

Laidlaw Scholarship Research Proposal

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I would like to examine a selection of writings by the Indian women's suffrage activist Kamini Roy in comparison to those of reformers from two groups: British women advocating for female enfranchisement, and Indian men advocating for nationalism. This topic resonates with me because it attempts to broaden two historical narratives. In focusing on this voting rights struggle in India, it expands the narrative of democracy to include reform movements in former Asian and African colonies, rather than solely focusing on Western states. Furthermore, it acknowledges Indian women's contributions to these movements, challenging the notion that they witnessed democratic reforms passively.

Roy, a Bengali writer, led a regional organization advocating for women's suffrage during the 1920s. Portrayals of India's women's suffrage movement have consistently excluded women such as her, instead emphasizing the roles of British women intervening on behalf of 'their Indian sisters,' or of forward-thinking, anti-colonial Indian men deciding women should be brought into the polity. Through a close-reading and comparative analysis of Roy's works, I seek to offer an alternate approach to understanding this movement that examines the roles Indian women had within it. This project would explore three questions: the relationship between Roy's writings and activism, the extent to which her writings responded to colonial and nationalist forces, and what distinguished her activism from that of British women and Indian men.

To ensure this project can be feasibly pursued in six weeks, I seek to base my exploration on three primary sources: Roy's essay "The Fruits of the Tree of Knowledge" and select poems from her collection *Alo Chaya*, addressing gender relations, Eleanor Rathbone's paper for the Indian Franchise Committee, offering a British woman's appeal for Indian women's enfranchisement, and Rabindranath Tagore's story *Aparichita*, providing an Indian nationalist perspective on women's rights. To contextualize these sources, I would also draw on works by historians that explore the relationship between nationalism, colonialism, and gender equality, including Columbia Professor Susan Pedersen's biography of Rathbone, Geraldine Forbes' *Women in Modern India*, and Mrinalini Sinha's *Specters of Mother India*.

This project draws on my past research experience in history, literature, and law. In 2018, advised by Susan Tananbaum, Professor Emerita of History at Bowdoin College, I authored and published a

paper applying stakeholder analysis to examine Botswana's 1990s AIDS crisis. By evaluating competing stakeholder interests for my research, I gained a foundation for comparative historical analysis, central to the methodology of this proposed project. Through the International Baccalaureate program in 2019, I developed skills in literary analysis from my research on authorial intent in Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc*. These would guide my approach to interpreting Roy's writings. In recent months, writing for the *Columbia Undergraduate Law Review*, I focused my research on legal reforms addressing sex-discrimination, driven by a commitment to advocating for women's political equality. It is this same commitment that leads me to proposing this project: that in investigating Roy's literary and social contributions, this research might compel others to recognize the agency and activism of women in Indian democracy.