SAVING THEIR INDIAN 'SISTERS':
BRITISH WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN INDIA IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The British Empire has been historically presented as a masculine enterprise in which men went out to "explore" and women stayed home to "reproduce the race," yet many British women did take up active stances against the issues they saw plaguing India.[1] The British Empire often used the behaviour and position of women within its imperial holdings to measure the progress of that particular colony, and condemned the society as savage if its treatment of women did not meet British standards.[2] India was accordingly categorized as barbaric due to the popular image of Indian women as uneducated and oppressed, and British women sought to 'save' their degraded Indian 'sisters.' In terms of historiography on this topic, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel note that studies in colonialism have traditionally excluded women's roles or have only focused on the "racist attitudes of white women."[3] Recent historians, all writing within the last three decades, emphasize the diverse experiences and efforts of the British female activists in combatting India's perceived issues; they agree that the female activists were informed by ideologies disseminated by the empire, such as gender roles and white racial superiority, and that it is impossible to simplify their actions into neat categories. Analyzing these ideologies as they informed British ideals helps to understand the diverse and contradictory ways the activists took up the cause of saving the Indian women. The British female activists genuinely believed they were improving the condition of Indian women through Christian reforms or feminist claims to universal womanhood, yet the effects of their intervention were not uniformly beneficial and sometimes only further legitimized the British presence in India.

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[1] Catherine Hall, "Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century" in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 47; Philippa Levine, "Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?" in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 1.

[2] Levine, "Introduction," 7; Mrinalini Sinha, "'Chathams, Pitts, and Gladstones in Petticoats': The Politics of Gender and Race in the Ilbert Bill Controversy, 1883-1884," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 100.

[3] Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, "Introduction," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3.

To understand what motivated the British female activists to devote their attention to the condition of Indian women, it is vital to first examine the ideology behind imperialism. Imperialism can be defined as the "conquest and domination of other lands in the name of civilization and development," and the practice of it by the British was legitimized by complex and intertwining Victorian ideas, particularly "gender asymmetry and class hierarchy."[4] These were "ideas of dominance" that created uneven power dynamics between groups of people and that moved in "concentric circles" to be replicated at all levels of British society, until this inequality was ultimately reflected in the "rightness of English rule" over other peoples.[5] British people at home were categorized depending on their gender, religion, or class, which largely decided their positions in relation to each other within society, but colonialism redefined the dichotomy of dominance and submission according to race or skin colour.[6] This consequently envisioned the internally divided British population as a collectively white whole against the non-white colonial peoples. Imperialism thus reproduced the basic inequalities that characterized Victorian society, translating them on a grander scale that used race as a means of domination and that put non-whites at an automatic disadvantage.

In addition to setting themselves apart from non-whites on the basis of race, the British used ideologies of gender to further debase the colonized groups and reinforce the imperial need to civilize and develop such countries. Firstly, native men were depicted by imperialists as "weak and unmasculine," a portrayal that was necessary to create and sustain colonies.[7] The British Empire, which was ruled by essentially unquestioned male authority, could not have conflicting

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[4] Helen Callaway and Dorothy O. Helly, "Crusader for Empire: Flora Shaw/Lady Lugard," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 91-2.
[5] *Ibid.*, 92.
[6] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule,* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.
[7] Levine, "Introduction," 6.

claims of power from the people it sought to subjugate so it effectively silenced those voices by removing the association of authority from the native male gender altogether. The authority of the natives was further stripped once the British compared their own standard of how to treat women to the colonial societies. Although women were regarded as the weaker sex according to Victorian ideals, they were simultaneously upheld as morally superior because of their "feminine virtues of nurturing, child-care, and purity."[8] Thus, when the British found that some natives "failed to respect proper womanhood" by isolating or selling their women, they took this treatment as an indication that the entire colonial society was savage and backwards.[9] The Victorian understanding of gender was a tool that the empire used to pursue its own imperialist agenda and that often reduced the culture and lifestyle of non-whites to barbarism, and it became the moral duty of British to educate these unenlightened subjects according to supposedly proper principles.

India was commonly used as an example of colonial barbarity and its "'progress'" became linked to the "'improvement'" of its women, with British women taking up the task of "saving Indian women from the barbarities of their archaic world."[10] Female activists in the early nineteenth century had already campaigned against the Hindu custom of sati, in which widows were burned at their dead husband's funeral pyres; the continuation of other traditions like polygamy, child marriage, and gender segregation via zenanas convinced British women to renew their efforts in helping their Indian counterparts during the latter part of the century.[11] Eliza Kent points to the "exaggerated representation of Indian culture" as "obscur[ing] the enormous diversity of practices and beliefs," which subsequently created the idea of Indian women requiring rescue

[8] Antoinette Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and 'The Indian Woman,' 1865-1915," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance,* eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 138.
[9] Levine, "Introduction, 7.
[10] Hall, "Of Gender and Empire," 51-2.
[11] Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865,* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 65-6; Hall, "Of Gender and Empire," 54-5.

and the justification for British intervention.[12] Significantly, the desire to help was not often spurred by first-hand experience, but instead by stories from missionaries or educated Indian men who came to England seeking "the assistance of British women" who sought work beyond Britain; some female activists never travelled to India or met one of the women they were campaigning to save.[13] The multiplicity of these representations no doubt affected how these British women activists perceived the condition of India, and many of them claimed the imperial burden of saving the Indian women with differing reasons that led to varying levels of success in their campaigns.

British female missionaries in India principally led Christianizing missions and attempted to educate the native women. The successful spread of empire necessitated "civilizing the natives" with Christianity and reforming their "social structures and practices," and this created new opportunities for married and unmarried British women alike in terms of travelling and freedom that many did not have at home.[14] Although it may appear questionable or even contradictory as to how or why British women activists defied the Victorian idea of separate spheres by working outside the domestic, the female missionaries occupied a specific position in the empire that was highly convenient for the spread of imperialism and Christianity. The seclusion of Indian women in zenanas in particular gave female missionaries a clear means of establishing and legitimizing their presence in India. Zenanas were gendered spaces that separated Indian women from men upon puberty, depriving these women of educational opportunities and effectively prohibiting the

[12] Eliza F. Kent, "Tamil Bible Women and the Zenana Missions of Colonial South India," *History of Religions* 39, no. 2 (Nov 1999): 134.
[13] Barbara N. Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance,* eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 129; Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, (London: Verso, 1992), 126, 129.
[14] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 21-2, 107.

entry of male missionaries into these dwellings.[15] The British feared that Indian women, ignorant and isolated in the homes where they practiced their non-Christian religion and raised the next generation, had the ability to "unravel the tapestry of Christian understanding" that was being created and controlled by male missionaries in schools.[16] Female missionaries therefore became a fundamental part of the imperial cause of civilizing the unenlightened natives.

Female missionaries brought their understandings of womanhood and domesticity to the Indian women while also abiding to the imperial ideologies of religious and racial superiority. Some British women engaged in convent education to turn young Indian daughters into "refined, well-educated, accomplished ladies" with proper Western virtues and conduct, but zenana missions were the primary way the missionaries fulfilled the imperial imperative to civilize Indian women.[17] These zenana missions, taking their name from the gender segregated spaces, were essentially Christianizing missions spearheaded by female missionaries who could enter these spaces in lieu of male missionaries to educate the isolated women. It was hoped that the women missionaries could transform the Indian women into "better wives and mothers" by instilling in them Western ideas of redemption through the acceptance of Christianity and ideals of femininity through needlework or sewing, thus faithfully replicating the Victorian association of women with the knowledge of domestic tasks and the home.[18] British female missionaries had an important position for the empire that utilized their abilities as women in order to transform the Indian women into the closest possible reproductions of proper women according to Victorian values.

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[15] Ware, *Beyond the Pale,* 129; Sinha, "'Chathams, Pitts, and Gladstones in Petticoats'," 100; Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies," 121; Kent, "Tamil Bible Women," 118, 120; Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 26-7.
[16] Kent, "Tamil Bible Women," 118.
[17] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 43, 46; Kent, "Tamil Bible Women," 118.
[18] Kent, "Tamil Bible Women," 128.

The *Missionary Herald* in 1875 stressed the importance of continued funding to the Ladies' Association, whose work in zenana missions "[threw] open" the doors behind which the Indian women were shut.[19] The document juxtaposed the "poor sisters in India" who were conceived as living in "darkness and misery" in terms of both their education and confinement with the vision of "English Christian ladies" as saviours bringing them light by opening the doors to their closed rooms and opening their minds to God.[20] Similarly, *Tait Edinburgh Magazine* published an article in 1859 claiming that it was the moral duty of Englishwomen to help their "sable sisters" in India with Western education to "expose [the] falsehoods" of the supposedly idolatrous Hindu religion and to replace it with the truth of Christianity, thereby improving all of society.[21] The article's rhetoric echoes the language used by the empire in the nineteenth century, explicitly linking the barbarism of the Indian people to what the British deemed a false religion and to the native women's ignorance. Both documents depict British women almost as the empire's best means of fixing India's perceived problems and attempt to justify British intervention in India. Both sources also serve as valuable examples to the kind of encouragement British women might have encountered to support the imperial cause in whatever capacity possible.

British female missionaries were seen as great helpers who used their inherent skills and moral duty as women to take up the Indian cause, but some of their work was harmful or at least limited in scope. The very notion of a civilizing mission was prejudiced since the British saw their own values as the only solution, defining India's progress in very narrow and exclusively British terms to validate their intervention. For example, "contemporary Indian women" who were not the "passive creatures of custom and zenana imprisonment" were already advocating for social

[19] "Zenana Work and Bible Women in India, In Connection with the Baptist Missionary Society," *Missionary Herald*, (Jan 1875): 8.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] "Indian Helpers and Rulers," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, February 1859, 109-110.

reforms by this time, but they were not upheld as examples of modernization because they did not fit the cause's image.[22] Moreover, while female missionaries condemned the zenanas as evil, very little was done to eradicate the practice and the zenana missions were a limited success in turning Indian women into examples of "genteel Western Christian femininity."[23] The missionaries' limits can be seen in a collection of letters by an older female missionary named Charlotte Maria Tucker, which were published posthumously in 1895 by Agnes Giberne. Giberne's commentary between Tucker's letters portrays her as a selfless example of women's activism and while she concedes that Tucker did not have "the delight of seeing many individuals won to Christianity through her own efforts," she quickly asserts the impossibility of "measur[ing] the results of [Tucker's] years of toilsome work in Zenanas."[24] Giberne's defence of Tucker's failed efforts reveals a solidarity in supporting the missionaries, but also illustrates flaws in the missions. Although the female missionaries wanted to reform Indian women with Christianity and new habits befitting proper British ladies, some did not necessarily contribute or they simply reinforced ideas of gendered domesticity and racial and religious bigotry.

It is important to note that not all female missionaries were "arrogant exponents of British culture or Christianity . . . with almost no interest in India, its culture, or its people," as many British women living in India have been commonly portrayed, because this representation discredits the very beneficial work some missionary women achieved.[25] As Kumari Jayawardena asserts, the missionaries were usually "insensitive about local culture and religion" but they were more advanced than the "state and local reformers on women's issues and in their efforts to

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[22] Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 8.
[23] Kent, "Tamil Bible Women," 119, 134; Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 28.
[24] Agnes Giberne, *A Lady of England: The Life and Letters of Charlotte Maria Tucker*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895), 242, 301-2.
[25] Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies," 119.

highlight social evils."[26] These missionaries, especially those working as medical doctors, were still informed by the values of Christianity and concerned with spreading the gospel. However, their primary objective was to work within that Christian framework and reform social traditions that were damaging to women's health, which included campaigning against the "horrors of child marriage and premature childbirth" that they regularly encountered in India during their medical work.[27] Neither the rulers of Britain nor India liked the idea of female practitioners but there was an "increasing demand in India for women doctors" by the 1860s and 1870s, especially since Indian women would "not be examined by men" due to traditional ideas of gender segregation; some Indian women were even trained by the British practitioners, giving them a much-needed advantage.[28] This work was not divorced entirely from Christianity but it arose from genuine concern that did not overtly reinforce ideas of racial superiority or womanly domesticity, targeting instead basic human necessities and advocating for the better treatment of women's bodies.

In addition to the British female activists who were primarily involved in Christian reform, there were British women whose contributions to the cause of helping Indian women were inspired by what is now considered feminism. These feminist activists were predominately concerned with "cleans[ing] local societies of social evils affecting women," and they challenged the assumptions commonly held by their missionary counterparts that spreading Christianity was a necessity for social reform, thus implying that it was possible to improve societies while letting the Indians practice their native religion.[29] Like the British women missionaries, the feminists began their activism with the desire to elevate the general condition of females in Indian by offering education,

[26] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 11.
[27] *Ibid.*, 29, 75, 77.
[28] *Ibid.*, 79; Alison Bashford, "Medicine, Gender, and Empire," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 122.
[29] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden,* 65, 67.

campaigning against child marriages, and providing better living conditions for Hindu widows once the practice of sati was banned.[30] Although there was no significant attempt to convert the Indian women, some feminists like Annette Akroyd or Mary Carpenter did seek to "mold the life-style of Indian women according to Victorian ideals that reflected Christian influence," illustrating that religion was not entirely separate from reform.[31] The contributions by feminist activists to the cause were more focused on social change than overt conversion, though there were still variations to how this help was given or approached.

The key difference between the British feminists and their missionary counterparts is the ideology that informed their activism. The female missionaries worked within rather acceptable boundaries of the empire and were commonly imagined as saviours who could enter the gender segregated zenanas and bring about reform through the light of Christianity. The British feminists, conversely, operated according to what was later coined as maternal feminism, which differs greatly from modern types of feminism. Maternal feminism conceived of women as the "moral guardian of [Britain]" and linked the idea of "female moral superiority" to the "progress of Britain a nation," envisioning British women as the only gender capable of preserving Britain's racial superiority and redeeming the colonial women.[32] Although it may not appear like a significant difference between the groups since both elevated the role of women as saviours, major divisions became clear in how the feminists positioned themselves in society and executed their reforms.

Much of the feminists' work rested on an assumption that being women gave them an inherent understanding of Indian women "that transcended national and racial boundaries," justifying their roles as representatives for people they may have never met.[33] Notably, many

[30] Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies," 132.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Burton, *Burdens of History,* 43, 59.
[33] Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," 148.

British feminists were involved in the suffrage movement and were often attacked by those who saw women's emancipation as "monstrous" because it would "enervate the [British] race" if women abandoned their domestic duties.[34] In response, the feminists used the helpless Indian women as evidence of their own imperial burden and exploited Victorian assumptions of women's "superior moral strength" and femininity to legitimize their work as important to the imperial mission and to silence the anti-suffrage exponents.[35] The feminists' portrayal of British women as the highest form of women ran parallel with the ideology of imperialism, for each operated on the idea that they were the redeemers of an inferior race. This similarity was reinforced by the fact that many feminists did not attempt to deconstruct the harmful imperial notions of white or Western superiority; instead of viewing Indian women as equals, these feminist activists constructed them as helpless creatures that could only be saved by their "British feminist 'sisters'."[36] The feminists claimed their experiences as women validated their contributions to the cause, but they still embraced the pervasive imperial and Victorian ideology of their time as further legitimation.

Josephine Butler's crusade against the Contagious Diseases Act is a good example of what these British feminists attempted to achieve for Indian women. The Contagious Diseases Act was first passed in Britain in 1864 to provide "'sanitary inspection[s]'" to prostitutes located near military depots in England and Ireland to prevent the spread of diseases to troops, since the inspection of the men themselves was considered "bad for morale and self-respect."[37] Butler and the Ladies' National Association publicly denounced the Act and fought for its appeal because it was "unequal between the sexes" by only targeting the women and it infringed upon the liberty of women by subjecting even those who were only "suspected of disease . . . to compulsory

[34] *Ibid.*, 138; Burton, *Burdens of History,* 18.
[35] Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," 137-8; Burton, *Burdens of History,* 10.
[36] Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," 137.
[37] Ware, *Beyond the Pale,* 150-1.

examination."[38] Butler applied this rhetoric of liberating women from the violating and sexist examinations to India once the Act was passed there in 1868, illustrating a rather progressive solidarity of women's rights that was not restricted by race or the distance between nations.

Butler's reforms, however, became problematic for two reasons: she only ever worked from Britain with "little or no direct contact with the Indian women," and she did not picture Indian women as equals.[39] While the female missionaries usually moved to India to directly help the Indian women and sometimes got to intimately know the native culture, Butler and the Ladies' National Association principally relied on accounts by agents they sent to India.[40] True to the ideology of maternal feminism, Butler did not let this lack of personal understanding of these women's situations deter her from claiming an inherent bond between them presumably based on their shared womanhood, which often resulted in Butler speaking on behalf of her Indian counterparts.[41] Moreover, she repeatedly invoked the popular vision of Indian women as "enslaved, degraded, and in need of salvation" in the belief that these Indian women would one day be able to "fight their own battles" under the "tutelage of British female social reformers."[42] Again following maternal feminism, Butler placed British and Indian women in a hierarchy whereby the latter required the former as the sole means of improving their lives.

Josephine Butler was undoubtedly forward-thinking and dedicated to campaigning for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which was rightly seen as an unwelcome violation and policing of women's bodies, yet the way by which she and other feminists engaged in these reforms was also harmful to the Indian women. Particularly, the assumption that Butler or any other woman

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[38] Josephine E. Butler, "Protest Against The Report Of The Royal Commission," *The Shield* 74 (August 1871): 612; Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," 139-40.
[39] Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," 142.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.,* 142-3
[42] *Ibid.,* 144-5.

could speak on behalf of all Indian women actually silenced the latter. Antoinette Burton notes that the feminists occasionally published stories in journals of the horrendous conditions of the Indian women's lives, but the Indian women themselves were seldom given a space in these publications to have their own voices heard.[43] Moreover, like the female missionaries, some feminists overlooked the contemporary Indian women who were "capable and desirous of effecting their own emancipation," which problematized the feminists' claims that only they could save the degraded Indian women.[44] Since the feminists imagined the Indian women as restrained and in desperate need of their British feminist 'sisters', it did not occur to them that it might be problematic to speak up for all women "in the name of universal womanhood."[45] Feminists like Butler promoted great advancements in the name of women's rights and were not overly preoccupied with Christianity as the only means of bringing about reform, but their affiliation with Victorian ideas of womanhood and moral superiority was similarly damaging to the Indian women.

To better understand the complex role of British women activists in India, it is important to include examples of women who questioned the work being done by missionaries, specifically the notion of civilizing natives. Those who were part of the Theosophical Society, also known as theosophists, believed that every country developed its own religion and culture to suit its needs, suggesting that what benefited Britain could potentially harm other countries and thereby undermining the ideology behind the British Empire's civilizing mission.[46] Moreover, the theosophists promoted Buddhism and Hinduism, sometimes adopting these religions and practices themselves, and also spread Western liberal ideas of "patriotism [and] national identity."[47] The

[43] *Ibid.*, 147-8.
[44] Burton, *Burdens of History*, 176.
[45] *Ibid.*, 195.
[46] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 134.
[47] *Ibid.*, 116-7, 119.

theosophists positioned themselves in direct opposition to the main components of imperialism and the claims of Western or Christian superiority, with the purpose of empowering native practices and protecting them from the contaminant of imperial thought.

An interview in 1895 with Annie Besant, a key theosophist who argued in favour of "cultural relativism," illustrates how the defence of certain Indian practices sometimes had the unintended effect of legitimizing "existing repressive structures."[48] When asked about the level of education Indian women received, Besant asserted that "[a]ccording to their own standard, Indian women are often highly educated," because elderly pundits came by their houses to teach philosophy and literature.[49] Although she later noted that she thought some questions asked by Indian women in a meeting were "strangely simple and childish in character," she described it as a "simplicity differing from that belonging to Europeans of the same class," as if trying to defend possible educational flaws.[50] Many of these Indian women in question were likely confined to zenanas but Besant's regard of the experience as normal according to Indian standards overlooked the detrimental nature of zenanas and the lack of education. Besant did express her disapproval of Indian child marriages but argued that the English government had no right to interfere because the Indians should not be compelled to change their established "social and religious habits."[51] Such a view not only discredited the valuable work that British missionaries and feminists were doing to eliminate these problematic social traditions, but also the native Indian reformers who similarly saw the practices as damaging.[52] The theosophists' resistance to the racist imperial ideas of white and Christian superiority was beneficial in preserving native traditions that imperialism

[48] *Ibid.*, 123-4, 134.
[49] "A Chat With Mrs. Annie Besant," *The Friend of India & Statesman* 25 (June 1895): 21.
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 134.

tried to overwrite, but simultaneously defended potentially oppressive practices in the name of this cultural preservation and equality.

The role that British women activists played in helping improve the condition of Indian women in the latter half of the nineteenth century has a complicated history. These female activists had both overlapping and disparate notions of how to best help the Indian women, which were ideas informed by a spectrum of often contradictory ideologies, and which ultimately produced both beneficial and problematic results. There were many difficulties the activists faced, including cultural, religious, and language barriers. However, underpinning all the activists' actions was the pervasive ideology of Victorian gender roles, particularly the understanding of women as morally superior and tied to the domestic, as well as imperial ideas of white racial superiority and the Christian moral obligation of civilizing the heathen natives of the colonies. Regardless of whether these female activists unconsciously worked within the imperial framework or deliberately tried to resist it, their actions were unavoidably tied to these fundamental theories.

Each group of activists undoubtedly contributed beneficially to helping the Indian women, but also created further problems or legitimized the empire's presence in India. Like the rulers of the empire, the female missionaries saw the Indian women as helpless beings whose elevation was only possible through Christianity. The missionaries brought with them Western assumptions of race and religion, disregarding the established culture and casting upon the women alien lifestyles, yet they did genuinely help with medical work and campaigns against traditions like child marriage. The feminist activists were equally concerned with women's rights and education but their approach was based on a united womanhood, rather than Christianization. The solidarity of women against patriarchal acts was progressive but the feminists' claim to be the utmost authorities on the Indian women's lives actually silenced the Indian women. Finally, the

theosophists undermined the empire's claims to an imperial and civilizing mission by supporting native practices, yet this defence simultaneously overlooked the problematic elements to these traditions that even Indian reformers were trying to change.

The contradictory work by the women activists cannot be viewed apart from the British Empire because every element of their work was in part influenced and indelibly tied to the empire, which is a highly contested institution itself. These British female activists, regardless of whether they were missionaries or feminists or theosophists or anything in between, were not perfect by any measure and their efforts to the Indian cause certainly varied in terms of their methods and accomplishments. Perhaps the best legacy these women share, despite their differences in approaches and opinions of the Indian women, is their one definite shared characteristic: they all defied the Victorian gendered expectations in at least some capacity by finding a niche for themselves as mostly independent women within the highly male-dominant sphere of the empire, regardless of whatever this position entailed. Although the effects of their efforts may not be so visible now, these British women activists still remain as excellent examples to the type of work that was done both in the name of and against the vast empire whose influence was once felt globally.

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