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# Stri-Dharma: Voice of the Indian Women's Rights Movement 1928-1936

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*STRI-DHARMA*: VOICE OF THE INDIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1928-1936

by

SARAH BROOME

Under the direction of Carolyn Biltoft

ABSTRACT

The journal *Stri-Dharma*, published by the Women's Indian Association from 1918 to 1936, endeavored to be the voice of the Indian women's rights movement. It addressed political and social issues facing women in India as well as the achievements of women worldwide. Using the dichotomy of the home and world, this thesis examines how *Stri-Dharma* represented the tensions experienced by the Indian women's movement as it pressed for reforms from the British colonial state, participation in the Indian nationalist movement, and inclusion in the international women's movement.

INDEX WORDS: *Stri-Dharma*, Women's rights movement, India, Women's Indian Association

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SARAH BROOME

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

The years between World War I and World War II brought tremendous social, economic, political, and cultural adjustments to the world. These changes included the rise of anticolonial nationalism, women's challenge to traditional gender roles, and a worldwide depression. During the 1920's and 30's the new leaders who emerged on the world scene were forced to deal with these issues. This period was particularly important in India, where its people struggled to gain independence from Britain and establish their place in the world. The tensions around these matters make this an enticing period to study and are important elements in the study of India's women's rights movement.

“The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity.”<sup>1</sup> Partha Chatterjee argues that this dichotomy between the world and home had “very special significance in the nationalist mind.”<sup>2</sup> As such it provides a framework for examining the movements within this period. The status of women was a major point of contention between the colonizer and the colonized, particularly during the interwar period. It is in this moment that the “woman question” was raised. The women's movement reflects the tensions within the Indian nationalist movement as well as larger international tensions over both the state of colonialism and women's status across and within borders.

India in the years following World War I, despite its status as a colony, was struggling to make its name in the world. The interwar period saw Indian nationalists

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<sup>1</sup> Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 120.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

calling more and more for swaraj—self-rule.<sup>3</sup> A variety of achievements helped unify the Indian nationalist movement, including the reconsolidation of groups within the Indian National Congress in 1916, the increase of cooperation between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, and the creation of the Home Rule League by Annie Besant in 1917.<sup>4</sup> Besant was a British theosophist who campaigned for various social reforms including women’s rights and Indian nationalism. She would live in India until her death in 1933. This time was also marked by the return of Gandhi to India. Throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s Gandhi urged the people of India to use non-violence to achieve the political independence they desired. The efforts to gain political autonomy played a pivotal role in India between the world wars.

The Indian nationalist movement is marked by three ‘phases’ preceded by a preparatory stage. The preparation of ‘Home Rule Agitation’<sup>5</sup> was led largely by Annie Besant, B.G. Tilak, and the Home Rule League. The first phase of civil disobedience movements took place between 1919 and 1929. During this period, Gandhi would come to play a major role on the political scene in India.<sup>6</sup> The years of 1930-1935 represent the second phase in the civil disobedience movements. This new phase was “ushered in with new hopes, a changed creed and the prospect of an active fight ahead.”<sup>7</sup> The period of time which is considered the last phase of the nationalist struggle in India would take the country through the turbulent years of World War II through the transfer of power and partition of India in 1947.<sup>8</sup> Through each of these phases the nationalist movement

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<sup>3</sup> Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, *An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls Her Life*, ed. Geraldine Forbes (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1968), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Kaur, 117.

<sup>6</sup> Kaur, 144-166.

<sup>7</sup> Kaur, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Kaur, 209-244.



expanded to include more of the Indian people and brought the Indian people closer together and closer to their goal of national unity.

The wartime revival of the nationalist movement is marked by efforts of Annie Besant.<sup>9</sup> In 1914, Besant joined the Indian National Congress—through which she demanded India’s right to self-government. During this period Besant also used the paper which would become known as *New India* to argue for the rights of the Indian people and against the rule of the British.<sup>10</sup> The most significant achievement during this period is the creation of the Home Rule League in September 1916.<sup>11</sup> Besant argued that the only way self-government for the Indian people could be achieved was if they were united.<sup>12</sup> While Besant was not arguing for a total break from the British but a role for India within the British Commonwealth, the British took notice of the work of Besant and the Home Rule League.

Serious efforts toward the non-cooperation movement began in 1919 in opposition to the passage of the highly controversial Rowlatt Bills. In a speech at a public meeting held in Madras the day before the bills were enacted, Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress, nationalist activist, and poet described the bills as “unjust, subversive of the principle of liberty and justice and destructive of the elementary rights of individuals on which the safety of the community as a whole and the State itself is based.”<sup>13</sup> The bills became law on March 18, 1919, just before the first non-cooperation movement was scheduled to begin on March 30. In fact, the movement was delayed until April 6—with the exception of Delhi which

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<sup>9</sup> Kaur, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Kaur, 126-127.

<sup>11</sup> Kaur, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Kaur, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 142-143.

did not receive the message of the date change.<sup>14</sup> The Satyagraha movement was successful – but not without its sacrifices-- some of the protestors were met with violence from the authorities and were killed.<sup>15</sup> On April 7, while traveling from Bombay to Delhi, Gandhi was arrested.<sup>16</sup> The first Satyagraha came to an end on April 18, 1919.<sup>17</sup>

The Khilaphat Movement was organized in 1920 in protest of the treatment of Muslims as well as in protest of the Punjab tragedies.<sup>18</sup> Gandhi used this as an opportunity to unify the people of India—warning the government that Satyagraha would resume if they did not receive justice. March 19 was selected as a day of mourning and the week of April 6-13 was designated as National Week. Even from England, Sarojini Naidu participated in the movement.<sup>19</sup> This movement was designed to get the government’s attention through the nationwide “boycott of titles and honours, elections and legislatures, schools and colleges, courts and tribunals”<sup>20</sup> In a speech entitled, “The Agony and Shame of the Punjab,” Naidu criticized the British for their treatment of the women of the Punjab and charged them as having betrayed democracy and dishonored the women of the Punjab. One of the most poignant moments of the speech is when Naidu charges the British as having “lost your soul.”<sup>21</sup>

Pandit Motilal Nehru, in his duties as President, addressed the 34<sup>th</sup> annual session of the Indian National Congress (hereafter INC) on December 27, 1919. In his speech, he describes the Satyagraha campaign as one of “truth, fearlessness, and non-

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<sup>14</sup> For more information see Kumar, 62-24.

<sup>15</sup> Sengupta, 145-146.

<sup>16</sup> Sengupta, 144-145.

<sup>17</sup> Kaur, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Sengupta, 159-160 and Kaur, 149.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Sarojini Naidu see Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 142-143.

<sup>20</sup> Kaur, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Sengupta, 161-162.

violence.”<sup>22</sup> He later goes on to describe these qualities as “essential if we are to take our rightful place amongst the nations of the world.”<sup>23</sup> These quotations provide evidence to the nation-wide impact of the non-cooperation movement which began in April 1919. As Nehru continues in his address to the INC, he praises the Satyagraha campaign as a day that India should always remember and “the greatest event of the year.”<sup>24</sup>

The women of India played a pivotal role in the Indian nationalist movement. In his book, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement 1857-1947*, Kaur quotes Annie Besant and her description of the importance of women in the Home Rule League: “is rendered tenfold greater by the adhesion to it large numbers of women, who bring to its help the uncalculating, heroism, the endurance, the self-sacrifice, of the feminine nature.”<sup>25</sup> Besant even goes so far as to describe the women of India as the best recruits and recruiters for the home rule movement. At her death in 1934, numerous articles were written in *Stri-Dharma* describing her contributions to women, India, and the world. Within an article entitled “Dr. Besant” she is described as “the guardian angel and warrior of India,”<sup>26</sup> The author goes on to describe the tireless work of Besant for the people of India, whom she adopted as her own, devoting her “richest powers to the service of India.”<sup>27</sup> In another article, Margaret Cousins, describes Annie Besant as “Super-Woman.”<sup>28</sup> Using the Hindu notion of a father-mother figure, Cousins praises Besant’s efforts for India: “Truly Annie Besant was ‘our father and our mother’ in India

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<sup>22</sup> K.M. Panikkar and A. Pershad, *The Voice of Freedom: Selected Speeches of Pandit Motilal Nehru* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Panikkar and Pershad, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Panikkar and Pershad, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Besant, *India Bond or Free*, p. 205 quoted in Kaur, 142.

<sup>26</sup> B. Govindaswamy, “Dr. Besant,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 9 (July 1934): 405-407.

<sup>27</sup> Govindaswamy, 406.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, “Annie Besant: Super-Woman,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 7 (May 1934).

which she loved and served so devotedly.”<sup>29</sup> The outpouring of love for Besant gives us insight into the tremendous effort she put into the betterment of the people of India.

At any rate, the movement for Indian independence was a major influence on the women’s movement in India—the leaders, workers, and movements were intertwined. The Satyagraha campaigns urged the people to use handloom spinning and to resist the British monopoly on the salt manufacturing process. These nationalist protests mobilized many women who became involved in other forms of activism. As the men were arrested during the civil disobedience movement, the women gladly took up the cause bringing to the attention of the leaders that they were capable not only of fighting for Indian independence but fighting for equality for women as well. “Thousands of women joined the Satyagraha Army of Gandhiji. They raised their voice against the Rowlatt Bill, Salt Laws, and Forest Laws and went to jail as a consequence of their defiance.”<sup>30</sup> The Indian nationalist movement provided women with their first chances at political activism and laid the foundation for their ‘feminist’ future.

A key element within this period was the marshaling of public opinion by both colonizers and the colonized. During the interwar period, numerous organizations were struggling for social and political reform. A critical strategy for achieving support for these reforms was through the use of the written and spoken word. Many of these organizations published newsletters or journals to spread their message and gather support for their causes. One organization that served to fill this role in the Indian women’s movement was the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) and the journal, *Stri-Dharma*.

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<sup>29</sup> Cousins, “Annie Besant.”

<sup>30</sup> Kaur, 4.

*Stri-Dharma* emerges within this period revealing the unresolved tensions within the women's movement including employment, health, and education. Its title meant the "sphere of women; women's duty or justice for women."<sup>31</sup> The journal was launched by Margaret Cousins, an Irish suffragist who moved to India in 1915, Cousins would be active in the Indian women's movement, and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who would later go on to serve as the editor of the magazine and the first woman legislator in British India. *Stri-Dharma* would serve as the platform of discussion for the women's movement in India. Comparable to Western women's movements in its use of "feminist terminology," the journal was published from January 1918 until August 1936.<sup>32</sup> Although predominantly an English publication, this journal was multilingual, with portions in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu to broaden circulation. The journal's format would vary slightly over the years depending on the availability of editors for each section. The English portion was the largest within the pages of the journal, followed by the Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu sections. These latter sections would vary in size and occasionally disappear until an editor could be found. The contributors to the journal included men and women from India and around the world who were fighting for the rights of women and the people of India.

*Stri-Dharma* has been a rich source for historians of the Indian women's movement. However, with the exception of the article "Writing *Stri-Dharma*: International feminism, nationalist politics, and women's press advocacy in late colonial India" by Michelle Tusan, this journal has been largely unexplored.<sup>33</sup> Due to its unique

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<sup>31</sup> Michelle Elizabeth Tusan. "Writing Stri Dharma: International feminism, nationalist politics, and women's press advocacy in late colonial India" *Women's History Review* 12, no. 4 (2003): 623 and 643.

<sup>32</sup> Shahida Lateef, "Whither the Indian Women's Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 12, no. 47 (November 19, 1977): 1948-1951.

<sup>33</sup> Tusan, 623-649.

nature as being “neither completely Indian nor British in character” it is an excellent case study of the tensions present within the international and Indian women’s movements.<sup>34</sup> The lack of scholarship focusing on a journal of such importance to the Indian women’s movement makes the need for this study evident.

Thus my thesis explores the Indian women’s movement through the pages of *Stri-Dharma* to gain a deeper understanding of the tensions present within the Indian women’s movement. Using the dichotomy between the home and the world, the varying issues facing the women of India will be analyzed. The second chapter of this thesis will analyze the role of women in the home, specifically examining the treatment of issues such as child marriage, women’s property and inheritance rights, as well as women’s health and wellness in the pages of *Stri-Dharma*. The third chapter of this thesis will analyze women’s role in the world including topics such as women’s suffrage, political participation, education, and the international women’s movement. The journal helped women activists in India clarify their thinking and intervene in matters of public opinion and government policy. To the degree that women shared problems and ideals across borders, *Stri-Dharma* helped unite the Indian women’s movement with the international women’s movement of the interwar period.

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<sup>34</sup> Tusan, 626.

## Chapter 2 Indian Women and the Home

The movements for women's rights worldwide had many of the same goals, methods, and strategies. However, "unlike the women's movement in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe or America the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home."<sup>35</sup> Partha Chatterjee argues the "inner space of the middle class home" served as an important focal point for "the history of women's issues."<sup>36</sup> The home became the battlefield for women's rights and the nationalist movement because it was viewed as the cultural and social heart of Indian tradition by both the British and the Indians. It is within the sphere of the home that the issues Indian women faced daily were most evident. As Chatterjee describes the colonizer used the rhetoric of women's rights to align themselves with an "unfree and oppressed womanhood of India" against a series of "barbaric social customs."<sup>37</sup> Using this justification for the colonizing mission, the status of women was one of the primary colonial justifications against India's political readiness. The people of India were well aware of the colonial claims that they were "unfit for political self-government"<sup>38</sup> and consequently realized they must find a way to address the issue of Indian womanhood and counter the claims of the colonizer.

One way the "woman question" was addressed was through the channeling of public opinion. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* exposed "graphic details of a variety of social ills in India, especially as they affected the position of women in India" in an attempt to *prove* India was "unfit for political self-government." Just as Mayo used the

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<sup>35</sup> Chatterjee, 133.

<sup>36</sup> Chatterjee, 133.

<sup>37</sup> Chatterjee, 118-119.

<sup>38</sup> <sup>38</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1. For more info on Mayo's *Mother India* see Chapter 4 of Sinha's, *Specters of Mother India*.

written word to sway public opinion, the women of India used journals such as *Stri-Dharma* to give women's issues and consequently the Indian women's movement a voice. Numerous issues including child marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights were all topics addressed within *Stri-Dharma*. Throughout this chapter the issues women faced in the home will be analyzed through the lens of *Stri-Dharma*. These writings clearly illustrate the diversity and tensions present within the Indian women's movement and *Stri-Dharma's* role in informing the public on issues including child marriage, divorce, women's property and inheritance rights, and lastly, women's health issues such as purdah, the devadasi system, and the physical health and well-being of Indian women.

Although the topic of child marriage had been an issue within India as early as the mid-nineteenth century, the release of Mayo's *Mother India* in 1927 brought new attention to the issue during the interwar period. Consequently, child marriages and their impact on the women of India was a frequent point of discussion within the pages of *Stri-Dharma*.<sup>39</sup> The marriage of a child at a young age had long lasting physical, emotional and mental effect. Opponents of child marriage argued these young girls were denied the right to choose their own destiny. Child marriage was described as the "bartering of a girl's liberty" within the pages of *Stri-Dharma*.<sup>40</sup> The young girls were taken from their homes, to a home with a man often old enough to be their father, and in a situation in which they were much like a servant. "As a servant eats food after his master, so must a wife; as a servant stands before his master, so must a wife. Marriage

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<sup>39</sup> For more information on child marriage see Sita Anantha Raman, *Women in India: A Social and Cultural History* Volume 2, (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2009), 156-157.

<sup>40</sup> N. Yagnesvara Sastry, "The Tragedy of Women's Life in India," *Stri-Dharma* 11, no. 9 (July 1928): 146-149.



that produces subordination instead of companionship between the parties is not a sacrament.”<sup>41</sup>

The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* continually argued against the “crime of infant marriage,” primarily due to the damage it did to the children of India. Why should they be denied the freedom and education that would allow them to grow into “strong, happy, educated, and free young men and women?”<sup>42</sup> The WIA in its attempts to prevent the emotional and physical toll child marriages often had on the bride, urged *Stri-Dharma* readers to boycott any marriages of brides under the age of 16 and grooms under the age of 21.<sup>43</sup> In addition to the emotional and psychological toll of a child marriage, the marriage of a child so young was dangerous to her health, particularly if she became pregnant at such a young age. The medical community spoke out against child marriages for exactly this reason.<sup>44</sup> Between the ages of 10 and 15, more females than males died—the only age span in which that occurred—in large part due to the high rates of maternal mortality.<sup>45</sup> The following case of a child bride was a tragic reminder of the physical, emotional, and mental suffering of the young women of India. A young girl, 13, died of burning after only being married for thirteen days—the jury found that she “committed suicide owing to the unbearable and inhuman solicitations of the so-called husband” despite the deposition of the girl which “would go to show that the husband

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<sup>41</sup> Sastry, 146-149.

<sup>42</sup> “Boycott Child Marriages,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 6 (April 1929): 256.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> V. Saraswathi Ammal, “Evil Offshoots of Hindu Religion,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 344-347. Due to the condition of many of the issues of *Stri-Dharma* from 1930, I was unable to determine which volume the articles were published in. For all citations in which this occurred, the number is listed as unknown.

<sup>45</sup> A Member of the Open Door International, “Real Protection for Indian Women: A Reply to K.E.M.,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 256-259.

had set fire to her clothes.”<sup>46</sup> This case is a tragic example of the cruelty forced on a child in the name of religion—this custom being a “moral as well as a physical evil”<sup>47</sup>

Mrinalini Sinha’s, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* dedicates an entire chapter to analyzing the role of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, more commonly known as the Sarda Act, in “Refashioning Mother India.”<sup>48</sup> The Child Marriage Restraint Act was written by Harbilas Sarda.<sup>49</sup> After passage of the law by “the assembly and the council of state,” on October 1, 1929, the law went into effect on April 1, 1930.<sup>50</sup> This bill whose object according to the author was the “prevention of widowhood at tender ages of girls” received tremendous attention and “roused feelings in the country as no other bill has done before”<sup>51</sup> Despite the introduction of Sarda’s act prior to Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*, the act came to be seen as a response to the highly controversial book.<sup>52</sup> While the original proposed version of the law set the legal marrying age for boys at the age of 15 and girls at the age of 12, the final version approved raised the legal age of a marriage for females to the age of 14.<sup>53</sup> Despite the overwhelming support for the act, which passed 67-14,<sup>54</sup> there were still complaints about the law from people on both sides of the political spectrum. For the next five years the Sarda Act continued to be a major topic of discussion within the pages of *Stri-*

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<sup>46</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “The Curse of Child Marriage,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 396-397. Reprinted from *Young India* 1926.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 152-196.

<sup>49</sup> For more information on the Sarda Act see Sita Anantha Raman, *Women in India: A Social and Cultural History Volume 2* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2009), 125-126, 157; Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1981), 145-147; and Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (London: Verso, 1993), 70-72.

<sup>50</sup> T.R. Veknatarama Sastrip, “Sarda’s Child Marriage Prevention Act and After,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, nos. 1 and 2 (December 1929): 15.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Sinha, 159.

<sup>53</sup> “Child Marriage Bill Passed” *Stri-Dharma* 12, nos. 11 and 12 (September and October 1929): 497.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

*Dharma*, including reactions to the legislation, enforcement of the act, criticisms, and finally efforts to have the bill amended. According to Sinha, the act “represented the potential of a modernizing national state in India” and “was the first and since then, also the only law dealing directly with marriage that was universally applicable across different religious communities each with their own ‘personal laws’ governing marriage and family life.”<sup>55</sup>

Prior to its passage, many groups and people expressed their views on the legislation. British women sent a letter expressing their support for the bill and described the legislation as “for the good of India and the credit of Great Britain.”<sup>56</sup> Others expressing their views on the act included the Madras Women’s Indian Association<sup>57</sup> and Pandit Motilal Nehru, an important leader of the Indian National Congress who would serve as its president from 1919-1920 and again from 1928-1929.<sup>58</sup> Both Nehru and the Madras branch of the WIA agreed child marriages throughout India should be abolished but they did not agree with the low age proposed by the legislation. They recommended the minimum legal age for girls to marry be raised to 16.<sup>59</sup>

Enforcement of the Sarda Act was one of the biggest challenges the reformers faced. The first problem was the reporting of the underage marriages. Those who were courageous enough to report those in their community who were violating the act were then forced to pay a deposit before the authorities would investigate the claim. Another challenge enforcing the act was presented when despite warnings from the authorities,

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<sup>55</sup> Sinha, 152-153.

<sup>56</sup> “British Women’s Support to the Child Marriage Bill,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, nos. 11 and 12 (September and October 1929): 494-495.

<sup>57</sup> “Madras Women’s Support,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, nos. 11 and 12 (September and October 1929): 495-496.

<sup>58</sup> “Pandit Motilal Nehru supports Child Marriage Bill,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, nos. 11 and 12 (September and October 1929): 494-495.

<sup>59</sup> “Madras Women’s Support,” 495-496.

the marriages occurred or the families evaded the law by choosing to perform the marriage outside of British India.

In their efforts to inform their readers and take full advantage of public opinion the Women's Indian Association through *Stri-Dharma* presented both sides of an issue. As a result, articles appeared analyzing the pros and the cons of the legislation as well as the successes. Contributors to the journal reported marriages of 11 and 12 year old girls being postponed after authorities investigated claims that these marriages were planned.<sup>60</sup> Another contributor was K.S. Gupta whose article, "Sarda Act at Work," detailed the punishments to the bridegroom as well as the mother of the bride for two illegal marriages—one of a 50 year old to a 10 year old and the other a man of unknown age to a 9 year old. According to the article, the authorities informed these men of the illegality of the marriages, but the violation occurred despite prior warning. As a result, the bridegroom was fined 100 rupees and imprisoned for one week, and the mother of the bride was fined 20 rupees and also imprisoned for one week. <sup>61</sup> Supporters of the legislation argued that while child marriages were still occurring, the overall progress made the legislation "one of the most beneficent pieces of legislation in recent times and one which can vitally transform the health and happiness of Indian society."<sup>62</sup> Those who took this stance argued for a broader look at the positive outcomes of the legislation to protect women and urged those who opposed the Act to allow the government to take the lead on an issue that the public opinion has not yet caught up with for the benefit of the country.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Encouragement for Sarda Bill Workers," *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 1 (November 1930): 4-5. and "Enforcing the Sarda Act," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 340.

<sup>61</sup> K.S. Gupta, "Sarda Act at Work," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 1 (November 1932): 29-30.

<sup>62</sup> K.V. Sessa Aiyangar, "Has the Sarda Act failed?" *Stri-Dharma* 18, no. 1 (November 1934): 4-5.

<sup>63</sup> Aiyangar, 4-5.

Within months of the Sarda Act going into effect, women and the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* had already begun to criticize the legislation. The law was described as “inadequate” and “unsatisfactory” due to the legislation’s inability to actually *restrain* child marriages as it was intended— only punish those who break the law.<sup>64</sup> Those who criticized the act argued that this did not achieve the purpose of the legislation to limit child marriages because the people who would report these marriages were required to put up money before any action would be taken. The criticisms of the Sarda Act as well as proposals to amend the act began as early as 1930—only six months after it went into effect.<sup>65</sup> Authors wrote books and articles that appeared within the pages of *Stri-Dharma* as well as reviews of other materials that criticized the act. Eleanor Rathbone, “who had been inspired by *Mother India* to lobby for the passage of the Sarda Bill” criticized the bill for its lack of effectiveness.<sup>66</sup> A supporter of Katherine Mayo, Rathbone would be alienated from Mayo when she chose to support the legislation, favoring some reform over none at all. In her book, *Child Marriage: The Indian Minotaur* (1934) Rathbone argued the women of India did not do enough to help the implementation of the Sarda Act.<sup>67</sup> Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy reviewed Rathbone’s book in *Stri-Dharma*.<sup>68</sup> According to Reddy, the book details the failures of the Sarda Act as “a harmless and innocuous piece of ornamental legislation”<sup>69</sup> inadequate to deal with the “horrors of child marriage”<sup>70</sup> Contributors to the journal had various suggestions on what could be done to improve the act including holding public meetings, forming organizations solely

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<sup>64</sup> “The Sarda Act,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 12 (October 1930): 528-529.

<sup>65</sup> “The Sarda Act,” 528-529.

<sup>66</sup> Sinha, 160.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> For more information on Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, see Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, 169-171.

<sup>69</sup> “Miss Rathbone and the Sarda Act,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 7 (May 1934).

<sup>70</sup> Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddi, “Book Review Child Marriage by Eleanor F. Rathbone,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 8 (June 1934): 282.

for the purpose of investigating early marriages, and gaining the support of government to amend the act.<sup>71</sup> Other changes that were suggested included “invalidating marriages celebrated within the prohibited ages ... a lower age limit, more generally acceptable ... and a heavier penalty imposed.”<sup>72</sup>

Another issue the journal *Stri-Dharma* brought to the attention of the public was divorce.<sup>73</sup> Local and national pieces of legislation concerning divorce attracted the attention of the women’s movement of India via *Stri-Dharma* and consequently resulted in articles dealing with the inequities in divorce laws between men and women. The princely state of Baroda was the first in India to give “equal rights to the wives for judicial separation, separate residences, for nullity of marriage, for restitution of conjugal rights, and for the dissolution of Hindu marriage.”<sup>74</sup> Under Hindu law, the husband is the head of the household. As a result, the wife had no legal rights and the husband was the only one with the authority to end a marriage. Under the Baroda Hindu Divorce Act, women and men were allowed to divorce for reasons including but not limited to disappearance for seven years, conversion to Islam or Christianity, drug addiction, adultery, and polygamy.<sup>75</sup>

In British India, the Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill brought national attention to the issue of divorce. While the women’s movement supported the aim behind the bill, the version that came before the legislature provoked a strong reaction from the contributors to *Stri-Dharma*. The contributors were most upset by the language of the

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<sup>71</sup> Bhagat Ram, “The Sarda Child Marriage Restraint Act and Its Long-needed Improvement,” *Stri-Dharma* 18, nos. 7 and 8 (May and June 1935): 282.

<sup>72</sup> Aiyangar, 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> For more information on divorce see Joshi, Rama and Joanna Liddle. *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste, and Class in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986: 37-39; 57-59; 66, 74, and 91.

<sup>74</sup> “The Hindu Divorce Act of Baroda,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 12 (October 1931): 545.

<sup>75</sup> “Brief Summary of the Baroda Hindu Divorce Act,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 12 (October 1931): 555-556.

legislation, which they found “offensive to us and detrimental to the best interests of women and marriage.”<sup>76</sup> Under the proposed bill the primary object of marriage was listed as children. The journal called for the legislation to be amended to protect women while not devaluing the sanctity of marriage. It argued for the multiple benefits of marriage—a life companion, a relationship full of mutual love and respect—and urged that “only those that really suffer will take advantage of this law to be relieved of the distressful situation in which they may be placed.”<sup>77</sup> The contributors continued to argue that only a bill and the public shame of divorce would “force husbands to treat their wives better.”<sup>78</sup>

As a result, numerous recommendations of changes were made within the pages of *Stri-Dharma*, which many reformists viewed as essential for the legislation to truly benefit the women of India. These recommendations include that “both enter into the marriage with mutual consent and with perfect understanding of the knowledge and responsibilities and the consequences of the married life.”<sup>79</sup> This recommendation is based on the “inhumane” act of young girls being married to men with grandchildren older than the bride.<sup>80</sup> In Dr. Reddy’s words, “How can a 14 year old girl grasp the significance of marriage?”<sup>81</sup> Other recommendations include provisions treating bigamy, polygamy, and adultery as punishable offenses as well as preventing the legislation from discriminating between the sexes.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 2 (December 1932): 71-74.

<sup>77</sup> “Hindu Marriages Dissolution Bill,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 3 (January 1933): 131-132.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> “Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill,” 71-74.

<sup>80</sup> “Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill,” 71-74.

<sup>81</sup> “Girls Protection Bill: Madras Women’s Support,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 7 (May 1934).

<sup>82</sup> “Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill,” 71-74.

As with the Sarda Act, the journal strove to inform its audience of the provisions of the various laws before the assembly and the implications these laws held for the women of India. During the summer of 1936, an entire issue was dedicated to the views of the Women's Indian Association on the social reform bills of the day.<sup>83</sup> One of the bills addressed in this issue is the Hindu Women's Right to Property Bill, also known by the name of its author, Dr. G.V. Deshmukh.<sup>84</sup> Under Hindu law, women were allowed to maintain but not inherit the "ancestral property."<sup>85</sup> This bill brought women's property rights to the attention of the public.<sup>86</sup>

Dr. Deshmukh's Hindu Women's Inheritance Bill won the whole-hearted support of the WIA and *Stri-Dharma*. The contributors argued strenuously for the law, which they viewed as "absolutely necessary to do justice to the Hindu women and to secure them their economic and social status."<sup>87</sup> They cited numerous reasons to demonstrate the worthiness of their cause including women's status in Indian history, examples of provincial legislature pioneering the reform effort, as well as a comparison between the positions of women within India's three dominant religions: Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. As a result, three areas of focus on the Hindu Women's Inheritance Bill emerge within the pages of the journal: the status of Hindu women in society; the bill's "vital importance to the welfare of Hindu society;"<sup>88</sup> and finally, the implications for Indian "wives, widows, and daughters."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Stri-Dharma* 19, no. 6 (July and August 1936).

<sup>84</sup> Dewan Bahadur Har Bilas Sarda, "Hindu Women's Right to Property Bill," *Stri-Dharma* 19, no. 6 (July and August 1936): 182-183.

<sup>85</sup> Everett, 143.

<sup>86</sup> For more information on Deshmukh's Bill see Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*.

<sup>87</sup> "Mr. Deshmuk's Bill in the Assembly to amend the Hindu law governing the Hindu Women's right to Property," *Stri-Dharma* 19, no. 6 (July and August 1936): 173-175.

<sup>88</sup> Sarda, 182-183.

<sup>89</sup> Dr. (Mrs.) S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, "Advice and Appeal to Women," *Stri-Dharma* 19, no. 6 (July and August 1936): 192-193.



In keeping with the primary goal of the journal *Stri-Dharma* to educate its readers, many articles centered on making women aware of the impact of legislation on their lives.<sup>90</sup> Contributors such as Dr. Reddy and V.V. Joishi “urged women to concentrate on this propaganda, find out members (of the legislature) who would expose their cause, and bring reform bills and try to win over the successful passage of such bills.”<sup>91</sup> As a result, the journal took on the controversial issue of what it meant to be a Hindu woman. In the words of one contributor to the journal, “a Hindu daughter is never a welcome addition . . . . A Hindu widow is an unwanted specimen of human.”<sup>92</sup> This is the view of womanhood that many Hindu women were forced to endure in their daily lives. A woman cannot spend any money “without the permission and consultation of the male members of her family.”<sup>93</sup> These practices made the lives of Hindu women unnecessarily difficult during the life of her husband and even more so upon his death. This was especially true for the widows of the wealthy who without provisions from their husband could be reduced from wealth to a life of poverty.<sup>94</sup>

A second argument presented in *Stri-Dharma* was that the benefits reforms would bring to the Hindu population of India. Rather than being a revolutionary law trying to change Hindu society, the contributors argued that Deshmukh’s bill was “only a case of restoration of the lost rights to Hindu women.”<sup>95</sup> The restoration of these rights would be a necessary step toward ending the injustices these women faced on a daily basis. Supporters of the legislation argued another benefit was the “peaceful and happy

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> V.V. Joishi, “Legal Disabilities of Hindu Women (continued from last issue),” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 8 (June 1934).

<sup>92</sup> “Mr. Deshmuk’s Bill,” 173-175.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> “Mr. Deshmuk’s Bill,” 173-175.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

atmosphere in the Hindu homes”<sup>96</sup> which would ultimately impact the Hindu community within India.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, the authors argued the long term implications toward future generations if Deshmukh’s bill was not passed into law. The Hindu women under the current laws were treated with “injustice and cruelty”<sup>97</sup> which has stifled the growth of the country, preventing it from reaching its full potential.<sup>98</sup> As a result of the limitations placed on these women, they have developed “an inferiority complex and a slave mentality.”<sup>99</sup> With this lack of self-respect, how could they make their own decisions? More importantly, how could they teach future generations of women to be the ideal wife, mother, daughter, and member of society? While the passage of Deshmukh’s bill would “certainly be conducive to the proper development of the physique and the mind of the future generation,” the failure of this legislation would only be detrimental to future generations of Hindu women.<sup>100</sup>

In presenting these arguments in support of the proposed legislation, the contributors and women of the WIA knew that this type of legislation had already been proposed and defeated in 1929.<sup>101</sup> To prevent Deshmukh’s Bill from failing, the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* took steps to answer the critics of the legislation. The attempt to silence their critics required the acknowledgement of their adversaries that India was changing. India around 1930 was not India of the eighteenth or nineteenth century.<sup>102</sup> As a result, they argued the laws governing India must change as well. Hindu

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> V.V. Joishi, “Legal Disabilities of Hindu Women,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 7 (May 1934).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> “Mr. Deshmukh’s Bill,” 173-175.

<sup>101</sup> Sarda, 182-183.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

law had been modified to enforce a custom that developed over time. As a result, custom was depriving women of their rights which requires the government step in and protect those rights.<sup>103</sup> A final way the WIA through *Stri-Dharma* attempted to appease their critics was by appealing to the government that even if they wouldn't pass the legislation in its present form it would make "certain necessary amendments as to make the Bill acceptable to public culture."<sup>104</sup> The WIA realized that even if they could not achieve all of the protections they wanted with this legislation, some rights were better than no rights at all and the progress would allow them to eventually gain the equality they so desperately sought.

The Women's Indian Association and the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* also fought for the health and wellness of the women of India. They took up topics such as purdah, the status of women in Indian society, devadasis and temple laws, polygamy, and medical treatment and training. I will analyze each of these issues to discern its impact on the health of Indian women. The Women's Indian Association and the contributors of *Stri-Dharma* sought to solve these problems so that the women of India could truly gain social equality.

The social structure of colonial India was based on a system of inequality.<sup>105</sup> It is no wonder then that the women of India were cast onto the lower rungs of the social system. This forced the women of India into a second-tier life due to no fault of her own—she simply was born a female. From the time of the birth of a daughter, she was a liability and was not considered a blessing—only a burden.<sup>106</sup> At one point in time, she

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<sup>103</sup> "Mr. Deshmukh's Bill," 173-175.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> For more information on women and the caste system, see Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters of Independence*, pages 57-69.

<sup>106</sup> Sastry, 146-149.

would have been killed, “but now she can live—only just live.”<sup>107</sup> In his article, “The Tragedy of Women’s Life in India,” N. Yagnesvara Sastry examines the condition of the Brahman women of South India, explaining those are the only ones of whom he can speak with certainty.<sup>108</sup> He discusses the numerous difficulties Indian women faced as they went through their lives—from the disappointment at the birth of a daughter, to the possibility of an education “to tell her the joys of knowledge, liberty and growth, without ever a prospect of attaining them,” to the fear at a marriage to a stranger when they are too young to know who they are, much less what marriage truly entails, to the “culmination of a women’s tragedy ... in her widowhood.”<sup>109</sup> He seeks to “to awaken the social conscience” of his readers.<sup>110</sup> This article was one of many that examined the social injustices women faced in India during the 1920’s and 1930’s and showed the many hurdles that women had to overcome if they were to achieve social equality.

The system of purdah secluded women from men and strangers.<sup>111</sup> Although this system was supposedly based on protecting the purity and chastity of the women, it evolved into a system that severely restricted and limited the women. Its critics alleged that this system damages women emotionally and psychologically. In an interview for *The Statesman*, reprinted in *Stri-Dharma*, women from Calcutta were asked to express their views regarding the purdah system. The Superintendent of the Sashawat Memorial Girls’ School, Mrs. R.S. Hossein, compared the purdah system to carbon monoxide gas, “because it causes a painless death.”<sup>112</sup> She goes on to describe the societies and groups of people for the protection of animals and the sadness felt for a dog run over by a car,

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> For more information on the purdah system, see Kaur, 24-27.

<sup>112</sup> “Calcutta Women’s Views on the Purdah System,” *Stri-Dharma* 11, no. 9 (July 1928): 142-143.

but no one stops to weep for women in purdah. Mrs. Kumudini Basu, discussed the impact of purdah on Bengali women, making them “like dumb-driven cattle.”<sup>113</sup>

According to reformers the devadasi system was one that brought nothing but pain to the people of India.<sup>114</sup> Devadasi means “servant of god.” The women of poor families, often for generation after generation, were dedicated to serve the god or goddess which they have been “married to.” These women are prostituted in the name of religion, often because their family was too poor to afford the dowry that the birth of a daughter brings. As a result of this sacrifice, the woman was at the mercy of the upper caste men who come to “worship” at the temple. Often these women were given to the temple even before they reached puberty. Efforts to abolish the devadasi system began as early as 1869. Legislation to prevent the “wicked and cruel custom” was proposed in states such as Mysore in an attempt to send the message “to the world that Hindu religion does not sanction immorality in either man or woman.”<sup>115</sup> The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* condemned the damage to the spirituality and emotional well-being of the women of this system as well as the “long-standing temptation to the impulsive and easily led astray wealthy youth of our country.”<sup>116</sup> The mental and emotional toll did not even touch on the physical damage, such as the sexually transmitted diseases which ravaged the women and men involved in this system. Contributors to *Stri-Dharma* pointed out that the festivals and religious ceremonies should be to make India more healthy, and that only “sympathy for the victims—the Devadasis and their offspring—will win victory in such a cause.”<sup>117</sup> The WIA and the contributors to the journal argued

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> For more information on the devadasi system, see Kaur, 27-29 and Raman, 49-51, 71-72.

<sup>115</sup> Reddi, “A Presidential Address,” 32-40.

<sup>116</sup> Ammal, 344-347.

<sup>117</sup> C.F. Andrews, “The Devadasi Problem,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 5 (March 1929): 212-213.

vigilantly for the abolition of the devadasi system. They likened the system to the conditions of a brothel:

No brothel can exist unless it is supplied with an ever continuous relay of girls, involving traffic, buying, selling, kidnapping, seduction of girls and women. Hence we believe that brothels 1. Involve revolting cruelty and vice to women and girls 2. Are an ever-present temptation to immorality to boys and men 3. Are a source of moral and physical disease and degradation in cities and towns, and that no amount of rules and regulations regarding them can make their blackness any the less black and harmful.<sup>118</sup>

This quotation came in a statement by the editors of *Stri-Dharma* expressing their regret that an article had appeared in the preceding issue arguing for regulation rather than abolition of the devadasi system. This statement reminds us that reformers differed in how to deal with the devadasi system and other institutions and practices that subordinated women. These varying viewpoints on the issues are clear indications of the diversity within the Indian women's movement.

The physical health and well-being of Indian women was a vital topic for the WIA. Unfortunately for the women of India, so many of them were not having their basic medical needs being met. As a result, the women of the WIA and the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* made it a priority to improve the health services available to women all across India and make the lack of resources and sanitation known to their readers. The issue of sanitation reform to help the cities have "better drainage, fresher air, more light, abundance of pure water, and therefore a healthier and cleaner city" is a topic the WIA took very seriously, believing that physical cleanliness and health would aid in the overall mental and emotional health of the people of India as well.<sup>119</sup> According to one report, only one percent of the revenue of colonial India was spent on health, while fifty-

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<sup>118</sup> Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Malati Patwardhan, and Ammu Swaminadhan, "Our Statement," *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 6 (April 1929): 266.

<sup>119</sup> "The Stumbling Block," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 12 (September 1930): 491.

five percent was being spent on military and police forces.<sup>120</sup> These statistics demonstrate the complexity of the allocation of money and resources—which should get precedence—public safety or public health? The journal *Stri-Dharma* described “the low health rate of our women is a national problem of the first magnitude.”<sup>121</sup> One such example of the difficulties facing the women of India is the lack of health services and a proper diet for women—particularly pregnant women. For example, the women in the Punjab suffered from a disease that caused the softening and distortion of their pelvic bones due to malnutrition. Without proper medical attention, these women suffered pain that could cost them their life and the life of their unborn child. Dr. Balfour pleaded through the journal *Stri-Dharma* for the money necessary to treat these women and to pay for the salary of a health official who could check on the women in these villages. She called on the women of India to avoid spending hundreds of rupees on jewels and sarees and to use that money to save the lives of “many suffering mothers and babies.”<sup>122</sup> These issues were just a few of the numerous medical issues facing the women of India.

The mistreatment of women within the vows of a marriage was a blight on the health and wellness of Indian women. One way a woman was mistreated came at the death of her husband. “Her head is shaven; and ornaments and decent clothes and even normal food is denied her. She can never marry again, though often she is only a girl of fourteen or fifteen. And her very name in Tamil is a term of abuse and contempt.”<sup>123</sup> How can this treatment to a child be helpful to her growth and development? Why should she be forced to watch the other girls her age experiencing all the joy her teenage

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<sup>120</sup> “Loss of Poona Women Workers,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 12 (September 1930): 530.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> “Dr. Balfour’s appeal for financial help to supply medical relief to the suffering women and children in Palampur Tahsil in Punjab,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 8 (June 1931).

<sup>123</sup> Sastry, 146-149.

years should bring while forced to live a life of misery? Why is a stigma attached to widowhood? What crime did this young girl commit—none! In order to help aid the misery the widows experience, philanthropists “have established hostels and schools for their maintenance, education and training so as to transform their lives of sorrow into one of useful service to humanity.”<sup>124</sup> Another way the women of India were mistreated within the bounds of marriage—which should be a sacred relationship—but for many that was not the case—was through the allowance of “bigamy, polygamy, and adultery” which were not punishable under the law.<sup>125</sup> These laws allowed systems such as the devadasi system and polygamous marriages to exist in society without any punishment for the men. As a result, the wives were forced to deal with the emotional and sometimes physical abuse from husbands who neglected them. One way the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* encouraged women to avoid this type of situation was by insisting there was a clause in the marriage contract stating that cruelty, adultery or a second marriage would void the marriage contract.<sup>126</sup>

The words of Dr. Reddy at a conference in November 1929 provide a summary of the reasons why the WIA and the contributing writers to *Stri-Dharma* argued so diligently for everyone to become involved in the fight for the health and wellness of the women of India.

We have no right to remain idle or indifferent, when the mothers and the children of India die in such large numbers, when many more become invalid through sickness and disease, when millions of our men and women, even in the prime of their life are carried away by epidemics every year, when the destitute old and young are crying for relief, when at every turn of our beautiful cities we come across crowds of beggars old, young, and sick, who clothed in rags, stretch

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<sup>124</sup> Reddi, “A Presidential Address,” 32-40.

<sup>125</sup> “Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 2 (December 1932): 71-74.

<sup>126</sup> “Muslim Women and Divorce: A Way to Prevent Polygamy,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 12 (October 1930): 543-544.



out their deformed and diseased hands for a few pies, when the brothels in our cities contain as many young girls and children ranging from the age of eight to sixteen undergoing agonies both physical and mental.<sup>127</sup>

In her view, Indians could neither expect the colonial state to solve problems nor wait for the nationalist movement to come to power—they must take action to help solve the many health and wellness issues facing the nation.

In conclusion, we can see from the pages of *Stri-Dharma* that Partha Chatterjee was right to highlight the importance of “the home” for colonial rule and nationalist opposition. What is more, it becomes clear that “the home”, not simply the public domain, was the target of a growing mobilization of Indian women between the world wars.

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<sup>127</sup> Reddi, “A Presidential Address,” 32-40.

### Chapter 3 Indian Women: Sisters of the World

The end of World War I brought tremendous changes—economically, politically, and socially—which culminated in a “new world order” full of promise. The world had witnessed the overthrow of the Russian czar, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and German empires, and the rise of the US as a world power. President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points called for a world order that could prevent aggression in the future. In *The Wilsonian Moment*, Erez Manela, describes the impact of Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of the principle of national self-determination. Wilson had seen this principle as the solution to European problems, but his rhetoric was not lost on Indians and other peoples who wanted to break free from their colonial masters. In the words of Manela, “The Wilsonian moment had encouraged Indian and other nationalists to formulate their claims for self-government in language that resonated with a wider, international course of legitimacy.”<sup>128</sup> This “led nationalists to expect immediate independence after the war and helped to shape their demands and the ways they pursued them as they prepared for the postwar world.”<sup>129</sup>

In no colonial country were the consequences of World War I more evident than in India. India lost 36,000 people fighting for Britain during World War I, while “thousands of others were wounded or maimed in action on the Western Front, in North Africa and the Middle East.”<sup>130</sup> The postwar years would unfold full of conflict as Indians struggled to achieve the swaraj (self-government) that many hoped would be the reward of their wartime sacrifices.

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<sup>128</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 217.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Carr, “Concession and Repression: British Rule in India 1857-1919,” *History Review* no. 52 (September 2005): 28. *MAS Ultra- School Edition*, EBSCHOhost (accessed April 6, 2012).

To appreciate this quest for swaraj we must understand the political situation in India during the interwar period. The government of India under the British had three main parts: the imperial government in London, the central government in New Delhi, and the local governments in the provinces. The leadership consisted of a Secretary of State for India, a Viceroy, and a council of India. The local governments in the provinces would make recommendations to the central government in New Delhi and to the imperial government but in many cases the recommendations were not followed. India was made up of two types of territories, British India and princely India. Provinces which were ruled by a governor or lieutenant governor, comprised the territories of British India. These provinces included Burma (which would become a separate colony in 1937 and gain its independence in 1948), Madras, Bombay, and Bengal to name a few. The princely states were governed by indigenous Indian rulers, who pledged loyalty to the British crown and gave up control of defense and foreign affairs, but otherwise had a good deal of autonomy. There were nearly six hundred princely states, most of which were very small.<sup>131</sup> They included Cochin, Mysore, Bhutan, Baroda, and Travancore. They would go on to be part of an independent India in 1947.

A key group that has played a critical role in both colonial and independent India is the Indian National Congress (INC), more commonly known as the Congress. Founded in 1885, the INC was initially not opposed to British rule. It evolved to become “the official representative of the nationalist movement in India.”<sup>132</sup> Originally committed to the British Empire and seeking dominion for India status, the Congress came around to the idea of complete independence from Britain during the interwar

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<sup>131</sup> Mohammad Patel, “The Path to Independence,” in *Muslims in India: The Growth & Influence of Islam in the Nations of Asia & Central Asia*, 68-91. US: Mason Crest Publishers, 2007. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 6, 2012).

<sup>132</sup> Sinha, 21.

period.<sup>133</sup> On January 26, 1930, the INC issued a demand for purna swaraj (complete independence). It alternated between a movement engaged in civil disobedience and a party exercising power in provincial governments. Eventually, it formed the central government with the achievement of independence in 1947.

With this background knowledge of the political situation in India, we can begin to appreciate the political changes that would occur during the interwar period. One of the reforms made during this period was the India Act of 1919, more commonly known as the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. This act created a diarchy or dual government, which consisted of “eleven self-governing provinces of British India and allowed Indian control over public health, education, and agriculture.”<sup>134</sup> This act changed the imperial council to a central legislative assembly and enlarged its size. The number of eligible voters was increased to approximately seven million people— who comprised approximately ten percent of the total adult male population— and gave the legislative councils more responsibility. Muslims, Sikhs, and Indian Christians as well as other minority groups were given reserved seats in both provincial and imperial legislative councils. Despite the direct elections which enabled Indians an official legislative forum in which to express their opposition to the Raj numerous restrictions were put in place to limit Indian control. These restrictions combined with the disregard of legislative council recommendations only served to spark nationalist agitation during the interwar period. These events would play a tremendous impact on the women’s movement.

As India struggled to find its place in the world, so did the women of India. To establish their place in the world, the Indian women’s movement participated in

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<sup>133</sup> For more information on the changes in the INC during the interwar period, see Sinha, 31-32.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

national and international affairs. This chapter uses *Stri-Dharma* to analyze women's role in the nationalist movement, women's suffrage and position in politics, education, women's role in the workplace, as well as the role of the Indian women's rights movement in the International women's rights movement. Three questions will guide my analysis: What was the role of Indian women during the interwar years? What reforms was the Indian women's rights movement trying to achieve? And finally, how did the views of women's role in India and the world demonstrate the diversity of the Indian women's movement?

The Indian nationalist movement was a topic in British India that could not be avoided—as such the topic became an important part of the conversation within the women's rights movement. The WIA and *Stri-Dharma* were avid supporters for the self-government of India. Speeches and support for India's nationalist movement could often be found in the pages of *Stri-Dharma*. In a speech for the self-government of India, Mrs. J. Vakil argued “no nation is good enough to rule another nation... Britain claims that she is the guardian and trustee for India. Who appointed her the trustee? Surely not India.”<sup>135</sup> The journal reported on the “Satyagraha movement progressing day by day”<sup>136</sup> The Satyagraha or non-cooperation movement was led by Gandhi and designed to be nonviolent. Gandhi was quoted by contributors to *Stri-Dharma*, which did not limit itself to issues of women's rights and social reform:

Freedom is our right; it is dearer to us than our life; obtain it we must and will, at the cost of suffering and if need be, of life itself. But we will not obtain it by war; that is by the wholesale murder of innocent men. There is a higher and better way. Britain may arrest us, imprison us by the ten thousand, and kill us, if she will; but we will not kill one of her soldiers or one of her people; we will not even hate one of her people; but we will compel her to do us justice and give us back

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<sup>135</sup> Mrs. J. Vakil, “A Speech for Self-Government of India,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 6 (April 1933).

<sup>136</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, “Women and National Freedom,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 289-290.

our country which she has stolen. How compel her? By refusing to co-operate with her.<sup>137</sup>

Non-cooperation hit the British where it hurt most—economically—in an effort to gain India’s independence. The movement opposed Britain’s salt monopoly. It also boycotted foreign cloth in favor of homespun cloth.

“The attempt to win political freedom from a foreign power by breaking laws that are bad ... immediately caught the attention of awakened women.”<sup>138</sup> Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the first woman to be arrested in the salt satyagraha,<sup>139</sup> and many other women played instrumental roles in the movement, especially by taking up the leadership after the imprisonment of men such as Gandhi.<sup>140</sup> As of 1930, “at least forty have been imprisoned”<sup>141</sup> for their involvement in the Salt marches. The movement for self-rule drew out “some of the finest and most ardent women workers—Sarojini Naidu has been in prison twice—each time for a year; Mrs. Cousins is now in prison; Kamala Devi’s health has broken down due to the prison food and conditions.”<sup>142</sup> As *Stri-Dharma* informed its readers of women’s involvement in the nationalist movement, it frequently highlighted the actions of prominent women. One aspect of the nationalist movement was Swadeshi, the organized boycott of foreign cloth and other goods in favor of Indian-made goods. Many leaders of the women’s rights movement, promoted through *Stri-Dharma*, the wearing of khaddar (home spun cloth), arguing that it showed women’s support for swadeshi and persuaded men to recognize the importance of women’s

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<sup>137</sup> Mahatma Gandhi quoted in G. Sumati, “Revolution? Mahatmaji’s Movement Today” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 7 (May 1931): 303.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Kumar, 74.

<sup>140</sup> For more information on Sarojini Naidu, see Kumar 56-57 and Kaur 169-178.

<sup>141</sup> Cousins, “Political Crisis,” 389-390.

<sup>142</sup> “Indian Women’s Franchise,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 628-630.

involvement in the movement.<sup>143</sup> Margaret Cousins and other women even formed spinning homes to supply khaddar as a substitute for more luxurious imported fabrics.<sup>144</sup> The women of India participated in the salt marches, boycotted imported cloth in favor of khaddar, and engaged in various forms of civil disobedience in their efforts to help India gain its rightful place in world politics. In 1930-1931, according to Kaur, “for every six persons who courted arrest, one was a woman.”<sup>145</sup>

Despite the hard work of the leaders and women involved in the nationalist movement, they faced many challenges. Women’s involvement in the Indian nationalist movement brought many varying viewpoints and clearly demonstrated the diversity within the women’s movement. Many of the women who deeply desired to be involved were “prevented from participating due to their husbands’ positions in government,”<sup>146</sup> while other women were bound by family ties.<sup>147</sup> Those activists who spoke out and were most determined to see India achieve self-government were often imprisoned for lengthy terms. This required not only someone else to take up the cause but also, in the case of women, that someone else had to take care of their families. In spite of the limitations from imprisonment, illness, or other obligations, the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* continued to urge “each woman to ... review her own life and give to India of her uttermost. Union is Strength. Strength is Victory.”<sup>148</sup>

A critical element in efforts to establish the role of Indian women in the world was education. Women activists argued that unless women achieved equal access to education, India could not make its name in the world. As a result, the Indian women’s

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<sup>143</sup> “The Swadeshi Movement,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 340.

<sup>144</sup> “First Things First- Swadeshi,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 11 (September 1930): 484.

<sup>145</sup> Kaur, 202.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Cousins, “Women and National Freedom,” 289-290.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

movement made education for the women and girls of India a key priority. As the Dowager Rani Lalit Kumari Saheba expressed it in her article on the Third Annual All-India Women's Conference<sup>149</sup> on Educational Reform—"the question of the educational progress of the women of India is bound up intimately with the improvement of our social conditions."<sup>150</sup> Using this logic, if women were to achieve other social reforms, they must first be educated. In order to bring attention to this important aspect of the women's movement, many women's organizations held conferences throughout India focusing on educational reform. The third annual All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform, held in January 1929 and the Muslim Educational Conference held in Madras December 1929 were two of the conferences convened specifically for this purpose.<sup>151</sup> These conferences, along with material within *Stri-Dharma*, expressed diverse views on the education of women and girls. The many topics of discussion included the present state of education, educational opportunities available to women, the appropriate curriculum for women, the language of instruction, the benefits of education, as well as other related concerns. Each of these topics raised numerous questions that the women's movement had to answer in order to help women find their place in the world.

What was the state of education for women in post-World War I India? This topic was addressed to inspire the women of India to "Awake! Awake! Rise up and get ye knowledge, womanhood of India!"<sup>152</sup> While progress in the education of women and

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<sup>149</sup> For more information on the AIWC, see Kumar, 68-69.

<sup>150</sup> Rani Lalit Kumari Saheba, "The Third Annual All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform," *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 3 (January 1929): 109-115.

<sup>151</sup> Mrs. Mir Muzheruddin, "Compulsory Education of Muslim Girls," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 145-146.

<sup>152</sup> Sister Nivedita, "Woman in Modern India," *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 5 (March 1929): 205-207. Reprinted from *Prabuddha Bharata*. Sister Nivedita was also known as Margaret Noble; despite her death in 1911



girls was made in the years following World War I, it was by no means equally dispersed throughout India. Cities like Madras made education available to females as early as 1928, which was much more rapidly than in rural villages.<sup>153</sup> The government of India produced a report on the status of Indian education in 1925-1926 which stated that only 1.3% of the girls of India were being educated.<sup>154</sup> The majority of the women in India were “immersed in ignorance and darkness, unable even to spell the alphabet”<sup>155</sup> with approximately only two percent of the population literate. In 1929, it was estimated that only twenty-one out of every thousand women in India were literate.<sup>156</sup> The literacy rate of the women of India makes the education system in the years following World War I seem bleak. As a result, the All-India Women’s Conference resolved to meet the challenge of eliminating illiteracy among Indian women.<sup>157</sup>

To justify the goal of equal education for the female portion of India’s population, the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* sought to show the benefits to Indian society as a whole. While addressing the Madras Constituent Conference of Women on Education, Zamindarnee Kumaramangalam argued that education would allow the young girls of India to be open-minded rather than crippled by prejudice and that until “our men and women begin to realize the dangers of many of our social customs” that India could not achieve “true freedom.”<sup>158</sup> Another reason the contributors argued women should receive the education they were lacking was that literacy would allow them make

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her writings were still used to inspire the women of India to action. For more information see Kaur, 99-103 and Raman 116-117. *Prabuddha Bharata*, (*Awakened India*), is an English language monthly publication which began in July 1896.

<sup>153</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, “Report of the Women’s Indian Association for 1929,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 354-356.

<sup>154</sup> Saheba, 109-115.

<sup>155</sup> Saheba, 109.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Zamindarnee Kumaramangalam, “Madras Constituent Conference of Women on Education: Presidential Address,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 2 (December 1928): 69-73.

decisions for themselves and begin to feel their own sense of national pride.<sup>159</sup> This sense of national pride would encourage women to take an active role in the affairs of the country and help India reach its ultimate goal of independence. The overwhelming gap between the men and women of India was another argument the writers of *Stri-Dharma* used to promote the education of women. The closing of this gap would allow the country as a whole to move forward and reach the place it so rightly deserved among the nations of the world. According to V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, “man and woman ... had to advance together, not only in the direction of family life, but in all directions in which human endeavor has to be made-- for the progress of our race.”<sup>160</sup> If the Indian people were going to continue and grow in the world, the women of India could not be ignored and left out. The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* repeatedly argued that the removal of social disabilities would lead to a new era in Indian society, one in which “our beloved motherland can ... take her rightful place among the civilized nations of the world.”<sup>161</sup> A final reason, argued by Mrs. Mir Muzheruddin, the President of the Madras Muslim Ladies’ Association, was that the ignorance of the women of India was hurting the nation. “The ignorance of women is the giant cause of our national degradation, poverty, mutual distrust and downfall ... the ignorance of women is the demon which stands in the path of our moral, material, and national progress.”<sup>162</sup> She went on to argue that women’s lack of education was impeding other efforts at social reform: “All the great social reforms are at a standstill and are stagnating because the women are uneducated and left within four walls to wash clothes and kitchens.”<sup>163</sup> Thus the arguments for

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<sup>159</sup> Nivedita, 205-207.

<sup>160</sup> Saheba, 115.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Muzheruddin, 145-146.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

women's education reform turned on its value for social reform and national development.

The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* discussed the obstacles to women's education. One challenge the education system faced in some regions was motivating young women to attend. One of the methods attempted in Calcutta to motivate young girls to attend regularly was by rewarding them with saris and jewelry. However, as Mrs. Huidekoper, former chairwoman of the All-Indian Women's Conference pointed out, this technique brought on a new problem.<sup>164</sup> In Calcutta, the schools filled up so quickly, young girls had to be turned away because there was not enough space to hold them.<sup>165</sup> Another challenge the education system in India faced was finding young women who were educated and qualified to be teachers. This was a two-fold problem: one, the girls often were married so young they did not complete school themselves and two, if the girls did complete school, there was the issue of keeping them in the "educational world as teachers."<sup>166</sup> Another challenge the education system in India faced was the inability of women to assist in the education of their children. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council-- argued that an illiterate woman cannot "train her children to be useful and patriotic citizens".<sup>167</sup> Using this logic, if India was going to take its place in the world, overcoming the obstacles to the education of women throughout India was vital.

*Stri-Dharma* presented controversial aspects of education reform. One of the most controversial topics involved young women receiving higher education. The older

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<sup>164</sup> Mrs. A.L. Huidekoper, "A Coming Problem in the Education of Indian Girls," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 305. Reprinted from *The Indian Social Reformer*, December 7, 1929.

<sup>165</sup>Huidekoper, 305.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, "A Presidential Address," *Stri-Dharma* 13, nos. 1 and 2 (December 1929): 32-40.

generation did not approve of this level of education for young women.<sup>168</sup> While many wealthy Indian women had gained higher education in previous years, in most cases their education had been received in Britain, the United States, and other countries. The founder of Poona's Women's University argued that the education system in India as a whole was flawed but that if women wanted to receive the same education as men "they should have it."<sup>169</sup> Arguments for curriculum changes for men and women encompassed changes for elementary education as well as higher education. In her Presidential Address to the Madras Legislative Council, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy argued that the "system for both boys and girls has to be remodeled so that the University may have as its primary goal the formation of individual characters and conduct and the training of leaders of society."<sup>170</sup>

The views regarding the appropriate curriculum for female students were extremely varied. Some commentators wanted to include courses to prepare women to be wives and mothers.<sup>171</sup> However, most considered this a narrow-minded approach to women's education equating this method of education to an education system which prepared men solely to be fathers.<sup>172</sup> This argument was due in large part to the fact that "eighty or ninety percent of those that receive secondary education will settle in married life, for many years to come."<sup>173</sup> The retired honorable V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, of the Indian National Congress and a former educator himself, saw the future of the education of women with confidence but argued that it was not enough to give women a

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<sup>168</sup> Kumaramangalam, 69-73.

<sup>169</sup> Professor D.K. Karve, "Women's Secondary and Higher Education in India," *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 7 (May 1929): 309-311.

<sup>170</sup> Reddi, 32-40.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Saheba, 109-115.

<sup>173</sup> Karve, 309-311.

little education.<sup>174</sup> If women were going to gain social equality in other areas, they must receive a well-rounded education. These women were not going to settle for token social reform—they wanted real and lasting change which would benefit the nation as a whole and lead India into the future.

The language of instruction was another controversial issue in women's efforts at educational reform. This is due in large part to those who felt that instruction in English was "unnatural."<sup>175</sup> Those who took this position, including the founder of the Women's University in Poona, argued that the primary language of instruction should be in the Indian vernacular languages with English as a required course.<sup>176</sup> Opponents argued that the use of English as the language of instruction simplified the process. In defense of English as the medium for instruction, some contributors argued further that English was an international language, particularly in the field of business.

An even larger issue that had to be dealt with was the issue of cost. Compulsory education was a goal for the women's movement, but one that was bound to be expensive. As Zamindarnee Kumaramangalam so accurately describes it in her presidential address ... "If it is to be really compulsory, it must also be free."<sup>177</sup> Some who argued that the cost was prohibitive, were the same who complained that poor children were attending the same school as their children. Some argued the position that only the poor were entitled to free education and challenged parents to "bear the cost of the education of their children to the extent they can, however little that may be."<sup>178</sup> Zamindarnee Kumaramangalam among others urged the women of India to "help

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<sup>174</sup> Saheba, 109-115.

<sup>175</sup> Karve, 309-311.

<sup>176</sup> Saheba, 109-115.

<sup>177</sup> Kumaramangalam, 69-73.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

local bodies and government to carry it (referring to compulsory education) out as early as possible.”<sup>179</sup> The Women’s Indian Association, in an attempt to encourage the education of the young girls of India, tried to “persuade government to make the inclusion of girls a condition of receiving government co-operation and grants for compulsory education.”<sup>180</sup> As a result of these varying views, the cost of education, whether through taxation or through tuition paid by the parents, became a hot topic in the pages of *Stri-Dharma*.

Despite the challenges and disagreements, the contributors to *Stri-Dharma* stayed true to their goal of reforming the education system in the interest of women. At the Madras Constituent Conference of Women on Education, Zamindarnee Kumaramangalam even went so far to claim that “many Indian women are now so well educated and advanced that they can organize work for the good of their sisters and thus forward the advancement of our cause.”<sup>181</sup> The Dowager Rani Lalit Kumari Saheba praised the universities that had made changes to their syllabi to suit the “special needs of women”.<sup>182</sup> In 1929, Madras City instituted compulsory primary education, including for girls, as a result of the canvassing of the commissioners by the Women’s Indian Association.<sup>183</sup> Other successes included the appointment of a WIA member to a newly formed committee on female education within Madras City and a WIA deputation to the Minister of Education of Madras to “urge the inclusion of girls in the Compulsory Primary Education schemes that are being operated in over sixty villages of their

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Cousins, “Report of the Women’s Indian Association for 1929,” 354-356.

<sup>181</sup> Kumaramangalam, 69-73.

<sup>182</sup> Saheba, 109.

<sup>183</sup> Cousins, “Report of the Women’s Indian Association for 1929,” 354-356.

district.”<sup>184</sup> Another educational success was the resolution passed by the Muslim Educational Conference to request the “Corporation of Madras to introduce free and compulsory education and in the case of Muslim girls ... open more elementary schools for them.”<sup>185</sup> While these successes were limited in their scope, the leaders realized that achieving small steps today would eventually allow them to reach their goal. Despite these successes, the women of India were not done. They had not yet achieved their mission of eradicating female illiteracy in India, and they realized they still had a long way to go.

As an organization that was always looking forward, the Women’s Indian Association was continually planning and setting goals for the future. Through its journal, *Stri-Dharma*, the organization urged the educated to realize the blessing that education is and to pass it on to those who were less fortunate. It argued that “the privilege of education has a responsibility to pass their knowledge on to seven others,” one to seven being the proportion of literate to illiterate.<sup>186</sup> The contributors consistently encouraged the men and women of India to work together to help the nation achieve freedom, “both individually and nationally”.<sup>187</sup>

The common goal of education helped unite women across lines of religion, class, creed, and race. To promote unity, *Stri-Dharma* reported on the educational achievements of women worldwide. For example it noted that Arab Christian women had raised their literacy rate to approximately 40%, compared to approximately 5% of the Muslim women.<sup>188</sup> In Japan, a first for women was doctorates of medicine and

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Muzherrudin, 145-146.

<sup>186</sup> Cousins, “Report of the Women’s Indian Association for 1929,” 354-356.

<sup>187</sup> Cousins, “Report of the Women’s Indian Association for 1929,” 354-356.

<sup>188</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 359.

science.<sup>189</sup> On her visit to Japan, Margaret E. Cousins described the Japanese girls as fascinating after examining the “immense school buildings everywhere filled with happy children.”<sup>190</sup> Miss Maude Royden received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Glasgow University, the first British University ever to award this degree to a woman.<sup>191</sup> This focus on the achievements of prominent women by *Stri-Dharma* served to demonstrate the changes in women’s role in the world.

The notion of a women’s rights movement most frequently brings to mind the struggle of women to achieve the right to vote or to hold public office. As we have seen, it can also include marriage, divorce, and education. Economic and social rights can be as important as civil and political rights. Of course, the pages of *Stri-Dharma* showed that women’s rights were conditioned in India by the tensions between colonialism and nationalism and tradition and modernity.

During the interwar period, the women of India made progress in terms of political involvement. The India Act of 1919 did not explicitly give women the right to vote, but did allow the legislatures of each province to decide. While this did not deliver universal adult suffrage for men and women, it was a step towards achieving their goal. The first province to give women voting rights was Madras, which would go on to play a leading role in the struggle for women’s rights.<sup>192</sup> *Stri-Dharma* consistently stressed to those women who were fortunate enough to qualify to vote to take advantage of this right. Despite the small number of women who were allowed to vote, women had the opportunity to make their voices heard and bring to the attention of the legislature the issues the women of India faced.

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<sup>189</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 4 (February 1931): 149.

<sup>190</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, “World Sisterhood,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, nos. 1 and 2 (December 1929): 10-14.

<sup>191</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 8 (June 1931): 349-351.

<sup>192</sup> “Indian Women’s Franchise,” 628-630.



In its efforts to publicize the women's movement in India, *Stri-Dharma* highlighted the achievements of women in government. An editor of *Stri-Dharma*, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy,<sup>193</sup> was the "first lady to serve in a legislature in British India."<sup>194</sup> Reddy was elected to the Madras Legislative Council in 1926 and served until 1930, when she resigned to protest Gandhi's arrest. In 1928, she was elected deputy president of the council. "A true reformer,"<sup>195</sup> Reddy dedicated herself to the cause of women and tried to remain clear of political parties. One of her accomplishments in office was the "relaxation of the rule (requiring personal presentation for voting registration) for the case of the sick and purdah women."<sup>196</sup> Reddy was not alone. Begum Alam and Begum Shah Nawaz stood for election to the Legislative Assembly.<sup>197</sup> *Stri-Dharma* supported their candidacies: "We are sure that Begum Alam and Begum Shah Nawaz will in every way fulfill the high hopes that women will cherish for those of their sex who will one day become elected members of the Assembly as well as other councils. We wish them every success in their endeavor."<sup>198</sup> This statement was typical of *Stri-Dharma's* emphasis on women's public service rather than partisanship.

*Stri-Dharma* covered the worldwide efforts of women to gain civil and political equality. Taking advantage of the vote, women won positions in government. In Norway, "for the first time since women were granted the suffrage, two women have

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<sup>193</sup> A letter from Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy to the Disarmament Committee is printed on p. 39 on the November 1933 issue of *Stri-Dharma*. This letter is signed Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy. Despite this, throughout articles within *Stri-Dharma*, her last name is spelled Reddi. For the purposes of this paper, I have kept the spelling the same within citations to facilitate locating the sources. However, I will use the alternate spelling Reddy throughout the text.

<sup>194</sup> "Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy as Legislator," *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 4 (February 1931): 133.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> "Differential Rules for Different Provinces," 142-143.

<sup>197</sup> "Differential Rules for Different Provinces," 142-143.

<sup>198</sup> "Notes and Comments: Women to Contest for the Assembly,".

been elected members” of Parliament.<sup>199</sup> The Soviet Union appointed Alexandra Kollontai as ambassador to Sweden, following her service as ambassador to Norway.<sup>200</sup> In Louisiana, Governor Huey Long appointed Miss Lee Grosjean as Secretary of State becoming “the first woman to hold a major political office in the state.”<sup>201</sup> In Pretoria, South Africa, Mrs. K. Malherbe was elected mayor and became the first woman to serve in that capacity. She had established a monthly woman’s magazine in 1917 and was the owner as well as editor. This magazine was the first African woman’s magazine. Other achievements in South Africa included the election of the first woman to Parliament, Mrs. Deneys Reit of Johannesburg.<sup>202</sup> While this was an achievement for women, only white women gained the vote in 1930, this distinction was not conveyed in *Stri-Dharma*. Universal suffrage would not be granted in South Africa until the end of apartheid in 1994.

During the interwar years, China made some significant improvements for women politically. According to the civil code drafted by the National Government of the Republic of China equality was granted to women – on the same terms as men— in many areas. *Stri-Dharma* outlined the key provisions:

1. Whereas under the old law, a married woman was restricted in her disposing capacity, that is she could not dispose of her own property without her husband’s consent, under the new law, women enjoy full & unrestricted disposing capacity.
2. While under the old law it was much easier for a husband to obtain a divorce, according to the new law, the grounds of divorce are the same in the case of husbands and wives.
3. The principle that unmarried daughters have the same right of property inheritances as sons, which was laid down some time ago by the Supreme Court, is incorporated in the new law.

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<sup>199</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 4 (February 1931): 147-149.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Miss Dorman, “South Africa’s First Woman M.P.,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 10 (August 1933): 512.

4. The duty of a wife to obey her husband is provided in the old law, is not recognized by the new law.<sup>203</sup>

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These improvements for the women of China would have been particularly interesting to Indian women who were struggling to achieve many of the same rights.

Indian women were also making progress in the world of law and government. In Margaret Cousins' article, "World Sisterhood," she argued that India was blessed with women in public service claiming by December 1929,

There are splendid Indian women Legislative councilors, over a hundred women municipal and local government board members, and eight women magistrates, while in Switzerland and France women have not even the vote, and in Japan women may not attend political meetings nor join any political associations and they hardly have any legal standing.<sup>204</sup>

The following women are perfect examples of the "splendid Indian" women in political service to India. Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy secured legislation to help end the devadasi system and other social reforms.<sup>205</sup> Srimati Rukamni Lakshmi served as a member of the Madras University Senate, the All-India Congress Committee, the Madras University Senate, and the Chingleput District Board. In addition to this extensive service, she was the first woman imprisoned in the Satyagraha movement.<sup>206</sup> "Mrs. Pavithram, a distinguished member of the Thiya community" was elected to the Cochin Legislative Council.<sup>207</sup> In Udipi, an Indian Catholic woman was the first woman appointed as a special magistrate.<sup>208</sup> The Travancore legislative council nominated Miss Chondrabai Ponkshe, niece of the late INC leader, G.K. Gokhale. Miss Ponkshe was not new to service to her country. She represented India at the World Women's Conference

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<sup>203</sup> "Women the World Over," *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 6 (April 1931): 246-247.

<sup>204</sup> Cousins, "World Sisterhood," 10-14.

<sup>205</sup> "First Woman Member of a Legislative Council in British India," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 334.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> "Women in India's Service," 145.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

in China as well as served as the Secretary of the YWCA.<sup>209</sup> “Begum Shah Nawaz, the only woman member of the Third Indian Round Table Conference” served India fighting for equal franchise under the Indian constitution.<sup>210</sup> These women are prime examples of the achievements Indian women were making politically during the interwar years and the tremendous good women could do in service to their countries when given the opportunity.

One way *Stri-Dharma* capitalized on the limited voting rights of women was by hearing from the candidates and endorsing the candidate who was most willing to fight for Indian women’s rights. It issued a manifesto and promised “to the candidate, irrespective of his or her political party, who will stand for the condition laid down in our manifesto will have the votes of the women!”<sup>211</sup> The women of Egmore held two meetings at Pantheon Gardens during “which the candidates for the Assembly for Madras were asked to come and express their party’s point of view with reference to the Women’s Indian Association Manifesto.”<sup>212</sup> The following issue of *Stri-Dharma* contained the responses of the two candidates, Mr. Satyamurti and Mr. A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, informing those members who were unable to attend the meeting as well as other interested readers what their stance was on the issue of women’s rights. While Satyamurti supported the Manifesto, Mudaliar did not feel it was practical to adopt a system of universal suffrage and explained he did not support the Girls’ Protection Bill because it was so badly drafted. When asked why he did not draft better legislation, he explained that he “had been very busy.”<sup>213</sup> The perceived nonchalant attitude of

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<sup>209</sup> “Women in India’s Service,” 145.

<sup>210</sup> [untitled article], *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 4 (February 1933): 190.

<sup>211</sup> “Our Manifesto,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, nos. 10 and 11 (August and September 1934): 494-495.

<sup>212</sup> “Election Meetings,” *Stri-Dharma* 18, no. 1 (November 1934): 25.

<sup>213</sup> “Women and Elections,” *Stri-Dharma* 18, no. 2 (December 1934): 71-75.

Mudaliar towards women's rights made it glaringly obvious the candidate the editors of *Stri-Dharma* supported and hoped women voters and sympathetic men voters would support as well.

Of course, the Indian women's movement had only achieved some of its women's rights agenda. *Stri-Dharma* made numerous appeals arguing that the improvement of the status of women would be a positive development for the health of the nation. As a result, it was continually urging the government to take further steps for the cause of women's rights. To make this progress, the government had to be made aware of exactly where women stood and their vision for the future of women and the nation. As of 1931, there was "strong evidence that men have been generally indifferent towards the needs of women."<sup>214</sup> The government was urged to keep the "needs of both sexes in mind," and to see both groups as "human beings." *Stri-Dharma* argued that the development of women was critical to the development of the nation because women have "always been and will always be the center of the home."<sup>215</sup> The journal also addressed various restrictions on voting rights and the impact those restrictions – including education, property, and military service as qualifications for voting— had on the women and men of India. It strenuously criticized the property qualification due to the implication that a woman must be connected to a man to vote.<sup>216</sup>

A very important way the women of India sought to improve their status was through the future constitution of India: "India cannot soar when the women proportion of the population remains behind as stricken with paralysis."<sup>217</sup> "Mere voting rights"

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<sup>214</sup> Ram, 410.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

were not enough.<sup>218</sup> Consequently, the Women's Indian Association proposed the following goals for the women of India:

1. That women should be free to contest seats in the general constituencies subject to the same qualifications to apply as men.
2. In addition to any seats thus secured by women, a certain number or proportion of seats—say five percent as suggested by the Nair Committee—should be reserved for women in each provincial council, at least for a trial period of three general elections.
3. Reservation should be filled by any suitable way that may be determined by the next Round Table Conference.
4. That full adult franchise be secured for both men and women.
5. That any woman—married or unmarried—possessing any one of the general qualifications for franchise would have the vote.
6. That for admission into the public services no woman shall be under any disability by reason of her sex.
7. Again we believe India will gain in power for good if it develops woman's side to its activities.<sup>219</sup>

In this way, the WIA sought a seat at the table where India's future constitution was being settled in negotiations between the British and the Indian nationalist movement.

Another aspect of the women's movement concerned efforts toward economic and social equality. One of the most challenging and controversial arenas for the women's rights movement was the field of rights for women workers. Some contributors to *Stri-Dharma* argued that "little thought has been exercised or energy expended on the improvement of the status of the Indian women wage-earner."<sup>220</sup> According to a source, in 1927 there were over 253,000 women workers. Approximately another 57,000 workers were children. This small but significant section of the Indian population deserved the attention of the women's movement.<sup>221</sup> The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* presented the challenges facing women in the industrial work force,

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ram, 410.

<sup>220</sup> K.E.M. "A Plea for Protective Legislation for Indian Women Workers," *Stri-Dharma* 12, nos. 11 and 12 (September and October 1929): 515-521.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

advocated needed reforms, anticipated the excuses for inaction of male dominated society, and celebrated the successes in improving women's position in the workforce.

The Factories Act of 1922 made several improvements for women workers. "The hours of work in all factories were limited by it to sixty in a week and to eleven a day; children were not permitted to work for more than six hours a day in any factory; rest intervals of one hour were prescribed in the case of adults after six hours' work; and children had to be given half an hour's rest after five and a half hours of work."<sup>222</sup> The Factories Act also prohibited night work for women in any kind of factory.<sup>223</sup> Other reforms included the prohibition of women working in the underground mines as of April 1929 and working in the Punjab salt mines as of April 1939.<sup>224</sup> The new Factories Act 1934, stated that the "maximum hours per week in perennial factories is fifty four" and that "women may not be employed except between 6 am and 7 pm."<sup>225</sup> Despite these gains, the writers of *Stri-Dharma* urged that these reforms were not enough:

it has to be realized that the wresting of a paltry municipal councillorship or an occasional honorary Magistrateship for a few advanced women are tawdry and tinsel gains, and cannot be made to do duty for the insistent need for removing the existing disabilities of Indian working women, and for securing for them conditions analogous to those existing in all progressive countries.<sup>226</sup>

As a result, there was more work to do if women were to achieve the full equality they so desired.

Women workers faced many challenges in mines and factories, including "long hours, low wages, and bad housing."<sup>227</sup> These work conditions were shared by many

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<sup>222</sup>Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> A Member of the Open Door International, 256-259.

<sup>224</sup> K.E.M., 515-521.

<sup>225</sup> Shareefeh Hami Ali and Janet Copeland, "The Factories Bill," *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 12 (October 1934): 536-541.

<sup>226</sup> K.E.M., 521.

<sup>227</sup> A Member of the Open Door International, 256-259.

workers – male and female—worldwide during the early years of the twentieth century. The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* argued that many reforms were needed to protect women from harsh conditions in the mines and factories, as well as on the plantations of India. One suggestion was an immediate prohibition of women working in the mines, while limitations were placed on this work; the gradual elimination was far from satisfactory for many of the contributors of *Stri-Dharma*. The reform that caught the most attention from the leaders of the women’s movement was maternity benefits for women workers. The Government of Bombay offered improvement with its Maternity Benefits Act, which went into effect in July 1929.<sup>228</sup> Other suggested reforms included legislation that would allow women to stop working in the advanced stages of pregnancy, give time off up to six weeks after a child’s birth, or require factories to provide medical supervision for female employees.<sup>229</sup> While the contributors suggested these reforms, the government stated four reasons these reforms could not be made—though attempted in 1921 and again in 1924— “1. Lack of public opinion in support of the proposals; 2. Impossibility of supervising a scheme which extends to all industries; 3. The case of evasion in a country where labor has such a migratory character; and 4. The small supply of women doctors in India.”<sup>230</sup>

Despite agreement on the need for reforms, many contributors disagreed on how these reforms should be achieved. One such organization was Open Door International, formed in Berlin in 1929 with headquarters in London and an office in Geneva.<sup>231</sup> The organization “worked to see that ‘legislation and regulation dealing with conditions and

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<sup>228</sup> K.E.M., 519-520.

<sup>229</sup> K.E.M., 515-521.

<sup>230</sup> K.E.M., 519.

<sup>231</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 142.



hours, payment, entry and training shall be based on the nature of the work and not upon the sex of the worker.”<sup>232</sup> Open Door International<sup>233</sup> agreed with other contributors on the poor conditions for women and that “little has been done to improve the state of the Indian woman wage earner” but disagreed on the methods to achieve improvement for the woman worker.<sup>234</sup> One issue on which Open Door International (ODI) took offense was the belief of some contributors to *Stri-Dharma* that regulations should be put in place to protect women from working at night. ODI argued this would put women workers at a disadvantage and that regulations preventing a woman from working at night, while intended to protect her from an unpleasant situation, actually was “a definite limitation of her rights as an individual.”<sup>235</sup> Open Door International also disagreed with other contributors to *Stri-Dharma* on prohibiting women from working in the mines. They argued that this prohibition was sentencing the women to “malnutrition and poverty,” which was much worse than working underground. The impact a flood of women into other fields of work would have on the women in those workplaces, which included the “overcrowding and lowering of wage rates, not only for themselves but for the trades into which they flock,” was another issue Open Door International had with the suggested reforms.<sup>236</sup> To wrap up their objections to the legislation supported by many of the contributors to *Stri-Dharma*, the Open Door International looked to industrial nations, where protective legislation was counterposed to the principle of equal opportunity:

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<sup>232</sup> Rupp, 142.

<sup>233</sup> For more information on ODI, see Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned: Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements c. 1880s-1970s*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 122.

<sup>234</sup> K.E.M., 519.

<sup>235</sup> K.E.M., 519.

<sup>236</sup> A Member of the Open Door International, 256-259.

To secure that a woman shall be free to work, and protected as a worker, on the same terms as a man, and that legislation and regulations dealing with conditions and hours, payment, entry, and training, shall be based upon the nature of the work, and not upon the sex of the worker; and to secure for a woman, irrespective of marriage or childbirth, the right at all times to decide whether or not she shall engage in paid work, and to ensure that no legislation or regulations shall deprive her of this right.<sup>237</sup>

This belief was supported by women from 21 countries including Sarojini Naidu, according to Open Door International.<sup>238</sup>

As the editors of *Stri-Dharma* analyzed the role of women workers, they also reported on the achievements of women in the workplace. The achievements varied widely and were in numerous fields. One of the nations in which these advancements were underway was Britain. Miss F. Sangster was appointed “managing director of the combined firms of W.S. Crawford Ltd. and Paul E. Derreck—one of the leading posts in advertising in Great Britain.”<sup>239</sup> Miss Fanet Shepherd was the first woman appointed to a technical staff position in the patent office.<sup>240</sup> Miss Dorothy Peto became the first woman to hold the position of “staff officer for women police of the Metro force.”<sup>241</sup> Similarly, the first woman was named a police officer in France.<sup>242</sup> The first woman in the world was appointed postmaster general in Turkey.<sup>243</sup> Also in Turkey, two thousand Anatolian women went on strike demanding “equal pay for equal work” and were successful achieving their goal and ensuring that there would no longer be an “economic distinction between the sexes”.<sup>244</sup> The Institute of Bacteriological Research in Berlin named Professor Lydia Rabinovitch-Kempner its director; she was also the first woman

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 4 (February 1931): 147-149.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 8 (June 1931): 349-351.

<sup>244</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 107.

to earn the title of Professor.<sup>245</sup> These articles are just a few examples of the achievements women were making in careers that were previously considered taboo for women. The contributors of *Stri-Dharma* felt it was their duty to share with their Indian readers the progress of women worldwide.

The contributors to *Stri-Dharma* often detailed the successes of their fellow Indian women workers. One field in which Indian women were entering the workplace was law. Miss Shamkumari Nehru, the daughter of Pandit and Mrs. Shamial Nehru, “became the first woman in Northern India to be a practicing lawyer.”<sup>246</sup> Other Indian women were making their name in the field of medicine. Dr. Anna Thomas was appointed the “lady doctor” in charge of child welfare in Bangalore.<sup>247</sup> Another field opening up to women was business. In Punjab, Dr. Jamila Mary Siraj-ud-din became the first Industrial Instructress for women.<sup>248</sup> In Madras, Mrs. Paul Appaswami was nominated to the Madras Corporation Council. Formerly, she had run a school for girls.<sup>249</sup>

A vital part of the Indian women’s movement was its connection to the international women’s movement. *Stri-Dharma* frequently published articles on the achievements and struggles of the international women’s movement.<sup>250</sup> There were still many countries where women did not have political or social equality, including Nicaragua and France, where despite the effort of the women’s organizations women

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<sup>245</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 7 (May 1933): 349.

<sup>246</sup> “Another Woman Lawyer,” *Stri-Dharma* 11, no. 9 (July 1928): 141.

<sup>247</sup> “Women in India’s Service,” *Stri-Dharma* 11, no. 9 (July 1928): 145.

<sup>248</sup> “News in Brief,” *Stri-Dharma* 12, no. 7 (May 1929): 306.

<sup>249</sup> “News in Brief,” 306.

<sup>250</sup> For more information on the International Women’s Movement, see <sup>250</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

had not yet achieved suffrage.<sup>251</sup> As a result, numerous organizations were formed during the early years of the twentieth century to fight for the political and social rights of women. One such organization was Britain's National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the successor to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. After women won the vote in 1918, NUSEC developed a broad agenda of issues including nationality, guardianship, and property rights.<sup>252</sup> Given the imperial connection between Britain and India, NUSEC sought to persuade the government of India to end what they described as "the generally acknowledged evils of their [women's] lot, such as illiteracy, early marriage, high infantile and maternal death rate, bad housing and sanitation, perpetual seclusion, etc."<sup>253</sup> The International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW),<sup>254</sup> the postwar successor to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, also broadened its agenda as more countries enfranchised women following the First World War.<sup>255</sup> These organizations are just two of the many groups fighting for equality for women between the world wars.

During the interwar years, many conferences, including the All-Asian Women's Conference, Asiatic Teachers Conference<sup>256</sup>, the International Women's Congress, and the Reddy Women's Conference, were held.<sup>257</sup> These and other conferences discussed the progress of women, specific reforms which were still needed, as well as what steps needed to be taken to achieve those goals. As a journal dedicated to promoting equality for women, *Stri-Dharma* often reported on these conferences. Consequently they were

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<sup>251</sup> "Women the World Over," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 7 (May 1933): 349.

<sup>252</sup> Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Suffrage and Political Activity," <http://www.tlema.com/Mayhall.asp> accessed January 28, 2012.

<sup>253</sup> "British Women on the Simon Commission," *Stri-Dharma* 11, no. 9 (July 1928): 140-141.

<sup>254</sup> For more information on the International Alliance of Women, see Rupp, 22-26.

<sup>255</sup> "Brief Herstory of the IAW," <http://www.womenalliance.org/history.html> accessed January 28, 2012.

<sup>256</sup> "All-Asian Women's Conference," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 12 (October 1930): 527-528.

<sup>257</sup> "Indian Women at Home and Abroad," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 7 (May 1933): 335.

able to bring this knowledge to their readers, but most importantly to the women of India.

One of the most important annual conferences brought together representatives of the women of India. The All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), first held at Poona in 1926, was organized by Margaret Cousins, Mrs. Huidekoper, Sarojini Naidu, Lady Tata, and the Maharani of Baroda. The conference "has become a great annual celebration and festival for the women of India belonging to all creeds, castes, and races."<sup>258</sup> The AIWC expanded to represent one hundred eighteen constituencies and sub constituencies in all the provinces in India.<sup>259</sup> As the writers of *Stri-Dharma* so eloquently described it, "the AIWC is itself a demonstration of communal unity and harmony, several of its constituencies having been originally organized and developed by women of different creeds and nationalities, European, Parsi, Hindu, Indian, Christian, Muslim."<sup>260</sup> The diversity of these women demonstrated that despite a plethora of differences, they could unite on the basis of their shared identity as women. Sisters bound by their common experiences as women, fighting for the social and political equality they so rightly deserved.

The British Co-operative Women's Guild, dedicated to making improvements for women in the workplace, held its annual conference in 1930. The following resolution expressed one of the organization's key legislative goals:

This congress urges that a bill be presented to Parliament demanding the equality of the sexes in all trades and professions, and that all avenues of work be open to women on the same terms as men, with equal opportunities for advancement. Further, that women receive the same pay for the same work, and that no obstacles be placed in the way of women who desire to work, whether single or married.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> "Women's Conference," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 5 (March 1933): 224-226.

<sup>259</sup> "The All India Women's Associations," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 627-628.

<sup>260</sup> "Women's Conference," 224-226.

<sup>261</sup> "Women the World Over," *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 4 (February 1931): 147-149.

As this statement so clearly illustrated, the organized women of Britain were striving for the same rights in the workplace that their sisters in India and around the world were fighting to achieve. Despite the divisions of politics, society, and culture, the women of the world united through this common goal.

The All-Asian Women's Conference was held in Lahore, India, January 23-30, 1931.<sup>262</sup> This conference attracted participants from "Syria, Palestine, Indo-China, Siam, Malaya, Nepal, Ceylon, Japan, Iraq, and Hawaii."<sup>263</sup> One woman from Jerusalem, the first to reply and a worker for the destitute children of her country, upon acceptance of her invitation described her belief in the conference in the following statement: "the conference will be truly of assistance in the growth of international understanding and of the social betterment for all peoples of this continent."<sup>264</sup> In support of the All-Asian Women's Conference, Muhammed Beyhum, a member of the Lebanese Academy of Beirut, "translated the invitation into Arabic and published it in the Press of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine."<sup>265</sup> The site of Lahore was chosen so delegates could fit in sightseeing in the nearby cities of Delhi and Agra. In preparation for the conference, *Stri-Dharma* in preparation for the conference encouraged the women of India to join the All-India Reception Committee. The support for the All-Asian Women's Conference testified to the thriving women's movement within India and across Asia as a whole.

One of the leaders of the Indian women's rights movement was Miss May Oung. The Superintendent of the National Girls High School of Rangoon, she had degrees from Oxford University and the University of Rangoon. She served as the Secretary of the

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<sup>262</sup> "All-Asian Women's Conference," 527-528.

<sup>263</sup> "All-Asian Women's Conference," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. 11 (September 1930): 485.

<sup>264</sup> "All-Asian Women's Conference," *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 339.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

National Council of Women of Burma<sup>266</sup>, the Secretary of the Burmese Women's Association, the only woman member of the Burmese Leaders' Conference, and the All-Asian Conference's representative to the Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality in Geneva.<sup>267</sup> She was one of the six vice chairmen of the All-Asian Conference of Women held in Lahore, India. She chaired one of the conference sittings due to the absence of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Conference President, as a result of her arrest as a political prisoner. The work of Indian women in organizing the All-Asian Conference of Women as well as in representing the conference at the Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality led to a strong bond between the women's organizations of India and the rest of Asia. Other connections were made as Indian women worked with international organizations such as the League of Nations. Three representatives, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Mrs. Hamid Ali, and Mrs. Ammu Swaninadham went to Geneva in 1933 to make recommendations on all matters concerning the welfare of Indian women and children.<sup>268</sup>

The Women's Committee of the Commonwealth of India League, originally named the Home Rule for India League, had been formed by Anne Besant in 1916. In April 1931, this organization sponsored a women's conference in London, which included delegates representing numerous British women's organizations. One of the key speakers at this conference was Mrs. Kamala Nehru, wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, a leader of the INC. *Stri-Dharma* felt this occasion was of such importance that notes on Mrs. Nehru's speech were published in the journal. Nehru's speech reiterated the views of many Indians that India should govern itself and that "those who fight will do so until

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<sup>266</sup> Burma was administratively part of British India until 1937.

<sup>267</sup> "Miss May Oung," *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 12 (October 1931): 572-573.

<sup>268</sup> "Indian Women and the League of Nations," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 597.

the bitter end.”<sup>269</sup> Her argument was centered on the ability of the women’s organizations to help India make the transition to an independent nation. In her words, “I have great faith and confidence in women. They are out to use their recently acquired civil power to change the whole scheme of life, re-moulding it nearer to the heart’s desire. Let India merit their serious thought and support!”<sup>270</sup>

The International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship<sup>271</sup> held a conference March 18-22, 1933 in Marseilles. *Stri-Dharma* advertised the plans for the conference as well as additional meetings in the surrounding towns to assist French suffragists in their campaign for the vote. In this way the journal demonstrated the mutual support and interconnectivity of women’s movements worldwide.

*Stri-Dharma* reported on a meeting of British organizations, organized by the NCW, to discuss the issue of nationality of married women. Held in London, the purpose of the conference was to debate whether a woman’s nationality and citizenship should be taken away when she married a foreigner. This issue was highly controversial.<sup>272</sup> The women took the following positions: “1. A British woman should not automatically lose her nationality on marriage with an alien. 2. A foreign woman marrying a British subject should not have British nationality imposed on her unless she applies to become a British citizen and 3. A married woman should have the right to naturalize and not be classed with minors and lunatics.”<sup>273</sup> This issue went on to be debated on the international level at the Women’s Consultative Committee in Geneva.

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<sup>269</sup> “Notes from Mrs. Nehru’s Speech at a Women’s Conference,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 9 (July 1931): 400-403.

<sup>270</sup> “Notes from Mrs. Nehru’s Speech at a Women’s Conference,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 9 (July 1931): 400-403.

<sup>271</sup> For more information see Rupp, 21-26.

<sup>272</sup> Rupp, 41.

<sup>273</sup> “Women the World Over,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 107.



This committee then in turn made recommendations to the Hague Nationality Convention. The Women's Consultative Committee included representatives from the International Council of Women, International Alliance of Women, Equal Rights International, and the All-Asian Women's Conference. As we have seen, Miss May Oung represented the All-Asian Conference of Women.<sup>274</sup> The committee members expressed their dissatisfaction with the Hague Convention in the following statement: "the convention refuses to treat a woman as a person in her own right."<sup>275</sup> Despite their recommendation that women and men should be treated equally, women were deprived of their nationality rights by the League of Nations. Evidently, it was a League of Nations of men, not of men and women.

On July 16-22, 1933, the International Congress of Women assembled in Chicago, arguing that "society faces two alternatives: either increased international co-operation with a view to the ultimate establishment of a world social order, or a return to rigid nationalism with its inherent evils."<sup>276</sup> One of the challenges before the international women's movement was the impact of imperialism and conflict between "East" and "West" even within the international organizations.<sup>277</sup> Participants from approximately 30 nations, including Japan, China, Turkey, Syria, Canada, and South Africa, represented the women of Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America at this truly international gathering.<sup>278</sup> In the words of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who served as the All-Asian Women's Conference representative to the congress, the goals of the conference were: "to review the women's progress during the past century and to honor

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<sup>274</sup> Rupp, 38-40.

<sup>275</sup> "Women the World Over," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 1 (November 1932): 38-41.

<sup>276</sup> "The Call of the Women's Congress," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 611-612.

<sup>277</sup> Leila Rupp. "Challenging Imperialism in International Women's Organizations" *NWSA* 8, no. 1: 8-27.

<sup>278</sup> "The Calling of the Congress of Women," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 613.

those women martyrs and pioneers who have built the present position of women in the world, but also to find a solution for the present distress and discontent, the misery, the unemployment and the suffering in the world.”<sup>279</sup> All of these organizations played an important role uniting the women’s organizations of the world into a movement that was truly global.

One of the best methods the Indian women’s movement used to connect with the international women’s movement was sending representatives to speak to other women’s organizations. Reddy was one of these representatives. Consequently, she served as India’s representative to the International Congress of Women in Chicago. While visiting New York before traveling on to Chicago, Reddy was interviewed about the situation in India by the press. Dr. Reddy was described by the press as the “Jane Addams of India.”<sup>280</sup> Given the reputation of Addams as an avid social reformer, this was high praise for Dr. Reddy. Addams had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 and helped found the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). During her speech at the conference, Dr. Reddy addressed the audience as “sisters and friends” who were united by an “indivisible fellowship of women in the service of humanity.”<sup>281</sup>

Like Reddy, Margaret E. Cousins was one another prominent leader of the Indian women’s movement.<sup>282</sup> In 1928, serving as the international representative of the Women’s Indian Association, Cousins was given the task of meeting as many of the

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<sup>279</sup> Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddi, “My Visit to America and The International Congress of Women,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 599-602.

<sup>280</sup> Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy, “My Visit to America (The Chicago International Congress of Women) Part II,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 1 (November 1933): 21.

<sup>281</sup> “Copy of Dr. Reddi’s Speech to the Chicago Congress of Women,” *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 2 (October 1933): 625.

<sup>282</sup> For more information, see Cousins, James H. and Margaret E. *We Two Together*. (Madras: Ganesh & Co. Ltd, 1950).

women's organizations in the countries she visited on her world tour.<sup>283</sup> Cousins "addressed over one hundred and fifty meetings of various women's associations in Switzerland, France, Belgium, Holland, London, Ireland, America, Winnipeg (Canada), Honolulu, Japan, China, and Singapore, giving the greeting of the awakened women of India to their sisters in all these lands."<sup>284</sup> According to Cousins, the women of the world were ill informed of the conditions for women in India and the "reports of the Women's Education Conference, the reports of the Women's Indian Association, and copies of *Stri-Dharma*" proved to be vital pieces of publicity for the Indian women's movement. This enabled Mrs. Cousins to pick up at least two subscribers to *Stri-Dharma* in each of the nations she visited.<sup>285</sup> She had the opportunity to attend a luncheon in New York hosted by the Foreign Policy Association in which "our brilliant Srimati Sarojini Devi Naidu<sup>286</sup> ... "astonished the American women by her genius, oratory, and the knowledge she conveyed to them about the history and ideals of India, past and present."<sup>287</sup> While in Honolulu, she was able to speak at a luncheon of the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference on the "good news of India's renaissance."<sup>288</sup>

Two Women's Indian Association members, Mrs. Jinarajadasa and Miss Barrie, while journeying from Madras to Vienna visited several cities to make connections with the women's organizations there. While visiting Basrah, Iraq there was no women's organization to be found but they were able to address a meeting attended by a few women and their husbands. This stimulated the women in Iraq to activity and led to the production of a play by both boys and girls. "This is the first production in Basrah in

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<sup>283</sup> Cousins, "World Sisterhood," 10.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Naidu was in the United States to promote Indian independence.

<sup>287</sup> Cousins, "World Sisterhood," 10-14.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

which members of both sexes acted together.”<sup>289</sup> Given Iraq’s status as a League of Nations mandate under British control, this was particularly interesting to the Indian women who could relate to the restrictions on the women of Iraq.

Finally, what impact did these relationships have on the Indian women’s movement and the women of India? To answer this question, let us take a closer look at the support the Indian women’s movement received from organizations and women worldwide as well as specific aspects of the Indian women’s movement affected by the international women’s movement.

Women’s organizations around the world sent their support to the Indian women’s movement, which the editors of *Stri-Dharma* relayed to their readership. These organizations and groups shared the vision of the leaders of the Indian women’s movement that women deserved the same rights as men. These groups often sympathized with the Indian women’s rights movement in the struggle for India’s independence. One such organization was the British branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) which informed the Women’s Indian Association that at their executive meeting on May 14, 1930 the following resolution was passed: “this executive committee urges HM Government to make a definite announcement that the object of the Round Table Conference is to formulate a scheme for full responsible government for India.”<sup>290</sup> WILPF published an article on how the British women could help Indian women in their struggle for national independence.<sup>291</sup> At a meeting March 6-7, 1933, the British WILPF passed another

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<sup>289</sup> “Inter-Asian Influences,” *Stri-Dharma* 14, no. 1 (November 1930): 3-4.

<sup>290</sup> “The Women’s International League and India,” *Stri-Dharma* 13, no. unknown (1930): 434.

<sup>291</sup> “The Women’s International League and India,” 434.

resolution demonstrating its support for the Indian women who had been arrested as political prisoners:

This council of the Women's International League wishes to support the government in its efforts to work for constitutional advance in India and in its vindication of the policy of central as well as provincial responsibility, but being convinced of the necessity of restoring good will and confidence in India, it urges the government to release all political prisoners not accused of violence and to seek co-operation of all parties.<sup>292</sup>

This encouragement from other women's organizations served to remind Indian women's activists such as Margaret Cousins and Sarojini Naidu, who had been arrested for political offenses, that they were not alone in this struggle. Their sisters worldwide were fighting alongside them.

Another method the international peace and freedom movements used to demonstrate their support for the efforts of the Indian women's movement was through an international conference. Held in Geneva, October 6, 1932 "delegates of twenty-six organizations and fifteen different countries"<sup>293</sup> formed an international conference on India. Dr. Edmond Privat, a Swiss journalist who traveled to India at Gandhi's request, served as the chairman. WILPF provided the facilities to hold the event which was aimed to "inform world opinion. Information must be organized and the ideal of non-violence must be spread throughout the world."<sup>294</sup> There was a question and answer session regarding India followed by a meeting attended by over three hundred people. The conference was due in large part to the initiative of Cousins, the WIA's international representative. While the conference was demonstrative of its support for India, it also

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<sup>292</sup> "Women's International League," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 7 (May 1933): 335.

<sup>293</sup> "Women the World Over: International Support for India's Demands," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 2 (December 1932): 95.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

was designed to lay the “foundation for coordinated work in the world on India’s behalf on a permanent basis.”<sup>295</sup>

A large basis of the support for the Indian women’s movement came from the international readers of *Stri-Dharma*. In 1933, the journal boasted at least one reader from each of the following countries: “Japan, China, Hawaii, Malaya, Burma, Java, Australia, New Zealand, Syria, Egypt, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, USA, Canada, Cuba, and South Africa.”<sup>296</sup> According to contributors to the journal, it has been “quoted freely by international newspapers and by the Indian press” and plays a vital role in carrying the news of the Indian women’s movement around the world.<sup>297</sup> In turn the readers of *Stri-Dharma* carried the news of the Indian women’s movement around the world and provided support and encouragement to the women of India.

The relationships formed from working with international organizations and the leaders of the women’s movements of the world often led to individuals supporting the Indian women’s movement financially. One such woman was Carrie Chapman Catt, the former president of the International Alliance of Women, who made annual donations to the Women’s Indian Association over a period of several years. The financial support Catt provided helped enable the Indian women to successfully earn the franchise. According to Margaret Cousins, “every month she reads *Stri-Dharma* with the greatest interest and sympathy.”<sup>298</sup> Other leaders of the American feminist movement, including

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<sup>295</sup> <sup>295</sup> “Women the World Over: International Support for India’s Demands,” 95.

<sup>296</sup> “Stri-Dharma,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 2 (December 1933): 76-77.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Margaret Cousins, “Some Women Leaders of Today,” *Stri-Dharma* 17, no. 2 (December 1933): 65–67.

Margaret Sanger and Alice Paul, offered their support through speeches, letters of encouragement, as well as donations. <sup>299</sup>

The worldwide women's movement, in addition to words of encouragement and financial support for the Indian women's movement, provided knowledge and experience. The knowledge that women's movements were able to share with each other provided valuable insights into the methods and strategies that were the most beneficial. The fact that women on opposite sides of the world, speaking different languages with different religions, could unite to support other women simply because they were women was a powerful force in shaping a peaceful and just world order.

In conclusion, there were four questions guiding our analysis of *Stri-Dharma* within this chapter: 1. What was the role of Indian women in the world during the interwar years? 2. What reforms were women trying to achieve during the interwar period? 3. How did the views of women's role in Indian and the world demonstrate the diversity of the Indian women's movement? and 4. How connected was the international women's movement? Throughout this chapter, the writings within *Stri-Dharma* were analyzed to demonstrate the role of women in the world. During the interwar period, the world was going through dramatic changes, most of which concerned the role of women in the world. As the writings within *Stri-Dharma* demonstrated, women of the world were achieving gains in the fields of education, the workplace, and in politics. However, despite these gains there was much debate on how these gains would best be achieved and if the time was appropriate given the nationalist sentiment of the period. Through this analysis we were also able to see the diversity within the Indian women's movement as different individuals and sections within the women's movement – nationally and

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

internationally had varying views on the methods and goals for the women's movement. Finally, the women's movements of the world were united in one international women's movement. The women's movements of the world "interested women in other countries, and the women who have become free in one country have helped the women of other countries, irrespective of colour, creed or race, to secure their rights and privileges."<sup>300</sup> While the women's movements of each nation may have their own goals, may achieve these goals at different times, and in different ways – they were all united by their status as women and sisters-sisters of the world.

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<sup>300</sup> "Women's Movement- International," *Stri-Dharma* 16, no. 12 (October 1933): 625-626.



## Chapter 4 Conclusion

This project set out to demonstrate the many tensions present within the Indian women's movement as illustrated within the pages of *Stri-Dharma*. Through this journal the Indian women's movement was able to spread their message to the people of India as well as the people of the world. The reforms advocated within the pages of the journal can be divided into women's role in the home and women's role in the world.

Women's role in the home was a topic that brought tremendous discussion and debate to the Indian women's movement. As a result, the writings within *Stri-Dharma* represented varying views on the role women should play in the home and what it meant to be a true Indian woman. The varying topics impacting women's role in the home included child marriage, inheritance and property laws, and women's health issues. As the journal strived to serve as the voice of the Indian women's movement, the contributors to the journal presented both sides of an issue. This allowed the journal to inform their readers, but also serves a larger purpose of illustrating the diversity within the Indian women's movement as well as the international women's movement.

The role of women in the world is another broad theme that can be seen within the pages of *Stri-Dharma*. Women's role in the world encompassed a variety of issues. One of the most important being education—many contributors to the journal argued the gaining of equality in education was a vital step to women gaining full equality in the home and in the world. Other issues the journal addressed were women's suffrage, women's participation in politics, as well as the connections between the women's movement in India and the women's movements worldwide during the interwar period. As *Stri-Dharma* educated its readers on the issues facing the women of India, they also set out to promote the women of the world including the achievements of specific

individuals as well as the achievements of the women's movements of the world.

Throughout the pages of *Stri-Dharma* the editors promoted the achievements of women worldwide. Through the articles they were able to celebrate and make these accomplishments known to the women of India.

In conclusion, the journal *Stri-Dharma* endeavored to give a voice to the Indian women's movement. Within its pages the political and social reform issues were presented, debated, and analyzed. While there was not one view of what freedom would mean, who it would include, or the even larger issue of whether women's role was in the home or in the world, *Stri-Dharma* analyzed the issues from varying viewpoints and the articles demonstrated the many tensions within the Indian women's movement. However, despite these tensions, and perhaps more importantly, they argued for unity – as women devoted to changing India and the world.

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