Gender and politics of South Asia
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Introduction

In the contemporary world of structured human organizations, political participation represents the ultimate level of decision-making in the public sphere of human activity. Women participating in politics is not just a matter of taking up a new activity in the public sphere but rather of breaking into an arena in which the institutions and norms are designed and populated primarily by men. Despite South Asia’s claim to fame of producing a high percentage of female heads of state since the mid-twentieth century, the proportion of women elected to legislatures in the region, from national levels to local levels, remains pitifully low. While policy interventions, such as gender quota systems, particularly at the local level of political processes, have attempted to rectify the overall gender imbalance in political participation, politics in South Asia remain a man’s game, and government remains a man’s club.

Social understructures: gender and patriarchy

Ideology of gender as evolved in the South Asian region places women firmly in the domestic sphere, with their primary responsibility being rearing and caring for the children and housekeeping. In general, from birth to death, through each and every life cycle, women are socialized to adhere to these accepted norms of social behavior. A plethora of mutually reinforcing socioeconomic, religious, and cultural practices, which have taken different forms, has been successful in perpetuating the patriarchal control of women in every part of South Asia.

The four countries in this study have democratically elected governments. Gender equality is enshrined in their respective constitutions. However, women’s participation in governance in the elected bodies is severely restricted due to the hegemonic control of the public space of politics by male political leadership. As Gail Omvedt (2005) has noted, the “village square” (read: public space) has consistently been a male area in South Asia, dominated physically and politically by the males of the community.
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Research focus and context

It is the contention of this study that the very low representation of women in politics in South Asia is a result of the impact of patriarchy. Further, I also argue that even the few avenues opened for women's active participation in the political processes are, in fact, only accessed through the gateways created by the underlying patriarchal social systems. Within that larger umbrella of the discourse, first, I analyze the impact of the struggle for independence from British colonial rule on reinforcing women’s traditional reproductive role in South Asian society. Second, I examine the seeming disconnect between the high-visibility female political leadership as manifested by the string of elected female heads of state and the dismal showing of female political representation in elected legislative bodies in every country of South Asia. Third, I analyze the public policy on “gender quota system” and its structure and form, as it has been implemented in the region. Fourth, I turn my attention to examine briefly how women utilize public space in relation to social and political movements, and public space’s possible effects on the political discourse in South Asia; finally, I analyze the effects of gender-based violence and systemic corruption in the political spaces on women’s ability to enter as well as play a role in the political arena in South Asia.

Gendered legacy of nationalistic struggle

The contemporary patterns of politics and political institutions of South Asia have been shaped to a great extent by the colonial domination by the British. Under British rule, which spanned a period of nearly one hundred and fifty years, the Indian subcontinent was a single unit of administration. The struggle for independence was based on a tidal wave of nationalism, which effectively used cultural icons to show the differences of “Indianness” in contrast to the Western culture associated with the British rulers. One way affirming “Indianness” was not allowing the traditional image of an Indian woman to change. As Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have observed, “the recovery of tradition throughout the proto nationalist and nationalist period was always the recovery of the ‘traditional’ woman- her various shapes readapt the ‘eternal past to the contingent present’” (Sangari Kum Kum and Sudesh Vaid, 1989:10).

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the first to use the image of the Indian woman as a “moral mother” who is a repository of both moral and spiritual values (Kumar, 1993). Undoubtedly, he created an avenue for women to emerge into the public sphere of politics by actively drawing them into the Indian freedom movement. Indeed, by choosing the spinning wheel and salt as symbols of the freedom struggle in the civil obedience movement, he brought the activities of the woman-specific domestic reproductive sphere into the public sphere of political agitation. The image of women as envisaged by Gandhi had its roots in Hindu mythology. His gendered perspective for male national hero was Rama, while the stoic, chaste, and sacrificial Sita was upheld as the national ideal for womanhood.

Actively encouraged by the Indian male political leadership, the Indian nationalist movement drew large numbers of women into the political arena. Many of the women in the Indian subcontinent who gained public visibility during the political struggle for independence were drawn into the public sphere by virtue of their kinship ties to the male political elite. Furthermore, their participation was seen mainly in terms of a supporting role to the male leadership. As affirmed by Sarojini Naidu, a prominent Indian woman leader during the struggle for independence, “remembers that in all great national crisis it is the man who goes out and its women’s hopes and women’s prayer that serve his arm to become a
successful soldier” (quoted in Mazumdar, 1992:10). Two other associated characteristics that were highlighted in relation to women during the struggle for independence in the subcontinent as well as in Sri Lanka were the responsibility of (1) upholding the “traditional” role of women in the reproductive sphere and (2) acting as the designated courier of South Asian culture, in particular, in terms of dress and behavior (Jayawardena, 1986).

Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon at that time, was an outlier of the Indian subcontinent. The struggle for independence from British colonial rule did not have the intensity or the strength of its more powerful neighbor. The elite and the middle-class women who spearheaded the women’s movement during the struggle for independence in Sri Lanka were known to operate within the existing patriarchal social structures (Jayawardena, 1986).

Dynastic elitism: class and gender in postcolonial South Asia

South Asia can lay claim to an impressive list of women as presidents and prime ministers from the 1960s to the present. Indira Gandhi of India and Sirima Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, daughter and widow, respectively, of the prime ministers of the two countries were pushed into those positions in order to earn political capital through name recognition from the electorate. Both turned out to be astute politicians who led their political parties to victory in at least two rounds of parliamentary elections.

With the exception of Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, all the other women in political leadership in South Asia at the national level were/are widows. This also highlights an interesting case of double standards in social and political acceptance. There is a widespread prevalence in South Asian society, particularly in Hindu India, of a lower status designated to widows due to religious and cultural practices. At the same time, there has been an overwhelming electoral acceptance of a few elite women married to powerful men, despite their widowhood. According to Hindu tradition, as Martha Chen has noted, a widow was expected either to commit Sati or lead a chaste, austere, and ascetic lifestyle (Chen, 1998). Historically, it was also the upper castes in India who imposed this lifestyle more strictly for widows. However, in contemporary times, this social and religious convention of social discrimination against widows does not seem to apply to women who inherit upper-class dynastic political power. In predominantly Muslim Bangladesh and Pakistan, where interpretation of the Islamic doctrine has pushed women into a subordinate position compared to men, leadership at the highest level of politics has been earned in open elections by two dynastically connected elitist women, both of whom are widows of former prime ministers. In predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka, while widowhood does not carry an explicit religious sanction, it is a status still considered to be somewhat inauspicious. Both the woman prime minister and the woman president in Sri Lanka were widows when elected to their respective leadership positions.

In India, the political power of a dynasty has extended beyond the positions of prime ministers and executive presidents. Maneka Gandhi, widow of Sanjay Gandhi, who wielded tremendous political power when his mother Indira Gandhi was the prime minister before his tragic death, also entered politics and is now a minister in the Indian government. The emergence of Sonia Gandhi, the widow of slain Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, as the leader of India’s Congress party and wide acknowledgement as the “king maker” of the party reaffirms this contradiction.

The family ties to male political leadership, though more prominently displayed at the national level, have also extended to the subnational provincial government level. While female leadership at this level remains very low, few of the women who gained prominence as chief ministers of a number of subnational units in India owed their position largely to the
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patronage they received from powerful male politicians. Among twenty-nine political units (states) and seven Union territories at the subnational level in India, only four are currently led by females. Three among them, Jayalalitha (Tamil Nadu) (no longer in office), Vasundhara Raje (Rajasthan), and Mehbooba Mufti (Jammu & Kashmir), have close kinship/patronage ties to powerful male political figures. Only Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal has risen from a middle-class family to rise in the ranks of political leadership to be elected as the chief minister.8

Using dynastic legacies for political power, even in modern democracies, is not unique to South Asian politics. What is remarkable of South Asian political leadership is that widows were pushed into its highest levels, despite the lower status accorded to women in general and widows in particular in South Asian society. It is noteworthy that name recognition associated with the class of political dynasties has undoubtedly outweighed the gendered patriarchal social norms of widowhood. What is also interesting is that since assuming power as heads of states, all of the women prime ministers and presidents of South Asia, and female chief ministers at the subnational units in India, have quickly dispelled any notion that they may be mere puppets in the hands of a male power base. When the Chief Minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav was incarcerated in 1997, his wife Rabri Devi was sworn in to replace him. Though her tenure as Chief Minister of Bihar only lasted for a short time until Yadav was released, Devi quickly came to be known as a savvy politician and an able administrator9 (Aiyar, 1997).

An ideal principle in a democratic political system is the right of every citizen, woman or man, to participate on equal terms in the political decision-making processes of her or his country. While it is widely noted that in general, women are not able to compete on equal terms with men in electoral politics, we also observe that class position within gender demonstrated in legacy politics in South Asia does add a deviant crinkle into this analysis.

**Women’s representation in electoral politics**

The elected membership of women in the legislatures in South Asia, especially at the national parliamentary level, has been very low. In India, between 1991 and 2014, women’s representation in the Lok Sabha (national legislature) has ranged from 7.08 percent to 11.42 percent. In Sri Lanka, during the election cycles between 1994 and 2015, women’s representation, in fact, decreased from 5.33 percent to 4.89 percent. In Pakistan, with the implementation of the gender quota system, women’s representation in the national assembly increased from .92 percent in 1990 to 20.74 percent in 2013. However, it should be noted that in Pakistan, women’s election under the gender quota system was based on nomination and not on open elections. In Bangladesh, women’s representation in the national legislature increased from 10.30 percent in 1991 to 19.71 percent in 2014.10 As in the case of Pakistan, the gender quota system adopted in Bangladesh used a system of nomination by political parties in selecting women representatives to the national legislatures. While in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, women do have the legal right to compete at the open elections for seats in the national legislatures, their success rate in gaining party nomination and winning seats in open competition with men in direct elections has been very low.

It is also noteworthy that similar to the pattern observed at the highest level of political leadership as prime ministers and executive presidents, a significant proportion of the women elected to the national legislatures in South Asia are also beneficiaries of kinship ties to male politicians (Samarasinghe, 2000; Wickrmasinghe and Kodikara, 2012). In the absence of such seeming relational advantages, an overwhelming majority of women in South
Asia find that male dominance of the political space is an insurmountable barrier to their successful entry into this space. In a recent study of the local government elections in Sri Lanka, it was clear that patriarchal control of the political space was so pervasive that women aspirants found it almost impossible to break the barriers to enter even the nomination level of the political parties (Samarasinghe and Liyanage, 2015).

**Gender quota system: push to achieve gender balance in politics?**

The gender quota system mandating reserved seats for women through legislative measures is widely perceived as an attempt to redress gender imbalance in representative politics. Often referred to as the “fast track” for drawing in women’s representation into the political space, gender quota system seems to have invoked a “quota fever” around the world (Dahlerup and Freidenwell, 2005). The expectation is that this policy push of bringing more women into the public political space could create a critical mass of a hitherto grossly underrepresented cohort of people. Furthermore, it is hoped that the emergence of such a cohort of women in politics would act as a catalyst for change in moving forward in achieving gender balance in political representation.

In the South Asian region, allocating reserved seats for women has been deemed the most appropriate mechanism to initiate women’s representation in electoral politics. The structure and operational form of the gender quota system differ in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. In Pakistan reservations for women in the national assembly go as far back as 1956 when 3 percent of the seats were allocated to women. While percentage increased over the years, particularly as new constitutions were introduced, especially by succession of military rulers, elections on the gender quota system were mainly by nomination by the incumbent members of the national assembly (overwhelmingly male), mainly according to political party affiliations. As noted earlier, among the four countries in this study, Pakistan has the highest percentage of women’s representation in the national legislatures. According to the current constitution of Pakistan, 30 percent of the seats in the national assembly are allocated for women, under the gender quota system. However, women are not elected via direct elections.

The gender quota system of reservation of seats for women in the national assembly in Bangladesh followed a similar pattern as in Pakistan. In the election cycles of 1973 and 1979 the gender quota system was implemented following upon the criteria laid down in the first constitution of Bangladesh of 1973, when reservation for women in the National Parliament was first implemented. Election was by nomination by registered political parties. When President Ershad imposed military rule in 1986, he promulgated a special ordinance (No. XLV11 1986) whereby 30 women candidates nominated and seconded by 151 incumbent members of Parliament would be considered elected. In 1990, the tenth amendment to the Bangladeshi constitution included Clause (3) to Article 65, mandating the provision of 30 reserved seats on a gender quota system. Elections for the reserved seats to the National Parliament continued to be by nomination. This practice of indirect elections makes the purpose of initiating a gender quota system somewhat of a mockery. It is the men who control the political parties and the national assemblies who get to elect the women representatives under the gender quota system.

The 84th Constitution Amendment Bill in India, or Women’s Reservation Bill, making provision for one-third reserved seats in state and national assemblies in India was first introduced in the Indian Parliament more than fifteen years ago. It is still languishing in Parliament. There are no policies on gender quota system in Sri Lanka.
Gender quota system at the local government level: elective principle

The enactment of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution of India, giving constitutional status to the Panchayat Raj (local governance) institutions and urban local bodies and mandating a gender quota system of reservations of 33 percent of seats for women has provided a landmark space for women to seek direct election to local governments. Activated in 1996, Panchayat Raj has now drawn in more than a million women at the rural and urban local levels of governance in India. Since 1997, the direct election has been implemented in local government elections in Bangladesh for the seats reserved for women. In Pakistan at the local government level 33 percent are reserved for women but direct elections are not the norm. Sri Lanka does not have a gender quota system in place at the local government level either.

Direct elections as mandated in the Panchayat Raj system in India since 1994 and under The Union Parishad Ordinance of 1997 in Bangladesh have certainly created more political spaces for women at the local government level. While a myriad of problems, including deeply embedded patriarchal controls in both societies, lack of resources, gender-based violence, and inexperience in governance, have posed obstructions to women’s participation, gender quota system based on direct elections have also given women the opening to emerge into the public space of politics in large numbers. In 2014, there were more than 1 million women representatives, accounting for more than 40 percent of the Panchayat Council elected members in India. Such numbers give legitimacy to women’s presence in the public space of politics, which they were hitherto denied. In the 1997 election in Bangladesh when the direct election was implemented for the gender quota system more than 43,000 women candidates competed for 12,684 reserved seats (Chowdhury, 2013). Furthermore, it is also noted that in countries of South Asia where gender quotas have been implemented, the popular culture has gradually become more accepting of women’s direct participation in politics (Pandey, 2008).

Sri Lanka is the exception to the general trend seen in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where the gender quota system has been adopted in one form or another. The Sri Lankan case also presents a paradoxical situation. Notably, Sri Lanka fares significantly better than all other South Asian countries in terms of gender inequality indices (GII) as measured by the United Nations Development Fund UNDP. It enjoyed universal adult franchise since 1931, while still a colony of the British and direct elections of political representatives have been an uninterrupted feature of its electoral system. One would expect a better educated, healthy population, particularly where there are no overt religious sanctions that discriminate against women, to be in a better position to participate more actively in politics. But this is not the case in Sri Lanka. While it had two women elected as heads of state, its female representation at every level of governance has been consistently lower than that of its neighbors. The Sri Lankan case demonstrates that notwithstanding relatively better human development standards enjoyed by both women and men, long-standing patriarchal controls in public life act as deterrents for women’s entry into competitive politics. While women’s groups in Sri Lanka have been consistently agitating for legislative reforms to incorporate a gender quota system in order to breakdown the patriarchal barriers in the electoral process, they have not been successful so far. Currently there are no legislative measures proposed to remedy the prevalent gender imbalance of political representation in Sri Lanka (Kodikara, 2009).

To be sure, top down legislative measures, such as the gender quota system, cannot be expected to change patriarchal determinants of political processes overnight. Indeed, the
exclusion of women in general from the arena of politics in South Asia illustrates the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture of politics. As Lisa Baldez explains, gender quota system may be perceived as an exogenous shock that would loosen the masculine hold on politics (Baldez, 2006). However, as we have noted, some of the “conditions” imposed on the election procedures, notably nominations of women, instead of direct elections reveal the difficulty of changing the norms set by patriarchal societies. Indeed, gender quotas, especially at national legislatures as practiced in Pakistan and Bangladesh, do not inspire confidence that they constitute a genuine effort of reaching gender balance in representative politics. However, the very opening of political space to women under the gender quota system gives a glimmer of hope that the initiative, flawed as it is currently practiced at the national legislature level, could give women the political space to prepare them for more effective and meaningful political roles in the future.

**Beyond electoral representation: women in social/political movements**

Since gaining independence from the British, most of the women’s movements in the subcontinent were directed at redressing the discrimination against and abuse of women in the private sphere, such as in the issue of dowry and dowry deaths, rape, and male alcoholism leading to gender-based violence. There were also long-drawn-out struggles, particularly in India, for land rights in Telangana and in Bodhgaya and on protecting the environment, which was critical for their livelihood survival as in the case of the Chipko movement (Samarasinghe, 2000). The protest movements were single issue-based initiatives. While such initiatives brought women into the limelight as effective social activists, its impact on women’s continued role in politics was limited.

Examples of direct political agitation led by women in South Asia also highlight the sanctity of motherhood in different ways. During the thirty-year, ethnicity-based civil war in Sri Lanka, a group of women from both ethnic groups formed a “Mothers front” in 1990 to demand accountability from the government for the “disappeared” sons of the Tamil ethnic group. While the political parties, especially those in the opposition in 1992, did support the “mothers front” in the election campaign of 1992, once that political party won power, the demands of the “mothers front” were ignored. As Kumudini Samuel has noted, while the presence of the “mothers front” on the political scene was important at the time, the movement itself was unable to translate the political gain of its public visibility to a sustainable political empowerment process of its members (Samuel, 2006).

**Mahila Agadi**, the women’s arm of the ultranationalist Hindutva Shiv Sena political party of India, demonstrates the success in mass mobilization of women along the lines of religious fundamentalism that openly advocates the primacy of women’s role and responsibility as mothers in agitating to protect the Hindu nation (Basu, 1995). A characteristic of the female role in this movement is female aggression, street protests, and rallies. **Mahila Agadi** women from the slums of Mumbai participating in street demonstrations openly shamed males by offering them bangles that women wear to show contempt at their supposed emasculation (Sen, 2007). Such actions highlight the perception of the **Mahila Agadi** women that it is the men’s responsibility to lead the charge in protecting the Hindu religion and the Hindu nation and the women’s role is to push them into action. The **Mahila Agadi** women, calling themselves “dashing ladies,” revealed political networks created by lower-level women in urban margins of Mumbai. Tarini Bedi calls it “political matronage” as opposed to “patronage” (Bedi, 2016).
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Violence and systemic corruption: as deterrents for women’s political participation

The increasing violence in the arena of politics in South Asia, especially during periods of general elections in countries of South Asia, further exacerbates the problem of women’s entry into the public space of politics. Millennia of patriarchal controls, which have pushed women into the private sphere, have failed to equip women to handle the so-called “rough side” of politics. One of the most lethal weapons used in perpetrating violence against women in the political arena is the threat of sexual harassment and rape. Rape symbolizes the ultimate ostracism for women in societies as was seen in the case of rape victims during the partition of India in 1948 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1972. Scholars note that following the 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution violence against women increased and the newly elected female members fear sexual harassment and being beaten if they participate in elections and in Panchayat meetings (Jayal, 2006; Samin and Nasreen, 2002). In South Asia, where sexual purity of women is often equated to an unblemished personal character, only a very few women aspirants for political office would take the risk of being subjected to unfair character assassination on issues of sexuality. This was a powerful deterrent for female aspirants seeking political office at the local government level in Sri Lanka during the last local government elections held in March 2011 (Samarasinghe and Liyanage, 2015).

Seeking elected office in democracies is an expensive venture. Unless they can claim dynastic name recognition and/or family resources, lack of access to resources for women compared to men is a significant deterrent against entering the political arena. And as the Bangladeshi Prime Minister noted earlier, backing a woman for political office is tantamount to losing the seat. Women cannot afford the expenses demanded in election campaigns, meetings, and networking events. Added to these drawbacks is the systemic corruption in the existing political system dominated by men who have better access to resources and who would not hesitate to use them in corrupt ways in order to maintain their political power (Samarasinghe and Liyanage, 2015). Finding financial backers is a daunting task for women aspirants of political office.

Would women’s entry into political spaces would lead to a reduction of corruption in the political system? Jain referring to the gender quota system at the local government level in India was hopeful that by creating spaces for women’s entry at the grassroots level, there was a distinct possibility of women transforming the state and its politics from within, leading to less corruption (1996:6). Stories of women in local government in India standing up to contractors; enforcing transparency; and, indeed, facing violence in return have also been recorded (Neema Kudwa, 2003). But as Ann Marie Goetz has noted, upholding women as political cleaners and new anti-corruption force may be a myth in the making. According to her analysis to “expect women’s gender alone to act as a magic bullet to resolve a corruption problem that is much bigger than they are, that is systemic, is unrealistic to say the least” (Goetz, 2007:102). She further contends that women in politics are seen as less corrupt simply because they have been excluded from opportunities for such behavior. Indeed, some women political leaders in South Asia, at the state and national levels have been accused and (sometimes charged) for resorting to corrupt political behavior.

Conclusions and looking into the future

Males in patriarchal societies have jealously guarded their hold of the public sphere of political decision-making as a male preserve. The high degree of male dominance of
politics has had adverse repercussions on women’s ability to enter the public space of politics in several complementary ways. First, by enacting laws and statutes that control women in the reproductive domestic sphere. Second, by the failure to enact public policy provisions that would create enabling conditions for women to successfully straddle the private sphere of reproduction and public sphere of formal wage work or politics. Third, using their coveted position in the public sphere to articulate the importance and indeed the sanctity of traditions, conventions, and beliefs that are orchestrated to confirm that the woman’s place is in the home.

It is clear that men and women are differently incorporated as citizens of the state (Waylen, 1996). What we have seen in South Asia in relation to women’s participation in electoral politics is not a rejection of the patriarchy per se but a possible opening in the existing system to emerge as political actors onto the public arena of politics. Family ties to male political leadership have been the main path that has led women in South Asia to assume leadership positions in politics as evidenced by the election of female heads of state in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. While the same path has propelled a few women at the subnational and parliamentary level to gain political recognition as well, in the absence of such patriarchal privilege, entry into active politics for the vast majority of women in South Asia is only distant possibility.

The introduction of the gender quota system introduced in order to rectify the gender balance in women’s political participation in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India has shown, at best, mixed results. In Pakistan and Bangladesh women’s reservation seats for the national assemblies are not based on direct elections, a privilege long enjoyed by men in electoral representation in both countries. While electoral principle of direct elections is written into the 84th amendment for women’s reservation at the national and subnational levels of the Indian constitution, the amendment is yet to pass in Parliament. Sri Lanka has no such legislation or any in the pipeline for any level of the electoral reform based on gender quota system.

The gender quota system at the local level in India since 1994 and in Bangladesh since 1997 offers the best hope for active female political participation through direct elections. Admittedly, while legislation cannot be expected to change centuries-old patriarchal traditions overnight, they can be a catalyst for change over time as the voters get used to the system and female Panchayat members in India and Parishad members get more experience in governance issue.

Notes
1 The countries that form the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, i.e. SAARC, are Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are identified as South Asia. For the purpose of this study I use Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, mainly due to the availability of comparative data.
2 India and Sri Lanka have nationally elected legislative bodies since 1948 and executive presidents (as in the case of Sri Lanka since 1978). Pakistan had military rule on a regular basis since the mid-1950s and in Bangladesh the military remained a most important force in national politics from 1975 to 1991 and from 1986 to 1991.
3 Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was administered as a separate unit.
4 Jawaharlal Nehru wrote,

Most of us menfolk were in prison, and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the situation. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British, but also their own men folk by surprise.

Jawaharlal Nehru. Discovery of India, 1982: 172
5 The list consists of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (India), Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka), President Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka. 1994–1996), Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh, 1991–1996 and 2001–2006), and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh, 2009 to present). Benazir Bhutto was the daughter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, a former prime minister of Pakistan.

6 *Sati* refers to widow immolation at the funeral pyre of her husband. This was an ancient Hindu practice in India, which was banned in the nineteenth century by the British colonial rulers.

7 As late as 1987, the case of 18-year-old widow Roop Kanwar was reportedly led to commit *Sati*. The Indian government enacted the *Sati* Prevention Act of 1988, criminalizing any type of aiding, abetting, or glorifying the practice of *Sati*.

8 Jayalalitha, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was the protégée of the popular actor turned chief minister M.G. Ramachandran known as MGR. Vasundhara Raje is the daughter of the Maharaja of Gwalior and Mehabooba Mufti succeeds her late father Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. The exception is Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal, who gained political prominence of her own accord. Anandiben Patel, who was the chief minister for Gujarat until August 2016, also did not have a strong family or patron base when she first entered politics in 1994. In provincial councils in Sri Lanka (subregional units of electoral representation), though not as politically important as in India, the majority of elected female representatives have close family ties to prominent male political leadership (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara, 2012).

9 Rabri Devi returned to active politics to become Chief Minister of Bihar from 1999 to 2000 and from 2000 to 2005.


The different years shown for the four countries are based on the election cycles of the respective countries.

11 The two researchers monitored nearly 90 female aspirants for elected political office in one of the 25 districts of Sri Lanka in the local government election cycle of 2011 in Sri Lanka. None of them had family political connections. While all of the women worked relentlessly to secure nomination, only eight women successfully navigated the male dominant political party nomination procedure and among them only five got elected.

12 *Panchayat Raj institutions* is a three-tiered system of local governance, consisting of *Gram Panchayat* for a village or a group of villages with a population between 5,000; *Thaluk Panchayat* for every block; and *Zilla Panchayat* for every district.

13 The Union *Parishad* is the bottom level of the local government governance system in Bangladesh.

14 According to GII rankings released by the UN in 2015, Sri Lanka was ranked at #72 with a score of 0.370, well above India ranked at #130, with a GII score of 563. Bangladesh was ranked at #111, with a GII score of 0.503, with Pakistan was ranked at #121, with a GII score of 0.536. GII measures disparities between men and women in three basic dimensions of Human Development, i.e. health, knowledge, and living standards (UNDP, 2015).

15 The majority of the population (73 percent) in Sri Lanka is Buddhists. There are no religious interpretations of Buddhism as practiced in Sri Lanka that explicitly discriminate women.

16 The civil war was between the Tamil ethnic group and the Sinhala ethnic group.

**Bibliography**


