

Business Standard

11 August 2014.

Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat

Helen McCarthy

Bloomsbury, London, 2014

(Pp.404 + xii, Rs.595)

This book's core message is: 'how the male-dominated world of British diplomacy gradually – and grudgingly – let professional women in'. As an academic, the author scores on objectivity, but the reader may miss an intimacy of personal experience that an insider might have provided. The author's reliance on documentary material, and absence of interviews with working diplomats, produces disproportionate emphasis on history; the book is weak on the contemporary scene.

This 400-page tome is fluffed up with an extended introduction on the evolution of the world of British diplomats from the late 19th century onwards, in which women were notable for their absence. But useful nuggets are thrown up. Who might imagine that as far back as 1893, most of the candidates recruited into the Foreign Office passed through a 'crammer' called Coombes, to prepare for entrance tests? It was the shortage of men during World War I that brought women into clerical level diplomatic work in London, but few rose to executive positions. When in 1933 the Foreign Office asked embassies if women could handle diplomatic and consular work, most ambassadors were aghast. It was the Soviet Union that in 1924 appointed the world's first female ambassador, Alexandra Kollontai to Norway. The US appointed its first female head of mission to Denmark in 1933 (that was a 'legation', headed by a 'minister plenipotentiary'; such junior embassies, withered away after WWII).

Two Chapters (5 and 6) are devoted to the proceedings of a 1934 committee that examined and recommended against the entry of women in the diplomatic service. It took WWII to bring about real change in British mindsets. At the 9-week conference at San Francisco, five women delegates were among the participants, from Canada, China (KMT), Dominica, Uruguay, and the US; the UN Charter bears the signatures of four women.

The main narrative is sketched through the archival material that the historian author has tracked down after rigorous search through official papers, personal diaries and letters and other sources. This produces fascinating pen portraits of strong characters, such as Soviet Ambassador Kollontai, fluent in 11 languages, who served in Norway, Sweden and Mexico; Dame Edith Lyttelton, UK's delegate to the League of Nations who argued in vain for women's entry to the diplomatic service; and Freya Stark, a Briton who became an Arab affairs specialist in the 1930s, exploring little known corners of Syria and the Arab peninsula, and during WWII worked with much verve in Cairo, Baghdad and Tehran. The few women that found diplomatic assignments, such as Nancy Lambton in Tehran, had to appear in academic gowns on formal occasions, since a diplomatic uniform— *de rigueur* in those days – did not exist for women.

It was as late as 1942 that Mary McGeachy became the first woman to be given diplomatic status, at the UK Embassy in Washington DC. While other civil services had become accessible to women twenty years earlier, the ban on women in the service's executive-level 'A Branch' was lifted in 1946. This was preceded by a 1943 White Paper that amalgamated the diplomatic and consular services, and a committee appointed in 1945 that recommended removal of the ban. But it came with two caveats, a marriage bar, and a 'quota' of 10%. Yet, through the 1950s, women did not make up more than 2% of the executive branch.

Presented through the eyes of women recruits, this final section of the book is fascinating, depicting the recruitment process (including the two-day 'house

party' where candidates that had passed the written tests were put through problem-solving and goal-achievement skills; how I wish such a process was used for the IFS). The Foreign Office was hugely behind the times in waiting till 1973 to remove the bar on marriage for women diplomats. Indian women diplomats confronted the same prejudice. They were required to resign on marriage; in the 1950s we lost outstanding persons such as Rama Mehta and Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea. This irrational rule was lifted in 1962 when Manorama and Hardev Bhalla, both in the IFS, married. In 1973 UK appointed its first woman high commissioner, but their first married woman as ambassador emerged only in 1987. India appointed CB Muthamma (the first woman to join the IFS in 1949) as it's a professional woman ambassador to Hungary in 1970.

UK's glass ceiling remains much worse for professional women than one may imagine. In 1995, senior-most woman diplomat Pauline Neville-Jones, FCO Political Director, could not win the prize she sought, the Paris ambassadorship; that went to a male colleague six years her junior. She declined substitute assignments and joined a bank. Till date, a woman has not headed any of UK's top six missions, nor served as FCO permanent under secretary. India has seen three female foreign secretaries since 2002, and ambassadors of both genders at virtually all its top posts.

The book evokes real issues that all foreign services face today: the old formula for wives of diplomats to immerse themselves in 'housewifery and hospitality', treating the embassy as an extended family, with roles assigned by status of their husbands, no longer works. The challenges faced by spouses taking up jobs while accompanying diplomats are all too common in all foreign ministries. One wishes the author had examined this further, looking also to practices in other countries.

Kishan S Rana

Former diplomat, author and teacher