

ARTICLE

# Solving world problems: the Indian women's movement, global governance, and 'the crisis of empire', 1933–46<sup>†</sup>

Rosalind Parr

School of History, St Katharine's Lodge, The Scores, St Andrews, UK  
Corresponding author. E-mail: [rep6@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:rep6@st-andrews.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article examines global processes of decolonization through an analysis of Indian women's interactions with world governance during the interwar 'crisis of empire'. This distinct form of activism asserted anti-colonial claims through engagements with transnational civil society networks and the social work of the League of Nations and the International Labour Office. In doing so, it undermined imperial legitimacy, shifted the terms of liberal internationalism, and prepared the ground for later developments at the United Nations.

**Keywords:** anti-colonialism; India; International Labour Office; League of Nations; social reform; women

## Introduction

In September 1933, a small delegation of Indian women lobbied the League of Nations and the International Labour Office (ILO) as part of a campaign to gain a formal role in world governance. Their efforts were focused on the League's Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and the 'Women's Work' section of the ILO, where they sought direct access to international officials and independent representation on influential committees. Although these efforts were obstructed somewhat by the India Office in London, over subsequent years the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) became increasingly integrated into the 'social work' of the League and the ILO. By 1937, it had become the only non-Western women's organization to be listed as a 'correspondent member' of the League's Advisory Committee of Social Questions. In asserting their right to independent representation and, to some extent, actually bypassing the influence of the imperial state, anti-colonial women working at the level of civil society helped mould the system of world governance into a site for undermining European imperialism. In doing so, their activities brought new meanings to liberal internationalism, tempering its association with imperial power structures and enabling state and non-state processes of decolonization.

The campaign was spearheaded by two anti-colonial nationalists who were also women's rights activists with strong international connections. Amrit Kaur (1889–1964) and Shareefah Hamid Ali (1883–1971) arrived in Geneva directly from London, where they had spent the summer months campaigning on the issue of women's suffrage. During that time, they had consolidated productive working relationships with a number of British women's organizations that would prove crucial in facilitating their access to official and non-official actors in Geneva. Kaur, an English-educated Christian and the daughter of a titled Indian prince, was a close associate of M. K. Gandhi who divided her time between her role as one of the Mahatma's personal secretaries

---

<sup>†</sup>The author would like to thank the editors of the *Journal of Global History* and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

and AIWC work. Both her parents had been active in elite philanthropic circles and Kaur had personal links to the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), a transnational society with headquarters in Geneva. Later, she would become Minister for Health in India's first independent cabinet and an active figure at the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization. Hamid Ali was a social campaigner with family links to Gandhi and the politics of mass civil disobedience. The daughter of an English-educated Muslim barrister, she spoke several languages and, during the 1930s, became India's most regular spokesperson at international women's conferences.<sup>1</sup> One of the few prominent Muslim women in the AIWC leadership, after Indian independence she served as India's representative on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Indian women's interactions with interwar world governance represent a distinct thread in the interwar 'crisis of empire'. In structural terms, liberal internationalism upheld the imperial order.<sup>2</sup> But it also opened up a space for diverse actors to confront the international status quo. As recent research has demonstrated, beyond the high politics of 'great power' diplomacy, the vibrant international arena that grew up around the League of Nations was a hive of below-state-level activism.<sup>3</sup> Among the participants in this 'global civil society' were anti-colonial petitioners attracted by the League's purported commitment to self-determination, and activists exploiting opportunities for expressing grievance within the mandates system.<sup>4</sup> European colonial empires remained entrenched (for now) but the persistent questioning of 'great power' authority called imperialism and its claims into question.

The recent historiographical focus on the 'technical' work of international institutions has opened up a rich seam of enquiry and brought multiple non-state actors into view.<sup>5</sup> However, despite recent work that recovers new, non-Western histories of liberal internationalism, the role of Indian women's organizations has so far been overlooked.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, in the historiography of South Asia, we have many excellent accounts of the Indian women's movement in a national or imperial context but the internationalist dimensions of this history are largely obscured.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in accounts of Indian women's activism, international institutions are viewed as external forces to which Indians were subject rather than arenas in which they themselves intervened

<sup>1</sup>Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 185.

<sup>2</sup>For the role played by the League in upholding imperial interests, see Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'Editorial: The Roots of Global Civil Society and the Interwar Moment', *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 2 (2012): 157–65.

<sup>4</sup>Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), chap. 2; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup>For example, Iris Borowy, *Coming to Terms with World Health: The League of Nations Health Organisation, 1921–1946* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009); Barbara H. M. Metzger, 'Towards an International Human Rights Regime During the Inter-War Years: The League of Nations' Combat of Traffic in Women and Children', in *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950*, eds. Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine, and Frank Trentmann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For an older study, see Carol Miller, 'The Social Section and Advisory Committee on Social Questions of the League of Nations' in *International Health Organizations and Movements*, ed. Paul Weindling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 154–76.

<sup>6</sup>For non-Western internationalist histories, see Simon Jackson and Alanna O'Malley, eds., *The Institution of International Order: From the League of Nations to the United Nations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). For an exception that notes Indian women's engagements with the League of Nations, see Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes*, 140–3.

<sup>7</sup>Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Feminism in India* (London: Zed, 2005); Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference, 1927–1990* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990); Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1993); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

in meaningful ways.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, this article presents an analysis of the AIWC's relationship with international institutions that foregrounds Indian women's agency.

In associating the Indian women's movement with Geneva-centred narratives of imperial crisis, this article brings the historiography of international institutions into conversation with global and transnational histories of decolonization. A recent strand of scholarship emphasizes how far anti-colonial struggles for national liberation were interconnected – bound together by transnational solidarities and activism across borders.<sup>9</sup> This incorporates an extensive historiography relating to the border-crossing activities of anti-colonialists in Europe, including in Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> We know, too, that the League of Nations itself was deemed, initially, to hold great promise for anti-colonial actors and, for a 'moment' at least, attracted hopeful petitioners encouraged by the rhetoric of self-determination.<sup>11</sup> However, because prominent anti-colonialists soon became disillusioned with interwar liberal internationalism, Geneva in the 1930s has remained outside the scope of these studies.<sup>12</sup>

As new global and transnational histories demonstrate, the border-crossing practices of anti-colonial activists reflect cosmopolitan worldviews that situated national struggles for independence in a wider global context.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, after the Second World War, 'nationalism won' as the guiding geopolitical principle of anti-colonial movements.<sup>14</sup> But interwar visions of decolonization were more fluid. As Manu Goswami reminds us, the sovereign nation-state was only one of the 'possible futures' available to those who sought to subvert colonial rule.<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging this level of contingency, historians have pointed to the Indian nationalist leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, who embraced the anti-imperialist internationalism of the Left, and others who imagined and organized along Marxist, pan-Asian, pan-religious, or 'coloured cosmopolitan' lines.<sup>16</sup> Thus, when viewed through the lens of anti-colonial movements, the interwar imperial

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174–6.

<sup>9</sup>Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Indian Nationalism and the "World Forces": Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War', *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 3 (2007): 325–44; Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2011); Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonisation from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Elisabeth Armstrong, 'Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation', *Signs* 41, no. 2 (2016): 305–31; Michele L. Louro, *Comrades Against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Su Lin Lewis and C. M. Stolte, 'Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War', *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–19.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015); Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London and New York: Verso, 2019); Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910–1920', in *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, ed. Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>11</sup>Manela, *Wilsonian Moment*; Urs Matthias Zachmann, ed., *Asia after Versailles: Asian Perspectives on the Paris Peace Conference and the Interwar Order, 1919–22* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup>For Indian nationalist disillusionment, see Maria Framke, 'India's Freedom and the League of Nations: Public Debates 1919–22', in *Asia after Versailles*, ed. Zachmann, 124–43.

<sup>13</sup>Sugata Bose, 'Different Universalisms, Colorful Cosmopolitanisms: The Global Imagination of the Colonized', in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>14</sup>The quoted phrase is taken from Samuel Moyn, 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 in the History of Cosmopolitanism', *Critical Enquiry* 40, no. 4 (2014): 369.

<sup>15</sup>Manu Goswami, 'AHR Forum: Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–85.

<sup>16</sup>Louro, *Comrades Against Imperialism*; Kama Maclean, 'The Fundamental Rights Resolution: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism in an Interwar Moment', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 213–19; Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*

crisis appears as a moment of subversive creativity when activists appropriated diverse ideologies in pursuit of an imagined global future.<sup>17</sup>

The Indian women's campaign in Geneva combined the anti-colonial, internationalist, and social reformist ideas of its leaders and moulded them to the context of interwar world governance.<sup>18</sup> Their interactions with international institutions in Geneva also represent a particular form of public activism that blurred the boundary between the social and the political. In contrast to petitions directed at the General Assembly or the Permanent Mandates Commission, their campaign targeted the specialist 'social' committees of world governance. Much of the work of these bodies related to the established programmes of Indian women's organizations on issues such as the reform of marriage customs, education, health, and prostitution. Consequently, they provided a natural focus for their activities.

The approach of Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali in Geneva reproduced a parallel effort then taking place in India, where anti-colonial feminists sought to combine the social movement for women's rights with the political project of national independence. As such, their activities were connected to, but distinct from, mainstream Indian nationalism. Although women's emancipation was theoretically integral to the nationalist project, the practice of pursuing it – as a matter of equal importance – alongside the anti-colonial struggle somewhat clashed with other priorities. Nehru, while being supportive of women's rights in principle, maintained that they were contingent on political freedom, which, in practice, meant that they could be deferred.<sup>19</sup> Although social reform was at the heart of Gandhi's nationalist vision, he was less committed to women's civic and political rights.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, both men were hostile to the League of Nations, which they viewed as an imperialist prop.<sup>21</sup> AIWC activists adopted a unique approach that appropriated the framework of world governance and incorporated anti-colonial ideas into the global movement for social reform.

Indian women's collective social activism contributed in specific ways to the crisis of imperial authority in the interwar period. As Mrinalini Sinha's study of the controversy surrounding Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) demonstrates, women's activities played a crucial role in effecting shifts in colonial discourse that helped delegitimize the Raj in the imperial context.<sup>22</sup> Indian feminists' refutation of Mayo's scurrilous claims about the degraded status of Indian womanhood countered wider assertions of Indian 'backwardness'. Meanwhile, campaigns led by Indian women's organizations around the issue of child marriage highlighted the impotence of the colonial state in effecting social reform and undermined the 'civilizing' pretensions of the British Raj.

This article builds on Sinha's insights by exploring Indian women's distinctive role in undermining imperial legitimacy within the framework of world governance. Although the campaign in Geneva occupied the realms of 'social work', it was inherently political. The delegation's claim to represent the women of India implicitly questioned the authority of the imperial machine, which

---

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup>For the intellectual process of appropriation and refashioning that foregrounds colonial agency in a different context, see C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>For 'feminism' in a colonial Indian context, see Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, esp. 204–5; and Chaudhuri, *Feminism in India*.

<sup>19</sup>See Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 193.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>21</sup>For Nehru's views, see Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History: Being Further Letters to His Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1949), 683. On Gandhi and the League of Nations, see Lisa Trivedi and Kevin Grant, 'A Question of Trust: The Government of India, The League of Nations and Mohandas Gandhi', in *Imperialism on Trial: International Oversight on Colonial Rule in Historical Perspective*, ed. R. M. Douglas, Michael D. Callahan, and Elizabeth Bishop (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), 21–43.

<sup>22</sup>Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*. For earlier antecedents of this process see Tanika Sarkar, 'A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal', *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 601–22.

maintained control over the Government of India's League and ILO business. Furthermore, because justifications for the British Empire rested on assertions of civilizational superiority, Indian women's self-representation as modern, well-informed experts in the field of social reform challenged the validity of colonial rule. Throughout the life of the League, the India Office impeded their efforts and maintained control over state-level appointments to Geneva. But, below the level of the state, multiple civil society actors, including League and ILO officials, accepted Indian women's claims at face value.

If Indian women's activism undermined the legitimacy of the imperial state, it also confronted the imperialist implications of international feminism. As important scholarship has long emphasized, the Western-led international women's movement reproduced imperial claims to authority at a level beyond and below the state. It was also infused with condescending cultural assumptions about colonial 'backwardness' that legitimized the imperial order.<sup>23</sup> This bestowed a sense of entitlement on Western feminists, who presumed to speak on their colonized sisters' behalf.<sup>24</sup> Yet Indian women's claims to self-representation disrupted these assumptions, and transnational networks of women, in themselves, became productive sites where anti-colonial claims could be effected. For over a decade before the campaign in Geneva, Indian women had sought to challenge the endemic imperialistic assumptions of Western feminism. As a result, they secured allies who were willing to accept Indian women's claims and, in so doing, shifted the internal dynamics of transnational women's networks. The campaign in Geneva both built on and contributed to these shifts.

Some of the historical significance of Indian women's internationalist activities is captured by the concept of 'idea-shift', which has been used in international relations scholarship to describe the process by which ideas emanating from the non-West radically alter global norms.<sup>25</sup> Indian women's interactions with the global arena challenged the received assumptions of the imperial order, while beginning to normalize the inclusion of non-Western actors in the international sphere. Of course, in macro terms, this issue was a long way from resolution. Women from the Global South would protest their marginalization in the international women's movement for decades to come, and many sought alternative routes to empowerment through 'Third World' women's networks.<sup>26</sup> However, the partial integration of Indian nationalist women into international institutions helped establish the principle of inclusion, which, in turn, prepared the ground for later developments.

Whatever the remaining tensions within global feminism, Indian women's interactions with Geneva in the 1930s incubated processes of decolonization more usually associated with the United Nations. The United Nations featured prominently in the foreign policy of the early post-colonial Indian state, and women are acknowledged to have performed an important role in that context.<sup>27</sup> From 1946 onwards, the new Indian regime relied heavily on AIWC activists, a number of whom led delegations, including to the United Nations General Assembly, the Economic and

<sup>23</sup>Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945', *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, no. 4 (1990): 309–21; Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Leila Rupp, 'Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945', in *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945*, ed. Karen Offen, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 139–52.

<sup>24</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, 'Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women under an Imperial State', *Indian Economic Social History Review* 36, no. 4 (1999): 461–84.

<sup>25</sup>Amitav Acharya, "'Idea-Shift': How Ideas from the Rest are Reshaping Global Order", *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 7 (2016): 1156–70.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness Raising Event in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). For 'Third World' feminisms, see Armstrong, 'Before Bandung'; Laura Bier, 'Feminism, Solidarity, and Identity in the Age of Bandung: Third World Women in the Egyptian Women's Press', in *The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 141–72.

<sup>27</sup>Manu Bhagavan, *India and the Quest for One World: The Peacemakers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Glenda Sluga, "'Spectacular Feminism': The International History of Women, World Citizenship and Human Rights", in *Women's*



Social Council, and the World Health Organization. This not only conferred international prestige on the Indian state but also helped establish the United Nations as an agent of decolonization.<sup>28</sup> India's appointment of women to high-profile international roles after independence has been portrayed as a tokenistic attempt to establish the new state's modern legitimacy.<sup>29</sup> However, this interpretation overlooks how far women's international appointments were contingent on experience and credibility gained through interactions with the League of Nations and ILO in the 1930s. In light of this factor, the activities of Indian women represent a clear line of continuity between pre- and post-Second World War international institutions.

Just like the imperial structures they disrupted, twentieth-century processes of decolonization flowed from below-state-level, transnational social movements. This article examines one of those threads. First, it will introduce some of the background to the campaign in Geneva, tracing the history of the Indian women's movement, including engagements with international feminist networks in the 1920s. Next, it will examine the official and non-official components of the campaign in 1933, before analysing subsequent interactions between Indian women and international institutions up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Finally, an epilogue connects this interwar activism to the post-war era of decolonization.

### Prelude to Geneva: the Indian women's movement and international feminism after the First World War

The AIWC-led campaign in Geneva was the first time that representatives of the all-India women's movement claimed an independent role in world governance. But it built on an earlier record of Indian women activists confronting imperial inequalities in the context of international feminism. In the years following the end of the First World War, rising nationalism in India coincided with the growth of the Indian women's movement and, globally, an expansion of feminist internationalism. Amid these converging forces, the international women's movement became, for Indian women activists, a productive site for contesting the imperial order. While many Western women resisted this challenge, others were more sympathetic and became supporters and allies. This, in itself, wore away at the structures of imperial dominance. In addition, these connections were useful in facilitating interactions between Indian women and influential contacts in Geneva.

Transnational networks of women constituted part of what Mrinalini Sinha has usefully conceptualized as the 'imperial social formation': a globally articulated, multi-scaled framework that ordered relations within and between societies under imperialism.<sup>30</sup> Although they functioned at a level below the state, women's networks reproduced imperial asymmetries of power. In the period immediately following the First World War, these were additionally bolstered by recently enfranchised British women seeking to embed their newly acquired citizenship through imperial projects relating, for example, to the status of Indian women. Beyond the British empire, this was replicated in international women's organizations such as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), which sought to extend their activism eastwards.<sup>31</sup> By challenging the hierarchical cultural assumptions that infused the international women's movement, Indian women undermined the leadership claims of their European and American counterparts.

---

*Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, ed. Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis, and Karssimira Daskalov (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 44–58.

<sup>28</sup>Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 4.

<sup>29</sup>For example, in reference to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, see Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London: Routledge, 2004), 264.

<sup>30</sup>Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 16–19.

<sup>31</sup>After 1920, the International Woman Suffrage Alliance changed its name to the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, which, by 1946, was shortened to the International Alliance of Women.

In India during the interwar period, an emerging national women's movement was at the forefront of social reform projects relating to women's health, education, position within the family, and political rights. The Women's Indian Association (WIA), the first all-India women's organization, was founded in 1917. Within a decade, alongside numerous local and community-based societies, it had been joined by the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the AIWC, which were founded in 1925 and 1927 respectively. Although the political outlooks of individual members ranged significantly and changed over time, there was considerable consistency in social policy and much overlap in personnel between the three organizations. They also regularly worked together, as they did in Geneva in 1933, to campaign on social and political issues such as child marriage, prostitution, and suffrage. Collectively, the three organizations claimed to represent the women of India and made much of their democratic credentials. In reality, the membership was dominated by the educated middle classes. Notwithstanding the leadership of Shareefah Hamid Ali in the AIWC, Muslim women were significantly under-represented and increasingly drawn towards separate Muslim organizations. While individual Muslim women, such as Jahanara Shah Nawaz, were internationally connected, their organizations did not become integrated into transnational networks in the same way.

From the outset, British women, including some with strong connections to the imperial establishment, were prominently active in the all-India women's movement. The NCWI was an affiliate of the International Council of Women under the presidency of Lady Aberdeen, while the AIWC had links to Lady Irwin, the vicereine (1926–31). Working alongside such organizations were imperial and transnational societies such as the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene and the YWCA. Nationalist women felt increasingly uneasy about the implications of these connections, which undermined anti-colonial claims to self-determination. Yet British connections brought valuable financial investment, prestige, and practical assistance. Often, they were also based on cordial affective relationships. Nominally, these tensions were resolved by the insistence that Indian women's organizations were 'non-political', their activities being confined to social issues such as women's education and welfare rights, while they remained 'neutral' on the question of national independence.

In reality, the women's movement had never been entirely 'non-political'. The WIA was founded by two nationalist-supporting, Irish feminists, one of whom, Margaret Cousins, went on to co-found the AIWC. Sarojini Naidu, the WIA's leading spokesperson on women's suffrage, was also one of the era's most prominent critics of the Raj. As the nationalist struggle intensified, women social reformers joined Gandhi's mass civil disobedience campaigns in large numbers. Furthermore, nationalist women increasingly dominated the all-India women's movement. All three national women's organizations followed the Indian National Congress in boycotting the first Round Table Conference on constitutional reform (1930–31), despite their hopes for increasing the women's franchise. Later, when delegations were formed to visit London and Geneva, it was nationalist women who spoke on the joint behalf of the three organizations. So-called 'Congress women' were particularly active in the AIWC, which they sought to align with the nationalist struggle despite the organization's 'non-political' stance. Spelling out this position in 1937, Amrit Kaur argued that '[w]hile I believe that all social and educational and economic reform is complementary to the larger struggle for freedom the latter cannot be ignored by us.'<sup>32</sup>

Although British connections produced tensions within the Indian women's movement, they provided access to wider networks that enabled nationalist women to challenge imperial dominance in the international arena. In 1920, a specially invited Indian delegation of ten attended the Eighth Congress of the IWSA in Geneva. The inclusion of 'women of the East' (two Japanese women and a lone representative from Turkey were also invited) was part of a bid by the

<sup>32</sup>Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, 'Presidential Address', *Twelfth Session of the All India Women's Conference, Nagpur, 1937*, 17, Countries Collection, 21, 2, Sophia Smith Archives, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

European leadership to help 'raise the status of the women of all races'.<sup>33</sup> Yet many among the non-Western contingent found the maternalist tone and universalizing logic of the meeting alienating. Sarojini Naidu's response was to emphatically undermine the leadership pretensions of Western women. In a rousing speech she criticized European feminists who 'imitated men in a fierce, resentful, revengeful kind of way' and instead asserted an independent Indian path to women's emancipation.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the decade, nationalist women were using international women's conferences to send an even stronger message. At the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship Congress in Berlin in 1929 (see figure 1), the Indian delegation, indignant at being 'huddled under the all pervasive British Union Jack', communicated their anti-colonial politics by fashioning an Indian National Congress flag from their saris.<sup>35</sup> Naidu reported back to Gandhi that 'The East is making a lovely show – Egypt, Turkey, India, Japan, China, and Persia, and for the first time the Indian national flag has found a place among the flags of the world!'<sup>36</sup>

Indian nationalist women's continual rejection of Western leadership assertions in the international arena gradually made an impression – at least among some British women's organizations. In the summer of 1933, while campaigning on the issue of the women's franchise in London, Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali worked closely with a network of British women's organizations that they termed the 'five friendly societies'.<sup>37</sup> Unlike more imperialist-minded organizations, which claimed to speak on behalf of Indian women on the basis of their 'greater experience', the 'friendly societies' committed to listening to Indian women's demands and acting accordingly. Meeting shortly before the arrival of the Indian women, the British branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom signalled its intention to 'wait until the views of the [Indian] Women's Organisations were known' before intervening on their behalf.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, Amrit Kaur received assurances that the organization would 'do all in [its] power to make the point of view of the organised women in India known in this country'.<sup>39</sup> Later, in 1934, members of the 'five friendly societies' formed the Liaison Group of British Women's Societies, which acted as a mouthpiece for Kaur and her allies after they had left Britain.<sup>40</sup>

The stance of the 'friendly societies' represents a move towards the recalibration of imperial relationships within international feminism. In contrast to the assumed hierarchies of the imperial order, the terms of these alliances insisted that Indian women had equal status. But, while any suggestion of Western superiority was rejected, the Indian delegation accepted practical support. In fact, links to the 'five friendly societies' were crucial in enabling access to influential figures in Geneva.

## The Campaign in Geneva

Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali arrived in Geneva in mid September 1933. As hopeful petitioners, they were not alone. The 'League around the League' was active all year round but

<sup>33</sup>Chrystal Macmillan, 'Introduction', in The International Woman Suffrage Alliance, *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva Switzerland* (June 1920), 22.

<sup>34</sup>Sarojini Naidu to Jaisooraya Naidu, 16 June 1920, in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters*, ed. Makarand R. Paranjape (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2010), 146.

<sup>35</sup>Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya Papers, Articles/Speeches by Her, file 97, 1, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi (hereafter cited as NMML).

<sup>36</sup>Sarojini Naidu to Mahatma Gandhi, 18 June 1929, in *Sarojini Naidu*, ed. Paranjape, 229.

<sup>37</sup>The 'five friendly societies' were the Women's International League, the British Commonwealth League, the Six Point Group, the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, and the Women's Freedom League.

<sup>38</sup>Minutes of W.I.L. India Sub-committee, 9 February 1933, WILPF/4/2, London School of Economics, London (hereafter cited as LSE).

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>See file 59-II (1934), AIWC archive, New Delhi (hereafter cited as AIWC).





**Figure 1.** The opening of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship Congress in Berlin, 1929. Sarojini Naidu in a sari, front right; Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, far left. Source: The Women's Library, London.

September in Geneva was uniquely busy owing to the influx of delegates, lobbyists, and journalists drawn by meetings of the League Council and annual General Assembly.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, the delegation's campaign to be recognized as the legitimate representatives of Indian women on the League's Advisory Commission for the Protection of Women and Children was thwarted by the India Office in London, which resisted attempts to bypass its authority. However, the campaign was an opportunity to promote anti-colonial perspectives in Geneva. It also marked a substantive turning point in the history of the AIWC, which now began to establish itself as an independent, internationalist organization with direct links to League and ILO figures. The significance of the campaign lay, first, in the discursive challenge it presented to imperial legitimacy and, second, in the influence gained by anti-colonial Indian women at a non-state level among international bureaucrats and civil society actors.

Given the scepticism felt by leading Indian nationalists towards liberal internationalist institutions in the 1930s, it is not surprising to find that the plan to travel to Geneva was attended by a degree of hesitation among the delegation.<sup>42</sup> But a new opportunity had opened up on the 'social' committees of the League of Nations, and the proximity of Geneva to London (where the women had spent the summer) made the trip logistically tenable. A year earlier, the AIWC had become aware that the make-up of certain League committees was under review and that J. C. Coyajee, the British-appointed Indian representative in Geneva, was seeking to secure Indian representation on the Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children.<sup>43</sup> The AIWC-led delegation's aim was to ensure that any Indian appointment was jointly approved by India's three national women's organizations, which, in practice, meant a figure such as Amrit Kaur who had the confidence of nationalist women.

<sup>41</sup>Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 7.

<sup>42</sup>See Amrit Kaur to Agatha Harrison, 4 October 1933, 7MCA/C10, Women's Library, London (hereafter cited as WL): 'I am *very* glad you made me come to Geneva' (emphasis in original).

<sup>43</sup>W. Turner, India Office, to Princess Radziwill, Social Questions Section, League of Nations, 5 December 1932, 11B/669/669, League of Nations Archives, Geneva (hereafter cited as LoN).

The prospect of representation on the Advisory Commission offered a unique opportunity for Indian women to undermine the civilizational assumptions that supported the imperial order. The commission was comprised of two committees – the Child Welfare Committee and the Traffic of Women and Children Committee – and fell under the jurisdiction of the League Secretariat's Social Section. The Indian delegation's engagement with this work conformed to widespread assumptions in Geneva and beyond about the proper concerns of women. (The handful of female delegates appointed to the League General Assembly invariably found themselves consigned to the Assembly's Fifth Committee, which dealt exclusively with 'feminine' social and humanitarian issues.<sup>44</sup>) However, involvement with the Advisory Commission was a chance for Indian women to demonstrate their expertise and, in so doing, challenge the concept of Western 'tutelage'. 'Tutelage' legitimized the League of Nations' mandates system and was inherent in imperial policy in India, where constitutional reforms purportedly marked the gradual evolution of Indian self-government.<sup>45</sup> It implied that mandated or colonized peoples were not yet ready to rule themselves. Any international acknowledgement of Indian women's expertise in field of social reform would suggest otherwise.

The campaign brought Indian anti-colonial ideals to bear on the liberal internationalist rhetoric of self-determination and transnational cooperation. In doing so, it reflected the revitalization of Indian nationalism under Gandhi and the demand for *purna swaraj* (complete independence) made by the Indian National Congress in 1929. But it also channelled an older cosmopolitan tradition within Indian nationalism, traceable to late nineteenth-century thinkers, that associated colonial self-determination with the greater global good.<sup>46</sup> In London, Amrit Kaur spoke of this in terms of 'world brotherhood', invoking the desire of Indian nationalists to 'throw off the fetters which [India] feels are binding her and preventing her from fulfilling her mission in the world'.<sup>47</sup> In Geneva, this was translated as a desire 'to contribute our mite towards the solutions of world problems'.<sup>48</sup> The campaign, therefore, combined nationalist and cosmopolitan ideals and refashioned them to produce a new anti-colonial interpretation of liberal internationalism.

The Indian women's visit to Geneva turned the Advisory Commission for the Protection of Women and Children into a site where the competing interests of imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism clashed. Although an unusual choice for anti-colonial activism, the women's strategy displays an informed understanding of international diplomacy. In diplomatic terms, the technical work of world governance was an opportunity for state representatives to gain international prestige.<sup>49</sup> The interest of Coyajee, the Government of India representative, in the Advisory Commission reflects this point. Coyajee, like other Indian liberals, sought to use the League of Nations to promote India on the world stage, albeit within the context of empire.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, for the British government, India's proposed appointment to the Advisory Commission was a chance to showcase its credentials as an exemplar of good imperial governance. Consequently, in keeping with imperial policy, the British authorities exerted tight control over the question

<sup>44</sup>See Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 120–2.

<sup>45</sup>For the ideology of the mandates system, see Mazower, *Governing the World*. For imperial policy in India, see Peter Robb, *The Government of India and Reform: Policies Towards Politics and the Constitution, 1916–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>46</sup>See C. A. Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large: Mazzini and Nineteenth-Century India Thought', in *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920*, ed. C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 355–74.

<sup>47</sup>Amrit Kaur, 'The Brotherhood of Man' in *Selected Speeches and Writings of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur*, ed. G. Borkar (New Delhi: Archer Publications, 1961), 57. She made this speech in London during the summer of 1933, shortly before travelling to Geneva.

<sup>48</sup>Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva', file 27-I (1933), AIWC.

<sup>49</sup>See, for example, Heidi J. S. Tworek, 'Journalistic Statesmanship: Protecting the Press in Weimar Germany and Abroad', *German History* 32, no. 2 (2014): 559–78.

<sup>50</sup>This phenomenon is described by T. A. Keenleyside, 'The Indian Nationalist Movement and the League of Nations: Prologue to the United Nations', *India Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1983): 281–98.

of Indian representation on the Advisory Commission. Until 1928, the Government of India's representatives in Geneva had been British officials.<sup>51</sup> After that point, loyalist Indians filled those positions but the Cabinet Office and the India Office in London maintained control over appointments.<sup>52</sup>

The case for Indian women's representation at the League was formally made on 27 September, when Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali were joined by Ammu Swaminadhan, an AIWC member, and Keron Bose of the NCWI. The four women made an official submission to the President of the Council of the League of Nations on the joint behalf of the three all-India women's organizations. The submission was carefully drafted to emphasize the Indian delegation's legitimacy and expertise alongside internationalist commitments to cooperation and the global good: 'We constitute one-fifth of the world's women; we are keenly alive to the vital importance of the Council's work; we are systematically studying the problems connected with the position, rights and duties of women and could, therefore, co-operate to international advantage.'<sup>53</sup>

The submission to the President of the Council was the centrepiece of the campaign. But further official interactions followed. Some days later, a meeting was held with Harold Butler, the director of the ILO. This elicited information about a forthcoming conference on women's labour issues and provided an opportunity for the delegation to assert their legitimacy as representatives of India's three national organizations. Amrit Kaur also joined a delegation organized by the International Council of Women to Joseph Avenol, the Secretary General of the League, where she used the wider campaign for women's representation in Geneva as a platform from which to make the specific Indian case.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the formal petitioning of world governance institutions, the women's campaign sought wider publicity among global civil society and international bureaucrats. It therefore included a busy round of informal lobbying that enabled the women to advance their claims publicly and make useful contacts. Their efforts reached two categories of people. On the one hand were civil society actors, mainly members of international women's organizations, who were potential allies in the campaign for representation and, more widely, influencers of global public opinion. The second group comprised influential League and ILO officials, including Eric Einar Ekstrand and Gabrielle Radziwill of the Social Section, who, it was hoped, might support Indian women from within.

The delegation's non-official interactions relied on transnational connections established during the women's visit to London during the summer. Their activities there had created momentum, enhancing their profile and securing allies who were willing to support their claims. The most practical support in Geneva came from Agatha Harrison, a prominent member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the YWCA, and the Indian Conciliation Group, an organization established in 1931 to promote the Indian nationalist cause in Britain.<sup>55</sup> Harrison was well connected in League circles, where she was recognized as an expert in industrial and social welfare, and enjoyed a close relationship with Ekstrand, the director of the League's Social Section. She became a crucial link to international civil society, arranging meetings and speaking opportunities to enable the Indian delegation to reach an international audience.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Framke, 'India's Freedom'.

<sup>52</sup>Stephen Legg, 'An international anomaly? Sovereignty, the League of Nations and India's Princely Geographies', *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014): 100.

<sup>53</sup>Amrit Kaur, Shareefah Hamid Ali, Ammu Swaminadhan, and Keron Bose, 'Submission to President of the Council of the League of Nations, 27th Sept 1933' quoted in Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva'.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Geoffrey Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter: A Life of Horace Alexander* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

<sup>56</sup>See Agatha Harrison, 'Report of 9th September, 1933', M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Papers), subject file 317, 148, NMML.

The campaign of 1933 was the first time that an Indian women's organization had claimed a formal role in world governance. But Kaur and Hamid Ali were undoubtedly aware of the workings of Geneva civil society prior to their visit. In 1928, the AIWC's co-founder, Margaret Cousins, had been part of a 'Women's Deputation' to the President of the League of Nations. Cousins was enthusiastic about the possibilities of Geneva, which she described on her return to India as 'a city to which people from every country in the world come to exchange ideas and to help in making a unified world-consciousness and a resultant world-peace'.<sup>57</sup> Three years later, the All Asian Women's Conference, a meeting that Kaur helped organize, appointed a liaison officer tasked with establishing relations between the conference executive and 'Geneva and international organisations'.<sup>58</sup> In the event, this overture amounted to little, but it established a blueprint that would guide later interactions with international civil society.

The Indian women's visit coincided with an international effort to increase the role of women at the League, which, for many feminists, was 'the key to equality', the hope of peace, and an important site for feminist activism.<sup>59</sup> The international women's movement was by no means united in terms of ideology and method and, indeed, by the 1930s there existed a substantial amount of scepticism about the value of the League.<sup>60</sup> However, in 1931, the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations was formed to streamline the work of women's organizations in Geneva and, within the League Secretariat itself, a liaison officer, Gabrielle Radziwill, was appointed as an official point of contact. Amrit Kaur was introduced to the strategy of the women's Liaison Committee by contacts in London. 'What we do here', explained one correspondent, 'is to press our Government to include women in the British delegations to the Assembly and to the International Labour Conference'.<sup>61</sup> This established framework provided the delegation with structure and a network of potential allies.

In civil society circles, the women asserted their anti-colonial claims more explicitly than in official representations. Hamid Ali spoke at an event billed as the 'Third International Conference for India', which publicized examples of British repression and passed resolutions in favour of Indian independence.<sup>62</sup> At a reception hosted by the YWCA, Hamid Ali and Amrit Kaur spoke on the social and political work of the women's movement and described how nationalist India sought 'free and full development within her own borders' so that she might 'make her real contribution to the solution of international problems'.<sup>63</sup> The Women's Disarmament Committee meeting presented an opportunity for the women to air grievances about the British use of force to put down protests in India; at the same time, they argued for Indian representation at the League on the grounds that 'there could not be any world peace if the East was excluded from Geneva'.<sup>64</sup>

The AIWC's supporters declared the campaign a great success. Una Saunders of the World's YWCA reported the 'joy and enlightenment which the visit of these last few days has brought to many of us here in Geneva' and described Kaur's work there as 'epoch-making'.<sup>65</sup> In London, the

<sup>57</sup>Margaret E Cousins, 'Women's Movement in Geneva', *Times of India*, 4 December 1928, 10.

<sup>58</sup>Sumita Mukherjee, 'The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and Their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation', *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 373.

<sup>59</sup>Carol Miller, "'Geneva – the key to equality": Inter-War Feminists and the League of Nations', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994): 219–45. See also Nova Robinson, "'Women's point of view was apt to be forgotten": The Liaison Committee of International Women's Organizations' Campaign for an International Women's Convention, 1920–1953', in *Institution of International Order*, ed. Jackson and O'Malley, 263–307.

<sup>60</sup>Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 136–62.

<sup>61</sup>Florence Underwood, Secretary of Women's Freedom League, to Amrit Kaur, 19 August 1933, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Papers, Correspondence, NMML.

<sup>62</sup>Ellen Horup, 'The Third International Conference for India at Geneva', *Modern Review*, November 1933, 7MCA/C10, WL.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>Una Saunders to Amrit Kaur, 29 September 1933, file 27-I (1933), AIWC.

Women's International League Executive noted 'the very warm welcome which had been extended to [Kaur and her colleagues] from all quarters, including the L.N. Secretariat and the I.L.O.'<sup>66</sup> Amrit Kaur herself also painted a hopeful picture, reporting to colleagues that the President of the Council was receptive to their democratic claims: 'he was particularly interested to hear that we were *elected* representatives of the Women's organisations and actually made a note of this fact'.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, the strategy of securing allies among global civil society and the League Secretariat seemed to have paid off. A month after the visit to Geneva came confirmation that the Council of the League of Nations had invited India to serve on the Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children, which immediately raised the question of who should be appointed. The delegation had repeatedly demanded that any Indian representative should be selected from one of the three all-India women's organizations. Now that they were back in India, Edith Bigland of the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organisations advocated on their behalf, writing to the President of the Council in October to press their case. She also wrote to Amrit Kaur to ask for information about possible candidates. 'If we can know their names quickly,' she urged, 'we will do our best to support them.'<sup>68</sup>

Building on earlier interactions with the international women's movement, the campaign in Geneva made gains in establishing the legitimacy of Indian women on the world stage. Their claims wore away at the logic of civilizational superiority that underpinned the imperial order. They also made more explicit criticisms of British rule in India, further undermining the imperial system. Additionally, in practical terms, they secured international allies who would continue to support their cause in the coming years. Perhaps the most path-breaking achievement was the forging of relations with members of the League Secretariat. A few months after the women's visit, Gabrielle Radziwill of the League's Social Section sent Kaur a collection of League documents on the work of the Advisory Commission.<sup>69</sup> This act bypassed the imperial authorities entirely and established a relationship between the AIWC and world governance that would outlast the British Raj.

### Consolidation and war, 1933–39

Throughout the 1930s, amid rising disillusionment regarding the League of Nations' diplomatic functions, the 'technical' work of international institutions continued. British imperial authorities maintained control over official appointments, just as the Indian nationalist leadership remained aloof from the League. But by persistently building on relationships established in Geneva in 1933, the AIWC carved out a non-state role as a correspondent of the Social Section of the League and the 'Women's Work' section of the ILO. India was years away from independence, which only appeared more certain after the end of the Second World War, but nationalist members of the AIWC were, in effect, already working outside the framework of empire. This signalled a gradual shift in the internal dynamics of world governance institutions and foreshadowed the more inclusive practices adopted by the United Nations in subsequent decades.

After returning to India in late 1933, Amrit Kaur continued as the driving force behind the AIWC's Geneva-facing activities. One of her first suggestions to the AIWC executive was the creation of the new office of 'liaison officer with Europe' – a position that held responsibility for maintaining contact with international women's organizations, the League Secretariat, and the ILO. Kaur herself was appointed to this role, followed, in 1935, by Shareefah Hamid Ali. Thereafter, as lines of communication became better established, interactions between the

<sup>66</sup>Extract from Minutes of WIL Executive', 10 October 1933, 7MCA/C10, WL.

<sup>67</sup>Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva' (emphasis in original).

<sup>68</sup>Edith Bigland, Honorary Secretary, J.S.C.W.I.O. to Amrit Kaur, 7 December 1933, file 27-I, AIWC.

<sup>69</sup>Gabrielle Radziwill to Amrit Kaur, 21 December 1933, 11B/9040/729, box 4667, LoN.



AIWC and Geneva were incorporated into the work of the AIWC's honorary organising secretary. In projecting itself as the authentic, independent voice of Indian women, the AIWC distinguished itself from the NCWI, an affiliate of the International Council of Women, which also remained in touch with the League and the ILO.

Initially, however, the AIWC's status in Geneva was uncertain. Ignoring a list of six women candidates organized by Amrit Kaur and approved jointly by the three national women's organizations, the India Office installed their own choice of delegate on the Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The appointment they made, in February 1934, was Radhabhai Subbarayan, a social reformer and the wife of a former chief minister of Madras. Insiders referred to her as 'a very able lady . . . a good choice but of course not the best'. She also, reportedly, 'enjoy[ed] the confidence of the Government of India' and was seemingly untainted by nationalist associations.<sup>70</sup> Kaur's objection that Subbarayan was 'a woman who has never been a working member of any of our organisations' no doubt made her all the more suitable in the eyes of the imperial authorities.<sup>71</sup> Kaur was further displeased by the additional appointment of Subbarayan to the ILO's conference on labour conditions in June 1934. Writing to a British contact, she complained that 'I am sure [Subbarayan] has never been inside an Indian Factory or mill whereas we have special women members detailed to study Labour conditions in particular.'<sup>72</sup>

Subbarayan's two appointments set the tone for imperial policy relating to 'women's issues' in Geneva. For the remainder of the League's existence, the India Office would pointedly ignore the nationalist voice emanating from the Indian women's movement and instead appoint loyalist figures. However, at the same time, Kaur and others in the AIWC sought to maintain relations at an alternative, non-state level by communicating directly with international bureaucrats. Undeterred by Subbarayan's appointment, Kaur commissioned a special report for submission to the ILO conference, arguing that 'there is no harm in our making our views known through our own agency'. 'In fact', she added, 'we should do so.'<sup>73</sup> Determined that the report should hit the target, as well as sending it to the ILO, she sent a copy to her new contact Eric Einar Ekstrand: 'Please be kind enough', she urged, 'to use your influence and help us to get the questions mentioned in this memorandum considered at the International Labour Conference.'<sup>74</sup>

Over time, the determination of Amrit Kaur to consolidate direct relations with Geneva-based officials bore fruit. From a strategic point of view, she was probably right in her instinct that 'it was essential for us to send in something to the [ILO] Conference in order to strengthen our hand for the future'.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, from 1935 onwards, the AIWC was reporting annually to the ILO, and the ILO was publishing these reports in its publication, *Industrial and Labour Information*.<sup>76</sup> During the same period, the Indian branch of the ILO, which reported monthly to the ILO headquarters in Geneva, included news of AIWC activities in its dispatches.<sup>77</sup> In December 1938, these connections were cemented when P. M. Hage of the 'Women's Work' section of the ILO travelled to India and met with AIWC figures. The connection with the ILO strengthened the AIWC's authority as an agent of reform in India and gave the organization an international presence.

<sup>70</sup>A. C. Chatterjee to Princess Radziwill, 27 February 1934, 11B/669/669, LoN.

<sup>71</sup>Amrit Kaur to Eleanor Rathbone, 2 April 1934, 7ELR/24, WL.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup>Amrit Kaur to Mrs Mukerjee, 7 April 1934, file 59-II, AIWC.

<sup>74</sup>Amrit Kaur to Erik Einar Ekstrand, 28 May 1934, 11A/11646/320, LoN.

<sup>75</sup>Amrit Kaur to Mrs Mukerjee, 18 May 1934, file 59-I, AIWC.

<sup>76</sup>See Harold B. Butler, Director, International Labour Office to Amrit Kaur, 8 March 1935, WN/1000/29/1, International Labour Office Archives, Geneva (hereafter cited as ILO). A somewhat less extensive correspondence was also maintained with the NCWI.

<sup>77</sup>See, for example, 'Report for May 1935', 62-28, and 'Report for January 1936', 55, ILO India Branch Reports, University of Göttingen, Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Göttingen.

The AIWC also maintained a direct relationship with the League of Nations Social Section, chiefly through knowledge-exchange activities. The League Secretariat shared expertise on issues such as sanitation and hygiene, maternity and child welfare, education, and women's labour. In return, AIWC officers responded with news from India. A typical missive might include a report on AIWC work being carried out, for example, in training Indian midwives or promoting child nutrition, or a list of AIWC resolutions on issues such as maternity care, prostitution, and child labour.<sup>78</sup> These reports, which were received in Geneva with assurances that they were of 'immense value' to the social work of the League, provided evidence of Indian women's expertise, and lent the AIWC credibility and prestige.<sup>79</sup>

The relationship with the League Social Section took on a more concrete turn in February 1937 with the convening of the Conference of Central Authorities in Eastern Countries in Bandung on the subject of Traffic in Women and Children. India was represented by the AIWC chairman, Mrs S. C. Mukerjee – an appointment that appeared to legitimize the AIWC as the sole representative of Indian women.<sup>80</sup> On his way back from Bandung, Erik Einar Ekstrand, who had served as secretary-general of the conference, conducted a lecture tour of India upon the invitation of the AIWC. Indicating the respect that the AIWC had attracted in Geneva, Ekstrand later praised the AIWC's organising secretary, Ammu Swaminadhan, 'who so efficiently and with such great competence organised the tour'.<sup>81</sup>

Later in 1937, the AIWC was appointed a 'correspondent member' of the League's Advisory Committee on Social Questions, which no doubt came about owing to the organization's careful nurturing of its relationship with the League's Social Section. This was not a state-level appointment. Rather it was an official advisory role created for the purpose of 'keeping the Committee in touch with voluntary movements in different countries'.<sup>82</sup> The official remit of a correspondent member included the 'privilege' of receiving materials from the committee and the opportunity of raising issues of concern. The criteria for the appointment included being internationally affiliated 'in a substantial number of countries', employing a 'full-time secretariat', and 'carrying out an active programme of work'.<sup>83</sup> As far as the Social Section was concerned, the AIWC had convincingly demonstrated its credentials as experts in social reform. Notably, the AIWC was now explicitly advertising its stance as an organization engaged in social and educational work of a 'nation-building character', a process that foreshadowed formal decolonization.<sup>84</sup>

The collapse of the interwar system of world governance after 1939 was a blow to the AIWC's rising status in Geneva. Among the last pieces of correspondence to reach the AIWC was a letter from the ILO's P. M. Hage in December 1939 declining an invitation to the AIWC's annual meeting because the international situation made travel to India impossible.<sup>85</sup> The situation inside India also became critical. Because the Government of India declared war on India's behalf without consulting Indian nationalist leaders, official Indian National Congress policy opposed the war effort and the AIWC followed suit. This tested transnational bonds of feminist solidarity. Several British feminists, including members of the 'five friendly societies' who had previously given unconditional support to Indian women's campaigns in London and Geneva, signed an open letter to the women of India urging them to support the war effort. The response from a group of

<sup>78</sup>See, for example, Mrs S. Hamid Ali to Princess Radziwill, 1 February 1935, and Lakshmbai Rajwade to Princess Radziwill, 14 February 1935, 11A/11646/320, LoN.

<sup>79</sup>A. Colin to Dina Asana, Hon. Organising Secretary, AIWC, 20 July 1937, 11A/11646/320, LoN.

<sup>80</sup>League of Nations, 'Traffic in Women and Children: Conference of Central Authorities in Eastern Countries', 13 February 1937, C.22.M.164, LoN.

<sup>81</sup>Eric Einar Ekstrand to Dina Asana, 9 February 1938, 11B/29871/26725, LoN.

<sup>82</sup>Eric Einar Ekstrand to President of the AIWC, 3 July 1937, 11B/29872/26725, LoN.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*; Eric Einar Ekstrand to Malinibai Sukthancar, 8 May 1939, and Renuka Ray to Secretary General, 25 May 1939, 11B/29872/26725, LoN; 'Status of Women: Addresses of Women's International Organisations', 3A/32474/13900, LoN.

<sup>85</sup>P. M. Hage to Dr Mrs Malinibai Sukthancar, 5 December 1939, WN100/29/6, ILO.

prominent Indian women, including Amrit Kaur, reflected an intractable tension between anti-colonial women and their British counterparts, which, while the war continued, proved impossible to resolve: 'As we see the reality, it is this. It is a war between the British Empire and Nazis and Fascists for world domination, meaning in effect exploitation of the non-European races. We cannot be in love with Nazism and Fascism. But we may not be expected to be in love with British Imperialism.'<sup>86</sup>

The gains made by anti-colonial women in Geneva during the 1930s could not be sustained during the war. Few allies in Europe accepted the Indian nationalist position on the war, while interactions with Geneva became impossible as the League of Nations ceased to function. However, the AIWC's interactions with world governance in the 1930s contributed to longer-term shifts in the dynamics of international institutions. In a general sense, their activities affirmed their right to self-representation and wore away at negative cultural stereotypes that underpinned the imperial system. More specifically they established the AIWC as an internationally respected, expert organization in the field of social reform. While these developments counted for little in the short term, they were deeply rooted enough to be significant as the world transitioned to a new order after the Second World War.

## Epilogue

Despite ruptures caused by the war, the AIWC's interactions with world governance in the 1930s link the League of Nations to its successor, the United Nations. In April 1945, the San Francisco Conference on International Organization was called, the purpose of which was to bring the new system of world governance into being. Meanwhile, in India, the leadership of the Indian National Congress (with the exception of Gandhi) was in jail, having been imprisoned in 1942. As the San Francisco conference opened, many around the world protested the exclusion of nationalist figures from the Indian delegation, which, critics claimed, was made up of British 'stooges'. Among those raising an objection was the AIWC, which found international expression through its links to the Liaison Group of British Women's Societies established by Amrit Kaur over a decade earlier. In solidarity, the Liaison Group organized a public appeal to the British government demanding that the nationalist leadership be released from prison so as to be available to attend the San Francisco conference: 'At a time when plans are being made for the post-war world', the appeal stated, 'we share the Indian Women's concern that their trusted leaders should take their rightful place in national and international affairs.'<sup>87</sup>

The most visible critic of the British-appointed Indian delegation was Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a former AIWC president and the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, who ran an unofficial campaign in San Francisco as the 'sole spokesman' for India. Her campaign, which combined formal petitioning with unofficial lobbying at the level of civil society, was in many ways reminiscent of her AIWC colleagues' Geneva campaign and built on international prestige established by them in the 1930s. As India transitioned to independence and in the decade that followed, Pandit became a prominent figure at the United Nations, most notably as the President of the General Assembly in 1953.

Within a few months of the San Francisco conference, the situation in relation to Indian representation was beginning to change. In November 1945, Amrit Kaur took her place as the delegate for India at the inaugural meeting of UNESCO, where she was also appointed a vice-president of

<sup>86</sup>'Reply to British Women's Appeal' (drafted by M. K. Gandhi and signed by Sarojini Naidu, Rameshwari Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Amrit Kaur, Rani Lakshmi Bai Rajwade, Ammu Swaminathan, and Radha Subbarayan), 21 June 1941, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 80:313, <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-80.pdf>. See also 'Women's Reply to British Plea', *Times of India*, 24 June 1941, 2. The inclusion of Subbarayan, who was now associated with the Congress in Madras, is interesting and seems to suggest how successfully the official Congress line on independence had taken hold in the women's movement by this point.

<sup>87</sup>'British Women's Appeal for Women and Children in India and Pakistan' (draft, approved 9 March 1945), 7MCA/C8, WL.

the conference. In a speech at this meeting, Kaur combined her urgent call for international cooperation with a strong Gandhian message on non-violence, her remarks asserting Indian moral leadership as a remedy for the destruction of the Second World War.<sup>88</sup> Kaur's appointment at UNESCO broke new ground in its elevation of an anti-colonial woman, signalling the beginning of a new international era. But her career suggests continuity. Her international appointments at UNESCO and, later, the World Health Organization built on experience gained in world governance during the 1930s. There is also notable coherence in her ideas. In Geneva she campaigned for Indian women to be allowed to 'contribute our mite towards the solutions of world problems'.<sup>89</sup> In 1949, as Minister for Health in India's first independent cabinet, she articulated her mission as 'mak[ing] of India a country which will help lead this troubled world into the paths of peace'.<sup>90</sup>

'Transfer of power' negotiations began in India shortly after the end of the war, culminating, in August 1947, with the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. As the attention of the Indian National Congress shifted from resistance to governance, the interim government led by Jawaharlal Nehru appointed Hansa Mehta, the then president of the AIWC, as India's representative on the newly formed United Nations Sub-Commission on the Status of Women (see figure 2). In many ways, Mehta was a symbol of change and historical rupture, her appointment advertising the soon-to-be-independent status of India, the global leadership role that the new state hoped to play, and the possibility of a new world order. Her work on the Sub-Commission asserted Indian women's authority in the field of social work, seemingly consigning the civilizing claims of imperial rule to the past. Notably, she introduced to the Sub-Commission the 'Indian Women's Charter' as a blueprint for women's rights globally.<sup>91</sup> These AIWC-drafted recommendations would go on to form the basis of the United Nations approach to gender equality, reflecting new possibilities for feminist internationalism in a decolonizing world.

At the same time, Mehta was a figure of continuity. As a representative of the AIWC, she brought to the United Nations experience gained from links to transnational civil society and intergovernmental organizations in the interwar years. Reflecting these connections, she was among those on the Sub-Commission to recommend that the United Nations' work on gender equality be linked to global civil society so as to maintain independence from state authorities.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, her assertion of Indian leadership in this work was not so much a break from the past but a continuation of the AIWC-led campaign in Geneva. It built on claims made and, to some extent, accepted within the framework of world governance in the 1930s, and continued the slow, quiet process of delegitimizing empire below and beyond the politics of state.

## Conclusion

The 'technical' work of world governance opened up a distinct, gendered opportunity for anti-colonial Indian women to engage with the international community. By developing and exploiting global civil society networks, they were able to use this opening to gain international recognition as agents of reform. In doing so, they chipped away at the legitimacy of the imperial system – a world order that sustained not just imperial states but also the below-state-level dynamics of women's

<sup>88</sup>Conference for the Establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Held at the Institute of Civil Engineers, London, 1st–16th November 1945', ECO/CONF./29, 33, UNESCO archive, Geneva.

<sup>89</sup>Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva'.

<sup>90</sup>Quoted in Daniel Behrman, 'India's Health is Her Job', *Courier* (Publication of UNESCO) 11, no. 8 (September 1949): 21.

<sup>91</sup>Summary Record of the Second Meeting of the Sub-Commission of the Status of Women, Held at Gillet Hall, Hunter College, New York, 1 May 1946 at 10.30am', E/HR/ST/7, 2, UN Records, New York (hereafter cited as UN).

<sup>92</sup>Summary Record of the Fourth Meeting of the Sub-Commission of the Status of Women, Held at Gillet Hall, Hunter College, New York, 3 May 1946 at 10.50am', E/HR/ST/9, 4, UN.



**Figure 2.** Members of the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women, 8 May 1946. Left to right: Hansa Mehta, India; Way Sung New, China; Fryderyka Kalinowska, Poland; Angela Jurdak, Lebanon; Minerva Bernardino, Dominican Republic; Marie H el ene Lefauchaux, France; Bodgil Begtrup, Denmark. Source: UN Photo.

transnational civil society networks. This discursive undermining of imperialism was an essential component of geopolitical decolonization. But the campaign in Geneva also prepared the ground for a new world order in more practical ways. When national independence came, Indian women associated with the AIWC were well placed to build on prestige and experience amassed during the interwar period. This served the interests of the new Indian state as it sought to establish itself as a leading force of decolonization after the end of the Second World War. This may be contrasted with the position of Pakistan, which lacked an internationally experienced women's organization and was not so quickly integrated into the social work of the United Nations.

The role played by the AIWC in Geneva has implications for how we think about the history of liberal internationalism. Although leading anti-colonialists viewed the League of Nations as a 'tool in the hands of the great powers', Indian women's involvement with international institutions in the 1930s suggests a more complex history.<sup>93</sup> Far from being a static bastion of the imperial order, interwar world governance was dynamic and evolving. Over time, it developed – transnationally and below the level of the state – through the agency of civil society activists. Indian women's interventions in and around world governance shifted the terms of liberal internationalism and, incrementally, helped reshape global institutions. Asymmetries of power and negative cultural assumptions remained. But their activism began to normalize the integration of non-Western women and their ideas into international institutions in a process that ran ahead of geopolitical developments.

The AIWC's interactions with world governance reflect some of the nuances of decolonization as a historical phenomenon. Just like the imperial frameworks it disrupted, twentieth-century decolonization implies a range of geopolitical, economic, and social processes that took place in multiple locations across uneven timescales. This includes the activities of women working through the movement for social reform in the arena of world governance. It is of course true that many of the cultural assumptions and global inequalities associated with European imperialism persisted well beyond the end of empire. But, conversely, it is also the case that AIWC activists were successfully eroding the legitimacy of the imperial order decades in advance of formal independence. Nationalist women working within the Indian women's movement made imaginative use of the framework of interwar world governance to confront the political and social

<sup>93</sup>Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, 683.



structures of the interwar world order. By subverting the ‘civilizing’ logic of European imperialism while at the same time working for the reform of society, they made available a possible global future where colonial freedom was compatible with international cooperation and advances for women.

Rosalind Parr is Lecturer in Modern History at the University of St Andrews. Her research interests centre on the transnational histories of Indian activists in the twentieth century with a focus on gender, knowledge exchange, and cosmopolitanism. She is completing a book on the international careers of anti-colonial Indian women during the 1920s and 1930s.