

EDITORIAL

The founding father of communist China, Mao Tse-tung is credited with heralding the gender equality in China. He used the ancient dictum of *Woman can hold up half the sky* (fù nǚ néng dǐng bàn biān tiān , Ch. 妇女能顶半边天) to emphasize that the women have an equal part to play in society. The opening of fissures in the Confucian mindset of patriarchy provided fertile ground for the Chinese women to take the strides to reach the high positions in business and politics of Asia.

Women dons the robe of business and financial leaders; political and spiritual leaders. But, hardly does one come across an authoritative female philosopher in Asia. It is not that the women get sufficient space in the Western world. Only a handful of female philosophers like Ayn Rand, Hannah Arendt, Simon de Beauvoir, Rosa Luxemburg, or the French school of *l'Écriture féminine* (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva) can be listed in the annals of western philosophy. In contemporary Asia, only a few female philosophers are active- Vandana Shiva is one of them, though she may not be included as a "hard" philosopher.

The marginalization of women in the realm of abstract thinking appears only after the advent of the Great Religions. In the Vedas, names of 27 woman seers can be found. Ghosha, Lopa, Maitreyi, Gargi, Sulabha are seen debating with the leading male counterparts. Maitreyi, the wife of sage Yajnavalkya is known as a "*brahmavadini*" (Knower of the Brahma Vidya or the absolute knowledge). Gargi, the daughter of sage Vachaknu challenged Yajnavalkya during the "*brahmayajna*" in the court of Janaka. They ruminated over the nature of the universe and the origin of elements. They debated man, nature and consciousness. They were co-creators of the central tenets of the civilizational wisdom.

This was before the crystallization of Great Indic religions. Then came Buddhism. There were women of substance like Amrapali, Sumangala, Subha during Buddha's time. But, Buddhism denigrated the women's capacity for abiding wisdom.

The Buddhist bhikshunis(nuns) were reduced to composers of the songs of spiritual realization and the age of gender-biasing dawned. The Therigatha section of the Khuddaka Nikaya contains 522 stanzas of such compositions. But, very few women could emerge as thinkers. All the transmission lineages of East Asia or Tibet list man after man. Buddhism in Asia turned into an absolutely gender biased tradition with very limited opportunity for women to reincarnate as tulkus/ rinpoches or even to elevate herself in the role of khenpos(scholars).

In China, there were woman scholars like Ban Zhao(45C.-116 CE). She is also known in Chinese history as Huiban. She is credited with completing "*The Book of Han*". She was an astronomer, a mathematician and a librarian at the Han Court. But, as Buddhism, a Great Religion started to exert influence over the Chinese court, hardly a female scholar could receive such prominence. During the Golden Age of the Chinese history when the Tang Dynasty was in power, again there is dearth of female scholars. Even though Wu Zetian (625-705A.D.) became the only female in Chinese history to rule as emperor, there is no trace of effervescence of female scholarship in her court. She is rather credited with elevating Buddhism over Taoism.

One of the last great female thinkers of ancient Alexandria was Hypatia (370-415 A.D.). She propagated secularized wisdom. She taught mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. She assisted her father, Theon of Alexandria, a mathematician and curator of Alexandria Museum, in writing his eleven part commentary on Ptolemy's *Almagest* and the new version of Euclid's *Elements*. But, the new Great Religion of Christianity targeted her for her pagan scholarship. On March 8, 415 A.D.; a mob of Christians led by one Peter, the Lector dragged her from a woman's carriage. She was stripped naked and beaten to death. Her body was torn apart and burnt. Her martyrdom for wisdom coincidentally is commemorated as the International Women's Day (Fù nǚ jié 妇女节).

The advent of another Great Religion, Islam further pushed female scholars into liminal zone. During the early phase of growth of Islam, we do come across female scholars like Fatima Al Batayhiyyah (8th century) who taught the celebrated work of Sahih al Bukhari in Damascus or Sutayta Al-Mahāmalī (10th century), an expert in *hisab* (arithmetics) and *fara'idh* (successoral calculations), credited with inventing several mathematical equations. Labana of Cordoba (Spain, ca. 10th century) is known for her contribution to mathematics. There were female engineers and technicians. Zubayda pioneered the project of digging wells and building service stations all along the pilgrimage route from Baghdad to Mecca. Al-'Ijliya who worked in the court of Sayf al-Dawla in Aleppo (Regnum:944 to 967 A.D.) made an astrolabe. [Mohammad Akram has prepared a 40-volume biographical dictionary (in Arabic) of the women scholars in Islam. An introduction of the book has been published in English under the title, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (2007)].

But, expansion of Islam and marginalization of female scholarship occurred in tandem. Muslim women could only dream to excel as good nurses or as expert in religious scripture.

Similarly, among Hindus, women scholarship in secular branches of knowledge was totally on the wane. They could excel only as composer of mystic songs. No woman could ever crave to the exalted position that Bhartrihari or Shankaracarya or Abhinavagupta could attain. *Where have all women philosophers gone?*

The advent of modern scientific tradition did provide opportunities for female scholarship to flourish in the realm of secular knowledge. Pioneering scientists like Marie Curie or Barbara McClintock have left everlasting imprint over mankind. But, as mentioned above, even modernity despises the blooming of female philosophers.

Can we have a Simon de Beauvoir in Islamic world? Can we have scores of Gargi in India? Can we have avatars of Hypatia in the West? Can Asia produce a female Confucius? Until and unless, the academic world provides opportunity and space to female scholarship, no longer we can revolutionize the knowledge tradition further! The world is at a standstill and in dire need of infusion of fresh ideas.

Women hold two-third of the heaven! The heaven is depicted as the place where rivers, streams and nectar flow in bounty. It is a place of liquidity. Women's body like heaven is the dynamic system of motility. Within the amniotic fluid, she holds up the heavenly womb and nourishes the new born with nectar flowing from her body. The future of humanity depends upon the thought-currents gushing forth from the wisdom-wombs of female philosophers.

Sooner the Great Religions and the modern knowledge tradition reform to provide ample opportunity for female philosophers, better it shall be. The world does not require the plethora of New Age Goddesses, Dakinis, Khandroma, and Devis. Women scholarship has to be freed from the simulacral prison of literature, art, mysticism and management. More and more female scholars need to be groomed in “hard” philosophy and “hard” sciences. New woman scholarship should carve fusion of the spirit of Ban Zhao, Hypatia and Gargi. The day female philosophers of contemporaneity ascend the academic thrones of the leading Universities, the fresh breeze of change will begin to blow.

The current issue of the Journal of Indian Research is publishing several papers from the pen of woman scholars from Makkah to Dhaka. It is a small step towards carving a grand vision. But, as is said, the first step howsoever small, is always the right step. We wish the readers of the JIR all the best in the year ahead and invite female scholars to contribute in this growing academic current.

- Niraj Kumar