

Honour for Pakistani artist

By Masood Haider

NEW YORK, Jan 4: Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistani miniature painter has been chosen by New York's Whitney Museum to present her work at their Biennial being held in March of this year.

Ms Sikander, who graduated from National College of Art in Lahore, did her Masters from Rhode Island School of Design and is presently teaching at Glasser Art School in Houston, Texas. Her work has been exhibited in various galleries in New York, San Francisco, Colorado, Los Angeles, Rhode Island, and Houston.

Although Whitney Museum has not announced the list of artists officially, the *New York Times* in its Friday edition printed an unofficial list given the immense interest in the Biennial within the art world here. Writing about the closely guarded list by the Museum's curators, the Times said "the secrecy surrounding the list of artists chosen for this year's Biennial is being described by art dealers as nothing short of Kremlin-like."

The Whitney Museum's list of artists is considered to be a barometer or survey of "whats hot in the contemporary art", says the Times art critic. Thereby the artists enter a "charmed circle."

The art dealers in New York concur that getting on Whitney's list is a prestigious thing, because the curators have tough standards.

"Once you are chosen to exhibit by Whitney, a whole new world opens up. There are people who have been trying for years to get on the Museum's Biennial list," said one dealer.

Indeed the Indian artists who are here in numbers and several whose works go for exorbitant prices have been hoping for years to get on such a list. Talking to *Dawn* on telephone Ms Sikander said, "I was unaware of the list's publication until I started getting calls from art dealers in New York. I tried to confirm it myself but the NYT was sold out on newsstands here." She added, "It is a great thing, I look forward to exhibit my work at the Biennial."

This year's Biennial has been organised by Lisa Phillips, curator of the Whitney museum, and Louise Neri, the United States editor of the international art journal *Parkett*.

DDD(CD)

ELECTION WATCH

Who will fight for tribal women's franchise?

By I.A. Rehman

THE tribal lords' declaration of war against their womenfolk who register as voters and their families should not cause any surprise, and there is no reason to begin doubting the justification or the timeliness of the decision to introduce adult franchise in FATA.

Nobody expected the measure to take effect without pain or obstruction.

What is now being done in FATA constitutes a far more radical step than the enfranchisement of the adult population of Pakistan 45 years ago, for it threatens the very foundations of the deeply entrenched and zealously guarded tribal hierarchy. Yet the reaction of the tribal chiefs is not as negative as might have been feared.

Democratisation of the tribal society is still the goal of a minor section in FATA which comprises young radicals, teachers and educated persons who live or work in the settled districts, progressive politicians, some women activists and a few elders.

The existence of powerful chiefs who oppose adult franchise for their people is no secret. It is therefore a vindication of the reform measure and the stand taken by democratic forces that, some reports of resistance to the enrolment of male commoners notwithstanding, the grant of the right to vote to tribal males has been accepted. Even the enrolment of a relatively small number of fresh voters in the tribal belt before Feb 3 will be a major step forward. The traditional barriers to democratisation have been breached and from now on political debate in FATA will be on new assumptions.

As regards the opposition to women's enfranchisement, the tribal leaders may not be very far behind the enlightened males in the rest of the country as women everywhere are considered unequal with men. Till some years ago the attitude of the elders in the settled areas of Frontier and Balochistan was similar to that now shown by the FATA chiefs. The former found resistance to change futile. So will the FATA lords. All that is required now is the preparation of strategy to

obstruction of voter registration a more clearly defined offence punishable by the Election Commission itself. But as of today the state seems to have lost the capacity to enforce its laws and even if it does regain that capacity societies are not changed by laws alone, however necessary laws may be, to establish a framework for the struggle, that any social change requires. Thus, the essential question now is: Who will take up the cudgels on behalf of the voiceless tribal women?

To begin with, it is necessary to examine the role of Political Agents in the present confrontation between democrats and traditionalists. The Political Agents have long ceased to be objective regulators of tribal affairs; they have in fact become strong pillars of the tribal system. Their vested interest in the status quo has been identified as a major impediment to reform and modernisation in all fields of life. The federal authorities have a duty to ascertain whether the Political Agents have used their influence with the tribal elders in favour of women's voting rights or whether they have preferred to side with the conservative chiefs.

There may be reason to believe that the tribal chiefs should have been amenable to Political Agents' persuasion. If these powerful overseers have no influence over Maliks whom they have pampered for years, then their retention in present positions becomes questionable. There should be no hesitation in proceeding against a Political Agent or any other state functionary who is found colluding with jirgas to defeat the adult franchise scheme.

However, the task of educating the tribal elders, or even the tribal women themselves, cannot be left to Political Agents or the Election Commission or any other state agency. It requires a concert drive and both government and non-government organisations will have to accept their responsibilities towards the tribal women with the seriousness that the matter demands.

It is a matter of regret that the high state authorities - the President, the caretaker Prime

some small outfits in the tribal belt itself or in the Frontier province, have evinced little interest in the matter. Their lack of concern for the tribal women's advancement will certainly invite doubts about their democratic credentials. They must realise that the issue is not merely that of securing implementation of an order issued in Islamabad, what is at stake is the right of a large population to grow out of mediaeval practices. On this issue there should be no division among the national parties, or the factions that parade themselves under that banner.

Women's organisations and human rights activists from outside the tribal belt will surely raise their voice but the nature of the struggle on their hands calls for a well-coordinated and carefully directed campaign. Their effectiveness will largely depend on the support they receive from democratic elements within the tribal area.

The arguments that anyone advocating tribal women's rights will run into are that the tribal people are deeply attached to their code of life, which is valued in some respects higher than religious belief even; that they do not like outside interference with their customs; and that therefore, plans to introduce such reforms as women's enfranchisement should not be rushed through. Similar pleas were heard when schools were to be opened or roads were to be built in the tribal areas, and the tribesmen over large areas have learnt to dismiss them. Besides, the suggestion that work towards a people's social progress should be deferred till they are willing to accept change is valid only to the extent that reformers should not use coercion to promote their ideas. Except for this reservation, all talk of prudence in addressing tribal people's transition to the democratic era amounts to extending the period of their deprivation.

As suggested earlier, the tribal elders' opposition to women's voting rights is a reflection of their resistance to their participation in polling in the settled areas of the Frontier and Balochistan that w