Unaided by Men, They Will Discover their Own Strength.

Women’s Associations and the formulation of new norms in late colonial India” (1917-1947)

Dr. Elena Borghi

From the beginning of the twentieth century, elite Indian women increasingly organised to enter the social and political arena as subjects, claiming a voice in matters that had so far been the domain of male actors wishing to reform Indian mores. The paper explores the emotional and intimate dimensions of this early feminist activism, focusing in particular on the first two pan-Indian women’s associations, the Women’s Indian Association (1917) and the All-India Women’s Conference (1927).

Drawing on concepts developed within the historiography on emotions, it suggests, firstly, that the community shaped by these associations can be analysed as an “emotional refuge”—a separate space within which women forged their own gendered emotional norms, designed not necessarily in opposition with prevailing ones, but certainly reworking them and integrating them with other notions. Secondly, the paper suggests that through a diachronic analysis taking into account a broad time frame, an intimate history of the “emotional community” of feminist activists can be traced, to assess the changes and evolutions of the feelings and emotional notions related to feminist participation in India.

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