BOOK REVIEW

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

REMARKABLE WOMEN OF THE RAJ

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The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule **by Kumari Jayawardena, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 310, £ 12.99 (paperback).**

To think of Western Women in South Asia during the two centuries of the Raj is to conjure up the image of the burra memsahib- haughty, arrogant, often overtly racist in her view with little to do other than with her needlework, play cards at the club and preside over her household of servants. Fiction has provided vivid portraits of such women of the Raj, capturing their narrowness of vision as they rivalled their husbands in their commitment to Crown and Empire.

But by no means every woman who travelled east from Europe or the United States to pre-independence South Asia conformed to this type. There were missionaries who, along with their Christian proselytising, built up schools and hospitals in a way that made a real difference to the local communities in which they worked. There were women doctors who, in the wake of battles at home for professional training and recognition, ventured to India to crusade for better health care for the long neglected, socially oppressed female half of the population.

Also drawn to India were women travellers in search of uncharted territory and women scholars involved in intellectual quests. And by the late 19th century, there had arrived the new woman-defying convention, questioning every facet of society, challenging orthodoxies, religious and political. While some 'new women' would be drawn to the esoteric world of theosophy and occultism others would turn to Socialism, openly identify with the rising freedom movement and involve themselves in anti-colonial struggle.

It is these other women of the Raj-the women who came not as wives but as individuals with a mission or cause all their own-who form the subject of Kumari Jayawardena's important new study.

In her book, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), Dr. Jayawardena challenges the view that feminism is a foreign ideology being imposed on developing countries; she has also consciously sought to bring back into the mainstream of history the lives of women who played a part in the national liberation and revolutionary movements of their countries.

Both themes-the projection of feminism as a movement of great relevance to women in developing countries and the need to tell the stories of women "hidden from history" permeate her latest work. In it, she seeks to cast an Asian "feminist gaze" on the activities of an eclectic collection of Western women who crossed boundaries of race and gender and "spoke with other voices"

> Whether spiritual or secular, many of these Western women were inspired by a movement which led them to abandon their home countries to live, and in most cases, die, in South Asia. Hence the sense of the `white woman's other burden' which was an attempt to liberate women, in terms of a Western or Eastern ideal and in terms of a vision of a better society.

A core assumption is that Western women in South Asia during the colonial period "problematise important issues of gender and race of feminism and nationalism". The author seeks to address three central tasks: to reconsider colonialism in terms of race, gender and feminism; to re-examine the role of women who spoke "with a different voice", and within an anti-imperialist perspective, to critically evaluate nationalist attitudes to gender issues and the question of women's equality.

Dr. Jayawardena groups her women subjects into five categories, each of which forms a distinct part of the book.

First come those involved in the business of "saving sisters from the sacred cows"-Christian missionaries whose battles for women's education often brought them into direct conflict with patriarchal Church and colonial authority, yet who remained convinced of colonialism's `civilizing' mission. Included here is the story of Harriet Winslow, an American Methodist pioneer who in the early 19th century spent 13 years in Jaffna working for girls' education before dying in child birth. The author also traces the life of the remarkable Pandita Ramabai, the Chitpavan Brahmin whose radical critique of orthodox Hinduism led her to convert to Christianity and devote her life to the service of Hindu widows.

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The second category is of women who were able to delink Christianity and social reform: educationists, doctors, campaigners against child marriage and forced widowhood, champions of penal reform. Included here are the stories of Mary Carpenter, inspired to come to India by the visit to Britain in 1831 of Raja Rammohun Roy, of the pioneer doctor Ida Scudder and also of the controversial, pro-imperialist Katherine Mayo, famed for her broadsides against Hindu religious traditions and social practice.

Thirdly the author profiles theosophists and orientalists, women who came out of heterodox movements in the West that questioned the social and ideological orthodoxies of the day and rejected the idea of Christianity as the only true religion. Describing Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant as "among the two most outstanding women rebels of their period" Jayawardena argues that their turn to spiritualism did not represent a rejection of feminism, for spiritualism itself "originated from dissenting currents of opinion, which included a strong component of feminism".

The book's fourth section is devoted to Western women who served as soul-mates to Indian gurus. Three stories are told here: those of Margaret Noble, better known in India as Sister Nivedita, who worked closely with Vivekananda; Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn) who stood for more than two decades at Gandhi's side; and the Egyptian born Mirra Alfassa, the companion to Aurobindo who came to be revered as "The Mother". The fifth and final section lifts from obscurity the lives of several Western Socialist women who threw in their lot with the anti-imperialist struggle in South Asia and the battle for a new type of society. Women such as Evelyn Trent, Agnes Smedley and Doreen Wickremasinghe, Jayawardena argues, took on the most wide-ranging, the most challenging assignment of all.

> The struggle for social change in the colonies meant an attack on foreign and local vested interests. Merely replacing the 'white sahibs' with the 'brown sahibs' was not enough. Hence, reformist Asian nationalists were discounted by Socialist Western women in favour of revolutionaries who had the dual goals of political independence and Socialism. In so doing, foreign women were not only confronting Western imperialism and its ideologues but also rejecting orthodox Asian reformers, religious gurus and leaders whose nationalism lacked a Socialist vision of the future. In a sense these women had the formidable task of taking on and fighting a whole array of patriarchs, both Western and Asian, who were hostile to western Communist 'she devils' and embarrassed by their presence.

The richness of Jayawardena's material impresses. She acquaints her reader with a sequence of remarkable individuals, all of them in their own way courageous, many of them openly disdainful of colonial authority and social convention. Take for instance Annette Ackroyd, a pioneer of secular education for Indian girls whose outspoken views annoyed both British officialdom and the Christian missionaries she described as "ignorant and conceited". Edith Pechey, a doctor and pioneer of women's medical education, started a training school for women in the face of official opposition and worked tenaciously for social reform and women's enfranchisement.

Annie Besant's tumultuous life has been the subject of several biographies. Jayawardena looks at it afresh and places it alongside the experience of other Western women theosophists. Among them is the flamboyant Florence Farr, who began as a scandal-surrounded actress and lover of Bernard Shaw in London and ended up as the principal of a Hindu girls' school in northern Sri Lanka, her colourful past well concealed.

Interesting too, are stories of Evelyn Trent and Agnes Smedley, young American radicals whose lives ran parallel for a while when they threw in their lot with the Indian Communist movement. Evelyn, the wife of M.N. Roy, is shown to have been an intellectual force in her own right noted for her well argued critiques of Gandhi. Smedley, an American Socialist better known for her association with the Chinese revolutionary struggle, spent several years as the companion of the Indian revolutionary Virendranath Chattopadyaya.

Certain threads emerge to link some of the narratives. One is the role played by the Cheltenham Ladies' College, an academic school for girls in western England founded in the mid-19th century. This is shown to have served as the model for Ladies' College, Colombo, a Christian-run institution that produced, along with women lawyers, doctors, diplomats and teachers, an impressive share of nationalists, Socialists and civil rights activists. Several of Dr Jayawardena's women subjects, among them Florence Farr, were educated at Cheltenham, while Pandita Ramabai taught Sanskrit at the school for a while.

What lessons emerge from these varied case histories? One is an interesting paradox: that women who were supportive of Indian nationalism were by no means consistent votaries of feminism, defined by the author as "a consciousness of injustices based on gender hierarchy and a commitment to change". The same was true in reverse: outspoken advocates of women's equality often proved quite compromising in relation to imperialism. As Jayawardena puts it,

> The irony often was that some of those who were 'good' on nationalism were lukewarm on women's rights for fear of offending locals and those who were all for the sun never setting on the British Empire, were often 'advanced' on the issue of women's oppression and did not care too much about offending South Asian males or their own patriarchs.

Pandita Ramabai is thus shown to have combined militant campaigning against child marriage, forced widowhood and other practices she traced back to the laws of Manu, with Christian proselytising and defence of the empire. In contrast, Annie Besant, architect of the Home Rule movement and a powerful critic of colonialism, applied no universalist yardstick to women's equality and rights; while speaking up for the militant movement for women's rights in the West, she advocated orthodoxy and traditional education for Indian women, talked of Hinduism's "ancient ideals" and even put up a defence of the caste system.

One is reminded here of the paradox noted by the Communist theoretician Rajni Palme Dutt in his classic work, *India Today*. Writing of the differences that separated the Extremists from the Moderate wings of the Congress-led freedom movement at the turn of the century, he noted that while the Moderates tended to be politically compromising in relation to imperialism, on social issues they represented the most progressive force in Indian society at that time. In contrast, the Extremists, combative in their methods, far-reaching in their critique of colonial rule, sought to build the national movement on the basis of the entrenched forces of social conservatism and orthodox Hinduism. From this era, argued Dutt "dates the disastrous combination of political radicalism and social reaction in India, which has had such a maleficent influence on the fortunes of the national movement".

Where nationalism and feminism come together in Jayawardena's book is in the closing section on Western Socialist women in South Asia. Who can doubt that Doreen Wickremasinghe, the British woman whose inspiring life in Sri Lanka as teacher, union activist, anti-imperialist fighter and campaigner for women's rights successfully united her anti-colonialism with deep-going commitment to the cause of women's emancipation? The same was true of Hedi Keuneman, for several years the wife of the Sri Lankan Communist leader Pieter Keuneman; a teacher involved in many aspects of party work and trade union activity, Hedi closely identified with the lives of working people and actively helped several women to make inter-ethnic and inter-caste marriages.

The central problem, for Jayawardena, is one of establishing a convincing connecting link between her disparate women subjects. What common thread can be discerned between women missionaries and social reformers supportive of colonialism and working firmly within its framework and militantly anti-imperialist women struggling for a new type of society? What links Katherine Mayo, vehement in her belief that Indians were unfit for self rule, with Annie Besant, Home Rule activist and uncritical, revivalist admirer of virtually everything in India's ancient past?

What justifies the inclusion in the study of the apolitical Mirra Alfassa, the 'Mother' of Pondicherry who made it a point to steer clear of social and political controversy, alongside Madeleine Slade, who gently but persistently inverted the gender, class and racial expectations of colonial society? Did some kind of feminist vision unite them? And, if it did, which was more important in objective historical terms-the feminist perspective or anti-imperialism?

The answers Jayawardena provides may not be entirely convincing. At one level, she suggests that her Western women subjects were united by a sense of 'sisterhood', by a conscious commitment to the advancement of Asian women. The problem is that in many cases their support for colonialism or their endorsement of obscurantist religious and social practice worked against that goal in objective terms. As the author notes, such a sisterhood could only be achieved through difficult and sometimes disparate tasks: first, confronting and opposing their own subordination under the patriarchal structures of religion, state and family; second, taking a firm stand against imperialism by supporting local independence movements and associating with their leaders; and third, by speaking out against the exploitation and oppression of women and other social evils in South Asia.

Only the women in Jayawardena's fifth category-that of Socialist Western women committed to the South Asian freedom struggle appear to have successfully brought these elements together.

At another level, the author finds belief in education to constitute some kind of connecting thread. "If there is one issue that is common to the foreign women of this book", she argues in the conclusion, "it is education, which was the key factor in the emancipation of local women". In fact, as her narratives reveal, the content of education for South Asian women was an area of quite bitter contention, with advocates of modern schooling pitted against those favouring traditional ways and the preservation of the traditional Indian wife and mother.

What does strike the reader is the variety of individual motives that carried unusual Western women to the uncertainties of life in South Asia. What they achieved in objective terms is not always easily assessed. Yet, reading about these women, one cannot but be moved by the willingness of every one of them to travel far, to step outside a conventional, settled life in Europe or North America, to battle for a cause, whether it be education and equality for woman, dignity for widows, modern medical care, the fight against obscurantism or freedom from colonial rule. In this pioneering study, Kumari Jayawardena brings their stories alive-vividly, intelligently and memorably. ■

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