

## Book Review

*Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition.* 1986. 2nd Edition. Diana Paul. 333 pages. University of California Press. Price: US \$ 8.95.

*Women and Colonization.* 1980. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (eds.). 339 pages. J.F. Bergin Publishers, New York: Price: US \$ 10.00.

*Women's Work.* 1986. Eleanor Leacock, et al. (eds.). 300 pages. Bergin and Garvey. Price: US \$ 16.95.

The zeal and the legal confrontations of the so-called women's liberation movement of the last decade has considerably waned. It has not left us with a dramatically different world, it seems. Our political systems are essentially patriarchal; our religious institutions seem as powerful and unshakable as ever; economic dilemmas and class divisions are as daunting as before; and basic divisions remain between those who have and those who have not.

Among those human problems that confront us on an ever increasing scale, the status of women may seem a minor matter. It is certainly a much weaker voice in the call for change and progress. Thus, those people who heard women's appeals and demands a decade ago may think that today's relative calm in this subject is a sign that it was a passing fashion, a tempest in a teapot, and a localized Western concern. If they do, they are wrong.

There is no doubt that women's consciousness and the liberation movement have changed. But they are far from faded. They remain strong and have become deeply embedded in our general social fabric. Nowhere is this more evident than in current literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Non-fiction today has a diverse and still emerging genre of writing, all inspired by women's thoughts about their history and culture-- their "being". A good proportion of current poetry, short-stories, humour (yes, humour), children's literature and novels express new feminism in one form or another. And it is profound, even entertaining at times.

In academic writing, a more conservative sphere of expression, feminism is being pursued just as energetically. The reason? A re-examination of all human history and culture is underway, from a revolutionary point of view. All philosophical and social theories are being subjected to new interpretations; all scientific conclusions are being reconsidered; facts are being uncovered which were never before considered worthy or significant. All these have to do with WOMEN.

At a recent United States-wide anthropology conference I attended, this movement was most evident in the display of new publications by leading academic presses. Every culture, every symbol, every language, every religious practice, is being examined and written about with the input of thousands of committed, articulate and concerned feminists.

Women thinkers are in the forefront of this wave but increasing numbers of men scholars are joining the ranks.

The books I review below, *Women in Buddhism*, *Women and Colonization*, and *Women's Work*, are not in the most recent list of important publications concerning women. I have selected them because of the diverse subjects they represent, and in two cases, their pioneering role in social science.

First is Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition*. This was originally published in 1979 by Humanities Press. In 1986 it was reissued (U. of California Press) with some additions. (So many earlier books about women, from women, explorers to epistolary collections which were initially overlooked because of their marginal subject interest have been unearthed and are being reprinted today.)

*Women in Buddhism* remains one of the few books about Buddhists from the point of view of theology's interpretation of the feminine. Until its appearance, anyone interested in religion remained in ignorant silence when Buddhism was presented in laudatory terms in contrast to claims about women in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The latter great religious traditions are distinctly misogynist. Their doctrines not only define women's polluted status; all of them prohibit women from participating in the priesthood on an equal footing; most exclude them altogether. In contrast to the other religions, our general view of Buddhism was that it fosters egalitarian principles and we (wrongly) assumed this principle extended not only between classes but between the sexes. In fact, most scholars of Buddhism managed to completely exclude the question of the feminine from their volumes of discussions and translations of Buddhism. Until 1983, when a special issue of *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (1983; 10:2/3), edited by K. Nakamura focused on women in Japanese religion, women clerics were also ignored. *Sangha* meant monks only.

This bias continues in the most carefully assembled scholarly publications. One of the most recent is a handsome, costly publication called *The World of Buddhism* (1984 Thames and Hudson), a volume which examines its proud traditions in a dozen countries where it is established. It is co-edited by eleven of the most eminent Buddhologists of our time. Yet, it mentions virtually nothing about Buddhist women sects or about Buddhist *sutra* and *vinaya* commentary on women. The same is of course true for the many volumes on Himalayan Buddhism now available.

Diana Paul's book was not consulted by any of those Buddhologists, it seems. But that is history. No future generation of scholars can ignore the window she has opened upon the subject. Hopefully later scholars will pursue an even wider range of issues. But this book is an important and highly sophisticated start.

Paul's collection includes stories from 15 sutra and 3 different parts of the famous Lotus Sutra as well. She translates these (from Chinese and Indian sources) and examines them in terms of their various presentations of the feminine. The chapters are assigned as follows: Chapter 1, the "Temptress", Daughter of Evil; Chapter 2, The Mother; Chapter 3, The Nun; Chapter 4, Good Daughter and Good Friend: Teachers of the Dharma; Chapter 5, Bodhisattvas with Sexual Transformation; Chapter 6, Bodhisattvas without Sexual Transformation; Chapter 7, the Celestial Bodhisattva; Chapter 8, A Female Buddha?. The stories she analyses raise questions and suggest answers simultaneously.

The book succeeds in its attempt to deal with the question of gender and its relation to states of spiritual being and the potential for religious practice. Instead of proposing definite answers, Professor Paul presents tentative propositions against the cultural background of gender definitions for women and their degree of social acceptability. She comments not only on the negative but also on positive definitions of the feminine in the texts she analyses. Indeed she is able to propose that in Buddhist society gender roles and definitions were constantly changing and notions of sexuality and its relevance or irrelevance to religious practice have no definitive answer or consensus concerning Mahayana Buddhist literature. Like so much contemporary writing on 'the feminine' this book also is not a stick with which to whip the less well-informed. It is a fuller, more scientific and more mature view of the subject of Buddhism, a view we can only benefit from.

Among the many new analyses of women and religion which readers may wish to make note of, and which are related to Paul's work is a 1980 collection of papers (Harper and Row), *Unspoken Worlds*, edited by N. Falk and R. Gross. A forthcoming volume of *The Tibet Journal*, (Dharamsala, India) called "Women and Tibet" is a collection of papers which examine the Feminine in (Tibetan) Buddhism.

The second book under review here, *Women and Colonization* published in 1980 (J.F. Bergin Publishers, NY) is almost a classic now. Co-edited by Mona Etienne and the pioneer feminist who only recently passed away, Eleanor Leacock. This book is a collection of 12 papers. They were the first to document the now wellknown process by which western influences in Christianity and capitalism intervened in more classless egalitarian societies to create greater divisions and imbalances than the traditional societies themselves exhibited.

In recent years, researchers and administrators have shown us how foreign aid to developing nations gives advantages to men first, just as it creates power elites who are increasingly distant from their own peasant populace. This book, focusing on early missionary and capitalist influence in the Third World, shows the origins of this process.

The individual contributors to this volume write about societies they studied, cultures as diverse as one can imagine: the ancient Aztec, the Kiriwina of Melanesia, the Tlingit of British Columbia's northwest coast, the Baule of the West Africa Coast, the Seneca of New York and the Inca of Peru.

Each of these papers shows first that in the society under study, far more equality existed than missionaries, early travellers and anthropologists first recognized. Westerners still have a tendency to think of their own system as offering women the highest status, while assuming Asian, tribal or rural women are subject to more oppression, have greater male dependence, and experience more severe misogynistic views (with the exception of the occasional matriarchy). The authors of papers collected here knew this was wrong. They knew that women in the Montagnais, Seneca, Tlingit, American Indian Peoples and others whose history they document had earlier enjoyed considerable equal status and wealth, more than some women in developed societies. And they document how those balances changed as colonization encroached on each of them.

The view of most writers in this volume is that any power enjoyed by those women was largely due to their more central role in the economy, where the unit of production was the household. Where that economy broke down and capitalist forces intervened to move production into the hands of a class or an outside agent, the power of women was eroded. The same process occurred when Christian missionaries moved through the world and began to define the activities of their converts in terms of western models, moving women to new jobs, stressing her mothering role.

We also learn of cases where women appeared to maintain or improve their status under colonization. The extent to which colonial powers sought to modify indigenous political structures by direct intervention was variable from one society to another, but differential wealth and power based on commodity exchange and the unequal participation of individuals and groups in colonial political structure generally exacerbated pre-existing stratification or promoted its emergence in previously unstratified societies.

Where they were members of a precolonial or newly created elite, women could especially benefit from the colonial situation. There were short-term benefits to a minority in contrast to long term loss of status for a majority in the Aztec, the Inca and the Tonga societies. But it became apparent in many cases that social and economic security for the majority of women in colonized societies could most easily be attained through men. Then the introduced ideology that perceived women as sexual objects made them more valuable commodities. One result was the spread of women's sexual exploitation and their economic exploitation as cheap labour. There is even documentation here that women (Inca, and Seneca of NY) in some cases actively resisted colonization because they rightly perceived themselves the loser. In both these cases, women's defense of their collective interests was related to the defense of their society as a whole.

Because we know the impact foreign aid has on our social fabric and how the accompanying modernization process seems to create social divides, we may think that the resulting discrepancies that have been noted for women in the Third World are now under control. A UN Fund For Women was established with the specific aim of helping redress the balance. There

are women all over the world who are moving into a wealthier middle class due to increased prosperity. As a result, some argue that women benefit from foreign aid in their capacity as wives and mothers of a growing prosperous class. This will have some impact, no doubt.

We may forget a more fundamental lesson offered through these studies: that tourism, development, and foreign aid are children of colonization and Christianity. They are embedded with Christian principles and with capitalist values and views of how people improve their lot, of what progress is. If the process of inequalities is to be thwarted or reversed, those deeper elements have to be rejected. I do not see that happening. I have found it odd that so many consultants and administrators I speak to are not familiar with this book. Development experts and local administrators appear not to see these colonial and Christian forces at work in foreign aid programs. They ought to read this book. I should be interested in hearing their assessment of these arguments in view of economic processes and women's changing role underway in Nepal and parallel Asian communities today.

*Women's Work* is the last book under review here. Again this is a collection of several articles and again one of the co-editors is Eleanor Leacock. With Helen Safa and 13 other women historians and anthropologists, Leacock examines "economic development and the division of labour by gender".

The case studies presented here are wide-ranging: a discussion of Europe's industrial revolution on "childhood" as a market for family labour; uneven development in the USA before 1900; family planning and the division of labour in Singapore; changing models of production and the sexual division of labour in Nigeria's Yoruba society; Australian aboriginal women's love rituals; capitalist development and family migration in the Middle East; and others.

In some ways this study could be considered a natural development of the 1980 collection reviewed above. It is also an assessment of Ester Boserup's early pioneering study *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970, St Martin's Press). These studies in *Women's Work* examine the ramifications of both capitalism and socialism and document the changing relationships of class and gender. While many economic analyses trace the economic ramifications of these major movements, the authors of this book focus on the implications for women. Women are often the ones left on the land to cultivate while men join the urban work force; women are almost always paid less and become the cheapest labour force in the industrial process; women still bear the children and as such have that additional factor limiting their options to new economic opportunities.

Readers in Nepal and India who have direct experience with development process will recognize factors at work in the cases described in this book. It will not be new to them. What may be of worth is how widespread are these issues and how they are altered within the socialist

context. The examples of women's work in Cuba, China, Tanzania and the Soviet Union illustrate different kinds of forces operating which should be considered in any assessment of this important subject.

This book is one of numerous new studies which focus on gender the labour. This has become a major issue in the social sciences today. If any social fact is universal, it is the sexual division of labour. As a basic human experience, the division of labour is altered by economic forces in such ways that we can begin to appreciate the ways women as a class are always subject to forces slightly different than men. Division of labour by sex goes beyond any rationalizing about women as child bearers, or women as weaker beings, or women as house-bound. Women's labour is a paramount commodity, and different cultures devise different means of harnessing it.

In connection with the latter two books reviewed, mention should be made of two recent publications about women and Nepal. By women anthropologists with long experience in Nepal, both are in a new women's series from Westview Press.

One is Sidney Schuler's *The Other Side of Polyandry* (1987) about property, stratification and nonmarriage in the Tibetan-speaking community near Muktinath. There is a great deal of valuable information here on modern economy. Significant as well is the author's position on Buddhist values. Dr. Schuler takes issue with Buddhist literature which tends to romanticize and inflate the status of Tibetan women in contrast to that of the Hindu women in Nepal. My own research into women in Tibetan society supports Schuler's claims. And I expect we shall be hearing much more about this in years to come.

*Women's Informal Associations in Developing Counties* is the other noteworthy release from Westview (1986). One of its co-editors is Kathryn March who has been studying Tamang women for many years and we can expect publications emerging from those researches in the near future. Dr. March joins with Dr. Rachele Taquu in this general discussion of the impact of development programs on women's informal associations. They look at credit, labour, ritual, and religious associations. They conclude, surprisingly, that mobilizing existing associations is often an inappropriate development strategy.

The price of these books, a consideration everywhere, varies. All are in paperback. Yet, the specialist books from Westview press, both slim volumes (200 pp and 154 pp) are almost US. \$20. each. Each of the 3 books reviewed in detail are closer to \$10. and are well worth that.

- Barbara N. Aziz