



BOOK REVIEW

Transnational Women in India

A Review of Indian Videshinis: European Women in India

Dr Ian H. Magedera; 352 Pages; Roli Books; New Delhi, 2018; ISBN-10: 9351941361, ISBN-13: 978-9351941361

The author of *Indian Videshinis* is a Senior Lecturer in French in the University of Liverpool. He was Educated at the universities of Cambridge and London, and has authored four books including *Danigo! French Grammar Reorganized* (available free via Google Books) and *Outsider Biographies: Savage, de Sade, Wainwright, Ned Kelly, Billy the Kid, Rimbaud and Genet, Base Crime and High Art in Biography and Bio-Fiction 1744-2000* (Rodopi-Brill, 2014). Ian is a would-be European who also blithely ticks the ‘British Asian’ box in ethnicity questionnaires. His cultural and academic research in Europe, speaking German and French, follow on from his parents’ journeys to the UK in English and Sinhala just after the end of the British Empire.

Review by

Swati Dasgupta

Assistant Professor in French, Department of Germanic & Romance Studies,
University of Delhi

The reviewer is an Assistant Professor in the French section of DGRS, University of Delhi. After her two MPhils from University of Delhi and the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, she did her PhD from the University of Delhi on the works of Jules Verne. Her main area of interest being French writings on India, her articles and book reviews in this domain have been published in various national and international journals.

Ian Magedera examines, within the time period of 1893-2017, the contributions of non-British European women who moved successfully to India and how “they were accepted or rejected by the Indians” (p. ix), given the fact that “the Indians have a tradition of accepting foreigners and carrying on” (p. x). The oxymoronic *Indian Videshinis* is, as stated in the book, divided into four parts: education and activism where Magedera has shown the contributions of Annie Besant, Sister Nivedita and Margaret Cousins, religion and spirituality which discusses Mirra Alfassa and Mother Teresa, International business and commerce examines the influence of Simone and Sooni Tata and finally state and national politics where Durru Shehvar, Niloufer and Sonia Gandhi are discoursed.

Other than a preface, an introduction and a conclusion the book has seven chapters analysing the contribution of women who represent a non-colonial relationship between India and Europe. The first chapter deals with a non-British semi-European lady who falls outside the purview of the book. Born Jeanne Albert and wife of Joseph-François Dupleix, the French Governor General in Pondicherry and Chandernagore, Jeanne Dupleix was undoubtedly a lady who influenced her husband greatly in his work. While the reasons for including the early eighteenth century Jeanne in this post 1893 volume may be tenuous, there is no denying that this lady’s activities had important implications for India. Having the multilingual Jeanne by his side greatly helped Dupleix in very successfully governing Pondicherry. According to *Indian Videshinis*, her role hovered arguably somewhere between being “an interpreter [and being] her husband’s plenipotentiary” (p. 35) Even her ardent critics acknowledge her “significant influence in the military domain” (p. 38). Jeanne’s helping the Indians by acting as a go-between the Tamilian women and her French husband, detailed by Rose Vincent in her biography of Jeanne, has not been dwelt upon in this monograph.

Education and activism being the theme of the second chapter of the book, three dissimilar women have been portrayed, showing up their differences within the realm of enlightenment for the Indians: Annie Besant, Sister Nivedita and Margaret Cousins. Annie Besant, the “first European woman to be commemorated in a postage stamp” (p. 47), besides being “active in the establishment of new educational institutions in India”—she founded the Central Hindu College in Varanasi, part of which was to become the Benaras Hindu University —, also “valorized Hindu traditions for both Indian and British audiences” (p. 47). In her own words, “My own work has always been educational and

the generating of enthusiasm for great principles” (p. 50). Nevertheless, despite claiming that “I have been a pioneer, not a politician” (p. 50), politician she did become, founding the Home Rule League with Lokmanya Tilak in 1916, probably inspired by the Home Rule Movement of her native Ireland. Besant saw herself as “a person who could ‘Wake up, India’” (p. 50). A completely different kind of person though also Irish, Margaret Noble, after her meeting with Swami Vivekananda in London, came to India to “dedicate herself to the working for the Ramakrishna Mission in the field of female education” (p. 51) under the name of Sister Nivedita given to her by Vivekananda. This deeply religious lady became so completely Indian that she began referring to Indian women as “us” instead of “they”. Besides founding a school for Hindu girls in Kolkata in 1898, Nivedita encouraged the artistic movement of the Bengal School, was a lecturer, a prolific writer and editor and supported Indian nationalism. Magedera has gone back and forth in this chapter in discussing Besant and Nivedita before finally talking about Margaret Cousins, the third Irish in this study. Advocating women’s movement in India, Cousins said, “Without adequate education the women of India cannot expect to rise to their full powers, and with the present standard of literacy in their own language, only two percent, it can be seen that the matter of education is of the utmost importance” (p. 58-59). To this end she worked tirelessly to help Indian women attain their goals and so established in 1926 the All India Women’s Conference. Ian, in this chapter, highlights the difference in these three Irish women by talking about Besant’s racial and gender bias to her projects: she favoured Brahmins over others and boys to girls. Sister Nivedita’s projects were largely confined to Bengal where she became, and has remained, very popular. First female honorary magistrate in Madras in 1922, Cousins was an ardent supporter of Mahatma Gandhi.

Mirra Alfassa, better known in India as the Mother is the Videshini discoursed in the third chapter. Mirra, reached Pondicherry from Paris, where she undertook a profound spiritual quest with Sri Aurobindo, setting up in course of time two spiritual organizations: the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and Auroville, the major part of which lies in Tamil Nadu. The chapter traces her life from her arrival in India with her husband, her spiritual journey with Aurobindo Ghose, her separation from her husband who returned to France, after failing in his political ambitions in India, her being the channel of communication between Aurobindo and the spiritual community, to the establishment of the Ashram and Auroville. Mirra’s goal was to have “upon earth a place no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings...could live

freely as citizens of the world” (p.115). The Aurobindo Ashram was to become, on a small scale, a place of collaboration, of real brotherhood. Ian devotes the rest of the chapter in detailing the setting up of Auroville and how the Indians and the Indian Government perceived the very cosmopolitan Mirra, her “Frenchness” being “globalized with an Indian tint” (p. 122).

Chapter four details possibly the most well known humanitarian Indian Videshini: Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, better known in India as Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa. This Albanian girl, at age sixteen, decided to leave her family and join a religious institution that prepared young women for missionary work in India, over three thousand kilometres from her home, where none of the languages spoken was familiar to her. She spoke Albanian, a little French and no English. Before coming to India, during her training in Ireland, “she mounted and won a struggle to convince the Church hierarchy to [...] found a new [religious order] based on her perception of Indian needs and how she could help Indians address them” (p. 130). She wanted to live with the Indians in the Indian way even though it scared her. After teaching for nineteen years in Bengali medium schools in India, she left the Loreto Sisterhood to start her own order: the Missionaries of Charity. The chapter subsequently describes the very Indian nature of Mother Teresa’s order, its expansion overseas, its reaching 130 countries in 1997, and her renown in India and world-wide shown by the fact that the Indian Government has issued three stamps in her honour vis-à-vis one each for the three activists in chapter two, and that the Albanian airport has been named after her.

Moving to two French women — Sooni Tata and Simone Tata — chapter five discusses two women who were considered French by the Parsis and Parsi by the French. Whereas the contribution of Sooni Tata (née Suzanne Brière), mother of J.R.D. Tata, appears to be negligible except in the domestic sphere which could arguably be called “cultural internationalism” (p.181) and described on p. 184 as “secondary human capital”, Simone Tata (née Dunoyer), spouse of Naval Tata played an important role in the line of clothing and cosmetics. The chapter dealing more with the entire Tata family rather than with the contributions of only these two women, and the Tata family being so large and illustrious, the inclusion of a family tree in the appendix would have benefitted the reader. The Swiss born French speaking Simone Dunoyer put India on her geographical map only when she started following M.K Gandhi’s activities and political philosophy on which there were lectures in her school. Her working with Air India in Geneva brought

her in contact with the Tatas since the precursor of the airline was the Tata Indian Airlines. After meeting Indira Gandhi and her future husband Naval H. Tata in Geneva, she undertook a personal trip of India where she wanted to see the monuments and places like Benares of religious and philosophical importance Naval H. Tata founded and named Lakmé, a Tata company for cosmetics, after the principal female role in a French opera about a “platonic love between a young Indian girl and a British officer in colonial India” (p. 192). While homemade beauty preparations were already in existence in India, “Lakmé was the first national brand of cosmetics” with “individual products made to international standards” (p. 192). The cosmetics sold by Lakmé, in India “prepared from French formulæ”, being “French-inspired” and “created in Paris” (p. 193) were intended to be, at some later point of time, manufactured in India. After her wedding to Naval Tata in 1955, Simone Tata, though a Swiss citizen till her death, made India her permanent residence and so became familiar with Indian women’s needs and desires. From the 1960s she was gradually inducted into the Tata Group and initially started working part time for TOMCO, of which Lakmé was a subsidiary. As Managing Director of the Company, Simone diversified it to include, among other things, talcum powder and traditional Indian fragrances. The principal commercial rationale of the company became the production of cosmetics for a wide range of skin tones. After selling Lakmé to Hindustan Unilever in 1998, Simone moved on to found an apparel store in India, “completely devoid of French or Swiss influence” (p.207), under the name of Westside. The chapter concludes with a summary on the status of the Tata companies in India through the ages.

Chapter six moves out of Europe into the city of Istanbul in the former Ottoman Empire and present day Turkey. Durru Shehvar and Niloufer were the brides of two Hyderabadi princes. Durru Shehvar’s principal contribution was to embolden “elite women in Hyderabad to organize themselves for the good of their state and to understand how that state could contribute in the 1930s and 1940s to the wider project of Indian freedom” (p. 224). She also founded the Children’s and General Hospital in Purani Haveli in Hyderabad. Durru maintained a very prominent public ceremonial role, presenting trophies at tournaments, and opening a new terminal building at the Begumpet airport — the first Indian woman to ever do so, emphasizing thereby the visibility of women in Hyderabad. Her female activism is seen in her address at the 11th session of the Hyderabad State Women’s Association, where she encourages the women on lines akin to *Swadeshi* and *Khadi*. Less vocal and far less prominent than Durru Shehvar, Niloufer too

set up a hospital in Hyderabad called the Niloufer Hospital for Women and Children. Very little else is written in the chapter about Niloufer. “A lasting legacy [however] of the marriage of the two princesses was the fading of the purdah among the Muslim elite in Hyderabad” (p. 248).

In the final chapter Ian Magedera dwells upon the contribution of the only other woman still alive of his ten chosen women (the first being Simone Tata): Sonia Gandhi, mainly running the reader through the various phases and events of Sonia’s life. Of lasting contribution he has said, “She has not forged a reputation for independent political thought on India’s internal situation, though she did take a leading role in pushing through the women’s reservation bill in March 2010” (p. 277). After being propelled into her current position by the unnatural deaths of three of her family members, “she has maintained a form of political continuity for the dynasty” (p. 278).

Indian Videshinis is a fascinating book tracing the lives and contributions of well-known and some lesser known women in Indian history, society, religion and politics. Each of his chapters could be read in isolation or in continuation, which makes it easier for the individual reader to decide the order in which the book will be read. Every chapter begins with several epigraphs lending interesting insights into the lives of the women being discoursed in the chapter. One of the main characteristics of the book is to show up the continuous mobility of each of the women discussed — whether it be within India like Jeanne Dupleix or cross-continental like most of the others —, emphasizing thereby the transnational and transcultural contributions they gave to Indian life style. It would have been more interesting however to consistently have direct source quotations: in several places, Ian has referred to indirect sources for quotations in lieu of quoting the subject being discussed. On page 66, for example — and this is not an isolated instance — Lizelle’s Reymond’s quotation on Vivekananda’s views about Bengalis as aired to Sister Nivedita leaves one wondering whether Vivekananda’s views have been correctly reported. Magedera sums up his book in his concluding chapter that highlights the diversity of the women in their origins and backgrounds who worked towards the improvement of India, but points out that each of these women, though not British, passed through England en route to India (p. 295).

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