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## UNIT 14 ASIAN PEACE INITIATIVES

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### 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and Asian, are always part of the peace initiatives across the places. While some rose to the prominence, others went unnoticed but played the role of untiring heroines in the crusade against injustice and conflict. Armed conflict, in any part of the world, is bound to create adverse impact on the society as a whole and lives of people, especially women. So does the community under the autocratic leaders. Time and again the international society at large recognises this. Since the spread of colonialism and emergence of state system, women lost their representation in peace building decision making process altogether due to a masculine paternalistic approach resulted out of it. In the mid 1990s some of the women started moving such exclusionary drive by forming the network of women worldwide. Eventually, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) has correctly identified the perspectives of conflict and lives of women in different parts of the World and recognised the role of the State in it. Later in 1999, UK-based organisation called International Alert launched Women Building Peace, a global campaign where almost 100 civil organisations came together across the world. Finally this led to the October 2000 signing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

There are conceptual tensions on how women and women's concerns are being received inside the debate of peacebuilding process. The 'gender' concern is emerging as a central focus in entire process where women demand their space and raise their voice to be heard in every corner of this world today. Historically, it has been found that the

conflict and its impact on Asian women always unfolded the untold stories of women who held a crusade against the curse it brought it on women and society as a whole. Here we discuss some of the initiatives taken up by the women leaders in the Asian context.

### **Aims and Objectives**

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The role of women in the peace initiatives in the Asian context.
- The need for peace initiatives in the Asian context.

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## **14.2 AFGHANISTAN**

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“Sustainable peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of women”, said Elizabeth Gibbons, Associated Director of Gender Rights and Civic Engagement in UNICEF’s Division of Policy and Practice. The devastation of social orders that resulted in justice and lack of human rights that happened during the Taliban regime is unthinkable. More than eight years after the fall of Taliban regime the lives of women and children in Afghanistan have not inched forward. The continued violence and surmounting insecurity impedes the access of women and children to basic rights and services. The most affected sectors are health and education.

There was a forum called Jirga, a national level meeting of leaders and elders was convened in the month of May 2011 where Ms. Gibbon urged the organizers to place issues affecting Afghan women and girls high on their agenda. “... peace building is not about formal negotiations alone. It is about ensuring the tangible benefits of peace – including access to basic social services, such as education, health care and protection, access to livelihood opportunities and the creation of an enabling environment for the realization of human rights of all. These peace dividends need to be secured in the daily life of women, men, girls and boys on an equal basis”.

As coordinator of the Afghan Women’s Network, an umbrella group of non-governmental organizations advocating gender equality, Afifa Azim brought somewhat a frontline perspective to the peace building panel discussion. She pointed to significant progress made in the country since 2001, including gains in girls’ education and women’s access to professional opportunities. “We all want stability and peace, but not at the price of women’s rights. We are told that women’s rights are a development issue, not a security issue. But women’s rights are part of what the fighting is all about. The world should not forget us. We want peace, but with social justice.”

Contextually, it is found in a report “*Afghan Women Speak: Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*” from Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at University of Notre Dame expressed the argument that a militarised environment does not help Afghan women and girls move forward in securing and protecting their rights.

David Cortright and Sarah Smiles Persinger observe that Afghan women become the victims of the violence between the foreign forces and the insurgents, crime gangs, local government and the police chiefs. This insecurity not only directly impacts women’s access to education, employment and healthcare but also reinforces their seclusion and their family’s control over them.

Dr. Sima Samar, a Doctor by profession, has been tirelessly working in war-torn areas

of Afghanistan for the healthcare and education to women and children. Born in February, 1957 in Ghazani and a Hazara woman, one of the most persecuted ethnic minority herself, Dr. Sima Samar had to face an uphill journey to settle herself as professional Doctor. She worked with Anti-Soviet Resistance Movement and fled to Quetta, Pakistan to serve as doctor in a refugee camp for Afghan women who were forbidden to visit male doctors. With the help of other women she established her first hospital in 1987 and later in 1989 she established, Shuhada, a non-governmental Organisation, committed to reconstruction and development of Afghanistan with special emphasis on women and children. She and her medical staff run four hospitals and ten clinics in Afghanistan, and provide medical training courses at the hospitals. She started schools in rural Afghanistan with more than 20,000 students and another in Quetta for Afghan refugee girls with food aid and information on hygiene and family planning. Two of her hospitals have been forcefully closed down by Taliban but she relentlessly worked for the betterment of women. She successfully networked with the outside world through her alliance with the International Network of Women Living Under Muslim Law and has a voice in United Nations too. She received Raman Magsaysay award for Community Leadership in the year 1984.

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### **14.3 BANGLADESH**

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Bangladesh emerged as an independent State after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Bangladesh's secession was the outcome of the suppression of its linguistic and cultural identity and the unequal terms of socio-economic contract. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, visionary freedom fighter, with his unchallenged capability led the country to the much awaited freedom from Pakistan and established Bangladesh as unitary and homogenous State. He ruled out the self rule aspirations of the people from the Chittagong Hill Tract. The successive military regime and democratic government bent on military suppression of Hill Peoples' movement. Eventually, although a peace agreement was concluded in December 1997, it did not bring the desired result to end the violence in the Hill Tracts simply because the agreement does not adequately address the Hill peoples' demands. The extremist groups do influence in public sphere which resulted out of its unsettled foundational principles of Bangladesh Constitution, especially of secularism. The democratic political terrain of Bangladesh is torn between the two dominant political formulations, the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party. The former is led by Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the latter is led by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of assassinated President General Ziaur Rahman.

The post independence era in Bangladesh is always witnessing the tension of socio-economic and cultural identity in building the nation. The world famous work of Bangladesh Grameen Bank and self-help groups of women founded and promoted by visionary noble laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus, originally from Chittagong, brought in a wave of economic upliftment of thousands of Bangladeshi women. The entrepreneurship approach of development helped many women from remote corners of Bangladesh to earn a modest livelihood.

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### **14.4 BURMA/MYANMAR**

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The emergence of Union of Burma in 1948 was the resultant effect of mutual understanding that the Union would be of one of co-equal, co-independent states, which was the prime spirit of Pang Long Agreement in 1947. But unfortunately post-independence, the mutual

understanding between the ethnic people was lost and decades of civil war ravaged the entire country. These wars severely impacted the lives of women and children. Women belonging to ethnic minorities have witnessed unbearable suffering like death of family members, forced labour, rape, torture, extra-judicial killing, forced relocations, extortion and confiscation of land and property by the military regime. The suffering of the people escalated after the crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy movement. This propelled the large-scale migration of people from Myanmar to the neighbouring countries like India, Bangladesh and Thailand. But there too they receive hostile atmosphere.

The majority of state violence incidents have been committed in the ethnic areas. Women's groups from Burma based along the border presented this issue at international fora including UN annual sessions of CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) and CHR. In June 2002, the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), a founding member of WLB (Women's League of Burma), jointly produced a report, "Licence to Rape" with the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) documenting 173 rape incidents involving 625 women and girls in Central Shan State from 1996-2001.

While the second Forum of women's Organisation of Burma was held in Chiang Mai from December 7 to 9, 1999, women who attended the forum, share their views on ways and means to find a common platform. Thus the Women's League of Burma comprising of 11 women organisations, who work for women's issues in Burma, was established on December 9, 1999.

The current membership is comprised of the following organizations.

- Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
- Kachin Women's Association-Thailand (KWAT)
- Karen Women's Organization (KWO)
- Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO)
- Kayan Women's Organization (KyWO)
- Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO)
- Lahu Women's Organization (LWO)
- Palaung Women's Organization (PWO)
- Pa-O Women's Union (PWU)
- Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU)
- Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)
- Tavoy Women's Union (TWU)
- Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB)

The aim and the objectives of the WLB as laid down by the first Congress include working for:

- The empowerment and advancement of the status of women
- The rights of women and gender equality

- The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- The increased participation of women in every level of decision making in all spheres of society
- The movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation.

The impact of the report and the international support given to the campaign was a tremendous morale boost for SWAN and WLB members and non-members. They became more motivated to work in their coordinated and collective efforts to fight back effectively to protect women against the state violence being committed by the Burmese military. In August 2003, WLB decided to launch a “Stop State Violence against Women” campaign. Activities of regional working teams include documenting women’s stories or data on violence against women cases and providing practical assistance to women who have suffered from violence, including counselling, temporary shelter, medical support and also linking with other NGOs for legal redress.

The contribution and struggle of Dr. Aung San Suu Kyi, a great woman leader who is leading the country to democracy, is enormous. Aung San, her father, founded the modern Burmese Army and negotiated Burma’s independence from the British in 1947. Aung San Suu Kyi, educated in some of the most prestigious institutions abroad, returned to Burma in 1988 to cater to her ailing mother but later she led the prodemocracy movement. From 1989 she was put under house arrest by the Military Junta. She remained separated from her family but eventually was released from her house arrest on 13 November, 2010.

While her personal life went through painful span due to separation, she did not stop fighting for the people of Burma. On her return to Burma in 1988, she led the prodemocracy movement on resignation of long time Military leader General Ne Win. She addressed half a million people at a mass rally in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, calling for a democratic government. But in September 1988 a new military Junta came to power. Later the National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded of which Suu Kyi became General Secretary. She decided to work on the philosophy of non-violence of Buddhist ideology as well as Gandhian philosophy. She received Nobel Peace Prize in the year 1991 for her distinguished accomplishment for the struggle and used the entire 1.3 million USD prize money to build a health and education trust for Burmese people. Even as late as in 2009, on his visit to Burma, Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of UN wanted to meet her only to be refused by the Military regime on the pretext that her trial was on at the court of Burma. One of her most famous speeches is the “Freedom From Fear” speech, which begins: “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.” She also believes fear spurs many world leaders to lose sight of their purpose. “Government leaders are amazing”, she once said. “So often it seems they are the last to know what the people want.”

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## 14.5 INDIA

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Traditionally woman has been defined as *abala* (*without strength*) in Indian scripts. In Sanskrit, *abala* means one without strength. If by strength one denotes strength of character and endurance as an individual, s/he would called as *sabala* i.e. strong in his or her character or personality. Gandhi, at the All India Women’s Conference in 1936, said, “When woman, whom we call *abala* became *sabala*, all those who are helpless will

become powerful". Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for the liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society (Thakkar, 2004). Gandhi had tremendous confidence in women's inherent capacity for non-violence. Here we would learn of some of selected women comrades of Gandhi who extended great support during freedom struggle of India.

### **Sarojini Naidu**

An accomplished and distinguished woman, Sarojini Naidu was the eldest daughter of scientist, philosopher, and educator Aghornath Chattopadhyaya, and Baroda Sundari Devi, a poetess. Her father was the founder Principal of the Nizam College, Hyderabad and also the first member of the Indian National Congress in Hyderabad, India. He was later dismissed from his position as Principal and even banished in retaliation for his involvement in political activities. Sarojini herself was a significant poetess too. After her studies abroad, on her return to India, she joined the Indian independence movement, just when Lord Curzon announced the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Gradually during 1903-17, she came into contact with personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Annie Besant, M. K. Gandhi, C.P. Ramaswamy and Jawaharlal Nehru.

From 1915 to 1918 she lectured all over India on welfare of youth, dignity of labour, women's emancipation and nationalism. She got herself involved with the cause of the indigo workers of Champaran. In 1925, she was elected as the President of the Congress, the first Indian woman to hold the post. In March 1919, while Gandhiji organised the Non-Cooperation Movement, Naidu was the first to join the movement. In July 1919, Naidu became the ambassador of Home Rule League to England. In 1928, she became member of Congress Working Committee. She courted arrests on different occasions. In 1931, she participated in the Round Table Summit, along with Gandhiji and Pundit Malaviyaji. On October 2, 1942, she was arrested during the "Quit India" protest and stayed in jail for 21 months. Naidu said, "When there is oppression, the only self-respecting thing is to rise and say this shall cease today, because my right is justice." She adds, "If you are stronger, you have to help the weaker boy or girl both in play and in the work."

### **Rajkumari Amrit Kaur**

Rajkumari was a member of princely family of Kapurthala in Punjab province. She finished her college education from Oxford University. She met Gandhi in 1919 and felt drawn to his thoughts and vision. She joined Indian National Congress and began to participate in freedom struggle. She co-founded All India Women's Conference in 1927 and went on to become its secretary in 1930 and president in 1933. She was imprisoned by British authority due to her participation in Dandi March in 1930. She joined Gandhiji's Ashram in 1934 to embrace an austere life. She took part in Quit India Movement in 1942 and again got jailed. She worked relentlessly against illiteracy, to eradicate child marriages and the purdah system. She became part of Nehru's Cabinet as the first woman to hold so; was elected President of World Health Organisation in 1950 as the first Asian and first woman to hold such post. She also pioneered the establishment of All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. She became the chairperson of the Indian Red Cross Society, initiated Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute in Chennai and established College of Nursing and the National Sports Club of India.

### **Kamaladevi Chattopadhaya**

Coming from a family of freedom fighters, Kamaladevi came into contact with many noted freedom fighters and the seeds of freedom were sowed in her mind quite early. Married and widowed at an early age, she defied all social norms and continued her studies. She graduated from Queen's Mary College in Chennai and married Harindranath, the younger brother of Sarojini Naidu against much of social anguish and norms.

She joined the national freedom movement and founded All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and became its first Organising Secretary. During Salt Satyagraha in 1930 she entered Bombay Stock Exchange to sell packets of contraband salt and imprisoned as result of such act. She later associated with stalwarts like Jayprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia. In the post-Independent India, she set up the Indian Cooperative Union; worked untiringly to settle the refugees in Faridabad town; did massive work to enliven the lost craft of people from North West Frontier to rehabilitate them; she initiated the Central Cottage Industries all over India to help the women in unorganised sector. In 1964 she initiated Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography (NIKC) at Bangalore under the aegis of Bharatiya Natya Sangh, affiliated to UNESCO, National School of Drama and also headed the Sangeet Natak Academy. She received some of the distinguished awards like Padma Bhushan in 1955, Padma Vihusahan in 1987, and Raman Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1966. The Visva Bharati University conferred on her Deshikottama, its highest award for her contribution to Indian Culture.

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## **14.6 INDONESIA**

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Indonesia is enjoying a period of relative peace and calm as the violent conflicts that wrecked the country at the dawn of the country's democratic transition have been resolved, for the most part peacefully. It was a question of bringing peace to Aceh, Maluku, Poso and West Kalimantan, where thousands died and many thousands more were displaced due to the ugly ethnic and religious violent conflict after 1998. The governments had considerable achievements in conflict management and peacemaking but the promotion of the role of women remains an area of attention.

Women are profoundly underrepresented in peace negotiations around the globe. In 2009, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) reviewed 21 major peace processes held since 1992 and found that women constituted less than 8percent of delegates to talks and less than 3 percent of agreement signatories.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective, including, the needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.

In the case of conflict in Ambon, Poso, and Aceh, for example, women have led many inter-religious and peace dialogues at the grassroots level. It was the actions of women that helped pierce the religious polarisation between Christian and Muslim communities in the vicious 1999-2001 Ambon and Poso conflicts by insisting on keeping markets open and crossing religious lines to bring their produce to sell.

The role of women are especially important in conflict situations, prevalent in Indonesia certainly, where complex social and economic issues are the drivers of violence rather than the traditional disputes over territory or sovereignty. In peace talks to end such

conflicts the critical issues relate more to matters of community relations and local economic wellbeing that women are more centrally involved in than men.

It is conspicuous that it is not about deploying women because they are more peacefully inclined or less prone to violence but because women's perspectives are directly relevant to resolving conflict. Consultations with communities affected by conflict in Ambon, in Poso and in West Kalimantan, for example, all reveal a lack of attention to the resettlement of IDPs, to compensation for lost property and other vital ingredients for long term reconciliation and peace in the community.

The lack of participation of women in government-led peacemaking efforts directly resulted in attending very important social and economic issues at the policy level. Whilst it is evident that women in Indonesia do play an important role in conflict management at the grass roots level, elevating their involvement to higher political levels remains to be done to help promote and share experiences in other conflicts, both in Indonesia and farther afield. The work of promoting women in peacemaking should not be confined, as is so often the case, to periodic workshops and meetings, but should become the basis for an active campaign by women in positions of political power and influence primarily at the policy making levels. It is noteworthy that the decision by the Indonesian Parliamentary Caucus for Women to encourage more of the 136 women in both the parliament and the regional assembly to get involved in international and regional affairs. Indonesia has a respected history of involving women in important national and political issues. Women were at the forefront of the country's nationalist struggle in the years before independence, with the first national women's congress held in 1928.

In a country that has already elected a woman as president it seems appropriate that Indonesia should spearhead efforts regionally and internationally to enhance the role of women in peacemaking.

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## 14.7 NEPAL

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A landlocked Himalayan country which witnessed the birth of Buddha, an ardent advocate of eternal peace, Nepal is yet to be peaceful in all respects.

A decade long armed conflict ended in Nepal with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in November 2006. The dialogue process led to the ceasefire that preceded the CPA, as well as the CPA itself, but failed to ensure women's participation at the formal negotiating table. Nepal's peace process involved Track 1 and Track 2 initiatives simultaneously. The Track 1 actors included both the bureaucracy and political parties while women's NGOs and groups undertook several of the Track 2 initiatives. The missing element was the link between the two tracks. Therefore, a Track 1.5 process was initiated in 2005: the Nepal Transition To Peace Initiative (NTTP). The idea was to create space for informal dialogue where the seven major political parties and civil society representatives could discuss their differences before making formal decisions. With many stakeholders, the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction acted as the executing agency liaising between the political parties.

The NTTP was recognised not as a settlement-oriented negotiation process, but as a consultation that may probably generate new insights and be a source of technical knowledge and inspiration for the parties involved. Local facilitators received technical assistance from international peace building experts, which built ownership in the process.



The NTTP made a number of important contributions. It helped draft the CPA, propose how cantonment of combatants would be managed, and envisaged the setting up of peace structures such as Local Peace Committees (LPC). It also supported the creation of the Women Peace Building Network which was made up of 11 large associations, mostly with a development background, with widespread membership in Nepal. This Network tried to create links between Tracks 1, 1.5 and 2, and to link leaders with peace forums. In addition to organising rallies to demand greater women's participation in the peace process, they held several rounds of discussions with the Prime Minister and the Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction to ensure women's participation in state structures. They also approached the Election Commission on the selection of 26 women to be nominated to the Constituent Assembly (CA). At a community level, the Network sought to raise awareness of UN Security Council resolution 1325 (SCR 1325).

The Network acted as a connector to the NTTP to ensure that women's rights were articulated and heard, and that women were included in the peace process and transitional justice mechanisms. At least three women from the Network sat in the NTTP forum meetings and one was nominated to the Ministry-level meetings and Peace and Conflict Management Committee (PCMC) at a later stage. As the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections approached, the Network became actively involved in educating people about voting systems, seeing that proportional representation would help ensure a larger number of women members in the CA. They also approached the Election Commission on the selection of women for 26 nominated seats in the parliament.

The peace process, regrettably, was driven by male-dominated political parties and a bureaucracy that was not sensitive to the needs of women. Though large in number, the Network was not as assertive as some ethnic groups and so was often shunned by political leaders. While this restricted the impact of the Network in some ways, these challenges also forced the Network to develop organisational and advocacy skills which allows them to contribute to the peace process more meaningfully today.

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## **14.8 PAKISTAN**

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Since its inception Pakistan's civil society is fighting for the basic human rights to be observed in all quarters of common people's lives. The state not only actively pursued policies that sought to restrict women's basic rights, but also encouraged non-state entities to force conformity through violence or the threat of violence. Women resisted this. Not just as individually, but as movement that was confident and forceful. Amid conservative extremely male dominated society of Pakistan, there came some few brave women who dedicated their lives to protect women's rights. Asma Jahangir, a leading Pakistani lawyer and an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, is most renowned for her role as a human rights activist, a role which has made her confront military dictatorships of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf and the civilian autocrats. Her resistance to army's role in politics has been legendary.

In 1980, Asma Jahangir and her sister Hina Jilani partnered with a few rights activists and lawyers and formed the first law firm established by women in Pakistan, named the AGHS Legal Aid Cell. To date, AGHS has provided legal services to several women and members of minority groups and continues to be the benchmark against which legal profession and public law in Pakistan will be judged in the annals of Pakistani history.

Asma was also at the vanguard of activists who created the Women's Action Forum (WAF). She used these platforms to organise protests against the enforcement of

fundamentalist laws, specifically the Law of Evidence (which made a woman's testimony inferior to that of men). WAF (Women Action Forum) was the first spark of resistance against the military rule and inspired Pakistani men and women of all faiths, ethnicities and backgrounds to rally against a repressive dictatorship. Her struggles continued through the 1980s and later when the civilian governments were ruling Pakistan. She was as outspoken as before and refused to adopt a partisan line. She received global acclaim and became a symbol of progressive and liberal-democratic elements within Pakistan. She stood for peace, equal rights and a discrimination-free society and was honoured by The United Nations and Asma Jahangir has been serving as a Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Religion or Belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. From 1998-2004, she also worked as a Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Extrajudicial, Arbitrary or Summary Executions, a job which took her to Afghanistan, Central America and Colombia.

At home, another key contribution has been the establishment and nurturing of the formidable Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Today, it is the biggest network of rights' activists with a presence in all corners of the country and is doing commendable work of alerting the citizens about how the state continues to abuse rights. Asma Jahangir has remained the Co-Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan for several years until earlier this year when she resigned to contest for the elections for the President of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) which she subsequently won. In addition, Jahangir has been one of the founders and Co-Chair of South Asia for Human Rights since 2000. She has been the recipient of several national awards, including Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Star of Distinction) in 1995; for her contribution in the field of human rights, she was awarded the American Bar Association International Human Rights Award in 1992; and the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders; and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1995. She was also honoured with the Bernard Simons Memorial Award of the International Bar Association in 2000.

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## 14.9 SRI LANKA

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In Asian context, Sri Lanka has very commendable human development indicators for women, which include high literacy rates and exceptional educational achievements. However, despite almost 70 years of female franchise and the election of the world's first woman Prime Minister, the country lags far behind most of the developing world with regard to women's representation in political institutions at local, provincial and national level. Women make up a mere 5.8 per cent in the current Parliament; 5 per cent in Provincial governments and a lower 1.8 per cent in local government. This has had a direct impact on Sri Lanka's peace process and its transition towards a post-conflict society. The mainstream political parties have consistently kept women's nominations down to an appalling average of about 5 per cent. Denying women equal opportunity to contest elections, coupled with patronage politics and a bartering of nominations among privileged men have restricted women's access to representative politics in Sri Lanka.

Women Parliamentarians were not present at any of the formal peace negotiations, which were conducted entirely by male politicians. Instead, the Government chose to appoint five women from the non-government sector to a sub-committee on gender issues that was established to advise the plenary of the peace process in 2002/2003. A Tamil speaking Muslim woman parliamentarian was brought into the process only in 2005 in an attempt to initiate the stalled peace talks. Women politicians engagement with formal

peacemaking has therefore been absolutely minimal. Despite these challenges, some women have stepped forward to run in elections in the conflict affected north east at critical moments although when it has been unsafe to contest. In the Municipal elections in 1997, held after a gap of over fifteen years, Sarojini Yogeswaran was elected as mayor in Jaffna only to be assassinated a few months later by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. At the next elections to the Jaffna Municipal Council in the aftermath of the war in 2009, 30 per cent of women contesting won, defying the national norm of 2 per cent. But, disappointingly, no political party came forward to nominate women to stand for parliamentary elections in 2010 from any of the conflict affected north or eastern districts despite women's commendable electoral triumphs post-war at the municipal level.

Sri Lankan women, from local activists to academics and politicians, have advocated for an increase in women's representation for more than 15 years. In the current post-war period, the Government has proposed to introduce hybrid proportional representation. This initiative is widely perceived as partisan and was challenged by eleven petitioners in the Supreme Court. The proposed amendments include a non-binding provision to increase nominations for women and youth to 25 percent. Two petitions by women's groups argued that the provision was a violation of women's right to equality guaranteed in the Constitution and submitted that the persistent failure of political parties 'to give even a semblance of equality to women' in the nominations process 'casts a duty on the state to take affirmative action'. It further argued that women should not be grouped together with youth and that the provision to increase women's representation should be mandatory and specific. However, the court upheld the provisions of the Bill, refusing to accept that unequal nominations were a departure from equal treatment.

Sri Lanka requires a desperate attempt to make the transition from a post-war to a post-conflict society. Conflicts inevitably produce structural transformations for some women, opening up new social, economic and political opportunities which challenge and reframe gender hierarchies and roles. One way to consolidate such positive gains is to ensure women's participation and representation in post war decision making processes. By ignoring historical discrimination against women, both the executive and the judiciary in Sri Lanka have missed a vital opportunity to redress a patent wrong and allow the Sri Lankan polity to benefit from the invaluable experience of more than half its population. This will make an already difficult transition to a post-war society even harder.

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## **14.10 SUMMARY**

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The above mentioned cases bring to the forefront the participation and initiatives of women from the Asian region in different field ranging from freedom struggles to human rights struggles. Asia has been home to numerous women prime ministers but the women in this region continue to remain grossly underrepresented in their home turfs and need further efforts to make their voice heard. Nonetheless, these efforts continue to inspire others to work towards the goal of women empowerment. After all, a peaceful regional order would go a long way in contributing to peaceful world order.

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## **14.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

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1. Discuss the peaceful efforts taken up in the conflict-ridden Afghanistan.
2. Analyse the role of women freedom fighters in India who sowed the seeds of women empowerment.

3. Briefly enumerate the efforts Nepalese women to consolidate their empowerment.
4. What are the peace initiatives taking place in Pakistan and Sri Lanka? Examine at length.
5. Discuss briefly the peace initiatives taken up in Burma/Myanmar.

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## **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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