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Hope for the future lies partly in the fact that, for all the extravagant
claims made by the nuclear energy establishments and chauvinistic
politicians, nuclear weaponization in both countries is likely to
proceed slowly. There is time for new political leaderships in both
countries to display the wisdom and the political courage necessary
to draw the subcontinent back from the brink of grave nuclear folly.

From : *Riding the Nuclear Tiger*

N.Ram is the Editor of *Frontline*

Text of a talk delivered at Women's Studies Conference, Hyderabad, January 2000

THE FEMALE CITIZEN

Sunila Abeysekera

The debate on public policy and women that we have all
been a part of over the past three days has focused on the
state, on the relationship between women and the state, and on the
relationship between the women's movement and the state. Issues
of governance, representation and rights have all been brought on to
the agenda as being critical elements of this discussion. Fundamen-
tal questions such as what form of government do we dare to dream
of have dominated the informal talks in the corridors and during
breaks.

The phrase 'public policy' assumes interaction with the state, in a
situation in which the state is deemed to be responsible for public
welfare and for the distribution of resources. This is the situation in
all South Asian countries. The post-independence South Asian state
has for the most part been perceived as being paternalistic and
essentially benign, provider of basic needs and protector of rights.
This particular form of the state has been called 'welfarist' although
the experiences of many marginalized communities in our region
point to the reality that the state only focused on the welfare of some,
at the expense of others. The role of the state in ensuring the
minimum needs of socially disadvantaged groups led many pro-
gressive groups and individuals to engage with the state. This
engagement often consisted of interventions that sought to shape
state policies in a way that would benefit particularly disadvantaged
communities. Trade union actions to bring about changes in labour
law and regulations, and actions by progressive groups, including
women's groups to reform laws pertaining to violence against
women, can be viewed as concrete examples. It is in this context that
the concept of 'lobbying' and 'advocacy' with the state and coop-
eration with state apparatus became an accepted part of so-called
pressure group politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Within the women's movement, not only in India and in South Asia
but throughout the world, the years following the first World
Conference on Women in 1975 were years in which various mecha-
nisms - such as Women's Ministries, National Commissions on
Women and various other institutes mandated with the care and

welfare of women - were set up by the state to take steps for the
advancement and empowerment of women. Economic programs
aimed at increasing women's income-generating skills became an
almost essential component of various poverty alleviation schemes.
The achievement of equal rights in the legal sphere was promoted
as a stepping stone towards the achievement of equal status for
women. As the women's movement travelled from Mexico to
Nairobi to Beijing, our commitment to lobbying and advocacy also
moved into the international arena. We prepared National Reports
for various international Conferences, in the understanding that our
interventions at the international and regional level could have an
impact on the situation of women in our own countries and in our
own communities. As we had previously negotiated policy changes
and shifts with our states, we now negotiated them with the United
Nations and with the World Bank. The language of women's rights
as human rights and of women's empowerment and participation
resonated through official UN and World Bank documents. As they
appropriated our language, they transformed the conceptual frame-
work within which this language had a meaning for women in our
societies

There were moments in which it seemed as if some gains had been
made through this process. Yet, as the deliberations of the past days
have shown, there has been an element of delusion in all of this. As
Maitreyi said on the first day, our record of progress is patchy at best
and dismal at worst. We have sought to change state attitude towards
women from diverse perspectives, focusing on small elements, and
rarely challenging the patriarchal normative framework that de-
creed women to be biological and social reproducers first and
citizens second. Thus, what we have achieved in terms of changes
in state policy has been fragmented and piecemeal, ad hoc and
incoherent, to quote the speakers from the first panel at this Confer-
ence.

I don't want at all to negate any of the achievements of any of you,
or of any of the other millions of women activists in the region who
are not here with us today. We are all only too aware of the fact that

our activism has made a difference to the lives of millions of women, directly and indirectly. But in the spirit of self-criticism that Susie Tharu rightly said was essential for any reflection on our actions and perceptions, I feel that this is an opportune moment to set out some of the problem areas I see in our understanding of the state and of public policy in terms of our capacity to intervene and change and shape it in any positive way.

Changing Nature of the State

In the first instance, I feel it is important for us to understand the changing nature of the state in modern society, in order to sharpen our interventions with regard to policy changes. Much has been said about the impact of globalisation on nation-states in the so-called south. Among the most easily felt consequences has been the withdrawal of the state from its traditional roles of distributor of resources and provider of welfare. Parallel to this, we have witnessed a rise in all forms of reactionary extremism in the political arena, with a growth in militarization and violence of all forms in our societies and in our communities. In the face of extreme social polarisation on the basis of class, language, ethnicity, religion and other differences, we have also seen a shrinking of the space for dissent and for civil society activism. Through all this process, the patriarchal nature of the state has not undergone any substantive transformation or change. The state still does not treat us women as full citizens, rather it focuses on 'protecting us' and on reaffirming our role as

In the second instance, it is also important to see how these changes or non-changes in the role and nature of the state in turn have an impact on the form of government and on the structures of power in our societies. Once again, we need to look into the past and look at the political structures we inherited from the British colonial system. The so-called Westminster model of government taught us that numbers mattered. In the system of 'One Person, One Vote', whichever group or individual could muster the majority of the votes could rule. This majoritarian system has ensured that successive Sinhala-dominated governments have ruled Sri Lanka since 1948. As the majority gained power, and the idea that being more in terms of numbers also meant having more power, the social groups that were lesser in number became classified as 'minorities'. Susie Tharu spoke of this construction of the 'minority' as an electoral effect of the post-Independence era. It may be true that the electoral effect may have deprived those groups that were lesser in number of access to political power in the post-Independent state. However, their exclusion from the centres of power and decision-making on the basis of their difference in terms of religion, ethnicity, language and cultural practice certainly has a much longer and more complex history.

If we examine post-Independence South Asia from the point of view of the increase in polarisation and social fragmentation that has occurred side by side with the paralysis of civil society activism, we could conclude that our experience of democracy has been quite fatally flawed since the very beginning. The form of democratic governance passed on to us by our colonial rulers was imposed on a society which was very authoritarian and hierarchical without in

any way challenging or attempting to change those inherently anti-democratic structures. The model of liberal democracy addresses itself to a free, rational and rights-bearing individual who makes independent choices based on the concept of the greater public good. It presumes many things which did not prevail in the sub-continent in 1948 and which unfortunately do not prevail anywhere in the region today. Our societies are largely based on principles of obedience to elders, unquestioning subordination to authority, acceptance of the relationships of power and powerlessness as being inevitable and the giving of priority to collective, community and family concerns over and above one's personal and individual choices. I have no intention of getting into any substantive discussion here about the relative value of extended families as opposed to nuclear families, or any of the other extremely valid and relevant arguments regarding certain elements of these traditional social formations that are worthy of being preserved and carried forward into the new millennium. The question of how to understand the hegemonic discourse of power in all its complexity and locate ourselves within it and not outside it remains a crucial one for all of us. However, at this point, what I do want us to think about are the dangerous consequences of imagining that we are engaging in democratic praxis while in fact we are only reinforcing traditional class, caste, gender and other hegemonic norms through a process of elections and voting in which there is very little challenge to existing structures of power and to social inequalities.

At the same time, the principle of freedom of expression and opinion and the right to dissent are critical elements of the democratic framework. Once again, the repressive and authoritarian social and political structures that prevail for the most part in modern South Asia allow little or no room for dissent or difference of opinion. This intolerance is at the root of a great deal of the violence and hostility that we find in our communities and yet there is very little attention paid to the many ways in which violence has become a normal way of behaving in our communities. Due to the efforts of the women's movement and its many supporters, the issue of violence against women and children in the home and in public spaces has become an issue of public debate. Yet, issues such as the physical and psychological punishments inflicted on students by their teachers, or on adherents by religious leaders, for example, are by and large accepted as 'normal' and rarely challenged. Still more dangerously, the violence inflicted on entire communities by the military, and by the state, in the course of the implementation of development projects or of the repression of internal conflicts, remains unspoken for the most part. We still lag far behind in our ability to make the practical and conceptual links between violence in the home and nuclear power politics between nations. This is sadly due as much to misplaced ideas of what constitutes 'national interest' as to our inability to develop the analysis of patriarchy and violence in the face of our own experiences in the modern world.

If one looks at the process of democratic development in South Asia, one can also see that the idea of the Constitution as a social contract between the state and the people is a highly undeveloped one. People have for the most part elected members of the traditional elite to the democratic bodies of governance, and have often felt unable to challenge their authority. Although we do have a history of evolu-

tion of new social movements, the activism and mobilisation of these movements has been largely based on single issues, and in specific sectors or regions. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is perhaps a good example. The era of nation-wide agitation seems to have come to an end. Along with the fragmentation of social issues and mobilisation, I also feel that we can divine a general sense of apathy, or, if you like, a lack of confidence in this particular system of governance and in the leaders that it has garnered for us. Within this context, the idea of being able to intervene effectively in matters of governance and of being able to have an impact on public policy is something that almost daily recedes from the public imagination. The position of women in such a situation is even more fraught since their entry into negotiations with the state and with civil society is also framed by their lack of equal rights and status as citizens.

Women's Citizenship

This is why I feel that the issue of citizenship in general and of women's citizenship in particular, is one on which we should focus more attention, within this discussion on public policy. Citizenship has been defined as the relationship between the individual, state and society. Women's citizenship needs to be looked at not only in contrast or comparison to male citizenship but also in relation to women's own affiliations within other social sectors and groups. An understanding of the sexualized and gendered nature of the social contract is critical to this discussion. We need to make a shift in our understanding of the goals and aims of our struggle for emancipation as women as well, moving away from the distracting notion of equality to a notion of full citizenship for women. Principles of equal rights and non-discrimination, rather than the notion of equality, should inform our interventions in this arena.

The liberal conceptualisation of the citizen is non-gendered, and assumes the existence of a free, rational and rights-bearing individual who makes independent choices. The experience of working with human rights has made it very clear for me that this conceptualisation is not a valid one for all and any of those social groups who are excluded from controlling power and resources in our societies: women, children, members of all minority communities, the disabled, gays and lesbians, people living with HIV/AIDS, indigenous and tribal peoples... the list is endless. Developing a new concept of the rights-bearing individual, which enables the active participation of the individual in making choices, has therefore been a personal challenge in my activism and in my scholarly work. Living and working in Sri Lanka, struggling to imagine a form of government which would acknowledge the dignity and worth of all Sri Lankans, I have also faced the challenge of working for the creation of a political framework that responds to the demands of plurality and diversity. The challenge of dealing with diversity is also one that engages feminist activists around the globe, as they struggle to define common agendas for the advancement of women in the realm of international and regional policy-making.

The possibility of expanding the concept of the citizen in an inclusive way is extremely problematic when the construction of citizenship as exclusionary has become so much a part of our political practice. From the moment of Independence, the sub-

continent was riddled with thorny questions about who belongs to what nation. As a consequence, even today, there are Biharis in Bangladesh who are nominally Pakistani citizens but who have lived out their post-1947 lives in a 'temporary' settlement not far from Dhaka. In the plantations in Sri Lanka we have Indian citizens who have never travelled to India. In Bhutan, thousands of Nepali speakers who have lived in Bhutan for generations have been expelled and now live in Nepal as refugees. Thus, it becomes clear that citizenship is a matter of 'national interest' as opposed to the humanitarian concern of a human being's right to belong to a particular place or community. The present tide of identity-based politics only sharpens the exclusive nature of our mode of citizenship. In the case of internal displacement, too, citizens lose many rights by virtue of moving away, by being forcibly moved away, from their place of origin and community. And of course we are all familiar with the legal norms that validate patrilinearity and deprive women of the right to pass on their citizenship and nationality to their children if they have married a non-national. The history of liberal politics shows us that in the beginning the right to vote and to participate in politics and thereby become a member of the citizenry was restricted to rich white men. How this right was gradually extended to all white men, to all men, and then to all men and women is a history of protracted and bitter struggle the world over. In a context within which the normative citizen is male, constructing the 'female citizen' is not an easy task. What makes it easier for us, however, is that because we are moving into this arena of struggle at a moment in history when the issue of diversity is a primary focus of our inquiry and of our activism, we can at the same time construct citizenship in many tiers including that of the disabled citizen, the lesbian citizen, the tribal citizen and so on. At the same time, the issue of diversity is pushing us to re-examine our own divisions of sex and gender and challenging us to reconstruct woman as a holistic and sexual being. In this process of creating a new concept of the citizen, we can also develop the idea of citizenship as a dynamic concept of citizenship as signifying both a status and a practice. A status which creates you as a citizen who is entitled to enjoy certain rights and who has certain obligations and a practice that focuses on your capacity to act to achieve the full potential inherent in your rights. Building on the work begun by Chantal Mouffe, we can draw on both the liberal formulation of the free and rights-bearing citizen and the republican notion of the politically active citizen to theorise a process of participatory civic engagement which in turn can lead to a pluralist re-framing of the common good.

I could not end my words on this occasion without referring to a comment that Susie Tharu made in her closing remarks for the panel on the 2nd day about nothing being non-negotiable. I beg to differ. Perhaps it is my work in human rights that makes me so committed to the elucidation of what is non-negotiable in our being human. I feel strongly that there is no way in which, as human beings, we can tolerate the institution of slavery, for example, or of torture, of child abuse. When I say non-negotiable this is what I mean: No human being can own another human being. That is non-negotiable. No human being can wilfully cause pain to another. That is non-negotiable. What has perhaps been most difficult in this discussion on rights has been the false juxtaposition of universality as opposed

to cultural specificity, of individual rights as opposed to group or collective rights, within the rights discourse. And it is the discussion on diversity that has once again made it possible for us to move beyond these crude and false dichotomies towards a formulation of what it means to be human, rejecting the creation of a uniform standard against which all human beings can be judged. Ruth Lister has spoken of a 'differentiated universalism' which stands in creative tension to diversity and difference and which challenges the exclusionary inequalities that stem from our diversity. This new concept of the citizen as the right-bearing agent of social change who operates within a wide range of difference and diversity is what can then point the way forward to what feminist scholars working on the issue have called a transversal politics of coalition-building. Let me end on an upbeat. Surely we owe it to the year 2000 and beyond. We stand on the threshold of great possibilities. As women, and in particular as South Asian women, our experiences of social and political activism are unparalleled. Perhaps we have rested too

easy on our laurels. Perhaps we have been fragmented and disheartened by the divisiveness of identity-based extremist politics that plague all our countries and all our communities. Yet, we know that it is women in the conflict-ridden parts of our sub-continent who have come forward to challenge patriarchal norms of war and conflict and to replace it with a humane norm of dialogue, consensus and negotiation. Whether it is in the North-East of India, or of Sri Lanka, women belonging to communities that are in conflict with one another have been the pioneers of community-based peace-building efforts, balancing their individual concerns as members of a particular community or group with their collective interests as women. It is this experience of transversal politics and coalition building that can shape and inform our interventions in the broader political and conceptual arenas of our activism. I want us to carry this hope with us as we leave this Conference and go back to our work in all corners of our sub-continent. I wish us all the strength to carry on. ■

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