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An intimate and imperial feminism: Meliscent Shephard and the regulation of prostitution in colonial India

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Abstract. This paper seeks to construct an antinostalgic portrait of an imperial feminist. As the representative of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) in India between 1928 and 1947, Meliscent Shephard was an embodiment not only of the feminist urge to challenge patriarchal gender relations, but also of the imperialist urge to classify and fathom the world through a series of racist typologies. Despite an earlier belief that blame for the exploitation of prostitutes lay with the colonial state and economy, she later fell back on explanations based on notions of Indian society and religion. Operating in a period of heightened anticolonial nationalism, these latter views thwarted any hope of her forging successful connections with emergent Indian social reform groups. This failure to cultivate intimate relations with Indian colleagues marks a failure at the level of national and racial politics. Shephard did, however, cultivate an intimate relationship with correspondents at the AMSH in London, while her experiences of the sexual geographies of Indian cities provided a form of intimate interaction that would inspire her mission to close down tolerated brothels. As such, this paper marks an empirical engagement with the intimate frontiers at which the affective grid of colonial politics was marked out.

In December 1928 Meliscent Shephard made the journey from England to India as a representative of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH). Although she intended to spend only three years abroad, hosted by the Calcutta Vigilance Association, Shephard remained in India until 1947. During her time as the Indian representative of the AMSH she sought to extend the abolitionist principles of the association through her campaign against regulated or tolerated brothels, and through campaigning for the equally high moral standards of men and women. This campaign would face various challenges relating to anticolonial nationalism, the international controversy sparked by Katherine Mayo's (1927) book entitled *Mother India*, and the financial implications of the 1930s Great Depression and war economy.

While there is no doubt that broader forces dictated the path that a representative of the AMSH could have taken in India, Shephard's personality was clearly essential in directing the way in which the local, national, and international networks that she straddled were interwoven, connected, and disconnected. These networks facilitated, and necessitated, certain types of intimacy, only some of which Shephard was able to embrace. This has become apparent in the extensive correspondence between Shephard and the AMSH, whose archives are now stored at the Women's Library in London.⁽¹⁾ The AMSH files have only just been catalogued, which may in part explain Shephard's near total absence from the commentaries on interwar India [Poonacha and Pandey (2000) provide the only traceable mention of Shephard]. The files consist of personal letters as well as formal reports, professional correspondence, and printed, circulated accounts of Shephard's time in India. These have been complemented by investigations of Shephard's writing in various journals, and her correspondence, with the Government

⁽¹⁾ For the files regarding India see the Women's Library, London (henceforth WL)/3AMS/C.

of India, as stored in archives at the British Library in London, and the National and State Archives in Delhi. Rather than a linear, biographical approach, this paper will be structured along the lines of three scales of intimate relationships Shephard negotiated, which also provide a loose chronological coherence. These relate to her experiences of Indian cities, her international correspondence, and the conflict between her racist worldview and that of anticolonial nationalists and social reformers. These three scales of intimate (dis)engagement will be explored after the theoretical, historiographical, historical, and biographical contexts have been briefly set.

Imperial intimacies: feminisms in interwar India

Scales of intimacy

The ‘closeness’ of intimacy has long since been dissociated from physical proximity (Seymour and Bagguley, 1999). This need not imply a consideration of an abstract plane of ‘plastic sexuality’ or intimacy as democracy (Giddens, 1992), but can extend our understanding of public and unstable zones of intimacy. Such places are not passive, rather they create “spaces and usurp places meant for other kinds of relation” (Berlant, 2000, page 2). These spaces can include undocumented contacts of bodies or biopolitical spaces of regulated domesticity. But Lisa Lowe (2006) has also suggested we study ‘global intimacies’ that take spatial proximity and adjacent connections to a continental scale.

Such spatial investigations of intimacy pose the vital question of scale. Analyses of the separation and connection of lives in a purportedly ‘global’ world necessarily raise questions of distance, scale, proximity, and intensity (Katz and Miller, 2006; Legg, 2009). A focus on the intimate helps to disable any sense of an ontological realm of the ‘global’ and forces attention back to the specific, quotidian effects of processes which are global in scope (Pratt and Rosner, 2006; also see Latour, 2005). Just as the domestic emerges as a porous space of worldly interactions (Blunt and Dowling, 2006), and the personal is highlighted as intensely political (McDowell, 1999), so feminist reconfigurations of scale replace an opposition between the local and the global with intimate correctives to a global outlook (Pratt and Rosner, 2006, page 17).

These scalar networks of intimate relationships necessarily bind the intimate to broader shifts in technology, economy, ecology, population, and society. Ann Stoler (2002) has done much to trace such broader ‘genealogies of the intimate’ in the context of colonial relations. These microphysical sites of Foucauldian power relations mark what Stoler (2002, page 7) calls the “affective grid of colonial politics”. These sites forged the boundaries between public and private exactly through incursions over that divide to ‘conduct the conduct’ of nursing, parenting, sex, and cleanliness in explicitly raced and gendered modes of governance. Such racial sorting did not divide and describe populations solely along the various rhetorical tropes of orientalism. It also distributed affective capacities to different populations, ascribing to them what Stoler terms either ‘limited emotive capacities’ or ‘more intense displays of affective expression’:

“Colonial authority depended on shaping appropriate and reasoned affect (where one’s sympathies should lie), severing some intimate bonds and establishing others (which offspring would be acknowledged as ones own), establishing what constituted moral sentiments (family honor or patriotic duty); in short, colonial authority rested on educating the proper distribution of sentiments and desires” (2006, page 2).

While this paper will question the extent to which the Government of India wanted to intervene in the intimate, and actually drew back from this domain in various ways, the rise of 20th-century welfare biopolitics eventually dragged the colonial state into

the realm of social hygiene. Such policies bring sentiments and the affective into the realm of the political and thus pose the challenge of discovering rare intimate archives, or of interpreting intimate accounts, objects, or silences in existing archives (Arnold, 1994; Chaturvedi, 2000). There are millions of intimate experiences which are irretrievably lost, entombed with subalterns who can no longer speak (Spivak, 1988 [2000]).⁽²⁾ But there are alternative subaltern experiences which have been archived. This paper does not propose to excavate a subaltern narrative which describes the affective colonial experience of being biopolitically governed. Rather, it seeks the experience of an individual at the forefront of the invasive governmentalities which sought to extend the realm of the political into that of the intimate. However, through examining a female pioneer of this frontier, it can also make a claim to be exploring a “subalternity of the elite” (Chatterjee, 1992, page 42; also see Chakrabarty, 1998) through examining a member of the ‘inferior’ sex within the ‘superior’ race and class. This is the story of an individual in a situation of comparative wealth and considerable power, but one fighting against the norms of a patriarchal imperial society and, what she viewed as, a society of unequal moral standards between men and women. That is, an imperial feminist.

Imperial feminism

As a theory, ‘imperial feminism’ has done more travelling than most (Said, 1984, page 227). Deployed by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984) as a withering critique of the situation of black women in 1980s Britain, it highlighted the imperial origins of international sisterhood. Academics have since been exploring these origins through studies of white women who launched international campaigns that aimed to benefit women of colour. While such studies have taken the theory of imperial feminism deep into Africa and Asia, and back into the 19th century, there are relatively few comparable explorations into ‘late colonialism’ (Darwin, 1999).

The imperial feminist literature examines women neither as objects of orientalist representations (Lewis, 1996), originators of imperial racism or subjects of imperial patriarchy (see Procida, 2002a, pages 165–192), nor as travel writers (Blunt, 1994; Blunt and Rose, 1994; Kearns, 1997; McEwan, 2000; Mills, 2005; Pratt, 1992). Rather, it examines the ways in which women in imperial settings carved out opportunities within the options available to them, which often meant sharing in common attitudes of racism, paternalism, ethnocentrism, and national chauvinism (Strobel, 1991). For instance, while memsahibs could bolster the colonial system by making their homes into microcosmic ‘headquarters of empire’ (Blunt, 1999), missionaries and reformers could also pose fundamental questions about the relation of humanitarianism to imperialism and the moral validity of externally induced social change (Strobel, 1991, page 50). Whilst often effecting material improvements in the lives of indigenous women, these women also spread Western culture, often in anticipation of formal colonisation (for early examples see Midgley, 2007). As such, they were placed in extremely ambivalent situations (see Legg, 2008), in which they were criticising the project of which they were, often explicitly, a part.

A central example of this ambivalence is Josephine Butler, who spearheaded the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) (1864–69), which allowed for the compulsory detention and treatment of prostitutes in British and Irish port towns (Walkowitz, 1982). After the repeal of the acts in 1886 Butler turned her attention to the operation of the Cantonment Regulations in India, which survived the repeal of

⁽²⁾ Although see Sumanta Banerjee (1998) for an analysis of the oral histories and scatological language used by prostitutes in colonial Bengal.

the Indian CDA (1868) in 1888 (Burton, 1994; also see Ballhatchet, 1980; Levine, 2003) and were ferociously debated in the 1890s (Levine, 1996).

Butler viewed white women as the purifiers of a corrupt empire of double moral standards, yet she also reconfigured imperial power by her portrayal of Indian women as passive and in need of salvation (Burton, 1994, page 17). Similarly, she attacked the state but not imperialism, viewing regulated prostitution as a threat to the validity of empire and arguing in favour of a more ethical imperialism (Burton, 1994, page 149). It was the legacy of these ideas that Shephard would have to negotiate as the Indian representative of the AMSH, which was formed in 1915 by the merger of Butler's Ladies National Association (LNA) and the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution.

Antoinette Burton (1994) provided a brief description of the activities of the LNA in the early 1900s (also see Summers, 2008), which reflects a broader lack of research on gender and sexuality in the 20th century compared with in the 19th century (Johns, 1999). Angela Woollacott (1999) has highlighted the acceleration and consolidation of feminist internationalism with the imperial sphere in the interwar years (also see Gorman, 2008). There were more traditional imperial feminists, such as Mary French-Sheldon, who, in writing of her travels in East Africa, combined her self-promotion as an American 'New Woman' with orientalist gender assumptions and a clear sense of racial hierarchies in the global sisterhood of women (Boisseau, 1995). Yet, not all women active in the colonial sphere were imperialists, nor were all Indian women passive (Candy, 2000). While collaborations between white European feminists and Indian social reformers did exist, they were increasingly under strain by the mid-1930s (Tusan, 2003, page 641). Kumari Jayawardena (1995) has shown that, within the context of heightened nationalism in India, white women were depicted as either 'goddesses' who respected and praised Indian life, or 'devils' who attacked local customs from Western perspectives. The latter, embodied most demonically in Indian discussions by Mayo, included not just sensationalist reporters but also many social reformers and memsahibs.

Mrinali Sinha's (2000a; 2006) groundbreaking studies have exposed the Mayo controversy as a watershed for both the imperial social formation (Sinha, 2000b; Stoler and McGranahan, 2006) and Indian feminists. Sinha stresses that Mayo's error was one of interpretation not always of fact, as Indian nationalists and external critics pointed out. Whilst the American investigative writer blamed 'society' and 'tradition' for the treatment of Indian women, others highlighted the role of colonial economics and legislation in creating and sustaining the conditions that disempowered and oppressed women. This fitted into a longer tradition of reformers who preferred to blame indigenous patriarchy over the effects of the colonial state (Strobel, 1991, page 51).

This marked a radical break in popular Indian conceptions of the political and the social. Since the uprising of 1857 the Government of India had withdrawn from interference in 'domestic' questions of social reform (Sinha, 2006, page 46), thus increasing the impression of a resolutely alien and external colonial state (Prakash, 2002). This state increasingly came to seem like the obstacle *to*, not the means *of*, social reform, despite its ongoing interventions and influence in other spheres (see Goswami, 2004). The role of female poverty, lack of education, and underfunded welfare schemes were all raised in the Mayo debate not just by Indian men, but also by the emergent Indian women's press (Orsini, 2002) and organisations (Basu and Ray, 1990; Tusan, 2003), as well as by nationalist parties more generally (see Nair, 2008).

Any sense of a global sisterhood was, thus, highly problematised by the mid-1930s. Woollacott (1999) has written of white 'commonwealth feminists' who were aligned to subimperial poles, rather than to London or to indigenous populations.

Barbara Ramusack (1992) has documented those ‘maternal feminists’ who were supposedly more benevolent and mothering in India than their more overtly imperialist white sisters. Examples from the 19th century to early 20th century include Mary Carpenter and Annette Akroyd Beveridge [for a comparison of Beveridge with Josephine Butler see Ware (1992, pages 167–224)]. Ramusack (1992) also lists Margaret Noble, who under the title of Sister Nivedita devoted herself to Indian life, as had Madeline Slade under the title Mirabehn, and Margaret Cousins, who devoted herself to Indian nationalism under the lead of fellow Irishwoman Annie Besant (see Jayawardena, 1995).

However, the severest problematisation of the global sisterhood came from what was explicitly viewed as ‘below’. Sarojini Naidu, a leading Indian female campaigner, declared in 1930 that she was ‘not a feminist’, because of feminisms’ Western orientation, although she retained faith in the international women’s movement (see Sinha, 2006, page 205). Naidu highlighted that feminism, like gender, emerged in a highly politicised context of European imperial control (also see Burton, 1999). As such, the issue of universalist ideals versus specific contextualisations was as much a historical, practical one as it is now a contemporary, theoretical one (Sinha et al, 1999). Whilst feminism made universalist claims, in the late 19th century it was mostly associated with suffrage throughout the empire (Mayhall et al, 2000). The term did, however, evolve from an association with this specific campaign into an ideological and political opposition to gender mores (Burton, 1994, page 20).

Jayawardena (1995, page 9) argued that, whether they accepted the title or not, many women active in colonial India in the 20th century were actively involved in opposing gender hierarchies and inequality. Yet, this is not to deny that many of their objectives ran parallel to those of the colonial state. A history of white women reformers in colonial India must, thus, be aware of both the common discourses and techniques that they shared with the state (Haggis, 1998, page 50), and of those European and Indian women who chose to oppose the state and struggled to discover positions of difference from which to make their case.

Shephard’s (figure 1) struggle was an especially complex one in this regard. This struggle began with her movement from Britain to India, and the challenge of relating her experiences has much to gain from the resurgent engagements between geography and biography (Daniels and Nash, 2004; Fuchs, 2002). Geographers have brought their own specialist skills in spatial analysis to bear on relating life stories as influenced by context, movement, relations, or environment (Thomas, 2004). David Lambert and Alan Lester (2006; also see Blunt, 1994; Myers, 2003) have brought these insights to bear on the lives of mobile actors within imperial networks. Other approaches have situated historical figures in their discursive as well as material setting (Kearns, 1997), which can be complemented by chronological narratives as well as by more dispersed genealogies (Legg, 2008). This paper will continue experimenting with biography and geography by situating Shephard not within historical genealogies, but as a self-conscious negotiator of spatial genealogies in the form of networks at varying scales, which ranged from the local to the international in scope. A more traditionalist biographical framing is, however, essential to appreciate how it was that Shephard crafted out such a position in interwar India.

Born in 1885, Shephard was educated at a private school in Hampstead, London, and spent her early career in supporting roles at various medical institutions: as a private secretary in a nursing home and hospital; as a confidential secretary to Lord Dawson of Penn, Chairman of the London Hospital Council and the King Edward VII Sanatorium; as an organising secretary at Paddington tuberculosis dispensary; as a principle secretary in the Territorial Force Nursing Services of the War Office between

1914 and 1918; and, after the war, as a secretary for the Nurses Demobilisation and Resettlement Committee.⁽³⁾ When she herself was demobilised in 1921, she became interested in social purity work, campaigning against 'vice' in London and Rochester.



Figure 1. [In colour online, see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/d10507>] Meliscent Shephard (Women's Library, 3AMS/C/5/2: undated photograph, reproduced with permission of The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University).

⁽³⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/1: Meliscent Shephard (MS) to Alison Neilans (AN), secretary of the AMSH, 17 January 1928.

Pursuing this interest, she enrolled at the Josephine Butler Memorial House in Liverpool, where she studied the legal and educational aspects of modern abolitionist principles, which sought the end of tolerated brothels or state regulation, but admitted the right of liberal subjects to choose to sell their bodies should they so desire.

Shephard then took up a role with the Manchester Diocesan Association for Preventative and Rescue Work in 1921, with whom she worked until 1926. She intended to work for the national church and turned down offers both from the north of England and from Rachel Crowdy, head of the social section of the League of Nations, in Geneva, before she received a letter in July 1928 from the AMSH in London. It requested her to respond to a letter from the Bishop of Calcutta seeking a representative of the AMSH to visit India for three years to help close down public brothels. The Chairman of the AMSH wrote to Shephard conveying the opinions of C F Andrews, a historian of, and reformer in, India who was increasingly aligned with Gandhi and the nationalists: “Mr Andrews who can speak not only from a unique knowledge of India but also, I think, from a greater knowledge of human nature than the rest of us, was emphatic that we should invite you to go.”⁽⁴⁾ Shephard visited Lady Barrett in London to request medical permission to be “released for the east”. Barrett reported in August 1928 that, while in no way diseased, Shephard’s tendency to nervous overstrain and her “free type of menstruation” could possibly be increased in a hot country, and that, being over 40 years of age, it was not the best time for a change of climate. This anxious disposition would stay with Shephard through her time in India, to which, after accepting the post on 11 September, she set sail in December 1928.

Urban intimacies: *lal bazaars* and the shame of colonialism

“I have had twenty-five years of experience in this country ... and during those twenty-five years I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indian people attempt to be intimate socially. Intercourse, yes. Courtesy, by all means. Intimacy—never, never.”

E M Forster ([1924] 1953, page 171)

Ian Baucom (1999, page 101) used the quote above from E M Forster’s *Passage to India* to reflect upon the spatial divisions used to order and segregate colonial towns and to deny, as Sara Suleri (1992, page 147) has put it, alternative racial geographies of intimacy. But there were parts of Indian cities where intercourse between Indians and the English repeatedly transgressed the line of the never, never intimate. It was these tolerated areas of prostitution, the *lal bazaars* (red markets/light districts), on which Shephard would focus her enquiries during her initial years in India. Just as the challenges Shephard faced were new, so her experiences open up spaces not familiar to standard geographies of colonial prostitution. These have highlighted the works of previous generations of governors and campaigners who worked for and against registration of prostitution in the name of sanitary science and military health (Howell, 2000; Kumar, 2005; Phillips, 2002; 2006). Whilst there have been studies of segregation (Howell, 2004a; 2004b), international cultures and modes of policing venereal disease (Levine, 2003), and the interracial politics of the brothel (Tambe, 2005; 2006), Shephard’s investigations thread together imperial relations, urban geography, and philanthropic social work to throw a fascinating new light on interwar India.

While Shephard’s experiences within the sexual geographies of Indian cities led to a series of intimate encounters, I am wary of reproducing a gendered binary that attributes intimate, subjective experience to women and distanced, objective knowledge to men (Rose, 1993). The data Shephard collected and the systematic nature of her reports

⁽⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/1: Reverend W C Roberts to MS, 30 July 1928.

constituted a rigorously social scientific methodology of knowledge production. Yet this knowledge was a product of her intimate engagement with the urban environment and its inhabitants, which produced a series of reports that are marked out by their social scientific intimacy. What is more, unlike Mayo's published work, Shephard's earlier reports focus relentlessly on the effects of colonial economics and society, rather than blaming indigenous traditions and customs entirely.

Whilst Shephard travelled out to India well-trained to combat commercialised prostitution, she was nervous about her commission and her task of overcoming the racial divide in working with the Indian people. Writing back to Alison Neilans, the Secretary of the AMSH in London, on 16 December 1928, Shephard conveyed her opinions of Karachi, the first port of call on the route to Calcutta, and the journey to India. The head of the Karachi Municipal Committee introduced her to some Indian friends, who insisted that they did not "feel like the ruled and she the ruler; one said often the case with English women." She had been anxious, and ashamed to be English, to see the way Englishmen treated English-speaking Indian passengers during the journey out, and was reassured to state that she felt no superiority complex in relation to the Indian men she had so far met. On the contrary, she only felt "terribly ashamed that my country should have very largely produced the problems with which I am trying to help—and very eager to learn all I can from those Indian men and women who will really open their real minds to me and say what they think, and not what they think I will want to know."⁽⁵⁾ Yet, within the same letter was a disavowal of those Europeans who chose to relinquish their nationality in devotion to the Indian cause: "Have you heard that Admiral Slade's daughter [Madeline Slade, née Mirabehn] has resigned her English nationality and joined Gandhi as a disciple? She will start as an outcaste sweeper and work up. Somehow I feel sure that this is the wrong method. It is not natural to pretend you were born in India. One has to try to be one's best English self; then somehow the question of colour doesn't enter into it."

In January 1929 Shephard sent a confidential note to Neilans giving her impressions of two roads full of brothels she had toured in Bombay.⁽⁶⁾ Her report combines a methodical charting of the racial and geographical hierarchies of the brothels with disgust at the practices that were carried on there. She listed four types of 'children', categorised by location. This was a familiar colonial technique of surveillance, which combined the anthropological taxonomising urge with the geographer's attention to habitat. [Biswanatu Joardar (1984, pages 60–61) recounts similar categorisations being used in Calcutta, from the street to mud houses to pukka buildings.] While Shephard would later go beyond these superficial categories to investigate the economic and social geographies of prostitution, her categories at this time were:

- Ground floor: cheaper brothels with iron-barred doors, from behind which girls called out their price. The curtains on the window were transparent such that it was easy to see what was happening within.
- Open shop fronts: higher class brothels, including Russian and Italian prostitutes.
- Second storey: Kashmeri and Baghdad girls enticed men up and earned money from dancing as well as prostitution.
- Streets: hereditary prostitutes on the street, with men of this caste acting as procurers.

Men were taken into side lanes by the girls.

Shephard was most affected by the second and last of these examples. Of the second, she wrote of seeing English men drive up in a Rolls Royce, bargain and embrace women on the street, and then enter the house. She also spoke of the "disgusting"

⁽⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/1: MS to AN, 16 December 1928.

⁽⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 3 January 1929.

spectacle of respectable cars full of Indian men and women slowly touring these areas to “see the sights”. She wrote that the “pitiful child prostitutes” in the streets “nearly broke my spirit in Bombay”. She claimed they were trained up when only eight years old, with one girl being aged only six. Yet again, she recommitted herself to Englishness, reporting that her Indian friend felt C F Andrews had lost his influence through having taken up Indian customs and dress and that the best way was that one should stay the same with each country doing its best.

Calcutta

Shephard adopted a more explanatory rather than descriptive approach to the scene in Calcutta, which she confidentially reported on after only a month and a half in the city.⁽⁷⁾ She began, as before, with a geographical taxonomy of prostitutes’ places of work. Collections of photographs were sent which suggested similar architectural/racial hierarchies to those in Bombay (figure 2). The ‘European’ brothels were similar, architecturally, to the average colonial bungalow, whether of a more baroque inspiration (figure 3) or of standard neoclassical construction. They were identified as abnormal by Shephard, however, by their barbed wire defences and their being shut down at 2pm, when the girls were sleeping. The Japanese brothels were less impressive, with photographs in the collection of open sewers and gangs of touts in the street. The less ordered landscape and slightly dilapidated, though still distinctly colonial, two-storey brothel (figure 4) marked a clear hierarchical shift from the European bungalows. Shephard later described the street as having brick buildings



Figure 2. [In colour online.] Karaya Road Calcutta: European Brothel quarter (Women’s Library, 3AMS/C/5/2: photographs sent to London on 21 April 1929, reproduced with permission of The Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University).

⁽⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 7 February 1929.

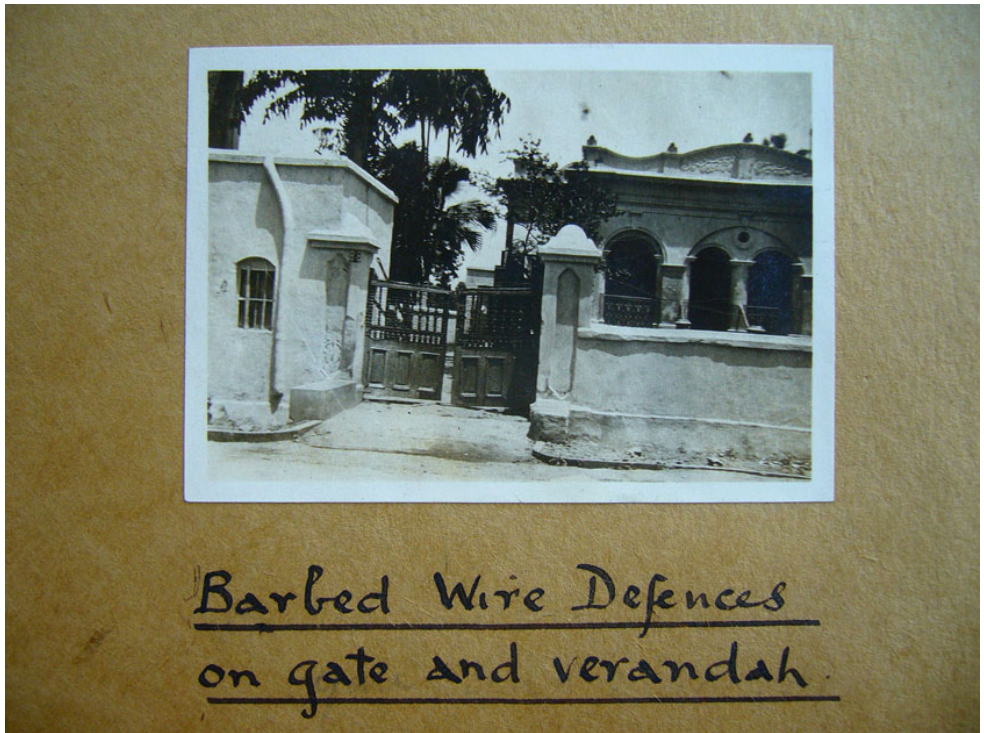


Figure 3. [In colour online.] Brothel in Karaya Road, the European quarter with barbed wire defences (Women's Library, 3AMS/C/5/2: photograph sent to London on 21 April 1929, reproduced with permission of The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University).

interspersed with *basti* (temporary structures) and *pukka* (permanent) shops and little restaurants.⁽⁸⁾ The houses were occupied mostly by Japanese and five were said to definitely be brothels.

In seeking to explain the existence of such brothels, Shephard moved beyond the standard classifications of brothels into a detailing of the lived, waged, and routinised nature of prostitutes' lives, which provided evidence of the intimate nature of her engagement with the urban environment. She located the source of the problem not in the "social" or "traditional" realm, but stated that "the root of the problem is that Indian women have no safe occupation or employment open to them except from marriage."⁽⁹⁾ Emphasis was placed on Indian men's alleged belief that sexual intercourse was central to their manhood and health, and should thus be started as early as possible, and on the caste system which she claimed excused anything men did but chastised women for any lapse.

Yet Shephard also explicitly stated that the economic question was "the key". She suggested that prostitutes could earn Rs 100 000 profit in five years (surely an overestimate for the majority of women involved in the trade, even if white), then build a brothel and retire as a 'madame'. Contrasted to this, the other legitimate forms of female employment were woefully underpaid: tea garden work at Rs 4–9 per month; jute mill labour at Rs 10 per month; or coalfield jobs at under Rs 1 per month. Shephard's analysis also took in: population and the disproportionate ratio of men to women (617:290); the high number of Hindu widows (68 613), many of whom were

⁽⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 29 November 1929.

⁽⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: draft statement by MS on her work.

widowed girls under 20 years old (9418); the lack of education for women, literacy rates of women which in Bengal stood at only one fifteenth the rate of men; and a lack of rescue homes or public support for prostitutes.⁽¹⁰⁾ The solution was, thus, a revolutionary



45 Japanese Girls
in this house.

Figure 4. [In colour online.] Brothel in Watgang Street in the Japanese quarter of Calcutta. The sign on the house reads 'Nagasaki Roof Gardens' (Women's Library, 3AMS/C/5/2: photograph sent to London on 21 April 1929, reproduced with permission of The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University).

⁽¹⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: undated manuscript in the 1929 file.

change of thought: to replace caste with brotherhood; to substitute the degradation of women, and widows especially, with safe employment and honourable social service; to replace racial bitterness with cooperation; and, most controversially, “in place of Krishna, Christ should be enthroned in the lives and thoughts of the Indian people.”⁽¹¹⁾ While Christianity had been used by Indian social reformers before, such as Ram Mohan Roy in the 19th century, for it to be used in this way in the 1930s was incendiary (Jayawardena, 1995).

Despite these controversial views, which also failed to take account of the Indian reform work which Shephard would encounter later in her career (see Basu and Ray, 1990; Watt, 2005), she wrote to London in April 1929 of her awareness that Indians were apt to assume that she wanted to condemn all non-British customs.⁽¹²⁾ She countered: “Frankly, I think the big problem out here is the English man and woman. There are whole blocks of flats where everyone there is known to be living with someone’s wife or with a prostitute.” This was an outcome of her ongoing investigations into the scene in Calcutta, during which she had got to know sixty girls in the prostitution business “quite well”. This had fortified her attention on the economy, in which there were few other jobs for women, and those women who were employed were abused at work.

By September 1929 Shephard was ready to send on her full report to London, which focused on the Watgang Street brothels (figure 4).⁽¹³⁾ She described the report as containing unpleasant details, which had taken a long time to collect because she had become so well known to the procurers in that street that she had to suspend the nighttime inspections she had been carrying out for a few weeks. She focused on Japanese brothels and provided exceptionally intimate details of some of the prostitutes’ daily work routines. Rising at midday, some would be picked up at 5pm to be taken to the garden houses of wealthy men. Customers would later arrive for the others, with women taking up to ten customers in an evening, with only two or three on a “bad night”. All the earnings would go to the “mistress”, for which they would be fed, lodged, and clothed in return. Some were being medically inspected and recommended for the use of “Tommies and Jackies” (soldiers and sailors) resident in Fort William. The girls confirmed that they were inspected by a ‘doctor in uniform’, from the fort, every week.

Shephard took immediate action with regards to these militarily inspected brothels, which were totally in breach of governmental policy, and she actually had them closed down by August 1929. This would be one of the AMSH’s most persistent success stories through the 1930s, during which they forced the government to apply its own ban on military inspection of brothels, bringing a resistantly autonomous space of military sexuality within the government’s frontiers of both sanitary and affective politics (Stoler, 2006). Shephard’s engagement with the sexual geographies of Calcutta during her first year had been intense and highly productive. She had been forced into emotionally disturbing circumstances which fortified her criticisms of the colonial state and economy. She had also pushed the boundary between intercourse, investigation, and intimacy during this research. She had produced social scientific reports on the economies and time–space routines of prostitutes through her engaged and intimate research in the *lal bazaar*, but also overstepped what the AMSH felt to be the legitimate boundaries of her remit.

⁽¹¹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: undated manuscript in the 1929 file.

⁽¹²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 9 April 1929.

⁽¹³⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 29 November 1929.

This was illustrated in December 1929 when Shephard wrote to Neilans of her financial trouble, due in large part to her employing prostitutes as a means of reclaiming them.⁽¹⁴⁾ She had taken in a Russian girl after she was mistreated for a venereal disease and left paralysed, and had employed an Anglo-Indian 18-year-old as a typist. She later defended herself against charges that she was using her pay to engage in rescue work and argued that she got involved only in charity cases in her search for “FACTS, not CASES”.⁽¹⁵⁾ On 14 April 1930 the president of the AMSH wrote to Shephard authorising another grant to help with her finances, but stressing that her charitable donations must stop as they would have no effect. The exact nature of Shephard’s relationships with the girls and women she met was not committed to pen and paper, thus we have to glean what we can from her investigations and statements. She seems to have been taken into their trust, as evidenced by the admissions the women made about their relationships with the military and medical authorities. The brothel mistresses were expertly familiar with regulations concerning prostitution and would have made it known that military use of brothels had been banned. Shephard had some elementary language training but would not have been able, at this stage, to speak to non-European prostitutes in depth, so we must assume that the majority of the relationships she established were confined to her official investigations.

Having received Shephard’s report, the President of the AMSH instructed her to draw her investigative work to an end and concentrate on drawing up a bill for the Bengal Legislative Assembly that would abolish all tolerated brothels, as had been accomplished in Bombay. This was the beginning of Shephard’s shift towards a more interactive relationship with the government, as directed by her colleagues in London. This correspondence marked a distant yet also intimate relationship upon which Shephard relied for the duration of her period in India, as examined below.

International intimacies and antimonies: Shephard’s imperial social formations

Debates over prostitution in the 1920s and 1930s formed a multiscaled imperial social formation, as described by Sinha (2006, page 17) regarding the Mayo controversy. They took in controversies regarding brothels and red light districts, regional traditions of prostitution, national legislation and cultures, imperial regimes of regulation, trans-continental trafficking in women and children, and international commissions by bodies such as the League of Nations and the AMSH (Gorman, 2008; Legg, forthcoming; Metzger, 2007). The concept of an imperial social formation allows the simultaneous comprehension of complexity; of coterminous discourses, practices, and material flows that embodied the multiple networks significant to such a complex phenomenon as prostitution. Whilst imperial, these formations also necessarily contained figures with ambivalent relations to the imperial project. These functioned in equally networked and spatially sensitive relationships, as Lambert and Lester (2004) have made clear with regard to colonial philanthropists. Within such a formation, Shephard maintained a globally intimate (Lowe, 2006) correspondence with Neilans in London, whilst growing increasingly antagonistic towards rival European campaigners addressing prostitution in India.

Shephard first made contact with Neilans, Secretary of the AMSH, when she accepted her post in September 1928 and remained in regular contact until Neilans died in 1942 [for a discussion of Neilans and the AMSH see Laite (2008)]. Their initial relationship was fraught as Neilans had to field Shephard’s anxious demands before heading out to India, regarding advances, settling telephone bills, return fares,

⁽¹⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 17 December 1929.

⁽¹⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 12 February 1930; WL/3AMS/C/5/3: 14 April 1930.

contracts, and salary. Neilans's reasonable outlines of working procedure, submitted with due sensitivity ("don't think I'm nagging!") were met with short answers ("You really must trust me! I think you do—but the first two points in your letter make me gasp a little!").⁽¹⁶⁾ The situation improved when Shephard was better settled in India, as she increasingly turned for reassurance in her work to Neilans, who retained her faith in Shephard's abilities. This was difficult at times due to Shephard's provocative remarks, which Neilans in part reproduced in soothing one complainant in February 1929:

"Poor Miss Shephard. She is perhaps for the first time really facing herself and realising how feeble we all are when actually face to face with age-long and intolerable social conditions and Pagan points of view. I hope very much she will come through, as beneath the obvious, and sometimes a little trying Miss Shephard both Miss Turner and I have thought there is a really beautiful character and spirituality, which at present is not functioning properly, but which is kept captive by her more superficial self."⁽¹⁷⁾

Neilans would also encourage Shephard when she expressed her fear of catching what she termed the "general spirit of depression".⁽¹⁸⁾ She replied that: "It is going to be alright, you know. Not easy, or free from discouragement, but don't you think there is something rather exhilarating in being on the minority side, but knowing you are right?"⁽¹⁹⁾ She continued in October that "when you feel very down in the dumps you must laugh at yourself a bit and not expect to change in three years an accumulated wrong thinking by millions of people for centuries."⁽²⁰⁾

Neilans was not uncritically supportive, however. To temper some of Shephard's developing views, she recommended Geoffrey Garratt's (1928) *An Indian Commentary* in March 1929.⁽²¹⁾ This was to encourage her to sympathise more with the Indian people, who, she stressed, had certainly benefited from colonial irrigation and law, but were getting poorer, with severe housing shortages, corruption, and social evils. She also warned against overly exaggerated statistics, such as the estimate that 75% of some Indian urban populations had venereal diseases, which obviously had to be treated with caution.

1931 marked Shephard's final year of her planned stay in India, but by April she had convinced the AMSH to provide her with two more years' partial funding, despite the stringencies enforced by the Great Depression. A committee was established in June to help her raise the remaining revenue, Rs 2000 of which was immediately donated by Viceroy Irwin from the Maharajah of Jaipur's Fund.⁽²²⁾ Over the following years, Shephard would grow increasingly attached to governmental funding, at the same time as her attachment to Neilans strengthened. This was bolstered by regular formal correspondence, but also by increasingly vicious gossiping about rival organisations. Indeed, whilst overt criticisms of the colonial state lessened in the correspondence, Neilans and Shephard never seemed happier than when lacerating fellow social reformers.

⁽¹⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/1: AN to MS, 19 October 1928; MS to AN, 20 October 1928.

⁽¹⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to Grace Human, 26 February 1929.

⁽¹⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to Grace Human, 18 January 1929.

⁽¹⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to MS, 25 January 1929.

⁽²⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to MS, 2 October 1929.

⁽²¹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to MS, 19 March 1929.

⁽²²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 16 April 1931.

Vigilance associations

When considering her initial acceptance of the AMSH's offer to go to India, Shephard expressed her reservation with regards to working with the Calcutta Vigilance Association, voicing her misgivings about the British branch. The National Vigilance Association (NVA) had been formed in August 1885 for the enforcement of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of that year, which provided for the repression of criminal vice and the improvement of public immorality in Britain.⁽²³⁾ The Assistant Secretary of the AMSH replied to Shephard in agreement, calling the London Vigilance Association "hopelessly reactionary" and insisting that Shephard would simply work on the principles of the AMSH [on the broader tensions between the AMSH and vigilance associations see Laite (2008)].⁽²⁴⁾ Neilans further confirmed this view when Shephard was in India. In January 1929 she wrote that Mr Sempkins, general secretary of the NVA, was really at heart a regulationist who, whilst stopping short of advocating regulated brothels or medical examination, felt that prostitutes should have special controls and regulations.⁽²⁵⁾ On 2 October Neilans continued that the NVA was now effectively a defender of the police, because it argued for special laws in relation to prostitutes.⁽²⁶⁾ Shephard commented along similar lines in December 1930 regarding her co-Honorary Secretary of the All India Vigilance Association, Herbert Bryant: "Bryant is my Sempkins! He gets all his ideas from S[empkins]. His Bill is on the right lines but not attributable to him."⁽²⁷⁾

In reply, Neilans revealed something of the personal, and gendered, politics behind her dislike for Sempkins, who, she claimed, had become too used to placing women in a subsidiary position:

"I believe my real offence with Sempkins was that from the start I treated him as an equal instead of listening deferentially, as a female should, to his utterances. Also I ventured to contradict him on more than one occasion, or rather to disagree with him, and I really believe it is his pride which is hurt far more than anything else. Apart from that he might be capable of education, but now he is up in arms in self-defence."⁽²⁸⁾

Through such correspondences, obvious warmth developed between the two campaigners, each tackling male-dominated institutions and mindsets in her own way. In further dialogue on Bryant, Shephard commented on how indiscreet she was becoming,⁽²⁹⁾ whilst Neilan confessed that: "Between you and me that Society gives me the creeps" in its endeavours to spread a new form of global regulationism.⁽³⁰⁾

Shephard wrote to Bryant in August 1931 pointing out the resolutions of the recent Warsaw Congress that urged the abolition of tolerated brothels and medically inspected, registered women.⁽³¹⁾ This obviously antagonised Bryant, who accused Shephard, when they met in October 1932, of attempting to run an "opposition show" in India that would replicate the divisions of the NVA and AMSH in the United Kingdom. Whilst Shephard reassured him that she intended to work in harmony, she immediately wrote to the India Office in London when she heard from Sempkins of

⁽²³⁾ WL/4NVA.

⁽²⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/1: MS to Ethel Turner, 9 August 1928; Turner to MS 11 August 1928.

⁽²⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to MS, 25 January 1929.

⁽²⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: AN to MS, 2 October 1929.

⁽²⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 18 December 1930.

⁽²⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 5 January 1931.

⁽²⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 27 January 1931.

⁽³⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 4 February 1931.

⁽³¹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to Bryant, 17 August 1931.

NVA plans to establish a new committee in India in July 1934.⁽³²⁾ She stressed that her organisation had been working in India since 1888 (claiming the legacy of the LNA) and that it would be a waste to duplicate operations.

The nature of Shephard's conversation with Sempkins is indicative of the antimony that had developed between the parallel yet rival organisations. He wrote to her a week later, on 31 July 1934, expressing his distress over their conversation and insisting that she had been unjust to himself and Bryant in assuming they were unfriendly: "Without a rapprochement work will suffer. In any case on further thought you will probably yourself admit that the accusation that both Mr Bryant and myself are 'vile', is, to say the least of it, a far-fetched accusation." Shephard haughtily replied that she had always tried to collaborate with Bryant and had found Sempkins himself critical and lacking in cooperation: "Your letter also contains at least three misstatements. But I gather that you wish me to regard this letter in the light of an apology and as such, I will consider it."⁽³³⁾

The British Social Hygiene Council

Shephard and Neilans were similarly united in their disdain for the British Social Hygiene Council (BSHC). The BSHC title was adopted in 1924 by the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases, which had been formed to implement the recommendations of the 1916 report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases (Hunt, 1999, page 183). It focused on extending free treatment for venereal diseases into the civilian population and was funded by the state. Like the AMSH, the BSHC extended its campaign into the empire, establishing a series of Imperial Social Hygiene Congresses and covering colonial topics in its journal *Health and Empire*. It had also established a dispensary in Bombay in 1918 and sent a delegation to India between December 1926 and January 1927 (BSHC, 1927). Unlike Shephard and Neilans's organisation, however, the BSHC aligned itself with the state and saw governmental initiatives as the route to effective medical care. It also focused solely on social hygiene, through collecting global demographic and epidemiological statistics and medical opinions, rather than moral hygienist concerns with broader education, gender inequality, or individual liberty.

The overlapping nature of their work meant that the AMSH and BSHC did cooperate, especially in the BSHC's earlier years. Within a month of arriving in Calcutta Shephard asked Neilans to send out the proceedings of the recent imperial congress organised by the BSHC.⁽³⁴⁾ She also supplemented her reports in the AMSH's *Shield* journal with a report in 1931 on her activities in the BSHC's *Health and Empire* (1931). Despite this, on 14 November 1929 Shephard wrote to Neilans that even medical authorities in India had little idea of the existence of the BSHC, and conflated its representatives with members of the government.

Neilans presented a less comfortable view from London of what was expressly viewed as a rival organisation both in scope and in approach. She wrote in October 1933 that the AMSH had been approached with regard to preventing any overlap of its work with the BSHC and with vigilance associations in India.⁽³⁵⁾ Shephard laughed off Neilans's fears that genuine abolitionist policies would be threatened by a coalition of Bryant, Sempkins, and the head of the BSHC, Sybil Neville-Rolfe. She argued that the idea of the institutions overlapping was "too amusing" as the BSHC presence was so limited, and claimed that Neville-Rolfe's recent visit to India "was stage managed

⁽³²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/7: MS to A F Morley, 30 July 1934.

⁽³³⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/7: MS to F Sempkins, 31 July 1934.

⁽³⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 1 January 1929.

⁽³⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/6: AN to MS, 23 October 1933.

from an official point of view; she toured like royalty and hardly touched the main problems.”⁽³⁶⁾ The Bengal, Madras, Mysore, and Bombay Social Hygiene Councils were later criticised as being ineffective and largely funded by the state.⁽³⁷⁾

Neilans was obviously less than amused, however, after a meeting in October 1933 to address the possibility of cooperation between the AMSH, BSHC, All India Vigilance Association, and the Indian Red Cross.⁽³⁸⁾ The meeting was attended by Neilans, Neville-Rolfe, and Bryant along with five other representatives of concerned bodies. Neilans vigorously defended the independence of the AMSH and insisted there was no overlap as it did not pursue medical issues, and denied Neville-Rolfe’s suggestion that Shephard had expressed an interest in the coordination of the bodies in India. She went on to contrast the state alignment of the two social hygiene bodies, stressing that the abolition of tolerated brothels could not be pursued by a “semi-official organisation” like the BSHC. The suggestion that an Indian Vigilance Association representative be established was batted down by Neilans, who claimed Shephard was already doing it, and her insistence that even a coordinating body would infringe on the AMSH’s ability to pressure the government led to the meeting being brought to a close with no conclusions.

After this meeting Neilans’s attitude towards Neville-Rolfe soured considerably. In 1934 she warned Shephard against contributing to a conference Neville-Rolfe was organising, claiming that she would simply “pick your brains and take the credit for the BSHC.”⁽³⁹⁾ Shephard gleefully informed Neilans that Neville-Rolfe had asked the Government of India if she could send a representative to organise a meeting in India ahead of a League of Nations conference on the traffic in women and children in the East, but the government replied that it did not need one as it had Shephard in India already.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Neville-Rolfe then approached Neilans in February 1935, attempting to restart the debate from the 1933 meeting by claiming that the AMSH and BSHC would be working along similar lines in the run up to the League conference, which took place in 1937 (League of Nations, 1938).⁽⁴¹⁾ Neville-Rolfe pointed out that Shephard had, by this time, been recognised by the Viceroy, thus undermining Neilans’s earlier implicit criticisms of the BSHC’s semi-official nature. Neville-Rolfe believed that the Viceroy would prefer a single policy in India, and suggested that Shephard should also represent the BSHC.

Neilans replied in March 1935, suggesting that, given Shephard’s close work with the Government of India and the Viceroy, had His Excellency desired cooperation of the two bodies, Shephard would have been the first to know about it.⁽⁴²⁾ She also stressed that the AMSH failed to see the benefit of the union and that it would be undesirable for Shephard’s work to be associated with such a specifically “British” title. Shephard worked equally hard to maintain a distinction between the two bodies. After clashing with the BSHC, who she argued had claimed the work of the AMSH as its own, she wrote to Neilans of Neville-Rolfe: “She seems to have the feminine equivalent of the Hitler or Mussolini mind—in her desire for domination.”⁽⁴³⁾ This line of character assassination continued into 1936: in January Neilans suggested “Mrs NR” did

⁽³⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/6: MS to AN, 12 November 1933.

⁽³⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/7: MS to AN, 15 January 1934.

⁽³⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/6/1: conference report, 6 October 1933.

⁽³⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/7: AN to MS, 19 June 1934.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/8: MS to AN, 17 January 1935.

⁽⁴¹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/6/1: Neville-Rolfe to AN, 25 February, 1935.

⁽⁴²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/6/1: AN to Neville-Rolfe, 22 March 1935.

⁽⁴³⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/8: MS to AN, 10 October 1935.

not know when she was being dishonest; when Neville-Rolfe announced that she would not be coming to India, Shephard claimed that “everyone will be delighted to hear that she is not coming to India”; while Neilans wrote of Neville-Rolfe in the same month: “That woman gives me the shivers. She is so unprincipled that I can hardly believe it myself.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Neville-Rolfe had also alienated Indian female campaigners at the 1927 conference of the British Commonwealth League (Woollacott, 1999, page 94). In her comments on India she claimed that prostitution and venereal disease were problems in the country because of Indian religion, ignorance of science, and an absence of social responsibility. Her speech was immediately criticised by Mrs S C Sen, who denied that Indian religion approved of prostitution and pointed out that it had flourished under the British. Rolfe’s two conference resolutions were not even discussed, but she did get to air her views at a small conference she convened to discuss *Mother India* (Mayo, 1927), which had just been published.

Rolfe was joined in her interest in the book by Eleanor Rathbone, a self-styled ‘new feminist’ and Member of Parliament from 1929, who also convened a conference to discuss the publication. Reading Mayo’s work stirred Rathbone to spread her feminist campaign to India, through a crusade against child marriage (Pedersen, 2004, pages 241–264). Rathbone has been portrayed as an imperial feminist of the most distant type (Jayawardena, 1995, page 102; Strobel, 1991, page 62), relying on correspondence with Indian women to inform her book on India (Candy, 2000), entitled *Child Marriage: The Indian Minotaur. An Object-lesson from the Past to the Future* (Rathbone, 1934). She did, however, visit India in 1932, where she was suspected of being a British spy, but met members of the Indian feminist elite who contributed to her turning against Mayo’s interpretation of the country and the role of the state (Pedersen, 2004, page 254; Ramusack, 1992, page 125; Sinha, 2006, page 83).

Shephard commented on the harm that Mayo’s book had done in India, despite having earlier claimed that what she said was true, and argued that Rathbone’s book would have the same effect.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Yet by 1931 Shephard wrote of opinions within the Calcutta Vigilance Association, her employer, that she was “another Miss Mayo”.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Their complaints were attributable in part to Shephard’s resolutely independent work style, but also to a statement she had made regarding moral conditions in Calcutta. It was both the bluntness of her statements, as witnessed in her intimate correspondence with Neilans, and the outdatedness of her racial views that worked against the achievement of intimate relationships in Indian civil society upon which the work of any British social reformer would depend in the electric political atmosphere of the 1930s.

National intimacies and racial antagonism

While Rathbone’s brief trip to India had awoken her to the injustices of colonial authoritarianism, increased her sympathy for the nationalists, and turned her against Mayo’s worldview, Shephard’s decade in India seems to have had the opposite effect. During this time, she drew closer to the state, expressed doubts over the advisability of Indian self-rule, and shifted the weight of blame for the abuse of prostitutes from the state and the economy to Indian society and its customs. This must be politically contextualised within the movement of nationalist anticolonial politics towards the civil disobedience campaigns (1930–34) and the Quit India movement (1942–44),

⁽⁴⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/9: MS to AN, 25 January 1936; AN to MS, 29 January 1936.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to Human, 18 January 1919; WL/3AMS/C/5/3: MS to AN, 20 August 1930.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to the AMSH, October 1931.

orchestrated by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, ahead of independence in 1947. In this context English women in India have been noted to have been highly critical of the nationalist movement (Procida, 2002b), a tendency which Shephard rapidly assimilated.

Accompanying the first report Shephard sent back to London, in February 1929, had been a note which encapsulated the tendencies in her thought that would develop in the political and financial context of the 1930s. Speaking of the popular rejection of C F Andrews's encouragement of mixed male and female socialising in India, Shephard commented: "it only shows how far behind the average intelligent Indian is, where the things of his social life are concerned."⁽⁴⁷⁾ In the same letter, she also commented that English people in India had their own caste-like system, and that she was slowly breaking into the inner circle of society. This trajectory would be accelerated, alongside the persistent racism in Shephard's writings, by the anticolonial nationalist ferment of the 1930s.

These racist assumptions ambivalently coexisted, in her early writings, with her criticisms of English society. In a letter from July 1929 Shephard commented on the mixture of civilisations in Bengal and provided crude summaries of her anthropological stereotypes, of: Hindus ("still in the stage of animal sacrifices, fear, worship of sticks and stones"); "Moslems" ("a far happier religion, though warlike, but their sexual license is as bad from the men's point of view, as the Hindus"); the Japanese and Chinese ("inscrutable, but their moral standards are distinctly higher than the Indian"); and the Anglo-Indians and Europeans ("the really big problems"). This final inversion did nothing to disguise the geo-graph by which the world's races had been hierarchised (Gregory, 1998, page 72).

The insincerity of this inversion was exposed in a letter to the president of the AMSH on 15 May 1930. This was just ten days after Gandhi had been belatedly arrested for starting the civil disobedience movement on 5 April, and Shephard described Bengal as being in political ferment. She went on to argue that "any race that regards tolerated vice areas as an amenity and a necessity is not fit to govern itself; a race which keeps women as slaves can hardly expect to be given independent status among the free nations."⁽⁴⁸⁾ This was a grossly hypocritical standpoint given that the colonial state tolerated brothels, and was hesitant to be drawn into legislation that addressed women's social conditions.

Shephard's characterisations and sweeping condemnations of non-Christian faiths continued in a printed and circulated letter to her friends in July 1930, as the disobedience movement continued. In this, she commented that: "That is India. Religion has no relation to life or conduct or knowledge or morals. Hinduism is a series of cults and devotions and ceremonies and pujas"⁽⁴⁹⁾ She continued that she found Gandhi's policies destructive, not constructive, "and I can only too sadly realise that India *without* the British administration for some generations to come, would merely be a shambles, Moslems fighting Hindus, and the North fighting the South; the women reduced again to slavery" (emphasis in original). Shephard defended these comments to Neilans in December 1930, insisting that India was not yet a nation and needed to be governed by people with Christian principles.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Such views were informed not just by the political context, but also by interactions with the sexual geographies of Indian cities, which could, in Shephard's mind, be firmly anchored to the Hindu faith:

⁽⁴⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 17 February 1929.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/3: MS to Helen Wilson, 15 May 1930.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/3: MS circular to "Friends at home", 16 July 1930.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/3: MS to AN, 20 December 1930.

“My visit to Benares was most interesting, though the city is more evil than any I have yet visited. I saw things happening there in broad daylight which—in a lunatic asylum in England—would be looked upon as extreme forms of the lowest perversions: yet there they were, all part of Hinduism, and if a fakir was involved, groups of praying devoted Hindus stood around, all worshipping the expressions and actions shown. It was utterly revolting.”⁽⁵¹⁾

Shephard seemed to believe that she could separate her racist and political views from her work for the AMSH, which she proclaimed in November 1930 to be “non-political”.⁽⁵²⁾ Yet despite this, she self-consciously censored her work in explicitly political ways. Her report on the Watgang Street brothels was not forwarded to the Calcutta Vigilance Association as Shephard was sure it would be used in anti-British propaganda.⁽⁵³⁾ She was also anxious to ensure that abolitionist laws should be enforced where they existed in India, such that when government was handed over to limited Indian self-government after 1935, they would not be able to accuse the British government of not having kept its own rules.⁽⁵⁴⁾ When Shephard was successful in closing down military inspected brothels in October 1929, she asked Neilans not to publicise the closures as she had not told the Calcutta Vigilance Association, knowing how much publicity the Indian nationalists would make out of it.⁽⁵⁵⁾ She had also commented that: “Politically, India seems to be trying Ireland’s methods. Alas, though the Irish were ready for self-government, India is not.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ It was in the context of these statements and political–racial opinions that Indian opinion began to turn against Shephard, leading to the comparisons between herself and Mayo, and her bid to win over Indian nationalists to her cause.

Rival intimacies

“You have no need to apologize for being a foreigner doing this service. When people realize that you have no other motive, but the simple motive of serving these fallen sisters of India and through their service also serving the fallen men of India, they will forget that you are a foreigner. Those who have other ends to serve under the guise of humanitarian service will always be treated as foreigners, whether they wear the white skin or the brown skin.”

Gandhi to Shephard, 4 March 1933
(cited in Gandhi, 1958, volume 59, pp 439–440)

While Shephard stressed that she would not be another Madeline Slade, and would always stand up for police and government, she was forced to seek rapprochement with the Indian nationalists in the face of growing accusations against her. She wrote to Neilans stressing that she actually wanted nationalist leaders to adhere to Gandhian values of nonviolence and truth at all costs, as both Gandhi and Shephard wanted the abolition of tolerated brothels [for confirmation of Gandhi’s views on prostitutes see Joardar (1984)].⁽⁵⁷⁾ In May 1931 Shephard could claim to have met Gandhi in Bombay for a 45-minute talk, and in July she met leading campaigner Sarojini Naidu to discuss the concept of fundamental rights for all women.⁽⁵⁸⁾ She kept in touch with Naidu and,

⁽⁵¹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to Turner, 1 February 1931.

⁽⁵²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/3: MS to AN, 5 November 1930.

⁽⁵³⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 29 November 1929.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: undated statement by MS on her work to date from 1930.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 22 October 1929.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/2: MS to AN, 28 April 1930.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: MS to AN, 18 April 1931.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/4: printed circular from MS to friends at home, May 1931; MS to Turner, 11 July 1931.

in May 1933, asked her to get a statement from Gandhi stating that the reasons for his fast against the colonial state were the same as those of which Josephine Butler spoke, being the unity of moral law and the equality of all souls before God.⁽⁵⁹⁾ This came after the letter that Shephard received in March 1933 from Gandhi, as quoted above, reassuring her over any doubts that she might be construed as an imperial feminist.

Despite this reassurance, Shephard was obviously conscious that her commentary on Indian events might seem to the committee at the AMSH to be very British and anti-Indian. She proved both of these points in her intended refutation in November 1933: "I am neither. I am facing the ugly facts, and trying to help some of these people, (whom I like in spite of their naughty ways!) to correct their own characteristics and backbonelessness."⁽⁶⁰⁾ Her thinking on the nature of Indian society not only was seemingly unchanged by her interaction with Indian nationalists, but actually seemed to have moved further towards a Mayo-esque privileging of social causes of prostitution. In a note written on 11 April 1934, Shephard listed three causes for the widespread acceptance of prostitution in India: firstly, the patrilineal system and woman's worship of man; secondly, the "fatalistic" outlook of Hinduism, which regarded human action as dictated by a previous existence, and thus unable to change; "a third cause is economic, though this is less prevalent than might be expected".⁽⁶¹⁾ This devaluation of the economic cause of prostitution relieved pressure on the state, which could be explained by the fact that the note was submitted to the Government of India as part of a plea for continued financial assistance for the AMSH. It resulted in a memorandum by the Viceroy being circulated around the Indian states, requesting money to fund Shephard's work.

This did not go unnoticed in London, where Neilans had defended the AMSH against the advances of the 'semi-official' BSHC only a year earlier. Neilans wrote in June 1933 to Shephard, commenting on the high circles in which she was moving, but also stressing how useful it was: "Had the work been, as it was 15–20 years ago, in direct opposition to the governments policy it might have been unwise to have relied so much on the results of contacts with influential people. Now we have to keep the generally sound government policy on the right lines."⁽⁶²⁾ Shephard's movement into a more intimate relationship with the government was thus as much policy oriented as financially driven, though it was definitely opposed to the policies of Butler and the fierce 19th-century critics of state regulation (Burton, 1994, page 149).

With the Government of India increasingly accepting abolitionist principles, as voted for in legislative assemblies across the country, the AMSH's aggressively oppositional politics became less necessary. It was thus able to accept more funding from the social and governmental elite than would have been possible in its earlier days. A statement from 1935 indicates the increasingly diverse sources of funding which the AMSH relied upon. Funds came from vigilance associations but also from chief commissioners, state governments, the Viceroy, and other members of the political elite.⁽⁶³⁾ By 1936 Shephard was holding receptions for Indian women reformers at the Viceroy's House, and by 1937 she could list Viceroy Linlithgow as the AMSH's patron and the Chief Commissioner of Delhi as its president.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Symbolically marking her acceptance into the inner circle of the caste-like society in British India, Shephard was

⁽⁵⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/6: MS to AN, 31 May 1933.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/6: MS to AN, 12 November 1933.

⁽⁶¹⁾ National Archives of India (henceforth NA): Home (Judicial) 1934, 624/34.

⁽⁶²⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/6: AN to MS, 20 June 1933.

⁽⁶³⁾ NA Home (Judicial) 1936, 175/36.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ NA Home (Judicial) 1937, 56/20/37.

awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind medal on 23 February 1938. Rather than marking a high point in Shephard's career, however, this came at a time when her capabilities were being questioned from both without and within the AMSH.

Despite Neilans's earlier reassurances, she was obviously unnerved by Shephard's closeness to the government and lack of connections with the Indian National Congress, who were swept to power in the elections of 1937. On 15 October 1937 Neilans wrote to C F Andrews, who was based in India by this time, claiming that Shephard was baffled and troubled by the impact that the Congress government would have on her work.⁽⁶⁵⁾ She asked if there was anything he, or Gandhi, could do to help. He replied on 28 October with what he termed "disturbing news". He was staying with Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a leading feminist campaigner who was closely associated with the All India Women's Conference. She informed him that Shephard "is now entirely out of touch with popular, national India and takes the 'Government' view and therefore it is useless bringing her and the popular ministers together; for she has lost confidence in them and they have lost confidence in her." He continued: "Somehow, it comes down to whether one can go on loving and loving without losing patience. I can hardly imagine a harder test in the midst of flaming nationalism and terrible misunderstandings: and as far as I possibly could, I have been on her side. But I don't know how I can pick up the threads again just now."

On 5 November 1937 Neilans wrote to Shephard, urging her to associate herself with Indian women and less with the government as many Indian women considered her to be a government spy.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Neilans then contacted Grace Lankester, who had done liaison work between the British and Indian communities in the past, and asked for advice on Shephard's predicament.⁽⁶⁷⁾ She stressed that, though in receipt of a government grant, Shephard was "no bootlicker" and caused the government considerable anxiety by her campaigning. Yet, Neilans admitted that she was difficult of temperament and needed to relate better to Indian women. Lankester replied a week later suggesting that Shephard's heavy workload had deprived her of "her sense of humour and balance of mind!" Lankester's Indian friends found her aloof, and rumours had spread that she found Hinduism to be full of horror and evil. Despite this, she acknowledged that Shephard was a truly fine woman who had done such magnificent work in the country during such a time of extreme nationalism.

Shephard responded to Neilans's warning that she was considered a British spy by pointing out that she had been under grave suspicion from British officials because of her interaction with Congress officials, during which time her mail was intercepted regularly, and thus should not be under suspicion by the new Congress governments.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Responding dramatically to what she obviously viewed as an attack on her record, Shephard claimed that she had come to India to suffer, but that "crucifixion is not a pleasant process ... I have given my health, all my money, all my thought, and nearly all my happiness in trying to help Indian women and men to reform their own affairs, and have stood in the background." Despite this, she remained unchanged in her views, as expressed in a letter to Neilans of December 1937: "for me as a person, they [Indian women] have nothing but friendly feelings. It is my work which they hate and shun. And when one knows what goes on in their temples and fairs and even purdahed homes, it is no wonder they hate a foreigner knowing anything about it all,

⁽⁶⁵⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/10: AN to Andrews, 15 October 1937.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/10: AN to MS, 5 November 1937.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/10: AN to Lankester, 18 November 1937.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/10: MS to AN, 29 November 1937.

and so they attribute to my work motives which are Mayo-like in character, and which have NEVER BEEN MINE.”⁽⁶⁹⁾

Conclusions

Shephard, not least through her vigorous fightback against her doubters, survived the 1937 crisis of confidence in her work and remained head of the AMSH in India until April 1947. During the war years of 1939–45, reduced funding meant that Shephard was confined to Delhi, where she engaged in local rescue work and legislative amendments to existing abolitionist laws. In her nearly twenty years in India, Shephard had achieved an almost incomprehensible degree of success, the extent of which the personal focus of this paper has not been able to convey. In terms of closing military brothels, drafting abolitionist legislation, establishing branches of the AMSH, making contact with the League of Nations, and winning the government around to enforcing social reform, Shephard’s tenure in India amounted to a huge accomplishment. However, her final period in Delhi was suffused with a certain sense of ennui. As she had been suspected of being both a British and an Indian spy, and failed to engage with emergent Indian women’s organisations, one must also conclude that Shephard’s stay in India was to some extent a failure. As an antinostalgic, nonrecuperative history (Haggis, 1998), I have argued several points in this paper. Firstly, as a feminist, despite her tendency to portray Indian women as passive, Shephard’s political voracity, intelligence, and work ethic mark her out as an inspirational success. But as an imperialist, despite her highlighting of conditions of real hardship, her failure to question the racial hierarchies and assumptions of a fractured empire in a period and place of vibrant anticolonial nationalism necessarily casts a shadow over her achievements.

So should this be read as the experience of an imperial feminist? Shephard certainly fits many of the identifying characteristics from the existing literature (Ramusack, 1992, pages 128–133): she was single, with her origins in public work in England; she was a lobbyist with officials, who viewed her as a busybody; she believed in the state as an engine of social change; and she preached women’s uplift. But this study has also suggested that such imperial feminists need to be situated in much more complex and volatile imperial social formations and contexts of practice. These have been explored through networks that operated at different scales at which intimate relationships, and also those of shame, antimony, and racial antagonism, were played out. At the most distant spatial scale, the international, Shephard enjoyed one of her most intimate relationships, with Neilans, but also crafted some of her frostiest, regarding Sempkins and Neville-Rolfe. At the urban scale, Shephard’s experiences brought her into contact with types of intimacy that “nearly broke my spirit”, but to which she responded with an intimate period of investigation which produced rare understandings of the social and economic geographies of Indian prostitution, but during which she was deemed to have overstepped E M Forster’s dividing line of the ‘never, never intimate’ by taking in prostitutes. At the national scale, Shephard failed to overcome her racial prejudices and became, as Andrews put it, “out of touch with popular, national India”. This failed intimacy was counterbalanced by an increasingly intimate relationship with the Government of India, as the sexual realm, and more specifically the brothel, emerged as a key site in the affective grid of colonial politics (Stoler, 2002).

This combination of a scalar epistemology with a broad understanding of the ways in which intimate relationships have diverse effects will hopefully provide some stimulus to the study of other ambivalent improvers of empire, as well as of imperialists, humanitarians, businesspeople, and the myriad other individuals

⁽⁶⁹⁾ WL/3AMS/C/5/12: MS to AN, 3 December 1937.

configured by imperial social formations. Whilst the idea of the fragmented and nonessentialist self is now accepted, further understanding is required of the ways in which different attitudes, approaches, personalities, and politics may emanate from the same subject through networks stretched across varying scales, and operating at varying degrees of intimacy.

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