

# THE CAREER PATH OF ASIAN WOMEN LEADERS: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN' POLITICAL STRUGGLE

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## ABSTRACT

*This article is an effort to explore career path of the Asian women political leaders, who rose to the top leadership positions. Most of the scholars emphasise that Asian women achieved these positions through their strong family background or political exigency. However, this study argues that beside family background and political situation, these women leaders demonstrated phenomenal political skills in most testing political situations and consequently acquired and retained their positions. Therefore, it is imperative to study the extra-ordinary struggle of these women political leaders. The questions under investigation are how women political leaders acquire and retain leadership positions not only through the backing of their already influential families but also through their extra ordinary struggle? How their personal character and skills were more instrumental in acquiring and retaining top positions? How the situation in which they took leadership provided a context within which opportunities were availed and personal character and skills were demonstrated? Qualitative research method is used to analyse selected case studies representing Asian women leaders. Secondary sources like books, journals, newspaper articles are used to collect data in order to explore the career path of these leaders and to substantiate the claims made by this study.*

**Key Words:** Phenomenal political skills, Testing political situation, Political exigency, extra-ordinary struggle.

## INTRODUCTION

Women political leaders have undoubtedly left a discernible mark in world politics. They have done so by shaping political and economic reforms within their respective countries and also by shaping international relations through distinctive foreign policy decisions. Currently, there are 22 women in the world who have occupied the most prestigious top political leadership positions in their respective countries. Among them 18 are elected through popular elections and 4 are appointed. 22 out of 193 have women head of the state and government. 13 out of 193 have at least 50 percent in national cabinet. 3 out of 193 have at least 50 percent in national legislature. Among 178 head of the states, 15 are women: 13 are presidents and 2 are queens. More than 70 countries can boast that a woman has held the position of president or prime minister there, many of those have been in Asia and Europe. Women political leadership is not an aberration in South America, South and in the Southeast Asia (Adamczyk, 2016).

Scholars would particularly refer to Asia when it comes to women political leadership. Asia has been much more generous in allowing women to reach to top political positions. Nitin would call Asia a 'heaven' for the women leading their way to success in politics. Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand and Mongolia are the countries with elected women heads of the states. This means that half (4 billion) of the Asian population are living in countries with women heads which makes it 'number one continent' in the world with women political leaders (Nitin, 2013:03). In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first female Premier in Sri Lanka who achieved leadership position. Followed by Indira Gandhi of India, Golda Meir of Israel, Corazon Aquino of Philippines, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, Sheikh Hasina Wajid of Bangladesh, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of Philippines, Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia, Pratibha Patil of India, Roza Otunbayeva of Kyrgyzstan, Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand and Park Geun Hye of South Korea also became prominent women political leaders in their respective

countries. Interestingly, most of these women leaders hail from the Muslim dominant countries (Szczepanski, 2015:01). There is considerable academic interest in the contribution of women political leaders around the world. However, there is comparatively less academic interest in how these women acquired leadership positions.

Asian women political leaders are all popularly elected, having influential families with popular family dynasties in politics and they are directly involved in the social activities and power structure of their countries (Fleschenberg, 2009:24-15;Jalalzai & Krook, 2010:09). Scholars argue that the emergence of these women leaders does not seem to modify the male-dominated nature of Asian societies. Rather, it verifies the power of a name and the perseverance of political dynasties, social class and caste system (Herath, 2015: 03).

Most of the women political leaders in Asia who have occupied highest public offices came from the politically illustrious families. Therefore, various scholars (see above) would conclude that the success of acquiring political leadership is determined primarily by family background. Such an understanding often undermines the abilities and struggles of women political leaders who acquire and retain top political positions. In this article, an effort is made to reflect on how women political leaders acquire and retain leadership positions not only through the backing of their already influential families but also through their extra ordinary struggle. In order to do so I explored the biographies of selected political leaders from Asia to investigate their career path. I undoubtedly claim that family background facilitated these women in acquiring top leadership positions, however, their personal character and skills were more instrumental in acquiring and retaining top positions. Moreover, the situation in which they took leadership provided a context within which opportunities were availed and personal character and skills were demonstrated. These women leaders were able to prove that besides taking care of their household they can also serve respective countries in face of all odds. They are hardworking, ambitious and (politically) skilled to carry out sound domestic and foreign policies.

The way women political leaders exploited situations and skills to reach to the top positions are the main focus of this article. It intends to do so by exploring the selective profiles and career path of these women leaders. The family backgrounds, their biographies and struggle of some of the top women political leaders of Asia are discussed to identify important factors that lead women to top positions and facilitate them to stay on those top positions. In this article, a profile sketch of these women leaders are brought under consideration and then analyse how their situation and skills facilitated them to acquire and retain the power for an extended period of time.

#### **Profiles of Women Political Leaders: An Over View**

##### **1.1)Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka):**

Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first Sri Lankan woman Prime Minister. She was born in Ratnapura District on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1916. Her father Barns Ratwatte Disave was a reputed senator and from a prominent Sinhalese family. These families have also served in the British colonial rule and adopted English first names. However, they were the staunch observers of Buddhism. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the eldest among her six siblings and at eight years, she was sent to Convent School for best education. After her education, she started social welfare programmes for the purpose to help needy and poor people of her country. She provided them food, medicines and arranged clinics for them as well. Such considerations towards her people enabled her to gain good reputation among the Sinhalese peasantry (Rettie,2010: 01-04).

She was married to Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike (1899-1959) on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1940, who was an Oxford educated lawyer and the minister of local government and health (1947-51) in the ruling United National Party. Srimavo Bandranaike persuaded her husband for resigning from the ruling United National Party and the government. After two years in 1951, he founded his own political party Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with the policies of democratic socialism and Sinhalese resurgence. After eight years of Sri Lanka independence, Mr. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in April 1956(Perera, 2012:02).

Sirimavo Bandaranaike took over the party leadership and became the president of the SLFP after Mr. Bandaranaike assassination by the Buddhist monk on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1959. She gained public

support and sympathies and proved herself as an undefeatable politician who worked as an undisputed leaders of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and had the reins of the party for forty years (Epasinghe, 2015:01). Mrs. Bandaranaike became the modern World first female Prime Minister in 1960 from the Asian continent and served her country three times (1960-65, 1970-77, 1994-2000) as a prime minister and remained the opposition leader during 1965-70 and 1989-94(Iwanaga, 2008: 272).

Generally in the Asian region, females have subordinate position to their males and have little or no stand in the public life but Sirimavo Bandranaike proved herself both nationally and internationally as an eminent woman political leader who continued her husband policies of socialism at home. She had nationalized all the foreign oil companies and all the government businesses were transferred to the State owned bank of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). She had also established new People's Bank. During her regime, Soviet aid was utilized for the industrialization process of her country, brought education reforms for the Buddhist Sinhalese and neutralism/non-alignment movement was adopted as well by her government(Perera, 2012:02).

But, Sirimavo Bandaranaike also faced different problems, communal riots, administrative turmoil and financial problems during her premiership. Her period of office was one of the mounting financial difficulty. Due to these reasons, she was defeated in 1965 elections but got prominence in the next elections of 1970's (Jones,2015:53).

Mrs. Bandaranaike faced severe criticism from her opponents because of her personal and political life. In 1962, her political opponents tried to overthrow her government, jobless youth raised against her government for their grievances in 1971 and in 1980 her civic rights were withdrawn, SLFP headquarters was closed and threats were given by the political opponents but she faced all the troubles and conspiracies courageously. Mrs Bandaranaike gained more and more popularity through her bold and consistent approach. She gave new constitution, changed the name of the country from Ceylon to Sri Lanka and declared it a Republic in 1972, foreign owned estates were nationalized by her government and placed the land limits to fifty acres by the Land Reform Commission. Sirimavo Bandaranaike died on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2000(Perera,2012:02).

She got sympathies of the public initially by making emotional speeches during the election campaign through which she earned the title of 'weeping widow'. But later her present mind, dedications towards her political career enabled her to make sound domestic and foreign policies and she adopted tough stance against the insurgents who tried to destroy the peace and prosperity of the Sri Lankan nation.

## **1.2) Indira Gandhi (India):**

Indian first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was born in Allahabad on November 19, 1917 in an aristocratic and politically prominent family of Nehru's. Her grandfather Motilal Nehru was a Nationalist leader and her father Jawaharlal Nehru, a prominent Indian Independence leader and the first Prime Minister of India (Frank, 2002:13).

Indira was brought up in a political environment where she met politically prominent figures influenced by her father. Her initial studies was from different Indian and non- Indian schools and sometimes from the private tutors. In 1934, she started her studies in Visva Bharatic Academy where the headmaster was a well -known writer Rabindranath Tagore who taught her philosophy and arts. She then got admission at Bristol, England in a progressive school. She started her graduation at Somerville College, Oxford in 1937 and finally completed her higher studies from Oxford (England) and Switzerland(Flatt, 2012:184).

After her graduation from Oxford in 1941, she returned to India. She married to a Parsi politician Feroze Gandhi in 1942 who was studying in London School of Economics at the time when Indira Gandhi was in Oxford. Indira Gandhi was actively engaged in the Indian independence movement against the British Imperial power because of which she was imprisoned by the British troops immediately after her marriage from September, 11<sup>th</sup>,1942-May 13<sup>th</sup> , 1943 at Naini Central Jail, Allahabad (Thelikorala,2011:02).

In 1953, she became a member of the Congress working committee which was the India's ruling party and she had also worked for the women interest while serving in the women department of the

Congress Party. She had visited different parts of the country to create awareness among women of India about their rights and duties. In 1959, she was the only female and fourth president of the Indian National Congress Party. Indira Gandhi also served in Jawaharlal Nehru government after independence during 1947-65 and gained much power within the government (Flatt, 2012:185).

Then, she became an elected member of the Rajya Sabha and held the post of the Minister of Information and Broadcasting in the cabinet of Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1964, after the death of her father. In 1966-1977, she was appointed as a Prime Minister of India after the Shastri's sudden death with the support of the K. Kamaraj who was President of the Congress party at that time (Chacko, 2012). She had won the elections of 1971 and introduced different economic policies for the increased productivity of agriculture and side by side she was also involved in the global politics as well. In the 1970's secessionist conflict of East Pakistan, she helped and supported them in their struggle of independence against Pakistan to become an independent state of Bangladesh. During her Premiership, India exploded her first nuclear bomb which empowered India to protect herself against foreign aggression and to create India's hegemony in South Asian region as well (Flatt, 2012:187).

But in June 1975, because of the election irregularities in the 1971 elections and violation of the election laws, Allahabad High court ruled against her to vacate the post of premier and banned her for six years from taking part in politics. In response of such ruling, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad had declared state of emergency on the advice of Indira Gandhi. Her government ban the media, imprisoned her opponents, limited the fundamental rights of people and used police force against the strikes and protests of her adversaries. While on the other side, her son Sanjay Gandhi had started the sterilization programme for the control of Indian rapidly growing population. Public rose against her dictatorial rule and she announced the date for the next general elections in 1977. On March 23, 1977 emergency was uplifted but she badly lost in the 1977 general elections (Green, 2013:03).

In 1980, elections were held for the lower house of Parliament (Lok Sabha). Indira Gandhi and her party again won the elections and all the cases against her were withdrawn. She became Prime Minister of India once again from 1980-84, but she faced severe challenges including separatist's movement by Sikhs community in Northern Punjab who revolted against her government. They were badly crushed by the Indira's government through the use of military force "Operation Blue Star" against the separatists within premises of the Sikhs Golden Temple. Thousands of civilian lost their lives in this revolt and she herself was shot dead on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards in revenge of the Golden Temple episode (Nadeau & Rayamajhi, 2013:126).

Indira Gandhi served the nation in two phases: 1967-1974 which were favourable years of her charismatic leadership and she gained much popular support for her good policies while the next phase 1975-1984 was considered to be the power centralization by her, who violently treated her opponents which gave her the image of dictator and authoritarian leader. Braga praised Indira Gandhi by stating that during her premiership Indian literacy rate was increased to 30% and the poverty rate was decreased to 45% from 65%. Her efforts and sound agricultural policies for the revival of agricultural sector raised the production of different food items to 25%, which brought Green Revolution in India (Braga, 2013:03). Such agricultural policies were the efforts by her government to handle the inflation. Through her sound economic policies, she nationalized the Indian Banks. Indra also created diplomatic relations with United States and USSR through her socialist policies. India became the nuclear power of the region during her premiership. Her policies enabled India to be self-sufficient to such extent as to no longer dependent on foreign aids. Through her power and abilities she is compared with Durga (Indian nation goddess) who has the power to stand against all odds (Aswathy, 2013:n.d).

### **1.3) Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan):**

Benazir Bhutto, was the first Muslim female Prime Minister of a Muslim country, Pakistan. She was born on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1953 in Karachi (Pakistan) and died on 27<sup>th</sup> Dec 2007. She received her early education from Karachi Convent of Jesus and Mary School run by Irish Catholic nuns and then went for graduation to Harvard University where she completed her graduation in Law at Lady Margaret Hall College. Benazir Bhutto obtained her diploma in Foreign Affairs from Oxford University (Buruma,

1989: 04). Then in 1976, she became the First Pakistani student elected as a president of the Oxford Union Debating Society in UK (Khuhro & Soomro, 2013:274).

Benazir Bhutto was the daughter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. He was from the wealthiest landowning families of Pakistan, an Oxford educated lawyer, former Prime Minister of Pakistan and the founder of the popular political party Pakistan People's Party in 1967(Hussain,2008:01). Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto got support of the people under the banner of Islamic Socialism and ruled the country for seven years from 1970-1977. He tried to overcome the main problems of Pakistan which was poverty, socio-economic imbalance and the dominance of the elite class in the socio-political system of Pakistan but later he himself was in need of the elites support. Some of his intimidating policies for the suppression of the political opponents, corruption and fraud ended his regime through military coup by Zia-ul Haq (Dolek, 2008:04).Likewise, mother of Benazir Bhutto, Nusrat Ispahani was the daughter of the Iranian businessman. Benazir Bhutto was the eldest among her three siblings. On Feb 17, 1987 she married with Asif Ali Zardari. Asif Ali Zardari is the son of a landowner/businessman friend of Z.A. Bhutto, Hakim Ali Zardari. The couple was blessed with three children, Bilawal, Bakhtawar and Asifa (Hussain, 2008:02).

Benazir Bhutto was nurtured in a political environment by her father Z. A. Bhutto. General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq imposed martial law on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1977, which was the third martial law in the history of Pakistan. Army chief promised for the elections to be held within 90 days but later he didn't fulfil his promise and postponed the elections on the ground of accountability of the corrupt politicians. As a result of accountability process, Z. A. Bhutto was trialled on charges of conspiracy and the murder of Ahmad Raza Kasuri and was later executed on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1979. Z. A. Bhutto's wife Nusrat Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto were placed under house arrest (Shah, 2013:04).

Imprisonment and then the death of Z. A. Bhutto and the murder of her two brothers made Benazir more enthusiastic, responsible and active in the political affairs of Pakistan but her life was full of difficulties facing time of exile, house arrest then reached to peak and gained power which was followed by her dismissals. She returned to Pakistan in 1977 after completing her education from Harvard and Oxford. She was warmly welcomed by the people of Pakistan and gave her the title of the 'daughter of Pakistan'. She earned the popular support which led her triumph over the military ruler and through her inborn abilities she was able to retain such popularity (Dolek, 2008:04).

She followed the footprints of her father in politics and continued struggling for the restoration of democracy against the General Zia military rule. For the purpose to restore the democracy in Pakistan, she launched a movement named 'Movement for the Restoration of Democracy' in 1981 with the support of nine other political parties. Her efforts were for the restoration of 1973 constitution, parliamentary elections for the purpose to transfer power to the democratically elected government and to uplift the martial law. As a result she was imprisoned till 1984 (Shah, 2013:04).The period between1979-1984, Benazir faced house arrests, imprisonment and self- exile to UK in 1986.Then in 1986 she returned to Pakistan and started her campaign for office. She was recalled as the political opponent of General Zia (Eoan, 2007, 02).

But, the excessive international pressure on Zia regime for the restoration of democracy made Zia announcing the election date in November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1988 on non- party basis. This elections were challenged by Benazir Bhutto in the Court of Justice but before any judgement, Zia -ul Haq died in a plane crash on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1988. Ghulam Ishaq Khan became the President of Pakistan and he held the general elections on 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> November 1988, which was won by Benazir Bhutto party. She became the first youngest (35 years old) Muslim woman Prime Minister of an Islamic country Pakistan, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1988 and became the tenth Prime Minister of Pakistan (Jaffrelot, 2002:24).

Benazir had occupied the post of Prime Minister from 1988-1990 and then from 1993-1996 and was the parliamentary opposition leader from 1990-1993 and from 1997-1998 and spent self - exile from 1999-2007 and was assassinated in 2007 (Fleschenberg, 2008: 64).Benazir Bhutto held twice the position of Prime Minister though she never managed to complete her terms but was a significant political figure in Pakistani politics (Iwanaga, 2008: 37).

Bhutto in her biography intended that her struggle paved the way to change the traditional aspects of our society, the common perception regarding the Asian women gender role is to perform the



family responsibilities. Benazir Bhutto stated that she faced the same challenges in the traditional society of Pakistan as an ordinary women faced when criticized by the clergy. She worked for democracy, liberty and social justice in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto brought some reforms in the early years of her government and made the press free, gave the people their basic right of speech and thoughts and made Pakistan free from all sorts of exploitation (Chitkara, 1996:67).

McCarthy contends that later Bhutto turned against her promises and worked for the consolidation of her political power rather than work for the welfare of people. She relied on the support of elite class instead of public. Similarly, she tried to settle the problems with India and Afghanistan through negotiations without taking the military in confidence which created great resentment in armed forces. Her close ties with the West and US for the foreign aid gave her a political breakdown and her government was dismissed in August 1990 on the charges of bargaining for personal gains, and there was a political competition and the humiliation of the opponents (McCartney, 2011:170).

Benazir Bhutto was again re-elected in 1993. President Farooq Laghari had good relations with Benazir and promised her to freely work without the interference of a president. She faced severe problems like in 1994-95 Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) led the Mohajir Nationalism in Sindh and was involved in violent acts which the government of Benazir responded aggressively (Shah, 1997:78). Similarly, financial condition of Pakistan was bad that country was close to bankruptcy. She led Social Action Programme (SAP) to provide better life facilities to people. Her government received foreign aid but most of it was utilized for the electricity generation. Her government choose to support US led Afghan Taliban both financially and military (Tucker, 2010:209). This policy made the military legitimized institution to interfere in the politics of Pakistan. Her government was again dismissed in 1997 on the basis of corruption and maladministration (Naden, 2011:69).

She went into exile for the second time in 2007. After political negotiations, with the President Musharraf she returned to Pakistan. On her very return she survived from an attack on her life. She faced second attack on her life in a procession gathered in Rawalpindi but she could not survive from this attack and died on 27<sup>th</sup> December 2007. Benazir Bhutto was a brave and courageous woman and always took risk for her life and fought against dictators (Brown, 2008:10). Though her life was full of troubles, struggles, successes and dismissals but throughout her life she faced the difficult situation courageously and worked for the rights, education and better life standards of people. She struggled hard against the dictatorial military rule of General Zia-ul Haq and led a movement for the restoration of Democracy (MRD) and brought an end to the 11 years rule of a military regime (Shah, 2013:01).

#### **1.4) Begum Khalida Zia (Bangladesh):**

Bangladesh Prime Minister, Khalida Zia was born in a business family in Jalpaiguri (North Eastern part of the Bangladesh) on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. She married Zia ur Rehman (b1935-d1981) in 1960 at fifteen years of age. Zia ur Rehman was serving in the Pakistan army as a captain at the time of her marriage. She had completed her studies at the college level three years later after her marriage. Then they were being transferred to West Pakistan for the Zia ur Rehman commitment in the 1965 war of Pakistan and India, to command the East Pakistan Regiment in the war (Gerlach, 2013:120) and later in 1967 the family returned to East part of Pakistan (now Bangladesh). When the liberation war was started by Eastern part of Pakistan, the country was divided into eleven different zones and Zia ur Rehman was the general in charge of one zone. He led the Mukhti Bahini Battalion and fought against Pakistan, became victorious and Bangladesh emerged as an independent state on the map of the world in 1971. After the Sheikh Mujeeb's assassination in 1975, he became the Chief of Army and a dominant figure of Army (editors of American Heritage, 2005:865). General Zia ur Rehman became the country's first military dictator who occupied the post of country's Presidency from 1977-1980. During Zia ur Rehman presidency, Khalida Zia acted as a typical house wife and remained away from politics (Gerlach, 2013:121).

But the situation after the assassination of her husband in 1981 paved the way for the politically inexperienced Khalida Zia towards political leadership. There were three candidates for the BNP presidency and in 1984 she became the leader of her husband's party Bangladesh National Party (BNP) which was a sign of popular support for her (Hudson, 1997:39 & 40).

The women in Bangladesh who fought against the military dictator were two noteworthy Begums: Begum Khalida Zia and Begum Hasina Wajid. In 1990 their struggles became fruitful and they brought an end to the military rule of Ershad for the second time (Foley, 2013:222). Then under the supervision of the interim government, elections were held in 1991 which was considered to be the first ever democratic elections after the Bangladesh independence. The leader of Bangladesh National Party (BNP), Begum Khalida Zia became an elected prime minister of Bangladesh and the rival party Awami League leader, Sheikh Hasina Wajid occupied the opposition benches. Khalida Zia brought certain changes in the constitution and replaced presidential form of government into parliamentary form with prime minister having the vast executive powers. Human rights situation became improved in the country by eliminating the restriction on the fundamental rights of the people (Askwik, 1995:95).

Her government made laws regarding compulsory education for female and the bill related to the death penalty for the crimes against the children and women was also introduced in February 14<sup>th</sup> 1995 in the parliament (Ahmed, 2004:231). The military ruler Ershad was imprisoned on the corruption charges. Her official visits to Saudi Arabia and China in 1991 were for the purpose of technical and economic cooperation. Likewise, her visit to India in 1992 was for the purpose to resolved water sharing problem. Bangladesh signed nine hundred and ninety nine years lease agreement of Teen Bigha Corridor with India. She also made official visits to Pakistan, Iran, Burma led her country close to the neighbouring and other countries of the World (Ahmed, 2004:232). Her foreign policy moves around good relations with China and Pakistan to counter the threats from the outside World especially from India (Singh, 2010:284).

She held the post of Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1991-1996 and then from 2001-2006. Again under the supervision of a caretaker government elections were held on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2001, in which BNP led the four party alliance won two third majority in the Parliament and Khalida Zia became the prime minister on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2001. Awami League throughout the BNP government boycotted and then returned to the parliament regarding different issues and criticized the sound economic and foreign policies of the BNP government. Law and order situation became worst during 2005, when extremist Islamist group attacked different government buildings and killed number of people but were suppressed by the government and peace was restored (International business publication, 2016:35&36).

Though, Khalida Zia was an inexperienced political leader but after achieving the post of Premier, she developed her skills and was able to cope with the new situation. She tried to solve different issues with the neighbouring countries. Her close relations with the different countries was the clear indication of her sound and friendly foreign policy. Such efforts make Bangladesh able to defend herself against any aggression.

#### **1.5) Sheikh Hasina Wajid (Bangladesh):**

Sheikh Mujeeb ur Rehman, father of the Bangladeshi nation became the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1975. He was assassinated on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1975 along with his family members. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajid, survived the assassination attempt because she was in Germany at the time of her father's assassination (Mitra *et al.* 2006:23).

Sheikh Hasina Wajid (daughter of the founding father) remained in exile for six years. Later, she returned to Bangladesh and actively participated in country's politics. After the assassination of all her family members, political succession of her family was passed to Hasina Wajid. In 1981 she was elected as the President of Awami League (Stange *et al.* 2011: 669). In 1986, she became the opposition leader by winning three constituencies in the Bangladeshi Parliament. Then in 1991, she became an oppositional leader with the government leader Khalida Zia. During this tenure, Khalida Zia initiated twelfth amendment in the constitution for the prime ministerial form of government in the country (Chakrabarti, 2013:483).

Sheikh Hasina Wajid struggled for the fair, democratic government by demanding the resignation of the corrupt politicians to conduct general elections in 1996 under the supervision of the caretaker government. These elections were won by Awami league, a political party led by Sheikh Hasina Wajid. She was able to form a coalition government and she took an oath of the tenth Prime minister of

Bangladesh on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1996. She remained in office from 1996-2001. She had served the country twice as a prime minister from 1996- 2001 and from 2009–present (Stange, *et. al*, 2011:669). Her electoral victory paved the way for democracy after twenty one year's long struggle against the oppressive, corrupt rule and after the continuous imposition of martial laws (Chitkara, 1998:313).

In December 1996, Ganges water sharing treaty was signed with India by Sheikh Hasina. She was enthusiastic to work for the improvement and development of her country (International Business Publication, 2011:38). In 1997, a peace accord named Chittagong Hill tract was signed by her government and in 1998 opened Bangabandhu bridge across the Jamuna River which linked the eastern and western part of the country. Her policies are related to create friendly relations with other countries (Shrestha, 2002:237).

Later in the 2001 elections, her party was defeated and she became an opposition leader. The elections were to be held in 2007 but later the schedule was changed and the elections become delayed. Sheikh Hasina Wajid was arrested on the charges of bribery and some other charges. Then in 2008 elections, Awami League formed a grand alliance with fourteen other political parties and won an absolute majority. Sheikh Hasina Wajid again took the responsibility of the country as a prime minister in January 2009 (Foley, 2013:222).

This time she is more enthusiastic. The first initiative took by her government is the formation of a committee for the restoration of the original constitution. Her government also announced the women development and education policies in 2010. Women development policies ensures the equal property rights for the women and specified forty percent quota for women in different government jobs including parliament and local bodies. While in the education policy, they make free primary education compulsory and the emphasis would be more on the scientific and technological education. She also took initiatives to solve all her problems with the opponent BNP for the betterment and progress of the country (Mastoor, 2009:23).

Her government also signed an accord in 2011 on the four-decade old border dispute with India. According to the accord, demarcation of the boundaries of both the countries and the exchange of their occupied area of about seven thousand acres and fifty thousand people are to be return. During her rule, government tribunal was formed to investigate the members of the Bangladesh Islamist party Jammāt-i- Islami was charged with the war crimes because of their cooperation with Pakistan during the liberation war of 1971 (Chopra, 2015:211).

#### **The Rise of Women Political Leader: Critical Analysis**

The above mentioned women reached to top leadership positions in countries where women are far from achieving political equality and their rights (Lithgow, 2000:01). However, ironically women politicians of the Northeast, Southeast and South Asia also led many governments and the opposition movements. In Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, women are predominant in politics and have occupied top leadership posts as presidents and prime ministers several times in their respective countries. The most notable among them are Indira Gandhi & Sonia Gandhi in India, Begum Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajid in Bangladesh, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Srimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka , Corazon C. Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo from the Philippines.

Mostly, the political victimization and crisis situations of family and country excel these women in public domain and motivate them to endeavour for the rights and prosperity of public. Further, Fleschenberg argues that they are the elected representatives of their people but are the descendent from socially and politically influential families and ruling dynasties (Fleschenberg, 2008:24-25). It is often assumed that this political legacy grant them top leadership positions of party leadership, prime ministers, presidents and opposition leaders. These women political leaders have ably led the political parties of their husbands and fathers. Basu argues that they are either the daughters of the founding fathers or the influential figures of their respective countries. They are/were the privileged political ladies whose parents or husbands served the country as prime ministers or former politicians (Basu, 2005:06). They skilfully led their political parties and united the dispirited public, and had articulated their hopes and ably gain their support as well.



Though these women political leaders laid the foundation of dynastic model of democracy, they became the successors of the political positions of the slaying male members of their families and set a pattern for the future females to occupy the political positions in the same hereditary manner (Jensen, 2008:16).

Being the successors of the political victimized male, they benefitted by gaining the sympathies and support of their people. Jensen mentioned Srimavo Bandaranaike prominence as 'weeping widow' and 'mother of the orphan children'. Srimavo Bandaranaike got sympathies of public through a political narrative highlighting the achievements and sacrifices made by her husband and her own ordeals in response to the death threats at the death of her husband (Jensen, 2008:16).

But, their skills and strategies to manipulate the situations in a manner to create a suitable environment in the patriarchal and traditional societies' further facilitated them in political struggle. Scholars posit that the education of these women leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto from the reputed colleges and universities, the social strata and their privileged class as compared to the general population also facilitated them in their rise to top leaderships. These privileges further increased their probabilities of success and leadership (Jalazai & Krook, 2010:08).

Though mostly women political leaders are inexperienced politicians performing the typical traditional role as mothers and homemakers and they are considered to be symbolic leaders who can be easily influenced and controlled by the male party members as compared to the established male leaders (Bakshi, 2001:01). But these suppositions are nullified by the women political leaders as they prove themselves strong. They demonstrate political acumen and ability to improvise through fast learning. Scholars have also referred to their efficiency (Alston, 2014: 235) ethics, intelligence, trustworthiness and honesty and risk taking in tumultuous political environment as compared to their male counterparts (Skard, 2012:156). The effectiveness of a political leader lies in their sincerity, honesty and trustworthiness. Women politicians demonstrate these characteristics (Davidson, 2004:70).

Thus, skills, characteristics and qualities demonstrated by Asian women leaders such as both Srimavo Bandaraika and Khalida Zia were politically inexperienced but their supporters considered them to be very ethical, morally upright and reliable leaders with illustrious political history of public welfare (Skard, 2012:156).

Women political leaders from South Asia have taken the charge of the disorganized political parties when the later were in bad shape. Each of the five women leaders (Indira Gandhi, Srimavo Bandaranaike, Khalida Zia, Sheikh Hasina Wajid, Benazir Bhutto) reorganized their parties in a much better way. This shows their ability as leaders in their own right (Bakshi, 2001:01). Such politically skilled leaders are aware of the feeling, emotions and requirements of their people by creating friendly environment and are able to influence their people with the help of their skills to handle the difficult situation with ease. They recognized themselves as true leaders of their people which make them able to remain in power (Braddy & Campbell, 2014:01).

Women politicians are able enough to impart a message of power, strength and decisiveness. Women leaders are not just the compromising leaders but they are strong enough to have adopted sound policies and took strong actions against those who sabotage their respective governments (Campus, 2013:06).

For a politically skilled leader, social relationship is needed in order to gain the support of their people to achieve the objectives. Women politicians through their former socialization and political skills formed their relationship across different constituencies and influenced their public in general to create a relationship with them in such a manner that they started including them in their struggle to achieve the desired goals (Klenke, 2011:56). This is also because women are believed to have good communication skills. Scholars have praised Benazir Bhutto political wisdom, courage, eloquent, endurance and commitment towards people's welfare and determination for the achievement of the set goals. Benazir Bhutto is credited as being an effective and democratic leader because of her political skills as perseverance and determination (Gillani, 2010).

Similarly writers appraised Srimavo Bandaranaike courage, political skills, dedication, capacity to learn and toughness. She was a modest, trusted and powerful member of her cabinet

(Richardson,2005:308). While Indira Gandhi earned the title of an 'Iron Lady of India' because of her tough actions against the odds. With such exceptional skills, attributes and determination these women leaders became a role model and example for other women folk(Thelikorala, 2011:01).

Similarly, apart for political skills, socialization and circumstances are important determinants for the emergence and amelioration of these political leaders. Socialization provided the force and skill to gain political power (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010:09).The grooming of Benazir Bhutto was totally for the political leadership. Benazir was brought up to be her father's political heir. As an elder child of her family, she got special attention. Z. A. Bhutto took Benazir to attend his political meeting and conferences (Skard,2012:125). Similarly, Indira Gandhi was also trained for politics, the fact that other ladies were able to hold their own in the tumultuous situation must be regarded as a tribute to their resilience as politicians (Dixit,2008:45).

Political socialization for Srimavo Bandranaike and Khalida Zia started after the assassination of their husbands. They came to the forefront and achieved the leadership of their political parties founded by their consorts and then occupied the top leadership position of their countries as well (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010:09).

Apart from skills, the circumstance/situation are also helpful in the rise of these women leaders to the top leadership positions and got political successes (Jalalzai & Krook, 2010:09). Scholars postulates that the place, time and circumstances facilitates the rise of a great leader (Bass, *et al*,1981:38) and situational leadership demands the compatible leadership style to the involvement and capacity of their followers (Northouse, 2013 :99). The above mentioned women political leaders emerged in an uncertain, chaotic situations. They sought political power in dramatic situation created by military coup, murder or sudden death of a leader or opposition by authoritarian forces. Women leaders led peaceful movement against autocratic and military rulers and women are highly vulnerable in conflict situations, whether household related conflict or violence, community or local tensions, armed conflict and civil war(O'Conner,2010:384). Political unrest, the demand for change and the unpopular regimes are helpful in providing opportunities to the women to take the leadership position (Skard, 2012:154). In several South Asian states, authoritarian /military rule has curtailed democratic processes which opened channels for the empowerment of discriminated groups including women (Shaheed,n.d:07). These women got prominent leadership position through democratic revolution in Asia. Uncertain situation in their countries provide chances to the women politicians to hold the top political leadership positions as they are thought to be more honest, moral and selfless advocates of the cause of their assassinated /martyred father or husband(Shehabuddin,2014:72). But all these women have their own experiences and have their own distinct style for configuring the influences and events (Martin & Borrelli,1997:45).The emergence of Benazir Bhutto(Lithgow, 2000:05), Khalida Zia, Hasina Wajid (Foley,2013:222) have revolted against the dictatorial rule in their own ways.

They faced different situations such as house arrest, exile threats and the assassination attempts. However, they survived and proved themselves as the substantiate leaders of the people because of their persistency in hard times (Shehabuddin, 2014:72), which paved the way for democracy and provide the fundamental rights of the people. Srimavo Bandranaike and Indira Gandhi faced different problems before and even after their commencement to top leadership positions from the secessionist/separatists group(Martin & Borrelli,1997:45). Similarly, Benazir Bhutto also faced resistance from the conservative/religious parties like Jamat-i-Islami, JUI clerics supporting by the ulemas of Saudi Arabia issuing fatwas against the women rule. A series of violent acts and agitation started to destabilize the new elected government but Benazir Bhutto called it the consequences of the election results by those who faced defeat and are backed by military (Ispahani,2015:56).These women leaders have resisted militarism, desire to become equally represented in democracies raised their voices against military dictators(Pandey, 2005:17).

All the above mentioned women political leaders after gaining top leadership position, stood courageously against all odds and critical situations (Jensen,2008:19) and despite the numerous hurdles and constraints, these women made their way to advance to top leadership positions. They

also achieved remarkable progresses by learning leadership skills like their male counterparts (Foley, 2013:230).

Women leaders after gaining power in critical situations proved themselves as survivors. Indira Gandhi appeared as a champion of democracy and steadfast leader who would not bow before any one. For this reason she was given the title 'Durga'<sup>1</sup> mother (Hindus Goddess). However, Indira Gandhi was also given the title of 'Kali'<sup>2</sup> because of her oppressive measures against her opponents (Panday, 2005:52). These women leaders are the pioneer of advancing the positive political change in traditional societies such a change is important to create an atmosphere for the women to be equally suitable to run the political office. These women mobilised politicians and traditional leaders to accept women in the parliaments and endure higher self-esteem and confidence. Through their experience women political leaders improved their decision-making skills. They brought necessary changes within their countries in spite of the unfriendly social and political environment. Their political leadership have transformed general perception regarding the status of women as weak, inferior and innocent to strong, intelligent and capable leaders. Their leadership enables women voices to be more influential and prominent within governance processes (Kumari, 2014).

### Conclusion:

Strong social and politically influential family ties facilitated the above mentioned women politicians to acquire political leadership. However, their own political skills and the ability to use the situation in which they rose to power are also an important contributing factors. They have the unbeatable courage, patience, intelligence, moral and ethical character which enabled them to occupy the top leadership positions and also to retain them. They won the support and trust of their followers in general over a period of time and this ensured their stay in power. Such popular support is evident from the fact that different titles were extended to them such as 'goddess' (Indira Gandhi), 'mother', and 'daughter' (Benazir Bhutto). Therefore, we can conclude that women political leaders in Asia acquired top political positions and retained them (such as Prime Minister, President) primarily through their consistent struggle and extraordinary talent. They also retained those positions for a period of time. Such examples also served to inspire more women to get into politics and acquire leadership positions in their respective countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Durga: The righteous Hindu Goddess who got success on slaughtering the demon, riding on her lion.

<sup>2</sup> Kali: Black one, she is also the Hindu's Goddess considered as a symbol of destruction and fury who also fought against demons and evils. According to their sacred book when Durga loses control or when faces dreadful enemy, Kali is born from Durga anger and embody her furore. Kali generally threatened order and stability. She is the goddess of Fierce. Her worshippers considered her as a mother of sympathy.

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