

Subverting Patriarchy? Leadership and Participation of Women in Politics in South Asia

Vidyamali Samarasinghe

Abstract

Ideology of gender as evolved in the South Asian realm puts women firmly in the domestic sphere, with primary responsibility of rearing and caring for children and in housekeeping. Male dominance is pervasive. In this study we argue that women in South Asia have used the existing system of patriarchy to break into the public sphere of politics. Using India and Sri Lanka as the case studies we demonstrate that at different levels of political participation and leadership, ranging from the national level to the local levels, women have demonstrated that they have the ability to use the patriarchal system to gain political visibility. Furthermore, the issues that emanate in the reproductive sphere, which is the designated sphere for women within patriarchal cultures, are carried into the public sphere as political issues that demand public articulation.

“Consciously or unconsciously, every woman I think feels that if Indira Gandhi could be Prime Minister of her country, then we all have opportunities.”¹

Ela Bhatt founder member of SEWA.

Introduction

It has often been noted that politics is a man’s game and government a men’s club. For women participating in politics it is not a simple matter of taking up a new activity. Rather, it is participating in activities and institutions designed and populated primarily by men.² In the contemporary world of structured human organisations, politics is the ultimate level of decision making in the public sphere of human activity. We are still counting on our fingers the number of women who win political office and celebrate their individual visibility in a sea of female political obscurity as simply unique. While each and every female who gains political leadership has a significant cumulative effect on enhancing women’s right and ability to be political actors, such achievements do not necessarily translate themselves into one powerful base for the creation of a critical mass of women actively participating in politics. On the other hand, the potential strength of female representation, outside the mainstream conventional political discourse was never better demonstrated than at the vibrant Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) forum at the United Nations (UN) Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985. Since then at every UN sponsored world conference, NGO fora have not only become an essential part of the proceedings, but have consistently been noted for their dynamism, as symbols of resistance and as avenues for articulation of alternative views. The initiative to find such a visible alternative illustrates the ability of a seemingly disenfranchised group to create or influence the process of creation of ‘spaces’ for themselves within the accepted dominant discourse.

Women, Men and Politics

Women's expected subservience is an essential marker of patriarchal controls. It constitutes a socially accepted behavioural trait that generally runs counter to the demands of political decision-making. The historical genesis of patriarchy is well documented³ and its socialisation processes have been operative and entrenched in all contemporary societies. At the most fundamental level, the public/productive sphere is the male preserve, and the private sphere, identified interchangeably as the reproductive or the domestic sphere is the designated venue of women. While this public/private dichotomy along gender lines is a global phenomenon, the force of its main organising principle, i.e. patriarchy, determines the degree of its entrenchment in any society. A plethora of cultural norms, traditions and myths successfully keep women out of the public sphere of politics. Furthermore, as noted elsewhere women's activities in the reproductive activities of the private sphere is so time consuming⁴ that it hardly leaves women time to get involved in political activities of the public sphere. Added to that, especially at the national level of political leadership in contemporary developing societies, when women are elected to political decision-making bodies, they find, as Thenjiwe Mtintso in South Africa did, that political institutions such as Parliaments are intensely 'women unfriendly'.⁵

Kate Millet defining power as the essence of politics, views patriarchal governments as the institutions whereby "half the population, which is female is controlled by the half which is male."⁶ This high degree of male dominance of politics has had adverse repercussions on women's ability to enter the public space of politics in three distinctly complementary ways.

1. By the enactment of laws and statutes to keep women in the private sphere. Males who control the decision-making arm of the state have been highly successful in constructing a somewhat impervious boundary between the two spheres.
2. By the failure to enact provisions that would create enabling conditions facilitating their entry into the public sphere.
3. By using their position in the public sphere to articulate the importance and indeed sanctity of traditions, myths and beliefs that are orchestrated to demonstrate that the woman's place is in the home. This eventually leads to a situation where, despite formal equality as voters (which is certainly true in the case of India and Sri Lanka), women and men, as Waylen notes,⁷ have been differentially incorporated as citizens of the state.

Given these constraints, the main question we pose is, what are the avenues available to women in South Asia, from the national level to the grassroots levels, to emerge into the public sphere of political decision-making? In this study, while we seek to explain and understand the forces that impact on women's participation in politics of India and Sri Lanka⁸ in contemporary times we analyse how spaces of female representation have been created within the dominant discourse of patriarchal control prevalent in South Asia.

Subverting Patriarchy from Within?

Moulded into shape as icons of culture by the dominant males, often used as symbols of docile dependency without a voice of their own, how would women enter the political arena of the public space? If patriarchy, in its many diverse manifestations, is the main obstacle that women face in entering politics, how do women begin to remove such obstacles? Deniz Kandiyotti contends that women in third world societies challenge patriarchy in two different ways. In some, as exemplified in certain rural societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, women openly confront patriarchy by exercising individual autonomy and protest against patriarchal practices. In some others, specially in Asia, women "bargain with patriarchy" by using manipulation within a tradition of subservience to attain certain goals.⁹ We add a third strategy that women may use to challenge patriarchy. In many

societies, women may not be in a position to overtly reject their roles as designated by patriarchy. At the same time they may not resort to manipulative tactics within the expected norms of subservience demanded by seemingly strong patriarchal society. Instead, women may subvert some of the entrenched elements of patriarchy itself, by subtly using their designated roles as wives and mothers to transform the system itself. Women's involvement in contemporary politics in India and Sri Lanka seem to suggest that subverting the patriarchal system from within is a closer reality over assertions of autonomy based on explicit protest against patriarchy or covert manipulation, while still being subordinate. With such subversions women could create 'openings' from within the existing social system itself, whereby they could emerge into the public sphere of politics carrying with them both certain symbolic features as well as agenda from the private spheres.

Ideology of gender as evolved in the South Asian realm puts women firmly in the domestic sphere, with primary responsibility of rearing and caring for children and in housekeeping. In general, from birth to death, through each and every life cycle, women are socialised to adhere to these accepted norms of social behaviour. Political activism, identified with public sphere of activity, seems to be far removed from the everyday lives of women. This is not to say that activities and behaviour norms of the domestic sphere of activities do not come into the political arena: they often do. What it simply means is that male political actors prominent in the public sphere assume the leadership role in all decision-making that affect both the public and domestic spheres of activity. In order to break into the system of active political empowerment, women have to find new avenues and create new spaces. A useful analysis in understanding the bases for women's diverse roles is the triple role categorisation identified by Caroline Moser who points out that women in poor societies play three roles, i.e. productive, reproductive and community.¹⁰ The physical possibility of straddling the domestic and the public sphere without moving away from what society perceives as women's primary responsibility, which lies with the home, the hearth and the children could create an important, accessible political space at the local level of the immediate community. Although Moser was referring specifically to poorer women in developing countries, women of different classes in such societies, may still use the issues and structures that emanate from the more familiar domestic sphere as the base for political participation. The feminist discourse that the 'personal is political' challenges and indeed contests the boundaries between the public and the private spheres of activities. As Anne Phillips points out that while, on the one hand, the way private lives are organised promotes male involvement and reduces female participation, on the other, "...who collects the children and who makes the tea is also a vital political concern."¹¹ As such, women's entry into active political participation is likely to call for a reconfiguration of the public space of politics through a more overt linkage of the private and the public spheres of activities.

In this study we attempt to analyse women's political activity in South Asia from the vantage point of five levels. It is our contention that, with rare exceptions, women in the two study areas seem to be using elements in the patriarchal system to reach the competitive political processes of electoral politics. First, at the national level women have created political spaces for themselves through kinship ties. After all, women in South Asia are identified through their relationship ties to the dominant males—as mothers, wives and sisters. In the political processes of South Asia, these very kinship ties seem to provide a useful opening, through which women have an opportunity to emerge into the political arena. Second, while kinship ties are significant at every level of politics from the national to the local, women with no kinship ties to powerful local males have entered into the political field by developing strong patron/protégé ties with powerful male political figures. Rounaq notes that younger males, to gain political visibility usually used patron/protégé relationships and that women did not use this strategy for a variety of reasons.¹² But we observe that well recognised males act as political mentors for hitherto unknown females with political aspirations. Third, issues emanating from the reproductive sphere that have a powerful impact on women provide the basis of female political agitation. Women have banded themselves together to agitate against particular issues, and have successfully managed to elevate such issues to the level of national political agenda.

Fourth, women facilitated by enabling conditions based on enlightened policy, bring the issues, hitherto hidden within the reproductive sphere as legitimate political issues. As seen at the local level of politics, women do not move away from their designated roles dictated by patriarchy, but make use of the political space created to gain visibility for themselves as well as the issues they bring from the reproductive sphere. Fifth, using fundamentalist religious interpretations, which rely on patriarchal tenants, women, supported by men, are revisiting glorification of the 'woman-as-a-mother' concept, in a successful bid for national political recognition. Women use the female identity as dictated by patriarchy.

Colonialism and Gendered Structure of Nationalism

The contemporary patterns of politics and political institutions of South Asia have been shaped to a great extent by the impact of Western colonial domination. The British colonial rule of South Asia spanned a period of nearly 150 years. Under British rule the Indian subcontinent was transformed into a single political and administrative unit. Colonial rule in its wake introduced a series of Western socio-economic and political institutions, most of which did take root in the Sub-continent. The subsequent struggle for independence from alien rule, especially in India, was based on a tidal wave of nationalism, which prolifically used cultural icons to show the difference of "Indianness" in contrast to the Western culture identified with the British rulers. Both in India and Sri Lanka some such nationalistic political aspirations were constructed on perceived notions of culture and tradition. Anti-colonialist nationalist movements in the process of creating an 'imagined community,' repeated and retrieved pre-colonial symbols and invented national cultures through which to challenge the cultural hegemony of the coloniser.¹³ As Chatterjee notes, the British in India, by assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, attempted to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of India. Indian nationalism, as a reaction to this,... In demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the "women's question" as an already constituted for it: namely, as a problem of Indian tradition."¹⁴ As Sangari and Vaid observe, "the recovery of tradition throughout the proto-nationalist and nationalist period was always the recovery of the 'traditional' woman – her various shapes readapt the 'eternal' past to the contingent present."¹⁵ One way of the affirmation of 'Indianness' was in not allowing the traditional image of women to change. Notions of Indian womanhood, entrenched in the private sphere, glorified as subservient, docile and sacrificial became an icon of Indian nationalistic aspirations. The image they projected here of womanhood, by and large, also contributed in no small measure in perpetuating patriarchal norms. The British colonial authoritarian regime that ruled the Indian subcontinent for one and a half centuries did make attempts to eliminate certain practices such as *Sati* (widow immolation), child marriage and ease restrictions on widow remarriage. However, they were half hearted at best, since implementation of the laws was never seriously undertaken.

Gandhi was one of the first to use the perception of the 'self-sacrificing nature of Indian women' as a special quality of Indian womanhood, based not on ritualistic dimension as used by the revivalist of the time, but on woman's existence as a mother. Gandhi's creation of the Indian woman was as a "moral mother" who is a repository of both moral and spiritual values.¹⁶ Undoubtedly, Gandhi created an avenue for women to emerge into the public space of politics by actively drawing women into the freedom movement. Furthermore, by choosing the spinning wheel and salt as symbols of the freedom struggle and the civil disobedience movement, he brought in the activities of the woman—specific reproductive sphere into the public sphere of political agitation. As Kishwar notes, it is significant that all of Gandhi's symbols of struggles and protest were from the feminine reproductive realm, namely, spinning, picketing of liquor shops, and picking on salt as a symbol of countrywide *Satyagraha* (non-violent civil disobedience).¹⁷ However, his image of women had its roots in Hindu patriarchy, and while Gandhi's icon for national hero was Rama: the stoic, chaste and sacrificial Sita was consistently upheld as the national ideal for womanhood. Actively encouraged by Indian male

political leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru, the Indian nationalist movement drew large numbers of women activists who did participate in all aspects of the struggle. At the same time it is noted that, “while Indian women were to participate in all stages of movement for national independence, they did so in a way that was acceptable to, and was dictated by male leaders and which conformed to the prevalent ideology on the position of women.”¹⁸ A poignant affirmation of the prevailing patriarchal norms and women’s accepted location in the private sphere are uttered by Sarojini Naidu (1870-1949), a most prominent woman activist of the time. Naidu said “remember that in all great national crises it is the man who goes out, but it’s the woman’s hope and women’s prayer that serves his arm to become a successful soldier.”¹⁹ During the struggle for independence in India, women who came into the political arena did not deviate from norms of womanhood identified by a male dominant society. Some of them became prominent, a larger number became active participants in the political struggle, but none could, or perhaps wanted to, supercede the male leadership.

The independence movement in Sri Lanka was more peaceful than in India. Also, as Jayawardena observes, the elite and the middle class women who spearheaded the women’s movement within the independence movement, were known to operate within the existing social parameters and were not known to question the patriarchal social structures or the role of the family in the subordination of women.²⁰ A possible parallel in Sri Lanka to the ‘Sita image’ of Indian womanhood was the image of Vihara Mahadevi, a historical figure, often projected as the exemplar model of Sri Lankan womanhood. A thirteenth century Pali chronicle written by Buddhist monks of the history of Lanka describes Vihara Mahadevi as the young woman who braved the angry seas to rescue her father from the wrath of gods and subsequently gave birth and nurtured a brave young warrior king to save a country and a race.²¹ In a perceptive study on the use of the ‘moral mother syndrome’ in politics in Sri Lanka, Malathi de Alwis shows how the image of Vihara Mahadevi has been repeatedly used by Sri Lankan male politicians from colonial times to contemporary times to depict a model of perfect daughter, devoted wife and courageous and patriotic mother for Sri Lankan women to emulate and follow.²² During the British colonial period, compared to women living in the subcontinent of India, women in Sri Lanka gained wider access to the educational system. However, the education imparted was mostly to make them good wives and mothers. Also the leading protagonists of the Buddhist revivalists of the nationalist movement, such as Anagarika Dharmapala warned that girls were being educated under Western principles by Christian educationalists and therefore it would be impossible to expect that a race of true Buddhists could be produced in the country.²³ Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, a Tamil Hindu politician, a pioneer in the independence movement of Sri Lanka, thought that enfranchising women in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka won universal adult franchise in 1931) was spoiling the sanctity of the home and declared that it was anathema to the Hindu way of life.²⁴ Hence, the political rhetoric during the nationalist movement in India and Sri Lanka was firmly focussed on recapturing a native cultural identity, which was lost during the colonial occupation. Not surprisingly, women’s role as perceived by the males, as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters to them formed a clear basis for the reestablishment of that cultural identity.

Political Mileage from Relational Ties—Subverting Patriarchy

Turning to empirical evidence from post-colonial India and Sri Lanka, we see that at the national, sub-national and to a lesser extent at the local level women’s entry into politics has been greatly influenced by the gender ideology nurtured and established during the struggle for independence. The identity of women continued to be based on kinship ties to males. Hence it is not at all surprising that women in South Asian countries have made use of this criteria, as perhaps, the best available avenue for participating in the political process. Indira Gandhi of India and Sirima Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, the daughter and widow respectively of male prime ministers of the two countries, were propelled into leadership positions, due to their relational ties. Initially, they were not expected to be strong leaders. The male ‘king makers’ in India and in Sri Lanka at the time thought that the two women to be malleable, act as mere figure-heads and would effectively provide the needed name recognition to gain

public support for their respective political parties. However, the two women soon demonstrated that they are charismatic leaders and astute politicians. While, both Indira Gandhi and Sirima Bandaranaike undoubtedly made use of their elitist ties to emerge into politics, their political prominence created a certain female political space, which continued to be identified and judged from a gender specific angle. Indira Gandhi was alternately equated to the Hindu goddess *Kali*, the powerful female destroyer who could only be controlled by her husband; or the mother goddess *Durga*. Both images were identified with the mother symbol. It is interesting to note that Indira Gandhi was continued to be identified with powerful mother deities, both malevolent and benevolent, and not with the docile, Sita, the devoted wife who obeys her husband's every wish, the inspiration for Gandhi's ideal Indian woman during the freedom struggle.²⁵ In Sri Lanka, where such deity based religious symbols are not that pervasive (70% of its population are Buddhists), Sirima Bandaranaike was often referred to as simply 'amma' (mother). It became a popular rallying cry especially during electoral campaigns. As de Alwis²⁶ illustrates the 'mother syndrome' has been effectively used repeatedly by the female political figures to capture the attention of the electorate as a caring person represented by the image of a 'mother.'

The emergence of these two women into undisputed political leadership also highlighted another cultural contradiction, especially for Indian society. Chen observes that according to Hindu tradition, a widow was expected either to commit *Sati* or lead a chaste, austere, ascetic lifestyle. Historically, it was the upper castes in India who imposed this lifestyle more strictly on their widows.²⁷ Indira Gandhi's natal family, the Nehrus are known to have rejected many of these traditions. However, what is surprising is that the predominantly Hindu Indian society, which continues to view with contempt the state of widowhood, looked up to a widow to lead the largest democracy in the world. The recent emergence of Sonia Gandhi, the widow of the slain Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to the leadership of the Congress party of India and as possible future prime minister of India reaffirms this contradiction. In Sri Lanka, in a predominant Buddhist society, widowhood is not associated with the same degree of stigma as in Hindu society. However, it is a status still considered to be inauspicious. Indira Gandhi and Sirima Bandaranaike in their role as political leaders effectively evaded the stigma attached to widowhood, and in fact, paved the way for other women in similar political circumstances to be recognised for their potential as powerful torch-bearers of political lineage and of ideological continuity.

It is often been noted that Indira Gandhi and Sirima Bandaranaike are but recipients of dynastic legacies. There is no doubt that they were propelled to power because of the powerful political imprint of a father and a husband. Ironically, what is often ignored is that it was due to the strong tenure of the two women, the impact of their own agency, which in fact, actually entrenched the dynasties. If, the two women remained mere puppets in the hands of the male political leadership as envisaged when they pushed the two women into high political office, there is every likelihood that the so called dynasty would have disappeared or weakened considerably with their tenure in office. The reality was very different. Not only did they become powerful, effective leaders they opened the spaces for their adult children to emerge into politics. As mothers in South Asian societies they saw no harm in sharing their largesse, political or personal, with their children. The patriarchal milieu in South Asia, which determines its cultural behaviour expects its women to have a 'child-centred' lifestyle. Indeed, when mothers assume political leadership they bring their adult children along with them and use them as trustworthy resources. The emergence of Indira Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay, as 'heir apparent' and the political power he wielded under Indira Gandhi's tenure as prime minister of India until his tragic death illustrates that it was she who in fact ensured the continuity of the dynasty. When Indira Gandhi herself was assassinated, her older son, Rajiv, a pilot turned reluctant politician took over the mantle of political leadership to continue with the dynasty. During the early tenure of Sirima Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, her older daughter Sunethra and that time her son-in-law Kumar Rupesinghe exercised enormous power within the government (1970 May-1977 July). Her son, Anura, soon came to be known as the 'heir apparent' to the mother's legacy.

The emergence of the present elected president of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga, brings a different twist to the pattern of female relatives of male political leaders gaining political leadership positions. Her father, the then prime minister was assassinated when she was a young schoolgirl. Her husband, a popular actor who became a politician was also assassinated. However, Kumaratunga had already emerged into national politics alongside her husband, who was the dominant partner in the political arena. As the wife of a popular actor/politician and daughter of two prime ministers, she had a name recognition that enabled her to enter the political arena on her own steam. She crossed over from the political party that her husband headed, to the party that her father founded and assumed its leadership. It was the latter leadership that eventually gave her the election victories. Kumaratunga was not propelled into politics, the same way as Indira Gandhi or Sirima Bandaranaike, rather she astutely made use of her positioning as widow and daughter to emerge into the competitive public arena of politics. In the traditional sense of perpetuating dynastic leadership in patriarchal societies, it is the 'male heir' who gets precedence. In Sri Lanka, Anura Bandaranaike, son of Sirima Bandaranaike, who had been involved in national level politics for a longer period than Kumaratunga should have been the 'natural choice.' It is obvious that Kumaratunga is the shrewder politician, who made use of the opportunity created for her as a 'political widow' with a name recognition, to grasp the opportunity to win political leadership. When in power, South Asian females have quickly dispelled any notion that they may be puppets in the hand of a set of male king makers. At the same time they are never far removed from symbolism of region specific patriarchal norms either. Chandrika Kumaratunga's projection as a peace candidate, and as a daughter, wife and mother who personally understood the trauma of violence, was readily acknowledged by society as caring characteristics, which are ascribed to a woman.

The year 1998 saw another widow stepping into visible political leadership in South Asia. Since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, his widow, Sonia Gandhi had been relentlessly courted by the Congress party to assume its leadership, which she eventually did. The use of the Gandhi name to bolster the flagging electoral fortunes of the Congress party was undoubtedly the prime motives for the pursuit of Sonia Gandhi by the male political leadership of the Congress party of India. Long before her acceptance as the president of the party, Sonia Gandhi's influence within the Congress party was well known. Widely known as the 'Sonia factor,' her entry into active politics, prior to the Indian general elections to campaign for the Congress party, was expected to stimulate a swing in the voting pattern. She gives the impression of a reluctant politician, pulled into the centre stage to give her support to rescue the country from falling into an abyss of divisive communal politics, purportedly the rallying cry of the rival Bahu Jana Party (BJP). She led the Congress party at the recently concluded elections. Although she won both parliamentary seats she contested, her party did not win a majority of seats. Sonia Gandhi may be another woman-in-waiting in South Asia to assume the highest office in the land.

Sri Lanka experienced a spate of political assassinations during the early part of the 1990s. Three leading politicians, including an incumbent president were killed. All three widows have entered the arena of national politics. Srimani Athulathmudali²⁸ was elected leader of her political party. She was subsequently elected as a Member of Parliament, and until recently functioned as cabinet member of the government. Srima Dissanayake,²⁹ replaced her assassinated husband as the rival candidate to Chandrika Kumaratunga at the presidential election of 1994. Hema Premadasa, is the widow of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was assassinated in 1992. Though Mrs. Premadasa did not seek elected office, she is more active in politics now than when President Premadasa was alive. In India, Maneka Gandhi, the widow of Sanjay Gandhi, who was the acknowledged 'heir apparent' of Indira Gandhi, entered politics as a widow: in fact in opposition to her powerful mother-in-law. She was a minister in the Janatha government of India and remains a very active politician. Priyanka Vadra, granddaughter of Indira Gandhi and daughter of Rajiv Gandhi, has been active in the youth wing of

the Congress party of India, and she has been campaigning alongside her mother Sonia Gandhi on behalf of the Congress party.

In the tenth (1994 August-2000 October) Parliament of Sri Lanka, more than 90% of female members have come into the competitive political process through kinship ties, with a father, brother or a husband. Since Sirima Bandaranaike, at the demise of her husband assumed the leadership of one of the two leading political parties of Sri Lanka, it became an accepted trend for wives, daughters and sisters to 'inherit' the political mantle of the male who either died or had been unseated. Once elected they have refused to become mere figureheads and have carved out for themselves separate political identities.

Mani Shankar Aiyar, an Indian political commentator, brings some interesting insights and observations on the kinship tie linkage of female politicians. When the chief minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav was incarcerated in 1997, his wife, Rabri Devi was sworn in to replace him as chief minister. Her tenure lasted 103 days, until the release of Yadav. She had been impressive as an able administrator and a savvy politician. Aiyar notes two distinct points from Rabri Devi's tenure. Firstly, he observes that "if participation of women in Indian public life begins with mothers, sisters (and mistresses) of public men being inducted into public life, though not as good as women being elected on their own, it is not such a bad thing either. It is better than not having them in public life at all." Secondly, he points out that Rabri Devi has proved that womanpower on governance is the single most important source of societal energy that Indians have "kept corked for half a century."³⁰

Male Political Patrons and Female Protégées— Another Path to Leadership

In the absence of powerful male kinship relations, women in South Asia have looked to powerful male patrons with nationally acclaimed political stature and influence to pave the political space for them. Mayawathie, a schoolteacher who became the chief minister of the most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh, came into the limelight as the favoured protégé of Kanshi Ram, a political heavy weight of the state. Firmly backed by Kanshi Ram, she became a founder member of the Bahujana Samaj Party (BSP). It was widely acknowledged that she wielded immense power in the decision-making process. Being a Dalit (scheduled caste) she did not have kinship ties to prominent male politicians. However, this gap was filled by Kanshi Ram who filled the role of her political backer. Kanshi Ram, in 1994 openly declared that "I am grooming her to become the prime minister. In the Uttar Pradesh she will always remain the chief minister."³¹ Although she lost her position as chief minister, and her relationship with Kanshi Ram was soured somewhat, she has remained extremely visible. She no longer needs the patronage of a male figure to gain political visibility. As reported during the Indian election of 1998, thousands of Indian women seemed to identify with her, attending her campaign rallies in large numbers, and *India Today*,³² a popular Indian news magazine notes "that it is evident 'Behanji'—as she is popularly called—is the reigning deity." Jayalalitha, chief minister of Tamil Nadu and the leader of a political party was the protégée of a popular actor turned chief minister, M G Ramachandran (known simply as MGR). When he died, Jayalalitha assumed the mantle of leadership. She is neither married nor does she have children but she is referred to by her supporters as 'amma' (mother), literally the mother of the entire state of Tamil Nadu. She has emerged as a political leader in Southern India courted by all the mainstream national parties of India. She astutely used her support for the coalition government of India in 1998 as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions for her state and herself. The withdrawal of her support led to the collapse of the governing coalition of India in 1999.

Being a small island nation with a centralised unitary system of government, Sri Lanka does not have the same needs or opportunities for political leadership at the sub-national level. At the sub-national level, the nine provincial councils of Sri Lanka consist of elected representatives. The female representation is less than 6% of the total membership. A vast majority of them have entered politics

through kinship ties. It is interesting to note that while in some cases, the husband is in the national parliament, the wife has entered the provincial council, in some others husband/wife teams are represented in the same provincial council. Since the provincial councils have limited powers, compared to the national Parliament, provincial council members of either sex do not have the political visibility that is comparable to the state level of representation in India. One woman in Sri Lanka, who effectively used the provincial council as a stepping stone to the national Parliament is Chandrika Kumaratunga, who was the chief minister of the Colombo Provincial Council, prior to her election to Parliament. At the municipal council level, two of the elected mayors in recent times have been women. Both have used their kinship ties to enter politics, and both were known to show strong leadership qualities once in office.³³ While at the national level of parliamentary representation in Sri Lanka from the time of independence to date, the majority of women elective representatives owed their position to kinship ties.³⁴ One could discern the same pattern at the sub-national level. It should be noted that there were notable aberrations of this rule especially during the 1950s and 1960s. That was the emergence of political 'couples' that won election to Parliament together. A few of the women entered politics on their own, while most of them followed their husbands into Parliament. The female partners of political 'couples' in Sri Lanka were known to be independent minded, fiery and focussed on very specific political issues.³⁵

An ideal principle in a democratic political system is the right of every citizen, woman and man, to participate on equal terms in the political decision-making process of her or his country. However, as noted earlier, women are differentially incorporated as citizens by the state. Thus, it is of critical importance that access or entry into this competitive political process is restricted. Consequently, women cannot compete with men on equal terms. The apparent contradiction between an ideal democracy, which seeks to ensure equality of opportunity on one hand, and the essential competitiveness it spawns, tend to marginalise a less powerful group such as women. Lacking visibility, women aspirants to positions of political power do not attract financial backing either, which was well illustrated in the United States, until the fund identified by the acronym EMILY was started to finance the political campaigns of women in the Democratic party. Lack of money poses a major impediment to women in South Asia from entering the competitive political process. Women in elite families are in a position to circumvent this obstacle, not only because they may have relatively better access to personal resources, but also because of their close association to people whom obviously have access to such resources. They can position themselves within the inner circle of the system. One certainly should not dismiss the importance of the political experience such women would have gained through their close kinship relationships. As noted earlier, as in the case of Rabri Devi, when she replaced her husband as chief minister of Bihar, society viewed her simply as a wife of a political leader and mother of nine children and a 'mere' housewife. Her short but impressive tenure shows that she has been a keen observer of the process of governing, not just a bungling amateur suddenly thrown into the complex system of governance from nowhere. Furthermore, what is important is how the women who the system propels into the political limelight fare as politicians. They have proved to be powerful personalities, who are no puppets on a string. It is widely commented, often with a smirk at nepotism, that women political leaders in South Asia owe their existence to male patronage. Male dominance is extremely pervasive in every sphere of society. Women's accepted position is in the domestic sphere, and rules, traditions, and conventions that govern women's behaviour is determined by the males of that society. Given such a restrictive situation it is hard to envisage a scenario whereby women could get an opportunity to enter public life, outside this system, on a gender neutral basis. It is more realistic to expect women to enter into the public sphere of politics from within the patriarchal system itself.

Many of these women leaders of India and Sri Lanka are no strangers to politics, having lived as wives, daughters and sisters of male politicians. During their tenure in leadership positions, they have been able to demonstrate their independence from male control at decision-making levels and indeed consolidate their positions as able leaders. The potential of female leadership was hardly ever realised

because the opportunities were practically non-existent. Often women are thrown into the public sphere at times of crises when men are either absent or when political movements and agitation need people irrespective of gender.³⁶ One critical feature that marks the success of leadership among individual women is not merely their entry into the public sphere of politics, but the length of time they have there to make their presence felt. Soon after Indira Gandhi was persuaded to assume the leadership of the Congress party, she proved to be no mere figurehead. She survived three splits in her Congress party, and in fact controlled the party until her death. When leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party was pretty much foisted on her, soon after the assassination of her husband, the then prime minister, Sirima Bandaranaike was dubbed the 'weeping widow.' She has been in public life for nearly 40 years, three times as the prime minister. She has proved herself to be a charismatic leader and an astute politician. Although Rabri Devi of Bihar stepped down from the position of chief minister when her husband returned in 1977, she certainly did not disappear from the political scene and was widely acknowledged as an asset in her husband's election campaign of 1998.³⁷

Reproductive Issues at the Forefront— (1) Social Movements and (2) Local Politics

Single issue-specific contemporary agitation, protests and collective demonstrations generally identified as new social movements are an essential part of the democratic process. Organised articulation of demands and resistance, as a strategy to demonstrate disapproval of policy or events are important forms of representation of diverse views in a democratic system. Writing on new social movements in Latin America, Hellman claims that the potential accomplishments of new social movements fall roughly into three categories: they transform the consciousness of the participants; they win concrete concessions for movement activists and they play a key role in the process of democratisation.³⁸ Women in India have successfully used this strategy to articulate their protests. It is significant that the issues they have taken up emanate from the domestic sphere. It was left to the women to take them up, to bring them into the public sphere of politics, issues which otherwise would be hidden as 'private.'

The Indian Constitution guarantees 'equality between the sexes.' However, the landmark report *Status of Women in India of 1974* showed in no uncertain terms the wide gender disparities that exist within every sphere of society in India. While gender equality was continued to be a rallying cry for feminists in India, starting in the mid-1970s women's movements began to take shape based on particular aspects of gender discrimination through well-organised extremely effective social movements. As Radha Kumar notes economic independence began to be seen only as best as a partial means to gaining control over women's own lives. Consequently, women began to agitate for a series of other rights as well.³⁹ While agitation for women's rights were basically submerged under the independence movement, the first certain significant stirring for women's rights in post-independence India was in relation to the *Telangana* movement of Andhra Pradesh during 1948-50. This was a movement of peasants for land rights where thousands of women participated. Attention was paid to such domestic problems as wife beating.⁴⁰

Somewhat similar to the situation in the US in the 1960s where the civil rights movement was a major stimulant for women's rights movements, in India political agitation by the leftist parties provided the space for women's movement in India. Women were drawn into many of the 'rights' movements initiated by the leftist parties. They provided a forum for domestic issues that impact on women to be brought into the forefront of agitation. The *Shahada* movement in Maharashtra started as a tribal landless labourer's movement against the powerful non-tribal landowners who continuously exploited the poor tribal groups. Soon the women took the issue of alcoholism and the resultant violence against women as a main basis for agitation. Likewise, the Self Employment Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmadabad, Anti-Price Rise movement of Maharashtra and *Nava Nirman* movement of Gujarat gave rise to the agitation for women's rights on specific domestic issues and/or

issues that impacted on women's contributions to household survival strategies. The Progressive Organisation of Women (POW), affiliated to a Maoist communist party formed in 1974 provided a base and a forum for women to protest against specific issues such as dowry and dowry deaths. Influenced by the POW, left oriented women's organisations were formed in the mid-1970s. They were vigilant on women's issues, and many of the organised protests on women's issues ranging from dowry, custodial rape, alcoholism and violence against women were spearheaded by such organisations. While most of such organisations were city-based, they took up issues that impact on women in rural as well as in urban areas of India. By the mid 1970s the *Telangana* movement, which was a rural-based movement, which started in the 1950s in Andhra Pradesh, was revitalised. Women's domestic issues, such as violence against women was propelled into the public sphere of political agitation. Also, the land rights *Bodhgaya* movement in Bihar gave voice to women's concerns about land rights. Aided by the *Chatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini*, a youth movement, women's group within the *Bodhgaya* movement demanded equal land registration rights for women.⁴¹

Agitation to redress particular acts of discrimination against women became the cornerstone of women's movement in India. Spearheaded by diverse women's groups issues hitherto mostly hidden within the private sphere were brought forcefully into the public sphere of political agitation. Murdering of young newly married women at the hands of their husband's family, known as 'dowry deaths' was one such issue where women's agitation resulted in certain changes and indeed better implementation of the law. Agitation against custodial rape and *Sati* (widow immolation) were other important issues where women took to political protest against blatant violence on women. The *Chipko* movement of India was a massive protest movement associated with poor rural women against the destruction of the environment, which provided their daily livelihood.

Such campaigns of protest were based mainly on single issues of overt gender discrimination. It brought women into the limelight as effective political activists. However, not all such movements could boast of success. The resilience of patriarchy is such that it has the capacity to transform itself by adapting itself to new situations. A case in point is the Muslim Women's Bill of 1986, which took away the Muslim women's right to maintenance from their husbands. The political expediency of bowing to parochial interests resulted in an obvious setback for women's rights. Secularism in the Indian law, where religion was separated from politics was severely tested in this bill. In order to uphold a Muslim religious tenant of denying alimony to a Muslim woman, secularism was interpreted as "...the right of every religion to co-exist with another religion. We acknowledge this by allowing every religion to have its own secular laws."⁴² The significance of women's movement is not only in bringing to the open particular acts of discrimination based on gender, which are often suppressed as 'private,' but also providing a basis for women to act as political activists in the public sphere. The symbols that they use in protests often denote that the women accept their roles as mothers and wives and their primary responsibility within the household. Especially seen in the Anti-Price Rise movement and Anti-Alcohol movement, women banged on metal serving plates, and rolling pins to draw attention at public rallies and offered men bangles that women wear to show contempt at their supposed emasculation.⁴³

In comparison to India, women's involvement in bringing up issues of gender discrimination in Sri Lanka was conspicuous by its absence. Although Kumari Jayawardena asserts that the women's movement in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s was more vibrant than the 1990s,⁴⁴ it was always a far cry from the effectiveness, and oftentimes mass appeal that the Indian women's movement of the time displayed. Welfare policies implemented by successive governments in Sri Lanka have resulted in Sri Lankan women achieving nearly 90% in literacy rate and 72 years of life expectancy. Fertility is low and infant mortality rates are among the lowest in Asia. Does all this mean that the harsher aspects of patriarchy, especially in relation to the private sphere of activities have been successfully controlled and that Sri Lankan women do not have to face such burning issues? This certainly is not the case. While there are no known 'dowry deaths' in Sri Lanka, dowries demanded from would-be brides is a

legally accepted social norm. Sunday newspapers devote pages to matrimonial columns, where dowries are offered for women and demanded for men, often irrespective of the fact that women are employed. Violence of men against women is well known and cuts across all classes, religious affiliations and ethnic groups. Rape continues to be a social problem, its impact exacerbated by the unchanging laws that seem to victimise the woman by the current structure of the law of evidence. The ethnic conflict, which has ravaged the country for nearly two decades, creates a situation where rape of women, especially by the armed soldiers was often dismissed as an inevitable part of the war itself.⁴⁵ However, the recent conviction of a few soldiers on rape/murder charges and sentenced to death was more a result of the media coverage and the agitation of Human Rights groups, both inside and outside the country, not women's groups. This shows the contrast between India and Sri Lanka, where the case of the custodial rape of a girl led to the formation of a specific women's organisation, i.e. the Forum Against Rape based in Bombay, which later changed to Forum Against Oppression of Women.⁴⁶ They agitated for changes in the law and spearheaded a movement to make women and men aware that rape is a violation of human rights that should not be tucked away in the private sphere because there is shame and stigma attached to a woman. In Sri Lanka there are no such specific women's movements, although concerned urban-based feminist groups are highlighting the incidence of this crime.⁴⁷

Indeed, one group of women's voices that is heard loud and clear in the public sphere in Sri Lanka belongs to the mothers of the 'disappeared.' In the mid-1980s when young Tamil men in the Northern Province were rounded up by the Sri Lankan army, the mothers of the arrested and the 'disappeared,' along with other women in the community formed a "Mothers' Front." During the period 1984-85 this Jaffna-based Mothers' Front was active protesting against arrests of sons, husbands and fathers. As Thiruchandran notes, "...when the mothers marched they carried broomsticks to symbolise their domestic supremacy and the removal of dirt, dust and rubbish; the protesters insisted on the removal of political discrimination and oppression and demanded an end to the violation of human rights in Sri Lanka."⁴⁸ However, soon afterwards the Mothers' Front was forced to conform to the rules laid down by the most powerful Tamil militants in Jaffna, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and lost its independent voice.⁴⁹ Not willing to be co-opted into a militant organisation the Mothers' Front of Jaffna was eventually disbanded. The 'disappearances' due to the uprising in the South of the country led to the formation of "Mothers' Front" in the South in the 1990s. Led by a woman physician, whose journalist son was taken away by armed forces and later killed, the "Mothers' Front" in the South illustrated a powerful protest against arbitrary arrests and disappearances and a demand for accountability from the state. However, the "Mothers' Front" of the South was soon co-opted to the mainstream politics of the country dominated by males. 'Motherhood' was used by mainstream politics to whip up the emotions of an electorate as one of the campaign issues of the elections. Although women's involvement propelled the element of 'motherhood,' strongly identified with the private reproductive sphere, it did not provide a wide enough opening for a significant group of women to emerge into the public sphere and bring other issues of the reproductive sphere as political issues. "The Voice of Women for Peace" was launched in 1989 to agitate for peace between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Sri Lankan Tamils who were engaged in a bloody ethnic conflict that spanned nearly two decades. This group, started by a group of women lawyers in Sri Lanka, strives to bring together women from both ethnic groups to create an environment of mutual understanding through dialogue and lay the basis of peace.⁵⁰ It is a small urban-based group and uses an essentialist identity for women that they are life givers and lifesavers, which is very much a part of their gendered social identity.

Both in India and in Sri Lanka, women's movements have two essential commonalities. First, most of them are initially launched in response to certain crisis situations. Secondly, most of the women's movements are based on issues that emanate from the private sphere of activities, where patriarchal norms are entrenched. However, there are also striking contrasts between the two countries. In India, many of the issue specific movements have created spaces for women to act as

independent women's groups to agitate for change in the legal and social structures. In Sri Lanka, while women's movements are relatively few, they tend to be more narrowly focussed on the issue at hand. As a result there is no space for the women's movement to emerge as a catalyst for change on a larger agenda of women's issues. It is oftentimes argued that discrimination against women due to religious and cultural practices in India is much more acute in India than in Sri Lanka. This is true to a certain extent. In Sri Lanka, there are no reported 'dowry deaths' or the practice of *Sati*, two extreme forms of gender discrimination reported in India, and indeed, the basis of two powerful women's movements in the subcontinent. However, the discriminatory practice of 'dowry' is still prevalent and legal, and violence against women in the domestic sphere is pervasive. Women in Sri Lanka are more educated, healthier and have a longer life span than women in India. However, they have similar levels of access to formal employment as in India and the informal sector provides the main avenue for income generation. Discriminatory inheritance laws on Tamil women, Sinhalese women in the Central Province and Muslim women embodied in *Tesavalamai*, *the Kandyan Law* and *Muslim Personal Law* respectively remain unchanged.⁵¹ It could very well be that the crisis situations that are experienced in the context of some of the better-known women's movements in India are simply not there in Sri Lanka. Hence, although patriarchy is dominant in society its harshness is less prevalent in Sri Lanka, a situation that may lead to a sense of complacency that 'all is right with the world.' At the same time, even the women's movement launched independently by concerned women in Sri Lanka are more likely to be co-opted by the male dominant mainstream political parties. As a result of which, they lose their identity as independent pressure groups lobbying for specific women's rights. Jayawardena observes that, "although we hear much about the high quality of life of Sri Lankan women in terms of life expectancy, health and education, subordination persists since the basic structure of society (including family) and attitude to women have not changed very much. It is well known that we have no Brahmins, yet 'Brahmin' attitude (*read traditional, patriarchal*) towards women prevail."⁵² (Italics and parenthesis added).

Both in India and in Sri Lanka, women's movements are generally initiated mostly by urban-based educated women. Especially in India, the discriminatory practices that such movements highlight mostly affect poorer, relatively less educated women from lower classes. However, many such movements have been able to mobilise larger segments of women and indeed have been more sustainable as political pressure groups, effectively drawing reproductive sphere issues to the public sphere of politics. In Sri Lanka too, it is the educated urban-based women who give leadership to the few women's movements. However, the movements have not quite been able to encompass women from lower classes. Strong social movements are essential components of civil society, which provides a vibrant basis for sustainable democracy. Women's movements often emerge as a result of a need to redress discriminatory practices perpetrated on women or to alleviate new burdens heaped on women in their designated role as the subordinate group in a patriarchal culture. The collective articulation of protest by women on such issues not only brings reproductive issues into the public sphere of politics, but also contributes to the visibility of women in the arena of politics.

Straddling the Public and Domestic Spheres— Women in Local Politics

We noted earlier, Caroline Moser's contention of the triple roles that poor women are expected to play in combining the activities of the productive, reproductive and community spheres. Their role in the community sphere would certainly give them the space for political articulation. Nearly 75% of women in India and Sri Lanka are rural. As such, it is important to understand how this vast majority of women position themselves with regard to political participation. While social movements in India such as *Chipko*, *Telangana* and *Bodhgaya* clearly show that rural agricultural women do have the capacity and the motivation to organise politically around survival issues that emerge from the reproductive sphere, it seems quite difficult for women to penetrate political structures at the local level. Although, theoretically the local or the grass roots level seems a more appropriate entry level for

a majority of rural women because it affords the opportunity for them to straddle the usually physically separate spheres of the public and the private. Traditional life styles are more deeply entrenched in rural societies. Caste and religion play a much decisive role in determining stronger patriarchal controls in rural societies. However, when enabling conditions are introduced through enlightened policy measures, an important political space gets created for female political participation. What is as important is that women's entry into politics at the local level also brings significantly more reproductive sphere issues into the public discourse.

In April 1993, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India was enacted as a law. It was an affirmative action programme with a focus on women. The law declared that the local government administration of three tiers should reserve 33% of its seats for women, of which 33% should be reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.⁵³ As Mohanty notes, if the 73rd Amendment is fully implemented throughout India, around one million women come into politics through local government elections to local councils known as *Panchayats*.⁵⁴ So far many states in India have had *Panchayat* elections. Madhu Kishwar, a well known Indian feminist writer opposes structure of reservations on the grounds that women would be mere puppets without power.⁵⁵ Indeed, in the rural villages of India where patriarchy remains very strong, there is reasonable suspicion that women will be manipulated by the dominant males. In some *Panchayats*, women members are not told of the meetings by the male leaders of the *Panchayats*.⁵⁶ What is also significant is that the *Panchayat* system brings into the open, the resistance of a patriarchal system to permit women's entry into the public space of political decision-making. In some case the consequences have been unfortunate. As widely reported in the press, men of the dominant social groups, as a protest against the stand of a female *Panchayat* member in Madhya Pradesh forced her to strip in public. In another incident, a female *Panchayat* member was gang raped since the dominant males opposed her advocacy against child marriage. These two incidents evoked wide protests and brought into the open, many aspects of discriminatory practices against women, often hidden within the domestic sphere. Status quo of discrimination against women is based on patriarchy, and indeed, when the status quo is challenged, resistance often turns to violence against women who are associated with that change. However, on the positive side, protests over such incidents also have brought women together to identify common domestic problems and the opportunity to grapple with such issues at a public forum.

An act of Parliament cannot be expected to change centuries old traditions overnight. At best it could be a catalyst for future change. What the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India has attempted to do is to open up a space at a level where such changes could begin to happen. The emerging positive outcomes in relation to women's empowerment based on the new law are encouraging. Firstly, there have been many cases where the female elected representatives have far exceeded the 33% threshold. In 1994 nine villages in the state of Maharashtra had elected all-women *Panchayats*. While in some states higher caste women had been elected, in some others women of backward classes had better rates of representation. Most of the women elected to *Panchayats* were married. It is interesting to note that among the married women there was a good representation of younger women.⁵⁷

A significant feature of female representation in *Panchayats* is the attention given to issues that emanate from the domestic/reproductive sphere. Elected women representatives have been focussing on issues of the reproductive sphere, such as health and sanitary issues, safe drinking water and public welfare distribution system. Hence, at the village level, female political participation would bring the issues of the private sphere into the public sphere of politics as open, legitimate issues in a process of democratic self-governance. Female representation in elected office at the local level, such as the *Panchayat* opens a space for women to elevate issues of the reproductive sphere to the legitimacy of the public sphere.

Bina Agarwal, notes the adverse impact of landlessness on poor women in a predominantly rural, agricultural India. Citing particular cases, it is shown how male dominant *Gram Panchayats* resorted to gender bias in land registration that virtually disinherited widows and daughters, and in one locality imposed punishment on a woman for using a plough, who was forced by circumstances to break a taboo on women using the plough. She opines that greater female representation in *Panchayats* could, "...Also make local decision-making levels more accessible to village women, increase the likelihood of women getting support for their cause in local property disputes and enlarge women's participation in public meetings held by such bodies. In addition it would increase the likelihood that decisions taken by such *Panchayats* would be less gender-biased."⁵⁸ The *Panchayat* programme, with all its initial flaws that seems to bring out some of the worst characteristics of a rural patriarchal system, also affords women, through a process of elected representation not only an opportunity to share political power, but also to bring the issues of reproductive and community management into the public arena as political issues. The reach of politics for women political activists at the local *Panchayat* is admittedly limited. But, these are women who are rural, either with very low educational levels or illiterate. Their subordination has been ensured by a patriarchal system that has been in operation for centuries. Under such restrictive circumstances, the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has opened a window of opportunity for rural women to forge a continuum between their socially ordained roles in the domestic sphere, with the potential for decision-making in the public sphere of politics. Indeed, it has already been observed that there is coalition building between female leadership in some rural areas in India between *Panchayats* and SEWA, which concentrates on women's informal sector activities.⁵⁹

There is no such progressive legislation in Sri Lanka. Compared to India, the structure of governance is much more centralised in Sri Lanka. While proposals for devolution of power to the nine provinces is on the current political agenda, as a political solution to the ongoing ethnic conflict, any kind of affirmative action to favour women is not on the policy agenda. There were no real spaces created for poor rural women to emerge into the political scene. One may hazard several explanations. As noted earlier, the smallness of the country and its very centralised form of governance draws all the energy of politics to the centre. The periphery is insignificant. This structure robs women of a legitimate avenue of participation in the public sphere of politics, where there is more space for reconciliation between what they perceive as their primary responsibility that lies within the domestic sphere and political participation at the community level. The bottom tier of the local government structure in Sri Lanka, *Gramodaya Mandalayas* do not have the elective principle.⁶⁰ Although some representatives from among women's groups are included at this level, they would be elite women. In sum, while male dominance is very much a norm in rural society in Sri Lanka, the opportunities that the *Gram Panchayats* have thrown open to rural women in India are not visible in Sri Lanka.

Re-Visiting Patriarchy— New Fundamentalist Political Movements in India

In the four categories noted above, women have used certain norms of patriarchy that prevail in society to emerge as politicians, to bring the reproductive issue more forcefully into the political agenda. The underlying motivation is not so much to change patriarchy altogether, but to change the harsher face of it and transform society in order to empower women. Women who are taking a leading role in the new fundamentalists movements in India are attempting to use patriarchy manifested in the Hindu religion in its doctrinal purity. Women's place accordingly is subordinate to men, but they have the power to propel men into a righteous path by being spiritual, working behind the scenes in the home and indeed by bringing up children according to religious values. It is their role to goad men into action so that religious values of the 'motherland' are maintained.

The *Hindutva* movement of India with the rallying cry of *Ramjanmabhoomi* (birth place of Ram, the legendary king of Hindu mythology), literally meant taking back the birth right of a Hindu nation.

The message of *Hindutva* harks back to the perceived notion of Hindu ideology where women are placed squarely within the home and propagates a patriarchal model. Flavia Agnes, a prominent Indian feminist notes how the liberal minded Indian feminists and the fundamentalist groups used the same icons but projected different messages. She notes, “The feminist movement had to constantly counter the allegation that it was ‘Western’. So in order to establish its ‘Indianness’ it relied on Hindu iconography and Sanskrit idioms denoting women power. They undoubtedly strengthened the communal ideology that Indian, Hindu and Sanskrit are synonymous.”⁶¹ The Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the Visva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rastriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS) are the three main political parties that are based on the notion of Hindu fundamentalist ideology. Women’s associations of the BJP and the VHP are bringing in new recruits while the *Durga Vahini* (The army of goddess *Durga*) is a VHP paramilitary organisation exclusively for women. Much of the *Hindutva* literature on women focus on the glorious past, “when women were worshipped” and promotes the perception that women lost all their glory during the dark period of history when India was invaded by barbarians. It’s a direct anti-Muslim message. The female icon is no longer Sita, but much more powerful *Durga* or the eight armed *Astabiya*.⁶² The threat to the community was defined by the protagonists of *Hindutva* as the chastity of women of the community/caste: this threat is then challenged through aggression against women of the other groups.

The BJP, the RSS and the VHP were able to mobilise women as political actors. The BJP was the only political party in India with a woman—Sushma Swaraj—as its general secretary. Leadership of the women’s wing of the RSS simply called *Samiti* has a sizeable following of committed women. The leaders were mostly widows of prominent men.⁶³ The articulate female messengers of the *Hindutva* ideology were very effective in projecting the image of women as mothers who should protect their Hindu nation and culture. A significant characteristic of the female role was in instigation of aggression. Sarkar and Butalia observe that politically and methodologically this assertive participation of right wing campaigns, pulled many of the assumptions of the Indian liberal-minded feminists into crises, since they had always seen women as victims of violence rather than its perpetrators and had perceived their public political activity as a liberating force.⁶⁴ Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharahi and Wijaraje Scindia are the three visible and powerful female politicians of the BJP. All three are celibate. While Scindia is a widow Rithambara and Bharathi have taken over the role of female *Sannyasins* clad in saffron robes. Their chastity removes them from female sexuality, which is perceived as both dangerous to men and a basis of pollution as well. It is a clever use of a non-threatening approach, to draw women into the public sphere of politics, in a highly patriarchal environment. They rely on patriarchy, but selectively use a norm that will not restrict their activities as women. Rithambara and Bharathi assume militant roles within right wing politics. Rithambara is engaged in a reassertion and a reformulation of patriarchal values, notably in the coercive approach of maintaining male sexual honour i.e. *Izzat*. She describes the future of the country in terms of a repetition of rape and pillage, which Hindu militancy must prevent.⁶⁵ The ascendancy of Bharathi as the president of the youth wing of the BJP gave her enormous power. Amrita Basu notes that one of the most important ways in which Rithambara and Bharathi have reached women is by politicising the domain of the personal life. Their radio cassettes have enabled housebound women to become familiar with their views.⁶⁶ Both women come from lower caste poor families. Scindia is from a princely family. She is known to support the practice of *Sati* as a Hindu cultural expression. This is an explicit acknowledgement that a woman is but an appendage of her husband and should die alongside him. Indeed, in this instance, personal is certainly not political, since Scindia is herself a widow. What is interesting about these three women is that they have emerged on their own, not by way of male relatives. But they have just as successfully used certain norms of patriarchal society in articulating their political stand and in establishing their own female identity. There is no question that they have succeeded in using attributes of the private sphere as rallying points in the political discourse located firmly in the public sphere.

Conclusions

We have used five categories for locating women in politics in India and Sri Lanka in order to tease out some of the important strands in understanding women's involvement in politics in India and in Sri Lanka. While there are certain differences between the two countries in relation to the way women participate in politics, both societies have distinct patriarchal structures. We argue that women are bound to operate within the existing system to gain access to the public space of political leadership and participation. We have demonstrated that they have made use of the only available 'openings' in the system to emerge into the more visible world of politics. At each level of political participation there has been a visible shrinking of the boundaries that were structured to keep women out of the public discourse of politics. The private sphere relationships, reproductive issues and patriarchal themes are certainly used as springboards for launching into the political arena. Women who have assumed political leadership have also demonstrated very clearly that they are powerful leaders and are able to withstand the rough and tumble of the system. They have carved their own niches, made clever use of the feminine labels ascribed to them and in fact, have been more successful in establishing dynasties, than the male politicians whose mantle they assumed. The strength of the female political leadership, at the national, sub-national and in the new wave of right wing communal politics show that it is certainly not a flash in the pan orchestrated by a few women. It is a reflection of a growing involvement of a group, which has been made to wait in the wings. They have ingeniously used the very patriarchal structures to subvert the known political system and emerge from an enclosed private sphere into the visible public sphere, but also to bring issues from the reproductive sphere as legitimate political concerns.

There is clear evidence that women who emerge into the political arena do not reject patriarchy. At the same time, by creating political spaces they seem to challenge the male hegemony over political leadership and active participation. Women in India and Sri Lanka seem to identify themselves with the roles that patriarchy designates for them primarily as mothers, wives, and sisters with responsibility in the reproductive sphere, and make use of that role as a base to emerge into politics. For women engaged in politics, the two spheres are but a continuum from one to the other. Thus in the realm of politics for women, personal does indeed become an effective political tool.

Vidyamali Samarasinghe is Associate Professor, International Development Program, School of International Service, American University, Washington DC , USA.

Notes

1. Elisabeth Bumiller, *May You be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India*, NY, Ballantine Books, 1990, p 151.
2. Virginia Shapiro, *The Political Integration of Women, Roles, Socialization and Politics*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1984, p 30.
3. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, NY, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986; and Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, NY, Ballantine Books, 1986.
4. Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "Counting Women's Work: Intersection of Time and Space" in John Paul Jones III, Heidi Nast and Susan M Roberts (eds), *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology and Representation*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1997, pp 129-144; and Maria

- Sagrario Floro, "Work Intensity and Time Use: What do Women do When there aren't Enough Hours in a Day?" in Gay Young and Bette Dickerson (eds), *Colour, Class and Gender: Experiences of Gender*, London, Zed Books, 1994, pp 168-188; and UNDP, *Human Development Report 1995*, NY, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
5. Thenjiwe Mtintso, "From Prison Cell to Parliament" in Alida Brill (ed), *Rising Public Voices: Women in Politics World Wide*, NY, Feminist Press, 1995, pp 103-108.
 6. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, NY, Doubleday, 1970, p 25.
 7. Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1996, p 14.
 8. India and Sri Lanka have been selected since they have a continuous tradition of democratically elected governments since the two countries achieved independence from Britain in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Bangladesh became a separate state only in 1972 and until the 1990s it primarily was under military rule. Pakistan has been governed by military dictatorships for most of the time since it became an independent country in 1947.
 9. Deniz Kandiyotti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy" in Nalini Visvanathan (co-ordinator), Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff and Nan Wiegersma (eds), *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, London, New Jersey, Zed Books, 1997, pp 86-92.
 10. Caroline Moser, *Gender Planning and Development, Practice and Training*, London, NY, Routledge, 1993.
 11. Anne Philipps, *Engendering Democracy*, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p 97.
 12. Jahan Rounaq, "Women in South Asian Politics," *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 9, No 3, 1987, pp 848-870.
 13. Sucheta Mazumdar, "Women, Culture and Politics, Engendering the Hindu Nation," *Special Issue on Religion, Gender, Class and Politics, South Asia Bulletin*, Volume X11, No 2, Fall, 1992, p 1.
 14. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1993, p 119.
 15. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989, p 10.
 16. Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights, 1800-1990*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1993, p 83.
 17. Madhu Kishwar, "Women in Politics: Beyond Quotas," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXX1, No. 43, 26 October 1996, pp 2867-2874.
 18. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London, Zed Books, 1986, p 108.
 19. Sucheta Mazumdar, *op.cit.*, pp 1-24.
 20. Kumari Jayawardena, *op.cit.*
 21. Maureen Seneviratne, *Some Women of the Mahavamsa and the Culavamsa*, Colombo, H W Cave, 1969.
 22. Malathi de Alwis, "The Moral Mother Syndrome," *Pravada*, Colombo, Social Scientists Association, 1998, pp 17-20, and "Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka" in Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (eds), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, London, NY, Routledge, 1998, pp 185-202.
 23. Kumari Jayawardena, *op.cit.*
 24. Chitra Wijesekera, *Women in Our Legislature: A Sri Lankan Study, From 1931-1977*, Sri Lanka, Ratmalana, Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 1995, p 13.

25. Susan Wadley, "Women and the Hindu Tradition" in Rehana Ghadialy (ed), *Women in Indian Society*, New Delhi, Newberry Park and London, Sage, 1988, pp 23-43.
26. Malathi de Alwis, *op.cit.*, 1998.
27. Martha Alter Chen, "Introduction" in Martha Alter Chen (ed), *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action*, New Delhi, London and Sage, Thousand Oaks, p 28.
28. Srimani Athulathmudali is the widow of Lalith Athulathmudali, a leading politician who was assassinated on 23 April 1993, allegedly by the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka.
29. Srima Dissanayake is the widow of Gamini Dissanayake, another leading politician who was assassinated allegedly by the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka on 24 October 1994. At the time of his death he was campaigning as the Presidential candidate of the United National Party against Chandrika Kumaratunga.
30. Mani Shanker Aiyar, "Back to the Kitchen Tribute to Rabri Devi," *India Today*, 29 December 1997, p 21.
31. Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, "Profile of Power Play," *Frontline*, 30 June 1995, p 10.
32. Sumit Mitra Harinder Baweja and Haresh Gupta, "The Sonia Blitzkrieg," *India Today*, 2 March 1998, pp 13-18.
33. Chandra Ranaraja was the mayor of Kandy. Her husband was a member of Parliament and Deputy Minister of Justice. Sarojini Yogeswaran was elected the mayor of Jaffna in 1998. She was assassinated on 17 May 1998 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who opposed the election.
34. Kamala Liyanage, "Women in Political Parties: The Sri Lankan Experience" in Sirima Kiribamune (ed), *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: A Comparative Perspective*, Sri Lanka, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), 1999.
35. Chitra Wijesekera, *op.cit.*, and Pulsara Liyanage, *VIVI: A Biography of Vivienne Goonewardena*, Sri Lanka, Colombo, Women's Education and Research Centre, 1998.
36. Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "Hanging in at the Margin: Political Participation, Democracy and Women in South Asia" in John Richardson Jr and S W R de A Samarasinghe (eds), *Democratisation in South Asia, The First Fifty Years*, Sri Lanka, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), 1998, pp 239-264.
37. *India Today*, "Shakti Seeks Votes," *India Today*, 16 February 1998, pp 16-18.
38. Judith Adler Hellman, "The Riddle of New Social Movement: Who They are and What They Do" in Sander Halebsky and Richard L Harris (eds), *Capital, Power and Equity*, Boulder, Westview, 1995, pp 165-184.
39. Radha Kumar, *op.cit.*
40. Radha Kumar, *op.cit.*
41. Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 286.
42. Radha Kumar, *op.cit.*, p 79.
43. Radha Kumar, *op.cit.*
44. Kumari Jayawardena, "Some Aspects of Feminist Consciousness in the Decade 1975-1985" in *The UN Decade for Women: Progress and Achievements of Women in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), 1985, pp 171-180.

45. Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "Soldiers, Housewives and Peacemakers: Ethnic Conflict and Gender in Sri Lanka," *Ethnic Studies Report*, Volume XIV, No 2, July 1996, pp 203-228.
46. Radha Kumar, *op.cit.*
47. *Nivedini*, "Statement No.1 on Rape: Incidence of Rape in the Eastern Province," Volume 5, No 1, June 1997, pp 99-100.
48. Selvy Thiruchandran, *The Politics of Gender and Women's Agency in Post Colonial Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Women's Education and Research Centre, 1997, p 43.
49. Vidyamali Samarasinghe, *op.cit.*, 1996.
50. Reena Bernard, "Forging Across Borders of Conflict: Women's Diplomacy" in Gay Young, Vidyamali Samarasinghe and Ken Kusterer (eds), *Women at the Center: Development Issues for the 1990s*, Hartford, CT, Kumarian Press, 1993, pp 182-192.
51. Savithri Goonesekere, "Realizing Gender Equity Through Law: Sri Lanka's Experience in the Post Nairobi Decade" in *Facets of Change: Women in Sri Lanka 1986-1995*, Colombo, Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), 1995, p 25.
52. Kumari Jayawardena, "Consciousness Raising in the 1990s," *Nivedini*, Volume 1 No 1, 1993, p 13.
53. A bill which has been tabled in the Indian Legislature for providing for one third reservation for women in both the Lok Sabha (National Legislature of India) and the State Assemblies. However, debate on the Bill has been put off the main Lok Sabha agenda for several years by successive Indian governments. If passed in the Lok Sabha it will be the 80th amendment to the Indian Constitution.
54. Bidyut Mohanty, "Panchayat Raj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXX, No 52, 30 December 1995, pp 3346-3349.
55. Madhu Kishwar, *op.cit.*
56. Pal Pal, "Women in Panchayats: Experiences of a Training Camp," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXX111, No 4, 14 January 1998, pp 150-152.
57. Bidyut Mohanty, *op.cit.*
58. Bina Agarwal, *op.cit.*, p 286.
59. Renana Jhabavale, "Social Protection for Workers in the Informal Sector," Seminar on *The Informal Economy: Social Protection and Poverty Reduction Policies*, Washington DC, World Bank, 31 May 2000.
60. Sirima Kiribamune, "Women in Local Government Politics in Sri Lanka" in *Women Claim Their Rights in Local Politics: Strategies to Increase Women's Participation in Local Government and Administration in South and South East Asia*, Bangkok, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1994, pp 81-115.
61. Flavia Agnes, "Refining the Agenda of the Women's Movement with a Secular Framework" in Tanika Sarkar and Uravashi Butalia (eds), *Women and Right Wing Movements: Indian Experience*, London, New Jersey, Zed Books, 1995, p 135.
62. Sucheta Mazumdar, *op.cit.*
63. Paola Bachchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues: The Sangh the Samithi and Their Differential Concepts of the Hindu Nation" in Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (eds), *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1996, pp 126-167.
64. Tanika Sarkar and Uravashi Butalia, "Introductory Remarks" in Tanika Sarkar and Uravashi Butalia (eds), *Women and Right Wing Movements, Indian Experiences*, London, New Jersey, Zed Books, 1995, p 3.

65. Kumkum Sangari, "Consent, Agency and Rhetoric of Incitement" in V Sathyamurthy (ed), *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, Volume III, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 468-508.
66. Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery of Real Women of Hindu Nationalism" in Tanika Sarkar and Uravashi Butalia (eds), *op.cit.*, pp 158-180.

References

- George Mathew, and Ramesh Nayak, "Panchayats at Work, What it Means for the Oppressed," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXXI, No 12, 6 July 1996, pp 1765-1771.
- Tanika Sarkar, "Hindu Women, Politicization Through Communalism" in Kumar Rupesinghe and Khawar Mumtaz (eds), *Internal Conflicts in South Asia*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage, 1996, pp 131-143.