

WIDOW'S MIGHT IN SRI LANKA

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In most cultures, the widow is represented as bereft, poor and unlucky, a figure to be pitied, since she has lost that most prized of possessions in patriarchal societies - namely a man. More charitable societies treat the widow as some one to be helped, but harsher cultural practice often blames her for the husband's death. Compassion is occasionally shown to widows; Christ made famous the 'widow's mite' by praising the poor widow whose donation of two mites (small coins) he valued more than the large amounts given by the rich. But generally widows are shabbily treated, the South Asian expressions and proverbs on widows being particularly cruel and derogatory.

But yet the widow can sometimes be a free woman, her very widowhood may liberate her from household obligations, or from the authority and domination of her husband and confinement to the home. Suddenly after years of being in the shadow of a man, she may be free to make her own decisions, to become her own person, to travel, and if she so chooses, to become a 'Merry Widow' or World Leader. Or she may be manipulated by party leaders to enter politics and gain support and votes.

Ironically, South Asia, some parts of which are infamous for the Hindu practice of *sati*, the discouragement of widow remarriage and the scandal of child widows, leads the world in the proliferation of widows in politics. And within Sri Lanka, after its recent spate of political assassinations, widowhood seems the most certain way to enter politics. The irony is that in this part of the world, widows have for long behaved as imaginary *satis*. Based on the belief that a woman's husband is her God, a woman who loses her husband is supposed not only to have brought disaster to the family, but also to have lost her own reason for living.

In the traditional Hindu code of manners for widows, she had to forgo all symbols of beauty and sexuality; she was not only supposed to cut her long hair, wear coarse colourless garments, give up attractive clothes, jewellery and ornaments, but also spend her time in drudgery and religious activities. Remarriage was out of the question. Even if these extremes are not now the case, the widow in South Asia traditionally follows an austere life-style. She is not supposed to be prominent at weddings and other auspicious occasions, and those setting out on a journey do not want to meet a widow; widows are also often ostracized, treated as outsiders by the husband's family and deprived of inheritance rights. Given this background, the appearance of the 'despised widow' as Head of State, has intrigued many observers of the South

Asian political scene. And wives of politicians, who earlier smiled and served cups of tea are now, with the death (and especially the assassination) of the husband, propelled overnight on to the very centre of the political stage.

South Asian politics in recent decades has had its share of widows, and if there were some murmurings about countries ruled by widows, they were hardly audible. The most famous widow, Indira Gandhi, was a widow in her own right, whose dynastic succession came from her father. It looks as if there are no qualifications for political widowhood and that even a foreigner is eligible as was seen in the pressure put on Sonia Gandhi by Congress leaders to enter politics. In Bangladesh, the widow and daughter of famous politicians contested for the leadership and the widow Begum Khaleda Zia, is now Prime Minister. In Sri Lanka Sirima Bandaranaike (who was hardly known nationally while her husband was alive) became the world's first woman prime minister in 1960 & was also in power from 1970-77. Today she still leads the opposition in Parliament.

The widow's might is not a phenomenon of the past, especially in Sri Lanka where three vigorous widows in the prime of life are contenders for party leadership and high office. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, at the moment the most successful, claims not only the paternal and maternal legacies of S.W.R.D. and Sirima Bandaranaike but also the political mantle of her husband Vijaya Kumaratunga, a popular film idol, leader of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party, who was assassinated in 1988. In the Provincial Council elections in May 1993, she gained the highest number of votes of any candidate (nearly 300,000) and is now the Chief Minister of the Western Province, a significant gain for the Opposition.

The two recent political assassinations of President Ranasinghe Premadasa and Lalith Athulathmudali (leader of DUNF - the Democratic United National Party) have predictably catapulted their widows into politics. Hema Premadasa, the classic grief-stricken widow at the funeral, surprised every one when she broke tradition and proposed the vote of thanks on behalf of the family; her speech was a political one and startled millions of TV viewers. The tearful widow metamorphosed into a politician, skillfully combining the personal with the political "I place my future and the future of my children in the hands of the people" she cried - "Do not think you have become lone and helpless. Please remember that I am determined to tread his same path to the best

of my ability. (Ceylon Daily News, 7 May 1993, emphasis added)

Mrs. Premadasa, who also leads the women's organisation known as *Seva Vanitha*, had been active over several years mobilising women all over the country, celebrating International Women's Day (March 8th) in great style, and also promoting a Women's Charter which promises equal rights in all spheres for women. Her political appeal is yet to be tested. Though disdained by the middle class, will she succeed à la Eva Peron to capture the hearts and minds of the poor? Cartoons are already depicting her laughing and crying her way into politics.

The other recent widow, Srimani Athulathmudali, never known to be active in politics, had a press conference recently announcing her decision to lead the DUNF in the Western Province "to fill the vacuum" created by the assassination of her husband. "My deep reluctance to play a public role has been overcome by the enormous sacrifices made by members of the DUNF," she said adding that "It is their determination to realize Lalith's vision of a better Sri Lanka that has convinced me of my duty to take this step" (Island 14 May 1993

emphasis added). Already she is becoming 'high-profile', pictured in all the daily newspapers (of May 22nd) standing next to Chandrika Kumaratunga at the latter's swearing-in as Chief Minister. All this raises interesting questions about her future role in politics. But more interesting are the general questions about widowhood and politics.

How is it that the unlucky widow is often a politically lucky leader? Does a nation bereft of the Father, now need the Mother who carries the name and heritage of the patriarch? Does charisma pass from husband to wife? Why are widows' tears a powerful factor in political mobilisation? Does a widow in politics cease to be a widow since she gives up the secluded life to woo and "Marry" the electorate? And why has it almost become standard political practice that the first refusal of the inheritance of a late husband's political movement is given to the widow? Is this good news for women and a sign of women's power (*shakti*) or is it, as many suspect, an aspect of patriarchy, where there is no *shakti* without Shiva?

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