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European Women and Indian Nationalism

KHUSHBOO BANSAL¹

ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the significant, yet often overlooked contributions of European women to the Indian nationalist movement, uncovering how they navigated the complex landscape of colonial India through political activism and cultural exchange. The study starts by examining the broader role of women in Indian nationalism, showing how they played crucial roles in challenging norms and fighting for independence. It then focuses on notable European women such as Margaret Noble, Madeliene Slade, Catherine Heilmann, Annie Besant⁶, Muriel Lester, etc who supported India's freedom struggle by advocating for political rights, promoting education and healthcare and bridging cultural divides. Despite facing obstacles due to their foreign status, gender roles, cultural affiliations and patriotic expectations, these women showed great resilience and dedication. The project also looks at how their contributions have been recognized over time, noting that their roles were initially overshadowed by national figures, men, indigenous revolutionaries but are now being acknowledged more in one or the other way. Overall, the study shows that European women played a vital role in enriching the nationalist movement, influencing anti-colonial strategies, challenging gender norms and fostering cross-cultural exchanges. This recognition and realisation open doors for more comprehensive and accommodating discourses on Indian nationalist struggle thus helping to better understand the collaborative efforts that defined India's struggle for independence and reflects a shared desire for global solidarity, self-determination, women empowerment, humanity and independence.

Keywords: *anti-colonialism, cultural exchange, European women, Indian nationalism, political activism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian nationalism is not something which started from revolt of 1857 and ended on 15th August' 1947. It is rather a long series of events which started from the very inception of British East India Company in early 17th century and had its remanences even after actually attaining independence. This was not something achieved in its full-fledged manifestation in a month, year or a decade, it engulfed some centuries altogether. Also, it was not a triumph of contributions made only by some exceptionally popular and revered freedom fighters, but also

¹ Author is a student at National Law University, Nagpur, India.

of some unsung players who remained backstage but are extremely crucial to the fight for freedom struggle. They are the lesser-known warriors from unprivileged sections of society who come from various regions, communities and socio-economic backgrounds.

These include ordinary workers such as peasants, farmers, craftsman, traders; tribal population; regional headmen; women; students and youth activists; Dalit and Muslim leaders; non-mainstream ideological thinkers; local writers and journalists. However, besides these categories, there is another important section which contributed significantly to Indian nationalism i.e., Europeans themselves. There were a few but momentous European contributors to Indian nationalist movements who believed that India should be freed from the atrocities and dominance of colonial powers. They upheld the ideas of liberty and equality even across the continents. However, we shall get into a detailed analysis of a small section of this unsung category i.e., European women. It is astonishing to know that there were numerous European women from various countries who stood up and contributed significantly to independence struggle of people who belonged to a country, who were under the subjugation of their own native nation. The intersection of European women and Indian nationalism represents a compelling and often overlooked aspect of the historical tapestry surrounding India's struggle for independence. While the leadership and activism within the Indian nationalist movement have been predominantly associated with male figures, the involvement of European women played a significant and multifaceted role in shaping the trajectory of this crucial period in Indian history. The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a tumultuous period for India as it grappled with the forces of colonialism and sought a path toward self-determination. Against this backdrop, European women emerged as dynamic agents of change, defying conventional roles and engaging with the Indian nationalist cause on multiple fronts. Whether through political activism, intellectual contributions, or personal associations with key Indian leaders, these women left an indelible mark on the contours of India's fight for freedom. By examining the stories of these European women, this research project seeks to enrich our understanding of the interconnected global networks that shaped the course of Indian nationalism. We shall look upon their experiences, challenges and methods of confrontations to gender expectations and power dynamics in the prevailing times. We shall also look upon whether these women gained recognition and veneration in the contemporary modern globalised world.

II. WOMEN AND INDIAN NATIONALISM

From the initial constraints of societal norms to active participation in the struggle for

independence, women's roles in Indian nationalism evolved significantly from 1750 to 1950. Women's contributions evolved from early resistance to becoming integral to the nationalist movement. The gradual breaking of traditional confines, the emergence of women leaders, and their pivotal contributions during mass movements showcased the transformative power of women in shaping India's nationalist narrative. The legacy of their struggles and achievements continued post-independence, emphasizing the ongoing journey towards gender equality and the empowerment of women in the socio-political fabric of India. Women played a significant role in the Independence movement, engaging in a variety of nationalist activities both within and outside their homes. Domestic contributions included spinning and weaving khadi, conducting educational classes for women, and actively participating in the creation of nationalist literature through articles, poems, and propaganda materials. Beyond the domestic sphere, women organised Prabhat Feris, where individuals from different castes and classes walked to local temples singing songs to inspire nationalist and patriotic sentiments. They participated in meetings, demonstrations, satyagraha, picketed toddy and foreign-cloth shops, and endured imprisonment and brutalities at the hands of British police. Diverse mass movements like Swadeshi and Salt March garnered massive support and participation from women classes who were often torn between two directions- patriotism and homemakers.²

The legacy of figures like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and countless others underscored that the struggle for independence was not gender-exclusive. They in contemporary India, stand as pivotal figures who changed the existing gender dynamics and reshaped the perception of women in modern India.

*"I think if anybody can truly represent the spirit of India, the women can do it and not the men." 47 He saw women as powerful potential force who could mould and build the destiny of the family, society and nation. "*³

- Jawaharlal Nehru

III. EUROPEAN WOMEN IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Participation of Indian women in Nationalist movement is much recognised and celebrated historical reality. But, in the intricate narrative of Indian nationalism, the contribution and challenges of European women who extended support to Indian nationalism is often

² Suruchi Thapar, *Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement*, 44 SAGE, 81, 81-83 (1993).

³ *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches Vol. 3(March 1953-August 1957)*, INTERNET ARCHIVE (July 01, 2015, 04:37 P.M.), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.98837>.

overlooked, Amidst the winds of change during the struggle for independence, they navigated a complex intersection of cultures and ideologies, contributing to shaping the destiny of a transitioning nation. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a convergence of worlds as European women, driven by curiosity and rebellion against societal norms, played pivotal roles in Indian nationalism. From writers to activists, their diverse perspectives left a lasting legacy, fostering a global understanding of the quest for self-determination during this dynamic period in history.

Some British women who made Indian nationalism their own cause, played important roles as 'helpers' as well as 'catalysts'. Among them were Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, both Theosophists, Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, and Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Swami Vivekananda.⁴ There are numerous other Anglo-Indian women who were instrumental in social movements, educational reforms, journalism, writing, cross-cultural alliances, forming organisations, etc. They may not have stood on the forefront, but their role backstage cannot be neglected. These women had an equally condemnatory view of the colonial policies, discrimination, injustice and exploitation. Transcending racial and cultural boundaries, they advocated improved conditions, rights and opportunities for Indians, fostering a sense of solidarity in the struggle against British rule. They were sometimes engaged in discussions, charitable activities, meetings and protests. While at other occasions, contributed to intellectual discourse by writing articles and books surrounding anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments.

The mainstream popular discourse on Indian nationalism may not widely cherish their contributions, but they had faced a myriad of challenges to align themselves with the nationalist movement.. Keeping in mind, the status of women even in contemporary world, one can only imagine how difficult it would have been, almost 200 hundred years back for a women of European nation to go against the supreme authorities of their own nation and support people of their colonies in public spheres. We shall delve into the contributions of these women in the nationalist movement to analyse their background, early engagements, contributions and influence.

(A) Sister Nivedita

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, born in Dungannon, Ireland in 1867, led a life marked by diverse achievements and unwavering commitment to social causes. Raised in a devout Christian household with roots in Irish home-rule advocacy, she embarked on a teaching career at 17 after training in Halifax. Her journey took her from Keswick to Wimbledon and eventually to India,

⁴ LEELA KASTURI & VEENA MAZUMDAR, WOMEN AND INDIAN NATIONALISM, 123-125 (1st ed. 1994).

where she made indelible contributions to education, social reform, and Indian nationalism. Noble was a featured speaker at the Wimbledon Literary Society's conversazione and also presented a paper titled "England and India: a Comparison and a Contrast" at a meeting of the Wimbledon Literary Society in November 1898.⁵ Her interactions extended to hosting Bengali Indian philosopher, Narendranath Dutta popularly remembered as Swami Vivekananda, the Bengali Indian philosopher, at Lady Margesson's home in 1895.

In 1895, Margaret Noble embraced a transformative journey as a disciple of Swami Vivekananda⁶, imbibing his teachings and becoming aware of the educational gaps for women in India. Motivated by a profound sense of purpose, she embarked on a voyage to India and arrived on January 21, 1898. In India, she was given the name 'Nivedita,' literally translating to 'Dedicated to God', by Swami Vivekananda when she embraced the vow of Brahmacharya in 1898. From then on, her life became an unwavering commitment to the betterment of Indian society. Nivedita dedicated herself to the education of Indian women, tirelessly working for the impoverished, advocating for social causes, and undertaking global travels to mobilise funds for her noble initiatives. He believed that education was the panacea for all social evils prevalent in contemporary India, particularly those affecting Indian women. He assigned Margaret (Nivedita) the pivotal role of education of Indian women⁷. In his letter to Sister Nivedita, he wrote,

*“Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man but a woman, a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women especially”*⁸

While initially sceptical of Indian nationalism, she underwent a transformation between 1902 and 1906, emerging as a fervent Indian nationalist. Critical of British administration and vehemently opposing the 1905 partition of Bengal, she actively engaged in the Indian Freedom and Swadeshi movements.⁹ Post-partition, Nivedita shifted her focus to India's cultural identity, advocating for arts, crafts, and a national art movement. Her influential book, "The Web of Indian Life" (1904), offered a groundbreaking exploration of the ethical and social ideals of

⁵ "Margaret Noble to Sister Nivedita, from Wimbledon to Calcutta", THE WIMBLEDON MUSEUM, (Nov. 06, 2021), <https://wimbledonsociety.org.uk/museum/wimbledon-stories/margaret-noble/>.

⁶Ankur Barua, "The Hindu Cosmopolitanism of Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble): An Irish Self in Imperial Currents", 113 HARVARD THEOLOGICAL REVIEW, at 14,15.

⁷ ARUNA GOEL & S. L. GOEL, HUMAN VALUES AND EDUCATION, 369-389 (1st ed. 2005).

⁸ Atmaprana Pravrajika, *Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda 1961*, INTERNET ARCHIVE (Oct. 14, 2015, 10:39 P.M.), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.553295>.

⁹ *Irish educators abroad: Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita)*, ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY (Jan. 29, 2019), <https://www.ria.ie/news/dictionary-irish-biography/irish-educators-abroad-margaret-noble-sister-nivedita>.

Indian women.¹⁰ Despite some conservative views on traditions like child marriage and purdah, Nivedita played a pivotal role in educating girls in her all-girls school in Baghbazar, Kolkata. The institution laid the groundwork for a new order of Women Monastics dedicated to advancing modern education for Indian women. Simultaneously, Nivedita tirelessly worked to aid the poor during crises like plague epidemics, famine, and floods in Kolkata and Bengal, even at the cost of her own health.

Sister Nivedita was a significant figure in Indian politics. In 1906, she contributed a design for the Indian National Congress flag, featuring the Vajra and 108 oil lamps, symbolizing righteousness and struggle. Although Gandhi later introduced a different flag, Sister Nivedita's 'Vajra' became a proposed national emblem, embodying the concept of self-sacrifice.¹¹

In 1902, she met Gandhi in Calcutta. Following Vivekananda's death, Nivedita, cognizant of the inconvenience her political activities caused the newly formed Ramakrishna Mission, publicly distanced herself from it. However, she maintained a cordial relationship with Vivekananda's disciples and continued her charitable and educational activities. She collaborated with Okakura of Japan and Sarala Ghoshal, a relative of the Tagore family, before working independently.

She inspired many youths toward Indian independence through her lectures and exposed Lord Curzon's deceitful practices, forcing him to apologise. In 1905, during the partition of Bengal, a pivotal moment in the independence movement, Nivedita played a pioneering role. She provided support, leveraged her contacts for information, and inspired artists like Abanindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy to develop a pure Indian school of art. Nivedita influenced the renowned Tamil poet Subramania Bharati to advocate for women's freedom.¹²

(B) Madeleine Slade (Mirabehn)

She was born in a privileged British family. She at the age of 15, developed a deep love for Beethoven's music, whose devotion extended to exploring his life and compositions in Vienna and Germany, fuelled by extensive readings, including Romain Rolland's works on the composer. A chance meeting with Rolland revealed his new book, "Mahatma Gandhi," prompting Mirabehn's interest in Gandhi's philosophy and marking the beginning of her association with the Indian independence movement. On her return to England, she read

¹⁰ S.K. Ratcliffe, *Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita)*, A6 SAGE, 242, 245-246 (1913).

¹¹ *Supra* note 4.

¹² RAMACHANDRA GUHA, *REBELS AGAINST THE RAJ: WESTERN FIGHTERS IN INDIA'S FREEDOM*, 104-116 (2nd ed. 2022).

Rolland's biography of Gandhi, which convinced her to become a disciple of the Mahatma. She later recalled in regards to the book,

"I could not put it down...From that moment I knew that my life was dedicated to Gandhi. That for which I had been waiting had come, and it was this."

Instead of immediately setting off for India, Mirabehn chose to ready herself for the transition by immersing in materials about the Sabarmati Ashram, adopting a cross-legged sitting posture, and embracing a vegetarian diet. In 1924, she communicated her desire to join Gandhi, enclosing a contribution of 20 pounds. Gandhi, appreciative of her patience and commitment to self-preparation, responded positively, advising her to make a final decision after a year. Mirabehn diligently continued her preparations, renouncing all alcoholic beverages, excluding meat from her diet, and acquiring skills in spinning and weaving wool, aligning herself with the ascetic lifestyle anticipated in India. That year in England, she subscribed to *Young India* and spent a part of her time in Paris reading the *Bhagwat Gita* and part of the *Rigveda* in French.¹³ When she first saw Gandhi at his ashram in Ahmedabad and fell on her knees at Babu's feet. Babu lifted her up and took her in his arms and said ' *"You will be my daughter"* ', he said, when she came to him in 1925 and he renamed her Mirabehn ("Sister Mira").¹⁴

Mira attended her first INC meeting held in the industrial town of Kanpur. Mira spent 1926-27 touring ashrams across North India. In September 1928, Gandhi sent Mira on an 'all-India Khadi tour' alone so that she would equip herself to start spinning and weaving training centres when she returned to Sabarmati. During this tour, she travelled to Himalayan town of Almora, towns in United Provinces, Madhubani in Bihar, Muzaffarpur on the banks of river Gandak and a university founded in rural Bengal, the Santiniketan. There she met the poet Rabindranath Tagore and reports to Devdas Gandhi that she had been "*deeply impressed by his simple sincerity and real beauty of inner nature*".¹⁵ After her stint in Santiniketan, Mira resettled in Bihar, founding a khadi centre in Chattwan, Darbhanga district. Her rural Bihar experience was transformative, fostering newfound confidence and boundless inspiration. Promoting homespun cloth and self-reliance, she penned a pamphlet linking the khadi movement to India's political freedom and colonial policies' impact on the indigenous economy. In 1930, unable to join Gandhi on the all-male Salt March, she vigorously advocated for khadi in villages.

Joining Gandhi at the Round Table Conference in London, Mira, dubbed 'the daughter of an English Admiral,' discussed India's political future. Post-conference failure, under Viceroy Lord

¹³ *Mirabehn*, ASSOCIATES OF MAHATMA GANDHI, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/associates/Mirabehn.php>.

¹⁴ Gitta Sereny, "*A Life With Gandhi*", *NYTimes*, Nov. 14, 1982, at 6(70).

¹⁵ *Mirabehn*, "*Mira to Devdas*", *DEVNAS GANDHI PAPERS NMML*, 27 January 1929.

Willingdon, both Gandhi and Mira faced arrest. In Arthur Road Jail, Bombay, Mira interacted with influential women like Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. Upon her release in May, she documented the harsh treatment of women prisoners in British Indian jails. She remarked, “ *The government may think that it is crushing our spirit by their policy but what it is actually doing is to rouse a spirit of burning indignation in the people and to widen the gulf day by day by which divides it from the sympathy of the masses* ”.¹⁶

In 1934, Mirabehn toured London to promote the message of India's freedom struggle, a request to which Gandhi acquiesced, where she discovered a deep sympathy for Indians, particularly among the working class. Carrying Gandhi's message, she toured industrial towns in Wales, Darwen, Lancashire's textile towns, and the Midlands before returning to the capital. Addressing places like Nelson, Newcastle, Warwick, Maidstone, Nottingham, and Ashford, she passionately discussed the colonial destruction of rural industries and the burden of high taxes on the peasantry. Mirabehn emphasised Gandhi's non-violent resistance, transforming India into a country of spirit and determination. During her United States tour, she spoke at 22 gatherings and delivered five radio broadcasts, meeting prominent figures like David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Post-independence, she established Bapu Gram and the Gopal Ashram, engaging in dairy and farming experiments. In Kumaon and Garhwal, she observed and documented the degradation of forests and its impact on floods in the plains.

Despite having support from her childhood friend Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Mirabehn embraced a voluntary life marked by simplicity, opting for natural foods and avoiding labour-saving devices. Her writings, alongside Gandhi and contemporaries, provide deep insights into her experiences, contributions, and challenges in India's struggle for independence. From a privileged British upbringing to the core of the independence movement, Mirabehn's transformative journey illustrates the compelling impact of one woman's dedication to Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of nonviolence and self-reliance. Her resilience and global travels left an enduring mark on India's quest for freedom.

(C) Catherine Mary Heilmann (Salrabehn)

Sarala Behn, originally Catherine Mary Heilman (5 April 1901 – 8 July 1982), emerged as a prominent English Gandhian social activist renowned for her influential efforts in the Kumaon region of India. During her childhood, her father was interned in the First World War, she faced adversities and experienced ostracism and denial of scholarships. Introduced to Gandhi and

¹⁶ “*Criminal treatment to political prisoners*”, three page ts signed ‘Mira’, 20 May 1932, PURSHOTTAM DAS THAKUR DAS PAPERS NMML.

India's freedom struggle by Indian students in Mannady during the 1920s, she left England for India in January 1932. She started working at an Udaipur school before sheading to Gandhi's Sewagram ashram where she spent 8 years.¹⁷

Sarla Behn, as named by Gandhi, was one of the 2 English daughters of the Mahatma. She went to Kausani in 1940 to escape heat and malaria but was so moved by subjugation and absence of self-worth in household woman treated as passive animals in possession of men, she aimed to establish an institutionalised framework for women empowerment.¹⁸ Thus an 'Lakshmi Ashram', named after the wife of donor of the land was established in Almora district. It provided education to girls following the Gandhian concept of "nai talim" (basic education) emphasizing not only academic learning but also incorporating a holistic educational approach including animal husbandry, health and agriculture.¹⁹ Sarla Behn, renowned for her pivotal role in the Chipko movement and environmental activism, was not only associated with environmental causes but also actively participated in Gandhian movements led by Acharya Vinoba Bhave and Jai Prakash Narayan. In the late 1960s, she collaborated with Bhave on the Bhoodan movement in Bihar and later joined Narayan in working with the families of surrendered dacoits in the Chambal river valley during the early 1970s. Despite facing house arrest and imprisonment for nearly two years in Almora and Lucknow jails, Sarla Behn continued her commitment to the cause, emphasizing the intertwined goals of freedom, empowerment, and environmental preservation. Her influence in the environmental sphere, particularly in the Himalayan region, was significant. Collaborating with Mirabehn, she played a crucial role in formulating a response to the environmental crisis in the area. Vandana Shiva, an activist-academician, credits Sarla Behn for laying the organizational foundation for the women's movement within the ecological view of Himalayan forests. In 1961, under Sarla Behn's guidance, the Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal was established with key objectives such as organizing women, combating alcoholism, developing forest-based small-scale industries, and advocating for forest rights.

Sarla Behn initiated the Chipko Movement after the Stockholm Conference of 1972. The movement, associated with the term 'Chipko' (meaning to hug), gained popularity as villagers hugged trees to prevent their felling. In 1977, Sarla Behn further organised activists to resist lumbering and excessive resin tapping from pine trees. A prolific author, Sarla Behn wrote 22

¹⁷ *Sushri Sarala Devi: Recipient of Jammalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1979*, JAMNALAL BAJAJ FOUNDATION, https://www.jamnalalbajajfoundation.org/Media/pdf/JBA_1979_Bio_Sarala_Devi.pdf.

¹⁸ B.D. Kasniyal, *Sarla Behn Remembered*, THE TRIBUNE (Apr 06, 2016 12:49 AM), <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/features/sarla-behn-remembered-218332>.

¹⁹ KAMALA GANESH & USHA THAKAR, *CULTURE AND THE MAKING OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA* 149-150 (1st ed. 2005).

books in Hindi and English, addressing conservation, women's empowerment, and environmental issues. Her autobiography, *"A Life in Two Worlds: Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi's English Disciple,"* provides insights into her remarkable life. Despite health challenges, she remained dedicated to India's freedom movement.

In 1975, Sarla Behn relocated to a cottage in Dharamgarh, Pithoragarh district, where she resided until her passing in July 1982. Following Hindu rites, she was cremated at Lakshmi Ashram. Honoured with the Jannalal Bajaj Award, she was hailed as the "daughter of the Himalaya" and the "mother of social activism" in Uttarakhand on her 75th birthday.²⁰

The Lakshmi Ashram continues to commemorate Sarla Behn's anniversary by hosting gatherings of Sarvodaya workers and community members to discuss strategies for addressing social and environmental issues. In 2006, the Government of Uttarakhand announced plans to establish the Sarla Behn Memorial Museum in Kausani. Sarla Behn's impact on Uttarakhand and Indian environmentalism, though she remains relatively unknown, has been substantial. She played a crucial role in inspiring grassroots organizations and spreading the Sarvodaya movement in the state.

(D) Annie Besant

Annie Wood, famously known as Annie Besant, was born in London to a doctor who passed away when she was five. Despite a failed marriage with Frank Besant, a Cambridge-educated priest, her journey from a divorced Englishwoman to becoming the first woman President of the Indian National Congress is truly interesting.

After her divorce, Besant became involved with the National Secular Society led by the renowned atheist Charles Bradlaugh. Her exceptional oratory skills allowed her to make a mark in speaking on secularism, science, and women's rights. She evolved into a fervent republican, opposing imperialism. As she delved into reading religious texts to better refute them, she also explored Eastern religious works, leading her to discover Theosophy. Under the guidance of Madame Blavatsky, she became a member of the Theosophical Society. Following Blavatsky's death, Besant decided to explore the lands where her teacher's teachers, the Himalayan Masters, were believed to reside. In 1892, she embarked on a six-week journey to India and ended up staying for 40 years.

During her initial years in India, Annie Besant played a pivotal role in mediating factional conflicts within the Theosophical Society, earning the affectionate monikers 'Amma' or

²⁰ *Supra n. 17.*

'Periamma.' Committed to fostering unity, she faced restrictions on completing her degree in England, prompting her to establish the Central Hindu College in 1898. Initially delving into educational pursuits to understand the country, Besant gradually transitioned into politics. Her contributions to Indian nationalism encompassed advocating for traditional attire, lifestyles, and cultural aspects, notably in her 1895 lecture on India's regeneration. Emphasizing the promotion of Indian arts and industries, she foreshadowed the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07.

As the Indian National Congress splintered in 1907, Besant actively collaborated with moderates like Gopan Krishna Gokhale and Motilal Nehru, aiming to bridge unity within the Congress and present its case internationally. She founded the weekly *Commonweal* and the newspaper *New India* in 1914. In 1915, inspired by Ireland's home rule fervour, Besant proposed the All India Home Rule League, inaugurated in September 1916. By 1915, she became a central figure in British India's political debates, eliciting both acclaim and criticism.²¹ In June 1917, Governor of Madras confined Besant for her writings on the home rule movement. Later that year, she made history as the first woman elected President of the Indian National Congress. In this role, she held crucial meetings with Viceroy Chelmsford and Edwin Montagu, addressing issues such as local government, District Boards' powers, provincial autonomy, and changes in the Imperial Council. Besant portrayed her election as a precursor to positive relations between India and Britain, challenging the prevailing perception of the British as mere conquerors and rulers imposing chains and control.

Yet, Annie Besant's journey within the Indian movement faced hurdles, encountering criticism and scorn for renouncing her own nationality. She endured humiliation, particularly from the non-Brahmanical intelligentsia of the Madras presidency, who resented her pro-Brahmanical ideas from her early writings. The Justice Party, their organization, cynically attacked the Irishwoman's office. Besant's ideologies diverged from Gandhi's, the predominant figure in later years of Indian nationalism, as she did not align with his satyagraha campaigns. Despite this, numerous followers of Besant gravitated towards Gandhian activities. While Gandhi may have been considered 'Mahatma' by many, to Mrs. Besant, he was simply 'Mr. Gandhi'.

(E) Margaret Cousins

Margaret Gillespie, hailing from an Irish Protestant family, was born in Boyle, County Roscommon, and received her education in Derry. Graduating from the Royal University of Ireland in Dublin in 1902 with a degree in music, she pursued a career in teaching. Her marriage to the poet and literary critic James Cousins in 1903 marked the beginning of a collaborative

²¹ *Supra n. 12.*

exploration into various intellectual and philosophical pursuits, including socialism, vegetarianism, and psychical research.

Cousins' activism extended to diverse spheres. She became involved with the National Council of Women (NCW) in Ireland after attending a meeting in Manchester in 1906. In 1908, she co-founded the Irish Women's Franchise League with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, actively participating in suffragist activities. Her commitment to the cause led her to participate in protests and demonstrations, resulting in her arrest and confinements. In 1915, Cousins and her husband relocated to India, where they became immersed in the country's cultural and political landscape. In 1916, she became the first non-Indian member of the Indian Women's University at Poona. She co-founded the Women's Indian Association in 1917 with Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa. She also served as the first Head of the National Girls' School at Mangalore in 1919–20. In 1922, she became India's first woman magistrate and co-founded the All India Women's Conference in 1927, later serving as its President in 1936.²²

Her legacy was further cemented when she became a member of the Flag Presentation Committee (headed by Hansa Mehta) at the Constituent Assembly, presenting the National Flag of India on behalf of Indian women in 1947. Despite her significant contributions to Indian society and feminist activism, Cousins recognised the importance of indigenous leadership of Indian womanhood and gradually stepped back from direct participation in the struggle.

Cousins' later years were marked by health challenges, but she continued to receive recognition and support from the Indian government for her invaluable services. However, a stroke in 1944 left her paralyzed, and she received support from the Madras government and Jawaharlal Nehru. She passed away in 1954, leaving a legacy of dedication to women's rights and social reform in India. She left an indelible mark on Indian nationalism through her contributions to education, women's empowerment, political activism, and cultural exchange. Her dedication to the cause, symbolised by significant events, exemplified international solidarity in India's struggle for independence, leaving a lasting legacy in the nation's history.

(F) Edith Brown

Dame Edith Mary Brown, born in Cumberland, England to a bank manager. She began her education in Manchester, Lancashire before moving to an all-girls school in London. She won a scholarship and studied natural sciences at Cambridge. Her older sister was in a missionary which led her to develop interest in medicine and missionary works. Commencing her

²² KUMARI JAYAWARDENA, *THE WHITE WOMAN'S OTHER BURDEN: WESTERN WOMEN AND SOUTH ASIA DURING BRITISH RULE*, 147–155, (1st ed. 1995).

professional journey as a science teacher at Exeter High School for Girls, she later received financial assistance from the Baptist Mission Society to pursue a medical education. She graduated with a Scottish-triple qualification from London School of Medicine for Women. The Baptist Missionary society sent her to Bombay in 1891 where she was shocked to see the medical condition of the nation and felt a need to educate women, especially midwives.

*“Trained Indian women doctors or nurses were almost unknown, and throughout the peninsula only one or two women's hospitals existed.”*²³

After spending two years working with various missions, Brown embarked on an independent initiative. In January 1894, a generous donation of £50 (equivalent to £6,057 today) from a woman in Bristol enabled Brown to lease an old schoolhouse in Ludhiana, Punjab. Establishing the North India School of Medicine for Christian Women, she initiated a Christian medical training centre with an initial enrolment of four students and four faculty members. This pioneering medical school, the first for women in India, expanded into a comprehensive college with medical, nursing, and pharmacy schools, along with a hospital equipped with 200 beds. Financial support flowed in from the Punjab governments, as well as women's auxiliaries in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and countries like Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. In 1911, the institution was renamed Christian Medical College Ludhiana, welcoming non-Christian students since 1909. During the tumultuous partition of British India in 1947, Punjab witnessed violent upheavals, but the college and hospital in Ludhiana remained unharmed. Serving as an emergency centre for the severely injured, the hospital played a crucial role in a time of crisis.²⁴

While Edith Brown's work was primarily in the domain of healthcare and education, her efforts indirectly contributed to the well-being of communities in India. The institution's pioneering effort in providing a holistic approach of education to women along with the establishment of a hospital and further removing religious bars. Her initiatives align with broader themes of social service and welfare, which were integral to the ethos of the Indian nationalist movement. Although she may not have been directly involved in political activism, her contributions to education and healthcare were undoubtedly part of the broader social fabric that contributed to the development and well-being of the Indian population.

(G)Muriel Lester

Muriel Lester was born in a prosperous Essex suburb, now called as Leytonstone in 1883. She

²³ *Obituary of Dame Edith Mary Brown*, THE TIMES, (Dec. 10, 1956).

²⁴ *CMC's History*, FRIENDS OF LUDHIANA, <https://www.friendsofludhiana.org.uk/about-us/cmcs-history/>.

was a daughter of a Baptist business, president of Essex Baptist Union. She was a pacifist, social reformer and a nonconformist. In 1915, she and her sister Doris acquired a vacant chapel with financial support from their father, intending to transform it into a 'teetotal pub' to provide the local community with an evening gathering spot. They named the establishment Kingsley Hall in memory of their brother who died young. In 1928, Muriel assumed the role of vicar in a new Kingsley Hall designed by Cowles Voysey for the sisters, serving as both a community centre and a place of worship. In 1929, a second Kingsley Hall was established on the Becontree Estate in Dagenham, Essex, for Bow residents relocated through the slum clearance program.

Muriel, a pacifist since 1914, co-founded the Christian pacifist organization, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFoR). Leveraging her connections with the IFOR, she extended an invitation to the son-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned Hindu poet and philosopher, to speak at Kingsley Hall. Subsequently, in a reciprocal gesture, he invited Lester to visit India. She travelled to India in 1926, initiating a warm but life-long friendship with M.K. Gandhi. Challenged by Gandhi, Lester was urged to "Speak the truth without fear or exaggeration" and to engage with everyone aligned with her purpose. Working on what he considered God's mission, Gandhi encouraged her not to fear societal criticism. During Gandhi's three-month visit to Britain in 1931, he resided at Kingsley Hall. In their shared commitment to both Christianity and Hinduism, Lester and Gandhi applied the teachings of Jesus to the endeavours for freedom from colonial rule in India.²⁵

Although, not directly involved in political activism, her contributions were more aligned with humanitarian and social causes. Lester's adherence to pacifism and her engagement with leaders like Gandhi reinforced the importance of non-violent resistance in the pursuit of Indian independence. Her support for Gandhi's principles and her efforts to connect international peace movements with the Indian struggle added a global dimension to the nationalist cause. Her role was more humanitarian, emphasizing the principles of non-violence and fostering cultural exchanges between nations striving for freedom

(H)Maud Gonne

Maud Gonne, born in 1866 in England but in 1882, her father was posted to Dublin where she accompanied him till death. She was an Irish republican, suffragette and actress. She was an important figure in Irish nationalism and actively agitated for Home Rule and then republic, achieved in 1916. In the 1890s, Gonne undertook extensive travels across England, Wales,

²⁵ Dan Buttry, *Muriel Lester (1885-1968)*, GLOBAL PEACE WARRIORS (Dec.15, 2014), <http://globalpeacewarriors.org/muriel-lester/>.

Scotland, and the United States, advocating for the nationalist cause. In 1896, she established an organization known as the "Irish League" (L'association irlandaise).

This well-known figure in Irish nationalism and feminism may need little introduction, but lesser-known are her early connections with Indian activists in Paris. Following extensive publicity surrounding her divorce from John MacBride and a decline in her popularity, she began spending much of her time in France. When her divorce appeal failed in 1908, and as her marriage separation verdict was recognised only in France, she relocated there permanently to retain custody of her son, Seán. Among the Indian nationalists in Paris she interacted with Sarat Chandra Bose, Madam Cama, Sardar Singh Rana, and Shyamji Krishna Verma. Madam Cama, much like Maud Gonne MacBride, was a dedicated political activist who established and edited nationalist journals in Paris and Berlin. Having become bitterly anti-British after experiences in Bombay during the plague epidemic of 1897, Cama, due to increased surveillance by British authorities, moved to Paris in 1909, following Krishna Verma who had relocated there in 1907. Gonne MacBride had already established contact with these influential activists in London, as her friend Charlotte Despard had attended the opening of India House in July 1905. At any rate, Paris in the early 1900s was the backdrop for the establishment of a loose network of anti-British Indian and Irish agitators, and this would be the basis for the formation of the Indian Irish Independence League some twenty years later.²⁶

Maud Gonne MacBride's contributions are not directly delved into nationalist operations but this fervent Irish republican nationalist's engagements and interactions with prominent Indian leaders reflect the inter-connectedness of anti-colonial movements of that period. It laid groundwork for future collaborations and cross-cultural alliances.

IV. BROADER ISSUES: THEN VERSUS NOW

(A) Experiences and Challenges

European women who actively aligned themselves with the Indian nationalist movement during the colonial era faced a complex web of challenges, stemming from the intricate socio-political landscape of the time.

One of the primary challenges was the social alienation experienced within European expatriate communities. Choosing to support Indian nationalism often meant going against the prevailing colonial mindset, leading to ostracism and social isolation. These women found themselves at odds with the dominant narrative of the British Raj, challenging the deeply ingrained beliefs of

²⁶ Kate O'Malley, *Irish women activists and the struggle for Indian independence*, HISTORY IRELAND (Mar.- Apr. 2018), <https://www.historyireland.com/irish-women-activists-struggle-indian-independence/>.

their fellow Europeans. The isolation could be not only social but also extended to professional circles, affecting career prospects and personal relationships. Hostility from colonial authorities posed another formidable challenge. British colonial officials viewed any dissent against the established order with suspicion, and European women advocating for Indian nationalism were not exempt from scrutiny. They faced the risk of surveillance, harassment, and even legal repercussions for aligning themselves with anti-colonial sentiments. The courage to dissent came at a high personal cost, as they navigated the hostile environment created by the very authorities they were challenging. Legal accusation and conviction in colonial trials was an everyday occurrence. Women like Maragaret Cousins, Annie Besant and Madeliene Slade faced arrest and conviction by British authorities but this did not suffice to shatter their strengths.

Within the Indian nationalist movement itself, European women encountered a mixed reception. While some Indian nationalists welcomed their support as a sign of solidarity, others remained cautious and even sceptical. Historical grievances against the colonial power sometimes overshadowed the genuine intentions of these women. Negotiating acceptance within the nationalist circles, therefore, became an additional hurdle for European women committed to the cause. One such instance is that of altercations between Annie Besant and Justice Party of Madras.

Gender-based discrimination presented a pervasive challenge. Stereotypes and traditional gender roles constrained the active participation and leadership roles of European women in both colonial society and the nationalist movement. The prevailing norms expected women to conform to certain expectations, hindering their ability to express dissent or take on prominent roles within the movement. Professional and personal repercussions were significant deterrents. European women who wrote against colonial policies or actively participated in nationalist activities risked censorship, loss of employment, and strain in personal relationships. The dual challenge of navigating both professional and personal consequences underscored the courage and resilience required to persist in their support for Indian nationalism.

Despite these formidable challenges, European women engaged in Indian nationalism demonstrate their remarkable courage, resilience, and commitment. These women, by defying social norms, enduring legal persecution, and navigating identity struggles, showcased a profound dedication to the cause of Indian independence. They navigated a delicate balance between their European identity and their support for Indian aspirations. Their willingness to bear personal costs and make sacrifices underscores the depth of their conviction in justice and freedom, illuminating the pivotal role played by European women in shaping the narrative of anti-colonial struggles in India. Their stories illuminate the complexities and nuances of a

historical period where individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds, sought to challenge oppressive colonial structures and contribute to the broader narrative of India's quest for freedom.

(B) Role And Recognition

Sister Nivedita stands as one of India's most influential female figures. Her book "Kali, the Mother" left a lasting impact, inspiring Abanindranath Tagore's iconic painting of Bharat Mata. In 2010, the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education office in Salt Lake City, Kolkata, was named in her honour.

The Sister Nivedita Academy, a Chennai-based institution, pays tribute to her memory. Numerous schools and colleges bear her name such as Government Degree College in Alipur, Kolkata and Baranagore Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama High School in Kolkata is named "Nivedita Bhawan" in her honour (2018), acknowledging her significant contributions. In 1968, the Indian Government issued a postal stamp in her memory. The Nivedita Bridge near Dakshineswar, Kolkata, is a testament to her legacy. These tributes underscore the enduring impact of Sister Nivedita on Indian education, culture, and the national ethos.

Sister Nivedita continues to hold a revered place in Indian popular culture, and her legacy is remembered through various educational institutions, books, literature, art, statue, memorial, cultural references, quotes and sayings.

European women played crucial roles in India's nationalist movement, challenging traditional gender roles and contributing significantly to the struggle for independence. Many of these women were inspired by Indian leaders and actively participated in various aspects of the nationalist cause.

Women like Annie Besant, a British activist, joined the Indian National Congress and advocated for Home Rule in India. Her efforts contributed to the political discourse and garnered support for Indian self-governance. Similarly, Margaret Cousins, an Irish nationalist, made substantial contributions, particularly in the field of education and women's rights.

European women were actively involved in social and cultural spheres as well. Sister Nivedita, born Margaret Noble in Ireland, became a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and dedicated her life to Indian education and nationalism. Her role in promoting Indian art, culture, and education was instrumental. Despite their contributions, European women in Indian nationalism faced challenges due to their foreign origins. However, their commitment to the cause and their ability to bridge cultural gaps helped in fostering international solidarity.

While their contributions were often overshadowed by male leaders, European women in Indian nationalism played pivotal roles in shaping the narrative, advocating for women's rights, and fostering cultural understanding. Their efforts deserve recognition for their lasting impact on India's journey to independence.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of European women and their involvement in Indian nationalism reveals a multifaceted and dynamic engagement that significantly contributed to the broader narrative of the independence movement. Despite challenges arising from their foreign origins, these women played pivotal roles in shaping political, social, and cultural aspects of Indian nationalism.

Their contributions ranged from active participation in political movements and advocacy for women's rights to fostering cultural understanding and promoting education. While often overshadowed by male counterparts, their dedication and resilience in the face of adversity underscore the importance of acknowledging their vital role in the historical tapestry of Indian nationalism.

Moreover, European women acted as bridges between different cultures, fostering international solidarity and creating a nuanced understanding of India's quest for self-determination. The recognition of their efforts enriches our understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the fight against colonial rule. As we reflect on this research, it becomes clear that the story of European women in Indian nationalism is one of collaboration, empowerment, and the shared pursuit of a more just and inclusive society.
