

IFRWH Panel Title: Spiritual cosmopolitanism and women's engagement in transnational webs of amity and activism on the cusp of Empire 1860s – 1940s.

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Caroline Wells Healey Dall and the links between American Transcendentalists and Indian members of the Brahmo Samaj

Introduction

The research presented here forms part of a book that I am writing which is entitled 'Cosmopolitan Feminisms'. This explores the history of collaboration on the 'woman question' between members of the Brahmo Samaj, an influential Indian movement for religious and social reform among Hindus, and British and American Unitarians and Transcendentalists who were leading figures in feminist and social reform movements. The project shows how spiritual cosmopolitanism underpinned the development of an informal transnational network of friendship and collaboration between Indians, Britons and Americans campaigning to improve the position of women in the nineteenth-century world. It traces an alternative history of engagement on the 'woman question' between Indians and westerners during the age of empire, arguing that this needs to be set alongside accounts which stress endemic conflict between evangelical Protestant missionaries and Hindu nationalists or which focus on the emergence of a British imperial feminism whose empowerment of western women was predicated on the silencing of Indian women.

My paper today sketches out a case study of Caroline Wells Healey Dall, an influential American feminist and Transcendentalist. Caroline's engagement with India has hitherto been neglected by scholars, despite the fact that her husband Charles Dall, spent over thirty years in Calcutta between 1855 and his death in 1886 as the first -and only - Unitarian missionary sent to India by the American Unitarian Association to develop religious education and make links with the Brahmo Samaj.

The lack of scholarly interest in Caroline's own relationship to India seems at first sight to be justified: her husband's decision to go there was a unilateral one, and she wrote plaintively in her diary on the eve of his departure: 'I did not sympathize in the least in the step he was taking, and could only respect his own interest in it.' (Deese, DoB, p. 229) She remained in the US, raising their two young children on her own,

earning a living as a public lecturer and a writer, and becoming a prominent women's rights activist, a promoter of Transcendentalism, and a co-founder of the American Social Science Association. It is these aspects of her life which have attracted scholarly attention. Yet , she did compile a memorial of her husband's activities in Calcutta after his death in 1886, and two years later she published a book entitled The Life of Dr Anandabai Joshee, a Kinswoman of the Pundita Ramabai,

When I first came across this book I wondered: what was Caroline's relationship to Anandabai Joshee, the first Indian woman to train as a doctor in America, and to her relative Pandita Ramabai, the pioneering Indian feminist who features strongly in papers on this panel, who became a member of the Brahma Samaj before later converting to a Unitarian form of Christianity in Britain, and who spent the years between 1886 and 1889 in America publicizing and gaining support for her project of setting up a boarding school for high-caste Indian widows in western India? And can the supportive interest in Indian women's education, professional employment and feminist activism that Caroline Dall manifested in the late 1880s be traced back earlier in time? Were there in fact links between her husband's ministry and educational projects in India and her own interest in Indian women?

Through thinking through the impact on her worldview of the cosmopolitan Boston environment within which Dall came to maturity, and through examining the huge collection of personal papers which she bequeathed to the Massachusetts Historical Society, I have been able to shed some light on these questions and, in the process, to clarify the nature of American Unitarian and Transcendentalist women's engagement with the 'woman question' in India and the networks through which it developed. I have been able to trace Caroline's active engagement with female education in India back to 1872, and in this paper I want to give you a flavor of the transnational networks of amity and activism evident in this American feminist's engagement with India women's education and pioneering Indian women activists.

1. Boston, Calcutta, London: commercial and cultural connections

First, something about the significance of Caroline's Boston background: born in 1822, her upbringing in wealthy Boston Unitarian family provided cosmopolitan horizons. Boston was just emerging in the 1820s as the hub of American Unitarianism, which was defining itself as a radical Protestant denomination with a

liberal rationalist theology which rejected the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the Calvinist emphasis on original sin. Boston as Atlantic port city was also becoming the hub of a transatlantic network of Unitarians who were at the cutting edge of movements for social reform, abolition and feminism. This network, from the outset, formed close links with members of the Brahmo Somaj, which was centred in Calcutta, a major port city and the capital of colonial India. This triangular web of connections among activists was facilitated by Boston's heavy involvement in the East India Trade, with merchants often dealing directly with Bengali merchants and forming close family friendships with them. Dall's own father, Mark Healey, a prominent merchant and importer, himself owned ships engaged in this trade (Deese, D o B, p. 66 illustration). From the 1830s such transnational connections, facilitating the circulation of knowledge about eastern spirituality and Hindu sacred texts in Boston, were an important factor stimulating Unitarian intellectual such as Ralph Waldo Emerson to develop Transcendentalism, which moved beyond Bible-centred Christianity to a focus on intuition and inner inspiration as the source of the individual's access God through self-culture. Caroline herself rapidly became a member of Boston Transcendentalist circles in the 1840s, inspired in particular by the minister Theodore Parker. The writings of Theodore Parker were in turn to have a deep influence on the leader of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen, when he was introduced to them in the late 1850s by the man who had become Caroline's husband, Charles Dall.

2. Women in America and in Bengal

If Transcendentalism was one connecting thread linking both Caroline and Charles Dall with India and with the Brahmo Samaj, a second was a shared interest in the 'woman question'. Keshub's wing of the Brahmo Samaj was active in social reform and keen to improve the position of Indian women, and one of Charles' first publications in Calcutta was a 1857 tract based on a lecture he had given comparing the position of women in India and America, A Lecture on Women in America and in Bengal. His stated aim was to send a message to a new generation of Bengali men about 'what woman, the world over, - women in Bengal, no less that woman in England or in America, may justly do; whether as a wholly domestic helper of her husband, or as an educator, or as a physician, or as an authoress, or a teacher of natural science, or a preacher of religion, or a philanthropist.' (p.1) While he made no

mention of his wife in his lecture, the information he presented on women in America and on women's capacities were clearly informed by and aligned with her own: an enthusiasm for co-education, a belief that the 'mind has no sex', an excitement that medical training was opening up to women, and a positive view of women's preaching.

3. Mary Chamberlain and the Hindu Girls' School

Caroline, however, was not drawn into active support for female education in India directly through her husband but rather through her friendship with his assistant, Mary Chamberlain. In 1870 Charles recruited Mary as superintendent of the Hindu Girl's School which he had set up in Calcutta in 1866 under the auspices of the American Unitarian Association. Mary was an English Unitarian had gone out to India in 1868 with Unitarian social reformer Mary Carpenter, who was engaged in a collaborative initiative with the Brahmo Samaj to set up training schools for women teachers. She moved to Calcutta after initially acting as female superintendent of a Female Normal School set up by a Brahmo judge in Ahmedabad.

In 1872 Mary Chamberlain visited the US to drum up support for Charles' Unitarian mission and her school and to defend Charles against the accusation that he had forsaken Unitarian Christianity by taking up Keshub Chunder Sen's invitation in 1871 to join the Brahmo Samaj. Mary stayed with Caroline during her three months in America and Caroline, highly impressed by her intelligence – she compared her to her heroine, the Transcendentalist intellectual and feminist Margaret Fuller - became good friends with her. As she later recalled, 'We passed the summer of 1872 in the happiest way. Miss Chamberlain went into the country with me, to meet the best friends of the India Mission. She was especially excited and interested by the steps taken in advance by women.' Although Mary's visit failed to buttress faltering American Unitarian support for Charles Dall's mission, it inspired Caroline to actively support the Hindu Girls' school in Calcutta and Mary's new initiative, the Hayward School for the girls of 'fallen' mothers. She began to collect an annual 'Calcutta Box' to send out to Mary, later recalling: 'every autumn we sent out from Boston a box of Christmas girls. Illustrated books, dolls, toys of all kinds, and fine patterns for needlework filled this box. Canned fruits were sent and were a useful means of breaking down all caste prejudices'.

Contact with Mary clearly increased Caroline's understanding of the lives of women in Bengal. It led her to question some of the western missionary stereotypes of poor 'heathen' girls held by her American friends, explaining to them that she did not want donations of cast-offs as the girls in the school were from high caste and very wealthy families and would only appreciate fresh, clean and dainty goods. Mary also told Caroline about her attempts to bridge racial divides by making social connections with Indians, noting: 'I often refuse purely European invitations but seldom a native one. I like mixing with the people.' In addition, Mary stressed that she saw herself as a 'learner' from Indians as much as their 'teacher'. Her stance doubtless influenced Caroline's own, helping enable her own future friendships with Anandabai Joshee and Pandita Ramabai.

4. Mary Carpenter and the American Association in Aid of Female Secular Education in India

The year after Mary Chamberlain's visit, Caroline also led an initiative to develop more systematic support among Americans for female education in India. She invited Mary Carpenter to attend the annual meeting of the American Social Science Association in Cincinnati in May 1873 and addressed the meeting about Carpenter's work in India. Directly after the convention she and a number of other women, including another leading feminist and Transcendentalist, Julia Ward Howe, met with Mary Carpenter 'to take into consideration the organisation of a Committee in Aid of Social Progress in India.' Carpenter gave an address setting out the objectives of the National Indian Association, which she had set up in Britain during Brahmo Samaj leader Keshub Chunder Sen's visit to the country in 1870 in an attempt to diffuse information about and raise funds for female education in India. This led to the founding of The American Association in Aid of Female Secular Education in India with Caroline Dall as its Secretary *pro tem*. Reflecting the terms under which Unitarians and Brahmos collaborated on the matter of Indian female education, the term 'secular' was deliberately included in the title to indicate the association's 'principle of non-interference with religious beliefs or customs' and to distinguish its agenda from that of evangelical missionary organisations. Subscriptions were taken for the National Indian Association and 'Mrs Carpenter promised to furnish the American Association with a file of its journals from the beginning'

As far as I've been able to ascertain, this American association, set up as a kind of auxiliary of the British association, did not take off. This may have been partly because Caroline actually had reservations about the effectiveness of Carpenter's approach to working in India: she later noted: 'Mary Carpenter made four visits to India in all, neither of them long enough to give her an intimate knowledge of the people She could not understand the Hindu [i.e. Hindi language], and at each visit brought out English teachers, who she placed over girls' schools It is only fair to say that she had not the smallest idea of the difficulties these teachers must encounter.'

5. Rachel Bodley, Anandabai Joshee and Pandita Ramabai

With Mary Carpenter's death in 1877, and Mary Chamberlain's marriage and resignation from the Hindu Girls' School at the end of that same year, Caroline's direct engagement with India seems to have petered out. Her renewed engagement came from a different direction, involving direct connections to two Indian women in the USA.

As an old friend of Rachel Bodley, principal of Philadelphia Medical College for Women, and a long-term supporter of women's medical education, Caroline was excited to learn in 1883 that a young Indian woman, Anandabai Joshee, had arrived to study at the College, the first to seek medical education overseas. Caroline travelled to Philadelphia to meet her, and a correspondence between Caroline and Anandabai began. Among their topics of conversation was the Brahma Samaj; P.C. Mazumbar's ongoing tour of America, his book The Oriental Christ, and news of the death of Keshub Chunder Sen. Impressively, Anandabai, despite her positioning as a young brown-skinned foreign student coping with living in a completely alien cultural environment and writing to a prominent older white western woman, engaged in a tone of equality rather than deference with Caroline. She was particularly concerned to clarify her own religious position as a Hindu who was not a Brahma but who greatly admired their work for the 'reformation of India'; and as a student sponsored by an individual female benefactor rather than by a Christian missionary organisation. She began to sign off her letters to Caroline as 'Your affectionate friend', expressing appreciation for Caroline's interest in her studies,

accepting her invitation to spend Christmas with her, and responding to Caroline's request for portrait photographs.

Caroline's long-standing friendship with Rachel Bodley and new friendship with her student Anandabai Joshee led in turn to her development of a friendship with Pandita Ramabai, who travelled from Britain to the USA in 1886 at Rachel's invitation in order to attend the graduation of her kinswoman Anandabai. She then stayed on, delivering paid lectures around the country on the position of Indian women in order to arouse support for her project to open a home and school for high-caste Hindu widows on her return to western India. Caroline met Ramabai when they both attended Anandabai's graduation (memoir of A, p. 134) , and attended Ramabai's first public lecture in America on the position of Indian women, delivered the following day to an audience of over 500 (memoir p 135). Ramabai and Caroline then entered into a correspondence, and Caroline invited Ramabai to come and visit her in Washington. Caroline, however, despite her own public lecturing experience, seems to have left it to Rachel to organise Ramabai's nation-wide lecture tour, and ensure the publication and sale of her book, The High Caste Hindu Woman (1887).

Meantime Anandabai had left America to take charge of a new hospital for women in the princely state of Kolthapoor in western India. Sadly, she became ill and died aged only 21 in 1887. With Rachel preoccupied with getting Ramabai's book out, Caroline took on the task of writing Anandabai's memorial, with the plan of dedicating any profits from its publication to support the boarding school for Hindu widows that Ramabai was going to open when she returned to India.

The friendship between Ramabai and Caroline, however, ran into problems over the contents of Caroline's life of Anandabai. Caroline had not sent the text of the book to either Rachel or Ramabai for checking before she dispatched it to the publisher, and it included critical comments about Anandabai's husband. Ramabai took great exception to this, writing to Caroline that though the memoir was 'very interesting' and had done justice to Dr Joshee, she had been 'very severe on poor Mr Joshee' Though she agreed that he had made mistakes in his public statements in America she stressed that it was important to remember that 'our heroic Anandabai could never have done what she had as a Hindu wife while under the control of her husband if he had been opposed to it.' She told Caroline that was sure that

Anandabai herself, had she still been alive, would have sent Caroline a 'strong and indignant protest' against these criticisms of her husband'. Thus, while she told Caroline that 'I respect and love you as one of those who have done so much for our sex', she explained loyalty to Anandabai's memory impelled her to protest. Ramabai then turned down Caroline's offer to give all the profits from sales of the book towards her school fund, stating: 'I feel duty bound to decline your generous offer' as 'I do not want to insult her memory'. She ended the letter by stating firmly: 'I am sure you meant to do right, and said what you honestly believed; I have nothing to say against your candor. But I am also certain that you would allow me the freedom not to do what I think is wrong from my own standpoint of view. She signed the letter: 'I remain with love and respect Sincerely yours Ramabai'.

Conclusion

Perhaps, to conclude very briefly, and as a way to reflecting on the complexities of cross-cultural friendship and transnational networking among feminists, we might speculate whether, in composing her biography of Anandabai, Caroline projected onto the Hindu man who was Anandabai's husband some of her own frustration at the lack of support she had herself received from her American Unitarian husband after he ran off to India!