Women’s role in postcolonial nation state building: Krishnabai Nimbkar and the question of rural development in and beyond India

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This essay is a preliminary investigation into the life and work of Dr. Krishnabai Nimbkar (1906–1997), a nationalist, physician and rural development activist. It is part of my current research project that explores how elite Indian women organized and implemented schemes of economic, educational, and health improvement for India’s female rural population between the 1920s and the 1970s. Rural development work for women was an important area of Indian women’s activity for postcolonial state making. The essay starts with a literature overview, followed by a short biographical introduction of Nimbkar, before introducing in more detail her rural development work.

**Literature overview**

The history of rural development in colonial and postcolonial South Asia has lately become a burgeoning research field. Recent works have pointed to the emergence of scientifically informed interest in the Indian countryside in the second half of the nineteenth century (Brunner 2018; Kumar 2016). But, corresponding to the global trend, only the interwar years turned the subcontinent increasingly into an experimental field for various projects aiming to promote village welfare. These initiatives, launched by colonial administrators, civil society actors, missionary and educational societies, and members of the national movement, were embedded in an emerging ‘transnational development regime’ (Sinha 2008: 59; Fischer-Tiné 2018; Brunner 2018; Kumar 2020; Jodhka 2002; Basu 2016; Das Gupta 2008; Pande 1967). While this growing body of literature shows that such rural programmes included multiple actors and aspects, such as agriculture, health and social reform, education, and questions of livelihood, a few of them have only scantily mentioned women activists’ participation or schemes that were specifically targeted at women’s training in ‘traditional roles’ and home economics (Sinha 2008: 67, 69; Basu 2016: 108).

With India’s independence in 1947, the rural population became the postcolonial state’s focus, as the peasants’ welfare and their productivity were closely tied to India’s national progress. To achieve the country’s food sufficiency and to forge national cohesion by making villagers citizens, the village was inscribed as one key development site in India’s first three five-year-plans (1951–1966) and targeted with the Indian Community Development Programme, initiated in 1952 (Sinha 2008; Unger 2015; Immerwahr 2015; Frankel 1967; Pande 1967). Several studies have demonstrated that India’s postcolonial agrarian policy drew heavily upon international state and non-state assistance (Unger 2011, 2015; Sackley 2011, 2013; Immerwahr 2015; Cullather 2010). However, to understand postcolonial India’s community development as an ‘predominantly external movement’, ignores, as Jack Loveridge (2017: 62–3) has rightly emphasized, domestic priorities, expertise, and engagement.

The role women played in India’s rural development after Independence has again not received much scholarly attention yet. Some authors have pointed out that both, the state and international actors, initially failed to engage rural women effectively in community development programmes (Unger 2015; Loveridge 2017; Pande 1967); others have framed women’s initiatives as part of the tireless efforts of male nationalist politicians.
A third strand of research has argued that the development efforts did not target rural women’s productive labour but their reproductive labour and ‘home-maker’ qualities, aiming to remove them from the land and install them within the home (Nadkarni 2014: 138–139; Berry 2003). Most recently, Taylor Sherman and Anne Devenish have provided helpful insights into women’s engagement in rural welfare programmes by examining their work in the Central Social Welfare Board (Devenish 2019; Sherman 2021). Inspired by findings of the scholarship so far, my project departs, however, in two ways: one, it closely analyses the organisation and implementation of non-official women’s initiatives next to the official ones. Two, instead of focusing exclusively on women’s relationship with the postcolonial state and its development programmes, I likewise trace transnational networks of cooperation and knowledge exchanges between local and national Indian women organisations and international non-governmental associations and intragovernmental players.

**Introducing Krishnabai Nimbkar**

Krishnabai Rau (married Nimbkar) was born in Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu in 1906 into a Maharashtrian family. Her mother Kamalabai, a reformist Hindu, had been educated at her parents’ home by tutors in English and Sanskrit and at a missionary school. She was a member of several progressive women’s organisations, amongst them the Tamil Madar Sangam and the Women’s Indian Association. Krishnabai’s father Lakshman, a theosophist, worked as employee in the Madras Revenue Department until his stroke in 1918. Both parents shared an interest in political and social reform; yet due to the extended family’s conservatism, Rau’s two elder sisters were married at young ages. Although the question of an early marriage came up in Krishnabai’s case too, with the help of her mother she succeeded to continue her studies and did her BA in Zoology at the Presidency College in Madras (Forbes 2007: 64–67). After her degree, Rau took up a lecturer position at the Crosswaithe Girls’ College in Allahabad in the late 1920s. Meeting Krishna Nehru and other members of the Nehru family sparked further Rau’s nationalist fervour. She joined the Allahabad Youth League and participated in volunteer drills. In response to Gandhi’s call for Civil Disobedience, Rau soon resigned her job at the college and returned to Madras, where she joined the Women’s Swadeshi League. She organized its picketing wing, the Desh Sevikas (Women Serving the Country), and led demonstrations in Madras. For her activities during the Civil Disobedience Movement, Rau was imprisoned by the British (Forbes 1999: 144–145, 226; Tagra 2006: 66–67).

In 1932, Krishnabai married a man of her choice, Dr. V.D. Nimbkar. She trained as a doctor at Madras Medical College and set up a private practice in Madras. Despite her professional work, Nimbkar continued her political and social activities as a member of the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and by participating in the Quit India Movement (Nimbkar 1986; Lal 1997). In 1945, the family moved to Poona. With India’s independence, Nimbkar’s interest in social work intensified. After partition, she engaged in relief work for refugees in the camp in Pimpri, situated between Bombay and Poona. She also worked as the Secretary of the Nagarik Sanghatana Samiti (Citizen Organisation Committee), a Poona based organisation, set up in 1947. The
Samiti assisted partition refugees and other persons in distress with a special focus on education, housing provisions and health care (Lal 1997; Nimbkar 1948: 6; Oturkar 1951: 120).

These experiences in social work also facilitated her emergence as an expert on women’s welfare in the 1950s. In this capacity, Nimbkar worked closely with and for the postcolonial state’s community development programme as member of the Central Social Welfare Board, and as a Special Officer in Social Education in the Community Projects Administration (n. a. 1953: 17; Nimbkar 1986: vii). Both the Central Social Welfare Board and the Community Projects Administration were institutions of the Indian development regime with a focus on rural development. The Central Social Welfare Board that aimed to bring together state and voluntary activities paid special attention to rural welfare services organized for women and children (Sherman 2021; Immerwahr 2015: 79–82). Nimbkar also attended conferences of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) in Toronto in 1953 and in Colombo in 1957, first as representative of the All India Women’s Conference, later of the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh (National Association of Rural Women India). Set-up in the 1930s, the ACWW was the first international organisation of and for rural women. The organisation continues its world-spanning work until today.

After the Toronto conference, she toured the United States of America and Japan to study Home Extension Programmes. In 1955, she took up the post of Honorary Secretary of the newly founded Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh, affiliated with the ACWW. The Sangh, a non-state organisation, worked for the rural development of women (The Associated Country Women of the World 1953: 344; The Associated Country Women of the World 1957: 214; U.P.A. 1953: 8).
Despite no formal professional education in social work, Nimbkar’s various engagements seem to have earned her a reputation as an expert in rural development. Hence, her friend and AIWC colleague Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay recommended her as such for a project planned in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Financed by the UP state government, one task of the Planning Research & Action Institute (PRAI) was to run and scientifically evaluate a pilot project in rural development. The American architect and planner Alfred Mayer was initially involved in the initiative. Shortly after India’s independence, Mayer had planned the Etawah Pilot Project in rural UP and had been appointed as Planning Advisor to the state government in Lucknow (Sackley 2013). Following Chattopadhyay’s recommendation, Mayer wrote to Nimbkar in 1956 with the request to apply for the position as ‘Specialist Women’s Programme’ at the Planning Research & Action Institute. In his letter, he pointed out that the job required not only the right language skills, i.e., Hindi, and experiences in rural development work, but also administrative skills and the readiness to supervise in person the ongoing work in the villages.¹
Taking a great interest in the task and position – for which she ultimately resigned from her voluntary work at the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh – Nimbkar emphasized her qualifications and experiences in her response to Mayer on 14 August 1956.

“During the last eighteen months, partly under the Community Projects Administration and partly as Secretary of the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh I have, through practical village visits, direct village experience and actual field work in the villages, been able to assemble together a fund of material on what should constitute an organizational basis to provide for the education, advancement and cooperation of rural women.”

Nimbkar got the job as Specialist of the Women’s Programme at the PRAI. In the next four and a half years, she not only set up and led the women’s section at PRAI, but together with her colleagues also run the institute’s pilot project for the development of rural women. After her contract ended in autumn 1961, she returned to Poona. So far, I have not been able to find out if she returned to her medical practice or continued to engage in social work. What we do know is that she emerged as a critical voice during the Emergency, challenging openly the politics of Indira Gandhi. Amongst others Nimbkar wrote a series of letters directly to Gandhi and members of the Indian Parliament, in which she criticised the former’s autocratic rule (Nimbkar 1978). Nimbkar died in May 1997.

**Krishnabai Nimbkar’s approach to rural development for women**

What follows here are a few first observations about the nature of rural development initiatives as understood and pursued by Nimbkar after reading parts of the comprehensive material she has produced on the theme. During her work for the Community Project Administration and later the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh, Nimbkar authored several reports on how to set up efficient and workable rural development schemes for women. In these reports from the mid-1950s, but also in correspondences with other actors involved in rural development, she emphasized the importance of pursuing a scientific approach. Hence, she suggested to set-up one or more pilot projects as experimentation fields that should be closely monitored and assessed. To understand better the conditions of women living in villages, Nimbkar also proposed to study in the pilot projects their day-to-day problems so that customized low-key solutions could be organized, where applicable.

Nimbkar often framed rural women first and foremost as housewives whose contributions to the nation consisted of reconstructing their homes. Kim Berry (2003: 1061) has argued that she did not draw attention to women’s extra-domestic roles. Yet, in my understanding Nimbkar was clearly aware of them being wage-earners and hence of their role in rural economy. More than once, Nimbkar proposed for successful development work to determine “the range and nature of activity of the woman as a wage earner - as either a partner of man or independently by herself.” Consequently, she urged her audiences to provide the right instructions and means to assist rural women to earn their livelihood. Soon, however, there seems to have been a realisation amongst women activists for rural development, that such suggestions might not be enough to
achieve real change. The Proceedings of the National Seminar on Development Work among Rural Women that took place in Alipur in September 1956 indicate such concerns. The seminar was jointly organized by the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh and the Indian Adult Education Association. Nimbkar served as the seminar’s Joint Secretary. The proceedings recorded as important objectives the need to change existing social security benefits, to target missing wage provisions and to ensure that rural women would have all necessary knowledge of their legal rights.

The self-understanding of the delegates as direly needed organizers and experts, reflected in the seminar proceedings through a sometimes-patronising language, was shared by Krishnabai Nimbkar. Thus, she had explained in a broadcast talk on the Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh in September 1955 that the Sangh would “in the spirit of trusteeship”, “act as a spokesman for the rural women”.

“Till the rural women emerge from their shell and assert a leadership of their own, it requires someone to voice their hopes and aspirations, their urges and their needs and to help them to shape their own programmes for their own betterment”. 4

The envisaged patronage that permeates the broadcast was noticeable in similar initiatives. It points to the complicated hierarchical relationship between the women ‘experts’, being often from a middle-class and urban background, and their programme ‘targets’, i.e., the rural women.

Moreover, it raises the question of how much space in designing, implementing and re-adjusting rural development schemes was given to the recipients and collaborators of such programmes. Taylor C. Sherman has explored this question in her work on the Central Social Welfare Board. Social workers employed in the Welfare Extension Projects devised by the Board shared a strong belief that rural women were unaware of their own needs. Consequently, the workers were meant to respond to the ‘felt needs’ of rural women. Their top-down efforts to induce rural women to articulate their needs from the bottom-up was, as Sherman has shown, not void of tensions (Sherman 2021: 307–308). Similar ideas also informed Nimbkar’s approach, for instance, when she defined as a task for village workers to raise the awareness of the rural women in regard to the needs of their households.
At the same time, Nimbkar was sensible to the recurring problem of urban middle-class women being in charge of these village projects without having a sufficient knowledge of rural India or an understanding for the rural women’s need. To solve this problem and to understand not the ‘felt’, but the ‘real’ needs of rural women, Nimbkar suggested repeatedly undertaking surveys and fact-finding questionnaires to collect necessary data. Again, we see here her strong belief in the necessity of a scientific methodology applicable in state-led and voluntary organized development projects.

The need for a scientific, knowledge-based approach in rural development initiatives also drove Nimbkar’s international work. At the conference of the ACWW in Toronto during a round-table on technical assistance, she advocated the closer cooperation between western organisations that could provide material assistance and the societies on the ground that would possess the necessary knowledge of the needs based on local conditions. Her interjection in the discussion aimed to secure that such cooperation would be more efficient and useful. At the same time, it carried a subtle claim for equality with western actors in organising and implementing rural development programmes in postcolonial contexts (The Associated Country Women of the World 1953: 30). This insistence on equality, on the importance of mutual learning and hence the rejection of any notion of superiority of western activists when it came to knowledge and organisational skills in development work, is also conveyed in Nimbkar’s correspondence with colleagues from the wider ACWW network. In 1957, for instance, the Honorary Secretary of the ACWW thanked Nimbkar for having sent papers on the National Seminar on Development Work among Rural Women. She felt that these papers not only covered “important ground”, but gave “plenty of food for thought and resultant action”.  

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Picture showing the work of women ‘experts’ from an undated leaflet titled “Gram Sevika”
Despite her interjections, Nimbkar was of the opinion that non-western participation in rural development programmes was still lacking behind. At the South East Asian Conference and Seminar of the ACWW held in Calcutta in July 1958, Nimbkar therefore encouraged the participants from different Asian countries to go ahead in their work and to forge ties with organisations such as the ACWW so that their ideas and voices would receive recognition on the international stage. As the ACWW acted as a consultative body in different sections of the United Nations, participating in this network allowed Asian activists to campaign international organisations for more attention to and assistance for the development of their countries (Associated Country Women of the World 1958: 63–64). Nimbkar, for instance, had been asked to comment on ideas in the area of rural development that the ACWW was asked to present to UNESCO in 1955.
The emphasis on equality and on being heard, however, did not foreclose requests for material assistance in establishing rural development programmes. After her return from Canada in 1954, Nimbkar, for instance, had hoped to receive financial support from the Canadian Women’s Institutes for an ACWW village project in India, a pilot project based in Maharashtra. In pursuing this idea, she did not only correspond with colleagues in Canada and the United States and with the Headquarters of the ACWW, but also tried to solicit support from the Indian government. Although, nothing seems to have come out of her efforts at this time, the ACWW became an important donor for various Indian non-state rural development projects in the 1960s and 1970s.

Krishnabai Nimbkar’s approach to rural development was not free from middle-class ideas and prejudices regarding India’s rural population. At the same time, Nimbkar stressed the necessity to involve rural women in the initiatives and to structure the work according to the real, not assumed needs in the villages. To be able to successfully pursue rural development schemes and hence to contribute to India’s nation building, Nimbkar urged her audiences and co-workers to take up scientific approaches to find the right and efficient methods and means for the success of rural pilot projects. Outside of India, Nimbkar established through the ACWW various networks with North American and European actors in pursuance of rural development work. Using these networks to publicize India’s efforts, Nimbkar seemed to have contributed to the international knowledge fields and discourses of rural development. In doing so, she insisted on a recognition of actors from the Global South and their work based on equality.

Footnotes

1. If not cited differently, all the following information on Krishnabai Nimbkar’s work is from the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Manuscript Section [henceforth NMML], Krishnabai Nimkbar Papers [henceforth KNP], Subject Files. ↩

2. NMML, KNP, II. Subject Files, File No. 11: Letter by K. Nimbkar to A. Mayer, 14.8.1956. ↩

3. NMML, KNP, II. Subject Files, File No. 8: Krishnabai Nimbkar: A collective and retrospective report on her six-month assignment as Special Officer, Social Education (Women) by Dr. (Mrs.) Krishnabai Nimbkar, period of assignment: September 1, 1954 to February 28, 1955. ↩

4. NNML, KNP, II. Subject Files, File No. 8: Broadcast talk on Poona Air: Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh and development work among rural women. ↩

5. NMML, KNP, II. Subject Files, File No 5: Letter from E.H. Pratt to K. Nimbkar, 21.3.1957. ↩

References


