



New Frontiers: Women Writers and the British Raj

On View April 10-22, 2018

Inspired by the 2018 British Women Writers Conference's invitation to reconsider the work of individuals living at the margins of traditional understandings of nationality and profession, this exhibit highlights the relationship between English-speaking women writers and British rule in India in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Where India offered an escape from the orthodoxy of Britain to some white women like Amy Carmichael and Marianne North, colonial anxieties regarding racial superiority led many women to act as guardians of traditional British values. At the same time, British rule eroded many Indian cultural practices including its strict patriarchal order. This led to new educational and professional opportunities for Indian women even as it imported new patriarchal and racial ideologies and left them struggling to articulate the new identities imposed on them by colonization. This exhibit attempts to interrogate the colonial implications of the idea of *the frontier*, acknowledging the importance of the concept as a justification for "civilizing" India. At the same time, the exhibit emphasizes the frontier's potential as a space at the edge of and even beyond systems of control. Through a mixture of poetry, fiction, scientific, and personal writing, "New Frontiers" speculates on the complex mixture of freedom and disenfranchisement imposed on both British and Indian women writers by the contradictions of Empire.

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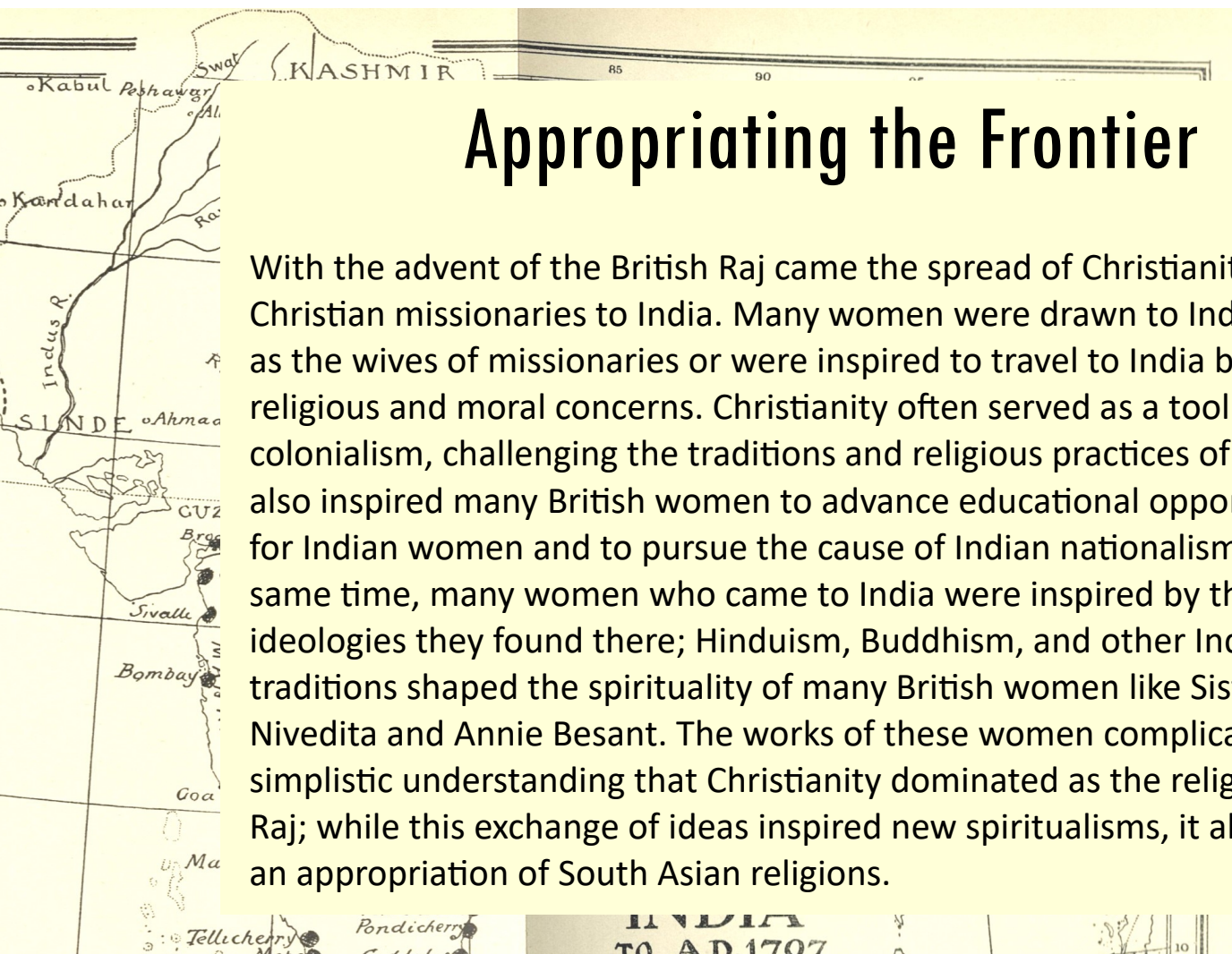


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“Saving” the Frontier

Many British and Irish women came to India through missionary work, which allowed them to take on positions of relative authority as they worked to convert Indians, primarily native Hindus, to Christianity. These efforts were an obvious branch of the colonial enterprise, forcing the spread of British cultural values and often perpetuating racist views. In missionary writings, Indians are frequently depicted as childish and lost and commonly referred to as “heathens.” This missionary work was often depicted as an attempt at social reform. In particular, Amy Carmichael’s (1867-1951) *Things as They Are* is a deeply critical depiction of the *devadasi*, women who were promised as servants to temple deities, usually at a very young age, and the caste system, which Carmichael argued stifled the spread of Christianity and harmed Indian society. While texts like Carmichael’s reveal a genuine concern for Hindu women’s well-being, the texts also suggest—and perpetuate—an ignorance of the intricacies of Hindu culture.



Appropriating the Frontier

With the advent of the British Raj came the spread of Christianity and Christian missionaries to India. Many women were drawn to India initially as the wives of missionaries or were inspired to travel to India by their own religious and moral concerns. Christianity often served as a tool of colonialism, challenging the traditions and religious practices of India. It also inspired many British women to advance educational opportunities for Indian women and to pursue the cause of Indian nationalism. At the same time, many women who came to India were inspired by the ideologies they found there; Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Indian traditions shaped the spirituality of many British women like Sister Nivedita and Annie Besant. The works of these women complicate the simplistic understanding that Christianity dominated as the religion of the Raj; while this exchange of ideas inspired new spiritualisms, it also led to an appropriation of South Asian religions.



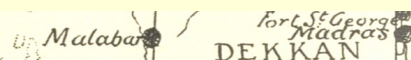
Knowing the Frontier

British colonialism often presented itself as a means of exploring new areas to broaden scientific, geographic, and cultural knowledge. For many women writers this was an opportunity to seize a unique authority. For instance, Marianne North (1830-1890) was a wealthy woman from an upper-class family who hated the social niceties of Victorian England. As a skilled artist and botanist, she spent much of her life travelling the world, including an extended visit to India in 1877. When North returned to England, she capitalized on the authority her knowledge of India provided to open a gallery of the art she produced while on the subcontinent. Today, North's collected works can be found in the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. While this authority was a great opportunity for many women, it also often facilitated colonial abuse. This can be seen in Favell Lee Mortimer's (1802-1879) *Far Off: Asia Described*, an educational children's book. While Mortimer never lived in India, her book clearly draws on these systems of colonial knowledge and includes many racist and demeaning depictions of Indians.



Writing the Frontier

The writing of English-speaking women in the British Raj expressed a wide range of positions regarding colonial rule in India. Some British women wrote about their perceived place within the British Empire as wives and mothers, acting as guardians of the British home and perpetuating colonial agendas. Some British women wrote about politics, using their books and articles as a vehicle promoting issues such as women's education and Indian nationalism. Others wrote about their travels throughout India, marveling at its beauty and diversity. Indian women living under the Raj wrote about their country as well, retelling cultural and religious legends and even defending the British Empire, despite the fact that the Empire provided constant reminders that they would never be truly British. These authors capture the tensions of race, gender, and colonialism that demarcated womanhood in the years of the British Raj.



Annie Besant

1847-1933

A child of the Irish diaspora born in London, Annie Besant was a radical in almost every sense of the word. She was an outspoken critic of British imperialism, a feminist, and a socialist organizer. Besant's passion for rebellion led her to join Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, and the Society's pattern of mining Hindu reform movements for spiritual ideas brought Besant to India in 1893. Here, Besant announced her intention to fight for Indian women's educational rights. But, her devotion to traditional Hindu culture and its strict gender roles sometimes posed a challenge for her activism. This led her away from women's issues, and she began raising money for a boy's college, the Central Hindu College in Benares, which opened in 1898. She returned to advocating for women in the early 1900s with a lecture series that attempted to reinterpret ancient Hindu texts to justify giving women more freedom in Indian society. Over time, Besant became increasingly nationalistic in her political concerns, and she was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1917. This move to nationalism led her to sacrifice women's issues again as she chose not to list suffrage on the Home Rule for India League's list of demands, focusing instead on the League's strictly anti-colonial agenda.



Flora Annie Steel

1847-1929



In many ways, Flora Annie Steel stands alongside Rudyard Kipling as the definitive author of the Anglo-Indian experience. She lived for twenty-two years in India while her husband, Henry William Steel, worked for the Indian Civil Service. This time in India inspired most of her writing, a wide array of novels, short stories, and nonfiction set in the subcontinent. Her nonfiction writing, such as *India*, reveals a deep concern for revealing India to “the West,” a depiction that is generally positive if given to orientalizing fantasy. She advises that those with a “scientific, botanical eye” will never see “behind the veil” to “enchanted India.” However, despite her infatuation with India, she was committed to racist understandings of British superiority and the importance of the British woman’s role as a guardian of traditional domesticity. This concern led her to co-author the very successful *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, essentially a housekeeping guide for British women in India.

Pandita Ramabai

(Rama Dongre)

1858-1922

Pandita Ramabai (Rama Dongre) was devoted to education. She was recognized from a very young age for her expertise in Sanskrit writing, and was given the honorific name “Pandita,” to suggest she was just as learned as the traditionally male brahmin pandits. She was very concerned about having female doctors and nurses working in India, a concern that led her to pursue a medical degree at the University of Edinburgh. She never completed the degree, but converted to Anglicanism while in the U.K. and committed herself to advocating for women’s rights and education reform in India. She toured the U.S. and wrote *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in 1887, hoping to generate global concern for the mistreatment of Indian women. Ultimately, she returned to India to found the women’s educational facility Sharada Sadan, which supported destitute widows, and the Mukti Mission orphanage. While primarily charitable institutions, these agencies also acted as missions where Ramabai spread her iconoclastic version of Christianity, which she attempted to position as a liberating alternative to the strictures of the Hindu caste system.



Ramabai

Sister Nivedita

(Margaret E. Noble)

1867-1911



Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble) was a proponent of women's education and Indian nationalism. An Irish schoolteacher and social worker, Noble was motivated by service. In 1895, Noble met Swami Vivekananda who would become her mentor and lead to her adoption of Shaktism, the worship of the Hindu goddess, as part of a monastic order led by Ramakrishna. Traveling to Calcutta in 1898, Noble was initiated into the order by Swami Vivekananda, who gave her the name Sister Nivedita (meaning "dedicated to God"). This was a unique development for the time, as Nivedita was the only woman and the only white member of the traditionally male order of monks. She spent her time in this order founding a girl's school and working for plague relief. After Swami Vivekananda's death, Sister Nivedita left the Ramakrishna order to advocate for an independent Indian nation. Her writings, such as the collection *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, are filled with the conviction that more connects the cultures of Britain and India than divides them. Still, her work within Hinduism was predicated on British ideologies of education and independence, situating her work within a colonial context even as she worked to understand Hindu spiritualism.

Toru Dutt

1856-1877

Toru Dutt had an early start as an English-speaking writer. She published her first article in *Bengal Magazine* in 1874, at the age of just eighteen. The Hindu daughter of a British-appointed Calcutta Justice of the Peace, Dutt's life was an example of the extent to which colonialism infiltrated Indian culture. Dutt's first language was English, and later she learned French. It was in these two languages that she most frequently wrote. Not until she spent four years traveling and studying in Britain did Dutt return to India determined to write in Sanskrit, in which she became fluent. Though she died very young, in 1877, Dutt wrote two unpublished novels and a collection of poetry linking the beauty of her native India with her reflections on her time in Britain. Her poem *The Ballad of Savitri*, the English rendition of a traditional Indian tale, tells the story of a brave young woman who wins her husband back from death. Here, this facsimile of some of Dutt's only writing in Sanskrit shows her commitment to mastering the language. Dutt's life and writing were shaped by her experience at the intersection between the worlds of India and Britain, and her complex, multi-lingual work suggest both opportunity and loss found in a Hindu and colonial-British upbringing.

