

Sybil Campbell Library Monograph Number 5

The Tiger Ladies by Sudha Koul

Seminar on “Memoirs of India and Kashmir”, 29th March 2006

Over the years that the Sybil Campbell Library was housed in the basement of 28 Great James Street the committee arranged lectures and seminars to which members of BFWG were invited. At one time these seminars were held in the Board Room at Great James Street and after that was no longer available other venues were found to host them. We were grateful to our neighbours at 6, Great James Street where we held one seminar and on many occasions to Dorothy Roake who arranged for several lectures to be hosted at the University Women’s Club, South Audley Street. March 29th 2006 saw the last of the seminars in London, a seminar held in the Library itself. On the Library shelves was a book entitled “Grandmother’s Footsteps” by Imogen Lycett-Green, whose grandmother was Penelope Betjeman. It inspired us to look at aspects of life in 20th century Kashmir and the area around Simla, basing our study on this and a book by Sudha Koul.

“The Tiger Ladies”, a memoir of Kashmir by Sudha Koul, gives a marvellous insight into the life of the Kashmir Valley where she was born, grew up and educated. Life had changed little in Kashmir until the 1940s as it was an enclosed valley and difficult to reach. Muslims and Hindus lived peacefully side-by-side, traditional ways having changed little for centuries. It was a matriarchal society and although the young brides went to live in their spouses’ family homes there did not seem to be any enmity between daughter-in law and mother-in-law as is so often observed in Indian culture. The Kashmir Valley, sandwiched between modern day India and Pakistan, was quite difficult to access and so remained relatively untouched until after the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947.

The winters were cold and the valley cut off from the outside world. To keep warm in winter wood burning stoves were used, but when Sudha was growing up not everybody could afford enough wood to keep them warm and so they all carried a “kangri”, a small, portable, terra cotta fire-pot around which a wicker basket was woven. It had many uses, warming beds, drying small articles of clothing, warming feet and hands, and the inside heat could be used for cooking meat, roasting chestnuts and burning incense.

The summers, when the snow had melted, were hot enough to allow apples, peaches, apricots cherries, plums, pears, melons, almonds, walnuts and grapes to ripen, but more exotic fruits such as mangoes, lemons, oranges and bananas had to be imported and were unusual.

Flowers that grow in the short summer months are narcissus, lotus, tulips, wild roses, hyacinths, peonies, irises and lilies. The famous protected tree of Kashmir is the chinar, a Himalayan tree and the pattern of its leaf and the almond shape of the famous paisley design are the most often seen in Kashmiri embroidery.

Shawls are very important and the visiting shawl seller with his patterns to choose from was welcomed, giving a chance for a social gathering of the ladies. He was welcomed with a cup of tea served in his special cup as he was a Muslim in a Hindu household. The pashminas he sold were a security for Kashmiri women, “their value equal to gold”.

Cosy winters, idyllic summers and a peaceful life were gradually shattered. Afghan Bailiki tribes started to infiltrate in 1947 and by 1965 the Pakistanis backed by U.S. sabre jets had completed the task. The peace loving Kashmiris were embroiled in Muslim/Hindu clashes fuelled by outside influences. The whole sad conflict in Kashmir developed and has not yet been resolved.

After attending a convent school, Sudha completed her education at the Women’s College in Srinagar, a Gothic stone structure which had been the Palace for Royal Widows (Kashmir being enlightened enough not to burn its widows on their husband’s funeral pyre). She went to work in India for a Government Department in New Delhi and describes meeting Indira Gandhi and Pandit Nehru, who was a famous Kashmiri. Throughout her story her mother’s hope is that she will marry and much is made of the “bottom drawer” preparations. Sudha failed to fulfil her Mother’s hopes but married a suitable Kashmiri and had a quiet wedding. The newly weds knew that they could not live in Kashmir and so became refugees in America where they still live. She describes going back with her daughters to a country ripped apart by religious bigotry and political mismanagement. Her heart is still in Kashmir but she lives in America and knows that she cannot go back.

Do read this book. It contrasts sharply with the other book we discussed at the seminar, Imogen Lycett-Green’s “Grandmother’s Footsteps”.

We have been the “Tiger Ladies” at Great James Street and through the tireless efforts of the “fiercest tigers” the Sybil Campbell Library has been relocated to Winchester University where we hope it will be inspirational to all who use it there.

Elisabeth Bown September 2006

The Tiger Ladies: a memoir of Kashmir by Sudha Koul
London: Review 2002