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Sayan Dey  
*Yonphula Centenary College*

Tanmay Srivastava  
*British Fort Foundation*

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## **Voices of the Dead: A Documentary Research on the Scottish Women of Calcutta**

Dr. Sayan Dey<sup>1</sup> and Tanmay Srivastava<sup>2</sup>

The documentary can be accessed through the following link: [Voices of the Dead](#)

### **Abstract**

The process of writing, understanding and interpreting the histories of the European colonizers have always been infected with different forms of social, cultural, gender, and racial hierarchies. With respect to the gender perspective, usually, it is observed that historical narratives that are associated with European colonization in general and the colonization of India by the Europeans in particular are highly heteronormative and patriarchal in nature. In other words, the various socio-historical narratives that make an effort to eulogize the 'contributions' and the 'sacrifices' of the European colonizers mostly talk about European men and systemically and epistemically fail to acknowledge the 'contributions' and 'sacrifices' of the women. As a result, such forms of historical narratives only unfurl a half-baked picture of the actual reality. With respect to these arguments, this documentary research makes an effort to unpack a set of ignored and undervalued historical narratives that are associated with the Scottish women of Calcutta. Most of the existing historical documents that focuses on the functioning of the British East India Company in Calcutta hardly talk about the Scottish in general and/or the Scottish in particular. Thus, this documentary research, which has been funded by a *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) fellowship, has made an effort to selectively bring forth the various social and cultural roles that were played by Scottish women in Calcutta during the time of British colonization. In the process of shedding light on these select Scottish women, this documentary has also made an effort to complicate the histories of colonialism and the challenges of the decolonial gaze.

*Keywords:* European colonization, historical narratives, Scottish women, British East India Company, decolonial gaze.

### **Introduction and the story continues**

This documentary research on the Scottish women of Calcutta is a continuation of our previous research documentary project, which was based on the experiential narratives of the Anglo-Indian women of Bow Barracks, Kolkata. The previous project was also funded by the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS), Bridgewater State University, USA. In order to bring forth the connections between these two projects, we would like to briefly reflect on the previous documentary project. The previous project on the Anglo-Indian women of Bow Barracks in Calcutta "sought to record and archive the undocumented socio-historical narratives of those women" (Dey, 2019: 406). During the previous documentary research, while we were interviewing the Anglo-Indian women, we came across several women who have a Scottish socio-historical

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Yonphula Centenary College, Bhutan.

<sup>2</sup> Student, Class XII, British Fort Foundation (RIPS), Jabalpur and Independent Film Maker.

background. While documenting their life stories, we realized that their socio-historical and inter-racial origin is quite different from those who have originated from the British, Irish, Portuguese, and French. This provoked us to shape this project about the Scottish women of Calcutta. In fact, this project can be analyzed as a precursor of the Anglo-Indian documentary research project, because many women who were influenced by the contributions of the Scottish women were the Anglo-Indians of Kolkata. Later on, some of those women settled in the Bow Barracks neighborhood. In the last project, we also argued that Anglo-Indian women played a pivotal role in transforming the lives of the women of Kolkata, and while completing the project we came to realize that without the socio-historical documentation of the contributions of the Scottish women, the arguments about the socio-cultural practices of the Anglo-Indian women of Kolkata and their impact on the other Indian women would remain underdeveloped.

With respect to these arguments, this project not only unfurls the socio-historical role of Scottish women towards improving the existential conditions of local women of Kolkata, but also how they implemented the colonial philosophies of conversion and proselytizing by uprooting the rich Indian philosophies that were once associated with religion, education, and health. To elaborate further, this documentary upholds the co-existence of two simultaneous and contradictory facts about Scottish women: On the one hand, they acted as humanitarians and on the other, they functioned as colonizers with a civilizing mission. These twin realities make this documentary a part of the larger decolonial project that reveals the complexity of people's lives and the contradictions embedded within colonialism.

### **Why was this documentary research developed?**

The existing socio-historical discourses on the diverse perspectives of colonialism in India are highly fragmented and hierarchical in nature. They are fragmented, because the contemporary frameworks of history continue to analyze the act of colonization by Europeans in a synecdochic manner. In other words, the history of European colonialism in India is widely interpreted and argued on the basis of British colonialism, and as a result it has systematically negated the histories of colonization by the other European countries. This is why, in spite of the fact that the English East India Company started functioning with Scottish officials, it was later on named, the British East India Company and historically it is portrayed as owned exclusively by the British. Besides epistemic fragmentations, the process of writing colonial histories during colonial and the postcolonial times have been largely infected with gender hierarchies. This 'hierarchy within hierarchy' is very prominent when there is a clear lack of sufficient historical records with respect to the contribution of European women in shaping the society and culture of contemporary India. A few research articles and unpublished documents reveal that many European women who accompanied their fathers and/or husbands to India assisted their male family members in establishing the colonial empire by building churches, schools, government institutions, libraries, hospitals, etc. Their actions deserve scrutiny that this documentary project launches, to disentangle the simultaneity of their efforts in constructing colonialism while claiming to lend a humanitarian dimension to that colonialism. Given the relatively unknown histories of these Scottish women of Calcutta, we begin what we hope will be further inquiries into the potential contradictions, discontinuities, and overlaps between the masculinist colonial project and projects initiated by women.

### *The Women's Stories*

During the early nineteenth century when Scottish and British officials were busy building their administrative empire in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal, a group of Scottish women, consisting of nurses, doctors, teachers, missionaries, and administrators, arrived in the city to work for the welfare of local women, who were highly victimized by patriarchal violence and religious hierarchies. A decolonial perspective cannot ignore that under the auspices of protecting and “advancing” the socio-cultural wellbeing of Indian women, Scottish women were engaged in expropriating Indigenous, native, socio-historical practices and appropriating the European/colonial ones toward their own objectives in a convincing manner. Doubtlessly, Scottish women indeed played a crucial role in establishing churches, hospitals and schools for locals (especially for local women) and serving there as missionaries, nurses, apothecaries and teachers respectively. However, their intention of building European/colonial frameworks of existential ethics and moralities cannot be ignored. This significant socio-historical episode has never been archived in the oral and/or written form, and currently it only exists as stories chiseled on the gravestones of their respective graves at the Scottish Cemetery in Kolkata. Therefore, this documentary was conceptualized and recorded in the Scottish Cemetery to render their graves a starting point in reconstructing a decolonial analysis of their lives. The cemetery is tucked away in one of the narrow lanes of Crowe Street in North Kolkata. Since the socio-historical narratives of selected Scottish women in the documentary were derived from their respective gravestones, this documentary is titled, “Voices of the Dead”.

In order to generate a de-hierarchized, depolarized and pluri-versal platform for postcolonial socio-cultural discourses in India, it is crucial to unearth the different untold episodes of colonial narratives. This project, which is a brief chapter of our current independent research on the various inter-racial communities of/in Kolkata, analyzes the different roles that were played by these Scottish women towards developing education, employment, healthcare, familial duties and public responsibilities. In 2013, the UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) in collaboration with Presidency University of Kolkata launched a joint research project to document and archive all the graveyards of the Scottish Cemetery. During the time of documentation, it was realized that due to lack of proper maintenance several gravestones were broken, the chiseled writings on them, faded and several of the graves, blanketed with wild growth. As a result, the individuals who were part of this archival project faced the uphill task of photographing and recording the details of each grave. The team did a commendable job and their online archive widely assisted us in locating the graves of the various Scottish women in the cemetery. But, we also realized that the process of documentation would remain incomplete without recording the detailed contributions of some of these Scottish women.

### **A Brief History of the Scottish Cemetery**

The Scottish Cemetery was established in the year 1820, to cater to the specific needs of the Scottish population in Calcutta. The Scots occupied numerous positions in the office of the British East India Company and in various other offices that were associated with the British colonial empire in the city. The cemetery was regularly utilized till the 1940s. But, after India's independence it was left in a neglected state until recently, with the initiatives of St. Andrew's Church, UK-India Education and Research Initiative and the Presidency University in Kolkata, the cemetery is being reconstructed and revived. According to the article “Experts seek to restore Scots

cemetery in India” (2008), around 90 percent of the graveyard belongs to the Scottish and the remaining 10 percent belongs to the converted Christian Bengalis.

### **About the Documentary**

In this section, we elaborate on the thematic and the structural content of the documentary, the process for selecting the gravesites of the Scottish women and documenting their narratives. The documentary was entirely shot in the cemetery over two phases in 2019. The graveyards of eleven Scottish women were selected on the basis of the record lists that are available at St. Andrew’s Church in BBD Bagh and at the cemetery office. Initially, we made a list of approximately twenty-four Scottish women whose socio-historical narratives, as per the record lists, were available to be documented. But, after noting down the numbers of the respective graveyards, as we entered the cemetery the view was highly disappointing. Most of the graveyards were in a decaying state and the carvings on most of the gravestones have faded. In some of the graveyards, even the catalogue numbers were not clearly available. Therefore, we had to reduce the number of narratives to eleven. Out of the eleven recordings, the graveyards of Sarah Carey, Susanna Bundlow, and Mary Hill were either partially or fully invisible and could only be located through the graveyard numbers. The various socio-historical narratives that are associated with them were documented through the available records in the cemetery office.

This documentary is divided into two chapters: “History of the Scots in India” and “The Scottish Women of Calcutta”. The first chapter reflects on how, with the establishment of the British East India Company on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1600, Scottish men and women arrived in the city of Calcutta. They arrived as Christian missionaries, traders, schoolteachers, nurses, doctors, maidservants, and apothecaries. After their arrival, gradually, they joined their British counterparts in the colonial civilizing mission through the destruction of the native social, cultural, political and economic practices, and the appropriation of European socio-cultural ethics and moralities. In addition to Scottish men, Scottish women also played a pivotal role as agents of European colonization, as noted above, by introducing schools for girls, working as Christian missionaries, serving the hospitals as nurses, doctors and apothecaries. These aspects have been briefly discussed in the second chapter of the documentary. The first chapter concludes with the brief histories of the various buildings that were once built by the Scottish in Calcutta, including Duff College on Nimtala Ghat Street, established in the year 1839 by a Scottish missionary named Alexander Duff; St. Andrew’s Church at BBD Bagh, established on the 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1818; the Presidency Hospital at Bhowanipore, established in 1707; and the Roxburgh Building of Company Bagan at Howrah, established in the year 1787.

The second chapter, “The Scottish Women of Calcutta”, focuses on how, from the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Scottish women constructed narratives of Christianity, western medicine, western science and western education by uprooting local Indigenous methodologies of thinking and doing. In order to understand the roles played by the various Scottish women, eleven graveyards have been selectively recorded and documented. The graveyards belong to Sarah Carey (a missionary), Anne Elliot (social worker), Caroline Snadden (apothecary), Carrie Jane (President of Women’s Christian Temperance, Bengal Division), Catherine Gordon (piano tuner), Susanna Bundlow (maidservant), Anne Baynes Evans (assistant missionary), Caroline Leach (apothecary), Christina Rodger Wighton (medical worker), Dorothea Henrietta Seymour (school teacher) and Mary Hill (missionary).

### **Contributions of the documentary**

The documentary contributes the following analyses:

- a. Through elaborately researching the roles played by Scottish women in Calcutta, this documentary research brings a highly ignored and undervalued historical narrative to the forefront. Typically, the historical records of the colonization of India by the Europeans hardly mention the contributions of European women in general and the Scottish women in particular.
- b. The socio-historical narratives of a selected group of Scottish women, which have been recorded and documented, not only unfurl the various social, cultural and political roles that they have played along with their male counterparts, but also challenge the existing heteronormative and patriarchal historiographical frameworks of white European male exclusivity.
- c. This research documentary (the first documentary that has recorded the graveyards of the Scottish women of Calcutta) serves as an archive for present and future scholars, who wish to know and/or conduct research on the Scottish women of Calcutta.
- d. By positing Scottish women at the problematic intersections of androcentric colonialism, the civilizing mission, and humanitarian assistance, we trouble conventional colonial history, opening doors for further decolonial reflection and analysis.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, this essay reveals the various factors that motivated us to conduct this documentary research project under the aegis of a JIWS Fellowship. It also outlines the structure and contributions of this documentary and lays a foundation for further inquiry.

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