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BLAZING THE TRAIL IN GENDER HISTORY: THE AMAZING PROFILE AND WORK OF DR ANNIE DEVENISH

Dr Annie Devenish is a historian and researcher with interest in gender, activism and identity in the global South, and how practices of history can be harnessed to transform society. She teaches in the Department of History at the University of the Witwatersrand. She has taught modules such as The History of Sex, Gender and History, Empires of the Modern World and Themes in Twentieth-Century History, among others. On top of reading some of Annie's work, I also managed to have an interesting conversation with her about her teaching and broader intellectual project.

Born in Cape Town in September 1978 and having stayed for a while in the then Bophuthatswana, Annie grew up in Durban, where she attended school and ultimately studied for a Bachelor of Arts Degree at the University of Kwazulu Natal between 1998 and 2000. She subsequently enrolled for an Honours Degree in History at the same university, earning a *cum laude*. Her Honours dissertation, which examines the relationship between black women and the Durban Municipality between 1930 and 1950, earned her a first-class degree. Annie maintained her exceptionally high academic performance when she enrolled and studied for a Masters in Development Studies, where, again, she earned a first class pass on a dissertation focusing on the professionalisation of traditional healers in Kwazulu Natal between 1985 and 2003. In our conversation, Annie told me that her interest in Development Studies was prompted by the need to make a difference given how practical the discipline is. But this temporary sojourn revealed that the discipline could be a bit technical, focusing more

on the economics and politics of society and sometimes losing sight of some of the broader human aspects, the personalities and accessible narratives that History had the ability of engaging. As a result, the History bug caught up with Annie, and she ultimately enrolled for a PhD in History at St Cross' College, Oxford University, between 2009 and 2015.

Annie's PhD thesis, entitled "Being, belonging and becoming: A study of gender in the making of postcolonial Indian citizenship 1946-1961"¹, was ultimately revised and published in 2019 by Bloomsbury publishers. The book: *Debating Women's Citizenship in India 1930-1960*, explores the variety of ways that citizenship was conceptualised at the intersection of nationalist and feminist politics at key moments in the history of Indian democracy.² Based on the activities of two women's organisations, The All Indian Women's Conference and The National Federation of Indian Women, the book examines the role of women in civil society and other movements. Based on research done at the Archives in Delhi, it is an important contrast to big white men histories. Although informed by the works of some prominent women leaders in these organisations, Annie managed to access the voices of less visible women, especially how they both conceptualised their gender identities and performed their role in these organisations between 1946 and 1961.

I asked Annie if there were any kinds of comparisons that she could draw between these women's movements in India and those of South Africa in the same period of her study. Her measured answer considered the different contexts. Her study examines India from 1946, on the eve of attaining its independence from Britain. Thereafter, it underwent a period of turmoil and uncertainty, especially considering the split between India and Pakistan and the ensuing bloody conflict. At this time, South Africa was on the eve of the coming to power of the National party, and with it, the apartheid movement. There were a number of women's movements such as the Black Sash that campaigned against apartheid and the rights of women and black people against successive apartheid governments. But as Annie rightly noted, the dynamic was different and therefore drawing any contrasts would be problematic. However, given that Annie herself is a white South African of Anglo, Irish, Scottish and Jewish heritage, her study of women's movements in South Africa and India can be illustrative in drawing interesting connections and contrasts to their challenges in an international context. This is what makes Annie Devenish a unique South Africa scholar whose examination of women's history in the global South is truly remarkable.

1 A Devenish, *Being, belonging and becoming: a study of gender in the making of post-colonial citizenship in India 1946-1961* (Phd, University of Oxford, 2014).

2 A Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930-1960* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2019).

Devenish's extensive and growing list of publications also shows the consistency and depth of her intellectual project. She has published on feminism and development in India and South Africa, labour activism and the informal economy, as well as traditional health practitioners. She has collaborated with several like-minded scholars and sole-authored a number of fascinating studies in leading local and international journals such as *Women's History Review*, *South African Labour Bulletin*, *Social Dynamics*, and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Annie's work represents the South African academy and the varied experiences of different races, classes, and nationalities of women on at least two continents, using the example of South Africa and India.

Armed with so much talent, Dr Annie Devenish is set to exceed the impressive academic heights she has already reached. As the features team at the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History*, we wish this trail-blazing woman historian all the best in her exciting and growing career.