Beyond the ‘poison of prejudice’

Indian and Australian women talk about the White Australia policy

Heather Goodall and Devleena Ghosh

This article opens two new inquiries into Australia–India relations. First, substantial existing analysis of the White Australia policy after the Second World War begins from Australian perspectives and sources: this article starts from the Indian side. It focuses on Indian women – on what they were reading in public media and what they said in speeches – because Indian women’s personal and political contacts with Australia increased during the Cold War. Secondly, we explore the contemporary potential of cross-cultural collaboration – between researchers from Australian and Indian backgrounds – to identify the dissonances in our interpretations and ask why those differences have arisen.

This article has been peer reviewed.

Introduction: Collaboration, dissonance and its potential

In this article we undertake two related explorations. The first traces formal exchanges, through conference attendance, between left-wing women in India and Australia after the Second World War. The views of women activists are important because, while the Cold War appears to have narrowed the international contacts of many trade unionists and other activists to Europe and the United States, the contacts between the women's movements of India and Australia seem to have increased from 1945 until at least the mid-1960s. So we examine the perspectives of Indian and Australian activists who crossed national borders for shared political purposes.¹ There is little information in the existing historiography in either country about these exchanges between women’s movements or associated ones such as the peace movement. Australian women were present at key events in Indian history, but their contributions and

¹ This approach has emerged from the research of Ann Curthoys, who problematised the histories of gendered colonial relations in Australia and transnationally. Much of her writing has been created in collaborative research with John Docker, Stephen Muecke and others.
speeches have not been well recorded or analysed. Similarly, the speeches of the considerable number of Indian women at significant Australian women’s conferences have received little notice. What were they seeing and hearing in their own country to prepare them for these conversations with women from the other? Is it possible to locate what they said in speeches and media recordings of their meetings?

Our second exploration is into the possibilities of collaborative research itself. We are mindful of the challenge that Lily Kong and her co-editors in Remaking Area Studies made to traditional ‘regional studies’ research. Too often, they suggest, ‘collaborations’ between developed and developing world academics merely tick the funding boxes as ‘cross-cultural’; in reality, a European or US academic usually drives the analytical work while the developing country scholars act as glorified research assistants. In our case, both of us have worked at universities in Sydney, but have differing backgrounds. Heather Goodall grew up and was educated in Sydney and lived during the 1980s in central Australia and south east Asia. Devleena Ghosh grew up and was educated in Rajasthan, Delhi and Calcutta, travelling in Asia and Europe before migrating to live in Sydney in the 1980s. In conducting our research we explored our many points of common ground as well as of dissonance. We began to realise that the latter, produced by our different educational and cultural backgrounds in India and Australia, could be deployed as a constructive research strategy. Our differences have forced each of us to articulate what might otherwise be unacknowledged assumptions as well as to compel us, sometimes uncomfortably, to view our own culture from the other’s perspective. Recognising these differences allowed us to identify new research questions and deepen our exploration of the research results.

Our first point of dissonance – and the subject of this paper – is the significance of the White Australia policy for our project. During her childhood and education in India, Devleena’s main (almost only) awareness of Australia was of its immigration policy, still known in India as ‘White Australia’ – she knew practically nothing else about Australia apart from the ‘outback’. Heather, although critical of Australia’s past immigration practices, expected sport – particularly cricket – to be the dominant factor in Indian consciousness about Australia. She expected the White Australia issue to be a sporadic rather than a sustained association.

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arising over disputes about specific border entries or deportations. Our own differences led us to ask whether people in each country might have seen the White Australia policy so differently in the past.³

The voluminous literature in Australia about the White Australia policy written by Australian political scientists and historians has focused mainly on decisions made in Australia at the political and bureaucratic level, with occasional references to views expressed in newspapers and political parties.⁴ Only a handful of studies have addressed the way in which the policy was seen by people in the region: the Asians and Africans who were usually the subjects of it. This group includes David Walker’s work on General Cariappa, Indian Consul General in Australia in the 1950s, Sean Brawley’s 1995 book, White Peril, Alison Broinowski’s 2003 About Face and Eric Meadows’ 2013 article, ‘He No Doubt Felt Insulted.’ ⁵ Walker concentrates on Cariappa’s time in Australia, and his study includes the Indian correspondence as well as the Australian media account of Cariappa’s complex diplomatic interactions. Brawley focuses on diplomatic literature in each of the countries he considers and consequently surveys very few of the vocal English-language Indian mainstream newspapers of the day. Broinowski goes further in seeking the broader philosophical and cultural perspectives of the countries whose people were targeted by the White Australia policy, but she focuses on south-east and east Asia, and surveys very few of the Indian newspapers. Meadows does look specifically at India, but focuses on the views of Australian diplomats serving there. We extend Meadows’

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approach by looking in the Indian press for interest in other arenas of interaction, including political/industrial action.

Our article will also be limited but we attempt to begin the investigation into how Indians more broadly saw the policy. We focussed this initial study on English-language papers where many of the most vocal criticisms of the White Australia Policy were found, in part because these newspapers were addressing both Indian and international audiences. We asked not only what the general Indian press were saying at the time but also what women’s movement publications were saying. We searched as well for what Indian women themselves actually said when in Australia speaking to Australian audiences or when on platforms with Australian women in India.

The White Australia policy, which effectively blocked immigration into Australia by people from outside north-western Europe, was aimed particularly at Chinese and Indian labourers in the eastern states, at Japanese divers in the northern Australian pearling fields and, in southern Western Australia, at Indian transport managers, often called Afghans, whose camel trains and later trucking companies supplied the gold fields. The policy had been clearly racial in intent and operation from the start, echoing similar legislation in California – in 1862 – and the South African settler colony. In this formative period, ironically, the British criticised the policy for hampering mobility across the Empire and called for its modification. Most of the press in India and the Islamic press in Britain and South Africa attacked it as anti-Asian. The policy was again bitterly debated internationally after the First World War, as Australian Labor Prime Minister William Hughes battled successfully to prevent racial equality from becoming a founding concept of the League of Nations.

The Second World War disrupted the old order. It forged new alliances against Fascism in European theatres, against Japanese expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, generated many warfare-forced migrations and led to decolonisation. Nationalist movements had been active across India and south-east Asia from the early twentieth century and often before. Some had been suppressed during the Second World War while others chose to cooperate with their colonisers against

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6 Tavan, Long Slow Death of White Australia, 10, fn 6, British protest occurred 1901.
Japanese expansion. As the war ended, however, there was widespread confidence that new relationships – including those between colonised and colonising peoples – would flourish across the region. We focus on two particular postwar periods – the later Chifley Labor government, 1945 to 1949, and the early Menzies years, from 1952 until 1956. Our final section analyses the conversations between Indian and Australian women in each of those two periods in light of the information circulating in India at that time.

I. 1945–1949: New beginnings or back to the past?

Relations between India and Australia were shaped directly by the changes brought by the Second World War. The war forced some new alliances to cross old imperial and racial lines. In 1941, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms Address and the Allies’ Atlantic Charter promised self-determination for all and decolonisation for European empires. Nationalists in Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, South Africa and elsewhere supported India’s independence struggle – before and after India’s and Pakistan’s troubled partition in 1947 – but they also demanded the restriction of migration from either country and sometimes the removal of Indian populations already in these British colonies.

At the same time Indian attitudes to Australia were shaped positively by Australian maritime unionists’ support for Indonesian Independence in September 1945 through the boycott of Dutch shipping. This maritime dispute was assumed to have support from the Australian Labor government and was favourably reported across India. The Committee of the Indian National Congress passed a motion at Lahore on 4 October 1945 recording its appreciation of:

the attitude of Australian workers and seamen in refusing to load Dutch ships, demonstrating the solidarity of labour with colonial freedom.

On 13 October, Jawaharlal Nehru himself released a statement saying in part:

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9 Hindu, 3 October 1945, 5 October 1945.
Australian, Chinese and other seamen have refused to load war materials meant for the suppression of the Indonesian Republic. That example of solidarity and effective action should be followed in India.  

Nehru and other public figures in India were hostile to European assumptions of racial superiority and argued that the independence promised in the Atlantic Charter could only be achieved through fundamental changes within all countries. In both India and Australia, there was an optimism that these new relationships, formed at the end of the war, would flourish as these changes occurred. 

Australian diplomats in India took a narrower focus. They advised Ben Chifley’s government that, to give the appearance of fairness, it should modify the White Australia policy with a quota system to allow entry to a small number of carefully selected Indians. This approach merely tinkered with technicalities but Arthur Calwell, as minister for immigration, strongly opposed such ‘relaxation’, which he claimed would be ‘viewed with alarm and hostility by the general Australian public’. 

The lingering Indian distrust caused by the White Australia policy affected discussions about Trusteeship in the newly established United Nations (UN). As early as August 1946 there was ‘frank discussion and spirited attack’ from India and China on Australia’s proposed Trusteeship of Papua New Guinea. Widespread Indian press criticism led to a lengthy rebuttal by Australian author Frank Clune in Calcutta’s *Statesman* defending the White Australia policy as protecting economic and social conditions. 

Criticism in India peaked in 1947 when the Australian government attempted a series of deportations. During the war Australia had admitted allies in the war against Japan, including numerous shipping crews and servicemen from China, British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. In late 1947, however, Australia reasserted its exclusion policy.

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10 *Hindusthan Standard (HS)*, 17 October 1945.

11 Ibid; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), National Archives of Australia (NAA), A1068/7, item M47/9/2/5.

12 I. McKay to H. V. Evatt, 22 December 1946, DFAT, NAA, A1067/1, item M46/9/21; McKay to Evatt, Despatch 20/47, 2 April 1947, DFAT, NAA, A1068/7, item 47/9/2/5.

13 A. Calwell to McKay, 9 May 1947, DFAT, NAA, A1068/7, item 47/9/2/5.

14 McKay to Evatt, 22 December 1947 (noting *ILO Information Bulletin* 36, 1 August 1946), DFAT, NAA, A1067/1, item M46/9/21.

15 *Statesman*, 21 and 22 August 1947.

Fourteen Malay seamen, many with Australian wives and children, were deported without their families. At the same time the Australian government began a protracted attempt to deport Annie O’Keefe, the widow of a Dutch Indonesian soldier and her five children, despite Annie’s marriage, after her first husband’s death, to Australian citizen Joseph O’Keefe. This deportation was finally rejected by the High Court on 19 March 1949 but not before there had been an outcry from Indians and other Asians as well as many Australians who abhorred this individual cruelty, even if they supported the policy in general. Criticism in Indian newspapers contrasted Australia’s plea for British migrants with its refusal to admit Asians. The *Indian Express* (Madras) editorial in February stated:

> Australia’s immigration policy is pronouncedly discriminating: whereas Mr Calwell has been pathetically pleading with the United Kingdom for wholesale transfer of communities and their industries, he has been also resolutely deporting innumerable useful citizens who had a stake in Australia simply because they happened to possess a tinted skin …

The *Indian Express* strongly endorsed the *Sydney Morning Herald* argument that it was incongruous for the Australian government to oppose Dutch aggression in Indonesia on the one hand and to expel Indonesians from Australia on the other.

Some people failed to enter Australia at all. In January 1948 Australian immigration officials in Bombay Harbour boarded an Indian ship bound for Australia. They ‘screened’ its passengers and ejected 150 Anglo–Indians who had planned to emigrate to Australia, as many did after Indian Independence in August 1947. In the ‘Camp of Lost Hopes’ (as the *Sydney Morning Herald* called it) scores of Anglo–Indians were told by Australian officials that they were not ‘white’ enough to come to Australia.

Australians often deluded themselves that Indians supported the exclusionary immigration policy. The argument that the policy was

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17 *Indian Express* (Madras), 3 February 1949.

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economic, not racial, had been unconvincing from the start\textsuperscript{19} but the situation worsened when External Affairs Minister H. V. Evatt failed to recognise that Nehru considered the issue of racial discrimination to be fundamental. Evatt’s claim in February 1949 that Nehru ‘supported the White Australia policy’\textsuperscript{20} was met with scathing criticism in the Indian press.\textsuperscript{21} Nehru’s response was measured and dignified but definite: ‘I thought a racial policy was wrong and to be deprecated.’\textsuperscript{22} Evatt’s apology was widely reported in India and the diaspora. The *Free Press Journal* in Bombay carried the sarcastic headline: ‘Dr Evatt Regrets: He Was Misunderstood.’\textsuperscript{23}

The archives of the Australian Foreign Service indicate that it organised its files into national groups (that is, India and Pakistan) and that it routinely surveyed only the mainstream English-language Indian newspapers, the *Times of India* and the *Statesman* (Calcutta).\textsuperscript{24} It did not, however, collect or comment on the far wider cross section of Indian newspapers which were compiled by the Indian Foreign Affairs department into its ‘White Australia’ file, which included Pakistani press.\textsuperscript{25} This Indian collection included the *Bombay Chronicle*, the *Free Press Journal* (Bombay), the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (Calcutta), the *Searchlight* (Patna), the *Liberator* (Madras), the *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), the *Tribune* (Lahore), the *Indian Express* (Madras) and the *Leader* (Allahabad). Furthermore, the Indian Foreign Service gathered press comment on White Australia from countries that had substantial Indian populations, like Singapore and Fiji. In some cases, Australian news articles were reprinted alongside furious local editorials and reports in newspapers such as the *Straits Times* or the *Malaya Tribune*.\textsuperscript{26} Such editorials were often republished in Indian newspapers – amplifying within India the rising hostility

\textsuperscript{19} *Indian Express* (Madras), 3 February 1949.
\textsuperscript{22} *Canberra Times* (CT), 24 February 1949, 25 February 1949; *Indian News Chronicle*, 24 February 1949.
\textsuperscript{24} National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra, various series.
\textsuperscript{25} ‘White Australia’ file, NAI, Delhi, F 208 (2).
\textsuperscript{26} ‘White Australia’ File, NAI, editorials from the *Fiji Samachar* were frequently collected, from the Malayan (*Malaya Tribune*) and Singaporean press (*Straits Times*) and, through London, news was gathered from Indian newspapers in Kenya and South Africa.
to White Australia and Calwell’s insults. Around 1949, the Indian diplomatic corps also began collecting articles on the systematic discrimination faced by Aboriginal Australians. This gave the lie to claims that no colour bar existed within Australia.\(^27\)

When the High Court quashed the attempted deportation of Annie O’Keefe on 19 March 1949, Calwell’s previous vitriolic statements were widely quoted throughout India, as in the *Hindustan Times*:

> The only people (in Australia) who want to water down the ‘White Australia’ policy are extremists of the Right and Left and silly sentimentalists … The fact is that only Asiatics who are political agitators are interested in our immigration policy … \(^28\)

Especially quoted, was Calwell’s statement that there would be ‘no appeasement, no quota, no watering down’ of the White Australia policy.\(^29\) In a story headed ‘Provocative and Insulting’, the *Bombay Chronicle* offered an overview of Indian–Australian relations:

> In one single speech Mr Arthur Calwell, Australia’s Immigration Minister, has very nearly destroyed all prospects of Asia and Australia maintaining friendly relations with each other … According to Mr Calwell and men like him, the dirty, uncouth criminal from the back waters of Europe and white countries is more acceptable than and superior to the best in Asia.\(^30\)

The paper’s strength of feeling was evident in its conclusion that “This is not a reasonable case but racial fanaticism *in excelsis*.”

For many Indians, Calwell’s aggressive defence of the White Australia policy reasserted the pre-war alignment of Australia with colonial powers. Furthermore, according to the editor of the *Pioneer* at Lucknow – a paper which had employed Australian reporters in the past – it aligned Australia with the emerging Apartheid state of South Africa, led by Prime Minister Daniel Malan since 1948. In a story headed ‘Whither “White” Australia?’ the *Pioneer* wrote of Malan and Calwell as protagonists of ‘white’ supremacy who sought to ‘cloak their discriminatory policy within the plea of economic considerations’. The people, he went on,


\(^{30}\) *Bombay Chronicle*, 28 March 1949.
must see that the Malans and Calwells, with their racial legislation, are not allowed to jeopardise their future happiness by rousing rancor and creating discord in a world slowly recuperating from the wounds of the last World War.31

Indian readers saw media opinion shifting over the final years of the Chifley government. In 1945, the Indian press had vacillated between a new respect for Australia’s support for decolonisation and suspicions about the persistence of the old White Australia policy. By the fall of the Labor Government in 1949, however, any goodwill had been squandered by Calwell’s rhetoric and the failure of either Chifley or Evatt to propose real change.

II. 1952 – 1956: Republic, Commonwealth, Cold War and Bandung

Indian readers were shown a much more promising view in the early years of the Menzies government after its rise to power in 1949. The world scene, of course, had changed too. New global institutions, like the UN and the British Commonwealth, were transforming the postwar situation, while the Cold War imposed new polarising alignments. Some of the tensions which had grown in the late 1940s between Australia and India were defused – partly because of the role played by R. G. Casey as external affairs minister from 1951. Casey was, from 1944 to 1946, a reasonably well-regarded former British governor of Bengal, who had criticised Calwell’s tactless handling of a ‘sensitive portfolio’.32

Simmering tensions remained, however, over the UN Trusteeships and their implications for the Commonwealth. India became a republic in 1950 but remained in the Commonwealth, a decision which was bitterly contested within India and achieved only after a strenuous campaign by Nehru. In Australia, Prime Minister Robert Menzies paid lip service to equality within the Commonwealth, but was suspected in India of favouring an inner circle of old white settler colonies for all important decisions.33 The Commonwealth sat uneasily within the UN structures, where the General Assembly, at least in principle, had an equal voice for each nation-state, no matter how recent its creation nor how diverse its ethnicity.

32 *DT*, 21 March 1949.
33 Menzies’ attitude referred to in Crocker to Casey, 6 December 1954, DFAT, NAA, A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 2.
Walter Crocker, appointed Australian High Commissioner to India in 1952, attempted to allay fears in India but revealed his own deep-seated prejudices in his confidential advice to Casey. Given the fact that we had ‘saddled ourselves’, he wrote, with a system ‘which invites and legalises irresponsible and mischievous meddling in colonial problems by Cubans, Filipinos and the rest’, we should note that, ‘amongst the anti-colonialists, India is the least irresponsible’.34 Over the next five years, the Indian press closely observed the way Australia and other countries voted in the UN. Three events brought suspicions over the White Australia policy back into the forefront. The first was Menzies’ 1953 visit to South Africa, then still a member of the Commonwealth but governed by the Afrikaaner National Party under Daniel Malan and in the process of implementing Apartheid. No Australian studies of the White Australia policy have identified this visit as a factor in Indian attitudes, but it received wide publicity in Indian newspapers. Calwell had been associated with Malan and South Africa but from the time of this visit, Menzies and his government also became linked with Apartheid in Indian media coverage. Prime Minister Malan hosted Menzies to a luncheon on 9 July 1953 at which he gave a glowing tribute to the White Australia policy, highlighting its similarities to Apartheid. He predicted that India would present a threat and offered South African support. Menzies appeared surprised by Malan’s claims but, within days, Menzies broadcast a speech sympathising with the South African government and its goals for ‘separate but equal development’.35

While Crocker believed that most anger in the Indian press was directed at Malan, several key newspapers expressed grave reservations about Menzies’ broadcast.36 As an Australian diplomat reported, ‘the Indian Express, directed by Feroze Gandhi, son-in-law of Nehru, saw the episode as further evidence of the determination of the West to impose Western civilisation on Africa and Asia by force’. The Hindustan Times, he continued, was also concerned. In its weekly editorial on 14 July it

34 Crocker to Casey, 8 October 1952, DFAT, NAA, A/1068/7, item M47/9/2/5.
35 Menzies spoke on a radio broadcast over Melbourne Radio (station unspecified) on 2 August 1953 reporting on his South African visit. Text of parts of the broadcast was carried by Reuters, 3 Monday August, and was quoted widely in the Indian press. This detail, including quoted sections is included in: O. L. Davis to Sec, DFAT, Memo 840/53, Despatch 21, DFAT A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 2. Details of Indian responses to this broadcast are in Crocker’s memo to Casey over the damage it had done. Crocker to Casey, 15 September 1953, DFAT A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 2.
36 Crocker to Casey, 15 September 1953. Criticism was directed at Australia and its White Australia policy over four days from the Times of India (TOI), 4 August 1953, HT, 14 July 1953, 4 August 1953 and the Free Press Journal, 4 August 1953, as well as the Pakistan Review: Pakistan’s National Cultural Monthly, September Issue, 1953.
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had said ‘neither Australians in high positions nor the Australian press has taken objection to Dr Malan’s declaration’. The paper scathingly satirised Australia’s position by saying that it found it ‘amazing’ that the Australian press had not objected to Malan’s assertion of the identical goals of Apartheid and the White Australian policy, and that instead it had been left to Sir R. P. Paranjpye, a former Indian High Commissioner, to defend Australia by claiming that its people held no ‘racial prejudices’ against Indians.37

Crocker tried to intervene to smother the anti-Australian press,38 but his advice to Casey was pessimistic:

it would be a disservice to Indo–Australian relations ... to conceal the fact that [Menzies’] broadcast, perfectly natural though it was for an Australian or for a South African audience, was unlucky as regards its effect in Asia. Race relations are the primary, almost the pathological, preoccupation of Indians, and to condone South Africa is to flick Indians on the raw ...39

The second event – or rather series of related events – was the very public controversies in Australia over the statements of General Cariappa, the Indian High Commissioner in Canberra appointed in April 1953. From his earliest public statement, in Darwin40 in November 1953 till the end of his term in 1956, Cariappa consistently argued in all his public statements that Australia should seek immigrants from Second World War allies to ameliorate its low population and need for development. He found it offensive and irrational that Australia insisted on rejecting wartime allies on the grounds of race while seeking immigrants from former enemies.41 It was, however, only when he made a similar speech in Brisbane in June 1954, that Cariappa’s comments were widely publicised in both the Australian and Indian press.42 The Indian government

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37 Unidentified DFAT officer (MD), 14 July 1953, attached to Crocker to Casey, 9 July 1953, DFAT A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 2; Paranjpye, Press Release, Indian High Commission Office, Canberra, 12 July 1946, detailed in Crocker to Casey, 24 July 1953, DFAT, A1838/283, 169/10/1, part 2.
38 Crocker explains his actions in Crocker to Casey, 24 July 1953.
39 Crocker to Casey, 9 July 1953.
41 Notes on 8 November 1953 conversation between Cariappa and unidentified officer, reported 11 December 1953, DFAT, NAA, A1838/278, item 169/10/7, part 1.
42 CT, Courier Mail (Brisbane), the Adelaide Advertiser and many other Australian papers on 22 June 1954; Hindu on Cariappa, 24 June 1954 and 26 June 1954; Hindu on Australia’s official refusal to compromise, 7 August 1954 and 19 August 1954.
responded with cautious support for Cariappa but it held grave reservations about encouraging Indian migration to Australia because it was not convinced they could live there ‘with dignity and honour as full citizens’. In Australia, the emphasis was not on Cariappa’s main points: rather it was on his minor claim that Australia’s opposition to regional communism was undermined by its racially discriminatory immigration policy, which alienated India and Pakistan from the Commonwealth. The Courier Mail was just one of many papers which picked this up in its headline: ‘Driving Millions to Reds: INDIAN BITTER ON ‘WHITE AUSTRALIA’ POLICY’.

Calwell, then opposition immigration spokesperson, criticised the Menzies government for not defending White Australia. Aiming his attack squarely at India, Calwell requoted his own statement of 12 July 1948, that Australia needed a ‘homogeneous European population’ and:

> With insoluble Indian problems in Singapore, Ceylon, Fiji and South Africa before our eyes, we are not going to allow the establishment of Indian settlements in this country.

Indian newspaper readers now regularly saw pessimistic accounts of Australian attitudes. In December 1954, Crocker wrote to Casey in his final dispatch, that the Indian press invariably ‘rush[ed] to conclusions ... as it did last year, over what it called a ‘Malan–Menzies Axis’ of race discrimination’.

Despite Crocker’s advice and with an extraordinary failure of insight, Casey wrote to Nehru asking for his help ‘to counter Communist subversion’ in south-east Asia by offering ‘moral support’ to the governments of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and his intervention to ‘restrain the Indonesians’ on the topic of the Netherlands’ refusal to withdraw from West Irian. Nehru unequivocally rejected both Casey’s requests.

Casey’s private diplomatic blunder was followed by a far more damaging media furore in India in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference of

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43 Hindu, 26 June 1954. This quote from an unnamed Indian Government spokesperson reflects closely the views expressed by Nehru on a number of occasions, that a sustained and continuous problem existed in Australian attitudes.
44 Courier Mail, 22 June 1954.
45 Press release, issued by Mr Calwell 25 June 1954, DFAT, NAA, A1838/278, item 169/10/7, part 1; SMH, 26 June 1954, 5.
46 Crocker, Final dispatch, 6 December 1954, DFAT, NAA, A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 2.
47 Casey to Nehru, 6 April 1955, DFAT, NAA, A1838/283, item 169/10/1 part 3.
48 Nehru to Casey, 13 April 1955, DFAT, NAA, A1838/283, item 169/10/1, part 3.
Non-aligned Nations held in April 1955. The Menzies government had been reluctant to attend this event and, despite some support from India and Burma, the Indonesian hostility to Australia over West Irian ensured there was no formal invitation to Australia.\(^4^9\) Non-government observers were welcomed but official Australian observers were marginalised.\(^5^0\) Nevertheless, apparently in another attempt to mend fences, Casey let it be known that Australia would welcome an invitation to the next Afro-Asian Non-aligned Conference.\(^5^1\) It was far too late: Australian advances were contemptuously and publicly spurned in December 1955 in two major newspapers, the Bombay *Free Press Journal* and the *Times of India*. The latter’s editorial explicitly rejected Australia’s request on the basis of the White Australia policy, Australia’s voting record in the UN and its support for the Netherlands’ continued colonialism in West Irian.\(^5^2\) ‘The White Australia Policy’, it argued, ‘has been a standing affront to Asian sentiment’:

> The plea that it is not inspired by racial prejudices but only designed to maintain economic and social balances is unconvincing in the face of the operation of a definite colour, as distinct from an economic or social, immigration bar.\(^5^3\)

Australia’s despatch of troops to Malaya in 1956 led to further criticism in India. It seemed to confirm Australia’s long-held commitment to a racially discriminatory and unjust colonial world in a new Cold War context. An Australian diplomat commented that Bombay’s *Free Press Journal*, a leading English-language daily newspaper, was indicative of the general view when it said that ‘use of Australian troops against armed nationalists in Malaya is the first piece of aggression committed by a member of SEATO working within the framework of the Commonwealth’. As a sponsor of the Bandung Conference, the *Free Press* editorial had continued, India could not watch silently while the Commonwealth was ‘perverted by white members into a formidable weapon dedicated to imperialism’. Urging New Delhi to lodge a strong protest both in London and Canberra, the paper declared ‘if perversion continues the time will

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\(^4^9\) *Hindu*, 2 January 1955.
\(^5^1\) *TOI*, 26 December 1949.
\(^5^3\) *Times of India*, 27 December 1955.
have clearly come for India to leave the Commonwealth as Burma has done’.\(^{54}\)

In the view of the Indian press, Australia consistently aligned itself with the old colonial world. Although the Australian government attempted to use its sponsorship of the Colombo Plan to restore favour with its Asian neighbours, thus gaining an invitation to the Afro–Asian network, it failed to persuade the Indian press of its changed intentions. Julia Suares has pointed out that Chifley attempted to open up new channels of communication with India, and Meg Gurry has argued that Menzies was largely responsible for the later estrangement with India.\(^{55}\) Indian newspapers, however, regardless of region or political orientation, repeatedly highlighted the sustained commitment of both the Chifley and Menzies governments to the racially discriminatory immigration system. Although Australians were only aware of Indian antagonism to the White Australia policy when it flared up over particular incidents, for the Indian press the White Australia policy was an underlying constant of the character of Australia, no matter which party was in power. This laid the basis for a belief among informed Indians that Australians believed in European racial superiority and in racially discriminatory internal policies and international relations.

### III. Women’s voices

What then can we learn about the conversations that activist women had with each other at conferences, in both India and Australia, during these two periods?

In the first of our two periods, there was accelerated mobilisation around the Charters of Women’s Rights in both countries. Jessie Street, who was born in India, raised in rural New South Wales and represented the Chifley government at the formation of the United Nations, attended the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) Congress in January 1946 when the Indian Women’s Charter was adopted before being taken to the UN. Kapila Khandvala, an experienced teacher and head of Primary Education under the Bombay Education Department, and Mithan Lam, India’s first female barrister, were both active in the January AIWC decision and came to Australia for the second conference of the Australian

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\(^{55}\) Suares, ‘Engaging with Asia’; Gurry, ‘Leadership and Bilateral Relations’.
Women’s Charter movement in August 1946. Both are clearly visible in the conference photograph. In February 1948 Kath Bacon, a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) represented the Eureka Youth League at the World Federation of Democratic Youth Congress (sometimes known as the Youth Congress) in Calcutta and then joined a Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) team of inquiry which was travelling through northern India. In our second period, Australian Betty Riley, another CPA member who had been working for the WIDF in Berlin, attended and spoke at the inaugural meeting of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in Calcutta in June 1954. Lucy Woodcock and Jessie Street (both of whom were sympathetic to the CPA though neither were members) went to the All India Peace and Solidarity Congress in Madras in December 1954 and in January 1955 travelled to Nagpur, Delhi and Bombay to meet with NFIW friends.

Despite this significant presence of Indian and Australian activists in each other’s country over this time, there seems to be no record of what they said to one another in the historiography of the period in either country. Indian historiography on the women’s movement has focused on the anti-colonial struggle (prior to 1947) or on the post-1974 emergence of women’s movements in various regions. In women’s history as with other areas of Indian and Pakistani history, the overwhelming focus on nationalist movements, either before or after Independence, means that international connections or international visitors have been of little interest. The NFIW Reports of Congresses do record the presence of Australian women, but offer only brief versions of their speeches. Our preliminary results from reviewing these Reports, and from the memory of surviving Indian activist veterans, suggest that Australian women in India spoke mainly about war and peace, concentrating largely on the


58 *NFIW Congress Reports*, held in personal collection of Sarla Sharma and in NFIW Offices, Delhi.
damaging impacts of the Second World War or on the emerging threats of atomic weapons and the need for disarmament.

There does not seem to have been any clear direction from the Communist movement in either country on this question: women’s organisations associated with the WIDF had a mixed membership, with some members who were Communists and some who were not.\(^\text{59}\) It is not surprising that there was little difference in the topics that CPA members Kath Bacon and Betty Riley spoke about in India compared with those of the non-CPA members, Jessie Street and Lucy Woodcock, who were both sympathetic to the CPA. Kath Bacon reported to the CPA largely about the need to support decolonisation movements in south-east Asia and Africa, with only a passing reference to ending the White Australia policy. Betty Riley’s talk, as reported by the NFIW, seems to have focused largely on the impact of the Second World War in Europe and the priority of ensuring peace. Jessie Street talked about the potential of the UN to maintain peace and Lucy Woodcock spoke of the atomic disasters of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Marshall Islands. We also know from our interviews with elderly Indian women activists that Australian women visiting India in the 1940s and 1950s were scrutinised carefully for any signs of racial prejudice but they seldom asked the Australian women directly about the White Australia policy.\(^\text{60}\)

The views of the Indians visiting Australia are even less visible in Australian historical accounts of women’s activism. There has been little discussion, for example, of what Kapila Khandvala and Mithan Lam said at the Australian Women’s Charter conference in August 1946. Marilyn Lake records only that Indian women were said to have ‘brought greetings’ from India.\(^\text{61}\) Zora Simic does discuss Khandvala’s plenary speech summarising the conference, but, since Simic’s focus is the widening split within the Australian women’s movement, she concentrates on Khandvala’s tactful phrasing of her conclusion.\(^\text{62}\) Yet

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\(^{60}\) Interviews by the authors with Sarla Sharma (February 2013; February 2014); Primla Looomba (February 2014); Rajni Kapur (February 2014).

\(^{61}\) Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999), 197.

given the passionate and lively attention to the White Australia policy in the Indian press by mid-1946, it would have been surprising if these two articulate and prominent Indian visitors had not raised related issues in Australia. With our collaborative dissonance in mind, we decided to look more carefully at the document recording Khandvala’s plenary speech at the Women’s Charter Conference and to search carefully for any evidence of the statements she and Lam may have made during their visit.

Khandvala’s plenary speech in fact not only summarised the conference sessions but listed the many contributions made, and topics covered, by herself and Lam in their busy program in Australia. Lam spoke about women’s movements in India, the position of professional women like herself and ‘White Australia’. Khandvala herself spoke at the education session, chaired by Lucy Woodcock, where she raised concerns about Australian textbooks showing ‘the poison of prejudice’. She spoke as well about the Indian Women’s Charter and the AIWC which had adopted it, and asked Australian women to contribute to Indian famine relief. Her most frequent intervention at the Charter conference however was about peace, on which she spoke four times including a major address at the final rally of the conference.63

There appear to be no detailed notes or transcripts of any of these speeches, and much of the newspaper reporting focussed on their dress.64

The only indication of the content of Lam’s contributions is a brief record of her interview with a journalist in Sydney, published on the front page of the Canberra Times. Headed ‘White Australia Policy an Insult, says Indian Woman’, the paper reported her as saying that:

Social Discrimination such as the White Australia Policy, menaced world peace and coloured people would resent any discrimination against them when they gained their independence.65

In addition, we do have a copy of a speech Khandvala made to conferences of the New Education Fellowship (NEF) in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. As she explained to the final session of the Women’s Charter Conference, she was, as an educator, also taking an active role in NEF meetings. The argument made in this speech, that the Women’s Movement in Australia had to recognise that peace was impossible as long as racial discrimination throve within Australia, is

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63 Kapila Khandvala’s Plenary Speech, Street Papers, MS 2683/3/1210, with biography MS 2683/3/1211, NLA.
64 Barrier Miner (Broken Hill), 6 August 1946.
65 Canberra Times, 12 August 1946.
likely to have also been the content of her interventions at the Women’s Charter Conference.

The transcript of Khandvala’s speech, ‘Education, International Understanding and Peace’, is included with other speeches in a published volume about the NEF Conferences.\textsuperscript{66} Two issues in this speech offer insights into her arguments about ‘White Australia’. The first was the relationship between peace and racial discrimination:

\begin{quote}
It is silly to think that the oppressed peoples, constituting the colonial possession of some of the imperial powers, do not know what freedom is or that they do not love it and desire to have it for themselves … They say that they fought and suffered, side by side in the last war, with the other nations of the world, to destroy fascism, and to establish freedom and peace for all.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

Khandvala went on to give three examples which she said were ‘the most glaring instances of racial discrimination of the coloured races of the world’: segregation in the USA, Apartheid in South Africa and the White Australia policy:

\begin{quote}
All lovers of freedom, democracy and justice must also object to, and fight against, what is known in this country as the ‘White Australia Policy’ … It is definitely racial and not just economic, and it is for that reason that it is objectionable. The real purpose of it is to keep the Asiatics out of Australia on the ground of racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

She satirised Australian fears, pointing out that there had been no rush by Indians to migrate to New Zealand or Canada, despite there being no ‘White New Zealand’ or ‘White Canada’ policies to stop them. She continued, explaining Asian feelings about the Australian policy:

\begin{quote}
This is bound to create a feeling of resentment among the Asiatics … The very idea underlying such policies is abhorrent, insulting and humiliating to the coloured peoples of the world, and they naturally resent it. If there was only the fear of economic standards being disturbed, it could be removed by suitable legislation insisting
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 113.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 114–5.
Beyond the ‘poison of prejudice’

on certain minimum economic standards being made uniformly applicable to all people of all countries.\(^{69}\)

Khandvala believed that education was essential for fundamental change within the metropolitan powers and she called on the NEF to nurture these transformations inside Australia. Her second point, therefore, concerned the practical way to address racial inequalities in which education was a key strategy:

Equality, justice and freedom are the three fundamental principles essential for peace. These very ideas must also form the basis of education, the world over, if humanity is to have peace. It is because these ideas are sadly neglected in education that problems of the coloured and colonial peoples, arising out of racial discrimination and hatred, still exist as the most disturbing factors to world peace.\(^{70}\)

As director of Primary Education in Bombay, Khandvala was deeply worried by what she found in Australian textbooks, although she gave no details of their content:

[t]he text-books in history and geography are full of false and prejudicial information about India. Such false information is bound to promote racial distrust between India and Australia. This is another problem which the NEF Conference, as a world organization, should undertake immediately to solve in the interests of international goodwill and peace, by supervising the distribution of accurate text-books on history and geography, giving correct information of the peoples of the world.\(^{71}\)

These two themes in Khandvala’s NEF speech are strikingly parallel to Nehru’s speeches at this time.\(^{72}\) They both argued that racial discrimination was crucial to the maintenance of colonialism and the outbreak of warfare. Both called not only for the dismantling of the structures of colonialism and the mechanisms for immigration exclusion but also for fundamental change at a personal and community level within the colonising countries. Khandvala’s speeches make it clear that for her, as for Nehru and other Indians, the White Australia policy

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 114–5.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 113.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 116.
\(^{72}\) For example, see Nehru quoted in HS 17 October 1945, 5.
was not just about the technicalities of entry through borders. Instead, Indians like Khandvala, Mihan Lam and Nehru saw these incidents as symptoms of a deep-seated, continuously underlying belief in European racial superiority. Khandvala argued at the NEF conference that it was the abolition of this underlying belief through education (among other strategies) which was essential if equality, justice and peace were to be achieved.

Conclusion: Looking beyond the border post

For Australian politicians and citizens, the White Australia policy seemed to create problems in India only episodically, at particular crisis points such as deportations or international crises. Australian diplomats stationed in India, as Eric Meadows points out, saw the policy differently. They reported time and again that Indians saw the White Australia policy as demonstrating a permanent characteristic of Australia. This Indian perception was only ever temporarily interrupted by contrary events, like the Australian Maritime Unions’ boycott against Dutch shipping in 1945. The broad literature on the White Australia policy, supported by the archival research for this paper, indicates that Australian diplomats of both the Labor and conservative governments focused on modifying only the technicalities of entry – those specific and occasional obstructions at the border. Khandvala, however, like Nehru and others, argued that inequitable structures like colonialism were rooted in a deeper and continuous racial prejudice that had to change inside imperial and colonising societies.

The discussion in this article suggests at least three reasons why Australians seemed then – and today – to be blind to Indian views of the policy as the expression of a continuing underlying problem. Firstly, it was uncommon for the perspective given in Indian newspapers to be reported or even noted in Australian newspapers. Major controversies in Indian media, such as the interaction between South Africa’s Prime Minister Malan and Australia’s Prime Minister Menzies in 1953, were largely invisible in the Australian press at the time. This pattern has been repeated in later Australian histories of the White Australia policy, which have shown little interest in the major English-language newspapers published in India, and no interest at all in those published

73 Meadows, ‘He No Doubt Felt Insulted’.
74 See for example, HS, 17 October 1945, 5.
in Indian languages other than English. There has consequently been little investigation of how Indians may have seen either the policy or Australia’s overall international relations with India.

The differences between Indian and Australian perspectives, demonstrated in our own collaborative discussions, raised further questions. We asked why, despite an already large and growing literature on the women’s movement, there had been so little analysis of the substantive contributions of Indian women – and probably also Indonesian and other Asian women – to the events in which they participated in Australia and to the broader women’s and other progressive movements in the 1950s and 1960s. Histories of women’s political movements in Australia have assumed that the stimulus for policies and goals arose either locally or from Britain and Europe. Where these histories do record the presence of women who came from India, Indonesia and elsewhere in the global south in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, there seems to be an assumption that those women brought little of substance to the discussions in Australia.  

This is perhaps because of the limitations of the archive. Jessie Street’s collection of letters and speeches, for example, is a wonderful resource but, as with all personal writing and memorabilia, gives a very individual perspective. It contains substantial material on Street’s visits to India which focused on interactions between Street herself and male Indian leaders, but Street’s papers do not contain reports of the conversations, noted by other observers, which she had with women activists at the many women’s conferences which she attended.

Even if the archives are limited, there remain questions about decisions made by later historians. Has Khandvala’s 1946 NEF speech, for example, been ignored previously because of expectations that women from the global south had little of substance to contribute? It is hard not to see this as symptomatic of the very concerns which Lam and Khandvala were raising. Both were educated and sophisticated women who had experience of what was even then recognised as one of the most important decolonising struggles of the twentieth century as well as being forerunners among women’s emancipation movements.

75 Lake, Getting Equal, 197; Simic, ‘A New Age? Australian Feminism and the 1940s’, 166.
76 For example, see Lucy Woodcock’s report of Street’s meetings in Amritsar with 25,000 textile workers, most of them women, and 400 women slum residents: Woodcock, ‘Address of Miss Lucy Woodcock to the United Associations of Women 29 Sept 1955’, United Associations of Women News Sheet, October 1955, 3–4, Mitchel Library, MSS 2160, ADD-ON 1317/Box 01.
in any colonised society. Khandvala and Lam had had exposure to English-language education and ideas in the United Kingdom and the United States – to local and international philosophies of resistance and solidarity, and to engagements with the intellectual contributions of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Marx. They were experienced public speakers, Khandvala honing her skills in the education area and Lam in various courts. They were at least bi-lingual, definitely cosmopolitan, with international sympathies and solidarities around peace, education, women’s emancipation movements and progressive politics in general and. At the same time, they were steeped in their own societies and cultures.77

Yet these women were effectively hidden from history: their speeches were either not fully recorded or were not preserved for posterity; they were seldom mentioned in the memoirs and autobiographies written by Australian women activists of the period; and, 50 years on, eminent and progressive historians have failed to notice their eloquent and extensive interventions in debates about education, race and colonialism. Australian colour-blindness has been a product of its own colonising history. The current recoveries of women’s history and international politics require a radical revisioning which recuperates the variegated and crucial interventions that women of colour made to important events in the global arena.

Australia was seen very differently by Indians than Australians might have expected. The idea of egalitarianism was pervasive among all Australians, but particularly left-wingers, who felt that they had defeated British class prejudice. Even right-wing middle class feminists felt they had achieved egalitarianism by doing without domestic servants.78 Yet activist Indians like Khandvala saw Australian culture to be awash with ‘the poison of prejudice’. Viewed through the Indian press, it appears that there were opportunities to challenge this perception on at least two occasions. Once was during the maritime unions’ boycott of Dutch shipping taking arms to fight Indonesian nationalists. The second was with the apparent sympathy of the Menzies government and its external affairs minister R. G. Casey, who had been relatively popular in India and was at least better informed than the Calwell had been. Yet both these opportunities


were squandered. The Chifley government threw away the good will it had earned during the boycott by vigorously deporting wartime allies amidst Calwell’s inflammatory rhetoric. Then the Menzies government, through Menzies’ own words, exposed itself as a strong supporter of the Apartheid Nationalist government in South Africa. Australia’s voting record in the UN confirmed the continued flow of this poisoned river of racism.

The dissonance between Indians and Australians means the frequent Cold War contacts between activists are all the more interesting. That such interactions were being undertaken despite persistent and renewed tensions makes it more important – although no easier – to seek out traces of these interactions even among the ambiguous fragments of memories and mementos.

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About the authors

Heather Goodall is an Adjunct Professor of History at the University of Technology Sydney, a senior researcher with the Centre for Cosmopolitan Civil Societies and deputy coordinator of the Indian Ocean South Asia Research Network. She has worked closely in collaborative projects in Australia with Indigenous people and with community members in innovative social histories on social, economic and environmental themes. Her current research is focussed on 20th century histories in the eastern Indian Ocean. In Countering the Cold War: interactions between Australia and India, 1945 – 1975, through the lens of the women’s movements, an ARC-funded Discovery project, Heather is working with Associate Professor Devleena Ghosh to trace the transnational relations between women’s movements during the Cold War.

Correspondence to Heather Goodall: heather.goodall@uts.edu.au

Devleena Ghosh teaches in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. She has researched and published widely in the fields of colonial and environmental studies and is currently collaborating with Heather Goodall on a project that examines the relationships between progressive women and women’s organisations in India and Australia in

Correspondence to Devleena Ghosh: devleena.ghosh@uts.edu.au