborated on the themes mentioned by Besant, Noble and Rathbone but also wrote some of her broader conclusions about Indian women. She presented a picture of politically conscious women, lauded their achievements, traced the development of such consciousness from the patriotic feelings of these women. Cousins viewed India as a vibrant nation. The images she created were of politically conscious women’s associations mushrooming in India, of women facing lathi charges (beaten by
the police using sticks), imprisonment, loss of property and reputation, of women actively participating in politics, hitherto a strictly male domain, also, of women picketing alcohol and foreign cloth shops.⁷⁴ Women, she reported, raised their voices against purdah and polygamy. In 1941, 5000 women came out on the streets to protest against purdah, inspired by Marwari women in Calcutta. She told of women filing for divorce, of women choosing education over marriage.⁷⁵ These women came from all religious backgrounds and also from across all classes.⁷⁶ She argued that it was evident that just as women were needed in the running of the house, they would be needed in the running of the nation because a nation was nothing but “a larger household.”⁷⁷

In the above narration of women’s activities, Cousins emphasized development of the women’s movement in India. She traced the “swift emergence of India’s womanhood from the darkness of the last century to the high light…of these present years.”⁷⁸ One of the key aspects of the women’s movements, according to Cousins was patriotism. Patriotism emancipated women, as their desire to see their country free gave them great personal freedom. “They do not naturally move towards fighting for their freedom, but through throwing themselves in with the ‘cause,’ they achieve their own liberation.”⁷⁹ For instance, when women joined Gandhi in his anti-salt tax movement, they did so not solely because of anti-British sentiment but because as home-makers they were affected by the rise in the salt tax. Once involved, they felt a new sense of power. Also the stance of satyagraha (truth-force) and non-cooperation suited women as they were naturally disposed towards creating life and not engaging in violence.⁸⁰

As patriotism brought women into the domain of national politics, so, wrote Cousins, it earned them the right to vote, a right that was not enjoyed by women in many other developed countries. Rathbone differed from Cousins in this regard as she wanted women to stay away from national politics till such time as they were granted equal status with Indian men. Her assumption was that women would lose their feminist consciousness and their goal once they joined the stream of national politics. In contrast, Cousins wrote, “By 1929 the vote was one of the links making Indian womanhood a vital unit in the life of the single nation India.” Cousins also showed how India, with 80 women members in the legislatures of its combined states and provinces, stood third
amongst the nations of the world as regards the political influence and position enjoyed by women. In contrast Britain had only eight women and Australia four, in the Parliament. Cousins pointed out that because the movement for women and the one for free India marched together, India, a country proverbially known for “slow change” was able to attain such heights of liberalization in terms of women’s suffrage.81

Margaret Cousin’s long involvement with the Indian women’s movement earned for her a place of immense respect and love in Indian society. However, as appreciative as she was of Indian women and Indian society at large she was also critical of many of its aspects. In fact, what seemed to be a great opportunity for women was often not so, as Cousins found out after closer inspection. For instance, Cousins pointed out how women in legislatures still had a long way to go because they were divided in legislatures and in any single legislature they were so small in number that they could not have any effective impact. Since most of the women were close to the national movement, during their imprisonment there was hardly any women’s representation in the legislatures. Women’s franchise had risen to 5 million but women still needed to be educated on how to use their voting rights and how to use them to further their own demands. India still had the lowest percentage of literacy in the world, fewest schools, and least money spent on education. Though measures were being taken to spread education, Cousins explained how the spread of education in India had been lop-sided. Thus, while the Parsi and Christian women were educated, Hindu and Muslim girls fell behind. Amongst the Hindus again, only the Brahmins received education and only for religious purposes.82

The population of the country was a serious impediment to the spread of education, especially because 90% of the Indian population lived in villages. The progressive women that Cousins cited were therefore a minority, 3% of the total women’s population. “Fundamental development for India’s womanhood must be examined and prophesied in terms of the agricultural masses of village women.” Whereas women in cities advocated reforms and used them, the “backwardness” of the women in the villages rendered that development null and void83 Cousins suggested state controlled initiative as in Japan or the efforts of a more zealous and literate reformers as in Russia, in order to spread education, especially among Indian women.84
With these criticisms Cousins aimed at shaking India and its women out of complacency and helping them develop further. As she explained, “But with all the good will in the world, my daily growing experience of India brings with it a daily growing knowledge that, when compared with the freedom of thought, word, and action in which the women of other countries live, the women of India are far away from the freedom that they need…Not all the governments in the world can give India true Swaraj if Indians themselves, men and women, do not remove the chains of out-of-date customs that hold… Indian women in impoverishment of body, mind and soul.” Each of her criticisms were followed by a solution. She believed that “the whole Time-Spirit” was working to liberate women in every country along “different lines according to different civilizations” and she was concerned about how India could be helped? Fortunately for Indian women, she not only accepted India’s different circumstances but suited to those differences the answers she gave: education, development of villages, seats for women in local panchayats, “love” between husband and his wife. So, Cousins’ accounts of her views and suggestions for Indian women reflect a perfect case of constructive criticism.

While on the topic of Indian women, the role of Indian men in oppressing their women must be addressed. Rathbone attributed child marriage not to Indian racial degeneracy but to the dominance of men across cultural lines. Rathbone also pointed out, ‘many of one generation resent attempts to ease their juniors from the struggles and sufferings they have themselves endured.’ In contrast, Margaret Cousins showed a nation whose male population was liberal in asking for equal rights for their women. She praised Kamaladevi Chattopadhya’s husband, who campaigned for her when she stood for the local elections. In narrating the story of Laksfmi Ammal’s election campaigns for the Madras presidency where she won a landslide victory, Cousins painted a powerful image of Lakshmi’s acceptance amongst crowd, with “no sex consciousness, no superiority no inferiority.”

Dadabhai Naoroji, also known as the Grand Old Man of India authored a book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* in the late nineteenth century, which was an expose of how British rule was systematically ruining India’s economy. The book enlightened many Indians about British exploitation of India. At the same time it opened the eyes of many British who were sympathetic to the Indian cause. The book
popularized the need for economic reforms. Considering the close interaction that the British women had with Indians, it is not possible that they had not heard about or read the book, but few of them actually spelled out a program of economic reforms for India. Most of them left only glimpses of the need for economic reforms in their works. Cousins for example, pointed out how the ruin of the village economy further perpetrated the oppression of women as women lost their jobs. Slade, as a disciple of Gandhi, noticed the gradual development of India as a mere producer of raw materials under British aegis. In her lecture tours, she met peasants from all over India and became informed about the lack of government guidance in the rural economy. Slade’s ventures, be it Gopal Ashram or Bapugram were in some ways putting into practice Gandhi’s ideas about village economy. Slade’s adoption and implementation of those ideals reflect that Slade viewed India in need of economic reforms, especially in the villages.

Besant, was the only one of the five British women who specifically addressed questions of economic reform in India. In India, Bond or Free (1926) Besant viewed India as a country of industries, but village industries and not factories. The decay of the former under British rule, brought the ruin of India. Besant explained, for instance, how the excise duty on Indian cotton made it expensive as compared to Lancashire cotton. So, when Lancashire supplanted the Indian textile industry in India, India was gradually forced to grow long staple cotton as raw material for Lancashire. In view of this, Besant suggested how Indian industries could be saved only if co-operative societies and co-operative banks helped businesses.

Finally, how did these women experience the spirit of India? The spirit encompassed the Indian people, men and women, their beliefs, their actions. It also pointed towards something larger than that, something indescribable. India, to Besant, Noble and Slade, was the land where all their spiritual qualms were put to rest. Considering that the country was riddled with problems, this might seem unusual and hence it is important to see how these women explained their attachment to India and their reason for valuing it so much. Though Besant became involved in Indian politics, India to her, was more the land of spiritual salvation than a colony in need of freedom. From Besant’s books, The Riddle of Life, Cults and New Religions and The Spiritual Life it is clear that there were answers she had sought for the first forty years of her life, and
that it was through theosophy, a belief system largely based on ancient Indian philosophy and wisdom, that she began to find those answers. In trying to explain the essence of theosophy, Besant pointed out that it was the path by which, man, who is divine himself, could know the divinity whose life he shared. Besant saw India embodying the spirit of theosophy. She saw in the lives of Indians, especially Hindus, one would assume, the art of living as if divine spirit existed everywhere, even in non-living objects. She also marveled at India for the sense of brotherhood the Hindus created among themselves, for their belief in the notion of *karma*, or actions that determine one’s fate in one’s next life, and in reincarnation and the unity of God. She found a liberalism, an openness about Indians that charmed her. Through all her work in politics, there was always a concern for an inner life and India took care of that part of Besant’s life. Not surprisingly, in spite of many harsh words from Indians, she continued to live in India till her last days. Besant had made India her home, but it was probably more because of what she received spiritually than anything else.

As Besant found peace in theosophy, so Noble found her answer in the Indian monk, Swamiji. Noble led an exemplary life, but what made her most famous was her position as Swamiji’s disciple. Swamiji made himself known to a western audience in September, 1893 when he represented Hinduism in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. His opening words, “Brothers and sisters of America.” took the western audience by storm and he continued to leave an indelible impression on everyone he spoke to. Referring to another lecture by Swamiji, which he delivered in London, Noble wrote in *The Master As I Saw Him* (1910), “yet it had never before fallen to my lot to meet with a thinker who in one short hour had been able to express all that I had hitherto regarded as highest and best.” Swamiji was a storehouse of vedantic philosophy and vedic texts. Swamiji was, to his countrymen as to a western audience, a symbol of Hindu philosophy and so Noble’s closeness to Swamiji gave her direct access to his ideas and thoughts. Noble’s book *The Master As I Saw Him* is an apt dedication from a disciple to her Master.

Noble’s view of Swamiji was important to consider because her portrayal of Swamiji contributed to the larger doctrine that Swamiji left behind. She described Swamiji as a liberal preacher, as he never preached any one religion. Swamiji spoke
widely on issues related to faith versus religion and pointed out how different religions were merely different paths seeking the same goal, truth and God. Noble found it praiseworthy that Swamiji had the utmost respect for Christianity and found tenets in the religion that were similar to Hinduism, and that he also had the greatest respect for Islam, Jainism and Buddhism. Swamiji’s famous quote, “it is good to be born in a church but terrible to die there,” is a lucid explanation of how important it was to hold on to religion outside organized practice. For Swamiji, the core of Hindu philosophy lay in the “worship of humanity” and the flexibility to have “freedom in thought.” Thus, from Noble’s words it is evident that Swamiji was not only preaching to Indians but his words had an international appeal. Noble’s records explain the reason behind Swamiji’s wide acceptance during a time when his country, India was still considered inferior and unfit for self-rule. Swamiji shared these ideas with Noble when they traveled to the United States and also to Amarnath and Badrinath, two pilgrim sites in India.

By her own admission, Slade had begun to look for a new meaning to life beyond wealth and prosperity as she grew up. Romain Roland remembered her as a person whose “mind was prey to violent and passionate disturbance,” and by introducing Slade to Gandhi he had directed her to a new destination. “By God’s infinite blessing I had arrived, not on the outer edge of Bapu’s activities, but right in the intimate heart of his daily life.” On reaching Sabarmati, Slade wrote, “To be in his presence was to be lifted out of oneself.” These words indicate that just as Noble found all her answers in Swamiji’s teachings, so for Slade, Gandhi was an answer to her wounded soul. Gandhi’s teachings such as ascetism, non-violence, passive resistance appealed to her. Also, every page of Slade’s book *A Spirit's Pilgrimage* contributed to the veneration of Gandhi, as Noble’s had of Swamiji’s.

Many aspects of Gandhi were revealed in the pages of Slade’s book. As Gandhi’s companion on many of his trips, Slade witnessed Gandhi’s hold over the masses and his charisma. Slade wrote about women who tore of jewelry from their bodies in order to contribute to the national cause. “I was deeply touched to see the way the peasantry parted with their copper and nickel coins.” She saw Gandhi as an object of adoration, but also as a target of mob anger, be it when Gandhi failed to stop the execution of Bhagat Singh or when in 1942 he suspended civil disobedience on grounds
that the masses had turned violent.\textsuperscript{100} Slade also witnessed Gandhi in his state of confusion when Indian was partitioned. He said to her, “My word carries no weight today.” No British woman had the luxury of interacting with Gandhi from such close quarters as Slade had, and so unquestionably she assumed an important position as a source for Gandhi and for twentieth-century India that Slade saw through Gandhi’s eyes.

The five British women discussed above, transgressed the traditional borders that women of their times mostly conformed to, borders that kept the British women away from interacting with the indigenous people of India. The roles they assumed and the willing service they rendered in India, whatever the cause or the conviction driving their actions, is indeed praiseworthy and will always be considered so. Their words will always illuminate what twentieth-century India looked like, what happened in the twentieth century, be it within the bounds of the zenannas or out in the election campaigns. As much as these sources tell us about women’s movements, they also tell us about the national movement. Thus, without a doubt British women should be included as an important source in the writing of twentieth-century Indian history.
Burdens of Culture

“Fueled by the media reports of the oppressive practices of the Taliban in Afghanistan, anti-American fury in Iran, and Saudis demanding restrictions on U.S. women soldiers, many Westerners tend to associate veiling with extreme gender oppression, even seeing the veil as an ultimate symbol of unified, monolithic Islam.”

-Nancy J. Hirschmann

Nancy J. Hirschmann’s article, “Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency,” written in 1998 broke the illusion of successful western feminist intervention on behalf of Middle-Eastern women in order to free them from the “veil.” Hirschmann pointed out how western feminists faced “cultural blocks” in understanding eastern society and eastern women. As a result, the campaign against the veil did not reap the desired results. The misunderstandings arose from lack of communication between the two groups of women and also lack of contextualized analysis. In 2003, L. Amede Obiora wrote a similar article, “The Foxes that Spoil the Vine: Revisiting the Feminist Critique of Female Circumcision” where she critiqued the limitations of certain western feminist protests against the practice. Though these are two very good examples of how, in spite of good intentions, western feminists were not able to help their Middle-Eastern and African sisters, these are not the only ones. The issue of working across cultural borders is a serious concern in feminist theory. What is interesting is that it is not a new problem. It did not start with western women’s intervention in trying to ban the “veil” or “genital mutilation” in the late twentieth century.

How did “cultural blocks” similar to those that Hirschmann and Obiora complained about, figure in the images, words, actions and initiatives, of the five British women in pre-Independence India? The British women painted myriad images of India in their writing. Sometimes they found beauty in India, sometimes they found the need for reform. Whatever their responses to India were, those responses are invaluable. This section will analyze the images that were created in order to see if they reflected an element of cultural limitation or cultural blocks that prevented these women from achieving their goals.
The foremost difficulty in such analysis arises in defining what might be a “cultural block” in this case. There is no time-tested definition of a “cultural block,” but to begin with, it is possible to identify what should not be interpreted as a cultural block. For instance, the inability or unwillingness to agree with certain views within India, critiquing social or other evils in India, or voicing one’s opinion on India based on western experiences, or exposing the western “self” instead of attempting to disguise it, should not be equated with cultural blocks. At the same time, dressing like Indians, speaking the language and having Indian friends should not be accepted as proof of no cultural block or thorough assimilation. The issue is more complex than that. In this essay a cultural block will roughly refer to these women’s inability or unwillingness to understand aspects of Indian culture, and to make sense of a majority Indian view. It will also entail an understanding of the processes by which these women had to discard some of their cultural assumptions in order to understand India.

Removed more than fifty years from the time period under observation and from the sources themselves it is albeit difficult to read cultural blocks in the writings of women who expressed concern for India’s freedom, when they need not have, when they toiled away their precious years in India far from home, when they could have just not cared. However, analysis is not impossible, if one can strike a balance between their contributions and their respective limitations pertaining to India. Moreover, the urgent need to analyze cultural blocks, cannot be underestimated. The issue of a cultural block is much larger and of greater significance in our contemporary world than the relatively narrow subject matter of this study might suggest, and a “block” does not negate, nor trivialize the contributions made by individuals from a foreign culture. The “difficult but not impossible” can perhaps be achieved by analyzing the instances where cultural blocks can be located: in contrasting the views of these British women in those instances where they disagree with each other and with the contemporary Indian views, and then in seeing how historians have viewed them over the years. By applying such a methodology, close to an objective stand can surely be attained.

The life of a nineteenth-century figure will make understanding the blocks in the twentieth-century British women much easier to see. Annette Akroyd Beveridge came to India of her own accord and soon enough became known as the symbol of
nineteenth-century British imperialism.” As her biographer Martha A. Scherer puts it, ‘she earned that reputation.’ Though Beveridge is important for the varied images of nineteenth-century India she portrayed in her writings, she stands out as the first public example of a British woman’s limitations in understanding India and its culture, a trend that, though marginally diminished, was not entirely missing in the twentieth century.

Beveridge was born in London in 1842. Beveridge’s father was a businessman and a public figure. Beveridge’s mother passed away when she was young but though her father re-married, her relation with him remained extremely close. She was educated at Bedford College and received as much education as a girl could receive in England at that time. After graduating from Bedford College, she started teaching in the College for Working Women in London, and she also became a member of the Kensington Society, which was one of the earliest feminist groups in England. Both her parents were Unitarians and so, it is not surprising that Beveridge also joined the Unitarians. The Unitarians were associated with the Brahma Samaj in Bengal, India. While the former offered a new way of believing in God and in his moral authority, Brahma Samaj offered new reforms in Hindu life. Beveridge’s links with the Unitarians exposed her to Brahma Samaj leader Keshab Chander Sen in London during one of his visits. Unlike Slade who did not know about Gandhi till Romain Roland told her about him, and Noble, who did not know Vivekananda till she heard his speech, Beveridge knew about Keshab Chandra Sen and Brahma Samaj. She had a great friend in another Brahma Samaj figure, Monmohan Ghosh and was well versed on Indian society and the problems which plagued it. Keshab Chandra Sen, on many occasions pleaded in his lectures for English women to come to India to educate Indian women. Sen’s pleas did have their appeal. Beveridge was always interested in the cause of women’s education and feminism. However, there were other reasons that Beveridge had for going to India. William, Beveridge’s son thinks there was no clear career path for her at home. Finally, as Sherer puts it, “Beveridge’s going off to India was promoted by the time in which she lived – she breathed the air of the Empire. Late nineteenth-century India was less problematic than it had been before or it was likely to be.”
Annette Beveridge in her 70s.
Beveridge arrived in India in 1872. One of Beveridge’s most important contributions in terms of social reforms while in India was the founding of Hindu Mahila Vidyalay (Hindu women’s school), which was first established as a school and then merged with Bethune College, which provided liberal education to Bengali women. In 1875, she married Henry Beveridge, a Bengal Civil Service Officer and had four children with him. Beveridge remained involved with women’s questions even after her marriage but was not very active. In fact, after her marriage she began to pursue what Scherer calls a “life of the mind.” Beveridge had leaned Bengali and Persian and her greatest achievement was probably the translation of the Akabarnama (a biographical account of the great Mughal ruler Akbar by Abu Fazl, the court chronicler). She turned deaf in her later years and died in 1929 in England. Beveridge left a rich but very complicated legacy behind her. Though she will always be remembered for translating Akabarnama and founding Hindu Mahila Vidyalay, she will also be remembered for her stand against the Ilbert Bill in 1883, for which she faced immense criticism from Indians. Till Bill was aimed at giving Indian judges the power to try European subjects and this spelled disaster for many British in India, including Beveridge. Beveridge’s stand also proved to many skeptical Indians that she had not been able to view Indians as equal to the British.

One of the reasons Beveridge had come to India was because, like Sen, she believed that she had much to offer in terms of educating Indian women. However, soon after Beveridge arrived, Sen underwent a change of opinion and became less and less progressive. Beveridge found the level of hygiene in Sen’s school unacceptable, and Sen did not agree that English customs needed to be taught to Bengali women. Beveridge was not successful in earning Sen’s approval for a more liberal curriculum in his school. Frustrated, Beveridge opened her own school where she could have her own way. As for initiating the western method of education in her school, not only did Beveridge see an India in desperate need of education reforms, she also saw herself as crucial to the implementation of such reforms, and in general to the process of the westernization of India. For example, Beveridge did not think the sari, the Indian dress, was ladylike as women’s legs underneath the sari remained uncovered. Beveridge wanted Indian women to wear stockings. Ideally, she also visualized western garb for Indian women and even making them use knives and forks.
Coming to the issue of westernization, had Beveridge earned the position to dictate to Indian women, how they should eat and what they should wear? Upon her arrival in Calcutta, Beveridge first noticed the “curious” crows and jackals and the “semi and demi-semi clothed” people.\(^{111}\) Beveridge wrote in her letters about Indian weddings she attended and how the dance performances were bad, the singing “ugly,” and the bride, looking tired.\(^ {112}\) On another occasion, “To the Government House, a large party—very nice music—but! This is a country where there almost always is a but! And this but! is of painful dimensions.”\(^ {113}\) Considering that Rathbone, after having written a book in Katherine Mayo’s defense, found India to be a place of “beauty charm, idealism and conviction” Beveridge’s language appears harsh, rude, and insensitive.\(^ {114}\)

The most controversial instance of Beveridge’s polemical involvement in Indian affairs, was her stand against the Ilbert Bill. The Bill was aimed at granting Indian judges the authority to try British subjects.\(^ {115}\) In a letter to the Englishman on March 6, 1883, Beveridge asserted, “I speak the feeling of all Englishwomen in India when I say that we regard the proposal to subject us to the jurisdiction of native judges as an insult…It is not the pride of race which dictates this feeling, which is the outcome of something much deeper – it is the pride of womanhood…They [Indian women] testify to the justice of the resentment which Englishmen feel at Mr Ilbert’s proposal to subject divilised [sic] women to the jurisdiction of men who have done little or nothing to redeem the women of their own races, and those social ideas are still on the outer verge of civilization.”\(^ {116}\)

Contemporarily, as also in the historiography that followed, Beveridge’s stand in matters of westernization and the Ilbert Bill, was examined widely. In terms of trying to westernize Indian women, it is true that Beveridge was not entirely wrong in sensing the lure of westernized dress and mannerisms for Indians, and there was a faction who believed, like Beveridge, that India was in need of radical reforms, but the language she employed in these and several other contexts, and her notions of superiority about everything British reflected a deep seated inability to treat the difference between the two cultures with respect. It is also interesting to note that as regards putting Indian women in western garb, Fanny, Beveridge’s sister, came down on it “heavily” and William, her son, remarked in his book, India Called Them that Beveridge “was not wholly reasonable
about Indian dress.” It is clear from these two instances that she was not able to view India from any other lens except that of a British woman steeped in her sense of racial and cultural superiority. Perhaps it is in view of these comments that it becomes possible to understand why Beveridge was branded as “culturally rigid,” by historical literature.

It was Beveridge’s involvement with the Ilbert Bill controversy that manifested her cultural rigidity in the most pronounced terms. Though Beveridge had earned the contempt of Indian men and women alike, for her attitude and for wanting to impose western customs on Indian women, Indians were not directly affected by her. They could well distance themselves from her school. However, her stand against the Ilbert Bill raised unprecedented acrimony, because with the Bill rejected every Indian became the target of blatant racism as it prohibited any Indian judge from trying an European in court. Most importantly, the Indian women Beveridge assumed she was representing did not share her opinion at all. Perhaps George Orwell’s comments that the “sexual arena is the one where it is the hardest to overcome our own background” could not be more apt to explain this issue. Beveridge surprised Indian women and many Anglo-Indian women, as well as her own husband when she opposed the bill. She wrote to Henry, her husband, who was in favor of the Bill, “…Except for your regret, I cannot regret having written that letter to the Englishman.”

Moving on from the nineteenth century Beveridge is a much discussed figure in the historiography on British women. Though most historians have agreed that Beveridge was unable to bridge the racial boundaries, what must not be concluded is that it was always Beveridge’s disagreement with Indian opinion that reflected her cultural block in a pronounced fashion. Pertaining to her split with Sen, historian David Kopf points out, how Sen found Beveridge to be “de-nationalizing” and Beveridge found him to be “too less progressive.” David Kopf uses the term “progressive” to describe how Sen must have viewed Beveridge. In contrast, Scherer points out how Beveridge’s split with Sen made historical literature brand Beveridge as “culturally rigid.” Considering that Sen’s own wife did not know English when Sen himself had said earlier that all women should know English, and that he gave his own daughter in marriage to a Raja (king) when she was a minor, proves that Beveridge’s inability to work with Sen cannot be insensitively branded as “unthinking racism.” So as far as Beveridge’s split with
Sen is concerned, it would only be fair to call her “progressive,” and in this instance her disagreement with an Indian should not be viewed as a cultural block.

There is, however, no denying that Beveridge’s stand on the Ilbert Bill and her disagreement with Indian opinion, confirmed her sense of racial superiority. It did not matter what reasons she gave for her opposition. Henry, her husband was taken aback by Beveridge’s decision to continue to protest against the Ilbert Bill. Historians have also not been kind to Beveridge. The historian Barbara N. Ramusack points out how Beveridge’s “continuing inability to empathize across racial boundaries and to understand the aspirations of Indian women including those who were educated and socially comparable to herself, led her to take an influential and controversial stance against the Ilbert Bill.”

Referring to Beveridge’s defence about “pride of womanhood” dictating her stand Mrinalini Sinha points out that it was “ironic, considering that Beveridge’s statement was derived from pride of white womanhood.”

This is ironic because Beveridge did have elements in her that could make for a more compassionate and liberal individual. When she came to India, she stayed with a Brahmo family, she learned the language, she tried to have “mixed gatherings” of Europeans and Indians, and undeniably it required broadmindedness to do that in the 1870s. Her attitude of contempt towards the Anglo-Indians and her reason for such contempt made Beveridge’s stand against the Ilbert Bill even more surprising. Beveridge realized from her observation of Anglo-Indians, the “falseness of our position here. All allowances made for some little insular prejudice, for we cannot at once get over this narrowness.” Beveridge was, in fact, so disgusted with the Anglo-Indian women’s criticism of Indian women who sat down with their “feet on the sofa” that she rhetorically asked “who has the most right to feel that, the people who pay for the house or those who make them pay?” Yet, Beveridge, in spite of her trip to India to work for Indian women, was not able to cross over the threshold of British cultural superiority. Beveridge saw India through the lens of British women who had intrinsic belief in their superiority and that of the western cultures they symbolized.

Some comparisons can be made between Beveridge’s experience in India and of the five twentieth-century women. The language that Beveridge employed in order to show her disapproval of Indian culture was quite rude and over time British women
learned to moderate their language in describing India. Be it Rathbone, or Noble or Cousins, their description of India is nothing but beautiful and their mention of problems in India very calculated and sophisticated. Whereas Besant never meant to hide how important she thought it was for India to westernize, Slade, Noble and Cousins rejected the need for westernization in India. Beveridge’s kind of rigidity about her own opinions surfaced only in Besant’s character, as Besant too found it difficult to accept any other viewpoint but her own. Even Rathbone, who was a strong supporter of imperialism, was very careful about her opinions on India. In general the British women were more aware and more critical of the British position in India. All were activists and hence had more exposure to India than other twentieth-century British women. Even then, these twentieth-century women each showed to some degree the limitations that Beveridge suffered from. Beveridge and many more British women who came to India after her, carried with them the burden of their own culture, a culture that instilled in them unquestionable superiority, a burden that made crossing the threshold of their own culture very difficult. For all women, the boundaries of the threshold varied and it is the different nature of boundaries that will now be studied.

The five British women from the twentieth century can be grouped by the similarities of their activities in India and by the types of cultural boundaries that limited them, and, how. The women have been grouped based on the nature of the cultural blocks they had. However, it should be kept in mind that these groups do not define these women completely, but only focus on one aspect of their nature. The groups are designed to ease understanding of the complex issues that lie behind the cultural limitations that women faced, and continue to face in reaching out to women across cultural lines. Besant and Rathbone, for instance, suffered from cultural blocks that came from a certain sense of superiority, cultural or racial. It is true that Besant was far more successful, in fact, most successful of all the women, in her contribution to the Indian national movement, but she shared these attitudes with Rathbone. Both of them, at a very fundamental level, shared a sense of superiority over Indians, which made both of them assume that they were naturally in a position to dictate matters to Indian women.

At the very extreme opposite side of this position stood Noble and Slade, who were so overwhelmed by Indian culture, they lost their own identity in the process of
assimilating with it. Whereas Noble lost her critical ability, Slade was caught up in her assumption that the non-western Indian culture could not be brought to interact with the western culture she came from and so, she too, gave up her identity at the cost of tremendous inner sufferings. Like Noble, she too lost her critical ability. Only Cousins, seems to have struck a balance between these two extreme positions. She also gradually overcame all elements of cultural block that she might have had, thus making it possible to hope that cultural thresholds can be crossed.

**Besant and Rathbone**

As incredible as it might sound given that Besant taught ancient Hindu epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and also translated the *Bhagvat Gita* from Sanskrit to English after only two years of training, Swamiji, the Hindu monk responsible for Margaret Noble’s arrival in India, perceived her knowledge and teaching to be superficial. Most of her students, who were Hindu boys, not to mention that they knew *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* since childhood, thought that she talked “nonsense” when she taught these texts. Given these two responses it would probably be interesting to interrogate the position Besant assumed in India and how did she fit into the culture as far as her notions were concerned, be it about politics or anything else.

Besant believed that “majority votes” would not work in India, and so, she blocked herself from all other opinions on the topic, even when they came from seasoned Indian politicians such as Tilak and Gandhi. “A democratic socialism controlled by majority votes, guided by numbers, can never succeed, a truly aristocratic socialism controlled by duty, guided by wisdom is the next step upward in civilization.” Tilak countered Besant’s notions by declaring that Congress would recognize no rule except “the Mahatma of majority.” Gandhi agreed. But Besant did not change her mind. There is further evidence of her rigidity in the ways in which she thought Indians should press for freedom with the British. Besant’s speech in 1910, where she accused the British of ‘racial prejudice’ was considered by many Indians to be dangerous, even if true, as it would give impetus to anti-Indian hostility among the British. In 1914, just when Britain got involved in the First World War, Besant pronounced that “England’s need is India’s opportunity.” She wanted to use the opportunity to pressure Britain into
giving self government to India. Most Indians knew that it was an impossible dream at this time and even offered to fight on behalf of the British in the hope that the Government would grant concessions as a mark of gratitude. It occurred to many Indians that Besant’s speeches, as sensational as they might be, would not subject her to the brunt of British reaction. In the end the Indians would have to suffer.

Not only was she opinionated, there were innumerable times when it was clear that Besant did not understand twentieth-century India as well as she would have liked to believe. First, the biggest blunder Besant made in India was to make public her view that the British Government needed to handle the violent protests against the Rowlatt Act in 1919 with “bullets” if necessary. To make it worse, when on 17th April 1919 the British government retaliated at Jallianwala Bagh by open firing on countless unarmed Indians, four days later Besant justified the action taken by the police officers. Though Besant’s apologizes followed, she was never forgotten. As it turned out later, the Punjab Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh was one of the biggest tragedies in the British Empire and Besant’s inability to understand the issues at stake prove that she had “cultural blocks.”

Second, with regards to education, Besant wrote about mass education and girls’ education in *Wake Up, India*. The former included men and women in villages, whereas the latter focused on women’s education in cities and among the higher castes. She wrote: “[A]s far as education is concerned, until you come to the technical employment in trade and agriculture, the education of village boys and girls may well go on completely side by side.” Besant was wrong in assuming that girls and boys had equal status in villages and were offered equal opportunities in terms of education. That being so, her entire treatise on education served no purpose for girls in villages as conditions that specifically tied them and held them back were not addressed.

Third, Besant’s assumption that one had to be of a certain faith to represent it, reflected her unwillingness to revise her personal prejudices against Indian personalities. Responding to a certain letter Besant wrote, “Miss Sorabji writes as though Indian traditions and ideals were dear to her…her arguments should be taken only at face value, not as having the weight belonging to a member of the faith she represents.” Besant’s comments followed from the fact that Cornelia Sorabji, India’s first woman
advocate was Christian. It should be noted that Tilak also complained about Sorabji’s letter but his reason had nothing to do with the faith she came from. Moreover, if Sorabji could not represent the Hindus, she could not represent Indians either, nor could Gandhi represent the untouchables.

Fourth, although Besant realized that unity was important to India, in attaining Independence, and after it, she failed to see that alienation of the Muslims and perpetuation of the caste system would affect that unity. Besant’s infatuation with the caste system, even when it came under attack from progressive Indians, and her public display of her notion that Hinduism was the only religion that came close to the universal religion, theosophy, that she favored, showed that she had failed to envision what would indeed be favored by Indians for their own country.

Lastly, Besant wanted freedom for India within the British empire. She thought that it was, after all, in the interest of the British that India should become free. It is true that the veteran politician from Punjab, Lala Lajpat Rai, who was a moderate also thought along the same lines but with time that notion had been abandoned, especially by the extremists, who were in the majority. In spite of presiding over the 1917 Congress session where the extremists took over the reigns of Congress from the moderates, Besant was unable to understand the humiliation that attainment of freedom “within” the British Empire meant to its political leaders.

Besant cherished the supremacy of her own ideas, and she lacked in understanding certain aspects of India. She seems to have enjoyed harsh criticism. Writing from Shanti Kunja in November 1905 to her friend Esther Bright she mentioned that, “The papers [were] attacking me furiously...It’s such fun to read all their abuse.” Most seriously, she never questioned her own opinions. When presiding over the 32nd Indian National Congress meeting (1917), Besant said, “I cannot promise to agree with you and follow you always; the duty of a leader is to lead.” Many Congressmen did not like the speech. It appeared to them, as if Besant were speaking from some kind of “alien authority.” They detested the fact that Besant interpreted her presidential post as an authoritarian position for the entire year she was in office. Tilak, noting this trait in Besant commented, “Though I admire her…I cannot bear for a moment the supremacy
which she claims for her opinions in matters political under the guise that she is inspired by the Great souls [the Mahatmas].”

Having analyzed Besant’s words in the light of the reactions she received, it might be important to question if her rigidity and her lack of understanding of Indian contexts was merely a personal trait, or was there something more to it? The question is indeed important because, like Besant, there were many Indians who supported the caste system, who did not want to help the British in their war efforts; there were Hindu fundamentalists, who loathed the Muslim presence in India. Tilak himself thought that Besant was more qualified to speak on “Indian wants and aspirations” than his countrywoman, Sorabji. Though it must be admitted that a part of her behavior and actions can be attributed to her personal character, the fact that she was significantly influenced by her Britishness, or by her experience of conducting politics in Britain at a very fundamental level, cannot be denied. Besant thought that it was western education that instilled in Indians their growing patriotism and a desire for freedom and self-rule. She exaggerated India’s fascination with England’s “ordered freedom.” In *India, Bond or Free* she started by asking the British why they were delaying the grant of freedom to India when all other colonies had begun to enjoy it? She blamed the government for creating expectations among Indians through western education and then betraying them. This showed that Besant attributed origins of Indian nationalism to western education and culture, thus differing from most educated, nationalist Indians.

True, Besant was earnestly trying to win freedom for India but her belief and her thought-process behind her words reflected her cultural block. It was this block that made it difficult for her to appreciate that Indians would have wanted freedom even if no other colonies had attained it. Self-rule, to Besant was a logical demand given the western values that the British instilled in educated Indians. She failed to understand because of her cultural assumptions that self-rule to the Indians was more a matter of pride, than plain logic. Yet again, in *Wake Up! India* Besant clearly elaborated that the reason women needed education was to provide a system of support to the men in the family. Besant pointed out that the progressive man, who was responsible for bringing in reforms in the country, often faced frustrations, and the women of the house ought to provide an “inspiration” to him such that he would not find in her “a clog and a
Besant did not quite realize that her comments did not favor the developments that the women’s movements in India were making. So it was not just a lack of understanding of India, but also as if she were guiding Indian women back down the path trodden by British women earlier. A traditional argument for women’s education in the west had been that women needed to become better wives and mothers, and education helped them in that regard. It is significant to note the trace of that argument in Besant’s words of advice to the Indian women. Thus, she was unable to negotiate with Indian problems beyond her own cultural limitation. Besant’s block lay in imagining that all she had to know about twentieth-century India she would know from its scriptures. She was not ready to enter into a dialogue with the India of the present.

On some level Besant must have realized the limitations of her position as a westerner. She dedicated *How India Wrought Her Freedom* (1915) to “The Motherland” and called herself a “servant” of India. When she presided over the Congress meeting in 1917 she began her speech with the words, “Up till now, knowing myself to be of the Nation, only by love and service, not by birth. I have claimed no authority of leadership but have only fought in the front of the battle and served as best I might. Now by your election I take the place which you have given.” This clearly shows that she acknowledged her position as an outsider. However, Besant seems to have never acted from that realization and that made it difficult for her to negotiate with others’ opinions, be it on the need for democracy or on the appropriate method for the national movement. Besant was never able to relate her understanding of the shortcomings of her position with her thinking and her words. Simply, she did not equate her limited position with a cultural block. It could certainly be expected of Besant though. In *India, Bond or Free?* Besant drew on Woodrow Wilson’s words, “nations are no more capable from borrowing experience than individuals are,” and to point out how “no foreign government can be a success over a civilized Nation, nor can it ever be really stable.” Ironically she was not able to extend these insights to her life in India.

Eleanore Rathbone’s images carry far clearer evidence of cultural block than Besant’s. 1927 to 1934 marked the years of Rathbone’s active interest and involvement in matters related to Indian women. She was deeply concerned about child marriage in India and strived tirelessly to see to its end. Rathbone offered a classic
example of how deeply seated cultural notions were and how difficult it was to be rid of them. Not surprisingly, in spite of Rathbone’s many efforts to bridge the gap between herself and Indian women, she remained an outsider, and that too at the cost of tremendous loss of reputation. But first, the various instances when Rathbone tried to reach out to Indian women must be described. She almost always failed. Rathbone wrote *Has Katherine Mayo Slandered India* in 1929 and established that the facts in Mayo’s *Mother India* were not wrong. By defending Mayo, at least as far as facts went, Rathbone earned the displeasure of many Indians. Even when she came to India in 1931, she was called the “English Katherine Mayo.” Rathbone also tried to organize a conference in London, in October 1929 to discuss child marriage, quite unsuccessfully as Indian women like Dhanvanthi Rama Rao, wife to an Indian Civil Service officer “disputed the right of the British women to arrange a conference on Indian social evils in London, when all the speakers were British.”

If these were some actions of Rathbone’s that backfired, her basic understanding of India also revealed her differences with Indian women. Rathbone considered Britain to be an advanced country which easily translated into support for imperial rule. Her interest in Indian women’s condition was an act of sympathy for people of a downtrodden country. She believed that “a general uprising of Indian women against child marriage and its sister evils would do more to forward the cause of Indian self-government and to raise the repute of India in the eyes of the world than any other single thing that is in the power of women to accomplish,” which simply meant that she thought it was only natural that constitutional reforms would follow social reforms. Rathbone ideally wanted to instill the realization in Indian women that they were women first and Indians second. She wrote in *Child Marriage in India* in 1931 that Indian women will know only later that it matters little if the representatives of the government “have white skins or dark.” Rathbone continued to harbor notions that not only would Indian women unite against the Indian men and the British government, but that they would also draw inspiration from the methods and achievements of the feminist movement in Britain. In *Indian Minotaur* in 1934, while suggesting extreme methods of protest to women, she added that “similar methods were first introduced into the women’s movements at home.”
In an attempt to introduce western style feminism in India, Rathbone was criticized by the Indian woman nationalist Sarojini Naidu. Naidu felt that “feminism” was not required in India citing that men and women were working together in the freedom movement. Rathbone retaliated by describing Naidu as a “poisonous woman” who lied “shamelessly” about the conditions of Indian women. Rathbone’s lack of understanding of the nature of the Indian women’s movement became evident over the issue of Indian women’s suffrage. Rathbone, inspired by developments at “home,” wanted Indian women to demand reserved seats to expand the number of women’s representatives in the legislatures. However, by May 1931 all three of India’s main women’s organizations had decided against reserved seats. The Indian organizations were proud of the fact that at a time when British women still faced age-based franchise restrictions, all but one provincial legislature in India had extended franchise rights to all women. Rathbone was “taken aback” by this because it was her belief that women should suggest changes that would not be considered “impracticable,” and universal suffrage, she thought, was one such demand.

Not only her Indian contemporaries, but also subsequent historians who have analyzed Rathbone have all reported a strong sense of racial and cultural superiority in her, which meant that she was never able to treat Indian women with equality and respect. Geraldine Forbes maintained in both *Women and Modernity* (1979) and *Votes for Women* (1979) that the relationship between Indian independence and the issues that Rathbone was responding to was far more complex and long standing than Rathbone realized. Forbes made it clear that as a western woman, Rathbone had failed to cross the threshold that would make her understand Indian sentiments and Indian reasoning. Joanna Alberti, Rathbone’s biographer, wrote in 1996, “Rathbone’s reaction to the social tragedy which she had read about was from the very beginning to involve Indian women in the solution, but it clearly did not occur to her that her own involvement might be seen as inappropriate or even harmful.” Susanna Pedersen in *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Consciousness* (2004) summarized Rathbone’s involvement in India as the mark of “feminist imperialism” and “cultural condescension.”

Thus, it can be concluded that Rathbone had a serious cultural block. But at the same time it is essential to review her “political maturity” over the years in order to
understand how hard Rathbone tried to break her imperialistic assumptions and help Indian women. When Dhanvanthi Rama Rao criticized Rathbone in 1929 alleging that the British Government was equally responsible for social backwardness in India, Rathbone did not turn a deaf year. She looked into the claim and having found much truth in it, henceforth always attacked the British government for social ills in India. So vehement and unsparing was she in her critique of the British Empire that William Wedgewood Benn, Secretary Of State for India cautioned her on May, 1930 that she was “doing the greatest possible disservice to his Majesty’s Government.”

From 1929 to 1931 Rathbone ardently believed that social reforms alone would open the gates for constitutional reforms. However, in recognition of the on-going nationalist propaganda and criticism of her initiatives, in December 1931 Rathbone announced that “self-government was [is] coming.”

In fact in Indian Minotaur (1934) there is clear recognition of the devolution of power. For someone who had supported British rule when she started off, accepting the devolution of power and critiquing the British government was a big advancement. When the Government of India Act 1935 was being discussed in the Parliament, Rathbone was advised by her Indian friend, Amrit Kaur not to vote for it as the Bill was contrary to the wishes of the educated Indian. Rathbone had come to trust her opinion, and so she voted against it. This was a great achievement, especially because Rathbone had worked for five years for this Bill. Rathbone did vote in its favor in the third reading but only after having made clear her reasons for disagreement. All these instances show that Rathbone definitely had the potential to revise her views when necessary and was not rigid about them.

But these instances of “political maturity,” as Pedersen uses the term, also reflect a bigger concern, that of the inability of an individual to break free from one’s own cultural limitations and to see another culture through a different lens. Rathbone worked for India but as a patriotic Briton, and she viewed India through that lens. Like other feminists of her time she was a collaborator in “the ideological work of the Empire,” an aspect of British feminism which has attracted the attention of scholars such as Geraldine Forbes and Antoinette Burton. As Pedersen pointed out, Rathbone was “ill-equipped” to work against child marriage in India because she, like John Stuart Mill,
believed in stages of civilization and considered India to be at a stage where British rule gave India its only access to development. In that capacity she defended British rule. In spite of all her attempts she could never free herself from the assumptions that her race instilled in her. Ironically for Rathbone, 1934 was the year that marked her political maturity and that was also the year after which her active participation in Indian politics receded to the background. For the time she was involved, Rathbone remained an outsider. It should be interesting to take note that when Rathbone offered to raise money for the All-India Women’s Congress, Amrit Kaur, refused the offer and said “we feel that we should and we must do this work ourselves.”

As evident in the above discussion, Besant and Rathbone led very different lives and had very different experiences dealing with Indians and also formed different opinions. Whereas Besant considered that girls in villages had the same opportunity for education as boys did, Rathbone was aware that such was not the case. At the same time, whereas Rathbone was clearly racial in her interaction with Indians, Besant was not. However, both of them set British models for Indian women to follow in an attempt to liberate them. Besant placed before the Indian women the goal of education such that they could become intellectually compatible to the men in the family, and Rathbone set up the model of “reserved seats” before the Indian women in their demand for suffrage. Both, at the time and later, received their fair share of criticism in India for acting from this cultural “superiority.”

Noble and Slade

Given the images that Noble created of India and her views on India, be it the national movement, Indian philosophy, or the spiritual domain that Swamiji introduced her to, it is easy to assume that her Irish background helped her in her assimilation in India. But it would be unfair to take away from Noble the individuality that inspired her to change her stand from being a defender of British rule to its opponent. The fact that she agreed to learn Bengali and the Indian way of life at large reflects that she was open to new ideas. Noble’s involvement with Swamiji and after his death, with India’s freedom struggle made her overcome problems that most women, steeped in their ideas of British superiority, faced in India.
However, in Noble, what is interesting to note is the alternate way in which one’s cultural background affects one’s understanding of another culture. The most common reflection of such cultural limitations was a view of the foreign country as inherently inferior. In the case of India, Annette Akroyd Beveridge and Eleanor Rathbone’s belief in the superiority of the British made them reach out to India as a sympathetic gesture. Beveridge’s efforts to westernize Indian women and Rathbone’s attempts to fight for Indian women’s suffrage rights did not extend to the advocacy of India’s freedom movement. Both of them agreed, separated as they were by three decades, on India’s subjection to the British Empire and its ineligibility for independence. Their cultural baggage made it difficult for them to engage with India to the extent that they wished to.

Fortunately, Noble had no such problems. Like Margaret Cousins and Madeline Slade, she loved India and considered it to be equal to Britain. But there is another type of cultural baggage that can be identified in her behaviour, in her words on India. The cultural baggage in her case, did not come from a smug sense of British superiority but from its reverse, an unquestioning faith in the grandness, logic and beauty of the Indian culture. A close inspection of her writings demonstrate her “cultural block” as she idealized Indian culture.

Noble became so much of an insider that she lost the position of the possible, all seeing, rational outsider. She drew images of the segregation of wives within the house, the “inviolability of marriage” for women and how it was tied with her honor, and justified all these customs. Noble’s justification of the caste system is even more surprising. She admitted very briefly that the caste system perpetuates inequality, but then she reminded her readers of the two greater benefits that the caste system gave to society. They maintained the purity of Aryan civilization and kept the professional classes distinct. The evils that were perpetuated because of the caste system drew attention from reformers even in the early twentieth century. But Noble did not question any of these practices, and it is in this discretion of hers, to glorify India but not critically evaluate it, that she lost her individuality as a westerner. As important as it was for her to speak for India’s freedom, keeping in mind the position of trust that she had, it was
equally important to speak out against social evils that kept India divided and prevented Indians from offering unified resistance against the British.

In addition, one is tempted to question the validity of some of the images Noble created and the degree to which they were representative of Indian society? Noble stayed in India for thirteen years and in those thirteen years she acquainted herself with the heart of Calcutta and her people. In describing the oriental mother, she spoke about how the mothers treated the sons and daughter equally, but she did not question why then, the girls never received the same education and had to remain indoors? Did not the mothers then perpetuate a patriarchal custom? About polygamy, she presented a picture of love and affection that the elder wife had for the younger/new wife. “In any case, the same tide that brings in individualism, swept away this custom; and whereas it was never common it is now practically obsolete, except for princes and great nobles.” She did not comment on the issues at stake in polygamy, that of the prerogative of the husband to re-marry but not the wife. Despite her disclaimer, history and literature both bear evidence to the widespread practice of polygamy in India even in the early part of the twentieth century. Also, it was not just the nobles. The brahmins often engaged in it. A short trip to India might not have revealed evils of Indian society to a western woman but it is difficult to believe that Noble would not be aware of it. In not criticizing these practices, Noble revealed a different type of “cultural baggage.”

Madeline Slade, was very similar to Noble in some aspects. Both went to India because of a prominent Indian figure. Noble was attracted to the prospect of service to mankind, a mantra she realized through Swamiji’s teachings. Gandhi’s teachings hypnotized Slade and brought her to India. Noble, as described, lost much of her critical ability with assimilation into the Indian culture. Slade’s story is similar but a more complex one to tell because of the lack of sources and the difficulties of reading those that are available. Also, be it Gandhi or any other Indian with whom Slade interacted, none had anything but praise for her. There is no instance of cultural or racial superiority in Slade. Slade’s cultural block lay in the fact that she lost touch with herself in India. Steeped in her desire to serve Gandhi, she lost a position that she could have naturally acquired as a westerner at the very centre of Gandhi’s activities. What is even more ironic
is that in her attempt to assimilate with Gandhi’s ideas, she not only suppressed her voice, her ideas, but also missed the opportunity to understand Gandhi.

Referring to Roland’s *Beethoven – Les Grandes Epoques Creatrices* Slade ended *The Spirit’s Pilgrimage* with the words, “Now I went to the box, took them out and sat down to read, and as I read something began to stir – something fundamental. I shut my eyes. Yes, it was the spirit of him from whose music I had been separated for over thirty years that I had heard and felt but now with new vision and inspiration. I became conscious of the realization of my true self.” Again, long after her departure from India, in an interview with Rosetta Spalt, a Gandhian, Slade admitted, “I only became a free person after I left India.” These words suggest the role Slade assumed in India was not her natural self. The words indicate a more painful realization that for more than thirty decades when she stayed in India, she lived as someone else.

It appears as if Slade were burdened with the assumption that India could be understood only if she submitted to it completely, and she operated in accordance with this idea. It should be kept in mind that India to her was Gandhi and, his ashram, Sabarmati. It can be justly argued that Slade did take many initiatives as far as the national movement was concerned: defending Gandhi in front of a western audience, starting Bapu Gram and Pashulok away from Sabarmati and Gandhi, staying back in India even after Gandhi’s assassination, but it should be counter argued that none of her initiatives broke with Gandhian principles. In all these instances Slade continued to work within the sphere that Gandhi had laid out, and she never offered evidence for any originality as far as her experience in India was concerned. It is interesting to note here the contrast between Slade and Noble. Noble, who also was absolutely uncritical about anything Indian, after Swamiji’s death involved herself completely with the national movement, something Swamiji had not done, nor addressed in his teachings. Noble treaded a new path when she chose Indian politics, and thus offered some proof of original, self taught ideas.

Yet another instance where Slade is seen as trying to assimilate with Gandhi and his disciples is related to Subhash Chandra Bose, an Indian freedom fighter whose means of securing freedom for India was different from Gandhi’s. Bose tried to rally an army of Indian soldiers abroad and then attack the British Indian forces. As could
be expected, Slade had the best things to say about Gandhi and Gandhi’s men, be it Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Motilal Nehru or his son, Jawaharlal Nehru. However Slade’s words about Bose are shocking.

I enjoyed his charm as a cultured intellectual, and found that side of him quite different from the one which came out in his public activities. At that time we had no idea of the full length to which his differences would extend. We only knew that he did not see eye to eye with other Congress leaders, and that he was filled with restless overweening ambition. Jawaharlal Nehru had been twice President of the Congress, so he must be too. He achieved that office and even that left him unsatisfied and restless. Then, when the war came, he vanished, turned Nazi, went to Japan, and gathering up elements of the Indian Army in Burma announced that he would help free India from the British, in co-operation with the Japanese. A wild ambition to serve his country which ended in a fatal air crash.166

These words by Slade point towards a key aspect of her nature. The use of the “we,” instead of the “I” reflects the silencing of her own voice, just presenting the general opinion that prevailed in Gandhian circles, with regards to Bose. Slade shut herself from any other opinion but the one that Gandhi believed in, and so, she seems to have been unaware that Bose to millions of Indians was not ‘ambitious’ for anything apart from India’s freedom. The fact that Bose gave up his position as leader of Congress to allow Gandhi’s candidate Pattabhi Sittarmayya to take charge could not have escaped her. Slade clearly did not deem it important to report on it. Also, it can be argued that in view of the obstacles faced by western women who wished to assimilate themselves in India, Slade assumed harsh language for Bose, in order to root herself even more firmly in Gandhian circles. That she gave up her own “self” so that Gandhi and his principles could reign over her is shown in Rosetta Spalt’s words, “Mira saw India through Bapu’s eyes, experienced India through his feelings.”167

It should not be assumed from her autobiography and other interviews that it was only after Slade left India that she realized that she was suppressing herself. Slade’s writing suggests that while she was in India she must have had some sense that
she was letting go of herself completely, and with that everything that she cherished most, including her love for Beethoven and his music. Slade wrote with reference to her first meeting, since her departure to India, with Roland in 1931, “It was when I met Romain Roland again, and felt the influence of his penetrating blue eyes, that I vaguely knew something was wrong—wrong in the sense that I was not my full self. My spirit silently wanted to reach out to him, but I could not emerge from that inner prison.”

Three years later when Slade met Roland again, she felt the “longing to be myself, and the fact that I was not, weighed on me just as it had in 1931, even more so, because this time I seemed more conscious of it.” The realization that she had suppressed herself dawned on her gradually and very painfully. In the process of becoming a perfect disciple of Gandhi, she parted with everything western in herself. To her Gandhi stood for everything Indian and against everything western. When Slade went to London in 1934, she did not attend concerts because her “tapasya” (meditation) held her “in its grips.” It was Slade’s interpretation of Gandhian ideals that dictated her to withdraw from everything western, even Beethoven. Slade wrote in one of her letters to Gandhi, “I am so little worthy of you – but I will strive and strive,” and “strive” she did.

The question arises, what dictated these actions? The answer lies in western culture. It was western culture that instilled a block in Slade that she was not able to escape from till the very end of her life. Slade’s western culture had instilled in her the concept of irreconcilable cultures, in this case, the western and the eastern. Beethoven and Gandhi stood for these two cultures, respectively. Both could not go together. As much as she loved Beethoven, she had found no vocation in western life. Also, Slade’s love for Beethoven was not without its share of pain. She writes, “Yes, I had found him. But now an anguish seized me–oh, what an anguish!...Why have I been born over a century too late? Why hast thou given me a realization of him and yet pull all these years in between?”

So, what Slade lacked in her love for Beethoven, she found in Gandhi, a physical presence, a blood and bones idol, towards whom she could direct her love and from whom she could expect reciprocation. Gandhi gave her freedom from inner turbulence. She took refuge in him and immediately shunned the world in which she was born. Ironically, she shunned her own western culture in favor of Gandhi’s but carried with her the western ethos of the irreconcilable cultures. Thus, she suffered from the
cultural block that pained her and kept her in “prison.” The cultural block in her did not permit her to let the two cultures interact.

Slade’s cultural assumptions also came in the way of her relationship with Gandhi. Perhaps, Slade would have successfully dealt with the loss of her identity, her voice and also her western self, including her love for Beethovan, and all this pain would have seemed worthwhile had she understood Gandhi. As dedicated as she was to Gandhi, Slade failed to see that if Gandhi stood for everything Indian, in the manner in which she interpreted it, she would have never been allowed to play a part in India’s freedom. Gandhi’s teachings went beyond the Indian national movement and its goal for free India, and Slade was never able to fathom that. It is indeed ironic that Slade’s western cultural assumptions blocked her from accepting any reciprocal relationship between world cultures, a key idea reflected in Gandhi’s principles.

A letter Gandhi sent to Slade on March 24th, 1931, read, “You have left your home…not to serve me personally but to serve the cause that I stand for. All the time you were squandering your love on me personally I was feeling guilty of misappropriation …You will truly serve me by joyously serving the cause.” Slade developed an attachment towards Gandhi which Gandhi did not approve of, more so because what Gandhi wanted was that Slade should work for India. Slade’s focus on Gandhi and Gandhi alone, made her almost blind to all that was happening in India and also contributed to her not developing her own voice. Thus the lack of reciprocation that she bemoaned in Beethovan’s case followed her to India. In fact, it was worse. In Beethovan’s case she could not expect reciprocation but in Gandhi’s case she could, especially because she was very close to him. But not only did Gandhi not reciprocate, he also asked her to channel her love for him towards India. On one occasion she wrote, “The thought of setting eyes on Bapu again after so long possessed me the whole time. When he finally arrived, I managed to remain outwardly calm, but that evening, after the evening prayer, my emotions suddenly got the better of me and I fled into the garden and burst into tears…I must accustom myself to separation.” Krishna Murti Gupta’s words explain her motivations and dilemma best: “To her men who stood for certain causes soon became in their persons embodiments of those causes, commanding respect and
service even above and beyond the causes. Thus Beethoven and Beethoven’s music was one. Gandhiji and the many causes he espoused were one.”

Like Rathbone and Besant, Noble and Slade had their differences and similarities. What unites them is the similarity in the nature of the cultural block they had. Both lost their individual voice once they came to India and both stood staunchly against the westernization of India. They had their differences as well. For example, Noble talked about the benefits of the caste system and did not criticize it as a social evil, but Slade did. As Gandhi’s disciple she worked hard to eradicate the caste system and especially worked to include the untouchables within the fold of society.

Cousins

Cousins stands out from all the other women because she found a balanced position in dealing with the British and Indian cultures. Unlike Besant, Cousins was not rigid in her opinions, nor did she think that she was in a position to dictate to Indian women what was best for them. Unlike Rathbone, Cousins did not view Indians as racially inferior and her interest in Indian women was not an act of sympathy. Cousins was a feminist who believed that women across cultures were equal and needed to support each other. Unlike Noble, she was never so embedded in Indian culture that she lost her ability to criticize. Unlike Slade, Cousins’ days in India were lived with great joy and individuality. There was no pain involved. Cousins left India when she felt the Indian women did not need her anymore, whereas Slade left India because of the increasing realization that she had lost touch with herself and that she was not “free” in India. Thus, Cousins praised as well as criticized India. She worked out an excellent way in which a western woman could bridge the gap between cultures and make the optimum contribution from her own to another culture.

Margaret Cousins’ works, her initiatives in India, not to forget the imagery of a vibrant India that she painted, show that she did not view India from a position of racial superiority. It probably had to do with her background and education. Born in western Ireland to Protestant unionist parents, she was convinced of the justice and necessity for Home Rule quite early in her life, which she spent, immersed in ideas of “freedom and culture.” She was also well-linked with the women’s suffrage movement.
when she came to India in 1915. In addition, she was gifted in being able to recognize the need for the unity of women beyond regional and racial borders. Whether it was because of her background or her education, or her own unique sensibilities, Cousins was strangely comfortable with the limitations of her position as a western woman in India writing on Indian women. Cousins knew her limitations as an author on aspects of Indian culture. She was aware that there was no dearth of comprehensive accounts of the Indian women’s movement but she made an effort to add more. Fortunately she was also aware of the advantages that “spectators” have because “they see most of the game.”

Cousins drew many conclusions about the status of Indian women but two stand out. First, the language she adopted was respectful and polite. She referred to Indian women as her ‘sisters.’ Even in her criticism she was most refined. Second, the methodology she adopted to draw her conclusions was also a great example of how a foreign culture ought to be understood and viewed. For instance, Cousins admitted that had it not been for the women in the zenanas she would not have been strong in “condemning a foreign system.” By this she meant that her conclusion was based on contextualized research by her that included interaction with the members of the zenanas. Yet one more of Cousins’ methods was her openness to revise her views on India. Cousins admitted that on her arrival in India she had thought that it would take women of India one more century to talk about political matters, but on discovering that women wanted equal citizenship in the 1920s she saw that she had “under-rated Indian mentality.” She then accepted that she should have judged “nothing in this ancient and wise country by standard of ordinary Western values of vaunted literacy.” It was this openness that allowed her to become one with the Indian women, something that Rathbone and Beveridge had failed to do.

The analysis of cultural blocks is not aimed at critiquing the position of the British women as important sources. Certain instances of cultural blocks in the actions and views of these women do not challenge the authenticity of their positions as pertinent sources of history. What is more important in the analysis of the cultural blocks is to see how the six British women, in their own ways, dealt with their inhibitions about India and overcame them. Beveridge and Rathbone were definitely viewing India through racial and imperialistic lenses but while Beveridge’s attempt to learn the language was part of
her effort to understand India better, Rathbone’s acknowledgement of India’s freedom was her way of resolving presumptions she had about the infallibility of the idea of British rule over India. Both Noble and Slade, steeped as they were in the greatness of the Indian culture, did attempt to hear their own voices, albeit at a much later time in their lives. Noble joined the Indian national movement, though her mentor had nothing to do with it, and Slade, realizing that it was a mistake to give up everything western in her, left India to return to the west, particularly to Beethoven’s music. Besant’s character made it difficult for her to revise her actions or her views but at the end of her life she did become milder about understanding the Indian point of view. About the comments on the Amritsar massacre, she did apologize. Cousins’ life is perhaps the best example of how questioning one’s position constantly, can resolve cultural differences. Every instance of Cousins’ involvement in activities with Indian women proved how she was ready to learn the Indian point of view, understand it and then form her opinion on it. All of these women have left behind, in word and deed, a solution to transcending cultural boundaries.
Conclusion

This study raised a question earlier about the quality of contribution that the British women made in Indian historiography. The British women discussed in this study made their presence felt not only among Indian women but Indian and British men as well. They not only tried to reform the lives of women within the privacy of their homes, but they also attempted to reform the nation, in the social as well as political spheres. If Rathbone and Cousins worked for Indian women and worked with them mostly, there was Slade, Besant and Noble, who worked with prominent Indian men. All of them made indelible impressions on the early twentieth-century Indian political climate. What distinguished their efforts was their personalized experience of Indian political life. In each of their accounts is found, not just an essaying of what happened, but a description of their personal experiences accompanying the event. For instance, when Slade described the Congress meeting in 1942, when the Quit India resolution was adopted, she not only described a historically significant moment in India’s political life, but by sharing her experience of carrying the draft of the resolution from Gandhi to the Congress leaders, she explained why the draft caught the imagination of the Indian people. Cousins, on her part, not only described how Indian women participated in elections and how they were received, she also narrated her own experiences with Indian women: those who rode motorcycles and those who preferred to pursue education rather than marry. Besant not only made India her home, but also adopted an Indian boy which made her association with India even deeper. It was the personalized nature of their encounters with India that were vividly embodied in their writings and made them significant.

The personalized nature of the British women’s experiences of Indian political life did come with its share of problems, namely the “cultural blocks.” However, going back to the early twentieth-century, it can be argued that had the British women borrowed methodologies for cross-cultural interactions from each other, they would have achieved greater success in India. If Beveridge had evaluated and changed her stand on the Ilbert Bill, if Rathbone had shed her imperialistic assumptions with regard to India, if Besant had been more willing to see India for what it was in the present, perhaps they
would have succeeded in their respective endeavors, more than they actually did. Many, like the historian, Margaret Strobel, believe that people cannot be expected to “transcend completely the values and attitudes of their times.”\textsuperscript{183} Maybe not completely, but that it is not impossible to be successful is clearly evident from Cousins’ accounts. Like there is no “time tested definition of a ‘cultural block,’” there is no one way to circumvent cultural limitations. For instance, it should not go unnoticed that three of the six women discussed in this study were Irish. In fact Cousins, as the only women who successfully interacted with Indians without any bias, can easily lead to the conclusion that being Irish made cross cultural interactions easy. But the fact that Slade and Noble on one hand, and Rathbone and Besant, on the other hand, faced similar cultural blocks in spite of being English and Irish, respectively, proves that Irish identity alone was not a guarantee for a nuanced understanding of India. This study merely suggests some ideas that might help in interacting with foreign cultures and reducing misunderstandings.

“Cultural blocks” continue to plague interactions across cultures even today. It is true that the context in which the twentieth-century British women operated was different, but the methods they adopted to reach out to India and its people can not only be applied in India today but anywhere in the world. Be it learning the language, or revising one’s stand as frequently as necessary, or questioning one’s positioning or critiquing one’s own cultural prejudices, all these methods were adopted by one or the other of the British women, as by others even before them. Perhaps, if these suggestions are adopted in the contemporary world, cross cultural interactions will become easier.

In line with this thought it might be difficult to agree with Stroebel when she says that, “good intentions do not account for destructive actions.”\textsuperscript{184} It is true that irreparable damage can be done in cross-cultural interactions if culturally prejudiced positions are not abandoned. But because any effort towards cross-cultural interactions requires as a prerequisite, good intention, it is wrong to assign no importance to it. Besant, Slade, Noble, Rathbone and Cousins are all fondly remembered by Indians today as British women who sought to make a difference in India in a good way, in spite of their cultural limitations. This proves that good intentions not only help in cross-cultural interactions initially, but at every step of that interaction. It should not be forgotten that the five twentieth-century women discussed in this study were involved in Indian affairs.
out of their own volition. It was because of their willingness to work in India and initiate reforms, that education among for women became common, conferences for women were formed, and more importantly, the British Government was forced to revise their stand in India. The presence of British women side by side with Indians proved strengthened the Indian national movement. Considering that it was their ‘intention’ that brought these women to India it ought to be admitted that some of their actions could not have undone their commendable contributions to twentieth-century India.
Endnotes


7 Taylor, 224.

8 Taylor, 278.

9 Taylor, 279.

10 Taylor, 285.

11 Taylor, 304.


14 Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries,” 125.


16 Margaret E. Cousins. *Indian Womanhood Today.* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1941), 59.

17 Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries,” 126.


20 Slade, 58.

21 Slade, 79.

22 Slade, 184-89.

23 Gupta, 19-34.

24 Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries,” 133.


26 Chakrabarty, 29.

27 Chakrabarty, 35-36.


29 Slade, 187.


32 Taylor, 311-312.

33 Gupta, 225-230.

34 Chakrabarty, 30.
Taylor, 313.


37 Chakrabarty, 46-47.


40 Gupta, 67-69.

41 Taylor, 286.

42 Taylor and Bright, 117.

43 Taylor, 134, 287.

44 Taylor, 300.

45 Besant, *India. Bond or Free?*, 1.


49 Slade, 236-237.

50 Besant, *India. Bond or Free?*, 199.

51 Taylor, 279.

52 Slade as in Gupta, 63-65.


54 Nivedita, *Sister Nivedita’s Lectures And Writings*, 147; Nivedita. *The Web of Indian Life*, 82-83.


56 Slade, 115.


60 Not many Muslims in India were from Arab but Noble used the word as “Arabia” is traditionally known as the land for the Muslims.


63 Slade, 261.


67 Besant, *India. Bond or Free?*, 119.

68 Rathbone, “Has Katherine Mayo Slandered ‘Mother India’?”, 212.


71 Taylor, 320.


81 Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, 33, 78-82, 55.

82 Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, 84-94.


85 Cousins, Indian Womanhood Today, 49-54.
87 Rathbone, “Has Katherine Mayo Slandered ‘Mother India’?” 207.
89 Cousins, Indian Womanhood Today, 61-76.
90 Besant, India. Bond or Free?, 137-141.
91 Besant, India. Bond or Free?, 149.
94 Nivedita, The Master As I Saw Him, 5.
95 Nivedita, The Master As I Saw Him, 199-205.
96 Nivedita, The Master As I Saw Him, 6-7.
97 Nivedita, The Master As I Saw Him, 175, 199.
98 Slade, 69.
99 Slade, 73, 106.
100 Slade, 124-125.
101 Hirshmann, 345.
102 Hirshmann, 345-47.
105 Lord Beveridge. India Called Them. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1947), 78
106 Beveridge, India Called Them, 221.
107 Beveridge, India Called Them, 211.
108 Beveridge, India Called Them, 225.
109 Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries,” 123.
110 Scherer, 239-240.
111 Beveridge, India Called Them, 88.
113 Beveridge. India Called Them, 88. (Letter to Fanny, Beveridge’s sister.)
114 Rathbone as in Pedersen, 254.
115 Mrinalini Sinha. “Chathams, Pitts, And Gladstones in Petticoats” in Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, 98.
116 Scherer, 300 and Sinha, 110.
117 Beveridge, India Called Them, 90.
118 Scherer, 239.
119 Beveridge Papers. Letter from Annette Beveridge to Henry Beveridge. C 176/15A. June 9, 1883. (The Englishman was a newspaper).
121 Scherer, 239.
122 Scherer, 304 and Internet : http://banglapedia.net/HT/S_0191.HTM.
124 Sinha, 112.
126 Beveridge must have used “Anglo-Indians” to refer to women with British as well as Indian connection, usually with a father or husband in the service of the Empire.
127 Beveridge, India Called Them, 88.
128 Taylor, 279.
129 Besant as in Taylor, 313.
130 Besant as in Taylor, 315.
131 Taylor, 300. Adapted from an old Irish slogan.
Taylor, 317.

Besant, *Wake Up, India.*

Besant, *Wake Up, India,* 201.


Taylor, 312.

Bright, 97, 105.

Taylor, 311-312.

Taylor, 315.

Lajpat Rai as in Besant, *India and the Empire,* 98.

Besant, *India and the Empire,* 3-35.

Besant, *India and the Empire,* 201.

Taylor, 311-312.

Besant, *India. Bond or Free?*, 12.

Pedersen, 253.

Ramusack, “Catalysts or Helpers?”, 15-16.


Rathbone, *Indian Minotaur,* 111.

Alberti, 114-115.

Pedersen, 251-255.

Pedersen, 257-258.

Pedersen, 243.

Pedersen, 245.

Pedersen, 257-258.

Pedersen, 242.


Chakrabarty, 2.


Nivedita, *The Web of Indian Life,* 27, 73.


Slade, 315-316.

Slade, 228.


Rosetta Spalt's “Retracting Mira Behn's Path” in Gupta, 225-230.

Slade, 147.

Slade, 186. Tapasya is a Hindi word for meditation.

Slade, 208.

Slade, 231.

Slade, 127.

Slade, 92.

Gupta, v.


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