

# Afghan women's new role

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THE process of change in Afghanistan is so subtle and the violence so pervasive that not many seem to have noticed the fact that the Afghan women are slowly emerging from the oblivion and coming into their own. According to one report nearly 40 per cent of the voters who have registered themselves for the October presidential elections are women.

That is an impressive figure given the fact that until recently women were not even allowed out of their homes, because of the obscurantist policies of the Taliban who were ruling the roost in Kabul until the end of 2001.

What has brought about this change? Many would of course say it is the 'liberation' of Afghanistan by the United States in the post-9/11 period and the political and social 'reconstruction' taking place under President Hamid Karzai. Others might point to the consciousness-raising mission of the women's groups such as the Revolutionary Association for the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) which seek the emancipation of their compatriots.

All of this must undoubtedly have contributed to the change but the most important factor is the preponderance of women in the country which has been at war since 1979. The Afghans were first fighting the Soviet troops and then they were fighting amongst themselves, which they are still doing but with fewer casualties.

and Ritu Menon talking to women whose lives were disrupted by the partition and the massive transfer of populations in 1947 found that some of them had transformed their lives by managing to build prosperity on the foundations of their distress.

Similarly a number of families who fled from Bangladesh in 1971 overcame their trauma and turned their misfortunes to their advantage. Dr Akhter Hameed Khan, the award-winning social thinker and the founder of the Comilla Project in East Pakistan and the Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, was of the view that the migrant families were, by and large, dynamic and willing to take the initiative to turn around a negative situation in their favour.

One may well ask, is it imperative to destroy the old structures to bring about a change in social values and attitudes? It would be preferable if violence were not the precondition for change. For, any revolution not only causes a lot of destruction, violence and loss of life, it also invites a counter-revolution before the system settles down. Yet change is the essence of life and development. If society has to progress it must renew itself to keep abreast with the changing environment.

Change can also be brought about through education and it is this that every society should work for. But it needs to be emphasized that the direction of change and its velocity is determined by the contents of education. Literacy is, after all, an intellectual tool, a term generally attributed to Vygotsky.

According to him, a child has elementary mental functions such as memory, attention and the capacity to make associations based on contiguity. These

The brutal onslaught of American forces on the pretext of rooting out the Al Qaeda and their supporters, the Taliban, in October-December 2001 also wrought havoc on this strife-torn country, killing many able-bodied men in the process. The violence and insecurity in Afghanistan is a continuing phenomenon today, thanks to the factionalization of the country and the presence of the American troops.

The victims of this violence are mostly men. As a result it is said that nearly 80 per cent of the households in some areas of the country are headed by women because the men are either dead or disabled or dysfunctional. The women are stepping out taking up a new role. This has been possible for them because of the change in outlook brought about by the RAWA and the liberalization of the social milieu that does not prevent women from going outside their homes.

In other societies too, change has come imperceptibly on account of the developments in another sector. In Pakistan in the seventies the process of change was observed when the "Dubai chalo" syndrome caught on and a number of men from the rural areas moved out to the Middle East in search of greener pastures. There they made fabulous money and remitted their earnings to their families who had to stay back home because they were not welcome in the host country and they themselves did not wish to be uprooted.

The influx of money helped them improve their living standards. But significantly, many families were headed by women who made day-to-day decisions in the absence of their male members. This they would never have been allowed to do otherwise. They also acquired literacy at their own initiative because they wanted to communicate directly with their husbands and wished to manage their financial matters themselves rather than depend on other male members, whom they probably didn't trust.

Sociologists believe that the factors which influence people's behaviour, lifestyle and attitudes are demographic (especially urbanization and migration), ethnolinguistic fractionalization and education. But these processes span a period of several of years, maybe even decades, before they produce any visible changes in society. But changes come faster when there is massive destruction and sudden upheaval and the people are forced to adjust to the new circumstances.

Researchers Kamla Bhasin

tions based on contiguity. These basic functions help a person make sense of his environment. The intellectual tools given to a child through education facilitate acquisition of knowledge and the full understanding of what he is taught.

Regrettably Pakistan has failed on both count, — in providing the intellectual tool to all its citizens and in giving them education which should provide them with food for thought. In 57 years we have succeeded in raising our literacy rate from 17 per cent to 54 per cent (according to the Economic Survey 2003-04). With the population having grown at a faster rate, the number of illiterates (people above 15 years) in the country has gone up from 17 million to 44 million in 1998.

At the same time the contents of our education system — that is what the children are taught — have actually regressed. The curricula in many subjects have not been changed for 30 years in some universities. At times even factual developments are not taken note of, let aside shifts in perspectives and concepts. For at least nine years after the demise of the Soviet Union the International Relations syllabus for B.A. in the University of Karachi expected the students to study the policies of the USSR as though it was still in existence.

The recent debate on the revision of the curricula seems to have produced no effect at all. If anything, it has restored the status quo ante. While the government has assured the religious lobbies that no textbook will be changed in the general education system, the madressahs have got away without registering with the government or having their syllabi revised. In fact, the ordinance requiring them to register has been quietly withdrawn — at least in the NWFP where the MMA rules.

In the existing situation it is futile to hope for any social transformation in Pakistan. A violent change is too awesome to think about. Besides it may not turn out to be what we were aspiring for. Afghanistan which has seen the worst has another story to tell. Its literacy rate has gone up from 32 per cent in 1999 to 36 per cent today.

More importantly, the net school enrolment for girls has tripled from five per cent to 15 per cent in the same period. Boys' enrolment has fallen from 53 per cent to 42 per cent. Are the boys out of schools because they have been made disabled by the millions of landmines that still dot the country? Or, are they from among the 8,000 child soldiers who fight for the unscrupulous warlords?