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Honour roll of Nobel women

With Rigoberta Menchu the activist from Guatemala the Nobel Prize for Peace for the second successive year has gone to a women. Last year's recipient being the imprisoned Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Still of the over 625 persons who have so far won the world's most prestigious honour, Menchu is only the 25th woman to have been so awarded.

The two categories where women have been relatively more successful are peace and literature. Nine women have won the Peace prize and seven Literature. At 33, Menchu shares the distinction of being one of the youngest woman to have been so selected along with the joint peace prize recipient Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of Ireland.

As early as 1905, the Austrian Countess, Bertha von Suttner, had won the peace prize for her ardent campaigns in then militaristic Germany and Austria in the late 19th Century. Countess Suttner is believed to have inspired Alfred Nobel to institute the Peace Prize.

Our own Mother Teresa was awarded the Peace Prize in 1979 for her work in providing shelter to the destitute, the poor and the dying. She is perhaps the most well-known woman living to have been so honoured.

Alva Myrdal of Sweden received the prize in 1982. She along with her famous husband Gunnar Myrdal were the first advocates of the Swedish welfare model in the 1930s. Today, ironically many Swedes are tired of the cradle to grave welfare.

Then after a gap of nine years, in 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi was nominated and cited "as one of the most extraordinary examples of

civil courage in Asia in recent decades."

It appears that in selecting the persons for the peace prize the Nobel committee is apparently following a dual policy.

Some of the nominations have gone to persons like Mother Teresa in recognition of their life long devotion and selfless service to their cause.

While others like Aung San Suu Kyi and Rigoberta Menchu have received the honour not only for their past work but also in the hope of benefits that might accrue to the cause following the recognition of the leader.

But the success of this policy has been mixed. While the military junta continues to keep Suu Kyi imprisoned in Rangoon, Menchu has been allowed to return to Guatemala from Mexico where she was in exile for the last 10 years.

The first woman to have received the Nobel Prize for Literature was Selma Lagerlof of Sweden in 1909. She was selected in appreciation of "the lofty ideal-

ism, vivid imagination, and spiritual perception that characterised her writings."

Her titles include Gosta Berling's Saga and The Wonderful Adventures of Nils.

Pearl Buck of USA was the recipient of the literature prize in 1938. She is probably one of the better known woman writers even now.

The latest woman author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature is Nadine Gordimer of South Africa. She is the 1991 winner.

One of the earliest winner in the sciences was the legendary Marie Curie. She shared her prize in physics with her husband, Pierre, in 1903. Eight years later, Madam Curie made history by winning the honour in chemistry as well. Till date she is the only woman to have achieved this rare double.

Quarter of a century later, Irene Joliot-Curie followed the family tradition and shared with her husband, Frederic, the 1935 Nobel Prize for Chemistry. Marie Curie did not live to

see the achievements of her progeny. She had died a year ago due to years of exposure to radioactivity during her research.

What made all these women scale such heights!

Many were loving wife, doting mother, women who were devoted to their families. When Rosalyn Yalow, won her prize, a newspaper headline read: "She cooks, she cleans, she wins the Nobel prize."

Others have consciously chosen not to marry. Rita Levi-Montalcini chose to marry science, saying: "I refused to marry. I chose to do science and not to marry."

While some sympathised with the feminist movement, others had opted for a much wider agenda. These women were a very diverse lot.

What they share with all the other Nobel laureates is their unfliching commitment to their cause. In their search for excellance these pioneers are continuously expanding the horizone of human endeavours. BM



Sang Suu Kyi: Fighters all