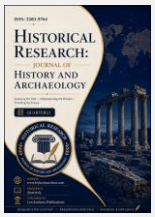
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Sarojini Naidu in Colonial India: A Historical Study of Political Activism, Print and Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

Sarojini Naidu's contribution to colonial India extended across literary expression, political activism, and the development of Indian nationalism. Her career reflected the growing participation of women in public affairs and the nationalist movement during the early twentieth century. The central objective is to examine how her literary publications, political activities, and organisational roles contributed to nationalist mobilization and women's political participation. A historical document analysis approach draws on her poetry collections, published speeches and writings, biographical accounts, and institutional records, with particular attention to the period from 1905 to 1949. The chronological analysis traces her participation in the women's franchise movement, her association with the Indian National Congress, her election as Congress president in 1925, and her involvement in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements. The findings reveal that Naidu's public career developed through the interaction of print culture, political organization, and nationalist mobilization. Her publications communicated ideas about Indian society, national identity, and women's public participation, while her speeches and political activities established her position within the national movement. Her career also demonstrates how English-language education and access to political institutions shaped the opportunities available to women leaders under colonial rule. Naidu's historical significance lies in her contribution to nationalist politics, public communication, and women's political leadership. Her life provides an important historical perspective on the changing role of women in India's struggle for independence.

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INTRODUCTION

British government, development of English education, social reform, and the formation of new associations and newspapers shaped the political and social history of colonial India in the late 19th century. Sarojini Naidu was born in the princely state of Hyderabad on 13 February 1879, and had a separate connection with British paramountcy. Her father Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was an educationist and had been involved in the founding of Nizam College in 1878 while her mother Barada Sundari Devi was a poet in Bengali. This family engaged in both educational reform and literary pursuits and public debates. Such situations were restricted Naidu to a small but growing part of Indian household whose literacy with modern education has allowed them to engage in the public sphere (Indian National Congress, 2021;

Naidu's initial schooling was linked to the broader educational landscape of British India. She passed the matriculation examination of the University of Madras in 1891, and went on to study at Girton College, Cambridge and King's College, London, in England in 1895. During her time in Britain, she became acquainted with literary circles and the contemporary women's suffrage movement. In 1898 she came back to India and got married to Govindarajulu Naidu, a physician. The marriage was inter-caste and her family consented to it. These events were part of a time in which education, marriage reform and the status of women in public life were much discussed in Indian social and political life.

One of the significant events in the history of Indian nationalism was the partition of Bengal in 1905. The Swadeshi movement promoted boycott of foreign goods, promotion of indigenous enterprise and public campaigns and political meetings. During this time Naidu had entered the national movement, and had started relationships with political and cultural leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore, Annie Besant and subsequently Mahatma Gandhi. Her involvement had nothing to do with a career apart from her literary career. Her debut poetry collection in the same year propelled her into the burgeoning field of Indian writing in English, where political identity and cultural representation were converging (Indian National Congress, 2021; Staggs, 2021).

It was first published in London in 1905, under the title The Golden Threshold, with an introduction by Arthur Symons. The repertoire comprised poems about Indian occupations, markets, landscapes and festivals, and domestic customs. The Broken Wing was published in 1917, but with the Bird of Time soon after came in 1912 with an introduction by Edmund Gosse. The dates of these publications are a chronological account of Naidu's literary growth at a time of political transition. Poems like The Palanquin-Bearers, Indian Weavers, The Coromandel Fishers, and The Bangle-Sellers introduced the reader to English to scenes of work and social life in India. The poems are historical documents for the study of the every-day life as presented to literature by an educated Indian writer, but they are literary works and not authentic eye-witness accounts of the men and women of whom they speak. The history of women's public activity was also a part of this. Traditional feminists and nationalists had been discussing the issues of women's education, marriage, property rights, and political representation since the nineteenth century. Women organizations and periodicals set up forums where the women could discuss these issues. Established in 1901, edited by Kamala Satthianadhan, the Indian Ladies' Magazine was a platform for women to write and debate. WIA—Women's Indian Association was founded by activists, Margaret Cousins, Annie Besant and others in 1917 and took women's demands into organized political campaigns. Naidu's work was part of a broader story of women's participation in public discourse and political association (Puri, 2022; Tusan, 2003).

English was a key element of Naidu's education and public speaking. It was the language of colonial administration and higher education, but it was also the language used to reach audiences in Britain and throughout the rest of the empire. Naidu was a writer in English, writing about Indian occupations, Indian places, Indian customs, and Indian political aspirations. Her writing is thus in the tradition of Indian English writing in the colonial era. Her poems appeared in London and were circulated in India, illustrating the extent to which literature was crossing imperial lines. The use of English must be read in the context of the unequal educational and publishing systems of the time—and the opportunities the language provided for Indian politicians. The political speeches of Naidu came into public record at the meetings, through newspapers, pamphlets and collected volumes. Her public

speeches covered women's education, social reform, self-government and national unity. She appeared in various venues across India for social welfare talks, women's involvement and nationalism, in the years 1915–1918. In 1917 she participated along with Annie Besant and others in presenting it to the British authorities for the demand for women's suffrage. Her political work illustrates how presentations made in public meetings got printed and then disseminated to an audience larger than the original. The issue of spoken address and printed text is, then, part of the history of the nationalist mobilization.

Within this paper, the concept "colonial print culture" is used to describe the newspapers, journals, books, pamphlets, publishing houses and public platforms in which the political and social arguments moved through British India. These media had a historic value to them because they could link people together across cities and regions, record speeches and offer places to debate. Cultural self-representation signifies their own Indian writers' published self-representation of Indian society and political life. Naidu's poems and speeches help to document the presence of an educated Indian woman in the public sphere and her role in shaping the national image and identity through public institutions and print. The account of Naidu's early life starts from 1879 and the main period of analysis is from 1905 to 1949. She started her literary and nationalist public career in 1905 with the publication of The Golden Threshold and the partition of Bengal. She has been engaged in the activities of the Indian National Congress, constitutional agitation and women's suffrage during the years 1917-1925. In 1930, she was thrust into the epicentre of mass action with the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Dharasana Salt Satyagraha. Her activities were related to the last years of British Raj and the early years of independence, as in 1942 she participated in the Quit India Movement and in 1947 she became the Governor of the United Provinces.

The paper adopts a historical perspective. It brings to life Naidu's public life by highlighting his publications, political campaigns, organisation, speeches, and significant events of the Indian national movement, all in a dated manner. The political context is established through historical scholarship and her experiences are juxtaposed with broader trends of women's activism and nationalism. Chronology and documentary evidence are the focus of the discussion. Explanations of gender, political representation, and print accompany when they help to explain the significance of specific events in history. Naidu has been portrayed as a "Nightingale of India", a famous poet or even a freedom fighter in the past. Though these are significant aspects of her life, her literary works, women's rights activism, Congress leadership, and role in civil disobedience are dealt with separately. By examining a historical account of her life it is possible to look into how these activities intermeshed. It also situates her public career in the evolution of women's groups, the shifting nature of the Congress, and the shift from elitist constitutional politics to mass movements (Staggs, 2021; Anagol, 2008). Naidu's career is historically significant because of her various public roles. She was an English-language poet whose work was also spread across the globe, an activist for women's political rights, an organiser of Congress, a civil disobedient and a provincial Governor post independence. Her career is a reflection of the gradual inclusion of women in politics under colonialism. It also reveals the differential conditions of social access to education, publications and political leadership. The paper traces Naidu's life and political activities in a broader context of the significant events of colonial India. It looks into her literary publications and early education; her involvement in the nationalist movement following 1905; her involvement in women's franchise campaign and Indian National Congress; her contribution to Civil Disobedience movement and Quit India movement; and her role in the early years of independent India. The thesis is that the literary and political work of Naidu grew hand in hand, and were influenced by the evolving institutions and campaigns of the time.

Methodology

This study uses historical document analysis to examine Sarojini Naidu's life and public activities. It places dated texts and events within their political, institutional, and social contexts. Primary sources include The Golden Threshold (1905), The Bird of Time (1912), The Broken Wing (1917), and her speeches and writings published in 1925. These materials are examined alongside records of her political activities and the chronology of the Indian national movement. Source analysis considers each document's date, purpose, origin, and historical setting (Bowen, 2009). The study focuses on 1905–1949, with earlier events included to establish Naidu's family and educational

background. Institutional and biographical records help verify dates relating to her education, organisational roles, Congress presidency, imprisonment, and governorship. Secondary studies published between 1974 and 2024 provide context on women's organizations, colonial print, nationalist politics, and her public career. These sources were identified through academic databases and publisher platforms, including JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, Project MUSE, Cambridge Core, SAGE, and Taylor & Francis Online. The analysis follows a chronological approach. Sources are arranged by date, references to political organizations, public campaigns, social reform, women's rights, and literary publications are identified, and these developments are compared with the wider national movement. The discussion examines five connected areas: print and public communication, nationalism and women's political participation, poetry and representations of Indian society, English-language education and colonial institutions, and public leadership and political constraints. Poems are treated as evidence of the social images Naidu presented, rather than direct accounts of the experiences of the communities represented. Her speeches and institutional records provide evidence of her public arguments, activities, and official positions. The study is limited by its reliance on published English-language materials. It does not cover all private correspondence, unpublished drafts, or speeches in Indian languages, and evidence of audience reception remains limited. It therefore reconstructs Naidu's public career and published representations rather than claiming to provide a complete account of women's experiences in colonial India.

Result and Discussion

Historical Analysis

The following historical summary identifies the main periods of Naidu's public life, the contemporary events associated with each period, and their significance for the history of women's participation in colonial and postcolonial India.

Table 1 Chronology of Sarojini Naidu's Life and Public Career

Period	Historical setting	Naidu's activities and dated evidence	Historical significance
1879–1898	Hyderabad under the Nizam; expansion of modern education; travel for higher studies in Britain.	Born on 13 February 1879; educated in Madras; studied at King's College London and Girton College, Cambridge (1895–1898); married Govindarajulu Naidu in 1898.	Her family and education connected a princely-state background with English-language education and wider public networks.
1905–1917	Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi politics, First World War, and the growth of women's organizations.	The Golden Threshold (1905); The Bird of Time (1912); The Broken Wing (1917); participation in nationalist activity and the women's franchise deputation (1917).	Literary publication and political organization developed alongside one another.
1919–1925	Jallianwala Bagh, Non-Cooperation, constitutional reform debates, and Congress mobilization.	Returned the Kaisar-i-Hind medal in protest after 1919; supported Non-Cooperation from 1920; elected Congress president at Kanpur in 1925.	Her public role expanded from advocacy and public speaking to national organisational leadership.
1930–1942	Civil Disobedience, Round Table Conference, renewed	Led the Dharasana protest on 21 May 1930; attended the Second Round Table Conference in 1931; detained during the Quit India movement in 1942.	She became a prominent participant in mass campaigns and faced repeated colonial imprisonment.

	repression, and Quit India.		
1947–1949	Transfer of power and the establishment of independent India's provincial institutions.	Became Governor of the United Provinces on 15 August 1947; died in Lucknow on 2 March 1949.	Her final public office connected the nationalist movement with the early administration of independent India.

Note. Compiled from published biographical and institutional records and the primary texts examined in this study.

Print Culture and the Formation of a National Public

Political ideas were circulated as a result of the growth of print in late 19th and early 20th century India. News, literary journals, books and public speeches linked together educated readers in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad and London. The access to these institutions was still unequal because the literacy, income, education and publishing opportunities were still limited to a small percentage of society. Naidu's literary career was nurtured in these circumstances. Her work was published in London in 1905 in The Golden Threshold, which provided a link with metropolitan consumers, and with her treatment of Indian themes, the volume became linked with the debate on Indian national culture.

Ladies magazines provided avenues for discussion. In 1901, Kamala Satthianadhan founded the Indian Ladies' Magazine to feature pieces by female writers from India and discuss issues such as women's public roles, education, family life and social reform. Embedded in the journal's history, was the fact that women did not only participate in reform debates, but also edit and contribute to print communication and organize it (Puri, 2022). The Women's Indian Association was established in 1917 and linked the discussion of women's issues with campaigns for women's rights. These institutions were a feature of the evolving political landscape on which Naidu operated. Her poems were published in books and periodicals and her speeches were recorded and printed. "The Palanquin-Bearers" is a collective voice of a wedding procession, "Indian Weavers" is related to the birth, marriage and death and "The Bangle-Sellers" is the voice of the ornaments sold at the various stages of women's lives. These poems are not to be viewed as a record of the occupations represented. They are a reflection of the cultural images with which an educated Indian writer introduced social life to the Indian and British readers.

The publishing record of Naidu's collections also shows the presence of literary middlemen. The Golden Threshold (1905) had an introduction by Arthur Symons and The Bird of Time (1912) a preface by Edmund Gosse. Through their endorsements, her work was introduced to the literary reader in England. These introductions also reveal the reception of Indian writers who went to England for publication by the metropolitan critics and publishers, and the effect they had on the presentation of their work. Naidu's writing career and her writing networks thus constructed her literary identity. Women's print activity became more political during the period leading up to and after the First World War. Established in 1928 as the journal of the Women's Indian Association, Stri-Dharma was part of a long-standing tradition of women's press advocacy, and connected Indian demands with international feminist campaigns (Tusan, 2003; Broome, 2012). Naidu's public speeches as well as her involvement in women's groups were part of this broader trend. Print and public meetings linked together: speeches were published in the newspapers, printed statements could be used as a basis for campaigns via associations and deputations.

Metropolitan literary institutions had an influence on the reception of Naidu's writing. Her introductions by Symons and Gosse earned her recognition among readers of English; they also introduced her work into the canon of British literary criticism. The story of her publications, then, is a story of unequal relations between Indian writers and the publishing institutions of the empire. While Naidu had access, she did publish poems about Indian life, but the recognition process was dominated by editors and editors' publishers who, in the main, were located in Britain.

In the early 20th century, print was an important means of political communication in India. The message and counter-message of the Swadeshi movement following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the rise of women's groups and the proliferation of nationalist gatherings relied on the spread of information and argument. Naidu's professional life traversed them all. Her poems created a literary public persona, her speeches and organisational activities connected her with political audiences. Writing is therefore part of Naidu's history, as is print and public communication in colonial India. Representations of Indian society were brought into books and journals, speeches and political meetings gave opportunities for direct participation. These modes of communication enabled the educated woman to emerge as a public figure, but social and institutional constraints continued to be significant for most Indian women.

Nationalism, Women's Rights, and Political Mobilisation

Naidu began his nationalist activities at the time of partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi movement. Boycott of imported goods, encouragement of local production, and mass meetings helped to expand the political sphere beyond the traditional leadership of the constitution. Her contacts with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, Annie Besant and others who were associated with various aspects of the national movement linked her to various currents of Nationalist politics. She spent the bulk of her political career as a speaker and an activist, not as a politician. New demands for political representation of Indians emerged after the First World War. In 1915, "The Gift of India" was published, celebrating the contribution and sacrifice of Indian soldiers fighting in the Imperial war effort. The poem metaphorically glorifies the Indian mother who has lost her sons in far off war fronts. It had a language that shows the complex political stance of Indian nationalists during the war years—India's involvement in imperial service came with a call for more autonomy. Rather than just a declaration of allegiance or opposition, the poem can be understood as a description of this tension. In 1917, Naidu focused her public activism on women's suffrage. That same year the Women's Indian Association was formed and along with Annie Besant and others, Naidu presented women's demands to the British authorities. The deputation was calling for the recognition of women's political rights at the time of discussion of the constitution in connection with the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms. The campaign failed to achieve universal suffrage, but contributed to making women's suffrage a part of formal political discussion. By joining the event, Naidu was included in the list of prominent Indian women who spoke out against the exclusion of women from representative institutions established by the British (King's College London, n.d.; Indian National Congress, 2021).

The political crisis further intensified due to the Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre on 13 April 1919. According to her biographical details of her political career, Naidu returned the Kaisar-i-Hind medal as a protest against the repression by the British. This was a more significant rejection of official imperial recognition and paralleled the expansion of mass nationalist opposition. Through her political campaigning, she became acquainted with Gandhi's non-violence and the campaigns after the First World War (Staggs, 2021; Indian National Congress, 2021). Naidu was active in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), which called for non-violent resistance and greater involvement of the public. The movement attracted students, lawyers, workers, traders and women in the nationalist movement across India. Naidu went out on tours and made speeches at public gatherings, advocating national unity and women's involvement. She also worked in the fields of Hindu–Muslim unity during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement. Here are some examples of the shift from the previous politics of petitions to mass mobilization and from the politics of elite associations to the politics of mass associations. In 1925, Naidu was on the winning side at Kanpur, where the Congress session took place. In 1917, Annie Besant was elected as the first female President of the Indian National Congress, and she became the first Indian woman president in 1925. Her election was indicative of the increasing importance of women in the public sphere of nationalist politics, but within the main decision-making structures, women were still under-represented. It was an important institutional success for Naidu and the fact that she became the first-ever woman to lead the principal nationalist organization during a debate on the direction of the freedom struggle made the history books (Indian National Congress, 2021).

Both her political leadership and the cultural expectations imposed on women in India contributed to Naidu's public persona. Her poetry and public speaking earned her the title of "Nightingale of India", but it also appealed to a feminine image, that of song and grace. Her political engagement was much more than this symbolic one. She spoke at public meetings, gave deputations, assisted in mass campaigns and held leadership roles. Her career demonstrates that women were able to enter into public arenas that were traditionally male dominated with the language of social service and national duty; and that gendered expectations continued to influence public recognition. Between 1905 and 1925, Naidu slowly grew into his political duties. She entered the fray during the Swadeshi movement, grew in significance during the women's suffrage movement and post-war movement and became truly prominent when elected as the President of the Congress. The developments were understood in the broader context of Indian nationalism that witnessed the emergence of women's political engagement in the form of associations, public speech, constitutional movement, and mass movements.

Poetry, Social Life, and the Representation of India

The cultural sphere that was presented in Naidu's poetry is reflected in her life during the early twentieth century. "The Coromandel Fishers" portrays a seafaring village readying itself for departure at sea, while "Indian Weavers" associates weaving with key moments in life. The Bangle-Sellers makes a link between coloured bangles and women's life at various stages including their marriage and motherhood. The poems are not statistical or ethnographic records of the occupations; they are merely informational. These illustrate the ways in which Indian labour, craft, ritual, and landscape were described in English-language poetry in an era when colonial depictions of Indian society were prevalent. The poems also fall into the phase of the rising nationalism in the domain of indigenous culture and economic affairs. The movement of promoting Indian goods and goods made locally was known as the Swadeshi movement. "Indian Weavers" and "The Bangle-Sellers" include crafts and trade in the literary record. Their importance is historical in the sense that they do provide a way to make artisans and occupations visible in a national cultural vocabulary. The poems are not definitive of the actual situation of weavers and sellers and the questions of their working conditions demand other economic and archival evidence. This was because The Broken Wing was being published at a time when Naidu was getting more involved in organised political activities. The collection has some poems such as "The Gift of India" which is connected with the First World war and Indian soldiers' service. It has a maternal image of India, and reminds of the sacrifices of Indian soldiers in an imperial war and that they made a contribution. The poem captures the political atmosphere of the wartime India, seen as a time of divided loyalties between the military and the demand for constitutional change and self-government.

During the colonial period, the right to represent the Indian society was challenged. Assumptions about social hierarchy, religion, gender, and progress were typical ways in which British officials, missionaries, travellers, and writers describe Indian customs. Histories, essays, fiction, poetry, and political speeches were the ways in which Indian writers responded. Naidu's work was part of this response because it was an English-language account of Indian life through the voice of an Indian author, whether in the form of occupation, festivals, landscapes or domestic life. As an educated woman from Hyderabad, her choice of content as well as audience was influenced by her background (Said, 1989; Sen, 2001).

The poet need not be condemned for writing poems that are nationalistic, but not everything that is political should be nationalistic. Also within specific scenes of work and social life, the fishers, weavers, sellers and bearers are figures. The words they chose and the order in which they placed them shows the poet's choice and arrangement of cultural images. The historical reading takes into account, thus, the political context in which the poems were published and the poems' particular features. This will prevent the imposition of the nationalist ideology on every picture of Indian life (Ahmad, 1987; Jameson, 1986). Naidu composed in English lyric forms known to the British publishers and readers. She wrote her poems using these patterns and Indian place names, professions, and cultural symbols. The outcome was not a plain copy of English poetry nor was it a wholesale rejection of English poetic tradition. Her collections were published in London, and the interest in the subject highlights the

significance of metropolitan publishing networks and its attempt to bring local life to the eyes of an international audience (Bhabha, 1984; Chakraborty, 2023). The study's historical proof positions Naidu's poems in the context of the political and cultural history of the early twentieth century. The works came out in the Swadeshi era, the period of First World War and the era of the growth of women's political organization. They were images of labour, ritual and landscape that were part of a public discussion about Indian identity. The poems are not to be interpreted as literal documents of these communities, but rather as literary products of the environment in which they were written. By presenting Indian settings and occupations to readers of English literature, Naidu's literary work was a factor in the cultural history of Indian nationalism. The poems were literary forms which provided artisans, venders, fishers, and women's ritual life with literary visibility. She was a social member and conventions of lyric poetry influenced their representations. They offer glimpses into the involvement of an educated Indian author in discussions of national culture but do not represent the experiences or testimony of those who are represented.

Education, English, and the Institutions of Colonial India

Naidu's education linked her to institutions that were a part of the colonial system. Her studies in Madras, King's College London and Girton College, Cambridge provided her with access to English literary traditions, and to international networks. English was the language of higher education, much official administrative and communication, and it was also a way in which Indian political arguments could be advanced to British audiences. Her career is an example of how colonial education was able to yield people who challenged colonialism through the use of colonial institutions and language.

The writing of English by Indian writers had preceded, but it was Naidu's career that was a part of those days when more writers were published by metropolis-based publishers and readers began to look to India for English publications. In 1905, The Golden Threshold was published in London, then in 1912, The Bird of Time, and lastly, The Broken Wing in 1917. These dates show the continuing importance of British publishing networks to the circulation of Indian writing. The poems also posed a threat to the idea that English languages literature must be about British life, as a lot of Indian themes were presented in the work.

Historical status of Hyderabad needs to be addressed. Naidu's birthplace is not in a directly administered British province, but in a princely state governed by the Nizam. Born to a Bengali father who worked in the education system and schooled in English, she was brought up in a social setting that was unique from many other parts of colonial India. This regional background was tied to an all-India political movement when she joined the Indian National Congress in later years. Her career thus represents the diverse paths by which actors got involved in the national movement (Shohat, 1992; Indian National Congress, 2021). She was not a typical woman of her time who was allowed to study and publish in India. It was reliant on family wealth, education, and access to literary and political circles. The poems described the weavers, fishers and sellers, who differed in their working lives from that of the writer. It is important in an historical interpretation, because Naidu's writing is the voice of the elite, not of all the social groups that are represented within her poems (Dirlik, 1994; Mohanty, 1988).

The geographical landscape of the political in colonial India was complicated. British India consisted of directly administered provinces and princely states like Hyderabad had their own rulers over whom the British had paramountcy. These political settings intersected due to Naidu's early life in Hyderabad and political career in British India. The inclusion of her in Congress activities provides an example of how nationalist groups worked to unite people across state lines, although the political rights and nature of government were vastly different between the princely states and the British provinces. Naidu's poems are voiceless in the sense of being constructed in literature. Poems composed by an educated poet in English are the voice of the weavers, fishers, and palanquin-bearers. Their words may not be considered as recorded speech or as an expression of their own political views. The poems are also of historical value because they reveal what and how Naidu chose to represent in his poems and what Naidu was presenting to readers in colonial days (Spivak, 1985).

In the introductions by Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse the role of the literary figures of Britain in bringing Naidu's work to the market is evident. She would be recognized by readers of English-language publications because of their endorsement. The relationship was unequal as critics and publishers in the metros had a significant influence in the reception of Indian writing. It was in these publications that Naidu has put Indian themes at the heart of her poetry, and developed a public persona that would then enable her to play a role in politics. English enabled Naidu to access a larger audience and political spaces beyond India, but also the unequal educational and publishing systems of colonialism. Her career, therefore, must be viewed in the context of opportunities offered by English education and the limitations imposed by social restrictions on opportunities. The language was her part in the historical conditions that made her a known poet and national speaker.

Public Leadership, Civil Disobedience, and the Limits of Political Participation

Naidu's political power was influenced by the norms of women's behavior in public activities. She was identified as the “Nightingale of India” and her name was synonymous with poetry, grace and elegance of speech. Such attributes endeared her to audiences used to male political leadership but they did not exhaust her activity. She was active in political campaigns, spoke to large audiences, and served as an organiser. Examination of her public career reveals that women's involvement in nationalist politics was both a growth in opportunity and engagement with existing gender norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Thapar, 1993). An achievement which happened in 1925 when Naidu was elected the Congress president marked a significant milestone but women were a minority in the national political leadership. Men dominated the senior positions in the organisation as the Congress relied on women for fund-raising, public meetings, picketing and civil disobedience. Naidu's presidency, however, showed the world that as a party leader, women can be described using the same terms as men are: that of a sacrifice, service, and moral influence (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Nagel, 1998).

Naidu's poems and speeches depicted women's lives in terms of marriage, family, work and ritual. These depictions brought women into the national culture, but not all women's experiences were represented in these images, which were limited by caste, class, region and occupation. Her own opportunity to education in the English language and to national platforms was extraordinary. Therefore, a historical account of Naidu has to differentiate Naidu's role as an important woman leader from the larger picture of what was happening to other women who did not have such access and resources (Mohanty, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991). Naidu's political techniques involved public speaking, association building, deputations and non-violent protest. She was able to operate within these institutional frameworks thanks to these strategies. Her leadership wasn't limited to the confines of the office and she became a campaigner for the nationalist demands among the masses of India and the outside world. Her career is a model of political agency being asserted within well-known organizations and within public gatherings, even if these institutions did not give women the same degree of agency (Mahmood, 2001).

In 1927, Katherine Mayo's Mother India sparked international controversy around Indian society and the state of women. Indian nationalists protested against the book's socio-cultural approach to opposing self-government. Naidu participated in the battle to defend Indian society against colonial and imperial criticism, and the general debate would reveal the tensions between the nationalist claims and the desire to tackle inequalities within Indian society. The historical record thus shows some resistance to colonial stereotyping along with ongoing conflicts about social reform and women's rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fruzzetti & Perez, 2002). There were several advantages and constraints in Naidu's public role. She grew up in a family with opportunities for her, but her opportunities were shaped by her education, family, region, gender and access to English-language publishing. This is because she has done it in a different situation compared to women in rural areas and working class jobs. It must not be taken as an indication of the equal political participation of all Indian women. Woman's activism was not equally developed by region and social class (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2015).

Naidu served in the political and women organisations and emerged as a nationally recognised public figure. She was given these institutional opportunities as a platform to advocate for women's participation in and national independence from institutions. But her personal experience was different

from that of many women living in poverty, without much education and with less mobility. It is important to keep in mind the difference between public representation and everyday experience, in order to grasp the historical boundaries of elite women's leadership (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The political record of the 1930s-1940s clearly illustrates Naidu's footprints in the struggle for freedom. She was arrested with Gandhi in 1930 and became the leader of the protest at the Dharasana Salt Works on 21st May, when police showed excessive brutality towards the volunteers. She was at the Second Round Table Conference, London, 1931 and arrested again during the later stages of the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was arrested in 1942 after the Quit India Movement was launched and was imprisoned for about two years and one month. These incidents put her front and center in the mass nationalist campaigns rather than merely a symbolic figure.

Limitations

The study is limited by the nature of the surviving and consulted sources. The main literary corpus consists of English-language publications, and the paper does not examine all of Naidu's correspondence, unpublished writing, or speeches in Indian languages. It also relies on published institutional and biographical records for several political dates. The poems provide evidence of cultural representation, not direct testimony from the communities depicted. Further archival research into private correspondence, Congress records, women's organizations, newspapers, and regional-language materials could provide a fuller account of Naidu's political networks and the reception of her work.

Conclusion

The parallel careers of Sarojini Naidu, as a print journalist and participant in the nationalist movement and political organization of colonial India, from the early 1900s through 1949, reveals the intertwinement of print, political organization, and nationalist mobilization in this period. Her literary work, political involvement of women in politics, public speaking and leadership role in Indian National Congress were all her contributions. She became a published Indian writer in English with her poetry collections The Golden Threshold (1905), The Broken Wing (1917) and The Bird of Time (1912). Her speeches and political actions, however, indicate a broader public presence which cannot be illustrated through her literary works. In 1917, Naidu took part in the women's franchise movement, which was a sign of the increasing need for women to be represented in public life. Being elected as Congress president in 1925 was a significant milestone for women's role in national political leadership. She was also engaged in organized resistance to colonial rule, being involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement, such as the Dharasana action in 1930, and the Quit India Movement in 1942. These developments put her in the broader context of political mobilisation and constitutional demands in India. Print had played an important part in this public career. Her poems, speeches and writings spread the concepts of Indian society, national identity, social reform and women's involvement. She was also educated in English and was given access to colonial institutions, which also influenced the platforms on which she spoke to political masses. Her status as a well-educated and politically well-networked woman at the same time acknowledged the opportunities and constraints of women in well-placed social groups. Thus, the visibility of her public image needs to be read in the context of unequal social relations of colonial India. Naidu's historical importance lies in the linkage of literary publication and continued political involvement. Her career is a testament to women's entry into nationalist institutions, their involvement in public campaigns and their leaderships during the struggle against colonial rule. An analysis of her life as reflected in the dated publications, speeches, organisational records and political developments puts her in the context of the history of Indian nationalism and participation of women in public life.

Author Contribution

Swapnil Sharma, Research Scholar in History, contributed to the conceptualization, literature review, source collection, and thematic analysis, interpretation of findings and preparation of the manuscript. Dr. Jyoti Dwivedi, Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, provided academic guidance and suggestions during the research and manuscript development. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethical Consideration

The study is based entirely on secondary sources, including published scholarly literature and documentary materials. No human participants were involved; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

Data Availability Statement

The study draws upon fifty scholarly sources identified through the literature selection process and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. All sources are appropriately cited in the manuscript and reference list. No primary data were collected. Additional research materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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