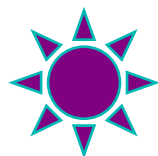


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WOMEN IN POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA

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The 20th century has witnessed major developments for women in the field of politics.¹ Many countries, including all South Asian Countries², granted women their franchise and have taken measures to ensure that women are able to participate in politics. This paper will trace the status of women in politics in various South Asian countries, along with the challenges they face in participating in the political arena.

THE NEED FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The importance of women's political participation is manifold. UNICEF, in its report³, identifies the need for political participation of women:

- Empowerment of Women in the political arena has the potential to change societies.
- The participation of women in local politics can have an immediate impact on outcomes for women and children, particularly in the distribution of community resources and in promoting provisions for children.
- Women's participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction is vital to ensure the safety and protection of children and other vulnerable populations.

While the need for political participation of women has been clearly established in the 20th century, the actual participation depends on factors of demand and supply of women participants in the field of politics. Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes identify culture and social structure as factors determining the supply side of women's participation while politics determines the demand for women's political participation.⁴

Culture plays an important role in determining the political participation of women. If the predominant cultural belief is that women are less capable of performing political functions than men, this can be a hindrance to their participation. For instance, even if women have the

¹ This paper was completed in January 2011. Publication was delayed until January 2012.

² The following are the years the various South Asian Countries granted women the 'Right to Vote': Srilanka - 1931, Maldives - 1932, Pakistan - 1947, India - 1950, Nepal - 1951, Bhutan - 1953 and Bangladesh - 1972 (IDEA - Table 6), p -

³ 'The State of the World's Children 2007, Women and Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality', UNICEF, p - 50

⁴ Paxton, Pamela and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics and Power: A Global Perspective*, Pine Forge Press, 2007, p - 103,121,135

right to contest, winning elections continues to be a great challenge. Across countries in the world, a 1% increase in the number of female candidates results in only a 0.67% increase in female legislators⁵. Similarly in cultures where the woman's role is mainly confined to the household, their role in politics will not be greatly encouraged. According to structural perspectives, the family education system, labour force and other societal structures are configured in ways that prevent women from gaining the skills necessary to participate in politics or compete against men for public office.⁶

Politics determines the demand for the participation of women. For instance, if the country has a quota for women in Parliament, the system will demand that a definite number of women participate in politics. In some cases, the political structure does not greatly differentiate between male and female candidates. For example, women seem to be performing better under the Proportional Representation system since they do not directly compete against male candidates. Paxton looked at 108 countries and found that even after accounting for factors such as democracy and irrespective of the level of development, PR systems have 3.5% more women in their national legislature.⁷

WOMEN IN POLITICS – A STUDY OF SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

Many South Asian countries have witnessed woman's leadership as Head of State or Head of Government. Women have gained the Franchise right in all South Asian countries. The following section provides a brief history of women in politics in the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives and Bangladesh.

India

Colonial period

The emergence of women's movements and reforms related to women can be traced to the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was set in motion with the support of the Indian National Congress when it started the National Social conference to discuss social issues. Aware of the dominant role played by men in defining reforms, Saraladevi Chaudhurani began 'the Bharat

⁵ Ibid, p - 147

⁶ Ibid, p - 121

⁷ Ibid, p- 137

Stree Mahamandal' (the Large Circle of Indian Women) in 1910 to serve as a permanent association of Indian women⁸. Women then started defining key issues affecting them, such as female education, child marriage, the observance of purdah and the status of women in the family.

Women's associations, under various names, sprang up all over India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of these organisations fought for a range of women's issues, including their right to vote. Three main organisations that were formed during this period are:

- The Women's Indian Association (WIA), whose four primary areas of work included religion, education, politics and philanthropy. Annie Besant became the first president along with Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadhabhoy, and Mrs Ambujammal as honorary secretaries. ⁹
- The National Council of women in India (NCWI): In 1925, the NCWI was established as a national branch of the International Council of Women¹⁰. Mehribai Tata (wife of Sir Dorab Tata), chair of the Executive committee of the Bombay Council in its first year, played a key role in its advancement. Because of its elitist nature, the Council failed to grow and become a vital national organisation.
- The All India Women's conference (AIWC): AIWC first met in Poona in January 1927, following more than six months of dedicated work by Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the WIA. Beginning with education, it went on to expand its preview, especially with regard to social customs which restricted female education, notably child marriage and purdah¹¹.

Franchise rights

On December 15, 1917, Sarojini Naidu, a veteran congress worker, led an All-India delegation of prominent women to meet with Montague and Chelmsford. With this deputation, Indian women began their struggle to secure for themselves political and civil rights¹². In 1932, the Lothain committee (to work out the issues of the rise in enfranchised women in India)

⁸ Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 1996,p – 70

⁹ Ibid, p-73

¹⁰ Ibid, p-75

¹¹ Ibid, p-80

¹² Ibid, p - 92

accepted a memorandum from the all-India women's organisations. In their final report, the Lothian Committee rejected adult franchise because of the country's size, large population, and high rate of adult illiteracy. They agreed more women should be enfranchised to facilitate social reform and recommended increasing the ratio of female to male voters from 1:20 to 1:5.¹³ This was a blow to the women's organisations fighting for franchise of women.

The fight for women's franchise also did not receive consistent support from the Indian National Congress. The Congress wanted women to help them fight against the colonists before focusing on women's right to vote. So women obtained the franchise right in a narrow and limited fashion. Bombay and Madras were the first provinces to extend the franchise to women in 1921; the United Provinces followed in 1923; Punjab and Bengal in 1926 and finally Assam, the Central Provinces, Bihar and Orissa in 1930.¹⁴

Women in the Nationalist movement

The most important aspect of the Nationalist movement was that it appealed to women from all sections of the society. Their participation also won the support of men to a large extent. During the partition of Bengal, women used their traditional roles to mask many political activities and supported the men. Women participated actively during the Civil Disobedience movement in Bombay. Rashtriya Stree Sangha (RSS), which had remained under the presidency of Sarojini Naidu with Goshiben Naoroji Captain and Avantikabai Gokhale as vice-presidents, was involved in the movement. It advocated *swaraj* and women's emancipation¹⁵ as its primary goals. Women also participated, albeit in smaller numbers, in the movement in Bengal and Madras.

The Government of India Act of 1935 granted the right to vote to women over twenty-one years of age who qualified because they owned property or had attained a certain level of education¹⁶. In the elections of 1937, some women had the right to vote and the right to contest to elections. Unfortunately, political parties, including the Congress, did not support women's candidacy outside the reserved seats.

In the 1940s, important changes can be noticed in the women's movement. The all-India

¹³ Ibid,p-109

¹⁴ Ibid, p - 101

¹⁵ Ibid, p-130

¹⁶ Ibid,p-191

women's organisations lost their hegemony, mainly because the ideology of these organisations were too Hindu, middle class and urban to appeal to a wide range of women.

As identity became a key element in power politics, mobilising women became crucial to the Muslim League. Begum Shah Nawaz agreed to organise a separate political league for Muslim women. By June 1936, a meeting of the General Council of the Punjab Provincial Moslem Women's League was announced in a newspaper and held at her house¹⁷. Following partition, she became a member of the Pakistani Constituent Assembly in Karachi and was elected vice-president¹⁸. The Quit India movement also witnessed the participation of women in large numbers. In the rural areas, women joined men in protesting against a number of issues including taxes and land tenure. Women were also part of social movements like the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal and Warli Movement in western India¹⁹.

India, Post-Independence

In India, a number of women's organisations emerged in the post-independence and post-emergency period. Some of them included the Samata Manch (Equality Forum), Stree Sangharsh Samiti (Women's Struggle Committee), Stree Mukti Sangathan (Women's Power Organisation), Purogami Sangathan (Forward Stepping Organisation), the Forum against Oppression of Women, Saheli, the Progressive Organisation of Women, the Women's Center, Kali for Women and Manushi. These organisations addressed a range of issues, though their primary concern was violence against women, dowry deaths, the rape of women by police and security forces and domestic violence²⁰.

In 1950, all adults above 21 years of age secured the right to vote.²¹ According to the Human Development Report 2004, women constituted 17.4% of female legislators, senior officials and managers, 8.8% of total seats in the Lower House of the Parliament and 10.3% of

¹⁷ Ibid, p-197

¹⁸ Ibid, p-198

¹⁹ The Tebhaga movement-In September of 1946 the Bengal provincial Kisan Sabha (Peasant's Organisation) called a mass struggle among sharecroppers to keep Tebhaga(two-thirds) of the harvest. Rani Mitra Dasgupta, Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakravarthy and other women who had worked with MARS during the famine years wanted to bring rural women into this movement and actively participated in the movement. Warli movement – Godavari Parulekar worked among the Warlis, adivasis in western India between 1945 and 1947 to help them obtain social and economic justice.

²⁰ Basu, Amrita, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005, p- 29

²¹ The age was later changed to 18 in 1989

total seats in the Upper House of the Parliament. Although the number of women's organisations grew post independence, it did not lead to an increase in their participation in the political arena. Many women's organisations preferred to remain autonomous to keep their agenda undiluted. This led to women's organisations working closely with the bureaucracy and at the grassroots level.

Despite the reluctance of many women's groups to join political parties, the parties realised the importance of including women's issues in their agenda. Many of them had a women's wing. For instance, the former Communist Party was active in mobilising women. This was essentially through its two wings - the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India Marxist [CPI (M)] - after the party split in 1964. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), affiliated to the CPI, also came to play a more significant role. In 1981, the CPM formed the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). AIDWA collaborated actively with autonomous women's groups and took up issues of violence against women²². It is interesting to note that both left-leaning parties and right-leaning parties took great interest in mobilising women. In the case of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), women have played a key role in Hindu Nationalism. Vijayraje Scindia, Uma Bharathi and Sadhvi Rithambara were at the forefront of the movement.

Reservation for women in politics

Many parties have been advocates of reservation of seats for women in the parliament. This is one facet of the movement where women's organisations have closely interacted with political parties. Although parties have been advocating for reservation, they fail to support the Bill when it comes to Parliament. Left leaning parties have often opposed the bill on grounds that it does not take into account caste inequality. The Janata Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Samajwadi Janata Party and the Bahujan Samajwadi Parties have all rejected it because it makes no provision for reservation on a caste basis for Other Backward Classes (OBCs)²³. Thus, the issue of reservation at the parliamentary level continues to be a debate in India. In 1996, a Women's Representation Bill was first tabled in parliament. It proposed to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and other legislative bodies for women, using a

²² Basu, Amrita, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005, p- 23

²³ Ibid, p- 30

constituency-rotating system. Since then, the Bill has been pending and has been discussed repeatedly, with various quota formulations. In March 2010, the Women's Reservation Bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha.

The creation of spaces for women at the local level happened with the 74th amendment to the constitution in 1993, which reserves 33% of seats for women. But the main critique of this system has been that since the reserved seats are based on rotation, the same constituency may not be reserved for two consecutive elections and a woman coming back to power in a general seat is tougher. In terms of quotas within parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) has a 15% quota for women candidates²⁴.

Bangladesh

A quick glimpse at the history of Bangladesh reveals that women have headed the government of the country. It also had a system of reservation for women that greatly favored their political participation. After its creation in 1971, Bangladeshi women got the right to vote and contest in elections in 1972. The first woman was elected in 1973. According to the Human Development Report of 2003, 49.29% of the total registered voters in the year 2000 were women.

Since Bangladesh was created as nation on the basis of linguistic and not religious identity, there was great hope that democracy and secularism would favor the participation of women in politics. In the 1970's, Zia ur Rahman's regime established the Ministry for Women's affairs in 1978. It encouraged NGOs and the government to undertake programmes targeting women, raised the number of parliamentary seats reserved for women from 15-30 (5% to 10% of the state open for general election) and reserved 10% of all public sector jobs for women²⁵. In the 1980's, following Zia's assassination, General Hussain Mohammad Ershad took over as president and encouraged formation of the Jatiyo Party. Women's organisations played a leading role in opposing the emergency rule declared by Ershad in the late 1980s.

In the 1990s, two women Prime Ministers ruled the country. Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh National Party) was elected Prime Minister from 1991-1996 and Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996 to lead the Awami League Government.

²⁴ Ibid, p- 30

²⁵ Basu, Amrita, *'Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia'*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005, p-16

The women's movement, which grew out of the nationalist movement, has played an active role in Bangladesh since the time of its creation. The left-leaning Mahila Parishad, formed in the 1970s, was the largest women's organisation in Bangladesh. The group took measures to influence government policy, including a campaign to support anti-dowry legislation and another for the ratification of CEDAW²⁶. One of the major struggles of the movement centered around the issue of reservation of seats for women in parliament. On May 16, 2004, the Jatiyo Sangshad (the national parliament) passed the 14th constitutional amendment to reintroduce quotas for women (article 65). The number of seats in parliament was raised to 345, 45 (13 percent) of which will be reserved for women in the next parliament. The seats will be allocated to parties in proportion to their overall share of the vote. This quota system replaces the previous quota law which expired in 2001²⁷.

Bhutan

Women received the right to vote in 1953 in Bhutan. Yet, this was not a complete right, in the sense that the election law in the tiny Himalayan country of Bhutan allowed only one vote per household. Even though Bhutanese women hold majority of property deeds and run households, men almost always cast those votes²⁸. In July 2008, universal suffrage was introduced after the new constitution was adopted, and all adult Bhutanese women will be able to vote in the next general election. As of 2004, women held 9.3% of the seats in the parliament in Bhutan. They also form 9.3% of female legislators, senior officials and managers²⁹.

Although women have been greatly restricted in their political participation, mainly because of traditional roles confining them to the household, there have been some measures taken to improve their position. For instance, the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) was established on April 9, 1981, by the 33rd resolution passed by the 53rd session of the National Assembly. It was first established as an NGO and entrusted with the responsibility of improving the socio-economic conditions of women across the country.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid, p-17

²⁷ Bangladesh, Quota Project - Global Database of Quotas for Women, <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?country=20> (no date)

²⁸ Electing Dragons, Women, Power and Politics, International Museum of Women, <http://www.imow.org/wpp/stories/viewStory?storyId=1699> (no date)

²⁹ Human Development Report 2004, hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr04_complete.pdf, UNDP 2004

³⁰ National Women's Association of Bhutan, <http://www.nwabbhutan.org.bt/aboutus.html> (no

The primary role of the association was structured on the forward looking strategies for the advancement of women adopted at the UN conference in Nairobi in 1985 and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). In 1990, NWAB was identified as the national body dedicated to the advancement of women. NWAB is currently registered with the UN as national machinery for the advancement of women. NWAB's secretariat at Thimphu is staffed with professionals, while its District chapters function with the support of a wide network of volunteers. Since its inception, HRH Ashi Sonam Choden Wangchuck served as the president of the NWAB. It aspires to advance the socio-economic conditions of disadvantaged women through the promotion of economic opportunities, capability enhancement and by raising awareness of women's rights and potentials³¹.

In the run up to the real elections in March 2008, women organised themselves into women's wings of the two major recognised political parties - the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party (BPPP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Lily Wangchuck, head of the women's wing of the PDP, sent out an international call for advice from the Internet-based iknowpolitics network, including lessons learnt from working in newly-formed political parties. The PDP dedicated a section of its website to discussing women's roles in the party and in a democratic Bhutan. These were creative and daring acts in a country that forbade Internet access due to its threat to a traditional way of life – until 2000³².

In the very first elections for the National Council (the upper house of parliament), three women were elected to the 20 open seats. In the end though, none of the six female candidates put forth by the PDP in the Bhutanese National Assembly (the lower house) elections emerged victorious. All four of the female candidates of the BPPP won seats³³.

Maldives

Women in the Maldives seem to have an active role to play in the community rather than in the political arena. The country's early history shows a remarkable record of women's participation in various aspects of nation building. Powerful queens ruled the nation, with

date)

³¹ Ibid

³² *Electing Dragons, Women, Power and Politics*, International Museum of Women, <http://www.imow.org/wpp/stories/viewStory?storyId=1699> (no date)

³³ Ibid

Queen Rehendhi Khadeeja (1343–79) being the most famous. She ruled for a total of 33 years³⁴.

It is interesting to note that since Maldives does not have major political parties and contestants for the parliament contest as independents, there is no party affiliation that women can take to gain political power. Women's organisations did not exist until 1979 when the National Women's Committee was established, preparatory to the International Women's Conference in Nairobi. Subsequently, an Island Women's Committee was established on each island. It must be noted, however, that long before this period, women as a group were traditionally active in clean-up campaigns and other community activities. On July 16, 1986, the National Women's Committee became the National Women's Council. The Office for Women's Affairs was created, with Mrs. Fathmath Jameel, the President of the National Women's Council serving as Director.³⁵

In addition to the two NGOs, each island also has a women's committee. (Similarly, there is one for each of the four wards in Male). The voluntary and unpaid activities of these committees, which work closely with the island chiefs, are generally devoted to tasks that benefit the community as a whole. These committees serve a modest but useful purpose in improving life on the islands. Of special benefit to women is their promotion of island cleaning and the construction and maintenance of women's mosques. These women's committees provide the most constructive ways in which women at the grassroots level are able to make a collective contribution to the life of the country.³⁶

Women have the right to vote for the President and for the Majlis or the Parliament. They may stand for election in the Citizen's Majlis and in the Citizen's Special Majlis, which are formed as the need to revise the Constitution arises. In practice however, very few women stand for election. Although there are 54 seats in Majlis, eight are nominated by the president. A woman occupies one of the remaining 46 seats. One reason why so few women stand for election is that members of the Majlis have to live in the capital and while they are paid an allowance, it is not sufficient to meet the cost of supporting a family. There are comparatively few unmarried women or women free of family responsibilities in the Maldives. In any case, in

³⁴ Office for Women's Affairs - the Republic of Maldives, Women's movements and organisations, Status of Women: Maldives, unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0008/000853/085382eo.pdf,p-7, UNESCO 1989

³⁵ Ibid, p-7

³⁶ Ibid, p-36

the small island communities outside Male (where everyone knows everybody else), election victory depends on local prestige, which is accorded to men³⁷.

Women have participated in the Maldivian democratisation movement by joining rallies and door-to door campaigning programmes. Pro-democracy organisations grew out of civil society, involving women outside mainstream politics as well³⁸. The 2009 elections were the first multi-party elections in the country. They were also the first to be held under the new President, Mohamed Nasheed, whose election in October 2008 put an end to President Maumoon Gayoom's 30 years in power. At stake were 77 seats in the new People's Majlis, all directly elected. A total of 465 candidates, 211 from 11 political parties and 254 independents, vied for seats in the People's Majlis. The 2009 elections saw a contest between the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) and the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP). Of the total 77 seats, 5 seats were won by women constituting 6.49% of the seats won³⁹. For instance, Mariya Ahmed Didi is currently a Member of Parliament and the chairperson of the Maldivian Democratic Party. She organised the first-ever women's rights rally in Maldives in March 2006⁴⁰.

Pakistan

The role of women in politics in Pakistan has been greatly impacted by the fact that the country has been constantly shifting between democracy and military rule. Women secured the right to vote and contest for elections in 1947. But the first woman was elected only in 1973. According to the Human Development Report of 2004, 21.6% of total seats in the Lower House of the Parliament were held by women and 17.0% in the Upper House⁴¹.

Amrita Basu argues that women's participation in Pakistan grew out of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle well before 1947. The following were the three distinct

³⁷ Ibid,p-35

³⁸ Swarna Rajagopalan, "Women in the Maldivian Democratic Transition," (unpublished) presentation at symposium on "Exploring the contours of democracy in the Maldives," WISCOMP, New Delhi, April 2010.

³⁹ Inter-parliamentary Union, Maldives Majlis (People's Majlis), http://www.ipu.org/english/parline/reports/2199_E.htm (no date)

⁴⁰ Swarna Rajagopalan, "Women in the Maldivian Democratic Transition," (unpublished) presentation at symposium on "Exploring the contours of democracy in the Maldives," WISCOMP, New Delhi, April 2010.

⁴¹ Human Development in South Asia 2000 – The Gender Question, Gender and Governance, <http://www.mhdc.org/html/ahdr.htm>, p -137, Oxford University Press 2000

ways women participated in the struggle:

- Active participation in the education reform movement led by Syed Ahmed Khan, fighting for the education of Muslim Women.
- In the Khilafat movement to support the Turkish Khilafat, which provided a symbol of Muslim identity.
- Demanding the creation of an independent state of Pakistan⁴².

The 1970s formed an important period for the development of women's agenda in Pakistan. The period witnessed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's rise to power. The 1973 constitution included a provision on affirmative action, reservation of 10 seats in the National Assembly and 10% of seats in the provincial assemblies for a specified period. All government posts were open to women, who were also appointed to several high-ranking positions⁴³. Around the same period, educated middle-class women formed a number of organizations - including the United Front for Women's Rights (UFWR), the Women's Front, Aurat and Shirkat Gah, which later gave rise to the Women's Action Forum⁴⁴. All these groups were committed to expanding women's democratic rights. In the period that followed, Zia Ul Huq introduced repressive laws, such as the Hudood Ordinance (1979) and the law of evidence (1984). The Women's Action Forum led a campaign against these measures and delayed the enactment of the Law of Evidence for 2 years.

The major political parties created by Zia and Bhutto, the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) respectively, continued to place women prominently in their agenda in the run up to the 1993 elections. Benazir Bhutto's coming to power in 1998 was greeted with enthusiasm by women's groups. But both Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif failed to bring about any major changes in the condition of women.

Many political parties have women's wings, but they mobilise women only to get votes during the elections. Some parties have established connections or have at least supported the agenda of women's groups. For instance, the WAF brought out a Charter of Demands, presenting a comprehensive women's political programme, in 1988. The Quami-e-Azadia and

⁴² Basu, Amrita, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005, p- 12

⁴³ Ibid, p- 13

⁴⁴ Ibid, p- 14

the Tehrik-e-Istaqbal parties incorporated some of WAF's demands into their manifesto⁴⁵.

In terms of efforts made to increase women's political participation, a series of constitutions and constitutional amendments across 1954, 1956, 1962, 1970, 1973 and 1985 provided for reserved seats for women at both the Provincial and National Assemblies. The allotment of seats ranged from five to ten percent and was only through indirect elections by the members of the assemblies themselves. For example, a 3% quota for women in parliament was approved in 1954. The 1956 constitution under Article 44(2) (1) provided for the reservation of 10 seats for a period of 10 years for women, equally divided between East and West Pakistan. Reservations lapsed in 1988 after three general elections (1977, 1985 and 1988) as provided for in the 1985 Constitution⁴⁶. In terms of reservation at the National level, according to the law of 2002, 60 of the 342 seats in the national assembly (17.5%) are to be allocated to women. According to the Devolution Plan adopted in 2000, 33 percent of the local legislative seats are reserved for women in legislative councils at the union, tehsil (municipality) and district level⁴⁷.

One of the main challenges faced by women in Pakistan lies in the overarching political context itself. Since the country has not had a stable democratic government, the political parties are weak and unrepresentative of all sections of society. Military regimes have sidelined women to civil bureaucracies and in some regions, the feudal structures exclude women from power. Fundamentalist movements and state-supported Islamisation programmes have also curbed the participation of women in the political arena.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was one of the South Asian countries where women won franchise rights as early as 1931. The country can also boast of having the first woman prime minister in the world. Srimavo Bandaranaike served as the president of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government in 1960-1965 and 1970-1977, the first time a year after the assassination of her husband, Prime Minister Solomon W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The second was Chandrika Kumaratunga, who served as president in 1994 and 1999. She was the widow of the assassinated political leader Vijay Kumaratunga.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p- 15

⁴⁶ Pakistan, Quota Project – Global Database of Quotas for Women, <http://www.quotaproject.org/displayCountry.cfm?CountryCode=PK> (no date)

⁴⁷ Ibid

A study of the history of the country tells us that early in the 1900s, professional middle-class women, especially teachers and doctors, became politically conscious and a few of them joined nationalist organisations. Associated with the earliest radical nationalist organisation, the Young Lanka League formed in 1915, was Nancy Wijekoon, a school teacher, who was well known for her stirring nationalist poetry. When the Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1919, there were several women delegates at the first sessions. They included Dr. Nalamma Burugesan (who later married the estate trade union leader Satyawagiswara Aiyar), Miss I. Ganguli, a Theosophist teacher from Bengal, and Mahesvari Seqararasingbam, daughter of Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam.⁴⁸

When the Donoughmore Commission on the reform of the Constitution came to Ceylon in 1927, the Women's Franchise Union was formed to give evidence before the commission demanding franchise rights for all women. The main activists were Agnes de Silva, Lady Daisy Bandaranaike (mother of S.W.R.D.), Mrs. R.S.S. Sumana Gunewardene, Mrs. Satyawagiswara Aiyer, Mrs. H.H. Gunasekera and Mrs. A.B. Goonesingha. After adult franchise was won in 1931, middle-class women formed several organisations, including the Lanka Mahila Samiti and the Women's Political Union⁴⁹. By the middle of the 20th century, it was not only urban middle-class women who were active in public life, but also many Tamil women working in the estates who became active in the trade union movement.

One of the main reasons for low participation of women in political office is the prolonged civil war, lack of measures like reservation of seats for women to enhance greater participation in politics and the failure of the political parties to encourage women's participation. The parties' national leaders, who make the final decisions about the choice of candidates, tend to favour men and select women only when they come from prominent political families. Among the 34 women whom parties nominated between 1947 and 1994, 25 came from political families and were nominated to fill the vacant seats of male family members⁵⁰. Ironically, the most chauvinist and militant parties and organisations, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been

⁴⁸ Jayawardena, Kumari, *The Participation of Women in the social reform, political & labour*, Praxis, v2, May-August, 1981, <http://www.ibiblio.org/ahkitj/wscfap/arms1974/PRAXIS/1980/2/a.htm>

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ Basu, Amrita, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005, p- 7

especially active in recruiting women and appealing to their interests⁵¹.

A more significant shift in parties' stance towards women came about with the 1994 general election. The UNP pledged to implement the National Charter, which provided for equal pay, women's rights to government-allocated land and houses and the safety of women factory workers. The UNP manifesto also promised to revise laws relating to divorce, the Land Development Act, sexual violence and the minimum age for marriage. The party manifestos of the People's Alliance (PA) and the TULF also demonstrated a strong commitment to women's issues⁵².

There are number of national-level organisations such as the Voice of Women, the Women and Media Collective, Kantha Shakthi, Women in Need (WIN), Women's Education and Research Centre (WERC), Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) and Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) which focus on a range of activities such as research, advocacy, lobbying and networking, both at local and international levels. The Sinhala Tamil Rural Women's Network (STRWN), based in Nuwara Eliya, was among the first independent women's group to contest for provincial council elections in 1999⁵³.

In terms of reservation of seats for women, several proposals on quotas for women were made between 1998 and 2000, but abandoned in 2000. A proposal for a 25% quota for women in local bodies, for example, was dropped in the draft constitution presented to the parliament and withdrawn in 2000. Tamil and Muslim party leaders opposed the quota because of the difficulties in finding women candidates. In 2002, calls for quotas were renewed. Hema Ratnayake, the Minister of Women's Affairs, declared that her People's Alliance government would draft a legislation to provide a minimum of 25% representation for women in all elected bodies - from the national parliamentary level to village councils⁵⁴. With the recent defeat of the LTTE, one needs to wait to witness improvements in the position of women in the political arena if stability returns to the country.

⁵¹ Ibid, p-6

⁵² Ibid, p-7

⁵³ Jayawardena, Kumari, *The Participation of Women in the social reform, political & labour*, Praxis, v2, May-August, 1981

⁵⁴ Ibid

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN

One of the most frequently raised questions about women in politics is that why do we find few women in politics? What stops them from participating in the political arena? Women have been long confined to households and been a part of employment in the informal sector. In the process, they have not only been constrained by resources, but have also not had enough opportunities to fight for their own space and engage in activities of their own liking. It is only when they make space for themselves in the household will they be able to fight for space in the political arena⁵⁵. Although measures are being taken to improve the political participation of women, they continue to be limited by a variety of social, cultural, economic and political factors such as traditional, gendered expectations of their role and position in the family and community, caste and class inequalities, lack of education, and lack of knowledge of laws⁵⁶. In this context, 'The Resource Model of Political Participation' theory becomes relevant. It argues that differences in men's and women's political participation are the result of individual level inequalities in certain prerequisites to participation such as money, free time and civic skills⁵⁷.

The following factors are important for women to contest in elections - family background, family financial support, the support of male members in the family, personality, education, personal involvement in politics, local politics, caste affiliation, plans of party leaders, campaign strategy and push from within the party⁵⁸. The participation of women has been limited by resources, their important role in the household, lack of education, lack of exposure to public spaces and public life and therefore their inability to raise support or lobby effectively in the political arena.

MEASURES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's participation in politics can be improved by removing the obstacles they face

⁵⁵ Chhibber, Pradeep, 'why are some women politically active? The household, public space, and political participation in India', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 2002; 43; 409, p - 411

⁵⁶ Joti Sekhon, *Engendering Grassroots Democracy: Research, Training, and Networking for Women in Local Self-Governance in India*, 2006, p - 101

⁵⁷ Paxton, Pamela and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics and Power: A Global Perspective*, Pine Forge Press, 2007, p - 121

⁵⁸ Usha Thakkar, *Engendering Politics for Good Governance*, p- 4

in entering politics. This will require deep structural changes and will be a time-consuming process. Measures such as capacity building, gender training and spreading awareness are also useful in improving women's participation. As discussed in earlier sections, the most popular measure in South Asia has been the adoption of quota to increase women's participation in politics.

However, the effectiveness of the quota system has been debated. Analysing the Indian quota system at the Panchayat level, some authors argue that the quality of participation may not be effective in the beginning. Nevertheless, these are success stories. Quotas are also used within political parties to improve the participation of women. Evelin Hust concludes that although it does not fully empower them, they open up an important space for them to become politically active, which will lead to empowerment in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the role of women played in politics in the various South Asian countries shows that a number of similarities and differences exist between the various countries.

Some of the similarities include:

- In most of the South Asian countries, women's movement has either emerged as a part of the nationalist movement or has played an important role in the nationalist movement.
- The political parties in most of these countries have identified the importance of women mainly in electoral politics and have therefore formed women's wings in their parties to enhance participation of women in the political arena. Although this participation might be mainly to mobilise their vote, it nevertheless opens up new opportunities for women.
- In terms of the challenges faced by women, there are overarching factors across these countries – the traditional role of women in the household, the resource constraints faced by women and many others.
- Most of the South Asian countries have also responded to international women's movements. For instance, committees or organisations have been formed in Maldives and Bhutan as a preparatory step for the International Women's conference in Nairobi.

The key factor creating differences in the role played by women in the South Asian countries has been the political structure of the various countries. Most countries have been facing either unstable governments, dictatorships or civil wars, which have defined the role women play in politics. With the recent developments in various countries, the role of women in politics will continue to change. Hence, it becomes all the more crucial to continue studying the political participation of women in these countries.

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