

# “Climbing The Ladder Aspiration”

## —Women In Thailand

SOUTHEAST Asia has one of the most equalitarian family and kinship structures in the world and Thailand is at its centre. In a large city like Bangkok, this may not be visible. One sees men sitting in offices and high places, women filling the unorganised sector, standing on the streets as food vendors, offering to office workers snacks which they laboured half the night to cook. Still, even here, there is a feeling of freedom and even a unisex looking dress. Women, it is true, often wear skirts and dresses, but both boys and girls are very likely to wear the slacks and loose blouses that seem to be fashionable for both. And, people in Bangkok tell me, “village society is matrilineal.”

Matrilineal? Anthropologists refuse to call it that, because there are no large identifiable lineages or clans, and both boys and girls may inherit property. But the fact is that most marriages are matrilineal- the husband goes to live with the wife’s family after marriage. Property is still inherited by both sons and daughters, but in many areas it goes only to children who stay at home, that is, to daughters. And the house and compound, along with the responsibility of caring for parents when they are old, go to the youngest girl.

### Mothers And Daughters

It is the mother-daughter bond that is socially the most stable and forms a kind of centre of rural social life; it is the husband who comes into the family as a stranger; it is the woman who is the centre of the household, both religiously and economically. Religiously, because she inherits from her mother the task of maintaining the household spirit cult. Economically, because, even if the husband earns more, she manages family finances;



Women vending fruit and vegetables in boats

the Buddhist marriage ceremony emphasises that this is her responsibility.

Agricultural tasks are shared by men and women, with some of the same division of labour that exists in India. Men, for example, do most of the ploughing. But this is much more flexible than in India, and a woman will plough if no man is around. There is no social barrier to a woman ploughing, just as there is no stigma attached to a single man who cooks and sews. Divorce is no great social disgrace and no great burden. If there is a major quarrel, it is the husband who has to move away- the home belongs to the woman.

A sensitive village study by Manning Nash, husband of feminist anthropologist June Nash, describes a village in nearby Burma:

“Given the nearly equal social position of women except in the religious sphere, no really important jural status is gained through marriage or lost through divorce. Women are full functional members of society, whether they marry or not... there is no clear pattern of authority between husband and wife. In theory and in public, the husband is supposedly dominant, but this dominance is so tenuous, so indefinite and ambiguous, that its social visibility is virtually nil. Women are not restrained at home in speaking out, nor in public are they shy and backward or deferential to men. The ordinary household will see men and women sharing tasks and giving and taking orders with about the same frequency.” (Nash, 253-4).

“A man has divided loyalties to his own family of procreation and the family in

which he is father. For women, the conflict does not arise, since they rarely get or accept demands that will conflict with close attachment to their mother. A man must take account of his wife's willingness if he wishes to help an aged parent or poor relative. I have recorded several cases of divorce turning on this pivot: wife objects to the use of household resources for the upkeep of her husband's relatives. There were no instances of family breakup because a woman similarly aided her relatives."(67).

Anthropologists may refuse to recognise such a system as matrilineal but it is perhaps understandable that the lands of Burma and east-ward have been known as *striraj* or women's kingdoms from ancient times onward.

Along with this, according to women in the Drug Study Group, a very lively, all woman, voluntary agency fighting drug abuse they had organised, among other things a demonstration against Depo Provera- there is no custom of fasting by a woman in the name of her husband, no menstrual seclusion, no type of *pativrata*. About the only woman related "superstition" they could think of were customs "in some families" of not eating meat and certain kinds of vegetables during pregnancy.

### No Oppression?

This is not to say women are not oppressed in Thailand. They are. The whole class society above the village, pressing down on the village, and partially pervading it, is patriarchal. Buddhism, for one thing, gives precedence to men. One can appreciate the lack of caste inequality and the fact that boys from all backgrounds become monks, but the limits of this can be seen in the fact that only boys can. Buddhism considers only men to have real spiritual power. Women cannot be ordained. They become white robed *maichis*, an inferior group who do much of the temple and monastery housekeeping jobs. Women can only hope for sons who will become monks and earn merit for their parents.

Religion in Thailand thus gives men the spiritual realm. Along with this, from



Mai Chis

the beginnings of the state-class society—states arose from the first century AD in parts of Southeast Asia but were only consolidated in Thailand from about the thirteenth century male domination has been fostered. The ruling class and aristocracy became patrilineal, giving men the right to have many wives, and village men were recognised as the "heads" of households, the ones who were called into the military or in corvee labour for the state while women carried on the burden of agricultural production. This "representativeness" of men has continued up to today, when the state recognises men as household heads and village heads and when all groups, from liberal developmentalist "voluntary agencies" to the embattled left, take male household heads as the main members of local cooperatives or peasant unions.

Feudal laws gave men extreme power over women, allowing them many wives and the right to buy, sell or pawn wives, physically punish them or kill one found in adultery. Family legislation from 1932 on disallowed polygamy, but made them the sole legal household head, to the point that no woman could make a contract without the signature of her husband. Yet, as late as 1965, women were said to own 90 percent of Bangkok's real estate and significant interests in many companies and firms. The

law disallowing women to enter into contracts was changed only in 1976, after a three year period of intense, general mass struggle against the dictatorship.

Along with this, sexist attitudes still prevail—women are considered weaker than men and only fit for different kinds of work. Men are the natural partakers of political power and religious achievement even while women continue to labour and handle financial matters.

This is exacerbated by the fact that for over a century, the influx of Chinese into Thailand has resulted in intermarriage and an elite heavily dominated by Sino Thais, who are estimated to be half the population of Bangkok and other major cities. The Chinese are as patriarchal as Indians, with authoritarian and tightly knit male headed clans using women as household servants and marriage pawns. It was only towards the end of my visit that I came to realise that a very large proportion of people I had been meeting, apart from villagers and street people with whom I could hardly communicate, and probably apart from the energetic women of the Drug Study Group, were Sino Thai. How much differences did this make?

In any case, the equalitarian, matricentric structures of Thailand are heavily overlaid by all kinds of patriarchal, statist traditions and, most recently, by

forms of western commercialism associated with a rampant capitalism that is fast eroding village society.

### **Economic Independence**

Perhaps we should be surprised instead by how much survives after all these centuries. For even the employment structures of Thailand are influenced by this equalitarian base. Women constitute a large proportion of the labour force. According to Pasuk Phongpaichit's ILO study, official surveys show women participating at 70 percent the rate of men, while she estimates the actual figure to be at least 83 percent. Yet, they are, as everywhere, in lower paid jobs than men.

Girls in rural areas are educated at a slightly higher rate than boys because they can go into white collar jobs to earn extra family income. The rural teaching profession, for instance, is flooded with women. Even the prostitution industry is shaped by this matricentric tradition. And this introduces a complex subject.

Thailand is one of the world centres of this industry. It had its beginnings in late feudal times and in service to immigrating Chinese males and the Thai aristocracy, it took off with the Vietnam war. Thailand is the bastion of US imperialist power in Southeast Asia, and during the war, US soldiers used Thailand as a base for "rest and recreation." Prostitution boomed, and even after the soldiers left, it continued serving the Japanese and European tourist trade.

There are two streets in Bangkok, a "Chinese street" and a "European street." Sex tours are openly advertised, and the business has now reached the point where "labour" is exported. European, especially West German, men are apparently interested in "Asian brides" who can be expected to be more "feminine" and submissive than European women "corrupted" by the liberation movement. About 9,000 German men marry Thai women every year and there are reportedly 200 agencies arranging brides for the cost of a one way air ticket and \$ 3,000. (*Newsweek*, February 11, 1985).

Phongpaichit's ILO study has analysed the business both in Bangkok and in two



**A woman vendor**

of the northern and northeastern villages from which women come. The remarkable point, in contrast to countries like India, is that it is an industry based primarily on free migration and recruitment. While it is somewhat looked down upon, the girls who go into it are not considered especially disgraced; they may even be respected for earning money to support their parents, and they may return to the villages with the money earned, settle down and marry. Their husbands will not be suspicious of them unless they think the women have fallen in love with another man. In other words, Thailand is one of the few places in the world where the sex industry is socially evaluated as a business like any other. In contrast to India, where being raped can ruin the entire future life of a girl, the extra exploitation that stems from being stigmatised by society hardly seems to exist in Thailand.

### **Every Industry Exploits**

What is one to make of all this? Blame the lax sexual morality for encouraging the industry? It is true that it is

exploitative and unhealthy, with venereal disease reportedly highly prevalent. But so is every other industry open to women—textiles develop "brown lung" disease; electronic assembly work destroys the eyesight, and everywhere, girls are hired young, worked till their health is gone and then sent home. The fact and the irony is that the Bangkok massage parlours and related work pay better than any other job. This industry links third world women most directly with the "advanced capitalist" countries.

In the final analysis, of course, all wage labour is a kind of wage slavery. The Thai sex workers, like male migrants anywhere, are basically peasants driven from their villages by capitalist imposed poverty and environmental devastation. Entering the capitalist world market at any level means a subjugation to intensified economic and patriarchal exploitation. Even if we decide it is more appropriate to help sex industry workers organise rather than "stamp out the evil", the whole thing is an evil but one that can only be dealt with by a massive attack on the whole system.

### **A New Search**

Today, southeast Asian societies are under varied kinds of domination. In all these countries, little mass opposition of any kind can find scope, and women's movements are just beginning.

The exception is the Philippines where the whole country is in turmoil with a growing women's movement that includes both rural and urban groups. In tightly repressed Thailand, a new wave is also building. My Drug Study Group friends report peasant girls from the northeast putting on Buddhist robes in defiance of prohibitions; cautious but determined groups like the Friends Of Women are working among the urban middle classes; prostitutes are beginning to organise as "nite life girls." The people's movements that emerged with the "democratic period" have given birth to a new search that continues, even though the mass peasant and worker movements and the jungle based armed struggle were, for the time, crushed.

Chiranan Phitpricha, an exile after that struggle, wrote a book describing oppressed women of the third world as "The Fourth World" and prophesied a liberated society as the land of Phra Sri Araya, the last Buddha, "where absolute truth would be obtainable because there would be absolute equality among men and women and among all the peoples of Thailand." Her poem written in 1973 could be seen on university blackboards even when I was there at the beginning of 1985:

*Woman has two hands  
That hold tight to the substance  
of life  
Her play of ligaments  
Is meant for heavy tasks.  
Woman has two feet  
To climb the ladder of aspiration  
To strive and stand together  
Not to lean on others.  
Woman has two eyes  
To search for new life  
And look far and wide into the  
world  
Not to seduce men.  
Woman has life  
That erases errors with reasons.  
The value of a free person  
Is not to lead the lust of others.  
Flowers have sharp thorns  
Not just to blossom and await  
admirers  
But to bloom and embrace  
The fertility of the land.*

**Bibliographic Note :**

The most thorough women's study of Thai society is written by a Burmese woman, Khin Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand* (London, Change, 19£0). Pasuk Phongpaichit, *Rural Women of Thailand: From Peasant Girls to Bangkok Masseuses* (Geneva, ILO, 1980) is also very important. Nash's study on Burma is *The Golden Road to Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 1965). For summaries of exciting archaeological dis-coveries of recent years, see Wilhelm Solheim, "New Light on a Forgotten Past", *National Geographic*. March 1971, and Don Bayard, "The Roots of Indo-Chinese Civilisation: Recent Developments in the Prehistory of Southeast Asia", *Pacific Affairs*, Spring 1980. Finally, of course, I owe a great debt to all the Thai men and women who helped me in my too brief stay in the country.



**Raju and Nilmani**

A televideo film maker, Jawahar Lal Sharma, has decided to make a human rights film highlighting the issue of women undertrials through the life stories of Nilmani Majhiain and Mariam Oraon, two tribal women from a village near Jamshedpur, Bihar. Mariam was in Ranchi prison for 33 years as an undertrial. She was found to be a tuberculosis patient and was released. Sharma is now trying to get her into mother Teresa's home.

## A Story Of Two Women Undertrials

Nilmani was pregnant when she was arrested. She had a son named Raju who is now 12 years old, and has spent his life in prison. He saw the outside world only when he accompanied his mother to court.

The film was inaugurated in April 1985 in the harijan colony at Jamshedpur. Nilmani was honoured on the occasion and she broke down. The chief justice of India, P.N. Bhagwati, has agreed to be the chief guest at the film's premiere. Sharma says the object of the film is to get undertrial prisoners released and get them compensation for the time that they have unjustly been imprisoned.

—**Madhup Singh**  
(translated from Hindi)