



## Women and the Democracy Movement

by  
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THE Himalayan country, Nepal, simmering with discontent for the last 30 years, finally exploded on April 6, 1990, and is now passing through historic transformations. The so-called partyless panchayat system was forced upon the people of Nepal in 1960, after the late King Mahendra staged a military coup against the then parliamentary system. Under the active patronage of the royal palace, the *panchayat* system virtually reduced this otherwise self-reliant country into an ever-begging country. Nepal is fast sliding towards first position amongst the poorest

countries in the world with its per capita GNP of \$160.

The main problem with the *panchayat* system was that it was a partyless system, and didn't allow opposition parties to play a role. As a result there was no system of checks and balances. Corruption, nepotism, red tapism was the result.

It was not that the *panchayat* system altogether ignored women. In fact, under the second constitutional amendment there was a provision that there must be at least one woman representative either by selection or by nomination on each *village*

*panchayat*. But as for the rest of the *panchayat* system, leadership of women was imposed from the top. As a result they never represented the women of Nepal. Nepal Mahila Sangathan functioned as one of the class organisations of the *panchayat* system. It had a wide network of organisational units within the country. But it operated more as a showpiece, its main function being to organise the birthday of the Queen. How ineffective this organisation was is proved by the fact that it never gave any statement condemning even the most heinous crimes against

women. The organisation did nothing to prevent trafficking of women to India. In many areas like Nuwakot, Sindhupal Chowk, the local *pradhan panchas* played a key role in procuring these women for prostitution.

The *panchayat* system bred *goondas* who were used to intimidate active students. The system would even use its reserve of Karate and Tykondo players to punish the active leaders. This was specially so during the recent democratic movement. In fact the raiding of the girls' hostel in Pokhara was done jointly by police personnel and hired ruffians. These hooligans perpetrated rape and eve teasing while the State did nothing to control them. In the name of Hindu religion, the rights of women were badly curtailed while blue video movies were openly shown in the lanes of cities like Kathmandu, Dharan, Biratnagar, Pokhara. In the name of encouraging tourism, the government played silent spectator to the growing prostitution within the country.

Unemployment is widespread and large numbers of Nepali youth are forced to migrate to India to do all sorts of unskilled jobs. According to Dr Gilada of the Indian Health Organisation, about 100,000 Nepali girls land up in various prostitution centres in India every year. More than 35 percent of prostitutes in Bombay alone are of Nepali origin.

The despotic *panchayat* system stayed in power for 30 years because the opposition was weak and disorganised. It was

the historic alliance between the otherwise banned Congress and Communist parties which provided confidence to the people to root out the *panchayat* system.

### Women in the Movement

One new element of the recent movement was the participation of women, children and old people. The different programmes organised by various political parties were able to mobilise all sections of the people, from pilots, engineers and doctors to housewives, the aged and school children.

The movement was directed not only against the dictatorship but also against hunger. Women are the first victims of hunger, the first to feel the pinch of scarcity. With the growing inflation in Nepal, especially after India enforced an economic blockade against Nepal in March 1989, scarcities had reached intolerable proportions.

Before February 18, the date declared for the launching of the movement, an incident in Pokhara on February 12 had already prepared the ground. On that day, hired ruffians and storm troopers along with the police raided the girls' hostel on Prithvi Narayan campus. That day the

students had organised a meeting to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela. The girls were dragged out, stripped naked and mercilessly beaten. They were then dumped into trucks and taken into police custody. The worst victim was Ms Laxmi Karkee, a student leader. She was widely rumoured to have died in custody but managed to survive. In her own words: "*Lathis*, boots and fists were showered on every part of my body. I told them that some day people would punish them. The police then showered blows even more severely and pierced *lathis* into my private part. I fainted. When I regained consciousness I realised that all my clothes were in tatters, and when I asked for water I was abused and told that I deserved urine." The very fact that this gruesome incident took place right under the nose of the royal family holidaying in Pokhara, enraged the people.

On February 20, in Jaduguwa village, Janakpur district, three women were shot dead. The incident took place when a group of policemen went to arrest one of the activists. Women protested and were suddenly sprayed with bullets, as a result of which many got wounded.

Janaki Devi Mandal, aged 50, Bhuwaneshwari Yadav, aged 46, and Sonawati Devi Yadav, aged 30, were killed on the spot.

On February 22, about 100 women in Biratnagar participated in a silent protest march, their mouths covered with black cloths. They had come out to protest against harassment of women and



children by police patrols on the pretext of searching for activists. They also demanded democracy in Nepal. About 25 women were arrested that day. The same day in Hetanda, about 50 women were arrested from a protest rally. In Butwal, in western Nepal, five women activists were arrested from a protest rally.

On March 8, international women's day, women from all walks of life assembled in Padma Kanya Women's College in Kathmandu. They tied black bands on their arms to protest against the atrocities in Pokhara and Jaduguwa. Professional women and housewives spoke and voiced their firm pledge to fight for democracy and to overthrow the government. Five participants, including myself, were taken into police custody.

In Jhapa, in the east, about 500 women participated in a rally to celebrate international women's day and to protest against the government. About 1,000 women in Siraha took to the streets demanding democracy. In Biratnagar, about 200 women participated in a protest rally and four were arrested. In Palpa, in the midwestern region, five, and in Butwal, about 33 women activists were arrested.

On March 13, about 2,000 women led a huge protest march in Narayanghat. They came onto the streets with their children, armed with sickles. About 200 women were arrested and taken into the dense jungle of Chitawan. They were detained there for three days without food, shelter or security.

On March 20, the coordinating committee, established to coordinate various professional organisations, had arranged a seminar on "The Role of Intellectuals in the Present Context of Nepal." All 700 participants and the speakers were taken into custody. Of these about 40 were women, of

whom four, including myself, were jailed. The presidents of two human rights associations were also arrested.

On March 31, an unprecedented mass upsurge of people of Patan, in the Kathmandu valley, liberated the city from the clutches of *panchayat* administration. Old people, children, and women took to the streets in large numbers in a spirit of do or die. Women farmers were armed with agricultural tools. Community kitchens were established at important junctions.

The liberation of Patan encouraged the people in Kathmandu city. On April 6, the streets of Kathmandu swarmed with people protesting against the royal declaration which had not given any sign of doing away with the *panchayat* system. This day was a turning point for the movement. Every residential area voluntarily organised distribution of water, sometimes even oranges. Water was sprinkled from the tops of houses to cool off the protesters. People swarmed towards the palace, but before they could reach there, they were indiscriminately fired upon. That day more than 200 people died in indiscriminate firing. Among them were several women, including 11 year old Rekha Riyal.

Another new element of this movement was that even school children took to the streets, shouting: "We want democracy!" Tear gas was thrown into school premises and school children taken into police custody. Old people, including women, mobilised themselves in their own way. For example, one programme was assembling in temple complexes to offer prayers in support of the movement. There was also a programme of beating empty utensils and plates to protest against rising prices, in which housewives participated. Blackouts called by political parties mobilised almost

every household in support of the movement. Those houses defying the blackout were stoned.

Women also helped the movement in many indirect ways. Before the planned protest march, many activists had to go underground because arrests had begun much before February 18. Women and children helped to pass messages and safeguard activists from arrest.

Ironically, one method used to mobilise inactive communities was sending them *churapote* (bangles and beaded necklaces worn by women). This gesture symbolised the cowardice of these inactive communities. When the first incident of violence occurred in Bhaktapur, in Kathmandu valley, where 12 people were shot dead, the people of Bhaktapur sent *churapote* to the people of Patan. Patan got mobilised and then sent *churapote* to Kathmandu. There were reports of the sending of *chura pote* to other places like Dharan and Birganj.

The 50 day movement finally simmered down after negotiations between the royal palace, the Congress party, and the United Left Front. The *panchayat* system was dissolved and a multiparty system was declared within the framework of the old Constitution. Right from the formation of the interim government I have not been satisfied with the way things are going on. The interim government committed a big political blunder by compromising with the royal palace without smashing the old *panchayat* Constitution. The whole movement was to overthrow the *panchayat* system but the present interim government was in such a hurry to form its government that it didn't bother to root out the *panchayat* Constitution. As a result of the conspiratorial role of the palace the present government is virtually ineffective. To top it all a polarisation



is taking place. The royal palace and Congress are aligning against the Communist forces. In Nepal, the Communists are a growing force and as a result Congress needs the royal family more than the king needs himself. The manifestation of this alliance is clearly seen in the incident of the Teej. On August 23, the day of Teej, when women all over the valley assembled in Pashupati Nath temple to dance and sing, the Queen's car was brickbatted by the people gathered there. I was taken into custody for intense interrogation. They were trying to project me as an extremist, as a terrorist. There is a strong rumour that the incident was planted by the palace to gain the sympathy of people and to sabotage the reform of the Constitution which undermines the position of the royal palace. After I was subjected to

intense interrogation in police custody on account of the Teej incident fresh warrants have been issued for my arrest. In fact warrants have been issued against all the top women activists of Nepal following the stoning incident. The drama of pelting stones at the Queen's car has been used as a good excuse to harass and intimidate the activists of the recent movement. Among those implicated are Laxmi Karkee, the heroine of the Pokhara episode and a central executive member of All Nepal Women's Organisation, Pampha Bhusal, the general secretary of All Nepal National Women's Forum, and Brinda Pandey, the president of Kathmandu's unit of All Nepal Women's Organisation. There are

more than a dozen male activists who have likewise been implicated in the same case. We all will be charged under the State Offence Act under which the maximum penalty is death, the minimum penalty is 10 years' rigorous imprisonment. Already 12 have been taken to jail under this case (they were taken into custody immediately after the Teej incident). This conspiracy has been hatched against all of us by the royal group and Congress party



to do away with the left supporters and left members.

The United Left Front is quite ineffective as they are being dominated by the Congress and the royal family. Hence I am in hiding these days.

All those warranted and arrested are either sympathisers or members of left parties. As a result, till date no new Constitution has been promulgated. Although the new reformed Constitution has been drafted by the alliance of three groups, Congress, Communists and the royal palace; the royal palace is intervening to reform it in a manner that favours them.

No fundamental changes have been introduced in the laws relating

to women. Not much has changed in their daily lives either. Women of Nepal have no claim on parental property. Only unmarried women over the age of 55 can share parental property and they must remain unmarried if they are to retain this share. Married women can claim a share in the husband's property only after 15 years of conjugal life or if they are over 35 years of age. After divorce, women are not entitled to a share in their husbands' property. Abortion is illegal in Nepal.

### **Women's Organisations**

What is more exciting, however, is that many women's organisations have sprung up after the movement. Some of them, especially those affiliated to political parties, were functioning underground during the *panchayat* period.

Already, many activities are taking place. There was a mammoth rally of women organised by the All Nepal National Women's Forum (ANWF) in the open air theatre. This is something very new and daring in Nepal because it had never been allowed under the *panchayat* system.

Another programme which created quite a sensation in Kathmandu was the protest against the beauty contest and fashion show that was to take place in a five star hotel. Women and men organised by ANWF went ahead with the protest programme and managed to stop it. It was quite a challenge for us because we had to travel a long distance to protest at 8 p.m. But we were overwhelmed by the turnout of

women, numbering about 100. One good thing so far is that men help us in our efforts. This particular incident created a controversy in our society.

All Nepal Women's Organisation called a mass rally against the rape of an 11 year old girl by hoodlums. In the first week of July a rally was organised in Dharan, in eastern Nepal, against the escalating prices.

About a dozen women's organisations are actively operating in Nepal today. Most of them are affiliated to political parties. What is missing is a spirit of close cooperation among them. Just as political parties are suspicious of each other so are the various women's organisations.

Besides these active

organisations there are other women's organisations which live on foreign donations and arrange seminars in five star hotels - these are not at all action oriented.

I am a member of ANWF which does not have any party backing. Women involved in it are mainly left sympathisers. The president of this organisation, Ms Pariyat, a 50 year old, is a famous writer who has written several novels depicting the plight of women. We have started *Asmita*, a monthly 10 page publication of poems on women and we sell it for Re 1. Our idea is to encourage women to express themselves. We are apprehensive about women's position in the new reformed Constitution since complete

sovereignty of the people is not yet guaranteed. The very fact that there is no women's representative in the nine member Constitution Reform Committee is a matter of concern. In the present interim government Shahara Pradhan, the only woman amongst 11 members, holds the portfolio of commerce and industry.

The issue of inheritance rights is now being raised by all women's organisations. The latest issue of *Manushi* on women's inheritance rights was very useful for us. The interim government is amending the old Constitution and women's issues will also be taken up.

Hence, the movement for women's rights in Nepal has only just begun.