

extended to all women over 30 years. There were no militant struggles, no arrests: the women of Sri Lanka won the right to vote in a very different manner from their European counterparts.

What this signified is interesting: the Women's Franchise Union was a class-based organisation of bourgeois women and their agitation—if it could be called that—did not arise from powerful political aspirations as in the case of Indian women, where it was linked to the Independence Movement, or from strong ideological commitment as with the Maxists; but it was more the articulation of a demand for a more complete form of social emancipation for women. It was chiefly owing to the liberal predisposition of the Donoughmore Commissioners, who, with their experience of the suffragette movement in the U.K., were inclined to be sympathetic, that the franchise was granted to Sri Lankan women in 1931.

The important thing is that they were there to articulate the demand in terms to which the Commissioners could respond at that particular historical conjuncture. The story does not end there: there was a coup staged by the new rich in the WFU, led by Florinda Wijekoon against the older rich in which the former were successful; Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike was ousted and the Women's Franchise Union was replaced by the Women's Political Union.

The granting of the franchise eventually benefited all classes of women in Sri Lanka and had an enduring multiplier effect with women contesting parliamentary seats in the early 1930s, Adeleine Molamure entered Parliament in 1931 to be followed in 1932 by Neysum Saravanamuttu. However, they did not contest on distinctly feminist issues or rock the local political boat. The granting of the franchise benefited all classes of women who thus became entitled to exercise a cherished democratic right.

An aspect that is of particular interest today are the reactions of different groups to women winning the franchise. The only people who were supportive were the few radicals like some members of A.E. Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union. Most English educated men whose views were exposed in the local press or in the legislature had reservations, thought it a joke or scoffed openly. The spokesmen for the Sinhala and Tamil traditionalists were alarmed. The Hindu Tamil traditionalists objected on the grounds that it would blemish the purity of Tamil women, by which they meant that the right to vote would give women an independence of outlook with the result that in the future Hindu Tamil men might not be able to count on total subservience to their own wishes on the home front.

The Sinhala Buddhist traditionalists moaned that it was totally against "Sinhala Culture," the general attitude being that Sinhala women were given sufficient freedom at the time that Sanghamitta their came to the island, so respectable Sinhala Buddhist women should not join any organisations for the purpose of winning the franchise for themselves or get involved in labour unrest. But in general they took the opportunity to indulge in tirades against the

westernisation of women which was anathema to them. An article in the *Sinhala Jatiya* went as far as predicting it would lead to the end of the Sinhala nation: "Our Sinhala nation is now nearing its end because a terrible epidemic has gripped our women. This contagion in the form of a new civilization is emanating from Europe. It is very dangerous" (1/4/1926). Such views in Sinhala and Tamil were rebutted by several women, particularly Tamil writers like Meenakshi Natesa Aiyar and Mangalamaal Masilamany.

The title of the book derives from an outrageous comment made by no less a person than Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan in his reply to the Donoughmore Commissioners on the question of granting the franchise to women. "Do not throw pearls before swine, for they will turn and rend you .... What suits European women will not suit us." It seems to have been the considered view of this worthy knight that such an act of folly would only result in women viciously attacking the male of the species. What it signified was a deep-seated fear that male supremacy would be undermined.

One of the things I particularly enjoyed in this book were the brief pen-portraits of the principal protagonists in the franchise drama. We have all heard of the Honourable S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and of his father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, the Maha-Mudaliyar, but who, besides the immediate family has heard of Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike, the wife of Sir Solomon, who was the first President of the Women's Franchise Union? She is described as a "matriarch of great character and strength who defied convention," obviously a redoubtable woman. Why has she been hidden from history? We should like to hear more of her. It might be of particular relevance in the political context of today.

There are several other colourful characters like Agnes de Silva née Nell the wife of George E. de Silva, Florinda Beatrice Silva, the daughter of a wealthy businessman N.P.D. Silva. (There was a wedding cake 16 feet tall at her wedding to Gerard Wijekoon.) There are several more: Dr. Nallamma Satyavagiswara Aiyar, Leelavati Aserappa, Nellie Gunasekera or the first women representatives in the State Council who deserve greater prominence in the island's history.

This is an eminently readable book, even for those who are not specifically interested in the history of the Women's Franchise Movement, for it is also sketches in the Lankan scenario that obtained in the 1920s and 30s. It is the work of two researchers who have experience in the handling of detail. There is enough detail to create a lively picture but not so much that it acts as a drag on the story. The simplicity of the language masks the wide scope encompassed in the book. The irony is quite delicious at times, for instance when the office bearers of the newly formed Women's Franchise Union are suddenly confronted with the prospect of appearing before the Donoughmore Commissioners or the absurdity of most of the male reactions. Considering the nature of the material, what I found particularly attractive was the lightness of touch for it would not have sounded right had the granting of the franchise to Sri Lankan women been dealt with in a tone appropriate to a momentous event like the French Revolution, as many researchers are unfortunately wont to do, notwithstanding the nature of their material. ■

## FOCUS ON AFGHANISTAN

### AFGHAN WOMEN - BARGAINING WITH PATRIARCHY

"Out go the Taliban, but will Afghan women be excluded again?" is the title of a comment by LaShawn Jefferson of the women's rights division of Human Rights Watch. This is certainly the question posed by feminists, women's groups and gender-conscious males around the world, who are watching the proceedings of the UN-sponsored conference in Bonn that started on November 27 to try and form a provisional government composed of the various forces in Afghanistan. History and politics, Joan Scott once said, "are enacted on the field of gender." This has been particularly true of Afghanistan.

Although under the Taliban the situation of Afghan women sank to an all-time low — no girls' schools or employment for women, no mobility and strict purdah for women who were also forbidden to leave home without a male relative. But was it always so? Many write about Afghanistan as if it were a totally primitive, backward tribal society, ruled by warlords, bandit chiefs and ferocious Mullahs — a case of classic tyranny and classic patriarchy. This is not, however, the total picture. The country has a history of moving one step forward and two steps back from the 1920s. Afghan women have a history of periods of advance on women's rights, which they can draw upon today while in the process — in Deniz Kandyoti's words—of "bargaining with patriarchy."

#### Amanullah's Reforms

In 1919 Amanullah Khan united several tribes, seized the throne, and tried to modernize the country. Calling himself a revolutionary, King Amanullah developed close ties with Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union. A proposed new constitution in 1923 gave voting rights to women, and Amanullah claimed that "the keystone of the future structure of the new Afghanistan will be the emancipation of women." He introduced a Family Code in 1921 forbidding child marriage, encouraged girls' schools, and banned polygamy for government employees. In 1928 his wife Queen Surayya appeared unveiled, and by decree, women were made to discard the veil. But unlike Turkey under Mustapha Ataturk where similar reforms were successful, the forces of tribal patriarchy and reaction prevailed in Afghanistan. Opposition to women's rights and modernization set in and the King was deposed in 1929. His progressive reforms were annulled, but his rule was not forgotten and is cited by Afghan women even today.

#### Turn to the Left

In 1965 the women's issue again came to the fore with the formation by Afghan intelligentsia of the People's

Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was for a democratic government to liberate Afghanistan from feudal rule. Its demands included equal treatment for women and education for all. That year six women activists formed the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW).

This organization aimed at doing away with female illiteracy, forced marriages and brideprice. As a result of this pressure women obtained the right to vote and four DOAW women entered parliament.

In 1978 the left-wing PDPA took power and introduced bold measures including land reform, cancelling rural debt and enforcing women's rights. The latter included a limit on the traditional practices of marriages for cash, brideprice, forced marriages and early marriage. A minimum age of 16 for women and 18 for men was introduced along with compulsory education for girls. This was keenly resented by traditionalists and (as one observer noted) opposed "by Afghan men, whose male chauvinism is as massive as the mountains of the Hindu Kush."

By 1979 there was organized opposition to the PDPA along with internal fighting. President Taraki was killed, succeeded by Hafizullah Amin who was killed and succeeded by Barak Karmal. Karmal ordered a gradualist approach to change, but attacks continued resulting in the Soviet invasion in December 1979, to protect the Afghan Communist government.

#### Soviet Invasion

In the period up to 1992 many changes took place in women's status. Women entered government service, worked on airlines, radio and television, in hospitals, as teachers in schools and in the army. Many women had prominent positions in public life. In the 1980s 65% of students in Kabul University were women. The DOAW, renamed All-Afghan Women's Council, was led by Massouma Esmaty Wardak, a member of parliament; other notable women were Soraya, director of the Afghan Red Crescent, Dr Soheila, Chief Surgeon of the Military Hospital, and Jamila Palwasha and Rubafza Kamyar, members of the Central Committee of the PDPA. There was also a Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded by the late Mina Kishwar Kamal in 1977, which now operates in exile in Pakistan.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops led to the downfall of the Communist government in Afghanistan, and the Taliban movement was supported by Pakistan, USA and Saudi Arabia. The powers

that intervened to help push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, showed no interest in that country's future. Tribal factionalism and civil strife further ruined the country. The result was massive reversals for women and their total exclusion from politics, from public life, from employment — making them invisible non-persons. The Taliban became internationally reviled for its atrocious treatment of women. All the earlier gains from the time of King Amanullah onward were erased and the Afghan intelligentsia and professionals fled into exile.

Hannah Papanek noted in 1989 that different regimes (in Afghanistan and Iran) have "used their specific stand on the 'woman question' as a way of signalling their political agenda." Covering and uncovering women signified the political, economic and cultural projects of these regimes. Today again the issue has come to the fore. Iranian-born Valentine Moghadam, Professor of Sociology, has reminded us that broad-based and popular social movements in which women participate — as in Iran — do not mean an enhancement of women's status, and conversely a minority government or imposed government may emancipate women — as occurred in Afghanistan. She argues that events in Iran and Afghanistan in the 1980s show that social upheavals are "not only

about contention over political power and economic change (among men)" but are also about "definitions of culture and especially male-female relations." In an interesting comparison of Iran and Afghanistan, Moghadam writes:

In Iran, the Islamic authorities saw a deep moral and cultural crisis exemplified in "the naked woman." To solve the problem, woman had to be covered and domesticated. By contrast in Afghanistan, the secluded veiled woman was seen by the revolutionaries as exemplifying the country's backwardness; consequently women had to be educated and uncovered.

We read that the Afghan King's delegation to Bonn includes two women. This is a hopeful sign. Recently The UN Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, met with Afghan women exiles in Pakistan who stressed the importance of women's participation in civil society and in the on-going negotiations. We hope that Brahimi will not let Afghan men persuade him that "national reconciliation" takes priority over women's rights. There can be no justice in Afghanistan unless women are free. ■

Courtesy *Cat's Eye*, 28, Nov. 2001.

## RECLAIMING 23 LOST YEARS: TO SECURE AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE, BRING BACK ITS WOMEN

Pamela Philipose

It's difficult to know where to begin when it comes to chronicling the immediate past of Afghanistan's women, just as it is difficult to know where to stop when it comes to fathoming the future. Only one thing can be said with certainty—if the country has to reclaim itself, its women will have to reclaim the present. Of course, all over the world a great deal of lip service is suddenly being paid to the cause, what with two famous wives—Laura Bush and Cherie Blair—recently participating in a worldwide campaign to focus on Taliban's brutality to women. But the evils of the Taliban regime are well known, what is not so familiar is the record of the Northern Alliance, which is not that much better. Its tolerance of music and barbers must not hide the fact that it comprises elements who would argue, like the Taliban do, that a woman's face is the source of all corruption. Afghan social activist, Fahima Vorgetts, put it this way, "Now people are listening to what we say about the Taliban but they must listen to what we say about the Northern Alliance to avoid future tragedy. We must not forget that the Northern Alliance committed so many atrocities during their rule between 1992 and 1996."

The future then is a slippery slope, made more difficult by the legacy of the last two decades, when every major player—including the UN and the new champions of Afghan women, the US—thought nothing of bartering away women's rights on the altar of expediency.

While the UN kept compromising with the Taliban, until women were literally erased from the mindscape, the US's role was a particularly cynical one. At one point, even as Hillary Clinton was loudly berating the Taliban for their cruelty towards women, her husband was keeping his fingers crossed that the \$4.5 billion pipeline network that oil transnational Unocal wanted to build to carry Caspian Sea oil across Afghanistan would come through with the blessings of the Taliban. Only women's groups in the US had the courage to speak out against this.

As for Islamic nations, their record was not much better. Today most of them don't hesitate to point out that the Taliban's ways were unIslamic. Yet, as Ahmed Rashid points out in his book *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, most of them, with the partial exception of Iran, never bothered to issue a single statement on the need for women's education or human rights in Afghanistan. Nor did they ever question the Taliban's interpretation of the Sharia. In hindsight, the treatment meted out to Afghan women over the last two decades and more could figure as one of the great crimes against humanity of our times. There were atrocities committed when the Soviets ruled. Survivors of the December 1984 massacres in Chardara district of Kunduz spoke of Soviet soldiers disembowelling pregnant women with bayonets. Amnesty International has recorded eyewitness

accounts of the forces of General Dostum raping women and of scores of women being abducted and detained by various Mujahideen groups. In this scenario, women were used both as weapons to settle scores and as implements to regulate social behaviour. In 1994, Islamic youth groups affiliated to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party, the Hezb-en Islami, warned women not to go to public places and to wear Islamic clothing. What did change once the Taliban established their dominance was the institutionalisation of this highly skewed order. With the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996, a decree was issued by the religious police, which rendered the city the world's biggest prison for women. It began like this: "Women! You should not step outside your residence..." Today, the details of that ugly era are well-known. How women were banned by the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice from wearing high heels, making a noise with their shoes while walking or wearing make-up. How 4,000 women students of Kabul University melted away never to return to an education. How some 50,000 war widows were reduced to begging since they could no longer earn. How thousands of young zealots walked around with kalashnikovs and whips terrorising women who had ventured out. 'Crimes' were met with exemplary punishment. A woman could have the top of her thumb removed for wearing nail polish, be flogged for defiance or stoned to death for adultery. The fact that such punishment was deliberately made public, with the Taliban rounding up people and forcing them to watch, indicated how central the instilling of public fear and the suppression of women were in keeping them in power.

But the consequences this had for ordinary Afghans will probably never be recorded in their entirety. Take something as innocuous as wearing a *burqa*. Being an expensive garment, the equivalent of five months' salary for some, few could afford it. Consequently, whole neighbourhoods had to share one garment, resulting in women having to wait for weeks before even venturing out of their

homes. In 1998, a report brought out by the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights pointed out that 97 per cent of the Afghan women they could contact showed symptoms of major depression. Doctors have reported a high incidence of oesophageal burns, as women swallowed battery acid or household cleaners in suicide bids.

Data from this era is, of course, practically non-existent. Up to 1996, Afghanistan figured in UNDP human development reports. It had a Human Development Index of 169, life expectancy of 43.7, adult literacy of 29.8. Only 12 per cent of its population had access to safe drinking water and its maternal mortality rate—1,700 for 100,000 live births—was the second highest in the world. Interestingly, the depredations of war came out clearly in the figures of the daily caloric intake of the people. In 1965, the figure stood at 73. By 1992, it had come down to 49. By 1997, Afghanistan had fallen off the data map and we hear no more about the welfare of its women and children. Things could only have gotten worse since then.

This was the past. If the future has to be any different, the tattered fabric of Afghanistan's civil society will have to be stitched together and only women can do this. Their strength, resources and courage are without doubt. Take, for instance, an organisation like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded by Meena Keshwar Kamal, a health worker who was assassinated, allegedly by the Mujaheddin, for her stance against fundamentalism. RAWA worked secretly right through those years of repression helping women, educating children, and documenting the tyranny of the rulers. Groups like this must today be given a voice in the rebuilding of the country. Afghanistan's women know, as RAWA put it in a recent statement, more than anyone else, that they can never achieve their rights through "the 'kindness' of fundamentalists". ■

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### Women and the Nation's Narrative

- Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka

Neloufer de Mel

This book explores the development of nationalism in Sri Lanka during the past century, particularly within the dominant Sinhala Buddhist and militant Tamil movements. Tracing the ways women from diverse backgrounds have engaged with nationalism, Neloufer de Mel argues that gender is crucial to an understanding of nationalism and vice versa.