Women and Political Leadership in South Asia[1]

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Introduction

The issues of gender equality and women's autonomy have been recognised as key factors in the recent political discourses.[2] However, it has also been argued, and rightly so, that if we want to operationalise these ideas at various socio-economic levels of the stratified societies of South Asian countries, we must understand the entrenched structures of inequality based on multiple identities such as class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and region. Gender is implicated in each of these identities. The popular notions of public and private, nature and culture, reason and emotion, modern and primitive become analytical features through which gender becomes involved in shaping individual and collective identities. An overview of

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[1] South Asia as a geopolitical entity consists of: India (independence achieved from Britain in 1947), Pakistan (independence achieved from Britain in 1947), Bangladesh (independence achieved from Pakistan in 1971), Bhutan (in 1910 the Kingdom of Bhutan signed the Treaty of Punakha that recognised the political autonomy of Bhutan from the British colonial rule in India and this treaty was a further consolidation of the Treaty of Sinchula signed in 1865), Nepal (in 1923 the British colonial rule in India recognised Nepal as an independent kingdom and in 2008 it became a federal democratic republic), Sri Lanka (became independent from Britain as the Dominion of Ceylon in 1948 and became Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972), Myanmar (Burma became independent from the British in 1948 and in 1989 the ruling military junta changed the name to Myanmar), Afghanistan (the history of Afghanistan is complex as it was never fully occupied by any imperialist force and yet has been vulnerable to the aggressive machinations of several imperial powers throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries), Maldives (achieved independence from the British in 1965).

[2] Anne Phillips (ed), *Feminism and Equality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips (eds), *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

female political leadership in South Asia with special references to opportunities, gaps, negotiations, and resistances of "women" must be situated within these complexities of social formations.

In the last couple of decades the scholarship on gender and politics in the South Asian context has developed theoretical depth and a wide-ranging coverage of issues. This article is strategically placed within this scholarship.[3] This scholarship offers a framework to understand how the politics of gender influences the formation of "woman" as a political category and how the interests, needs, and concerns of this category are defined in different South Asian countries. Drawing from the larger body of feminist scholarship, and especially, South Asian feminist scholarship, this article makes an effort to elaborate an overview of female political leadership in South Asia.

Women and Politics in South Asia

In order to understand the complexities of women's political leadership it is imperative to recognise that gender is not a synonym for women. If we agree with Simone de Beauvoir's foundational statement that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, it will be reductive to accept that men are born men.[4] Accepting men as universal subjects of politics usually overlooks the constituent codes of "manliness", their internal differentiations, and the contextual meanings of femininity and masculinity. It is the perception of difference between men and women which needs to be considered in the idea of "gender equality". Accepting men and women

[3] Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender" in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (eds), *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996); Patricia Jeffery, "Agency, Activism, and Agendas" in Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (eds), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 1998), 221-43; Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (eds), *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

[4] This is a much quoted sentence from Beauvoir's ground-breaking book *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012). For an exposition of feminist conceptualisation of masculinities and gender, see Terrell Carver, *Gender is Not a Synonym for Women* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

as different but equal has certain advantages. This analytical standpoint allows us to define politics, especially political leadership, differently for men and women, i.e., the qualities of political leadership need not be the same for men and women leaders. However, in the context of "real-politik" such considerations are rarely valued. An anecdotal reference will illustrate the point. Inder Malhotra, in a biography of Indira Gandhi, wrote that Gandhi had been wryly humorous about her anomalous position of a woman in power. In response to US President Johnson's hesitation about how she should be addressed, Gandhi is reported to have said, "You can tell him that some of my cabinet ministers call me 'sir'. He can do so, too, if he likes."[5] The issue is not merely about addressing a woman head of state, but rather how the presence (or absence) of femininity in a position of leadership can be conceptualised.

South Asia provides an extraordinary regional background to conceptualise this connection. Defining "South Asia" as a region, however, becomes the first important task. The innovative methodological approaches and interdisciplinary content of "South Asian Studies" reflect the geopolitical realities of this region in its "modern' frame".[6] For South Asia, modernity combines the experiences of colonialism with various strands of nationalist thought and political activism that have emerged since the nineteenth century, which have shaped the postcolonial condition(s) of this region. The emergence of academic writing on the history, politics and practices of women in South Asia in the 1990s has led to the publication of several significant collections of essays on South Asian feminism(s) in the past few years, creating an exciting new field of study.[7] South Asian feminism conceptualises the region beyond a cluster of border-sharing nations and their political relations in terms of neighbourhood foreign policies. Insights from a range of disciplinary specialisations – ancient Indian history, literary criticism, histories of oceanic region formations, political sociology,

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[5] Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 191.

[6] Saloni Mathur, "History and Anthropology in South Asia: Rethinking the Archive", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29, 2000, 89-106.

[7] Ania Loomba and Ritty Lukose (eds), *South Asian Feminisms* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012); Alka Kurian and Sonora Jha (eds), *New Feminisms in South Asian Social Media, Film, and Literature: Disrupting the Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

and cultural studies – have influenced South Asian feminism(s) to trace the historical formation of the region through movements of people, goods, and ideas. South Asian feminist politics tracks the diverse yet connected feminist struggles of a region where public and private spheres intersect at various nodal points like family, community, religion, sexuality, caste and class.[8] In this broader vision of politics the understanding of women's political leadership, even when achieved through family ties or specific caste/religious affiliations, gain different meaningful dimensions. It becomes far more important to ask the question why family ties and dynastic rule are referred to more in cases of women leaders when male leaders also benefit by such connections than arguing that women leaders are "puppets" at the hands of male party bosses. Similarly, it also becomes a more serious concern for feminist politics to identify conditions of oppression at the grassroots level of political leadership and collectively challenge them rather than ask for only reformist public policies to accommodate women.

If we consider the case of South Asian women, the contextual meanings of women's political agency become more complex in everyday life and in periods of crises.[9] Jeffrey argues that even though South Asian women have been repeatedly stereotyped as victims, epitomised by the child bride, oppressed widow or *sati*, illiterate woman doomed to ignorance, and more recently as victims of dowry murders, honour killings, public sexual harassment or rape; they have been involved in anti-colonial struggles, and various caste- and class-based political and social movements, registering their voices. Their everyday resistance to different forms of patriarchal domination has also attracted the attention of feminists. In sites of everyday resistance like reproductive capacity, autonomy over body, division of labour, and access to resources like education and wage labour, the impact of women's participation in mass-based social and political movements have not always been impressive, but decisive changes are also not uncommon. Women in South Asia have also emerged as leaders in the public sphere of politics from the grassroots level to the level of supreme command in the electoral democracy with political parties. Familial ties, caste status, social class, and sheer political acumen to manoeuvre in specific

[8] Ania Loomba and Ritty Lukose (eds), *South Asian Feminisms* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012).

[9] Jeffery, "Agency, Activism and Agenda".

situations have been crucial factors in either catapulting women into leadership positions, or to pave a tenacious ascendancy within a leadership structure.

Women leaders in South Asian countries (Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in India; Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan; Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh; Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumartunga in Sri Lanka) have often assumed power in periods of intense political crises and usually been propelled to power by their respective political parties to continue some sort of dynastic rule following the death of a close male relative – either father or husband. Raunaq Jahan, in her rather comprehensive study of women leaders of South Asia, points out that these women leaders were chosen by the party bosses for their relative political inexperience and their acceptance among the people to be able to carry on the legacy of the dead leader.[10] The significance of family relations is undeniable in these women's rise to power. However, the issue which Jahan admits not to have touched upon and which Rajeswari Sunder Rajan analyses with the case study of Indira Gandhi concerns how these women leaders consolidate power at the helm after rising to that position. Sunder Rajan's excellent analysis reads selected high-cultural and popular texts to situate the cognitive structures of "female" authority.[11]

Female Political Authority vis-à-vis Women's Interests

A significant feature of this gap is the fact that no woman leader has overtly concerned herself with women's issues, even less with the women's movement. In the Indian context, women political leaders at the regional level, like Jayalalithaa in Tamil Nadu, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh and Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, have also not in any manner explicitly taken up women's issues as main issues of politics. This gap, a section of feminist political theorists have interpreted, is an inevitable outcome of the largely patriarchal system within which political power functions. At this point of overview, however, it is important to remember that women's

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[10] Raunaq Jahan, "Women in South Asian Politics", *Third World Quarterly* 9.3, July 1987, 848-70.

[11] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Gender, Leadership, and Representation" in her *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 103-128.

empowerment in schemes of development and the issue of female political authority are separate, albeit with some overlappings. Unpacking certain dimensions of this overlapping will help us to further situate the complexities of political leadership/participation, women's interests and women's needs.

Women's political participation, outside the "elite" circle of women leaders, in South Asian countries has traversed an uneven territory in the postcolonial period. Let us discuss the contours of this uneven territory through three examples. In India, though the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 gave a historic opportunity to increase women's representation in governance at the local level (*Panchyati* System) by granting 33% reservation, women still face structural inequalities. These inequalities, based on lesser access to resources like education, wage labour, autonomy over one's own sexuality, and financial independence, are entrenched in an overarching patriarchal social and cultural organisation which refuses to give women the final decision-making power.[12] Similarly, in Bangladesh, although women have made serious advancements towards women's empowerment through increased economic participation and widening girls' enrolment in educational institutions since 2000, women's political participation has not increased noticeably even after having two women leaders at the top of the principal political parties contesting for power.[13] In contrast, in the protracted people's revolution in Nepal (*Janayuddha*), the Nepali Maoist leadership took a conscious decision to mobilise women, especially young women. This strategic interest in women, it has been argued, involved a degree of coercion in Maoist recruitment policies. The greater visibility of illiterate and neo-literate young women reflects a move towards restricting women within lower ranks. The question of gender equality in the leadership of the movement remained undecided in spite of reformist practices like abolition of polygyny, and es-

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[12] UNDP, India [United Nations Development Programme], *From Reservation to Participation: Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives and Functionaries of Panchayati Raj Institutions*, Report published on 31 December 2009.

[13] Sohela Nazneen, Naomi Hossain and Maheen Sultan, *National Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Continuities and Change*, IDS Working Paper, Volume 2011, Number 368 (July 2011).

tablishment of women's rights to inherit land, to divorce, to choose marital partners, and to access formal education.[14]

All three examples invite us to closely review women's interests and needs. Drawing from Maxine Molyneux's argument of making a considered division between the "strategic" and "practical" interests of women, it is possible to point out that it is important to distinguish between immediate reforms required to be implemented by the state to ensure a certain level of gender equality, and the long-term goals of effectively challenging (and eventually abolishing) patriarchal forms of oppression.[15] Reservation for women in processes of political representation is a reformist practical interest that would help in women's easier access to resources like land, financial independence, education, and entrepreneurship. It is imperative to overcome both tendencies of either *mystifying* – perpetuated through images of powerful figures of motherhood, or an almost androgynous soldier-like figure of "manly woman" – or *trivialising* – reducing *all* women leaders as replacements of their dead male relatives – the relationship between femininity and political leadership as a long-term goal of gender equality. The crucial question in deciding on the course of action concerns prioritising between immediate and long-term goals. What constitutes women's interest depends on the need of "women" as a political category.

Women as a category, however, is heterogeneous and the "strategic" as well as "practical" interests are equally diverse. In such a situation, countries in South Asia face the challenge of deciding what kind of need can achieve at least a sense of alliance among various identities residing within "women". Ferree and Mueller argue that "[n]eed definition is a political struggle over whose version of reality will be translated into public policy and social practices".[16] The problem becomes acute for women outside the "elite" circle of women leaders, when the same "elite" circle refuses to

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[14] Rita Manchanda, "Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalising Gendered Narratives", *Cultural Dynamics*, 16 (2/3), 2004, 237-58.

[15] Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilisation without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua", *Feminist Studies*, 11:2 (1985: Summer), 227-254.

[16] Myra Max Ferree and Carol McClurg Mueller, "Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective" in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 576-607.

overtly concern itself with women's issues, which are also political articulations of women's needs.

The issues around women's empowerment and violence against women constitute the principal themes around which women's political leadership becomes meaningful outside the "elite" circle. Both these themes have been serious concerns of the international development discourses and national governments across South Asia have formed policies with advice from international organisations like the United Nations.[17] These policies are directed to encourage women's leadership at the grassroots level, to nurture women's agency and to ensure women's equal access to resources like rights to property, education and entrepreneurship. Implementation of women's rights, as they have been articulated in CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), has been one of the most important challenges for ensuring women's political leadership at the grassroots level. The challenges are considerable and South Asian feminists have critically engaged with the International Development Discourse to chart out realistic paths for women in South Asia.[18]

Conclusion

The collective mobilisation around women's interests, needs, and concerns is referred to in everyday parlance as the women's movement. Feminism, as a body of knowledge, is inextricably connected with the women's movement because the principal concern of feminism is gender-based inequalities and the goal remains defining, analysing, and challenging the power relations between femininity and masculinity. Feminist authors and activists are not necessarily women, but rather, the movement and the knowledge production construct women as a political category. Political

[17] For example, government policies at the central and state level in India have launched several schemes of financial insurance and assistance to families with girl children. Policies like "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao", "Dhanalakshmi Yojana", "Kanyashree Prakalpa", and "Ladli Scheme" are directed to maintain a favourable sex ratio for girl children, to prevent school drop out among girl children, and to prevent forced marriage before girl children reach the legal age of consent. Well-known film personalities or figures from the world of sports often star in the advertisements of these policies.

[18] Ania Loomba and Ritty Lukose (eds), *South Asian Feminisms* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012).

leadership, consequently, is an integral part of the movement as well as feminism. However, there has been an ambivalence in feminism regarding individual women leaders who have risen to positions of power within the public sphere of politics. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has pointed out that the typical female subject of feminism has been the subaltern woman, or the woman-as-victim where the analytical point of departure for defining the principal protagonist of feminist politics is the shared experiences of oppression – powerlessness and collectivity. Individual women leaders, especially those who have not shown an overt solidarity with this shared experience, creates an unease among feminist authors and activists. This unease concerns the feminist opposition to the repressive role of the state – coercion and dominance often achieved through the armed forces, where typical codes of "manliness" are deployed with regularity. Political leadership in feminist politics, therefore, is more about shared aims than a hierarchy of obeying orders.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that a more radical reconstitution of the concept of power is required, where leadership ceases to be a tool for securing hierarchy and dominance. South Asian feminist politics is striving for redefining women's struggles. One half of achieving that courses through greater inclusion of women in governance, but the other half demands redefining modes of governance itself.