

ASIAN WOMEN*

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Generalizations about women in Asia, perhaps like all other sweeping statements, are risky. In spite of similarities, it is a continent of vast varieties. There are differences of ethnicity, class, socio-political systems, religion and urbanization. The Asian countries reflect the world's major cultures, systems and beliefs. Their populations vary - so do their levels of development. Japan has a per capita GNP of over \$6,000; for a few others this figure is a little over \$100. As exemplified by the case of the People's Republic of China, India and Pakistan, for example, the political systems are diverse. There are about a dozen Moslem countries, some with militant and others with conservative views. And Turkey is a secular state among them. The recent resurgence of Islam in countries like Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia is a reminder underlining the importance of religion in defining women's status. In some countries where the Confucian and Hindu traditions are still strong, multitudes of women, though not all, 'obey their fathers when unmarried, their husbands when married and their sons when widowed'. Such religious diversity cannot be found in any other continent. Hinduism (India), Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Japan), Christianity (the Philippines) and Islam (Turkey, Iran, the Arab countries, Pakistan, Indonesia) are all represented in Asia. These reminders on variation may be sufficient.

One encounters the same variety in the world of Asian women. One finds women such as Mrs. Bandaranaike, Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Aquino in powerful political positions. In the leading cities, one also sees thousands of well-educated professional women. But especially in the rural areas, there are high rates of female mortality at child birth, low life expectancy, hunger, ill-health, illiteracy and overwork... Although there are important differences from one country to another or even between regions, millions are caught up in this vicious circle. Male dominance is frequent. But the

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condition of women is improving substantially as a result of modernization and economic growth.



One should be reminded that patriarchy, whether in parts of Asia or elsewhere, has been the product of historical development rather than an indication of man's natural superiority. (How many men can jump as high as Lyudmila Andonova?) If Aristotle believed that men were by nature superior or if later prominent thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte and Georg Hegel maintained that a woman should only rear children and obey the husband, they merely reflected the institutionalized role of the sexes.

Findings prove that at the dawn of society the leading role belonged to women. Since it was impossible to establish fatherhood, descent was traced through the maternal line. As tools developed, men took the leading place in society, becoming the hunter (breadwinner) and the soldier (defender). Their functions being increasingly limited to managing the household, women were kept from participation in social production and hence became economically and morally dependent on men. Even the simplest societies, such as the Inuits (Eskimo), became men-dominated. Under feudal economy the vast majority of women lived in complete subjection. Even participation in formal religious activity by women was infrequent. For instance, women appeared more often as "witches" than as priestesses. Although there were some conspicuous examples (such as the Iroquois) of the power of women, even among them actual power was in the hands of men. The elevated social status of individual women was accidental. For instance, the position of the queen mother in West Africa or the chieftainess in Samoa was not related to any fundamental concept of the high placement of women. If there was a Russian female officer (Nadezhda Durova) who took part in the 1812 war against the armies led by Napoleon, such cases were infrequent.

As the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution transformed production, women were drawn into the factories. They had already become a part of the French Revolution - to such an extent that a girl calling for the destruction of the old order was the symbol of Freedom. It is no surprise that women's rights came to the fore first in the industrializing states. Charles Fourier, a prominent French utopian socialist, was perhaps the first among those who said that the degree of emancipation of women was a yardstick for the degree of a general emancipation in a society. Later assertions for a supposed biological inferiority was a screen for the oppression of especially the working women.

The Chartists included woman suffrage in their program. The "Union des Femmes" was organized during the Paris Commune (1870-71), the "Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein" was founded (1865) with a platform around the demands for women's rights, and the "Women's Rights Convention" was held (1848) at Seneca Falls, New York. In the United States, higher education for women began with the opening of Oberlin College as a co-educational institution (1833). In England Girton College (Cambridge) was established (1869) as the first women's college of university rank. But no woman was qualified to practice law in England until 1922. Women were not permitted to matriculate in Germany until Heidelberg and Freiburg granted them that right (1901). It is worth to remember that the National Socialist Government in Germany decreed in 1934 that women may not exceed 10 percent of the total student body in an university.

Throughout history class lines have cut across sex lines. Women have enjoyed privileges denied to some men and some women, but within each class, women have been generally at a disadvantage. Similarly, women of dominant races had privileges withheld from men or women of other races. Even in some advanced societies women are deprived of the right of equal pay for equal work, and they play a very modest role in state administration. For instance, a U.S. researcher, Kirsten Amundsen, writes in **The Silenced Majority: Women and American Democracy** that American women, which constitute 40 percent of the total labour force, were underpaid and overworked. Professions in the scientific and technological fields are generally monopolized by men. Economic crises and the introduction of new technologies generally lead to a decrease in jobs for women. The application of cybernetics will cause a further decrease in the number of working women.

The situation is extremely serious in some parts of the world, such as the south of Africa, where the racist South African régime endangers the peaceful development of Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Lesotho. Women in those countries additionally suffer since scarce resources have to be used for defence or for political emancipation.

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The status of women throughout Asia is undergoing a drastic transformation. Republican Turkey was perhaps the first country in that continent to abolish legal inequalities and recognize women's rights to participate in public life - in any case earlier than in a number of European states such as Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece or Por-

tugal. Mustafa Kemâl Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, was preoccupied with the idea of radically changing the status of Turkish women. Indeed, his sweeping reforms in all walks of life made the Turkey of the 1920s and the 1930s a forward-looking society. Turkey was then one of the very few countries in the world with a republican régime.

As to women's rights voting privileges in England were not extended to women on the same terms as to men until 1928. Attempts to enfranchise women were defeated in the upper house in Sweden until 1921. Turkey, on the other hand, abolished the Caliphate and promulgated the Law for the Unification of Instruction (both in 1924), the latter bringing all religious schools under unified control. The introduction of the Turkish Civil Code (1926), which made no discrimination between the sexes, as well as a secular, co-educational system were "revolutions" for a society with traditional Islamic norms.

It is true that most of the major progressive reforms, including those in favour of Turkish women, were given rather than fought for. But it is fair to remember that reforms in the "superstructure" facilitate qualitative changes in society. Extraordinary organizers may also perform essential functions. This fact refers not only to scientists, writers and artists without whose work the development of science and culture would be inconceivable, but also to men like Atatürk engaged in public affairs. It is true that the course of history is determined by the struggle of large social groups. But the great men of history are those outstanding figures whose deeds further the development of society and who serve the cause of progress. Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca, a leading contemporary Turkish poet, says in one of his couplets that "nations breathe with their major sons". Truly, their activity can accelerate the course of history and alleviate the birth pains of a new and a better society.

Although problems still beset the Turkish women of today, the transformation started by a new legal system cannot be minimized. Under Turkey's conditions, the cases of Sabiha Gökçen, Turkey's first female military pilot (of the 1930s), and of Keriman Halis, Miss Turkey elected Miss Universe (1932), were symptoms of a basic change. Turkish women enrolled in schools, became professionals, entered politics and earned fame as writers and artists in the earlier part of the Twentieth Century.

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The status of women throughout Asia has undergone a drastic transformation, either on account of modernization or change in the political system. Women in general are more zealous in the strive for equal partici-

pation in economic and social development. Following the United Nations declaration of the Decade of Women and Development, many Asian governments have set up special executive agencies bent on women's issues and concerns.

In the Central Asian Soviet Republics and in China a new ideology and political system and in Japan economic growth gave women a higher status than instituted by tradition. The ideology of the Soviet Union and China counter-balanced the traditionally inferior status of women.

Countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizistan, Tadjikistan, Kazakistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, as Republics within the Soviet Federation, are governed in accordance with their own constitutions which guarantee equal rights to women in all spheres of economic, government, cultural and other public activity. Women are expected to take part in governing the state, receive equal pay for equal work and have equal opportunities for jobs. Since the state allots funds for building nurseries and kindergartens, boarding schools, laundries and service shops of all kinds, which help relieve women of a part of house work, women have opportunity to study, learn a trade or profession and choose an occupation to their liking.

In the Central Asian outskirts of the Tsarist Russian Empire, women were generally victims of arbitrary rule. Older people, who for years had closely adhered to the traditions of their ancestors, were also largely hindered by prejudices even under the new Soviet régime. Younger people naturally broke away from the laws of the past more readily.

Turkmenistan, for instance, was a poverty-ridden, backward looking area in the 1920s. Today, it has twice the ratio of students per inhabitants compared to the Federal Republic of Germany. The status of Turkmen women has radically changed. They now have the same opportunities for education and employment as men. One of the Turkmen female deputies in the USSR Supreme Soviet (Oguldjennet Kulova) is a Vice-Chairwoman of the Soviet of the Union. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Turkmen SSR has five women members (35 percent of its membership), and three women in the Council of Ministers. Women are represented in the local Soviets of People's Deputies, making up nearly 45 percent of their membership. 360 women occupy leading posts in executive committees of regional, city and district Soviets. They have free excess to all domains of creative activity, production, education, science or culture. 42 percent of all working people engaged in the national economy are women. They make up 40 percent of the scientists, 50 percent of its medical personnel and 45 percent of its teachers.

The facts and figures are about the same in the other Soviet Central Asian Republics. In Uzbekistan, for instance, 183 deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic are women. Uzbeki women have equal rights with men legally and in everyday life. Every third engineer and scientific worker is a woman, three out of four doctors are women and 45 percent of the teachers are likewise women. The social status of Azerbaijani women (Caucasus) has also changed drastically. Today women account for 53 percent of all the specialists in public education and for 59 percent of those in health care. They are firmly established among the engineers at various industries where they make up 26 percent of all experts. On the whole, Azerbaijani women represent 43 percent of the labour force. They participate in all spheres of life, including the management of state and social institutions. They are in charge of large industrial enterprises, farms, educational establishments and research centers.

The position of women in China, as portrayed in Pearl Buck's **The Good Earth**, was abandoned in the early 1950s since women were now needed for agrarian and industrial production. Doubtless, their status improved significantly in the last four decades. Yet, there were several shifts in their position as the "Great Leap Forward" or the "Cultural Revolution" advanced or regressed. As a matter of fact, the women's liberation movement in China, from the end of the last century, passed through various stages. It was always connected with other causes, such as nationalism, the war against Japan and the Revolution.

In the past, Chinese women were assigned an inferior status under the Confucian canon. Although the torturous foot-binding custom was not attributable to Confucius, but the result of a kind of "masculine aesthetic standard", women were placed in a fixed hierarchy in favour of a "stable" society. But continuous and humiliating defeats in the hands of foreigners forced the reformists to think of promoting women's education as an insurance against the decline of China's sons. Some urban gentry class daughters, who studied abroad, came home with feminist ideas. They even joined secret revolutionary societies, a significant figure of this period being Qiu Jin, who was a feminist educator and who had died as a revolutionary martyr. The 1911 Revolution spread women's schools from coastal cities into provincial capitals, and the "May Fourth Movement" (1919), which started as a protest against the Paris Peace Treaty, evolved into a cultural crusade embracing ideas of a new status for women. Double standard of morality, concubinage, arranged marriage, foot-binding and the like were condemned, and monogamy, political participation, equal heritage rights and women's education were advocated.

Under the "Nationalist" rule, the only achievement was the Civil

Code (1931), which improved the legal position of women. They gained equal property inheritance and were entitled to choose their husbands. But the "Nationalists" were more entangled with military affairs and less with the implementation of the new laws. When Chiang Kai-shek launched the "New Life Movement", the emphasis was again on women as wives and mothers only. Until 1949 Song Meiling (the wife of Chiang Kai-shek) was the only female figure, who was the first lady, not a political leader.

Mao Zedung, on the other hand, qualified women as a potential revolutionary and productive force. Consequently, the first Chinese Soviet (of the Jiangxi province, 1931-34) promulgated the most radical marriage laws China has ever known. But this caused a hostile reaction from the male population. It was the Communists who turned back their policy to avoid alienation from the male masses. Efforts were renewed to win over the women for production when the anti-Japanese war broke out (1937). The establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949) gave the new government a chance to promulgate the final version of the marriage law, supposed to deal the last blow to the traditional family structure. The majority of Chinese women were assigned to the labour force, going to the factories and the fields. Mao Zedung had said: "Women hold up half of the sky". But in 1955 there was an unemployment crisis and women again turned to housekeeping duties. They were once more needed for production with the "Great Leap Forward" (1958). In spite of the several other shifts in later years, women's role has undeniably improved. Many household tasks being collectivized, they constitute a solid percentage of the work force. Yet the traditional norms within the family are difficult to break. In some circles, marriage is still "arranged", and the tradition of paying a dowry to the girl's family is maintained to some extent.

Changes in the political systems elsewhere in Asia inescapably brought about important transformations in the lives of those communities. For instance, the life of an Afghani woman was within the confines of her home prior to the April 1978 Revolution. Even today there are Afghani families sharing obsolete views as to the position of women, but there are also female mechanics and specialists, who view their role in the society in a different way. The 1979 Revolution in Iran proved that women can bring their weight in favour of radical changes in a country hitherto torn by contradictions. In Iraq and Syria, where the different branches of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party are in power, official circles believe that the society remains in chains unless its women are liberated, enlightened and educated. Women take part in party work

and in mobilizing the people as well as in fields such as the judiciary, teaching, the arts, literature and journalism. In North and South Korea women today enjoy a great deal of freedom and privileges, compared with their grandmothers, discrimination against whom was justified by the Confucian doctrine and the customs based on them. While the North experienced the conversion on account of a new political system, the South owed the change to steps towards modernization.

It was perhaps much more in Japan that the rapid socio-economic changes put women in a place different than the bottom of the social order of the feudal and the Tokugawa periods. The status of Japanese women improved immeasurably especially since the end of the Second World War. The Constitution (1946) guaranteed legal equality for all, regardless of sex. The Japanese Civil Code abolished the traditional household system. The Education Law stated that every child, boy or a girl, was entitled to advance into all strata of learning. The Election Law gave women the right to work. Consequently, the voting rate of women exceeded that of men since 1968. Finally, as the Japanese economy made remarkable advances since the 1960s, there was an increased demand to recognize women as part of the labour force. Although there is a gap between men and women with respect to wages and promotion, the number of female employees has increased and the range of their occupations has expanded. The Japanese Government is bringing further efforts to promote the participation of women in decision-making bodies and to eliminate discriminatory practices.

Although there are important variations worthy of remark between the South Asian countries, there are similarities, such as low female participation in labour force. Successive censuses show that the participation rate for women is only 11 percent in India and lower in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Doubtless, all South-Asian countries wish to modernize. But this process displaces women in some societies from the traditional work in agriculture and in cottage industry. They do not become idle, but they withdraw from the labour force and turn to poverty induced marginal occupations.

The problem of the state of women had begun to exercise the minds of the pre-Partition Indian reformers in the early years of the Nineteenth Century. They agitated against child marriage, **purdah**, enforced widowhood and the denial of education to girls. The Nineteenth Century battle for reforms were inconclusive. The reforms would reach only a part of the urban middle class. Gandhi's views on the status of women were radical. He held that women ought to be treated as individuals in their own right with full potentialities for self-development. Engaged in the

fight against alien rule, Indian women had a moral right to equality. It was left to Jawaharlal Nehru to provide the constitutional and legal framework for equality between the sexes. That outstanding leader of the Indian national liberation movement paid considerable attention to the problem of women's emancipation. He threw his weight against discrimination. He endeavoured to embody the principle of equality in the Indian Constitution. But there was criticism of the early bills introduced in the Indian Parliament to grant Hindu women limited rights to secure divorce and inheritance of property. Before the enactment of the new Hindu Code, Muslim women enjoyed advantages over their Hindu sisters in matters of divorce, remarriage and inheritance. They had also joined hands with their men for the struggle against alien rule and for the creation of Pakistan. Fatima Jinnah and Ra'na Liaquat Ali represented Muslim women leadership of the 1940s and the early 1950s. Career women of Pakistan in the following decades, such as Abida Hussein in politics, Shaista Ikram in diplomacy or Zubeida Agha in arts proved that work and employment were not necessarily disruptive of the family.

The scene in India and its neighbours is certainly changing, even though the rates may be uneven. Attitudes and roles are in a flux in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Women's legal status is generally guaranteed through progressive legislation related to child marriage, divorce, polygamy and inheritance. Hundreds of thousands of women now work out of economic need rather than to get even with men. The educated women in all these countries acquired remarkable confidence. Female literacy in India, for instance, is rising at a faster rate than male literacy. But the demographic and socio-economic data for countries with extensive territory and large diversified population is bound to differ from one area to another. Hence, female literacy is 65 percent in Kerala (India), but 11 percent in Rajasthan.

Although the most important role of South Asian women may still be motherhood, they are not "nailed to their own crosses". Conditions vary between regions and classes, and there are government plans to attack the problem. The Government of India seeks to promote the social progress of working women, above all those living in the rural areas. A Women's Division of the Government of Pakistan was established in 1979, two years after the process of Islamisation was initiated. This Division launched about 4,000 multi-purpose projects such as centers for literacy, vocational training, health and legal aid. A Women's Rights Wing strives to represent women's interests in public policy formulation. A number of national conferences on the theme have been organized by this Wing. In Bangladesh, where the legal status of women is determined by the **Sharia** laws, the

Parliament has a reserved quota for women members, a separate Women's Affairs Ministry has been established and a quota of 10 percent of jobs is set aside for them.

The status of women varies according to the ethnic (Sinhalese, Tamil, Moors), religious (Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Moslem), caste, class and legal disparities in Sri Lanka. But that country produced the world's first woman Prime Minister. Female literacy is 70 percent, life expectancy is 67 years and women form 40 percent of all university students. They, nevertheless, constitute 27 percent of the total work force. Except teachers, doctors and clerks, they receive unequal pay. They still work on plantations - longer than men.

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Women of South-East Asia have traditionally enjoyed a higher status. For instance, they do not practice seclusion (**purdah**). Filipinos frequently point out how well off their women are. Indeed, they obtain as much education as the men and are able to pursue a wide array of occupations. Female urban literacy is 92 percent and rural literacy 77 percent. But women have higher rates of unemployment, they receive the lower ranks of the occupation in the distribution of level of responsibility and when they are employed, they earn about 44 percent less than men of comparable education. Although the President is Mrs. Aquino, very few (0.6 percent) of them become executives.

The traditional society of Indonesia (with its kinship system) still exercises an important influence on women's position. But the universal marriage law, promulgated in 1974, sets a minimum age (16 for women) for marriage, restricts polygamy as well as men's right in respect to divorce. Inheritance, however, is still determined by customary (**adat**) law. Although there are also segregated Muslim and Catholic private religious schools, the system of learning is co-educational. Having ratified the ILO Convention, the Indonesian Government has thus accepted the principle of equal pay for equal work. Those who have reached 17 or are already married have the right to vote. Indonesian women have been elected to the Constituent Assembly and have worked as Cabinet Ministers.

Progress is closely linked with the role women play in society. The attitude to various aspects of their position differs from country to country depending on the social system and the level of economic development. It is clear, however, that problems relating to their life can no longer wait for a solution. The position of women is a "barometer of democracy" in any country. The statements of all Asian leaders, when combined, make

up a program of the social emancipation of women. The first provision of this program is their complete equality as an inalienable part of the transformation of society for the better. Women are a powerful social force without whose participation it is impossible to solve fundamental problems. One of the primary conditions for the emancipation of women is the wide use of female labour in social production. Free, conscious and creative female labour in such production helps the all-round development of the woman's personality, relieves her from secluded life and stimulates her general activity. Increasingly active part in the administration of enterprises and of state is included in the performance due to women.