Women Leadership In Southasia: A Myth Or A Reality

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Abstract: The paper explores the dynamics of power politics of South Asia from a gender perspective. It critically analyses the nature of politics in South Asia where the countries at some point of time, (in case of Bangladesh even at present) are governed by female head of states. The paper mainly centres around three issues. Firstly it looks into the factors that influences the nature of women leadership in political domain in South Asia. Secondly it focuses on to what extent women leadership in the region is gendered and thirdly it seeks possible ways to make political domain gender sensitive and gender inclusive.

Keywords: Leadership, Empowerment, Dynasty politics, Patriarchy

There are certain common features that tie the South Asian states together like historical factors, geographical factors, common colonial past of most the South Asian states, economic underdevelopment of the region and gender discrimination. A gendered perspective is very important to understand the complexity of South Asian politics.

Women leadership in South Asia has a specific significance. Gail Omvedt (2005, pg. 4746) calls it a paradox. She points out that South Asia has more powerful women politicians than any other set of countries in the world. Women have been prime ministers, leaders of major parties, heads of state and regional governments and at the same time overall women's participation is dismal.

Jahan (1987) vividly portrays two images of women in politics in South Asia. "One image is that of powerful women leaders (Indira Gandhi, Srimavo Bandaranaike, Benazir Bhutto, Hasina Wazed, Khaleda Zia), swathed in beautiful traditional dresses, surrounded by party leaders who are mostly male, addressing huge public rallies, enthusiastically attended – again, mainly by men. Another image is that of female masses, poor, illiterate, often veiled, huddled in groups in separate 'women only' polling booths or ration lines, or in labour lines seeking casual jobs."(pg. 848)

Scholars like Rounaq Jahan, Gail Omvedt, and Andrea Fleschenberg amply reveal that 'women empowerment' is a partial truth. Ground realities always have a different tale to share. Women participation in politics gets gradually eroded as we move from top to bottom level of politics and there is a need to make politics gender inclusive. This paper mainly concentrates on women leadership at national level politics (women as heads of state) then the focus is on women's participation in governance in general. It looks into women representation in rural and urban politics, what prevents women from participating in politics and how to overcome the obstacles.

SOUTH ASIA AND WOMEN'S SPACE

South Asia as a region is a continuous block of countries comprising of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan. South Asia has a distinctive geographical identity with the Himalayas on the north and the Indian Ocean on the south. South Asia has a diverse ethnic identity invaded and settled by many ethnic groups like the Mongoloids, Indo Aryans, and Dravidians etc. If one looks at South Asia from an economic perspective it is one of the poorest regions of the world after the Sub Saharan Africa. One-fifth of the world's population resides in South Asia, it is the most populous region of the world but it contributes very less to the GDP and human development. Colonial exploitation is something common experienced by the region and it is an important factor responsible for the economic underdevelopment of the region. Thus we can say common historical (civilization) background, common

geographical identity, colonial past and gender discrimination are some significant features of the region.

Although South Asia represents a space with varied culture, languages, religions, customs and way of life albeit common in many senses one major common thread as pointed out by Amna Mahmood is gender discrimination. "Women traditionally are considered subordinated to the male and this remained a prominent feature both in rural and the urban areas" (2005, pg 151)

Globally women's subordination is prominent in all spheres of life. Gender discrimination is not limited to cultural or religious sphere but also visible in political and economic domain. A gender perspective is very crucial to understand the complexity of South Asian politic, in context of its multiple socio – economic, religious and cultural factors. Women who have emerged as state leaders, to what extent they are able to challenge patriarchy are highly debatable.

WOMEN LEADERSHIP AT NATIONAL LEVEL POLITICS

Though South Asia is lying behind in human development, and trapped in the midst of patriarchal values and norms but the region is ahead than the rest of the world in terms of recognizing the leadership of women. A gender perspective of analysing women leadership bound us to look into the political settings, the nature of their leadership and their personal background which led to the emergence of women as Heads of state in South Asia.

THE POLITICAL SETTING THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR WOMEN LEADERSHIP

SRI LANKA: Srimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first woman Prime Minister democratically elected way back in 1960. An economically backward third world country created a new chapter in history by electing a woman as Head of state following the assassination of her husband. Assassination has always been a part of Sri Lankan politics. Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka led to the assassination of Solomon Bandaranaike whose Sri Lankan Freedom Party governed Sri Lanka from 1948-56. After his death the party members made a choice for a woman Prime Minister. His party members felt that his wife Srimavo was a suitable Prime Ministerial candidate after Solomon Bandaranaike. The politics of assassination brought contended wives into the politics of Sri Lanka (Sharan 1995)

PAKISTAN: Benazir Bhutto in 1988 became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. She was democratically elected by the country as the Head of state. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) on whose platform Benazir stood for election was founded by her father, the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party initiated the wave of democracy in Pakistan but he was not wholly successful. His death made his party members elect Benazir as their leader. Benazir was chosen as a public face to grab sympathy vote

"The workers and members of the Pakistan and the supporters of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto found in her a leader who was very close to the founder of PPP."(Sharan 1995, pg 95)

BANGLADESH: Khaleda Zia came to power in 1991.She stood for election from the party that was created by her husband Ziaur Rahman. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was founded by him in 1979. Zia Islamised Politics of Bangladesh. Like Sri Lanka and Pakistan, assassination of leaders is also part and parcel of Bangladesh politics. Zia did not give importance to women empowerment. It is a sour reality of South Asian politics. Society is parochial, according to Rahman "my wife is my wife and she looks after the house...If she is not going to look after the house then I can't do my job..." (Marcus, Frande, 284)

Ziaur Rahman was assassinated In May 1981 which marked the entry of Khaleda, a political novice into politics. Khaleda followed the footsteps of her husband. She made democracy sustain in Bangladesh but continued to play politics on religious ground.

Khaleda's party was committed to Islamic faith and practices. Her party entered into an arrangement with the right wing Jamaat-i-Islam and came to power. Her party was pro Pakistan and not India (Sharan 1995)

INDIA: Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy in 1966. She belonged to the legendary Nehru family. Her father Jawaharlal Nehru was a charismatic leader who had contributed immensely to India's freedom struggle. He was the first Prime Minister of Independent India.

"Nehru with his world status calibre and orientation had remained at the driver's seat of the State of India during its formative period of nationhood."(Sharan 1995, pg 46)

Nehru was the architect of India's future; he was a visionary, a charismatic leader who was the role model of millions of India. People of India viewed Nehru as an leader who was born as a prince but gave up all luxuries and pleasure for his struggle for independence and this image favoured Indira Gandhi to come into power after Nehru's death in 1964. Indira Gandhi was the first and till date only woman Prime Minister of India. Indira Gandhi was elected four times as the Head of State and she was the world's longest serving woman Head of State from 1966-1984, in between for a short while Janata party came to power.

NATURE OF THEIR LEADERSHIP

Srimavo Bandaranaike led her party with a left leaning. She encouraged cultural ties with several communist countries. After 1960, when in 1970 she again came back to power she headed a left oriented coalition. She introduced radical economic programs like nationalization of banks and encouraged import trade of essential goods. (Sharan 1995) She was anti west and believed that west was a real threat to the possibility of peaceful co-existence between nations. Bandaranaike played politics on ethnic ground. Religious discrimination started at his time and it was continued by Srimavo.

Srimavo stood for reviving Buddhism. She allowed and encouraged the use of Sinhalese Buddhist symbol in state function. Srimavo continued the politics of her husband. She followed neutralist policies; she intended to follow the Definite Centre Party Policies of her late husband because those policies represented the interest of rural people. (Sharan

1995) Her party was basically left inclined and she brought in hues of religion into politics.

Benazir Bhutto attempted to portray herself as a democrat. She criticised the right as evil. She stressed the need for socialism to end the ills of Pakistan. As a democrat she wanted an end to military regime that has suppressed the voice of people, a regime which is responsible for Pakistan's economic backwardness, political instability and is the hub of corruption. She was full of western ideals of democracy, liberalism and attempted to bring radical changes that were not acceptable to the masses. She could not reach out to the masses.

Khaleda Zia – She made democracy possible in Bangladesh but could not overcome the massive problem of poverty, economic backwardness of Bangladesh. One factor that favoured her political success was her husband's popularity and she was also successful in focusing the failure of her opponent party. It was Zia who islamised the politics of Bangladesh, he initiated religious nationalism which the Awami League was critical about and Khaleda continued to play religious politics.

Khaleda did not prove her selves to be an extra ordinary leader. She made democracy possible in Bangladesh but she did no good in overcoming poverty, economic underdevelopment of the nation.

Indira Gandhi – The death of her father marked the beginning of her political career. She displayed extraordinary political skills. She came to power with the support of syndicates (senior congressmen) whose sole purpose was to make best use of her political inexperience. They believed that as she was a political novice she would depend on them in every political decision she makes. But their assumption failed, she emerged as a powerful leader and a bold decision maker. Indira Gandhi very soon discovered the intentions of the old congressmen which made her form Congress (I) a separate political party. To establish her position as Prime Minister she had to fight with the Syndicates. Her leadership was very much different from that of her father.

"Indira Gandhi was a practical politician; Nehru was an idealist and a philosopher. Nehru could not assess crisis beforehand but Indira Gandhi was superb in tackling crisis of all kinds."(Sharan 1995, pg 48)

Indira Gandhi completely eroded the party society ties that Atul Kohli talks about. She completely deinstitutionalized the party system. She became autocratic. Nehru encouraged opposition to raise their voice. Nehru encouraged criticism as he believed it to be essential for healthy democracy. All voices were listened if not accommodated by Nehru but Indira completely disassociated the party from society. She completely curtailed inter party democracy. People in the party were no longer elected but were selected by Indira Gandhi. She surrounded herself by people who were loyal to her. "Indira Gandhi projected her sons as close political advisers."(Jahan 1987, pg 853)

Her populist approach towards masses made her popular amongst the masses. With huge mass support she became a dictator. Secessionist movements demanding state autonomy, religious and ethnic violence grew manifold under her leadership which resulted to her assassination in 1984.She was a bold decision maker. She personalized and centralized politics.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND OF THE LEADERS

Indira Gandhi, Srimavo Bandaranaike and Benazir Bhutto were born into rich aristocratic families and were educated in the west. Khaleda Zia was born to a middle class family and was less westernized. What was common was that they were politicised within their family connection. All the women leaders of South Asia were related to powerful heads of government, either as daughters or as wives (Jahan 1987)

Except Indira Gandhi, the other prime ministers of South Asia- Srimavo, Benazir, and Khaleda inherited the leadership of their political parties from their husbands or their fathers who founded these parties. The Bangladesh Nationalist party was founded by Ziaur Rahman who was Khaleda's husband, the Pakistan People's Party was formed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was Benazir's father, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party was formed by Solomon Bandaranaike who was Sirmavo's husband. The people's Alliance in Sri Lanka was a coalition of left parties and Bandaranaike's party led by Chandrika Kumaratunga. (Sharan 1995) The present Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed who has been in power since 2009 has led the Awami League since 1981 which was founded by her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

'Dynasty politics' is central to South Asian politics. Dynastic politics, political instability and political assassination are closely connected to South Asia and all these factors have contributed to the emergence of women leadership. "The most important political posts open to women have been so because of familial ties to prominent male politicians-the opportunity for such women having been greatly enhanced by their husbands' deaths and often dynamic martyrdom. This is in marked contrast to the political success of women like Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir."(Richter 1990-91, pg 528)

None of the women Prime Minister in South Asia started from scratch. They got a readymade platform to stand for election made by their late father or husband. For Khaleda Zia and Srimavo it was their husband who made the party on whose platform they stood for election, for Benazir it was her father but Indira Gandhi does not fit into this categorization. Nehru was not the founder of Indian National Congress but undoubtedly his charismatic leadership quality favoured his daughter to come into power.

Dynasty politics opens up opportunity to the daughters, wives, nieces, nephews, sons of prominent politicians. The established name of the family is used by these women for public appeal and bargain for power. (Omvedt 2005)

The political setting which led to the emergence of women leadership in South Asia and the nature of their leadership reflects the patriarchy that prevails. It is often the male party members that elect women as the leader of the party. They are chosen as the leader of the party after the death of their husband or father who were charismatic leaders popular amongst the masses. Women are made to stand for election not based on their capability but instead they have always been used as a public face to grab sympathy votes.

The political inexperience of these women leaders was certainly another reason for the party members to bring them into power, as they perceived that these women can be ruled by them and indirectly they will rule the party. The Syndicates though faced a huge blow on their face made Indira Gandhi the leader of Congress so that she could be used as a puppet. It is a different story that Indira Gandhi emerged as a powerful, bold leader but the intention of the party members in appointing a woman as the leader of the party is not for woman welfare or empowerment but for their own selfish interest. Their clean image is looked upon as a good alternative to corrupt politics and it would benefit the party to grab more votes. Women are believed not to be intelligent and rational enough to make political decisions and on this ground of stereotypical beliefs, men elect women as leaders so that their two fold motive gets served, firstly to grab sympathy votes and secondly to dominate the party by dominating the women in power.

"What is generally noticeable, not only in South Asia but all over the world is that women are often in the front ranks when a political struggle is in its ideological phase but they become invisible when the struggle enters the phase of distributing the fruits of power. Women are mobilized on an adhoc basis to support specific causes and issues, but ones the cause is achieved and the movement turns into a routine power game, women tends to lose out, either being pushed back by men to their normal duties at home or themselves losing interest in overt power struggles." (Jahan 1987, pg 863)

This reflects male dominance, how the political domain is moulded in a way that it caters only men's interest. Whether it is private sphere or public sphere women as an individual are always given a subordinate position, subordinate to her male counterparts and there is never equality and justice in distributing reward. Women Prime Minister's in South Asia may symbolize women empowerment but in a very limited way. They do not depict any female characteristics in decision and policy making. They reflect a masculinised image. Whether one looks into the politics of Bangladesh or Pakistan or Sri Lanka, whenever women leader comes to power they never bring in any innovation into politics. There is no doubt that Khaleda Zia and Benazir Bhutto made democracy possible in a military regime but all South Asian women Prime Ministers portrayed masculinised image which did no positive contribution to women empowerment.

The islamization of politics that was started by Ziaur Rahman, the anti-secular ideologies which he initiated was carried on by Khaleda. "Khaleda's government was more inclined towards Pakistan than India."(Sharan 1995, pg 41) On the other hand Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League was secular in its ideology and it has been continued by Sheikh Hasina. Mujib's Awami League was pro India as because India helped him and his party in their freedom struggle against Pakistan and it has been carried on by Sheikh Hasina.

The ethnification of politics that was started by Solomon Bandaranaike was carried on by his wife Srimavo. Ethnification of politics often resulted to political instability and conflict on the island and it became the prime factor for Bandaranaike's assassination but Srimavo continued the same line of politics after her husband's death.

"Srimavo Bandaranaike encouraged the use of symbols of Sinhalese Buddhist culture at state functions."(Sharan 1995, pg 119) This led to discriminatory practices against the Christians and Hindu minorities and encouraged secessionism amongst the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka.

Indira Gandhi the 'Iron women' of India was indeed a bold decision maker. Her ideologies and perspectives did not match to her father but she never portrayed any feminine characteristics in politics. She made India visible in the International arena as a potential nuclear capable state and a growing military power.

None of the women leaders did any significant contribution towards women development. "First female leaders often simply lack a supportive system and structure to enhance alternative leadership style and political agenda. Second like male politicians, they too are bound by party ideology and program."(Fleschenberg 2008, pg 50) The impact of patriarchy is very much visible in South Asian states though women leaders have captured power at centre. When women capture power at centre they become similar to their male counterpart. Whenever women come into power she proves that politics is a domain where only masculine characteristics can prevail and it gets reflected by their actions.

"Several of Asia's women politicians at the top are roaring tigresses in terms of electoral and governmental record, but tame kittens in terms of pro women agenda setting." (Fleschenberg 2008, pg 50)

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE (WOMEN REPRESENTATIVE IN RURAL AND URBAN POLITICS)

The dichotomy between the domestic and public sphere is present in most cultures, and assigning women the domestic sphere has limited women's participation in the public sphere of politics. (Rosaldo 1974)

The public private dichotomy, gender discrimination is a dominant feature of South Asian politics both in urban and also in countryside.

"Even though South Asia claims some of the most powerful leaders of the world, the overall political participation by women remains dismal."(Omvedt 2005, pg 29)

"Women forms disproportionately small segment of representatives in elected bodies across all levels of governance, and several studies have indicated that even those women who are elected as representatives suffer severe limitations on their participation." (ICRW-UN Joint publication)

Patriarchy sets limit to women's participation in politics. It is not only men but women themselves set limit to their capabilities. Patriarchy cripples women.

In South Asia only 7% women are members of political parties. (World Development Report 2011)

On average, women hold only 7% of ministerial positions and 15% in national parliaments in all the countries of South Asia region. In countries like Sri Lanka women have as low as 6% in ministerial positions and 5% share in parliament. In India, women have a share of 10% and 11% respectively in ministerial positions and the national parliament. Only Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Afghanistan have

Constitutional quota for women in their national parliaments. Women are also underrepresented in the justice system: Across South Asia, women make up less than 5% of the police and less than 10% of the judges. (UN Women 2011-12)

BANGLADESH: In 1972, 15 out of 315 seats were reserved for women in the Parliament. In 1978 the reserved seats were extended to 30 seats and the total numbers of seats were increased to 300. This provision lapsed in 1987 which was again reincorporated in 1990, and lapsed again in 2001. In 2004 a constitutional amendment raised the number of seats in Parliament to 345 from 300, and the quota for women was re-introduced raising the total number of reserved seats from 30 to 45. (ICRW-UN Joint publication) In 2008 election women formed 18.55 %of strength of the Parliament of Bangladesh, that is, 64 of the 345 members are women (IPU, 2011)

Efforts were also made by government to increase representation of women in local governance. Local Government Ordinances of 1976, 1983, and 1993 increased the representation of women in government bodies at the local level, but it did not have much bearing on their participation because their entry depended upon nomination and later indirect election because of which they lacked the support base of a constituency. Moreover, the roles and responsibilities of the women on reserved seats were left undefined by all the three acts. (Pandey, 2013) In 1997 direct election for the reserved seats were introduced.

It has been found that the functions of women have by and large remained very limited in the Union Parishad, due to resistance from male colleagues and the discrimination emerging such resistance. The knowledge of women regarding financial issues of the Parishad was inadequate and their opinions were often side-lined in decision making process. (Afroza 2007)

BHUTAN: 6 of the 25 members, that is, 24 % of the National Council are women, and 4 of the 47 members, that is, 8.5 % of the National Assembly are women. (IPU, 2011)

There are no quotas or affirmative legislation in Bhutan to ensure a minimal proposition of women in governance. Women in Bhutan to a great extent gets the power to make economic decisions but in public sphere they are underrepresented (Ghimire 2006)

NEPAL: Monarchy has come to an end and a multi-party federal democracy was established in 2007. The Interim Constitution of 2007 directs the state to enable women to participate in all the organs of the state on the basis of proportional inclusion. It also states that one-third of the total number of candidates nominated shall be women. It also states that political parties should ensure proportional representation of women, i.e. 50% of candidates on party lists should be women. The Local Self Governance Act of 1999 states that each of the nine wards comprising a Village Development Committee should have one woman as ward committee. (ICRW-UN Joint publication)

In Nepal the Constituent Assembly has 601 members of which 197.that is, 32.77 % are women. Of these, 161 were elected through proportional representation list election, 30 were elected through the FPTP election, and 6 were nominated and appointed by the Cabinet led by the Prime Minister. (Bylesjo, Kandawasvika-Nehudu, and Larserud, 2010)

PAKISTAN: "The growth of military Islamic fundamentalism has included special forms of discrimination against women which are justified by appeals to Islamic tradition. This happened in spite of equalitarian provisions in the original constitution of the undivided Pakistan. The situation worsened dramatically with the Islamist regime of Zia ul-Haq. (Omvedt 2005, pg 4750)

Until 1977 no special provision existed for representation of women in Pakistan. During Zia's regime (1977-85) only 2 seats were reserved for women at Union Council level. The reign of Nawaz Sharif in between 1990-93 saw the quota for women rise to 10.4%. During the second tenure of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister, different quotas existed for women in different provinces, like in Punjab 12.7 %, in Baluchistan 25.8% and in Sindh 23%. In 2001 Pervez Musharraf came to power he reserved 33% quotas across all levels of governance in all provinces of Pakistan uniformly. (McCarthy and Sultana 2004)

At national level 60 out of 342 seats are reserved for women in the National Assembly and 4 out of 100 seats are reserved for women in the Senate. In the Senate, the women who occupy the four reserved seats are elected indirectly by the other 96 members. The local level government Ordinance of 2001 guarantees the participation of marginalised sections of society through 33% reservation of seats and 20 % reservation for peasants and workers. (ICRW-UN Joint publication)

In 2008 National Assembly election 22% were women i.e.76 out of 343 members were women. Election to the Senate was conducted in 2009 which gave entry to 17 women in the 100 members' house i.e. 17% of the Senate members were women. (IPU 2011)

INDIA: The Bill propagating 33% reservation of seats for women in Parliamentary election yet has not been passed by the Government of India. The Bill has been passed by the Upper House on 2010 but it has not yet been passed by the Lower House. The main opposition for 33% reservation comes from Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Lalu Prasad Yadav and Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav. The opponents are of the view that reservation would only help women of elite groups to gain seats in the Parliament, causing further discrimination and under representation of the poor and the backward classes. It has also been viewed that powerful members might be tempted to reserve seats for women relatives and thereby for themselves.

The 33% reservation of seats for women in grassroot politics happened back in 1992. Around 100,000 women are elected to the panchayats every 5 years. The reservation of seats for women in grass root politics happened long back but at national level politics the struggle for reservation has yet not been successful. This is because National level politics is viewed to be more important and crucial than grassroot politics.

SRI LANKA: Sri Lankan constitution encourages affirmative laws and policies for women. However this position in the constitution has not been implemented in any form, and there are no quotas for women in Sri Lanka. (ICRW-UN Joint publication)

Women's organizations have been lobbying for the reservation of a 25% to 30% quota for women candidates in

elections, but the demand has not been acted upon by the policy makers in Sri Lanka (ADB, 2008)

Sri Lankan societies are relatively equalitarian where gender discrimination is less compared to other South Asian countries but these women remains outside local self-government and are also under represented in the national Parliament. (Omvedt 2005)

In each of the South Asian states whether a democracy or a military, a Hindu state, a Islamic state or a secular state, women's visibility in politics gets eroded considerably as we move from top to grassroot politics. Reservation of seats for women in national politics exists in some states and not in the others, but in both cases women as representative are of very small in number compared to the size of women population they represent at all levels of governance. The elected members are disproportionate to the size they represent. Cultural and social barriers prevent women from becoming active members in politics. It is essential to look into the factors which are responsible for women's under representation and subordinate position in politics. Gender equality cannot be achieved by being gender blind.

OBSTACLES THAT PREVENTS WOMEN FROM PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

A number of factors have kept the representation of women in politics and government low.

"The main reason for low political participation of women in politics is the patriarchal structure of the society. According to the Islamic traditions and culture, the participation of women in politics and the public eye is against the generally accepted role of women. The patriarchal values have subjected and distempered women."(Abidi 2013 pg 22).

Patriarchy is a reality, not only in Islamic societies but almost in every other society of South Asia and such a society creates obstacles for women in every sphere of life both in public as well as in private domain. Patriarchal values and patriarchal structure of society are the main reasons for women subordination in every society.

Religious fundamentalism has considerable impact on gender discrimination. Religious norms and beliefs always favour men over women and it prevents women's access to public sphere. The veil culture, the "purdah system" is predominant not only in Islam but also in Hindu society. In most Hindu societies women covers their head with the saree they wear as a sign of respect to the elders but its implication is not limited to that. The purdah culture demarcates the private from the public. It sets limit to women's freedom. More than a symbol of respect it becomes a symbol of inequality.

The veil or the Hijab system which the Muslim practices is an Islamic tradition that is based on physical and psychological morality. It is important to distinguish between hijab and purdah. Hijab is about both male and female behaving and dressing up modestly. Purdah does not necessarily conform to Islamic teachings. Hijab never becomes a barrier to achieve education and empowerment of women but it is often the conservative religious leaders that misinterpret the true meaning of hijab and prevents women's access to public sphere on religious ground. (Abidi 2013)

The Brahmanical norms and rituals are often responsible for Hindu women's plight and subordinate position in society. The general subordination of women in India is made possible by the use of powerful instruments of religious tradition, caste and gender. All these factors are closely connected. The central factor for subordination of upper caste women is to control her sexuality. There is a need for effective sexual control upon upper caste women to maintain patrilineal succession and caste purity. This became more pronounced since private ownership of property has come into being. (Chakravarti 1993)

Religion is thus used by both Hindu and Muslim society as an instrument to subordinate women's position and it is justified on religious grounds.

Criminalization of politics is an important factor that prevents women's participation in politics. Role of mafia, money, manipulation and muscle power have played dominant role in South Asian politics. Building support in South Asia politics requires not only mobilization but also muscle power, goondas (armed henchmen) is necessary elements of politics. (Abidi 2013, Jahan 1987)

It is very difficult to motivate and encourage women to join politics as it is perceived to be dirty and not safe for women. The stereotypical notions and prejudices held against women like- women are weak, meek, shy, fragile, delicate, emotional, irrational creates obstacles and prevents women from participating in politics. Feminine characteristics of being soft hearted, caring, sensitive are not accommodated in male dominated political domain.

Women's economic dependence on male members prevents them from taking their own decisions and also prevents their participation in politics. Family support can either prevent or promote women from participating in politics. Women generally need to receive permission from their husbands or fathers in order to embark on a political career. Without their permission it is difficult for any women to become successful as politician. Women's lack of access to and control of economic resources hampers their ability to participate in politics. (Abidi 2013, ADB 2008)

Politics is looked upon as an expensive hobby; whole lot of money is required during election campaign to mobilize people, it is a costly affair. The traditional dichotomy between men and women, men as breadwinner and women as homemaker makes women economically depended on men. Women's will to participate in politics is not enough to bring her into politics as she is financially depended on her husband or father.

Lack of proper institutional factors also prevents women's participation in politics. "There are many institutions established for the overall development of women but there is a lack of institutional mechanism which can encourage and support women to take part in elections. There are many women's organization related to different political parties but they have not been able to provide moral and financial support to women who are interested in becoming involved in politics."(Abidi 2013, pg 23-24)

"In the countries of South Asia politics is a lucrative source of income and power which men attempt control" (Omvedt 2005, pg 4747)

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND WAY FORWARD

There are innumerable factors that are responsible for women's limited participation in politics. Women's political participation is not an end in itself; it is just a means to achieve an end. The end is women empowerment. Women's greater role in political domain would definitely facilitate women empowerment. So there is a need to assess different alternatives to bring in more women into politics.

Reservation of seats for women in both national and grassroot politics are perceived to be one of the best ways to bring more women into politics. "Women represents 50% of world adult population, and a one-third of official labour force, they perform nearly two-third of all working hours, receives a one-tenth of world income and owns less than 1%of world property. Therefore reservation for women is not a bounty but an honest recognition of their contribution to social development." (Sachar 2003)

Demand for reservation is a demand to recognise the contribution that women makes towards social development, but reservation on its own cannot make a big difference. Reservation undoubtedly has improved the life of many women; new opportunities are made available to women with the allocation of 33% reservation of seats in many South Asian states. At this point a question should be raised 'Does reservation benefits women from all section of society?'

The real empowerment can be achieved only if there is social and economic empowerment. For that society must be changed at large. Reservation of seats for women in politics has helped to draw women's interest into politics. Affirmative actions may bring in more women into politics, it has opened up a space for women in decision making but it has failed to serve the purpose of their presence. So capacity building (so that women can deal with the issues and challenges that one faces in position of power), their trainings and their active involvement in party decision making process should create political consciousness and help them gain experience. (Mahmood 2009)

There is a need to clean up the dirt's in politics. The malpractices, corruption, criminal activities, the violence involved in politics should be erased because such activities confines women to her household and limits her access to the public sphere.

"There is a need to transform the system of politics into a fair game, so that honest, decent, competent and educated people from middle class including women can come and join. If women would be protected in all spheres of public life, it would encourage other women to follow the path."(Mahmood 2009, pg 160)

Poverty and illiteracy are the main concerns of all the states of South Asia. As all these states are patriarchal in nature the conditions of women are worse than that of men. True empowerment of women can be achieved through education. Education can contribute towards economic empowerment and economic empowerment will help women to take her own decisions, as she financially does not have to depend on any male folks. If women are financially independent they can finance their own political campaign or any other expenditure. Education and economic empowerment are the means for women's social political and all round development and empowerment.

According to Foucault 'Knowledge is power' and women can achieve this power through right education. Meaningful education can wipe away all evils from society and so education should be made available to all. Education will empower women not only politically and economically but will also give her the power to fight against all injustices happening in her own life and also in others life.

"South Asian women are not weak. They have strong determination, ability and devotion. What they need is awareness and guidance."(Mahmood 2009, pg 156)

Religion has a dominant hold in South Asia. The ways religious scriptures are interpreted by the priests are always gendered. It favours men over women. Misinterpretation of religious scriptures by the priests curtails women's freedom and places her in a subordinate position in society. "As women are exploited in the name of religion, as in South Asia local culture and value system impacts women," (Mahmood 2009) there is a need to challenge the interpretation of religious scriptures on rational ground.

As the political system in the South Asia reflects western civic values and liberties the same should be followed for women rights. Civil societies and NGO's can promote women equality. Democracy can contribute towards eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women. South Asia is one of the least developed societies in the world and the human development of the region is horrifying though one-fifth of the world's population resides here and the condition of women is worst. Women in South Asia are not weak, they are strong and brave. They have proved themselves in worst environments. Any work delegated to women they perform it with dignity and perfection. Women therefore should be encouraged; there is a need to inculcate self confidence in them. (Mahmood 2009)

It is very important to inquire the experiences of women as elected representatives, and also important to take into account the views held by men of elected women representatives in order to understand how governance is impacted by gender relation and role expectations (ICRW-UN Joint publication)

Women should emerge as agents of change. Woman empowerment would not only improve the lives of women but the entire human race. If the under privileged 50% of the world's population gets empowered, real positive changes would definitely take place. Women's attitude, their perspective towards life and society should be explored. Women's mind set are different from that of men and politics is of viewed only as men's domain. There is a need to explore politics from a different vantage point, Feminist perspective can provide a suitable alternative to this.

Women leadership in National politics is prominent in South Asia, but when they come to power they portray a masculine image to get a firm hold on power. The women leaders by their actions and decisions prove that the political domain is an area where only masculine behaviour and thought process can prevail. The dominance and impact of patriarchy must be challenged to bring real positive changes in society. The world has been ruled enough by men; women should also get her due chance to rule or serve as per her own

natural instincts. World War I, World War II, Cold war and numerous civil wars that the world has experienced have happened under men's leadership. It is pertinent to assume that the world's history might have been less strewn with bloodshed with women at its helm. The feminine characteristics of love and nurturing can make this world a better place to live in. In the words of Napoleon Bonaparte: "Give me the best mothers and I will give you the best nation". The Motherland should be left in the hands of the mother.

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