

Asian Tradition of Feminist Activism

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The booklet, *Feminism in South Asia*, was first published in 1986 with two subsequent printings in 1987 and 1988, by Kali for Women. It is an attempt to respond to questions and doubts raised on feminism. The following excerpt from the booklet focuses on the early activism of our South Asian sisters and their male counterparts. They continue to serve as an inspiration in our continuing struggle for women's rights and empowerment.

18th Century Women Activists

There were many women activists in Asia in the 18th century. Some of the lesser known early agitators on women's rights were *Pandita Ramabai* (1858-1922) of India, who attacked Hindu religious orthodoxy and spoke up for women's freedom as early as the 1880s and who herself led an independent life; *Kartini* (1879-1904), a pioneer of women's education and emancipation in Indonesia, who defied tradition to start a girl's school; *Qurrat ul Ayn* (1815-51) of Iran, a Babi heretic who abandoned her family, gave up veiled seclusion, preached unveiled in public, and died fighting on the battlefield; *Jiu Jin* of China (1875-1907) who left home to study in Tokyo and to involve herself in revolutionary politics and women's issues. *Jiu Jin* was arrested for these activities and executed. It was she who said, "The revolution will have to start in our homes, by achieving equal rights for women."

Sugala (from the Mahavamsa) and *Gajaman Nona* are two Sri Lankan women who defied the stereotype of

feminine passivity and prudery to give expression to their individuality as women. *Sugala* fought King Parakrama Bahu I in defence of her kingdom, while *Gajaman Nona* wrote poetry, some of which are considered by men to be too ribald for a woman.

Male Counterparts

Many of the earliest agitators for women's emancipation in the East were men. In China, for example, Kang Yu-Wei attacked footbinding and women's subordination: "I now have a task: to cry out the natural grievances of the incalculable number of women of the past. I now have one great desire: to save eight hundred million women of my own time from drowning in the sea of suffering. I now have a great longing: to bring the incalculable, inconceivable numbers of women of the future the happiness of equality and of independence."

In Egypt Ahmed Fares El Shidyak in 1855 wrote a book (**One Leg Crossed Over the Other**) supporting women's emancipation, and Kasim Amin, around the same time created a sensation with his book, **The New Woman**.

In Iran several male intellectuals of the 1880s and the 1890s took up the issue of women's rights, opposing polygamy and the seclusion of women; while in India, from the time of Ram Mohun Roy who agitated against sati and women's enslavement, numerous social and political reformers have raised the issue, including famous names like Vidyasagar, Gandhi, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore, Nehru, and Syed Ahmed.

The Link to Europe

European imperialism directly linked the European capitalist system to those countries that were colonized and brought about major changes in them. These changes were not only political and administrative but also fundamental to existing economic and social systems, in that they fundamentally altered the lives of the colonized peoples. Women were equally affected by all these changes. The policies and practices of the colonialists made the position of women even worse than what it used to be.

As in Europe, in South Asia women of the bourgeoisie were kept in the home but were given some education and a few basic rights. But in spite of these, basic laws were patriarchal with the man as the undisputed head of the family.

Thus with the growth and development of capitalism both in Europe and in the colonies, patriarchal structures were strengthened. Women lost their earlier rights in household production and were exploited in the field and factory, or confined to the home.

In all spheres, the culture of capitalism initiated in the 19th century by colonialists reinforced and established patriarchy and patriarchal socioeconomic values more firmly. □

Original source: "Feminism is Relevant" by the Feminist Study Circle in Colombo.

Our Source: "Feminism in South Asia." India: Kali for Women. 1986.