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‘Eleanor Rathbone and Radhabai Subbarayan: Debates on Indian Female Franchise in the 1930s’

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During Eleanor Rathbone’s early parliamentary career she was a vocal campaigner for the rights of Indian women and supporter of Indian female franchise in the 1930s. She kept up a regular correspondence with a number of Indian women throughout that decade, chaired a British Committee for Indian Women’s Franchise, and visited the country in early 1932 to conduct her own independent tour and campaign to increase the size of the Indian female electorate. Rathbone, as president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), had dealings with Indian campaigners for the female vote from at least 1919 when Herabai and Mithan Tata, suffragists from Bombay, visited Britain to campaign on this issue.¹ However, her election as Independent MP for the Combined English Universities in May 1929 enabled her to focus her attention on issues relating to Indian women.

Indian female impressions of Rathbone though were not always positive. Particularly influenced by the publication of the American Katherine Mayo’s book *Mother India* in 1927, and ongoing debates about child marriage, resulting in the Child Marriage Bill (Sarda Act) in 1929, she organised a conference on ‘Women in India’ at Caxton Hall, London in 1929.² Rathbone angered a number of Indians because no Indian women had been called upon to speak, and because she appeared to support Mayo’s criticisms of India.³ Dhanvanthi Rama Rau publicly criticised the conference from the floor, and a letter signed by a number of Indians residing in Britain, and by sympathisers such as the Theosophist, Emily Lutyens, was

sent to *The Times*. Rathbone responded, in her defence, that the conference had mainly been organised to galvanise British support for Indian causes, arguing also that she had consulted with Indian women.⁴ Nevertheless, despite Rathbone's attempts to highlight reform issues for Indian women, criticisms and suspicion from Indian women plagued her throughout the 1930s. Barbara Ramusack has described Rathbone, along with some of her contemporaries, as a 'maternal imperialist' adopting a 'mother knows best' tone when she lectured Indian women about the suffrage movement.⁵ Susan Pedersen has argued that despite these criticisms Rathbone was not a maternal imperialist, but rather was bound by Westminster politics, and that her language and actions relating to empire varied considerably with audience and context.⁶ This article seeks to explore further the question of interpreting Rathbone's imperial concerns, through exploring her engagement with the issue of Indian women's franchise and her relationship with an Indian activist, Radhabai Subbarayan.

After 1921, Indian women were slowly enfranchised on a province by province basis. By 1930, only women who met the required property qualifications could vote, and since the majority of women neither owned nor could inherit property, the numbers who were eligible was very small. The ratio of male to female voters was about 25:1, and the percentage of women voters compared to the adult female population was under 1% in most provinces.⁷ Female enfranchisement remained an important issue and came to a head in the 1930s as the British Government began negotiations about constitutional reform for Indians, discussing ways to ensure greater political participation for 'minorities'. In a 1933 House of Commons debate on Indian Constitutional Reform, Rathbone claimed that she had lived with the question of the position of women under the new Constitution for four years, with hardly a day not pondering it, and reminded the House that in reference to the 'minority question' women were India's largest 'minority'.⁸

Rathbone was not unique in her interest in Indian women for it was an issue that agitated many British women, inside and outside of parliament, because of India's close relationship to Britain and the campaign activities of Indian women who lived or visited Britain in the interwar period.⁹ Some of Rathbone's correspondence with Indian women, based both in India and Britain, especially in the 1930s, can be found in the Women's Library in London. This article concentrates on her relationship with another Somerville alumna, Radhabai Subbarayan. Subbarayan was one of two Indian women delegates at the first Round Table Conference (RTC) on Indian constitutional reforms in London in 1930, and also attended the second RTC in 1931. She and Mary Pickford were the two female members on a Committee on Indian Franchise chaired by Lord Lothian, which toured India gathering evidence in 1932.¹⁰ Rathbone and Subbarayan shared similar views about the methods by which to *gradually* enfranchise Indian women, but faced opposition from various official Indian women's organisations who, in contrast, demanded immediate and full adult franchise.

Subbarayan and the Round Table Conferences

The RTCs, held at the end of 1930, 1931 and 1932 in London, were designed to discuss the potential for dominion status of India within the Commonwealth, and the nature of political representation within India, with reference to a range of 'minority' interests including those of Muslims, the depressed classes and labour (workers). When the initial list of delegates was prepared for the inaugural RTC there were no women included. As it was held during a time of civil disobedience in India when M. K. Gandhi and a number of members of the Indian National Congress were imprisoned, the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) boycotted the conference in solidarity.¹¹ However, Rathbone petitioned for both British and Indian

women to be included in the delegation. Letters were also sent by British women's organisations, including the Women's Freedom League and St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, to the India Office specifically asking for British women to be involved in the conference. The RTC was seen as an example of the way in which British women, despite equal political rights, continued to be excluded from the full range of Westminster politics, especially imperial affairs.¹² Subbarayan and Begum Shahnawaz were eventually included, and although Catherine Candy suggests that Rathbone may have been influential in their appointments, in Shahnawaz's case it was partly a matter of convenience as she was already in London serving as private secretary to her father Sir Muhammad Shafi, a leading Muslim official in British India.¹³

Radhabai Subbarayan was born in South India in 1891 and was the daughter of a lawyer and prominent social reformer. She was a graduate of Madras University and a member of the reforming Hindu sect, the Brahmo Samaj.¹⁴ Her husband came from a family of landowners and in 1922 became an independent member of the Madras Legislative Council, serving as Chief Minister from 1926 to 1930. His position enhanced the view of her as being loyal to Britain's interest. Subbarayan herself was involved in various small-scale women's and reform groups in India including the Madras Ladies' Recreation Club, the Niligari Ladies' Club at Ooctamund and the Girl Guides Executive Committee. She was the first woman to be elected to the Senate of Madras University by the graduates and was subsequently elected to the Syndicate of the University by the Senate.¹⁵ In 1930, Subbarayan was accompanied by her 11-year old daughter, Parvati, to the RTC. She knew the South of England well, not only from her term spent studying at Somerville College in 1912, but from regular summer visits to Eton College, where her three sons were studying.

The Simon Commission Report on India, published in May 1930, had expressed a desire to increase the proportion of female voters and had suggested that the wives and widows, aged over twenty five, of existing male property owners should be granted the vote, and that a literacy qualification for women should also be introduced. As an article for the Women's Freedom League paper, *The Vote*, put it, although female franchise was ultimately the concern of Indian women, 'indirectly, however these questions are also of great concern to the women of this country, for we know by experience that the inferior status of women in any one country has a damaging effect on the status of women in every other country.'¹⁶ Throughout the 1930s, British feminists were keen to point out that the Simon Report had noted that Indian women were the 'key to progress', echoing the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, a phrase that Rathbone in particular was very keen on.

With the involvement of female delegates, the topic of female franchise was raised at the RTCs, and the discussion not only covered the right to vote but also considered whether women should have 'reserved seats' (quotas) within political assemblies alongside other minorities. In this, Subbarayan drew the ire of the two leading organisations, the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and AIWC, following her participation in the first RTC. They were critical of her not only because she was not their chosen representative but also because she favoured reserved seats for women and a gradual, rather than immediate, increase in the franchise. These divisions became more apparent in the ensuing years and Subbarayan reflected upon them at length over the rest of her career.¹⁷ Her position on the matter was similar (though not exactly the same) as Rathbone's, and the two became close allies. Subbarayan noted that conceding votes to women in stages had taken place not only also in Britain but in other western countries too and saw her recommendations as progressive, but

both women were criticised by Indian women's organisations for not listening to the views of 'Indian women'.¹⁸

At the first RTC, Subbarayan and Shahnawaz issued a memorandum in which they stated that although they believed in the principle of full adult franchise they were willing to allow a limited franchise for women to continue, as long as it was increased from the *status quo* based on property ownership. Subbarayan was particularly critical of the property qualification, arguing that civic spirit was not peculiar to those with more wealth, and argued that the electorate needed to be broadened to reflect the views of all sections of people. In private correspondence to the MP, Lady Astor, she revealed her concern that the property qualification allowed 'dancing girls of ill repute' the vote.¹⁹ Rathbone was also in favour of increasing the female franchise in stages, and supported the recommendations of the Simon Report. British female MPs, including Astor, Rathbone and Pickford, sent in a memorandum advocating that wives or widows of existing Indian male voters be given the vote, when aged over twenty one.²⁰ The government had made it clear that universal adult franchise was not possible at this stage, and Rathbone believed and urged Indian women to agree to these concessions.

In her own memorandum to the RTC, Rathbone argued that Indian women should also have seats reserved for them in the provincial assemblies, whilst Subbarayan wanted seats reserved for female candidates in the Legislative Assemblies for the following fifteen years, or three elections. Subbarayan suggested that this would be an effective way to jump start the number of female MPs and give them experience in political office.²¹ Referring to the experience of Britain where it had taken twelve years to only elect fifteen female MPs, Subbarayan's colleague Shahnawaz asserted that the 'theory that women need only a fair field and no favour does not yet apply in this world – certainly not in India'.²² The

Manchester Guardian's special correspondent supported the policy, citing the experience of other countries where women who had only recently become engaged with public politics were finding it hard to get elected.²³

Members of the WIA and AIWC became aggrieved with the authority Subbarayan and Shahnawaz were asserting in London on behalf of Indian women and rejected the proposal for political quotas. In October 1930, one of the editors of the WIA organ, *Stri Dharma*, criticised the appointments of the two women to the RTC:

They have absolutely no credentials from the organised women of India to say that they represent the opinions of Indian womanhood. They represent only themselves and as such women will wish them good luck, but they will mis-represent [sic] the thirty thousand prisoners, including many of Indian's best women.²⁴

On the other hand, both Subbarayan and Rathbone rejected the view that the WIA or AIWC represented the views of Indian women, citing their relatively low membership and examples of Indian women who disagreed with these official views. In the aftermath of the first conference, the leaders of the WIA continued to express their concern about the female appointments and that Subbarayan, in particular, was too loyal to the imperial government.²⁵ By May 1931, the WIA had called a meeting alongside other women's organisations to draft a memorandum condemning the recommendations of the conference and demanding that only full adult franchise would be accepted and that there should be no reserved seats for women.²⁶ They rejected Rathbone's argument that they should take on board the concessions, and became militant in their hard-line stance. In continued correspondence and delegations to various sections of the Government, Indian women's organisations expressed their

displeasure that their views on franchise were not being heard and explained that Rathbone's suggestions did not reflect Indian opinion.

Subbarayan and Rathbone: Utilising their Networks

After the first RTC, Subbarayan consulted Rathbone regularly for her advice on the female franchise question and how to deal with the often vociferous criticism from the main Indian women's organisations. On 1 May 1931, Subbarayan explained to Rathbone that the prominent women's organisations had declared for 'equality and no privileges'; 'a fair field and no favour'. She believed that though many Indian women supported her view, the authoritarian leadership of the WIA and AIWC would not allow space for dissenting voices, and that Indian women were also being influenced by the support that Gandhi and the Indian National Congress were giving them. She asked Rathbone to take on the cause of reservation of seats and to explain this to her contacts, including an appeal to ask Sir Philip and Mabel Hartog to write to the WIA, for the International Council of Women in London to write to the Bombay Council of Women, and for the Women's International League to write to the AIWC committee.²⁷

In 1932, Ramsay Macdonald introduced the Communal Award which gave reserved seats to women, with some of these seats further divided along 'community' (religious) lines. Indian women's organisations felt hugely betrayed as they had consistently argued that Indian women did not care for communal divisions. Subbarayan was extremely disappointed as she had been in favour of reserved seats for women, precisely to avoid communal interests seeping in, and women's organisations in India considered boycotting these seats. In correspondence, Rathbone reassured Subbarayan that women should take up these reserved

positions and then work together to demonstrate that they did not believe in communal divisions.²⁸ Meanwhile, Subbarayan sent letters to Lady Astor despairing about the communal vote and the need to increase the female franchise. She asked her to bring all the women MPs in parliament together to support Indian women – ‘We expect you, as women, to help us’.²⁹ It was soon after this, in April 1933, that the British Committee for Indian Women’s Franchise was set up.

One of the specific concerns Indian feminists had about Rathbone’s recommendations was that by enfranchising the wives and widows of existing male property owners only married women were getting votes, and women weren’t being enfranchised based on individual citizenship rights. As Charulata Mukerjee, secretary of the AIWC, put it to Shahnawaz in 1933, she did not understand why Rathbone was ‘so insistent on the wives & widows getting votes’, explaining it was derogatory to Indian women. ‘It might have been alright some years ago, but now women want to stand on their own rights & Miss Rathbone, more than anybody else, should understand that point’.³⁰ In fact, following her tour of India in early 1932, Rathbone became even more adamant that Indian women needed to accept these recommendations. Despite not being married, she remained supportive of enfranchising wives, arguing that Indian women faced so many disadvantages, including the incidence of purdah, unfair property laws and high illiteracy, that ‘a fair field and no favour’ was an impossible dream.³¹

Faced with the criticism of Indian women leaders who were allied with anti-imperialist nationalist thought, Subbarayan became increasingly keen to downplay her relationship with Rathbone, afraid of Englishwomen ‘butting in’.³² In a letter of 8 January 1932, Rathbone retorted:

By the by, if when you or others are pressing for reservation of seats you are again criticised (as you told me you had been) on the ground that you are being too much influenced by Englishwomen, you can tell your critics that the English women's societies which have interested themselves in India are just as much divided as Indian women themselves. [...] [i]t is really inconsistent of Indian women to say that they want perfect equality between the sexes and yet that they resent Englishwomen expressing any views about Indian affairs. So long as this country is concerned with India at all and is appointing Committees and placing projects before Parliament, it cannot be right that British men should be able and expected to express views and exercise influence, while British women are asked to keep their hands off. There are so few of us in Parliament and in the official machine, that that machine is bound to take a mainly masculine view.³³

More than a year later, on 6 February 1933, Subbarayan wrote to Rathbone: 'It is not because I do not wish to acknowledge my appreciation of your help but because the suspicion that I am "a tool in the hands of the Br. women" will do harm to our cause', as franchise reform was bound up with anti-colonial sentiment.³⁴ Although the correspondence between Subbarayan and Rathbone (in the archives) appears to have ceased by 1934, official Indian women sentiment towards Rathbone also appeared to be softening by 1933. Leading Indian campaigner Sarojini Naidu, who had been critical of Subbarayan, described Rathbone as able and energetic and was appreciative of her efforts.³⁵

The Aftermath

The Franchise Committee completed its recommendations in 1932, suggesting that female franchise be increased gradually along literacy and wifehood lines. Indeed, much of the language appeared to be lifted from Rathbone's memorandums on the issue.³⁶ By 1933, it was clear that these recommendations would form the basis for the 1935 Government of India Act and Indian women's organisations conceded that universal adult suffrage would not be possible at this time. Indeed, by 1933 some members of the AIWC and WIA were putting forward recommendations to enfranchise women in urban areas, and discussing methods of group voting. Despite this, criticisms of Rathbone were still forthcoming with Rama Rau writing from London in 1934 to AIWC member Rajkumari Amrit Kaur that Rathbone was still active on the issue of Indian suffrage, and still failing to consider or discuss the views that Indian women were taking, as she had failed to do in the 1929 conference.³⁷ However, by the 1940s, Indian women leaders appeared to have softened towards Subbarayan who, after becoming the first female member of the Indian Council of State in 1938, became a member of the Congress party and became more actively involved in civil disobedience and nationalist politics.³⁸

This article adds complexity to our understanding of debates about who could properly represent Indian women's interests. Indian women's organisations were as critical of Subbarayan, for not actually representing their official views, but promoting her own views which were at variance with theirs, as of Rathbone, for failing to take their views into account. Rathbone was not unique in her interest in Indian women, for it was an issue that agitated many British women, inside and outside of parliament, largely because of India's close relationship to Britain and the campaign activities of Indian women who lived or visited Britain in the interwar period. Whilst she was not universally admired, and was viewed as overly meddling by some Indian women, Rathbone also had many supporters appreciative of

the action she took on this issue. Her recommendations and insistent lobbying within government circles ultimately formed much of the basis of Indian female franchise legislation in the 1930s, helping to increase female political participation in some small way before universal adult franchise was introduced in 1949.

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¹ For example, Rathbone chaired a meeting of Liverpool Council of Women Citizens on 13 October 1919 calling for the enfranchisement of Indian women: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi (hereafter NMML): Misc. Acc 612, Tata Collection, Jessie Beavan to Herabai Tata, 27 Nov 1919.

² For more on *Mother India* controversy and reaction see M. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: the Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 109-51.

³ D.R. Rau, *An Inheritance: The Memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rama Rau* (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 169-170. Rama Rau was a member of the National Council of Women in India and the AIWC.

⁴ 'Women in India', *The Times*, 22 Oct 1929, p.12; 'Women in India', *The Times*, 24 Oct 1929, 12.

⁵ B.N. Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945', in N. Chaudhuri & M. Strobel, eds, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 33.

⁶ Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 427 (footnote 100).

⁷ British Library (hereafter BL) *Indian States: Enfranchisement of Women*, India Office Records, , IORL/I/1/171, file 25/3.

⁸ *HC Deb*, 28 Mar 1933, vol 276, 941

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- ⁹ S. Mukherjee, 'Herabai Tata and Sophia Duleep Singh: Suffragette Resistances for India and Britain, 1910-1920', in R. Ahmed & S. Mukherjee (eds), *South Asian Resistances in Britain 1858-1947* (London: Continuum, 2012), 106–21.
- ¹⁰ Mary Pickford was Conservative MP for Hammersmith North from 1931 until her death in 1934.
- ¹¹ G. Pearson, 'Reserved Seats - Women and the Vote in Bombay', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, 20, (1), (1983) 53.
- ¹² The Women's Library@LSE (hereafter TWL), St Joan's Social and Political Alliance Minute Book, 7 November 1930, 2SJA/A1/6; 'Women and the Round Table Conference', *The Vote*, 19 Sept 1930, 300.
- ¹³ C. Candy (2000) 'Competing Transnational Representations of the 1930s Indian Franchise Question', in Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall & Philippa Levine (Eds) *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race* (London: Routledge, 2000) p.198; J.A. Shahnawaz, *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (Lahore: Nigarishat, 1971), 100–103.
- ¹⁴ Somerville Archives, Oxford, 1912 Register, Subbarayan.
- ¹⁵ Reading University Library Special Collections (hereafter RUSC): Nancy Astor Papers, MS1416/1/251. Press cutting labelled 'N. C.', 24 Oct 1930. See also 'Indian Women's New Freedom', *Daily Express*, 12 Sept 1931, 3.
- ¹⁶ 'British Women for India?', *The Vote*, 6 Mar 1931, 76.
- ¹⁷ R. Subbarayan, *A Statement on the Political Status of Women under the New Indian Constitution* (Madras: Madras Publishing House, 1933), 3.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁹ BL: Q/RTC/23. Indian Round Table Conference 1930-1. Franchise Committee; RUSC: Astor Papers. MS 1416/1/1/1012: Subbarayan to Astor, 26 Aug 1932.
- ²⁰ Q/RTC/23: 3rd meeting of franchise sub-committee, 30 Dec 1930.
- ²¹ Q/RTC/23.
- ²² Charles A. Seldon, 'Indian Women Ask Equality as Voters', *New York Times*, 23 Dec 1930, 7.
- ²³ 'Parliament of all India', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Dec 1930, 4.
- ²⁴ 'Women and the Elections', *Stri Dharma*, XIII, 12 (Oct 1930), 532.
- ²⁵ 'Mrs Subbarayan's Commonsense', *Stri Dharma*, XIV, 5 (Mar 1931), 180.

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- ²⁶ ‘Women and the New Constitution’, *Stri Dharma*, XIV, 7 (May 1931), 286.
- ²⁷ TWL, 7ELR/07, Subbarayan to Rathbone, 1 May 1931. Philip Hartog was an educationalist who had worked in India.
- ²⁸ TWL, 7ELR/07, Rathbone to Subbarayan, 2 Sept 1932. For more on Rathbone’s stance on Indian suffrage see M. Sinha, ‘Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women under an Imperial State’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 36/4 (1999): 461–84.
- ²⁹ RUSC: Astor Papers. MS 1416/1/1/1012: Subbarayan to Astor, 26 Aug 1932.
- ³⁰ NMML: AIWC Papers, Roll 3. File 34. Mukerjee to Shahnawaz, 1 June 1933.
- ³¹ NMML: AIWC Papers, Roll 2. File 21. Rathbone memo, 10 Mar 1932.
- ³² TWL: 7ELR/07, Rathbone to Subbarayan, 8 Jan 1932.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ TWL: 7ELR/07, Subbarayan to Rathbone, 6 Feb 1933.
- ³⁵ Anon., ‘Indian Women Vigorous Fighters’ in S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, *Mrs Margaret Cousins and Her Work in India: With a Brief Life Sketch of Her Colleagues and Comrades* (Adyar, Madras: Women’s Indian Association, 1956), no page numbers.
- ³⁶ Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone*, 254.
- ³⁷ NMML, AIWC Papers, Roll 6. File 59. Rama Rau to Kaur, 9 Feb 1934.
- ³⁸ P. N. Premalatha, *Nationalism and Women’s Movement in South India, 1917-1947* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2003), 146-8.