

## **WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND PERCEPTION – A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH ASIA**

**C S Anuradha**

*Abstract*

*While the public and private spheres are often compartmentalized on the basis of gender, the female movement from the private to the public has hardly been appreciated. Their personality has always drawn negative criticism when assertive and judged as unsuitable for leadership when docile. Also, the rise of women to political power casts aspersions on their relations with male leaders. However the personal lives of male political leaders are seldom treated as testing ground of their skill in the public realm. The media representation of the South Asian women political leaders has been far from favourable. Highly opinionated and concentrating more upon the personality, the style of leadership rather than its essence, perceptions of the media have been exaggerated at best. Even in the case of analysis the ‘report card’ by journalists and media on women is harsher and more judgmental.*

### **Introduction**

As the debate on the possibility of the first woman President in USA ever in history heats up, the image of the woman in power and how it affects women leadership the world over makes interesting study. The Chinese leader Mao Zedong said women hold half the sky. This is true demographically but politically this is not a fact. While the presence of women at the political level can be traced to the Middle Ages when queens ruled vast empires, their numerical representation in modern legislatures and the executive positions is relatively poor. The discrimination of women in all fields of activity continues in many parts of the world. However surmounting such odds, women outshine their male counterparts in areas like management, corporate and business enterprises. The breaking of the glass ceiling occurred slowly but surely. Hitherto male territory even in sports like wrestling, boxing and weightlifting are witnessing enthusiastic participation by women.

On the other hand, the political arena presents some interesting facts. In the West women’s political representation has risen with the evolution of the feminist movement. It is in tandem with the all round empowerment of women. The Nordic countries have among the highest political representation of women in the world. In fact very few countries have

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*Dr C S Anuradha is Lecturer, Dept. of Politics and International Studies, Pondicherry University, India.*

achieved the legislative representation of nearly 40% that the Scandinavian countries have successfully forged<sup>1</sup>.

While women are still expected to clarify the role that their gender will play in their campaign, they must simultaneously justify their participation in what is perceived as a male dominated realm. The construction of gender identities in politics has very real consequences not only for female political candidates, but more for their ability to exercise power and control their image<sup>2</sup>. According to the patriarchal view of society, male and female genders are assigned different roles and the individuals are always viewed through these “lenses of gender”<sup>3</sup>. These include notions that men and women are fundamentally different, oppositional and natural. This informs perceptions of persons in public life as well as famous personalities. This lens also provides a hierarchical structure whereby men dominate the public sphere (which is considered important) while women are relegated to the (relatively unimportant) private sphere. Femininity and masculinity characteristics are also opposite. Thus female leaders operating in a male dominated sphere are unfit due to their femininity. This means that due to the intrinsic quality of females they cannot take up the “male” tasks. Further, if such leaders attempt to be assertive or authoritative then such acts are labeled “unfeminine”. Hence women are thought incapable of leadership. In other words, the issue of femininity is used both as a scale for assessment of and disqualification for women becoming political leaders. Perceptions, judgments and evaluations have been harsh if the women depart from expected feminine behavior. This article seeks to estimate how women political leaders in the South Asian region are viewed.

### **South Asian paradox**

The region of study here, namely South Asia, is unique in several respects. South Asia as a region has elected more women to the helm of public affairs as state executive than any other region in the world. Yet the plight of the common women has hardly changed. As members of one of the poorest regions of the world and dogged with illiteracy and social and economic discrimination, their voices have still not been heard.

The high rate of women to political office is, to some extent, ascribed to the politicisation of the entire population. During the anti colonial struggle especially in countries like India, Sri Lanka, the continued imprisonment of the men involved in the process forced the women to lead the struggle<sup>4</sup>. This mobilization together with Gandhian ideology and the

importance of kinship are cited as the driving factors for the prominence of Indian women in politics.<sup>5</sup> The proximity of some women to the male power base has also emerged as one of the main reasons for South Asian women participating in politics. Another surprising feature is that, though the South Asian society is generally seen as conservative and traditional in outlook, it has managed to elect more women leaders to the echelons of power.

### **Gender and Leadership style**

Pathbreaking research and observations have come out with startling findings. For example, in the field of business, the leadership styles are analysed and two major types of leadership emerge namely transactional and transformational leadership. It is felt that the transformational model is more effective as this type of leader functions by example and encourages participation of the subordinates in making decisions and provides incentives. In general, transformational leaders are defined as those who serve as role models, mentor and empower workers and encourage innovation even when the organization they lead is generally successful. Researches point to the possibility that women could make better leaders by using the transformational style as it is a nurturing and more skillful way of leadership<sup>6</sup>. However the transactional leadership is one that depends on reward and punishment offered to subordinates as incentives. Here the leader performs a transaction. It has been found that women leaders are perceived as more transformational than men<sup>7</sup>.

Alice H. Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky made a meta-analytic study of gender and leadership and found that women leaders were devalued more than men when they were autocratic and directive<sup>8</sup>. Personality profile has also been studied to indicate contribution to leadership style. The complex character of a woman political leader like Indira Gandhi, the only woman Prime Minister of India was assessed as a 'dichotomy'. Whereas one part of her personality, "sought fulfillment in political leadership, the other craved for greater intimacy, peace and security of private life"<sup>9</sup> Researchers are seeking to explain this manifestation of contradictory personality types as an operative of gender using more rigorous case studies.

### **Path to power**

Apart from the apparent disjunction between the women leaders and the status of the common woman, there is yet another interesting factor to be observed. In a majority of cases, the South Asian women have not assumed leadership solely through the dint of their work but more by quirk of fate. Stanley Wolpert describes it as "accident of gender"<sup>10</sup>. Another

commonality in these women leaders has been the manner in which they gained the mantle. Most are victims of the violent death of a close male relative – a husband or father. In other words, paraphrasing what Shakespeare said in the *Twelfth Night* on greatness it can be said, "Some have leadership thrust upon them". And even in the case of exceptions where they were groomed for the highest office it was not by their ability alone but more because of a proximity to male rule.

Indira Gandhi was the daughter of the illustrious Jawaharlal Nehru who died a natural death. Benazir Bhutto assumed the mantle of the Pakistan People's Party after the hanging of her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by the military leadership. While Indira and Benazir had some amount of political experience the others like Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, and Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh lost their husbands, both politically significant members, to assassination.

Chandrika Kumaratunga is the daughter of two former Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka SWRD Bandaranaike and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first woman Prime Minister. She is also the wife of the slain actor turned politician, Wijaya Kumaratunga. Khaleda Zia on the other hand is the wife of former premier of Bangladesh Gen.Zia ur Rehman. Khaleda Zia's rival and the recently arrested former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was among the two survivors of the massacre that completely wiped out the family of Sheikh Mujbir Rahman – the founder of Bangladesh. Inexperienced and novices, these women were chosen not for any extraordinary skill but to keep contenders at bay and keep the political parties together.

The reason offered for choosing women among siblings to assume power is that it was treated as a 'soft option' compared to the more aggressive male relatives. This is true in the case of Benazir Bhutto and Chandrika Kumaratunga where their brothers were seen as strong contenders. Hence the choice of women was not due to any benevolence on the part of the political party in power but purely for the purpose of retaining power. Once in power these women often opposed the very people who ushered them to highest political office. Soon the allegations included those of corruption and nepotism that have greatly affected the image of female political leaders in this part of the world.

### **View from within**

Capitalizing on their positions as 'victims', the political bosses in these countries thought them pliable and more manageable than the less favourable male siblings if present.

Thus perceptions of mentors, colleagues and relatives were one of under-estimation. In this light the description of Indira Gandhi as *gungee gudiya* (literally “dumb doll”) by Ram Manohar Lohia, a veteran Congressman or Morarji Desai’s terming her the “Little Princess”<sup>11</sup> can be seen as manifestation of the expected nature of the women chosen as leaders – docile, ‘no problem’ candidates. In the case of Benazir she was portrayed as usurper of the male’s place in Islamic society<sup>12</sup>.

The South Asian women political leaders thus were the torch bearers of the legacy of some of the most prominent male political figures in their own countries. They were often portrayed as matriarchs. Soon the image became more complex and often treated as a counter to the corrupt, illegitimate male contenders. At a later stage the perception differed largely and extended even to the point of deification. In India for example, the then young opposition member, Atal Behari Vajpayee, is said to have praised Indira’s spectacular victory in the Bangladesh war of independence by saying that she was “Goddess Durga”<sup>13</sup>.

The pressure of operating in a male dominated field forced them to be more than men. Her speeches initially, in Benazir's own words "were quite aggressive"<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly most of the women negate the factor of "woman" affecting their leadership styles. Indira Gandhi was described as "the only man in the cabinet".<sup>15</sup> Also, none of the women leaders had women's rights or empowerment as a primary focus. Rather they were concerned with party feud, unstable national political climate and strife. India also fought a war with Pakistan that carved out a new state in South Asia i.e. Bangladesh. Benazir had to tackle a strong army establishment and call for “jihad” against India to placate the fundamental groups in her support base.

The performance of the women leaders is yet another indicator of the perception about them. Indira Gandhi's policies are even now criticized as having pushed the country into backwardness. Her rule saw a devaluation of the rupee, the Indian currency; the worsening food crisis and the suspension of freedom of speech and basic rights with the imposition of the state of “emergency” in 1972-1975. The imprisonment of opposition leaders and gross violation of human rights were the bitter fruits of this emergency. The invocation of the emergency is the most blatant "blemish" on her rule. Benazir Bhutto on the other hand has been twice dismissed from office on charges of corruption. The style of leadership also left much to be desired. The earlier expectation that women would offer a viable alternative was replaced by accusation of corrupt practices and high handedness and

even nepotism. The individual personalities and their abilities have been analyzed in much detail<sup>16</sup>.

Women's sudden rise to power using patriarchal identities indicates the lack of organizational base and political inexperience. In countries like Pakistan, the women in addition to this inherent weakness have to face another formidable group - the armed forces. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, the army was in power for certain periods of time and as a traditional set up, the least adapted to female leadership. Interestingly these countries also have had huge dissatisfied groups; military aid need and domestic strife and the women in power have to appease the army establishment not jeopardizing their domestic agendas.

### **Press projections**

Not only the political community but the media too has played a very important role in projecting a not so favorable perception of South Asian women political leaders. The women political leaders were received with misperception and disdain. Research already shows that women even as political leaders are stereotyped as mothers, homemakers and sex objects that are incompatible with the image of political leadership. The perpetuation of such stereotypes by the media might have even "diminished the chances of success of other women aspiring for political office".<sup>17</sup> Since most of the South Asian women leaders have assumed power by feudal, tribal, hierarchical structures, the media has presented them as extensions or mirrors of their male relatives.

Campaign coverage, speeches and general publicity of these women has been concentrating on femininity, hairstyle, dress code and at times personal relations or casting aspersions over some of the above mentioned. For example, a journalist recollecting his adolescent encounter with Indira Gandhi describes a scowl that could not be missed and hence fit to be captured on camera. He adds that "I understood why big and powerful men were scared witless by this little woman in a crisply ironed sari".<sup>18</sup> Even in countries like Sri Lanka where women in politics were accepted phenomena, the political or educational qualifications were hardly mentioned while their familial responsibilities were always emphasized. Chandrika Kumaratunga won the largest landslide victory in any democracy in history for her Presidential election against the widow of the slain leader Gamini Disenayake. But the election campaign was projected by the media more as one headline put it, "Sri Lanka Election: A Battle of Widows – and Dynasties."<sup>19</sup> It did not highlight their

individual accomplishments or professional qualifications. Election manifestoes or policies were not even talked about.

Performance of women political leaders is found to have been evaluated more harshly. While most analysis of Indira's reign revolves around the emergency debacle hardly any talk of her success at achieving self-sufficiency in food production. The 1971 Bangladesh war is seldom examined as a triumph of her leadership and diplomatic tact. Khaleda Zia restored democracy but rarely does the media comment on it, rather the rivalry with Sheikh Hasina gains more coverage. In the case of Benazir Bhutto her political distinction is reduced to the trivia that she is the only leader who delivered a baby while in office.

Deification or ascribing familial relation tags to female leaders has been prevalent in South Asian politics. Often the self-projection of the female leaders is as mother or saviour, daughter or sister of the people. In India more particularly the image of a goddess usually wrathful is used to depict the women leaders.

## **Conclusion**

While the public and private spheres are often compartmentalized on the basis of gender, the female movement from the private to the public has hardly been appreciated. Their personality has always drawn negative criticism when assertive and judged as unsuitable for leadership when docile. Also, the rise of women to political power casts aspersions on their relations with male leaders. However the personal lives of male political leaders are seldom treated as testing ground of their skill in the public realm.

The media representation of the South Asian women political leaders has been far from favourable. Highly opinionated and concentrating more upon the personality, the style of leadership rather than its essence, perceptions of the media have been exaggerated at best. Even in the case of analysis the 'report card' by journalists and media on women is harsher and more judgmental.

Within the political community too, perception of women political leaders has seldom been objective. Character assassination and mud slinging on women politicians are a favorite pastime. Thus the overall picture is bleak in that women elected to the highest political office are perceived differently and often with difficulty. The dynastic ropes to political prominence, the lack of organizational base, inexperience and leadership style tend to

indicate that in spite of many South Asian women in the upper echelons of political power, the general perception is one of figure-head rather than a point of change or progress in the political lives of the countries in the region.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> For the exact percentages see the table in Sweden: women's representation in parliament [http://www.idea.int/news/upload/sweden\\_women.pdf](http://www.idea.int/news/upload/sweden_women.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Shane Miller, The woven gender : Made for a woman but stronger for a man, *The Southern Communication Journal*, Spring 1997; Vol 62 No.3, p.217
- <sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of this concept refer Sandra L. Bem, *The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality*, Yale University Press, 1993. pp.256
- <sup>4</sup> Romila Thapar *Illustrated weekly of India* Fall 1972
- <sup>5</sup> Mary Finsod Katzenstein, Towards equality? Cause and consequence of political prominence of Women in India, *Asian Survey*, Vol.18 no.5, may 1978. p.487
- <sup>6</sup> Women Effective Leaders for Today's World, Northwestern University *News Release*, August 4, 2003 , [http://www.northwestern.edu/univ-relations/media\\_relations/releases/2003\\_08/leadership\\_text.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/univ-relations/media_relations/releases/2003_08/leadership_text.html)
- <sup>7</sup> Sally A. Carless, Gender Differences in Transformational Leadership: An Examination of Superior, Leader, and Subordinate Perspectives, *Sex Roles*, Vol. 39, Nos. 11/12, 1998 p.900
- <sup>8</sup> Eagly, A. H., Makhijani, M. G., & Klonsky, B. G. Gender and the evaluation of leaders: A metanalysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 111 Issue (1), 1992. pp3-22
- <sup>9</sup> Masani, Z. (1975). *Indira Gandhi*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.p.126
- <sup>10</sup> Tim Mcgirk, Feminine Mystique, *Time*, August 11, 1997 Vol. 150 No. 6
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/view/0030851x/dm992047/99p04652/6?frame=noframe&userID=cbc18752@pondiuni.org/01cc99332400501b7762b&dpi=3&config=jstor>
- <sup>12</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/wiwp/statcon/bhutto\\_pro7.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/wiwp/statcon/bhutto_pro7.shtml)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1146828.cms>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/wiwp/dyncon/bhutto.shtml#>
- <sup>15</sup> A powerful vote for freedom, *Time*, April 4, 1977 Vijayalakshmi Pundit is supposed to have said it after the defeat in the elections. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,947857-7,00.html>
- <sup>16</sup> Biographies by authors like Nayantara Sehgal, Katherine Frank offer a scathing analysis of the style of leadership and its consequences.
- <sup>17</sup> [www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/beijing12/2000\\_asia\\_women\\_dynasty.pdf](http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/beijing12/2000_asia_women_dynasty.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> Ruchir Joshi, A Different Mrs. Gandhi, *Time* May 31, 2004 <http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501040531/essay.html>
- <sup>19</sup> Lynette Lithgow, *A Question of Relativity: The Role of the News Media in Shaping the View of Women in Asian Political Dynasties*, The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, *Working Paper Series* No. 2000-13, p.6