

# Nepalese Women: Symbols of Historical Achievements and Political Leadership

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

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*Tho I myself am despised by society, and cast aside, it is I who must prove my innocence.* Yogmaya Neupane

Nepal is perhaps unique in the world of nations today with its [three top public offices occupied by women](#): Bidhya Devi Bhandari is president; Sushila Karki is chief justice; and Onsari Gharti Magar is speaker of Nepal's parliament. This record is particularly noteworthy in a fledgling democracy, a new Asian republic that since its founding in 2008, has been by members of Nepal's communist and Maoist parties.

Those three appointments are surely a credit to leftist politicians currently dominating Nepal's elected positions: prime-minister, and cabinet and parliament members. Although one must caution that these "socialist" administrations have done almost nothing to advance parity at institutional levels through land reform, economic equity, job creation and worker protection, or by attacking caste discrimination.

Parity for most Nepalese women is advancing only slowly as well. In the recent constitutional referendum, campaigners failed to win a 50% quota of parliamentary seats for women. In the family, discriminatory customs deny women their inheritance rights. And older women, even professionals, face strong resistance when asserting their independence from brothers and sons.

Nepal's appointments of women to high office may be seen as merely symbolic. But symbols are potent- as effective today as in the past, in the West, across Africa, and in the East. Note how (not so very long ago) a U.S. presidential hopeful set her sights on her nation's top job, partly as a symbolic demonstration that American women were truly equal, and the country was fully democratic. (She didn't succeed. And many Americans view this defeat as a sign of the many obstacles women still face.)

There are compelling indications that the symbolic promotion of women, such as those three Nepalese appointees, does make a difference. Its impact may even surpass the work of multitudes of NGOs devoted to 'uplifting' women. (Gender projects registered in Kathmandu constitute a sizable industry; its' a burgeoning branch of human rights, absorbing many educated women in fundraising and planning, although with questionable results.

Yes, the number of educated Nepalese girls is less than boys. Yes, sisters and mothers are refused inheritance rights by domineering brothers and sons. Yes, there's widespread wife abuse by drunken husbands. Yes, children are abandoned or sent to work far from home. Yes, many Nepalese women are victims of human trafficking. But most of these social ills can be tackled by good government, by policies which create more jobs for everyone, and enforce laws already in place to protect women and children. (Regulating out-of-control

liquor consumption would certainly help as well.)



Symbols can be powerful incentives to motivate women too. So President Bhandari and other political women are to be applauded. We should welcome any actions that champion women's achievements since these projects remind us of our historical precedents (and potential). And they correct the historical record.

Scanning world history even in the era of Google, one is hard-pressed to identify more than a handful of women who are widely acknowledged as outstanding public figures. (English-language web-lists are regrettably dominated by American personalities.)

So what has Nepal to offer beyond its current president, chief justice and speaker of parliament? Perusal of Nepali postage stamps by my colleague Sukanya Waiba offers more models than expected. In a list of 18, in addition to goddesses Sita and Shrina (wives of the Hindu god Ram), Maya Devi (mother of Gautam Buddha), a 'living goddess' Kumari, Princess Bhrikuti, daughter of an ancient king, and three 20<sup>th</sup> century queens of the Shah dynasty, we find noteworthy secular leaders. There's the eminent singer Melwa Devi Gurung, the much admired, radical Marxist agitator and award-winning poet, Parijat Lama (Bishnu Waiba), and two Everest mountaineers Pemba Doma Sherpa and Passang Lhamu Sherpa. (The latter's statue overlooks a prominent square in Kathmandu Valley.)

The most recent addition to this collection is one of several political activists. She's the yogi, poet and revolutionary Yogmaya Neupane. A firebrand operating at a repressive time in Nepal's history, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she chose a remote valley far from the capital as her center of operation. This past November (16.11.2016) a postage stamp issued in her honor marks her restoration and her recognition as a major historical figure, a champion of women's rights, and an opponent of exploitation by religious functionaries and the rich.



An individual of profound insight and courage, Neupane confronted the rule of Juddha Shumshere Rana, an entrenched dictatorship. No dissent was tolerated during Nepal's Rana era. Hindu priests' authority was unassailable; and religious law dictated that women endure cruel conventions.

Yogmaya Neupane was eventually driven to her death (in 1940/41) whereupon all historical references to her and her movement were suppressed. Mention of her was forbidden; her surviving followers dispersed and fell silent. Only after 1990 when free speech was permitted, have Nepalese begun to examine Neupane's career and conduct research into her movement. This is aided by a treasury of extraordinary poems newly brought to light, known as "*Sarwartha Yogbani*". The declarations embodied in her quatrains are receiving serious attention by Nepali language scholars, historians, the Nepali press, and by interested Nepalese citizens as well as a London-based professor of Nepali literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Even novelists seem inspired by her. Here are more examples of Neupane's fiery invocations composed in the 1920s in that faraway Himalayan village:

Your fat bellies burst, and look: those bribes you hoarded and now ooze from  
you are poison/ so savor your riches while you can.

And:

Kill the corrupt, jail the thief/ judge with virtue, eliminate lies/ truth will reign  
when our redeemer arrives/ smashing king and courtiers alike.

A substantial and reliable Wikipedia entry ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogmaya\\_Neupane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogmaya_Neupane)) devoted to Neupane is certain to increase interest in her. In addition to the stamp, a Yogmaya National Women's Prize founded by Nepal's Srastā Samaj organization is awarded in recognition of her fight for women's rights. The 2016 winner is Durga Ghimere, recognized as the first person to campaign against women trafficking (*Kantipur*, Nepali-language daily, 09/18/2016).<sup>[2]</sup> With this award a circle seems to have been completed.

The stamp honoring Neupane continues a tradition of recognizing women's political activism in Nepal: in addition to the outspoken poet Parijat, five other contemporary women are featured: Setu B.K., martyred during the 2005 revolution that finally overthrew the king; Congress Party activist Chhaya Devi Parajuli; Mangala Devi, a major figure in Nepal's Congress Party along with her husband Ganesh Man Singh; activist Sadhana Adhikari; and Moti Devi Shrestha, one of the founders of Nepal's Communist Party. From this we may reasonably conclude that there's nothing symbolic about President BD Bhandari, justice S.

Karki, and Speaker OG Magar.

Notes

[1] See BN Aziz, 1993, M. Hutt 2011, and D. Neupane, 2015 listed in the Wikipedia entry.

[2] With special thanks for assistance to U. Pant, DJK Sherpa, N. Subedi, NM Tuladhar, and S. Waiba

*Barbara Nimri Aziz, a New York-based anthropologist and writer, hosted RadioTahrir on Pacifica-WBAI in New York City for 24 years. Her 2007 book Swimming Up the Tigris: Real Life Encounters with Iraq is based on her 13 years covering Iraq. Aziz' writings and radio productions can be accessed at [www.RadioTahrir.org](http://www.RadioTahrir.org).*

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