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ABOUT US

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provided dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

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IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF THE BOOK,
INDIAN SUFFRAGETTES BY
SUMITA MUKHERJEE

AUTHORED BY – SAPNA INDU PILLAI

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In the book, Sumita Mukherjee covers various aspects of the Indian Suffragettes campaigns that took place with its transnational connections and relevance in today's time. The author deeply talks about not just the campaigns but also "intimately intertwined transnational and international nature of the women's movement and suffrage campaigns around the world".¹

One of the major claims of the author throughout the book becomes about how the suffragettes movement was not motivated and wholly influenced by "western concerns"² and that it was a common misconception because of various instances that did not highlight the movement and she substantiates this claim by showing how the suffragette campaign was failed as their concerns were never brought up during the Round Table Conference during 1930 and 1932 in which the women were very much involved in the discussions before the conference and highlighted the concern of the unavailability to vote or their political representation yet the women's representation question was conveniently brushed under the carpet and the conference became about power dynamics between the two states involved.³ The author also talks about how it is in instances such as these of complete ignorance and deprioritising of the women's movement in India which has led several to believe that there truly was no movement and that if there was one, it was a simulation of the western movement which is untrue.⁴

The author also concentrates that on the relationship shared between the empire and the Indian women and also talks about the relationship and similarities and dissimilarities between British

¹ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University Press, 2.

² *ibid*, 6.

³ *ibid*, 210.

⁴ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

women and Indian women in the 20th century and how the British women thought themselves to be better than Indian women and claimed it to be their “imperial burden”⁵ to save these colonized women yet they are themselves oppressed by similar structures.⁶ The author states that even though the Indian suffragettes were keenly involved and connected in global networks and were a form of “subaltern networks of resistance”⁷ they did not take too kindly to the idea of feminism and rejected from calling themselves feminist. They instead concentrated on concepts such as womanhood and made strong bonds through friendships with one another, be it intimate or professional in nature.⁸ According to the book, women in the movement were constrained to the private sphere and that they were a part of the national movement but were in a lot of ways restricted to private spaces.⁹ The book goes into depth about the struggles and challenges the women’s movement had to go through to get political power at provincial and national levels and how the first demand to vote came about in 1917 when the viceroy of India (Chelmsford) came but they only started getting enfranchised only in 1920s very regionally and slowly.¹⁰ The author talks about how communal politics and representation also was a major issue that the suffragette movement had to phase. The division of quotas based on religion which was finally decided between The Muslim league and The Indian National Congress which became the priority of the nation as oppose to the upliftment on women politically.¹¹ The author also goes into detail regarding how women were asked to hold “auxiliary”¹² roles during the nationalist movements as instructed by Gandhi which was spinning khadi and picketing liquor stores and chores related to the private sphere primarily the home.¹³ The presence of Indian women in the London conference also proves that feminism in itself was just not a western effort but was highly influenced and constructed by colonized women and their experiences as well. After 1947 with the separation of India and Pakistan the issue of the women’s question took a back seat and was not recognised.¹⁴

The book also analyses the need for post - colonial rethinking as a lot of the experiences faced by

⁵ *ibid*, 29.

⁶ *ibid*, 29.

⁷ *ibid*, 9.

⁸ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

⁹ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 27.

¹¹ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

¹² *ibid*, 20.

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

the Indian suffragettes are either unrecognised or put under an umbrella of western experiences which is not the case. This claim by Sumita Mukherjee can be supported by a text from Rana Kapur in which she states how it is deeply problematic to expect colonised and marginalised sections of societies to just accept the liberal view as the need of the liberal view to be a universal one tends to be exclusive in its nature.¹⁵ This further states how it becomes difficult to identify the faults with the liberal view point because of its wide appeal to masses that benefit and exploit it and how the disadvantageous are easily identified by the oppressed classes facing the wrath of the view point. and that Rana Kapur further goes on to explain how the need for a commonality and universality of experiences in order to have a homogenous future tends to be always dominated by the western story and this need futile need would not lead to emancipation of the masses as only selective tales of regionalised experiences are being heard and dealt with.¹⁶

The book also addresses the impact of the Common Wealth on India and the suffragette movement by claiming that the campaigns in India were highly influenced by the earlier enfranchisement of New Zealand and Australia and their need to be equal to them in terms of rights.¹⁷ The movement also empathised with their colonial counterparts in areas like Kenya and South Africa thereby bridging transitional narratives. Sumita Mukherjee calls this sort of feminism “colonial feminism”¹⁸ because of its singularity in terms of the narrative related to colonialism and concentrating exclusively on that.¹⁹ The book also goes into grave details on how the issue of race was something that the Indian suffragette movement refused to engage with.²⁰ This is surprising considering the fact that India was facing discrimination due to oppressive structures such as caste which the British for the most part did not involve themselves with and neither did the movement. The book also looks into how a selective type of women from the Indian suffragette movement who was educated and well brought up was welcomed into conversations with the white dominated nations where as majority of the women were simply ignored.²¹ This becomes interesting as even though the Indian Suffragette movement was trying to aim towards being

¹⁵ Rana Kapur, “New Cosmologies: Mapping the Postcolonial Feminist Legal Project,” in *Erotic justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (2005)

¹⁶ Rana Kapur, “New Cosmologies: Mapping the Postcolonial Feminist Legal Project,” in *Erotic justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (2005), 21.

¹⁷ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University, 78.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (2018), Oxford University.

²¹ *ibid.*, 80.

unified and having their concerns about being marginalised heard they chose to ignore questions of race and the injustices caused to people because of it and I believe that the text does not delve into that irony in depth. The book also sheds light on how there was a Eastern collective of women that came together during the Asian Relations Conference which was inaugurated by Nehru which saw women from many places such as India, Malaysia, Egypt, Iran, Korea etc emphasising on conversations on women's rights internationally which was a welcomed change from the usual conversations that were centred around the West ideals and they were able to identify the difference in situations as the women's question in Asia centred around "political and economic upheavals"²²

The book in one of its five segments addresses the relationship between the suffragettes campaign and nationalism in which it discusses the three important women's organisations that existed during the 1930's namely the AIWC, the NCWI and the WIA and how it was impossible for these organisations to talk about the women's movement without also talking or engaging in the nationalist movement because of how interlinked the two movements were and gives examples on how women faced police brutality and imprisonment and how this played out in the larger anti colonial movement that was taking place giving various instances where these complex relationships were highlighted.²³

The epilogue of the book finally discusses the Indians women's movement post- independence and shares details on how even though the movement was majorly constituted of upper - class women but the group that campaigned for female vote was a very mixed crowd of identities.²⁴ It also sheds light of the quota system debate and provides statistical information regarding the participation of women in politics and how its increased throughout the years and also looks into how the question of participation was silent during the 1950s and 1960s and rose again during conversations about the panchayat system and the lack of women in the panchayat and village system.²⁵ The book ends by highlighting various historic moments of where the women's movement was truly undeniable in India for example during the 2013 rape case how there was a unity like never before and how even internationally with Indian women's movement has shown strength for example when Donald Trump became the US President a march for organised

²² *ibid*, 191.

²³ *ibid*, 198.

²⁴ *ibid*, 245.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 247.

showing dissent and how it is important to recognise the uniqueness and importance of the Indian Suffragettes movements place and positive contribution to world history and politics.²⁶



²⁶ *ibid*, 251.