

Rita Manchanda (ed.). *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001. 304 pages. Paperback. Indian Rs 295.00.

In the past few decades, South Asia has experienced a number of intra-state (caste, class, communal, ethnic or nationality-based) conflicts. Civil society has lost its existence as a consequence of the panic created by the security forces and armed groups (two major parties involved in the conflict). The worst victim in these riots are women, who have been affected both directly and indirectly. However, in these instances, women, instead of moving only in their private sphere with their traditional role as a victim (on humanitarian grounds), have surfaced with a new responsibility in the public sphere, which used to be the preserve of the male. There was no choice left for them except to take up arms to protect themselves and their families.

Women, War and Peace in South Asia highlights the experience of women and response of the civil society to insurgencies in South Asia. The volume explores how women in these specific areas in South Asia adjusted their lives and created specific economic, social, cultural, ethnic, and national values. They came forward as envoys for social change and conflict resolution. The theme behind the volume is to present the patriarchal nature of South Asian society. This is presented with the support of evidence which shows that the women in the region were used and abused by the male members of their society. The focus is also on why women, whose mobilisation and activities were so obvious during the struggle, were marginalised and reverted to their traditional domestic duties in the post-conflict scenario. Their 'activism' was undervalued and they were not allowed to participate in the formal political activities; they were also blame with 'they don't want to be political'.

The volume, followed by the Introduction, is comprised of six case studies that revolve round the gender aspect in civil society conflicts. The introduction attempts quite successfully to synthesise the whole volume. The emphasis is on the critical consciousness of women about the legitimacy and illegitimacy of violence. No doubt, the strength of the volume lies in this chapter.

The first case study analyses the women's experience in the last ten years of conflict in the Jammu and Kashmir region of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent. The author illuminates the three phases of conflict and women's behaviour accordingly. The first phase, 'popular upsurge and public demonstrations', sees the public appearance of women in the struggle for freedom. In the second phase, 'repression and armed struggle', women enter the dialogue with the government security forces for the survival of their families and community members. In the third phase, 'politics of armed struggle leading to the politics of extremism', women realise the

corruption in the militant struggle and turn away from it. The trauma of this freedom struggle is that women have been used by the political patriarchs of the struggle, in the role of the martyr's mother or sister and raped women for propaganda purposes only. They don't receive any respect or recognition for their sacrifices and are marginalised in the formal realm of politics. In short, the conclusion of the study is that in surviving the conflict, women have acquired power informally but are unable to translate it into authority in the public space of formal politics.

The second case study elaborates on women's intervention in the 18-year old conflict between Tamil guerrillas and the Sri Lankan government, where the fear of sexual violence has limited their mobility and choices for livelihoods. Some have taken up arms for their respective nationalist struggles and some have become political and social activists for peace. The study throws light on the new activities of women in their everyday life in the north and east of the island, where the conflict has completely changed the social structures. Menfolk are either disempowered or have disappeared. The conflict has opened up a new era for women's agency, despite the fact that it has traumatised and placed a double burden on many of them. The author of the study advocates that the changes this civil war has brought about in women's lives, and in the social and cultural framework of families and communities in Sri Lanka, cannot be generalised for all women in conflict but might direct us to develop a plan for improving women's status and ability for building peace in post-conflict societies.

The third chapter explains the gender experience in the state versus-community-conflicts in the two states of Assam and Nagaland in northeastern India during the last 20 years. The author presumes the state and the rebel group as two institutional powers, and women being a stranger to both, become more vulnerable. It has been shown in the study that women were denied any space in formal politics by the patriarchy. Women were used for political gains and then later ignored or mistreated by society. The common experience of women was again that their 'activism' was undervalued as the struggle got more militarised. It happened despite the fact that their role was not just that of a victim. Their role also defused the myth that women are not interested in political movements by strongly participating and organising such movements. Out of frustration in such situations they sometimes chose the jungle or a martyr's death. Such deaths are attributed not only to violence but also to being against patriarchal social norms that deny equal social space to women.

The fourth case study elucidates the plight of women belonging to the group formed by the Urdu-speaking immigrants from India, the *Muttahida Qaumi Movement* (MQM) in Karachi, during the ethnic riots involving state, political parties, private mafias, and individuals with their personal agendas. No doubt, the

group most heavily involved in the conflict with the government was the MQM. Women have been exploited by all the groups involved. Large numbers of women were mobilised only to show the MQM's strength but were not involved in decision-making. On the other hand, they lost family members or close relatives, and were harassed by the police. Some were also arrested, killed, and tortured. In short, they have been used or abused, as the situation required, and then left in isolation. The focus of the study is to dilate on the role played by the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in creating awareness among the MQM women. The forum initiates exploring the possibility of bringing women from all, even opposing communities, together on a neutral platform to share common grievances and empathise with other women.

The fifth case study is about the poor peasant women in the western hill districts of Nepal, where, literally, there are no men! These backward hilly areas have been transformed into guerrilla zones of the Maoists, thus provoking immense police oppression on mainly poor peasants of minority ethnic groups of Nepal. The men, in trying to protect themselves from the police or becoming a target of the Maoists, have fled to the jungles or to the cities in Nepal or across the border in India. Women are left alone to cope with the whole situation. Besides looking after their families, they provide food and security to the Maoists and are sometimes directly involved in the 'People's War' as propagandists and guerrillas. The gender issue, in general, and land rights for women, in particular, are the centerpiece of the Maoist revolutionary programme there. It is this invigorating promise of the movement that has drawn into it so many women even from relatively less culturally oppressed communities and better developed districts. According to the author, this might be the only struggle in which the women's question has not been postponed till a time after the insurgency.

The final study in the volume explores the women's version of the independence struggle in the hill tracts of Chittagong. In the militarised situation, the Jumma women constitute the most vulnerable section of the population. The author narrates their story through the voices of 'Chakma and Bengali' women. The author explains how the conflict affects the daily lives and ambitions of these women, besides the fact that they are the direct victim of police violence. They redesign their willingness to send their children to fight for self-respect. Here, again, women fight not only for the freedom from ethnic discrimination but also for their own rights and related gender issues within their own community. The author explains how women are in the process of defining for themselves a space of their own, both within their own organisation as well as in society.

The book presents different gender perspectives of civil society conflicts extensively but concisely. However, all the case studies are not of equal quality.

Some are well-articulated, but others are a little weak in the presentation and organisation of ideas, with certain chapters being repetitive and unnecessarily long. The contributors have made much effort to collect the relevant facts and details of the conflicts and the idea behind the volume is highly thought-provoking, but the reader is distracted in some instances by flowery language. Still, the book will be an excellent resource for all those who are interested in gender issues.

Afia Malik

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,
Islamabad.