

### 3 Becoming Global Citizens

I ... tried to give the audience some idea of the spirit that was today animating India, in particular her women, how our country was striving to find her true place in the world comity of nations so that she might have room not only for free and full development within her own borders but also the opportunity to make her real contribution to the solution of international problems.<sup>1</sup>

When the Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali left London in September 1933, they did not return directly to India. Instead, they travelled to Geneva to initiate a campaign for recognition within the League of Nations system. Their experiences of the constitutional process had confirmed the limits of campaigning for women's advancement within the framework of empire and further justified the pursuit of political independence. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 2, engagement with the franchise campaign had produced sympathetic allies and it was in these newly configured networks that the real value of the London trip lay. Connections forged in the heart of empire would, in time, act as a springboard for the all-India women's movement to decisively transcend the imperial framework and enable the AIWC to establish itself as a global actor. By the time the outbreak of the Second World War brought the institutions of world governance to near-obliteration six years later, the organisation had been officially appointed as a 'correspondent member' of the League of Nation's Social Section. Despite the calamitous rupture of the war, this international recognition would prove significant as India emerged as an independent state in the 1940s.

#### **Geneva: the opportunity**

The women's visit to Geneva was timed to coincide with the annual meetings of the League of Nations Council and General Assembly. Every September, activity levels in the city became frenetic with the arrival of an international throng of delegates and their support staff, journalists, activists and other camp followers. In addition to the transient population was a more permanently based global

civil society. This included League of Nations and International Labour Office (ILO) officials and numerous Geneva-based transnational organisations which lobbied, advised and supported the League, creating a semi-official 'League around the League'.<sup>2</sup> Although the League of Nations system overwhelmingly reflected the power dynamics of the international status quo – imperialist, white and male – it also offered a space for alternative perspectives and the airing of discontent. In seeking to exploit this opportunity, the Indian delegation joined a multivocal international arena that included women's organisations, anti-colonial petitioners attracted by the League's purported commitment to self-determination, and activists exploiting opportunities for expressing grievance within the mandates system.<sup>3</sup>

The formal focus of the women's activities in Geneva was the League of Nations Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children where they sought to gain independent representation on influential committees. The Advisory Commission was an aspect of the 'technical' work of world governance, which may be contrasted with the League's diplomatic functions. It fell under the jurisdiction of the League of Nations Social Section and was staffed by nationally appointed delegates with relevant expertise. A year earlier, the membership of the Advisory Commission had come under review and, as a means of garnering diplomatic prestige, the British-appointed Indian delegation to the League was seeking to secure Indian representation.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the women's delegation was to ensure that any Indian appointment was jointly approved by the country's three national women's organisations. This was part of an attempt to gain international recognition for the expertise of the Indian women's movement in the area of social reform. By asserting Indian expertise, as well as their right to self-representation, the campaign undermined imperial legitimacy, particularly the widely held notion of 'tutelage', which was used to justify colonial rule, including the League of Nations mandates system.

Social reform work, which was central to the liberal notion of women's citizenship in the Indian context, conformed to the gendered expectations of the international system. Women were in the extreme minority in the League General Assembly. Furthermore, the few women delegates who were appointed invariably found themselves consigned to the Assembly's Fifth Committee, which dealt exclusively with 'feminine' social and humanitarian issues.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the international women's movement was highly active in global civil society circles in Geneva. Western women's organisations had long recognised the possibilities of internationalism, organising, for example, the International Women's Congress in The Hague in 1915, which in some respects foreshadowed

the principles of Wilson's Fourteen Points.<sup>6</sup> After the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919, the new international organisation became, for many feminists, 'the key to equality', the hope of peace and an important site for feminist activism.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of a series of semi-successful national suffrage campaigns, the international arena was viewed as the logical 'next step' in the struggle for women's rights.

The arrival of the Indian delegation in Geneva coincided with a substantial effort within the international women's movement to increase the role of women at the League. The London-based Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organisations, which represented seven major transnational women's societies, existed exclusively for the purpose of securing positions for women on League of Nations committees.<sup>8</sup> Equal Rights International (founded in 1930 by an AIWC ally, the British organisation the Six Point Group, or SPG) lobbied the League for an international equal rights treaty. Others, including the International Council of Women (ICW), campaigned for protectionist legislation, while an often fractious alliance of pro- and anti-protectionist feminists campaigned for married women's nationality rights.<sup>9</sup> The international women's movement was by no means united in terms of ideology and method. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, there was an increasing amount of private scepticism about the League amongst feminist organisations.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in 1931, the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations was formed to streamline the work of women's organisations in Geneva; within the League Secretariat itself, Gabrielle Radziwill was appointed as Liaison Officer. Prior to the Geneva visit, Indian women had no independent presence within this framework – neither in the 'League around the League' nor in the League itself.<sup>11</sup> But connections made in London over the summer provided access to these networks.

The international effort to secure women's representation in Geneva was bolstered by the claim that women had a particular contribution to make based on their supposed natural propensity for peace. The idea that 'women, probably more so than men, are strong in their determination to prevent the catastrophe of future wars' garnered near-universal acceptance in the international women's movement.<sup>12</sup> Similar ideas were already in circulation in India. Indeed, the association of women with peace-making was a narrative entirely familiar to anti-colonial women, whose involvement in non-violent Gandhian activism was legitimised by such tropes. Furthermore, the promotion of peace and cooperation could be elided with cosmopolitan-nationalist claims that promoted Indian independence as a route to global harmony. The Mazzinian and religious

universalisms that featured in the speeches of Sarojini Naidu, for example, tracked neatly to the internationalist rhetoric of interwar Geneva.

Early on in the League's existence, there had been some optimism amongst Indian leaders that the new international organisation might support anti-colonial goals. However, by the 1930s, a general sense of disillusionment had set in amongst Congress leaders.<sup>13</sup> Observing that the League functioned to uphold the existing geopolitical status quo, Jawaharlal Nehru described the organisation as a 'tool in the hands of the great powers'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, India's anomalous position as the only non-self-governing nation with a seat at the League of Nations was widely understood to serve the interests of imperial Britain rather than to represent the discreet concerns of India. It certainly was not intended to give voice to nationalist dissent.<sup>15</sup> Although some of India's civil servants may have wished otherwise, correspondence between the League and India went through the Cabinet Office in London and the appointment of delegates was controlled by the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India.

Ultimately, the Indian women's campaign for official representation would be obstructed by the imperial authorities. However, the system of world governance offered other opportunities. Notwithstanding Nehru's hostility towards the League, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which was connected to Indian nationalist figures through Agatha Harrison, had already sought to exploit these openings on Indian nationalists' behalf. In December 1931, it had helped organise Gandhi's brief appearance at Victoria Hall in Geneva. Further public meetings in support of Indian independence had been held under its auspices in October 1932 and March 1933.<sup>16</sup> The women's visit in September 1933 coincided with a further event, also organised by the WILPF, which was billed as the 'Third International Conference for India'. Among the speakers at this event were Subhas Chandra Bose, Bhulabhai Desai, and, newly arrived from the franchise campaign in London, Shareefah Hamid Ali.<sup>17</sup> The conference, which attracted international media attention and League of Nations Assembly delegates, publicised examples of British repression and passed resolutions in favour of Indian independence. One resolution demanded that Britain should not appoint India's representatives at the League. This prepared the ground for the Indian women's campaign, which, echoing claims made in the imperial context, insisted on the right of the all-India women's organisations to represent India at the League.

One opening available to the women's delegation in Geneva was the opportunity to make connections with influential figures in the League and ILO bureaucracies. The most potentially valuable contact was Eric Einar

Ekstrand, the Director of the Opium Traffic and Social Questions Section, who coordinated the League's technical work in a range of areas, including issues relating to women. Gabrielle Radziwill, the League Secretariat's Liaison Officer, and Harold Butler, Director General of the ILO, were also considered valuable allies. Harrison, who was an acknowledged expert on industrial welfare and served as an unofficial advisor to the League, was on close terms with Ekstrand and she put this connection at the disposal of the Indian delegation. Beyond League and ILO officials was a wider network of civil society figures who lobbied, advised and sometimes assisted the League in its 'technical' work. This included members of international women's organisations who served on the Joint Standing Committee of International Women's Organisations. Such figures were viewed as potential allies in the campaign to gain official representation and, more widely, as influencers of global public opinion. It was through this below-state-level framework for international activism that members of the Indian women's delegation were able to establish themselves as global actors.

### **The campaign for representation in Geneva**

The campaign in Geneva reflected the increasingly internationalist outlook of the Indian women's movement. Subsequent to Sarojini Naidu's appearance at the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1920, Indian women had continued to attend international conferences. There had been attempts to establish alternatives to the Western-led international movement, including the convening of the Indian-led All-Asian Women's Conference (AAWC) in 1931.<sup>18</sup> However, Indian women's engagements with the League of Nations were filtered through Western connections. The National Council of Women in India (NCWI), which was a national affiliate of the ICW, served as a link to global civil society in Geneva, where the ICW maintained a presence. In 1928, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) hosted a meeting of the Bombay branch of the NCWI at which the speaker, Evelyn Gedge, gave a report of recent ICW meetings in Geneva. Gedge relayed details of lectures from League and ILO officials, including one by Rachel Crowdy, the then Director of the Social Section of the League.<sup>19</sup> It was precisely this area of League of Nations activity with which the Indian delegation of 1933 sought to become involved. However, in contrast to these earlier interactions, the delegation now sought a direct and independent connection to League work.

For anti-colonial women, the earliest link to Geneva-based internationalism came through Margaret Cousins, co-founder of both the Women's Indian

Association (WIA) and the AIWC, who was also a member of the first 'Women's Deputation' to the President of the League of Nations in 1928.<sup>20</sup> 'Geneva,' Cousins wrote in the *Times of India* after this visit, 'is a city to which people from every country in the world come to exchange ideas and to help in making a unified world-consciousness and a resultant world-peace.'<sup>21</sup> Cousins made several attempts to bring the cause of India to the attention of Geneva society, including through a formal offer of support from the AAWC to the long-standing campaign for an equal rights treaty.<sup>22</sup> This activity was publicised in Indian newspapers and journals informing an emerging internationalist consciousness amongst publicly engaged women.

The AIWC had first directly engaged with the League of Nations late in 1932. Knowing the membership of the Advisory Commission on the Protection and Welfare of Children was under review, the organisation had written to the India Office to '[urge] the adequate representation of Indian women in the League'.<sup>23</sup> However, even at this point, the India Office evidently already had a clear view on who might be a suitable candidate. 'There is, as a matter of fact, an Indian woman in London at present who might be well qualified to represent the Indian point of view in these Committees,' wrote a British official to the League Secretariat.<sup>24</sup> No name was mentioned but, as soon became clear to the AIWC leadership, the imperial machine had no intention of advancing Congress-supporting women to such positions.

Amrit Kaur picked up the issue of Indian women's representation in Geneva during her stay in London the following summer. Tapping into her newly consolidated network of British supporters, she contacted several friendly British women's organisations with experience of working in Geneva and asked for their help. The response was supportive: the SPG said they would do 'everything possible', while the Women's Freedom League wrote to the Secretary of State for India to urge him to use his influence to include women in the Indian delegation to the Assembly.<sup>25</sup> Margery Corbett Ashby, who as Chair of the Liaison Committee of International Women's Organisations was an experienced operator in Geneva, warned that 'it is not very easy except by direct pressure on your Government'. However, she declared her organisation 'very willing indeed to address a letter to the Indian Government'.<sup>26</sup>

The arrival of Kaur and Hamid Ali was marked by a reception held in their honour by the World YWCA and attended by 'a large audience of men and women of all countries' made up of 'international circles' and 'League people'.<sup>27</sup> The invitation to this event explained that the two women 'went to England to give evidence before the Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional

Reform' and that they were in Geneva 'for the express purpose of getting into touch with international thought'.<sup>28</sup> Addressing this event, Kaur spoke on the issue of women's suffrage and emphasised the importance of Indian independence. Combining the internationalist Geneva spirit with an older cosmopolitan-nationalist tradition, her speech promoted Indian independence as an 'opportunity to make her real contribution to the solution of international problems'.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the Indian delegates presented themselves as model global citizens.

Further events followed, including 'various luncheons and afternoon and evening parties' where Kaur pushed the delegation's specific demand for representation at the League alongside general nationalist propaganda and appeals to internationalism. The visit took place against the background of the World Disarmament Conference, which provided the delegation with an opportunity to relate Indian grievances to a matter of global concern while at the same time boosting Indian nationalism's international moral authority. At a lunch meeting of the Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations, Kaur brought up several issues, including the 'importance of relinquishing the throwing of bombs in every part of the world, with particular reference to the N.W. Frontier Province', where the British had deployed aerial bombardment. The theme of disarmament also provided an opportunity for criticising the British use of force during non-violent, Gandhian civil disobedience agitations. During these events, the women emphasised that 'though we [are] fully occupied at the moment with national affairs we [do] not forget the international spirit [that] was necessary in order to make us better nationalists'.<sup>30</sup> Locating Indian freedom in the larger context of global progress, Kaur drew on the claim (also voiced by Naidu and others) that that 'there could not be any world peace if the East was excluded from Geneva'.<sup>31</sup> As we shall see in following chapters, this idea became an anti-colonial axiom at the United Nations (UN) and informed nationalist India's self-representation as it emerged as an independent state after the Second World War.

The petition requesting Indian women's representation on the League's Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children was formally presented to the President of the Council of the League of Nations on 27 September. On this occasion, Amrit Kaur and Shareefah Hamid Ali were joined by Ammu Swaminathan, an AIWC member, and Keron Bose of the NCWI. The four women delivered an official submission on the joint behalf of the three national women's organisations. It expressed the desire of Indian

women to help the League's work relating to women and children and made two 'suggestions': first, that Indian women be appointed to relevant committees and, second, that the three main Indian women's organisations be consulted on issues covered by these committees. They based their claim on three arguments: first, that they represented one-fifth of the world's women; second, that they were qualified by their awareness of international issues relating to women; and third, that their expertise with regard to 'the position, rights and duties of women' could be used to global advantage. Underpinning these arguments was their self-representation as progressive, modern citizens – a point Kaur later underlined in a report of her activities in Geneva when she specifically noted that the President of the Council 'was particularly interested to hear that we were *elected*'.<sup>32</sup> With the question of who had the right to speak for Indian women at issue, the submission represented a challenge to imperial authority, albeit one that was couched in the unchallenging rhetoric of good global citizenship.

Two days after the Indian women's submission to the President of the Council, Charles Te Water, the President of the Assembly, and Joseph Avenol, the Secretary General of the League, received members of the ICW. The delegation was intended to draw attention to the contribution made by women to international issues such as the prevention of human and narcotic trafficking, women's rights and world peace.<sup>33</sup> At the last minute, Kaur's name was added to the delegation – her committed networking, it seems, having paid dividends. At the meeting, she pointed out 'how keen [Indian women] were to contribute [their] mite towards the solution of world problems affecting the welfare of women and children in particular'.<sup>34</sup> From the point of view of the ICW, the inclusion of an Indian woman in the delegation lent considerable weight to its claim to represent the world's women. For Kaur, it was not just an opportunity to make the case for Indian women's representation to influential League officials, but a chance to chip away at assumptions relating to Indian women at a high level.

Amongst the Indian delegation's supporters, the visit was considered a success. Una Saunders of the World YWCA was flushed with the 'joy and enlightenment which the visit of these last few days has brought to many of us here in Geneva' and described Kaur's work there as 'epoch-making'.<sup>35</sup> In London, the WIL Executive noted 'the very warm welcome which had been extended to [Kaur and her colleagues] from all quarters, including the L.N. Secretariat and the I.L.O.' and considered the visit a 'very successful and useful piece of work'.<sup>36</sup> Agatha Harrison, who had done so much to facilitate Kaur's activities, was deeply satisfied, writing to Gandhi of the 'wonder of [the] visit



and what it has achieved'.<sup>37</sup> Harrison's enthusiasm was, perhaps, buoyed up by the personal attachment that had developed between her and Kaur. Shortly after leaving Geneva, Kaur wrote warmly: 'It has been such a joy to know you and to feel I have in you – and India has in you – a true friend for all time.'<sup>38</sup>

The campaign also generated new support. Harold Butler, the Director of the ILO, urged the delegation to supply him directly with names of suitable candidates for specialist women's committees.<sup>39</sup> Then, when, shortly after the delegation left Geneva, India was formally invited to serve on the Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children, new contacts sprung into action.<sup>40</sup> With the issue of exactly who would serve on the Indian delegation to the fore, Emilie Gourd, an assessor on the Child Welfare Committee, asked the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organisations to throw its weight behind the campaign to secure the appointment of an appropriate Indian woman. In response, Edith Bigland, the Joint Standing Committee's Honorary Secretary, wrote to the President of the League of Nations Council in October 1933 to press the case. Next, she wrote to Kaur asking for information about possible candidates. 'If we can know their names quickly,' she urged, 'we will do our best to support them.'<sup>41</sup> Back in India, Amrit Kaur hastily coordinated a list of six women who were jointly endorsed by the AIWC, the WIA and the NCWI. Margery Corbett Ashby of the Joint Standing Committee wrote approvingly, 'I am sure that [the Government of India] could not make a better choice than you have suggested to it.' 'Naturally,' she added, 'it would be a special pleasure to us here if you yourself were to be appointed.'<sup>42</sup>

Support was also forthcoming from the members of the League Secretariat. Ekstrand celebrated India's appointment, patiently explained logistics and expressed the hope that

the representative chosen will be a person of high standing and representing the spirit of modern development which characterises the work of so many prominent Indian men and women whom I have had the privilege of meeting.<sup>43</sup>

Gabrielle Radziwill 'rejoice[d]' at the appointment of India to the Advisory Commission and expressed the idea that an Indian women 'of the right type and right vision would be extremely valuable for the work of the Commission'.<sup>44</sup> Pre-empting a formal announcement, she bypassed the imperial authorities entirely and sent Kaur a collection of League documents on the work of the Advisory Commission.<sup>45</sup>

## **Being global citizens, 1934–39**

The campaign in Geneva established the AIWC as a global actor in the below-state-level civil society networks that carried out the technical work of world governance. However, in the short term, the AIWC's position was uncertain. Several months after the women's delegation had returned to India, the India Office named its appointment to the Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The appointee was not one of the six names submitted by the Indian women's organisations. Instead, the imperial authorities installed Radhabai Subbarayan, the wife of a former Chief Minister of Madras. As a former delegate to the Round Table Conference, Subbarayan was evidently considered a safe option in Geneva. Insiders judged her to be 'a very able lady ... a good choice but of course not the best'.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, from the point of view of the Government of India, she was seemingly untainted by nationalist associations. But, as Kaur objected, she had 'never been a working member of any of our organisations'.<sup>47</sup> After hearing that Subbarayan had also been appointed to represent India at the ILO, an angry Kaur called on her contact in the British Parliament, Eleanor Rathbone, 'to expose this total lack of appreciation of true service in England', adding, bitterly, that '[i]t is getting well nigh impossible for us women to go on cooperating with Government when they invariably turn a deaf ear to our very reasonable demands'.<sup>48</sup> Subbarayan's appointment indicated that the British authorities had no intention of relinquishing imperial influence on the world stage, even when it came to 'soft' diplomatic matters such as 'women's issues'. For the remaining existence of the League and in the early days of the United Nations, the British authorities would continue to block the Indian nationalist voice in world governance.

However, despite the barriers put up by the imperial authorities, the AIWC persisted with the project of maintaining relations with Geneva at an unofficial non-state level. In particular, their energies were focused on the Social Section of the League Secretariat and the Women's Work section of the ILO. By building on contacts established during the visit in 1933, Kaur, Hamid Ali and others established formal and semi-formal links to the organs of world governance that brought international recognition to the AIWC. This activity not only circumvented the authority of the India Office but also diluted the usual dominance of Western-led organisations in global civil society. This signalled a shift in global dynamics at the level of civil society even though, in geopolitical terms, the imperial system remained entrenched.

The driving force behind this below-state-level engagement with Geneva was Amrit Kaur as the AIWC's first 'Liaison Officer with Europe'. Having discovered that the ILO was to hold a special conference on women's labour issues in June 1934, she commissioned a report on conditions in India for submission on behalf of the AIWC. Although India was officially represented by Subbarayan, Kaur proposed that 'there is no harm in our making our views known through our own agency'. 'In fact,' she added, 'we *should* do so.'<sup>49</sup> This was in many ways a public relations exercise intended to demonstrate the AIWC's expertise on the ground. Complaining that Subbarayan had 'never been inside an Indian Factory or mill', Kaur was, by contrast, able to call on 'special women members detailed to study Labour conditions' to hastily produce a report in time for the ILO conference.<sup>50</sup> Kaur judged it 'essential for us to send in *something* to the International [ILO] Conference in order to strengthen our hand for the future'.<sup>51</sup> But not all her colleagues were similarly motivated. The AIWC Labour Sub-Committee complained that it was being pressured to 'submit the memorandum ... in such a great hurry' when 'our organisation has not been asked to submit any memorandum and we have been totally ignored'.<sup>52</sup> In the event, a report on mining conditions was produced and sent directly to the ILO, pointedly bypassing Subbarayan. The report was also a pretext for renewing contact with Ekstrand: 'Please be kind enough,' Kaur urged, 'to use your influence and help us to get the questions mentioned in this memorandum considered at the International Labour Conference which is shortly to be held.'<sup>53</sup> The AIWC maintained direct relations with the ILO in other ways. From 1935 onwards, the AIWC was reporting annually to the ILO, and the ILO was publishing these reports in its publication, *Industrial and Labour Information*.<sup>54</sup> Simultaneously, the Indian Branch of the ILO, which reported monthly to the ILO headquarters in Geneva, included news of AIWC activities in its despatches.<sup>55</sup>

The AIWC's engagement with Geneva on labour issues brought the organisation into transnational ideological debates. The introduction of protectionist labour legislation was an issue that divided the women's movement.<sup>56</sup> On one side were equality feminists, led by Open Door International (ODI), who rejected any form of discrimination, including affirmative measures, and insisted on complete equality between the sexes. The AIWC memorandum represented the opposite position associated with 'difference' feminism. It was based on the logic that the particular biological and social circumstances that applied to women necessitated specialist legislation, including maternity

benefits. This protectionist stance brought the AIWC into disagreement with some of its supporters in Britain, including the SPG, a representative of which wrote to Kaur asking her to reconsider the AIWC's position.<sup>57</sup> Yet the AIWC ignored these pleas, judging the 'equality' ODI stance to be ill-suited to Indian conditions.

Beyond labour-related issues, the AIWC also maintained connections with the League of Nations Social Section. The League Secretariat shared knowledge on issues such as sanitation and hygiene, maternity and child welfare, education, and women's exploitation. In response, AIWC officers sent information on their own initiatives to increase the training of Indian midwives and programmes promoting child nutrition in addition to sending copies of AIWC resolutions relating to maternity care, prostitution and child welfare.<sup>58</sup> These reports, which were gratefully received in Geneva, were further evidence of Indian women's expertise that lent the AIWC international credibility.<sup>59</sup> As a measure of this gradually acquired reputation, when a League-sponsored conference on the Traffic of Women and Children in Asia was convened in Bandung in February 1937, Mrs S. C. Mukerjee, the AIWC Chairman, was appointed as the delegate for India.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, the AIWC sought to bolster their emerging international reputation through the policy of inviting 'visitors of influence' to their annual conferences. After the visit of Margery Corbett Ashby and Agnes Maude Royden in 1934, this practice became well established. Amongst the visitors at Kaur's presidential conference in 1937 was the Liaison Officer for the 'friendly societies' in 1934, Grace Lankester. The AIWC also welcomed League and ILO officials to India, including P. M. Hage of the Women's Work Section, who visited in December 1938.<sup>61</sup> Probably the most productive visit was that of Ekstrand, who conducted a lecture tour in India en route to the Traffic in Women and Children Conference in Bandung in 1937. The success of this tour likely contributed to the AIWC's official appointment as a 'correspondent member' of the League's Advisory Committee on Social Questions. This advisory role was formal recognition of the AIWC's interconnectedness, professionalism and expertise, and resulted in it being the only non-Western organisation to be listed in the League's record of 'Women's International Organisation'.<sup>62</sup> This connection continued until the League disbanded during the Second World War, establishing an international profile for the AIWC. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the appointment of Indian women to UN committees after the new international organisation was established in 1945.

## **Imperial (dis)connections and the outbreak of the Second World War**

Transnational connections established during the 1930s brought a measure of solidarity and raised the profile of the Indian women's movement on the world stage. But international cooperation in the field of social reform was framed by political tensions. Although the AIWC was officially 'non-political', Congress women within the organisation increasingly sought to officially align it to the nationalist struggle. As Amrit Kaur urged in her presidential address to the AIWC's annual conference in Nagpur in 1937, 'While I believe that all social and educational and economic reform is complementary to the larger struggle for freedom the latter cannot be ignored by us.'<sup>63</sup> It is no surprise that, for women used to operating internationally, the Indian independence movement was imagined in a global context. Later in her address, which was itself intended for international consumption, Kaur presented Indian subjugation under colonialism as part of the prevailing 'Might is Right' tradition that defined the global imperial order. Drawing attention to parallels between British imperialism and the internationally condemned muscle-flexing of Italy and Japan, she asked AIWC delegates to consider

[w]ith what voice can we raise a protest against the Italian conquest of Abyssinia or Japanese ruthless aggression in China if we cannot condemn the bombing of villages on the North West Frontier or speak out against imperialistic designs wheresoever they be?

Meanwhile, she presented Gandhi's non-violent ideology as a universally applicable counter to the prevailing state of 'selfishness, exploitation, oppression, imperialism and cruelty'.<sup>64</sup>

By 1937, the Indian women's movement had, many thought, good reason to take an international leadership role. Earlier that year, elections had been held under the terms of the new Government of India Act, which had resulted in decisive success for the Congress Party. In the United Provinces, one of the eight provinces where the Congress had won a majority, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was appointed Provincial Minister for Public Health and Local Self-Government. In the process, she became India's first (and the world's second) woman to achieve cabinet rank.<sup>65</sup> Speaking at the AIWC conference in Nagpur, Pandit presented this as a collective honour for Indian women and a signal of the progressive gender ideology of Indian nationalism. 'In appointing me to a position so far closed to women,' she argued, the Congress was 'demonstrating to the world

the equality of man and woman in the new India which is in the making today.<sup>66</sup> The presence of Grace Lankester, the British Liaison Officer, at the conference ensured that this message was relayed back to Britain.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, an American writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* announced that Pandit's appointment 'typifie[d] changing times'.<sup>68</sup>

The outbreak of the Second World War brought about shifts in the international relations of the Indian women's movement. The Government of India's declaration of war on India's behalf without consultation once again brought the Congress into dispute with the British authorities. As discontent simmered amid the suspension of civil liberties, nationalist civil disobedience and imprisonments, relationships between Indian women and some of their former allies were tested. As Congress women joined the leadership in boycotting the war effort, a group of British women, including some long-term supporters of the AIWC such as Grace Lankester, Daisy Solomon and Margery Corbett Ashby, published a public plea to 'the women of India' to throw their support behind the Allies. The plea, printed in the *Times of India*, appealed to Indian women to reconsider their opposition in the name of the cause of 'human freedom' and democracy.<sup>69</sup> 'We know how passionately you hate war. We hate war too,' the appeal continued, '[y]et British women have entered on the war in the full responsibility of citizenship ... Side by side with our men we are shouldering the burdens and braving the perils of the struggle.'<sup>70</sup> From the perspective of nationalist India, where the conflict was seen as one driven by European imperialist rivalries, the claim that the British were fighting for freedom and democracy rang rather hollow.

The British women's appeal exposed the tensions implicit in the international women's movement in an age of nationalism and imperialism. For many Indian women, especially those with a developed abhorrence of fascism, the question of whether to support the war posed a difficult problem. However, the Congress had determined that support for the war was conditional on full and immediate independence. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, recently released from prison after serving a sentence for civil disobedience, was the first to respond. She answered 'with some diffidence' to the British women, some of whom she considered 'friends whose friendship I value'.<sup>71</sup> Yet she toed the Congress line and asserted that Indian women could not support the war without first becoming free themselves. She claimed that by insisting on the guarantee of India's independence as a condition for participation in the war, nationalist women were themselves upholding the global cause of freedom. 'We desire equally with you the defeat of Nazism and all it stands for but we cannot fight for your freedom while we ourselves are your

slaves,' Pandit's statement concluded.<sup>72</sup> A few days later, an open letter apparently drafted by Gandhi and signed by prominent AIWC members, including Pandit, Amrit Kaur and even (the previously anti-Congress) Radhabai Subbarayan, spelt out the nationalist position yet more starkly:

As we see the reality, it is this. It is a war between the British Empire and Nazis and Fascists for world domination, meaning in effect exploitation of the non-European races. We cannot be in love with Nazism and Fascism. But we may not be expected to be in love with British Imperialism.<sup>73</sup>

For British women this was a difficult message to receive; even the British Section of the WILFP, the most closely allied of the 'friendly societies', described Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's opposition to the war effort as 'challenging'.<sup>74</sup>

If the war brought ideological differences to the surface, it also posed practical obstacles to transnational activity. When war broke out, P. M. Hage of the ILO's Women's Work section was forced to decline an invitation to the AIWC's annual meeting that year, concluding that

the present international situation and the preoccupations which it entails make it extremely difficult for the Office to undertake to be represented at a Conference in a centre so far away from Geneva.<sup>75</sup>

In Britain, it was reported that '[t]he war situation has made it impossible for the Liaison Group of British Women's Societies to respond to the warm invitation from the All India Women's Conference to send a delegate to attend the Annual Session'.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, the attempts of Vera Brittain of the SPG to attend the AIWC conference in 1941 were blocked when authorities refused her an exit permit from the United Kingdom. This prompted Pandit, as the then President of the AIWC, to publicly protest what she characterised as an obstruction to transnational understanding:

The decision was unfortunate. At this critical period in the relationship between the people of India and those of England, human contacts are important. Miss Vera Brittain would have forged another link in that chain of friendship between our peoples which this organisation has been trying to create.<sup>77</sup>

Despite these obstacles, some sense of solidarity held fast. In 1939, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya travelled to North America and made contact with branches of the WILPF, which she declared 'the only [women's] organisation that gave her

hope and faith'.<sup>78</sup> Even signatories of the 'British Women's Appeal' maintained relations with the AIWC throughout the war, evidently viewing the war and the divisions it exposed as a temporary obstacle. Six months after the 'Appeal', a second message was sent to the AIWC that, while reiterating that '[o]ur first energy must go to fighting the evil forces of Nazism and Fascism', expressed the desire

to link up our efforts with yours to plan and build a new world from this strife to which you and we must equally contribute even if communications become more difficult. Please believe in our continued friendship; our joy at bridging the miles that separate us and our hope that next year one of us may be with you.<sup>79</sup>

In June 1943, when the Congress was effectively silenced by the imprisonment of the leadership and thousands of activists after the Quit India agitation, seventy British women signed a further appeal. This time it urged the British government to employ 'the method of consultation and negotiation' to end the political deadlock with the Congress.<sup>80</sup> Two years later, the Liaison Group of British women's societies, formed in 1934, was still active. Working, it claimed, in cooperation with the AIWC, it again lobbied the British Government to demand the release of Congress leaders from prison so that they might 'take their rightful place in national and international affairs'.<sup>81</sup> This support from women who, in many cases, had no particular sympathy for anti-colonial nationalism shows the value of transnational connections for Indian women in making their voices heard.

In India during the war, the AIWC made substantial efforts to remain connected to their international networks, repeatedly extending invitations to their annual meetings and sending reports and resolutions to their supporters abroad.<sup>82</sup> In spite of Indian nationalist opposition to the war, they assured their European contacts of their sympathy. 'Believe me,' stated Hamid Ali in a letter sent to London at the time of the Battle of Britain, 'to whatever schools of thought my countrymen belong we are all united in our great sympathy with England in its hour of trial.'<sup>83</sup> For others, sympathy was magnified by personal concerns: 'Sorry to hear of the renewed air attacks on England,' wrote Kulsum Sayani, the AIWC Secretary in May 1944. 'My eldest son is studying medicine at Glasgow. I quite realise a mother's anxiety.'<sup>84</sup>

If the Second World War brought about the collapse of the League of Nations, gains by anti-colonial women through their interactions with world governance proved more enduring. By engaging with the Geneva system, the AIWC asserted



its credentials and moral authority as representatives of the women of India. In challenging the concept of Western ‘tutelage’, this undermined the legitimacy both of the imperial state, which sought to control the access of Indians to the League, and the Western-dominated international women’s movement which, heretofore, had spoken on behalf of women everywhere. In addition, the AIWC’s interactions with world governance in the 1930s contributed to longer-term shifts in the dynamics of international institutions. In a general sense, their activities affirmed the principle of colonial self-representation. More specifically, they established the AIWC as an internationally respected expert organisation in the field of social reform. While these developments counted for little in the short term, they were deeply rooted enough to be significant as the world transitioned to a new order after the Second World War.

In the meantime, anti-colonial women continued to cast their gaze globally. During the war, the AIWC’s publication *Roshni* carried articles under such titles as ‘Leningrad Women’, ‘Chinese Women’s Role in the War’ and ‘American Feminism Enters a New Phase’.<sup>85</sup> While, on the one hand, promising relations were established with nationalist China, others turned their consideration to the United States of America, which they recognised as an important player in the post-imperial world order. Anti-colonial Indians had long understood the significance of public opinion in American politics, including in influencing foreign policy. At the start of the war, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya travelled to the United States, following Sarojini Naidu’s example of a decade earlier, to promote Indian independence and seek out new solidarities. Four long years later, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a former AIWC President, travelled to the United States. The next chapter examines this tour, where, with the support of American civil society organisations, she embarked on a momentous campaign that helped establish India as a global player in the new post-war order.

## Notes

1. Amrit Kaur, ‘Report on Activities in Geneva’, File 27-1 (1933), AIWC.
2. Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 7. For the ‘League around the League’ see Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis and Anne-Isabelle Richard, ‘Editorial – The Roots of Global Civil Society and the Interwar Moment’, *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 2 (2012), 157–65.
3. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*; Pedersen, *The Guardians*; O’Malley, *The Institution of International Order*; Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), ch. 2.

4. W. Turner, India Office to Princess Radziwill, Social Questions Section, League of Nations, 5 December 1932, 11B/669/669, League of Nations (hereafter LoN).
5. Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 120–22.
6. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 28.
7. Carol Miller, “Geneva – the Key to Equality”: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations’, *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994), 219–45.
8. Founded in 1926. The organisations it represented were: the World’s Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the International Council of Women, the World’s Young Women’s Christian Association, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the World Union of Women for International Concord and the International Federation of University Women.
9. Miller, “Geneva – the Key to Equality”.
10. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 212–13.
11. As we have seen, the NCWI was linked to the ICW but it had no direct, independent link to the League and ILO at this stage.
12. The Late Dame Millicent Fawcett, ‘Can Women Influence International Policy?’ *Times of India*, 19 August 1929, 8.
13. Maria Framke, ‘India’s Freedom and the League of Nations: Public Debates 1919–22’, in *Asia after Versailles: Asian Perspectives on the Paris Peace Conference and the Interwar Order, 1919–22*, ed. Urs Matthias Zachmann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 124–43.
14. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History: Being Further Letters to His Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1949), 683.
15. Stephen Legg, ‘An International Anomaly? Sovereignty, the League of Nations and India’s princely geographies’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (January 2014), 96–110.
16. Margaret Cousins, ‘Appeal for an Expression of International Opinion’, July 1932, 7MCA/C10.
17. Ellen Horup, ‘The Third International Conference for India at Geneva’, *The Modern Review*, November 1933, 7MCA/C10, WL.
18. Sumita Mukherjee, ‘The All-Asian Women’s Conference 1931: Indian Women and Their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation’, *Women’s History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017), 363–81, 373.
19. ‘Women’s Council at Geneva: Miss Gedge’s Lecture’, *Times of India*, 28 February 1928, 7.

20. Margaret E. Cousins, 'Women's Movement in Geneva', *Times of India*, 4 December 1928, 10.
21. Ibid.
22. Mukherjee, 'The All-Asian Women's Conference', 373. The AAWC was a relatively short-lived organisation. Nevertheless, it played an important role in developing the international perspective of the Indian women's movement.
23. Turner to Radziwill, 5 December 1932, 11B/669/669, LoN.
24. Ibid.
25. Florence Underwood, Secretary of Women's Freedom League to Amrit Kaur, 19 August 1933; Florence McFarlane, Hon. Secretary, The Six Point Group, to Amrit Kaur, 8 September 1933, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Papers, Correspondence, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).
26. Margery Corbett Ashby to Amrit Kaur, 18 September 1933, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Papers, Correspondence, NMML.
27. Una Saunders, Vice President of Worlds' Young Women's Christian Association, to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, 29 September 1933, File 27-1 (1933), AIWC; Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva'.
28. 'Invitation of the resident Committee Members and Staff of the World's YWCA', 7MCA/C10, WL.
29. Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva.'
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid. (emphasis original).
33. E. A. van Veen, Executive Secretary, I.C.W., to Princess Radziwill, 27 September 1933, 5A/3614/394, LoN.
34. Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva.'
35. Una Saunders to Kaur, 29 September 1933, File 27-1 (1933), AIWC.
36. 'Extract from Minutes of WIL Executive', 10 October 1933, 7MCA/C10, WL.
37. Harrison to Kaur, 6 October 1933, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Papers, Correspondence, NMML.
38. Kaur to Harrison, 4 October 1933, 7MCA/C10, WL.
39. Kaur, 'Report on Activities in Geneva.'
40. Joseph Avenol, Secretary-General, League of Nations to Secretary of State for India, 19 October 1933 and 3 February 1934, 11B/9040/729, LoN.
41. Edith Bigland, Honorary Secretary, J.S.C.W.I.O., to Kaur, 7 December, 1933, File 27-I, AIWC.
42. Margery Corbett Ashby, President, IAWSEC, to Kaur, 23 February 1934, File 59-II, AIWC.

43. E. E. Ekstrand, Director of the Opium Traffic and Social Questions Sections, to Kaur, 11 November 1933, File 27-I, AIWC.
44. Radziwill to Kaur, 21 December 1933, 11B/9040/729, Box 4667, LoN.
45. Gabrielle Radziwill to Amrit Kaur, 21 December 1933, 11B/9040/729, Box 4667, LoN.
46. A. C. Chatterjee to Princess Radziwill, 27 February 34, 11B/669/669, LoN.
47. Kaur to Rathbone, 2 April 1934, 7ELR/24, WL.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Kaur to Mukerjee, 7 April 1934, File 59-II, AIWC (emphasis original).
50. Kaur to Rathbone, 2 April 1934, 7ELR/24, WL.
51. Kaur to Mukerjee, 18 May 1934, File 59-I, AIWC (emphasis original).
52. Nalinibai V. Dalvi, Convenor, Labour Sub-Committee, AIWC, to Mrs Mukerjee, 13 May, 1934, enc. in Mukerjee to Kaur, 16 May 1934, File 59-II, AIWC.
53. Kaur to Ekstrand, 28 May 1934, 11A/11646/320, LoN.
54. See Harold B. Butler, Director, International Labour Office, to Amrit Kaur, 8 March 1935, WN/1000/29/1, ILO archive (hereafter ILO).
55. See, for example, 'Report for May 1935', 62–28, and 'Report for January 1936', 55, ILO India Branch Reports, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Centre for Modern Indian Studies.
56. Miller, 'Geneva – the Key to Equality', 224–26.
57. Le Sueur to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, 1 May 1934, File 59-I, 80, AIWC.
58. See, for example, Mrs. S. Hamid Ali to Princess Radziwill, 1 February 1935, and Lakshmibai Rajwade to Princess Radziwill, 14 February 1935, 11A/11646/320, LoN.
59. A. Colin to Dina Asana, Hon. Organising Secretary, AIWC, 20 July 1937, 11A/11646/320, LoN.
60. League of Nations, Traffic in Women and Children. Conference of Central Authorities in Eastern Countries, 13 February 1937, C.22.M.164, LoN.
61. P. M. Hage to Madame Thibert, 6 January 1939, WN1000/29/5, ILO.
62. Ekstrand to President of the AIWC, 3 July 1937, and Ekstrand to Malinibai Sukthankar, 8 May 1939, 11B/29872/26725; 'Status of Women: Addresses of Women's International Organisations', 3A/32474/13900, LoN.
63. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, 'Presidential Address', *Twelfth Session of the All India Women's Conference, Nagpur, 1937*, 17, Countries Collection, 21, 2, Sophia Smith Archives (hereafter SSA).
64. *Ibid.*, 18.
65. The first, Margaret Bondfield, was appointed Minister for Labour in the British Cabinet in 1929. Out of 1,500 new legislators in the provincial

assemblies, Pandit was one of fifty-six women to be elected. The total number of Congress Party women legislators was thirty-six. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 195.

66. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 'Address to Women's Conference, Nagpur', 28 December 1937, V. L. Pandit Papers, First Instalment, Speeches by Her 1, NMML.
67. 'India's First Woman Cabinet Minister', *Manchester Guardian*, 7 March 1938. Further publicity followed when she visited the United Kingdom in September 1938. This was partly orchestrated by the India League in London. See India League (London) press release, IOR:L/I/1/M82
68. 'Woman's Career in India Typifies Changing Times', *Christian Science Monitor*, date unknown, Countries Collection, 21, 18, SSA.
69. 'Realise India's Peril & Join War Effort: Message to Women', *Times of India*, 12 June 1941, 7. The signatories included a number of veteran suffragists who had involved themselves in the Indian women's franchise campaign, including member of the 'five friendly societies': Violet Bonham Carter, Elizabeth Cadbury, Thelma Cazalet, Margery Corbett Ashby, Lady Hartog, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Grace Lankester, Lady Layton, Daisy Solomon and others.
70. 'Realise India's Peril & Join War Effort.'
71. Quoted in WILPF, International Circular Letter No.4/1941, WILPF 3/1, 6, London School in Economics (LSE).
72. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 'A Reply to the Appeal Made by Certain British Women to the Women of India', 16 June 1941, V. L. Pandit Papers, Second Instalment, Speeches and Writing by Her, 6, NMML.
73. 'Reply to British Women's Appeal' (drafted by M. K. Gandhi and signed by Sarojini Naidu, Rameshwari Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Amrit Kaur, Rani Lakshmi Bai Rajwade, Ammu Swaminathan, Radha Subbarayan), 21 June 1941, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 80, 313. See also 'Women's Reply to British Plea', *Times of India*, 24 June 1941, 2.
74. WILPF, International Circular Letter No.4/1941, WILPF 3/1, LSE.
75. P. M. Hague to Dr. Mrs. Malinibai Sukthankar, 5 December 1939, WN100/29/6, ILO.
76. M. I. Corbett Ashby and Dorothea Layton to Dear Madam, 15 December 1941, enc. 'Copy of Message', MCA/C11, WL.
77. Quoted in Vera Brittain, *Testament to Experience. An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925-1950* (London: Gollancz, 1957), 281.
78. WILPF, International Circular Letter No. 3/1946, November 1946.
79. Violet Bonham Carter, Jean Henderson and Margery Corbett Ashby, 'Message to A.I.W.C.', 18 December 1941, 7MCA/C11, WL.

80. “‘End Deadlock in India’: British Women’s Plea to Premier’, *Times of India*, 5 June 1943, 5. See also draft letter, 16 March 1945, 7MCA/C12, WL.
81. ‘British Women’s Appeal for Women and Children in India and Pakistan’, undated, 7MCA/C12, WL. The Liaison Committee established in 1934 now consisted of only four of the original organisations: BCL, SPG, WFL, WIL.
82. Kulsum Sayani to Vera Brittain, 25 May 1944, Vera Brittain Papers, Box 94, McMaster University Archive (MUA).
83. Begum Hamid Ali to Vera Brittain, 19 August 1940, Vera Brittain Papers, Box 94, MUA.
84. Kulsum Sayani to Vera Brittain, 25 May 1944, Vera Brittain Papers, Box 94, MUA.
85. See, for example, *Roshni*, July 1944, AIWC.