

FEMALE LEADERS IN SOUTH ASIA: THE IMPACT OF FEUDALISM AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

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Patriarchy is at the core of virtually all feudal and religious fundamentalist traditions. There have been a few matriarchal societies in centuries past, and some features of matriarchy persist in a few societies that have become, in recent centuries, less and less matriarchal. The scriptures of nearly all major religions appear to lend legitimacy, in larger or smaller measure, to some forms of gender-based disparity. That many liberal scholars and theologians feel the need to engage in feminist reinterpretation of traditions and scriptures underscores the ubiquity of patriarchy in what they are seeking to reinterpret.

Throughout history, the proportion of women who have risen to be major leaders of politics, societies and religious communities has been small, in South Asia as elsewhere. Given the close links between patriarchy, feudalism and religious fundamentalism, it may seem reasonable to assume that the emergence of women leaders would be more difficult in societies immersed in feudal and religious fundamentalist traditions than in modern liberal democracies. In fact, many eminent scholars have pointed to the sudden emergence of women leaders at the apex in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as evidence of emancipation and lack of gender prejudice in those countries and in that region. But is this what the facts reveal?

In Sri Lanka on the assassination of the Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1959, his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who had neither been politically active nor held any significant political office previously, was acclaimed leader of the ruling party and became the world's first female prime minister. She repeatedly claimed that her task as prime minister was to carry out the policies of her 'late husband'. She consolidated her political grip, continued as the unchallenged leader of her party, and was prime minister whenever that party was elected to power till she handed over the reins to her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, herself widow of the assassinated charismatic political leader Vijaya Kumaratunge. In 1994 Chandrika became prime minister, and went on to be the country's first female executive president few months later.

Curiously, her main opponent in that presidential election was another widow, Srima Dissanayake, nominated in place of the assassinated Gamini Dissanayake. Chandrika, too, consolidated her political position and held office till the completion of her second term as president in 2005. Both mother and daughter were charismatic political leaders, whose rise to the top was very sudden. They enjoyed the support of very large numbers of female voters, but the percentage of female Members of Parliament (MPs) remained abysmally low (of the order of 5%) before, throughout their tenures of office, and after. Neither of them appeared to have been particularly interested in advancing female political representation or other feminist concerns. There are no reservations for women in the Sri Lankan Parliament, but there are moves to legislate for such reservations in local government.

In India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri who, in turn, was succeeded by Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru. Unlike Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi has been deeply immersed in political issues from a very young age. She too consolidated her party and national leadership but was assassinated in 1984, she was succeeded by her son Rajiv Gandhi. Later, he was assassinated. In due course his widow Sonia Gandhi (from Italy) became party leader and was offered the office of prime minister which she declined. She remains the most charismatic leader of her party. Neither Sonia, nor Indira Gandhi before her, had been associated with advancing women's political representation or other feminist issues.

There are no reservations for women in the Indian Parliament and the proportion of women elected has always been 10% or less. That the proportion of women in the Indian Parliament is about double that in the Sri Lankan Parliament may be due primarily to the history of massive involvement of women, young and old, in the Gandhian social and political movements leading to independence. But 10% is not adequate. The major Indian political parties have agreed to a female political representation level of at least 33%, and this is provided for in respect of local government in terms of the Constitutional Amendment of 1992. Attempts to amend

the constitution to provide for quotas in Parliament have not yet succeeded despite agreement in principle by all the major parties. This remains a live issue.

In Pakistan, too, large numbers of women of diverse age groups were involved in the independence movement as well as in the agitation for partition (i.e. creation of Pakistan). Mohamad Ali Jinnah would often have his sister Fatima Jinnah sit with him at public meetings, before and after independence, despite repeated protests from orthodox religious leaders who held that women should not be active in politics nor hold high office in a Muslim country. In 1958 Field Marshal Ayub Khan captured power and went on to establish a new constitution in 1962, replacing the 1956 Constitution which had provided for dual voting rights for women – for the general seats open to men and women as well as for a few seats reserved for women. The imposed 1962 Constitution abolished direct elections to the presidency and to Parliament, and substituted indirect elections by an Electoral College based on local bodies. This effectively permitted manipulation by the incumbent president/dictator. In any case, it was mostly men who would be in the Electoral College. Thus, only six women were elected to Parliament under that Constitution.

Fatima Jinnah dared to contest the field marshal position in the 1965 presidential election. Her candidature generated unprecedented enthusiasm, particularly among women. Even the orthodox religious parties including the very powerful Jamaat-e-Islami, which had repeatedly declared that a woman could not hold high political office, supported her candidature. However Field Marshal Ayub Khan manipulated the Electoral College to secure his re-election, though it was clear that the majority of the voters backed Fatima Jinnah.

Women and students continued to play a major role in the agitation for democracy. In the parliamentary elections of 1970, there was over-whelming support in West Pakistan for the Pakistan People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and in East Pakistan for the Awami League led by Mujibur Rahman. Denied the office of prime minister despite winning the Parliamentary majority, Mujibur Rahman led a revolt and East Pakistan seceded to form Bangladesh. In the course of time Bhutto was dislodged and executed and his family fled the country. His daughter Benazir Bhutto returned to lead her father's party and to contest the 1988 elections at which she swept the polls and became prime minister. She was again expelled from the country but returned to contest and win the 1993 parliamentary elections. The military has been very powerful in Pakistan, and military dictators most difficult to

dislodge. It looked as if it was Benazir Bhutto who could succeed in doing it. In due course she returned again to contest parliamentary elections and generated much popular enthusiasm, but was assassinated on the eve of the elections in January 2008. Her party went on to win and her widower Asif Ali Zardari is now the party leader and president.

Despite women playing decisive roles in several national and regional elections the number of female MPs in Pakistan never reached double figures pre-2002, nor even during or in the immediate wake of the campaign led by Fatima Jinnah in 1965 or those led by Benazir Bhutto in 1988 and 1993. However there have been some remarkable individual successes. Nasim Wali Khan, widow of Wali Khan and daughter in law of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, was elected as leader of the opposition of the remote ultra-feudal North-West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan and, even more incredibly, an Irish woman was elected as a member of the National Assembly from another remote region, Baluchistan. The feudal factor in one case, and the related colonial factor in the other, lent legitimacy, overriding the gender factor.

In Bangladesh, since the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the effective leadership has been rotating between the military, several male leaders, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina Wazed, and Khaleda Zia, widow of President Ziaur Rahman. In recent years these two women have emerged as the most charismatic national leaders. Hasina is now the prime minister and Khaleda the leader of the opposition. Overall, the direct participation of women in politics in Bangladesh is at least in one respect in advance of that elsewhere in South Asia. Sri Lanka and India have no reservations for women in Parliament. Pakistan has a higher proportion of women (21.1% consequent to the 2002 elections), but most of these 72 members were selected indirectly by the elected MPs and only a few were directly elected. In Bangladesh, as from May 2004, the Constitution provides for reservation of 45 seats for women in a Parliament of 345, which works out to 13%. Unlike in Pakistan, these elections to Parliament are based on popular vote from territorial electorates.

In these four countries particular female leaders have been able to inspire and draw widespread support, especially from women voters. Such leaders as Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in India, Fatima Jinnah, Nasim Wali Khan and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, and Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh derived their charisma, at least in part, from their father, brother or husband. These women

have surely inspired and given confidence to other women and helped to break down gender prejudices. These advances are undoubtedly of significance but not on any transformative scale. None of these leaders appeared to have made a major durable impact on the level of women's representation or on other feminist issues. Curiously, in exceptional cases, feudal succession has gone from women to men (Indira Gandhi to her son Rajiv, and Benazir Bhutto to her husband Zardari), and in one case from mother to daughter (Sirimavo Bandaranaike to Chandrika), but the overriding factor in the succession is feudal. Some of these women have also secured the backing of powerful conservative religious leaders who were also, clearly, influenced by the feudal factor legitimizing a particular female succession rather than any commitment to the emancipation of women.

Even in feudal Europe, legitimacy has occasionally been conferred on a particular woman (e.g. Joan of Arc) to play a leadership role generally denied to women. In modern democracies, the rise of women to top political leadership has been slow and the feudal factor has not played, or seems likely to play, a major role. The sudden emergence of individual women at the political apex has not happened in modern democracies outside Asia. Perhaps, with the progressive modernization and democratization of society and the emancipation of women, such sudden emergence of female national level leaders may cease to occur in Asia, too.

Though from the perspective of undermining prejudices against women holding high office, every opportunity for a

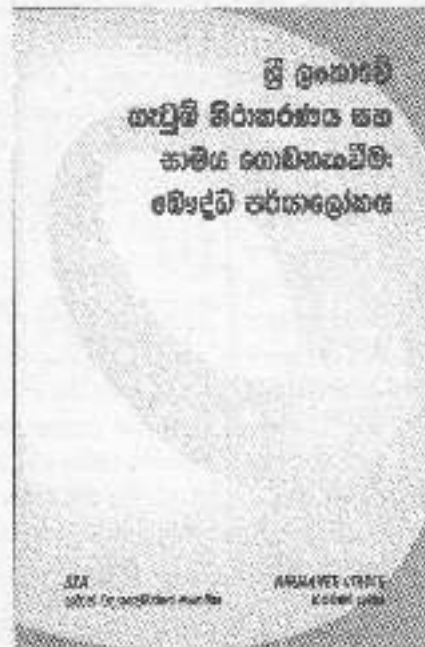
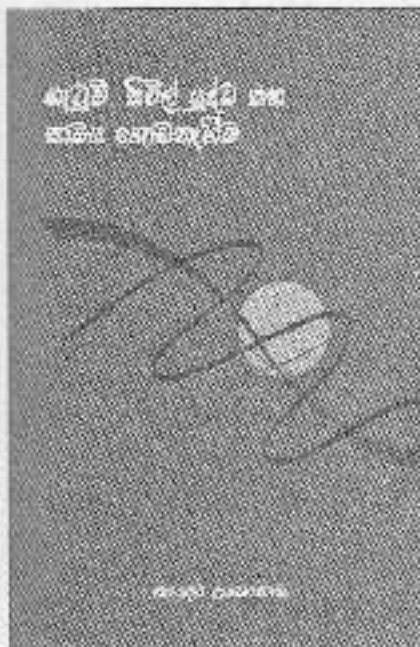
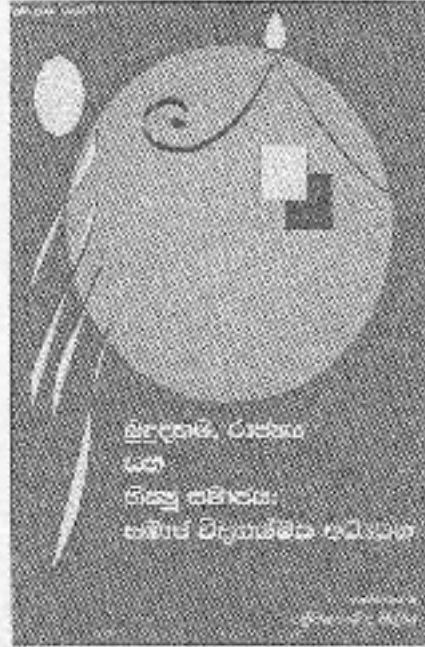
woman to hold high political office may be welcome, we need to be wary of interpreting such opportunities as evidence of emancipation. It would be much more important to broaden the field, e.g. getting more women directly elected to political bodies at all levels from territorial electorates, whether open or reserved, whether on the strength of women's votes or that of all voters in the territory. The emancipation of women cannot rest securely on a feudal base. At least for a limited period (a few decades?) well-designed schemes of reservation could be critically instrumental in advancing the emancipation of women.

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