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## Women, political parties and social movements in South Asia

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

5

# Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia

by Amrita Basu





**Occasional Paper 5**

**Women, Political Parties  
and Social Movements in South Asia**

by Amrita Basu  
July 2005

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# acronyms

AIDWA	All India Democratic Women's Association
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CP	Communist Party
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DMK	Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam
FEMA	Fair Election Monitoring Alliance
JP	Jatiyo Party (National Party)
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LSSP	Socialist Lanka Samaja Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NFIW	National Federation of Indian Women
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
PA	People's Alliance
PML(N)	Pakistan Muslim League
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
RSS	Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TDP	Telugu Desam Party
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UCC	Uniform Civil Code
UFWR	United Front for Women's Rights
UNP	United National Party
VHP	Visva Hindu Parishad
WAF	Women's Action Forum

# summary résumé resumen

## SUMMARY

This paper will explore two sets of relationships that have until now received relatively little scholarly attention: those between women and political parties, and those between political parties and social movements that organize women. My focus will be on South Asia, with case studies of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and, given my area of expertise, particularly India.

The paper will address a range of issues concerning women, parties and movements in South Asia. First, what are the major determinants of the success of political parties in recruiting, retaining and promoting women? To what extent are there systematic differences between parties of the left, right and centre, and between national and regional parties in this regard? How common and effective are quotas for increasing women's representation within parties? How effectively have the women's wings of political parties defended women's interests?

A second issue concerns the strategies that parties adopt to gain women's support during elections. Parties have increasingly directed their appeals at particular groups, including women, by addressing their distinctive interests and identities and by having women organize electoral campaigns. At what point, if any, do parties that receive significant support from women feel compelled to represent their interests? To what extent have women's movements exploited parties' need for women's votes by pressuring them to address certain issues or to honour their pre-election commitments?

Third, what is the relationship between women's leadership and women's representation in political parties? From Srimavo Bandranaike to Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, South Asia has had the largest number of female heads of state of any region in the world. What impact have they had on women's participation in party politics during their tenure in office? What are the systemic or structural obstacles to their effectiveness?

A fourth issue concerns relationships between political parties and social movements. How successful have women's movements been when they have tried to strengthen parties' commitments to gender equality? A second kind of social movement with which parties have allied is the ethnic/religious movement. What implications has this had for women's participation?

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## RÉSUMÉ

Ce document portera sur deux types de relations jusqu'ici peu étudiés par les chercheurs: les relations, d'une part, entre les femmes et les partis politiques et, d'autre part, entre les partis politiques et les mouvements sociaux qui réunissent des femmes. Il s'intéressera plus spécialement à l'Asie du Sud: les études de cas concernent le Pakistan, le Bangladesh, Sri Lanka et enfin l'Inde, pays que l'auteur connaît particulièrement bien.

Il cherchera à répondre à diverses questions concernant les femmes, les partis et les mouvements en Asie du Sud. D'abord, quels sont les principaux déterminants du succès des partis politiques lorsqu'il s'agit de recruter, fidéliser et promouvoir les femmes? Dans quelle mesure y a-t-il des différences systématiques entre les partis de gauche, de droite et du centre, et entre les partis nationaux et régionaux à cet égard? Dans quelle mesure les quotas sont-ils répandus et parviennent-ils à augmenter la représentation des femmes dans les partis? Avec quelle efficacité les sections féminines des partis politiques ont-elles défendu les intérêts des femmes?

La deuxième question touche aux stratégies adoptées par les partis pour se rallier le soutien des femmes lors des élections. De plus en plus, on voit les partis s'adresser à des groupes spécifiques, notamment aux femmes, en parlant de ce qui les intéresse particulièrement et en s'identifiant à eux, et en plaçant des femmes dans l'équipe responsable de l'organisation de la campagne électorale. Les partis qui rallient de nombreux suffrages féminins se sentent-ils obligés de défendre les intérêts des femmes, et à partir de quel moment? Dans quelle mesure les mouvements féminins profitent-ils de ce que les partis ont besoin des voix féminines pour les amener à s'attaquer à certaines questions ou à honorer les engagements pris pendant la campagne électorale?

Troisièmement, quelle est la relation entre les femmes dirigeantes et la représentation féminine dans les partis politiques? De Srimavo Bandranaike à Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi et Benazir Bhutto, l'Asie du Sud est la région du monde qui a compté le plus grand nombre de femmes chefs d'Etat. Quel impact ont-elles eu sur la participation des femmes à la vie politique des partis pendant leur mandat? Quels facteurs systémiques ou structurels ont nui à leur efficacité?

La quatrième question qui sera abordée ici est celle des relations entre partis politiques et mouvements sociaux. Quel a été le succès des mouvements féminins lorsqu'ils ont essayé d'inciter les partis à s'engager plus avant sur la question de l'égalité des sexes? Les partis ont pu s'allier aussi avec d'autres types de mouvements sociaux comme les mouvements ethniques ou religieux. Quelle en a été l'incidence sur la participation des femmes?

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## RESUMEN

En este documento se analizan dos tipos de relaciones que hasta ahora han sido relativamente poco estudiadas por la comunidad académica: por una parte, las relaciones entre las mujeres y los partidos políticos y, por otra, las relaciones entre los partidos políticos y los movimientos sociales que sindicán a las mujeres. Este documento se centra en Asia meridional, con estudios de casos de Pakistán, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka y, teniendo en cuenta mi ámbito de especialización, particularmente, la India.

Se abordarán una serie de cuestiones relativas a las mujeres, los partidos y los movimientos en Asia meridional. En primer lugar, ¿cuáles son los principales determinantes del éxito de los partidos políticos en lo que respecta a la incorporación, la permanencia y la promoción de las mujeres? ¿Hasta qué punto existen diferencias sistemáticas a este respecto entre los partidos de izquierda, derecha y centro, y entre los partidos nacionales y regionales? ¿En qué medida son habituales y eficaces las cuotas para incrementar la representación de las mujeres dentro de los partidos? ¿En qué medida ha sido eficaz la defensa de los intereses de las mujeres llevada a cabo por el ala femenina de los partidos políticos?

En segundo lugar, se hace referencia a las estrategias que adoptan los partidos para ganarse el apoyo de las mujeres durante las elecciones. Los partidos han tratado de atraer cada vez más a grupos particulares, incluidas las mujeres, al abordar sus intereses e identidades particulares, y permitiendo que las mujeres organicen campañas electorales. ¿En qué momento, en su caso, se sienten obligados los partidos que reciben apoyo considerable de las mujeres a representar los intereses de estas últimas? ¿En qué medida han explotado los movimientos de las mujeres la necesidad que tienen los partidos de recibir votos de las mujeres, presionándoles para que aborden ciertas cuestiones o respeten sus compromisos anteriores a las elecciones?

En tercer lugar, ¿cuál es la relación entre los dirigentes de las mujeres y los representantes de las mismas en los partidos políticos? Desde Srimavo Bandranaike hasta Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi y Benazir Bhutto, el número de mujeres jefes de Estado en Asia meridional ha sido mayor que en ninguna región del mundo. ¿Qué efectos han tenido estas últimas en la participación de las mujeres en la política de partidos durante sus mandatos? ¿Cuáles son los obstáculos sistémicos o estructurales para su eficacia?

En cuarto lugar, se hace referencia a las relaciones entre partidos políticos y movimientos sociales. ¿En qué medida han tenido éxito los movimientos de las mujeres cuando han intentado reforzar los compromisos de los partidos con respecto a la igualdad de género? Un segundo tipo de movimiento social con el que se han aliado los partidos políticos ha sido el movimiento étnico/religioso. ¿Qué consecuencias ha tenido esto para la participación de las mujeres?

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# introduction

This paper will contribute to the discussion of governance, democracy and civil society by exploring two sets of relationships that have until now received relatively little scholarly attention: between women and political parties, and between political parties and social movements

that organize women. My focus will be on South Asia, with case studies of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and, given my area of expertise, particularly India.

Scholarship on women's political engagement has devoted a great deal of attention to the state, but much less—and less nuanced—attention to political parties. Whereas writing on gender and the state has been attentive to the complex ways in which states have reproduced or undermined gender inequality, it has ignored parties' stances on women's participation and representation. One possible explanation is that scholars "go where the action is", and there isn't much to report on parties' success in organizing women. Most political parties are male dominated and neglect women and women's interests. Whereas women have played very visible and important roles at the higher echelons of power as heads of state, and at the grassroots level in social movements, they have been under-represented in political parties, particularly in the upper reaches of party hierarchies, as party officials and as members of key decision-making bodies. Those women who have played leading roles in political parties have rarely addressed women's interests and questions of gender inequality (Rai 2002: chapter 1).

This paper will address a range of issues to do with women, parties and movements in South Asia. First, what determines the success of political parties in recruiting, retaining and promoting women? To what extent are there systematic differences between parties of the left, right and centre, and between national and regional parties in this regard? How important are differences between parties in power and in opposition with respect to women's participation and representation within party hierarchies? How common and effective are quotas to increase women's representation within parties? How effectively have the women's wings of political parties performed this function?

A second issue concerns the strategies that parties employ to gain women's support during elections. Parties have increasingly directed their appeals at particular groups, including women, by addressing their distinctive interests and identities and by having women organize electoral campaigns. At what point, if any, do parties that receive significant support from women feel compelled to represent their interests? To what extent have women's movements exploited parties' need for women's votes by pressuring them to address certain issues or to honour their pre-election commitments?

Third, what is the relationship between women's leadership and women's representation in political parties? From Srimavo Bandranaike to Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, South Asia has had the largest number of women heads of state of any region in the world. What impact have they had on women's participation in party politics during their tenure in office? What are the systemic or structural obstacles to their effectiveness?

A fourth issue concerns relationships between political parties and social movements. I am interested in social movements of two kinds. The first is women's movements. While some women's movements have deliberately refrained from allying with political parties, others have worked closely with them. Some have feared that a close relationship with political parties might lead to their cooptation and deradicalization, while others have seen parties as vital to advancing women's political interests. What are the costs and benefits of each strategy?

How successful have women's movements been in strengthening parties' commitments to gender equality when they have tried to do so? A second kind of social movement that interests me is also relevant here: the ethnic/religious movements among with which parties have formed alliances. What implications has this had for women's participation?

The under-representation of women in party politics reflects certain deep-rooted prejudices concerning women and gender. Beliefs that men are better equipped than women to exercise power in the public domain are widespread and deeply held in South Asia. Women who have been involved in politics often characterize the political world as dirty and corrupt, and fear that their involvement may endanger their reputations. Parties have done little to provide women access to networks and resources that would enable them to ascend the ranks of party hierarchies. The growing incidence of violence at elections in South Asia is another important deterrent to women's electoral participation. Many fear participating in the dangerous and violent exercises that elections have come to entail. However, parties' stances towards women are filled with paradoxes and contradictions that have been inadequately appreciated. Many parties combine conservative views on gender with support for certain forms of women's rights and empowerment. Moreover, pressures from civil society domestically and internationally have sometimes led recalcitrant parties to concede to certain feminist demands. This paper asks how and when women can benefit from parties' contradictory stances on women.

In contrast to the literature on political parties, there is a rich literature on women's activism in social movements. Democracy movements in Pakistan, peace movements in Sri Lanka, and struggles of poor rural women in Bangladesh have been amply and ably documented. There are also numerous studies of women's participation in ethnic secessionist and religious nationalist movements. Most of these studies confine their attention to the realm of civil society and exclude political society, even though many social movements straddle this divide.

There is a long-standing chasm between scholarship on movements and on parties. In part this reflects the boundedness of disciplinary enquiry, which relegates the study of "social" matters to sociologists and of "political" matters to political scientists. It also has to do with the compartmentalization of knowledge that historically separated the study of conventional and unconventional politics. Charles Tilly et al. argue in *Dynamics of Contention* that reification reached its peak in American social science during the 1950s and 1960s. Political science claimed "normal" prescribed politics as its bailiwick, leaving social movements, in William Gamson's ironic phrase, to "the social psychologist whose intellectual tools prepare him to better understand the irrational" (Gamson 1990:133). The discipline thus relegated to the sidelines of academic life those who questioned dominant arrangements of power.

It is misleading to draw hard and fast lines between social movements and political parties. Most scholarship on political parties draws on the experiences of Western Europe and the United States, which developed well-institutionalized party systems. By contrast, political parties in South Asia are less institutionalized, more loosely-knit entities. Loyalties to particular leaders, sometimes based on kinship ties, often provide the basis for factionalism and the formation of new parties. Moreover, many South Asian political parties have ties to societal groups, formed around religious, caste or ethnic identities. Thus political parties are formed and influenced within and by civil society (Kohli 2001).

Yet it is useful to draw broad distinctions between political parties and social movements on the basis of the different realms in which they organize and the different constituencies they attract. Parties and movements sometimes find in alliances the possibility of achieving otherwise unattainable goals. Parties have often been loath to provide women institutional access, whereas social movements have organized women extensively outside the formal corridors of power, although they have often neglected to raise women's interests and confront gender inequality (Eschle 2001). Parties that seek to enlarge their electorates often employ the tactics of social movements or make alliances with them. A critical area to be examined, then, concerns the large-scale mobilization of women by combinations of parties and movements or by parties that employ movement tactics.

The intersection of party and movement-based mobilization of women has acquired unprecedented significance with the growth of ethnic and religious political parties, many of which have been extremely successful in organizing women. Examples include the Jama'at-e-Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in India. These parties have not only mobilized women around elections as "vote banks"; they have also made them figureheads and spokespersons for their parties, and often very militant ones at that. They have encouraged them to sacrifice themselves for nationalist causes. Yet they have generally not offered them lasting institutional power or rights that would increase their autonomy from their families. What explains the ability of these movements to appeal to women while undermining their interests?

## II.

south asian  
diversities

Comparing countries in South Asia permits us to examine those aspects of women's participation that result both from their shared histories and from their very different circumstances today. While there are certain common prejudices within South Asia about women's relationship to politics, there are critical differences in their experiences of nationalism, the character of the different

regimes and the relationship of political parties to civil society organizations. In many parts of the post-colonial world, social movements and political parties are deeply intertwined through their genesis in nationalist movements. Indeed, the major political parties in the region are products of nationalist movements. Large-scale mobilization during the independence struggles continued in the aftermath of liberation as governments sought to increase popular participation and representation in governance. It was in these national social movements that women were often active for the first time in politics. The first national political parties were formed out of these movements throughout South Asia, and women were often prominent within them.

However, the divergences are even more significant. First, while South Asian countries share a colonial past, their nationalist movements and women's relationship to nationalism differ significantly. India stands out as having experienced the longest, largest and most mass-based nationalist movement, and one that involved extensive participation of women. The women who gained access to power in the aftermath of independence were active in the nationalist movement. Moreover, with women's contribution to nationalism came the Congress Party's recognition of their rights after independence was achieved. Women's involvement in the Indian nationalist movement set an example that male and female nationalists in other parts of South Asia emulated. By contrast, the partitions that brought about the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh did not greatly mobilize women, and entailed extensive violence. In Sri Lanka, independence came about more through male-dominated elite negotiations than through mass mobilization.

Second, the extent to which parties represent women and take up their interests is closely tied to the health and vitality of democratic processes. However, the strength of civil society initiatives is not entirely dependent on the strength of political institutions; the women's movement in Pakistan was remarkably active in mobilizing women during a period of repressive, authoritarian rule. Conversely, strong political institutions and parties do not guarantee the representation of women's interests. The ability of women's movements to work with political parties to increase women's representation and address gender inequality, however, provides an important indicator of the strength of both parties and movements. Moreover, the fulfilment of many feminist demands assumes the existence of a democratic framework that includes an independent judiciary, an accountable state and a representative parliament.

In this respect too, India is at an advantage over the other three countries considered here. It has stronger political parties and civil society organizations than Pakistan or Bangladesh, where the armed forces have often interrupted democratic rule and weakened civilian institutions. The militarization of Sri Lankan society has brought about a marked increase in violence against women, in the form of rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Although the civil war has mobilized anti-militarist feminists, it has also fostered splits within the feminist movements between those who gave priority to developing a critique of Sinhala nationalism and militarization and those who gave priority to inequalities of gender and disregarded those related to ethnic divisions (Jayawardena and de Alwis 2002:261).

If democracy is part of the solution, however, it can also be part of the problem. Civil society gives rise not only to feminist and human rights movements, but also to chauvinist ethnic and religious nationalist movements, which often have strong ties to parties. Several observers of Indian politics have identified a democratic resurgence in the growth of regionally based parties, often founded in religious, ethnic and caste identities (see for example Brass 1991, 2000; Yadav 2000). Thus democratization may paradoxically be linked to the growth of anti-democratic movements.

Ethnic and religious parties have some distinctive features with regard to women. They generally do not provide women greater access to institutional power within the party. They may involve women in activities such as armed combat that break with their traditional gender roles. Their goals, framed in nationalist terms, often threaten to undermine women's rights. And yet their appeals, which are frequently gendered, have galvanized men and women on a very large scale. The experiences of Sri Lanka, described below, provide an excellent illustration of the complicated implications for women of democratic processes amidst the growth of ethnic nationalism.

## III.

## sri lanka

Compared with most South Asian countries, Sri Lanka stands out as combining a long tradition of democratic governance with a relatively high ranking on the gender development index. The post-independence government introduced a comprehensive welfare package that included free education and health services, and a subsidized food scheme.

As a result of these policies, literacy rates for women rose from 67.3 per cent in 1963 to 87.9 per cent by 1994, and life expectancy from 41.6 years in 1946 to 74.2 years in the early 1990s. Maternal mortality rates dropped from 16.5 per cent in 1945 to 0.2 per cent in 1995 (de Mel 2001:33).

Alongside the two major parties, 39 smaller ones compete in regularly held elections, and women's rates of electoral participation are almost as high as those of men. Sri Lanka can boast two female presidents. The first was Srimavo Bandaranaike, who served as president of a Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government in 1960–1965 and 1970–1977, the first time a year after the assassination of her husband, Prime Minister Solomon W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The second was Chandrika Kumaratunga, who served as president in 1994 and 1999. She was the widow of the assassinated political leader Vijay Kumaratunga. Thus the political capital that both women acquired derived in large part from their connections to powerful male leaders.

Set against the positive aspects of women's participation, however, are several negative ones. Women are greatly under-represented in political office, partly because of a failure on the part of political parties. The prolonged civil war has been associated with gross violations of women's human rights. Ironically, the most chauvinist and militant parties and organizations, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been especially active in recruiting women and appealing to their interests.

The trend towards political parties addressing questions concerning women and gender inequality did not emerge until several decades after independence. Before then and immediately afterwards, only leftist political parties devoted any attention to women. The Socialist Lanka Samaja Party (LSSP), formed initially as a protest movement against British colonialism in 1935, was the first party to support a proposal for women's equality. Its constitution made a commitment to eliminating oppression and inequalities arising from gender differences. The Communist Party (CP), formed in 1943, pledged to improve the conditions of working women, eliminate sexual discrimination, and agitate for equal pay for equal service. In their manifestos for general elections in 1952, 1956, 1960 and 1965, both the CP and the LSSP supported women's equality, welfare services for mothers and children, and maternity benefits. The United Women's Front, which was affiliated with the LSSP, fought both to support women workers and to demand the entry of educated middle-class women into the civil service.

Women's roles in most aspects of party life are secondary to those of men. Although most parties do not keep reliable membership records, studies suggest that women's membership in political parties averages 20–30 per cent. From 1947–1977 the number of women candidates at general elections was extremely small: under 3 per cent until 1970 and 3.2 per cent thereafter. Since 1977 it has slowly increased, but no party except the SLFP, which nominated 17 women candidates in 1994, has nominated more than 13 women candidates in any one election. Between 1974 and 1994, the LSSP nominated 5.6 per cent women, the United National Party (UNP) 2.7 per cent, the SLFP 2.8 per cent, the CP 3.1 per cent, and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) 2.9 per cent (Liyanage 1999:115).



There are several possible explanations of why so few women stand for political office, many of which are germane to other regions of South Asia. The parties' national leaders, who make the final decisions about the choice of candidates, tend to favour men and to select women only when they come from prominent political families. Among the 34 women whom parties nominated between 1947 and 1994, 25 came from political families and were nominated to fill the vacant seats of male family members. Amidst the severe competition that party nomination entails, women are generally at a disadvantage with respect to access to resources and networks. Given the prejudices that surround women's participation in party politics, most female party members are not interested in running for office. Women who enter party politics without family connections often feel inadequate.

Not surprisingly, the actual number of women elected to office is very low: below 4 per cent until 1977, 5.3 per cent in 1989 and 4.3 per cent in 2004. With the exception of the 1994 election, described below, women in the two major parties have played very minor roles in the cabinets. In the period 1947–1956, when the UNP governed the country, there was not a single woman cabinet minister. Nor were there any women in the cabinet when Mrs Bandaranaike was president, from 1960 to 1965 and 1970 to 1977. Women members of the middle-ranking and minor parties have never been able to enter the cabinet, and have rarely been appointed to the more powerful ministries that deal with the budget, foreign affairs and armed forces. The 11th parliament, elected in October 2000, had only nine out of a total of 224 women members. A total of 117 women candidates stood for office. The cabinet, which consisted of 44 ministers, included only two women.

The number of women in the central or working committees of their parties is also very small. The UNP Working Committee has 5 per cent women and its Executive Committee 8 per cent. The SLFP has 10 per cent, the LSSP 2 per cent and the CP 4 per cent women representatives. Women have not held the post of general secretary in any of these parties. Nor are there many women in the middle levels of the party structure. They tend to be most active at the local level, in youth and women's organizations, which generally do not play important decision-making roles.

When the United Left Front was formed by several political parties in the 1970s, it pledged to eliminate discrimination against women and to raise their status in the workplace and in the community. All the major political parties issued statements on women in advance of general elections. Two of these parties, the UNP and SLFP, included women in their policy statements in preparation for the parliamentary election in 1977. By the 1989 election, every major political party felt compelled to take up women's issues. The UNP manifesto promised to eradicate prejudice and discriminatory attitudes, to provide women with access to all key state services, start development programmes for plantation women, introduce social security to female-headed households, and implement a policy enabling active participation of women in community affairs at the village and subdistrict levels.

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

For the first time, several women's groups sent a policy paper to the political parties in advance of the 1994 election, identifying violence against women as a major priority and asking parties to nominate more women to run for election and to put more women's issues on their party manifestos. The newly elected Peoples' Alliance government (a coalition government led by the SLFP) promised to strengthen the provisions of the Penal Code that related to violence against women, and made significant changes in laws dealing with rape and sexual harassment. To curb the incidence of violence against women, it also supported the introduction of women-only buses, special sections in police stations staffed by policewomen, more stringent rape laws, and the appointment of a commission to investigate a notorious rape and murder of a Tamil girl by a soldier. The new government appointed three women ministers (including the president and the prime minister) and four deputy ministers to the cabinet.

What explains the increased pressure from the women's movement on political parties to address gender issues and recruit more women, and parties' responsiveness to their demands? The global context of the United Nations women's conferences certainly played a role, particularly in the government's formulation and acceptance of the Women's Charter (1993), the establishment of a Human Rights Commission (1996) and the attempts to strengthen women's rights under the constitution. However, these international influences did not persuade the UNP or PA to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in parliament. Moreover, no political party has addressed the negative impact of globalization on women workers in the free trade zones or on women migrant workers in the Middle East.

Of even more direct and immediate significance was the crisis that was created by the civil war and the response of women's organizations to it. One of the most important women's organizations ever in Sri Lanka was the Mothers' Front, which was formed in 1984 to protest against the disappearances of family members who had been arrested and detained by security forces. A Southern Women's Front started in July 1990 during the height of the JVP uprising. By 1992 the Front had a membership of 25,000, mostly poor, women. It played a critical role in overthrowing the UNP regime in the 1994 election. The SLFP's indebtedness to the Mother's Front for its electoral victory helps explain why it and other political parties recognized the need to take women seriously in their 1994 election campaign.

From the perspective of the women's movement, however, the outcome of this alliance with a political party was not wholly positive. First, as Malathi de Alwis has argued (1998), the SLFP took over the independent agenda of the Mother's Front and thereby undermined its strength. Two members of the Mother's Front, both men, won parliamentary seats in 1994. After becoming ministers in the new government, they ceased to be active in the movement that had brought them to power. Second, the UNP responded to the challenge of the Mother's Front in 1992 by forming its own Mother's Front, which appropriated the radical demands of the first movement (de Mel 2001:247).

Given the unreliability of political parties as allies for women's movements and the dangers of cooptation, some feminists have chosen to bypass the party system in contesting elections. An independent women's group stood for the 1998 provincial council election in the district of Nuwara Eliya. Its main stated objective was to enhance women's contribution to governance and the creation of a peaceful and prosperous society. The Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum, a broad network of autonomous women's groups, actively supported its efforts. The Forum also engaged in other activities to encourage political parties to include more women in their nomination lists and to address women's concerns in their election campaigns and manifestos (Jayawardena and de Alwis 2002:248–249).

## III.A.

*the civil war*

There are many ways in which the protracted civil war has created great hardship for women and women's movements. Radhika Coomaraswamy argues that there has been a dramatic growth of domestic violence alongside the growth of violence by the state and by militarized

Tamil and Sinhalese movements (Coomaraswamy 2002). The women's movement has faced difficult dilemmas as a result of the civil war. Many have shifted their emphasis away from an exclusive focus on gender inequality to address broader human rights abuses. This has caused a rift within the women's movement. A further dilemma concerns the manner in which militarized movements have made gender and even feminist appeals and thereby reduced feminists' potential constituency.

Two militarized movements have been active in Sri Lanka since the early 1970s: the JVP and the LTTE. The former represented the interests and frustrations of educated, unemployed Sinhala youth in the late 1960s. It organized a major insurrection in 1971–1973 and another in 1987–1989. The JVP women's wing played key roles during these struggles. It formed propaganda cells in schools, government departments and private institutions, organized strikes, distributed leaflets, made posters and addressed meetings. In all of these activities, it took orders from the male leadership. A man headed the woman's wing; men decided to allow women into combat situations and determined which military roles they could undertake. The main JVP leader, the second in command and the 12 members of the politburo are all men. Women are generally only active in the JVP's organizational structure at the district level and local levels in the rural areas. Yet the JVP's policy declaration is filled with pro-women and pro-family values. It promises to implement an equal pay system; to provide suitable employment for everybody after two years of military training, paid maternity leave for working women, and crèches and children's parks; and to abolish the dowry system.

The LTTE was formed in 1976 with the objective of achieving self-determination for the Tamil minority population through the creation of an independent Tamil state. To this end, it has launched one of the most formidable and sophisticated armed struggles anywhere in the world today. The LTTE is constituted as an extra-parliamentary movement. The only time it lent its support to political candidates was in the 2004 election, when it supported the Tamil National Alliance.

In 1983 the LTTE founded the Vituthalai Pulikal Makalir Munani (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers). Women constitute between a third and a half of the LTTE's membership. Many join the movement as young girls, and children constitute about 40 per cent of its cadre. In its early phases, the Women's Front mainly engaged in propaganda, surveillance, medical care, and fund raising. Later, as the LTTE faced acute personnel shortages, it began to recruit women into combat, and now has a well-organized Women's Military Wing. According to Adele Ann Balasingham, the wife of Anton Balasingham, one of the LTTE's chief theoreticians, in 1991 there were about 3,000 women fighters, who constituted about 20 per cent of the core combat strength (Balasingham 1990). Women are also active in the Black Tiger cadres of the suicide squads, and make up most of the Sea Tigers, the LTTE naval force.

LTTE women have engaged in unusually extensive violence. They experience the same rigorous training in combat as their male counterparts. There is of course the famous example of Dhanu, the suicide bomber who killed Rajiv Gandhi and herself on 21 May 1991. But while women suicide bombers provide the most dramatic instances of LTTE women's violence, they are by no means unique. There are many other instances of women having played leading roles in violent attacks. They engaged in direct combat with the Sri Lankan army in Mannar, Vavuniya and Killinochchi districts, and were at the forefront of the attacks on government forces in Jaffna.<sup>1</sup>

What explains the LTTE's success in recruiting women to defy social conventions and engage in such violent activities? The Sri Lankan press often carries reports of the LTTE abducting young girls and sometimes being intercepted.<sup>2</sup> But coercion alone is inadequate to explain the LTTE's success in recruiting women. Its appeals to martyrdom and self-sacrifice resonate with certain deeply held cultural and religious values in Sri Lanka and India. These values are gendered. The expectation that for women the family comes first easily translates into the expectation that the nation comes first.

Another key to its success is its emphasis on achieving the liberation of Tamil women by eliminating discrimination against them. In her book, *Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers* (1998), Adele Ann Balansingham describes a Tamil woman's decision to join the LTTE as signifying her willingness to defy patriarchal authority. In an address to women cadres on International Women's Day, 8 March 1996, Vellupillai Prabhakaran described the liberation of the Tamil woman as:

the fervent child that was born of the Tamil national liberation movement. The women's liberation movement is forging ahead as an integral part of our greater struggle. For the awakening of the nation and the salvation of the women the Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself into a tigress! Fierce and fiery, she has taken up arms to fight injustice.

Balansingham described the women's military wing of the LTTE as "suthanthirap paravaikal" or the "birds of freedom." She argued that the turning point in politicizing women and drawing them into militant activities was the brutal Indian invasion. Freedom Birds is the name of a journal that the LTTE first published in December 1984. That name soon became a synonym for the women's unit.

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- 1 One instance of this occurred on 20 August 2001 when the LTTE surrounded a police station in eastern Sri Lanka, killed 15 policeman and left 20 wounded. Most of the attackers were from the women's unit of the LTTE. They staged the attack on the anniversary of the death of one of their comrades, Koneswary Murugesupillai, a 37-year-old woman and mother of three who was gang raped and killed in a police station in 1997 (The Hindu 2002).
  - 2 There have been numerous reports of the LTTE abducting children in regions under its control. For example, there was a report on 17 February 2003 that the navy intercepted two LTTE women cadres who were trying to abduct two 14-year-old girls in school uniforms when they were on their way home from school (<http://www.satp.org/>, accessed on 22 April 2005, section on Sri Lanka). There was a story along similar lines of LTTE women cadres abducting a 22-year-old girl and demanding that her brother, who had escaped from the LTTE, rejoin the organization (28 June 2003). On 27 January 2003, four women cadres of the LTTE abducted an 18-year-old woman whose mother went to the LTTE and pleaded with them for her release (<http://www.abooda.com/News/Snippets290103.asp>, accessed on 22 April 2005). The Hindu estimates that almost half of the LTTE's members are women and they are often recruited as children. See the *Sunday Observer*, 16 February 2003 [www.sundayobserver.lk](http://www.sundayobserver.lk), accessed on 22 April 2005.

On 8 March 2004 the LTTE women's section issued a statement in which it said:

While fighting to liberate their homeland, Tamil women are also fighting to liberate themselves in society, and so setting an example to other women. They are committed to fighting injustices done to women, and indeed all forms of oppression. Women have to fight in order to change society and dismantle oppressive social structures.

(LTTE Press Releases 1998)

Clearly the LTTE's claims to women's liberation cannot be sustained if one recognizes the inseparability of feminism and basic human rights. The organization has been especially brutal in its treatment of Tamil women who have refused to join the movement. University Teachers for Human Rights, a Tamil Human Rights organization, says that until 1990 the LTTE had in its prisons about 200 Tamil women who had dared to challenge its views (De Mel 2001:224). They had been treated brutally. Moreover the LTTE combines talk of feminism with some very conservative views on gender roles. It has prescribed a dress code that would require Tamil women to give up western clothes and opt for traditional Tamil dress, like the *dhavani* and the *sari*. It has prohibited adolescent boys and girls from interacting with one another, warning that this transgresses Tamil culture. It has imposed restrictions on women's movements between the north and Colombo, and depicted women who travel from north to south as sexually loose.

The LTTE may find it difficult to continue asking so much of women while offering them so little in return. The top-ranking LTTE women leaders have demanded that they be given 50 per cent of all vacancies in the administrative bodies in the proposed Interim Self-Governing Authority proposed by the LTTE for the north and east (Neloufer de Mel, letter to the author, 19 May 2004). The UNP has indirectly been partially responsible for this. In February 2003 it appointed a gender subcommittee comprising five women from the LTTE and five from the south as part of the Norwegian-brokered peace talks between the government and the LTTE. It was the LTTE women on the subcommittee who put forward these bold proposals.

For women, the only positive implications of the civil war are that it has given rise to new directions in feminist activism. A multi-ethnic group, Women for Peace, was formed in October 1984 to organize marches, vigils, pickets and petitions opposing the militarization of Sri Lankan society. Feminists have also been active in many human rights organizations, including the civil rights movement that was formed as a response to state repression during the first JVP uprising, the Human Rights Organization, the Movement for Defence of Democratic Rights, the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, the Movement for Peace with Democracy, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Colombo and the Home for Human Rights in Batticaola. For all of these groups, struggles to emancipate women must also entail a critique of state violence, ethnic chauvinism and human rights abuses.

To summarize, women's experiences with political parties in Sri Lanka are paradoxical and complex. Sri Lanka possesses strong political parties and state institutions in which women have played leading roles. Yet the leadership of these women has not resulted in large-scale representation or participation of women in party politics. What has brought women into the public sphere in large numbers is their involvement in civil society organizations, ranging from ethnic separatist groups like the LTTE to human rights and peace organizations. Because the civil war has resulted in such extreme human rights violations, in which political parties have often been complicit, the women's movement has become an increasingly important political actor both within and beyond the party system.

## IV.

## pakistan

Women's participation in the Pakistan movement grew out of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle well before 1947. Muslim women participated in this struggle in three distinctive ways. First, they were active in the education reform movement led by Syed Ahmed Khan, which was particularly concerned with Muslim women's education. Second, they were active in the Khilafat

movement to support the Turkish Khilafat, which provided a symbol of Muslim unity.<sup>3</sup> The third was the movement demanding the creation of an independent state of Pakistan, in which they participated in large numbers, if not around their specific interests as women (Ali 2000:41–42).

Pakistan achieved nationhood in 1947 with a powerful military bureaucracy and a weak political framework. Out of six general elections since then, only those that were held in 1970 and 1988 were free and fair. Pakistan's political history includes several constitutional crises, frequent periods of political turmoil, martial law regimes, internal strife over ethnic, linguistic and provincial autonomy issues, and economic instability.

The overarching political context has created serious obstacles to women's participation in politics, and party politics in particular. Political parties have been weak and unrepresentative, and some of the secular ones have been so corrupt that the women's movement has not cultivated their support. Military regimes have excluded women from policy-making roles and have sidelined civil bureaucracies where women could potentially play a more important part. Moreover, in certain regions of Pakistan such as Sindh and Baluchistan, tribal and feudal structures that exclude women from power have had an extremely important influence on Pakistan's leadership. Fundamentalist movements and state-supported Islamization programmes have also curtailed women's participation in the public arena.

What Pakistani women do possess are certain constitutional rights, such as the right to vote and to stand for elected office. The Fundamental Rights laid down in the constitution guarantee the equality of all citizens before the law and forbid discrimination on the basis of sex alone, while permitting the state to take affirmative action measures for women. A provision for reserved seats for women in the legislatures, in addition to their rights to contest general elections, expired after the 1988 election and has not since been renewed.

Pakistan also has a strong women's movement, which has played a key role in defending and extending democratic processes. Indeed the more repressive the state's actions, the more the women's movement has been galvanized into action. Perhaps because of the high degree of centralization of state power and the weakness and unreliability of political parties, the women's movement has directed its attention more to the state than to political parties.

3 The Turkish Khilafat consisted of the religious leadership of the Islamic umma that ruled Turkey under the Ottoman empire. It was abolished in 1923 by the modern, secularizing political leader Kemal Attaturk.



It is impossible to understand the relationship of women to movements and parties without first reviewing Pakistan's chequered history of democracy. Pakistan experienced its first coup d'état when Field Marshal Ayub Khan seized power and banned all political parties. He ruled from 1958 to 1968. The first general election, which was only held in 1970, brought Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to power. The Bhutto era (1971–1977) entailed great progress for women. The 1973 constitution included several measures that were designed to increase gender equality, including the provision of affirmative action and the reservation for women of ten seats in the National Assembly and 10 per cent of seats in the Provincial Assemblies for a specified period. All government posts were open to women and women were appointed to several high-ranking positions. The government appointed a women's rights committee to recommend measures to improve women's legal, political and economic position. It subsequently approved the committee's recommendation to form a Women's Division as a separate ministry under the federal government.

Allegations that Bhutto had rigged the 1977 national election sparked the anti-Bhutto Pakistan National Alliance movement and brought the Bhutto era to an end. The election witnessed the entire opposition, including the Islamic fundamentalists, centrist and liberal left-of-centre parties, coming together to form a nine-party Pakistan National Alliance. It culminated in Bhutto's arrest and execution by President Zia ul Huq, who reimposed martial law. Islam came to exercise growing influence over political life.

Zia ul Huq (1977–1988) engaged in a far-reaching programme of Islamization that sought to rescind women's rights and reduce their public visibility. He introduced such repressive laws as the Hudood Ordinance (1979) and the Law of Evidence (1984).<sup>4</sup> Women's organizations, led by the Women's Action Forum, responded with a well-organized campaign opposing these measures. As a result, the government substantially modified the Law of Evidence and delayed its enactment for two years. The Law of Qisas and Diyat, tabled in 1984, was passed only in 1992, under the 12th amendment to the constitution, without the clauses discriminating against women.

Even after the demise of Zia and Bhutto, the parties they created – the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) respectively – became the two major political parties. Neither of them curbed the growth of orthodox religious parties. Zia in particular enabled the Jama'at-e-Islam to grow by inducting it into the upper house of parliament, the Senate, through indirect elections for seats reserved for the *ulema* (religious scholars).

The PPP, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML(N)) and the Pakistan Islamic Front all placed women prominently on their election agendas in the run up to the 1993 election.<sup>5</sup> Even the Jama'at promised to improve women's conditions through such measures as jobs in the fields of health and education, mobile family courts and separate women's universities. The women's movement greeted the election of the PPP, headed by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in 1988 with great enthusiasm. However her government only lasted two years, for it was unable to withstand the competing authority of the president and the chief of the armed forces, who

4 The law of evidence reduces the value of women's testimony in court to half of that of men and makes women's testimony unacceptable in the absence of male testimony in matters of written financial transactions. The Qisas and Diyat Act allows for compromise and compensation in matters of bodily harm and murder, including all forms of violence against women. The Hudood Ordinances contain the most punitive provisions concerning women, such as imposition of *had* or maximum penalty and making young girls liable to harsher adult penalties than boys for offences related to rape, adultery and extra-marital sex.

5 The PML(N) government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was toppled from power by an army coup on 12 October 1999. The PML (Junejo) was in power from 1985 to 1988.

continually sought to undermine her power. The president dismissed her government in 1990. While in office, Benazir Bhutto made some token gestures to improve the situation of women by upgrading the Women's Division established by Zia to the status of a ministry and establishing a Women's Bank run only by women. However she was afraid to tackle more serious and substantive issues like the reservation of seats for women. Instead of simply committing the PPP to selecting more female candidates in the next election, she stated that she wanted to tackle this issue jointly with the Pakistan Muslim League. Her successor, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, came to power with a great deal of good will but faced the same problems as Benazir Bhutto. Thus, for example, instead of repealing the legal changes that Zia had introduced, his government actually passed the Shariat Bill (Yasmeen 1999:193). Four consecutive governments were rapidly dismissed after 1988. Nor was the PPP able to accomplish much for women when it was reelected (1993–1997).

In the 1997 election, the PPP and its coalition partner, the PML (Junejo) put up nine women as candidates for the National Assembly out of a total of 161 seats contested, while the PML(N) put up six women out of a total of 177 candidates. This election produced the highest number of directly elected women members of the National Assembly in Pakistan's history. However, the six women members (three each from the PPP and the PML(N)) constituted less than 3 per cent of the National Assembly strength of 207 directly elected members. None of the 13 independent women candidates who contested the election won a seat.

Most women's contacts with political parties are confined to voting in the elections. According to the Election Commission in 1993, the total number of voters was 50,834,648, of which nearly 55 per cent were men and 46 per cent women. In 1995 it reported that the total electorate was 55,026,324, of which about 56 per cent were men and 45 per cent women (Zia and Bari 1999). Since women constitute nearly 48 per cent of the population, the disparity in the voting strength of men and women is larger than the difference in population. Due to under-registration, there were 6.7 million fewer female than male voters in 1993 and 4.7 million fewer in 1995. In the 1997 election, again some 56 per cent of men and 45 per cent of women were registered to vote.

Most political parties have women's wings that mobilize women to vote during elections. Whether these increase women's involvement with party politics is another matter. Women's wings allow parties to "ghettoize" women and women's issues; Farida Shaheed (2002) notes that parties like the ANP and the Tehrik-e-Istaqlal, which do not have women's wings, are quicker to nominate women for general seats. Women's representation in the upper echelons of political parties is very small. According to the Report of the Special Inquiry for Women, they hold only three out of 21 decision-making posts in the central executive committee of the PPP, and five out of 47 posts on the equivalent committee in the PML(N).

The real vitality of democracy lies not in political parties but in civil society, and in Pakistan particularly in the women's movement. Educated middle-class women formed a number of organizations in the mid-1970s, including the United Front for Women's Rights (UFWR), the Women's Front, Aurat and Shirkat Gah, which later gave rise to the Women's Action Forum. All of these groups were in some way committed to increasing women's democratic rights. Over the years they became increasingly effective, in part as they acquired experience by negotiating with the bureaucracy and political parties. They were also strengthened by regional and international recognition of their work.



In the early years of their existence, most women's organizations shied away from interactions with political parties. They may have been fearful of losing their autonomy and being co-opted, or may have considered certain social issues pressing and likely to be ignored by parties. Also, political parties were banned for long periods in Pakistan, and thus women's organizations could not work with them. With time, most women's organizations came to endorse a more actively, explicitly political orientation. The Women's Action Forum (WAF), for example, initially described itself as a non-political body and eschewed alliances with political parties (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987:10). With the restoration of democracy and elections in 1988, however, the WAF brought out a Charter of Demands, presenting a comprehensive women's political programme. It circulated this to political parties that were signatories to the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy between 1983–1986. The Qaumi-e-azadi and the Tehrik-e-Istiqal parties both incorporated some of the WAF's demands into their manifestos.

The Sindhiani Tehrik's affiliation with the Sindhi Awami Tehrik, a regionally based party in Sindh province, is a good example of a successful alliance between the women's movement and a political party. Greatly influenced by its relationship to the WAF, the Sindhiani Tehrik has campaigned against early marriage and polygamy, and demanded the right for women to consent to marriage. It has sought to create greater educational opportunities for women. The WAF considers this relationship a great achievement, without which it would not have the kind of reach that it has acquired. However, it has had much less success in working with the women's organization that is affiliated with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which sees its role to ancillary to that of the party.<sup>6</sup> Moreover the WAF has had to confine these kinds of alliances to the smaller regional political parties, for the major parties are too compromised or too weak to seriously address feminist concerns.

To conclude, the broader political context suggests the challenges that confront the Pakistani women's movement as it has sought to defend and extend democracy. Given the frequency with which martial law has been imposed, elections have been rigged, rights rescinded and repressive religious laws proposed, much of the work of the women's movement has been defensive. It has entailed seeking to retain previous gains and oppose the state's attempts to turn the clock back. This has made it difficult for the women's movement to branch out proactively in new directions. Moreover the steady growth of political Islam has made many feminists rethink the value of a wholly secular approach that would separate them from the large majority of women, for whom religion is central to their daily lives. Given fractures in the women's movement around questions of faith, a secular framework cannot be assumed. Where the women's movement has been extremely successful is in locating itself at the nerve centre of Pakistani civil society so that it is well positioned to address the critical issues of the day. The weakness of civil society and political parties and the repressive capacity of the state have made the women's movement critical to defending human rights and minority rights in Pakistan.

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6 MQM is the regional political party from the Sindh province.

## V.

## bangladesh

At the time of Bangladesh's founding, certain conditions seemed propitious for women's participation in party politics and democratic movements. Bangladesh was formed as a secular state in which religious parties were banned. The commitments to a Bengali ethnic and linguistic identity that had brought the nation into existence militated against privileging a religious identity (Kabeer 1991).

Rejecting martial law regimes, Bangladesh constituted itself as a parliamentary system with a prime minister as chief executive. Over a hundred registered parties were created, of which five contested the most recent election: the Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the Jatiya Party, the Jama'at-i-Islami and the Islamic Okkya Jote. Bangladesh is the only country in the world today where women head both parliament and the opposition.

Over time, however, the weakness of the democratic infrastructure became apparent. Democracy gave way to rule by presidents, successive coups d'état and martial law regimes, interspersed by elections that voted autocratic regimes with entrenched military interests into power. Civilian parties were unable to distance themselves entirely from the military. One of these military governments removed secularism from the constitution and declared Islam the official religion. The Jama'at has gradually become a full and active participant in the electoral process. Although official policies of Islamization have not gone as far in Bangladesh as in Pakistan, the government has reneged on some of its earlier commitments to women's rights for fear of offending religious orthodoxy. Thus the government never implemented certain gender equity measures that it had adopted at the time of independence, like the reservation of 15 seats for women in parliament and of a 5 per cent quota of government employment for rape victims.

To briefly review the country's political history, the Awami League, under the leadership of founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, formed the first national government of Bangladesh after independence in 1971. Although its secular socialist beliefs initially found support, it incurred the opposition of the military. In 1975 a group of junior officers assassinated Mujibur Rahman and a succession of coups followed. General Zia ur-Rahman founded the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and ushered in an era of "guided democracy" (1975–1981).

Zia ur-Rahman's assumption of power coincided with the onset of the United Nation's Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the Second Five Year Plan (1980–1985), which emphasized the need to incorporate women-in-development strategies into development planning. In 1976, the government established a Women's Affairs Division in the President's Secretariat. According to Rounaq Jahan (1995), the military government in power at the time was attempting to project a modernist, development-oriented image and found "women in development" to be a good vehicle for that purpose. The regime also wanted to increase the volume of donor assistance, and therefore picked up on the popular issues of population and women.

Zia's administration established the Ministry for Women's affairs in 1978, encouraged both NGOs and government agencies to undertake programmes targeting women, raised the number of parliamentary seats reserved for women from 15 to 30 (from 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the seats open for general election), and reserved 10 per cent of all public sector jobs for women. He made it mandatory for all political parties to have women's wings that would advance their roles in politics.

However, Zia lacked a strong base of support in either civil society or political institutions. He conceived state policies without consultation with non-governmental organizations and social movements. At the same time, the military resented sharing power and resources with the newly established BNP. In March 1982 he was assassinated in a military coup that toppled the government. General Hussain Mohammad Ershad took over as president (1981–1990), and encouraged the formation of a political party, the Jatiyo Party (JP, or National Party) under his leadership. There was massive opposition to the Ershad regime, in which women's organizations played leading roles.

An election was held in 1991. Gender figured more centrally than it had in the past platforms of political parties. The Awami League, in its 1991 election manifesto, took a stand against policies that discriminated on the basis of gender, expressed a commitment to women's social and economic independence, and promised facilities and training to enable women to join the skilled labour force. The BNP likewise pledged to integrate women into national development efforts, guarantee them an honourable role in every aspect of national development, and implement all UN conventions on women.

The BNP, headed by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, the widow of Zia ur-Rahman, formed a civilian government (1991–1996), but was weakened by the overwhelming influence of the army over the party. Moreover, because the BNP did not garner a majority of votes and had relied on the Jama'at to attain office, it was forced to accord the Jama'at a formal role in government. In 1996 Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur, came to power to head an Awami League government.

The Jama'at had felt slighted because the BNP government abandoned the party shortly after the 1991 election. In 1995 it joined the opposition and demanded that the BNP resign and an election be held. The Jama'at has since played a key role in Bangladeshi politics. It has exercised its influence not only electorally—by either withholding or providing support to parties that cannot obtain an absolute majority of votes—but also by reshaping popular discourse. Virtually all candidates, including those belonging to the Communist Party, have felt compelled to show their commitment to Islam through speeches, banners, manifestos and slogans. Even Sheikh Hasina, representing the relatively secular Awami League, wore black headgear and a long-sleeved shirt before and after the 1996 election, and declared publicly that her party had no quarrel with *Bismillah* (the will of God).

The Bangladeshi women's movement grew out of the country's nationalist movement. The left-leaning Mahila Parishad was formed in 1970 with an affiliation to some leftist parties. With 25,000 members in 1998 (Chowdhury 1994:104), it is still the largest women's organization in Bangladesh. It does not have ties to any political party, though it supported the alliance led by the Awami League in the 1986 election. It has taken a number of other measures to influence government policy, including a campaign to support anti-dowry legislation and another for the ratification of CEDAW.

The growth of the Bangladeshi women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s, together with its growing involvement with politics, has its roots in the international, regional and domestic contexts. International influences clearly played an important role, initially in supporting women and development initiatives, and later with the UN-sponsored International Women's Year conferences, encouraging the growth of women's rights/human rights activism. Regional influences may also have been quite significant. The women's movement in neighbouring Pakistan was extremely active in opposing the martial law regime of Zia ul Huq in the late 1970s. The Indian women's movement had mobilized around questions of violence against women during that same period. Many South Asian feminist groups were in contact with one another through regional networks and conferences.

The growth of the Bangladesh women's movement was also a direct response to particular events in Bangladesh from the late 1980s onwards. There was growing dissatisfaction with Hussain Ershad's regime, for both politicizing Islam and suppressing democracy. As some of the most organized groups within civil society, women's organizations played a key role in the protests that removed Ershad from office. The movement also played a key role in organizing large-scale voter turnout for the 1996 election. As a result of their initiatives, electoral participation, particularly among women in areas where social movements and NGOs had been active, was extremely high in the 1996 election (Chowdhury 2000:573).

Believing that women's rights could only be realized in a democratic environment, the women's movement opposed the constitutional amendment that made Islam the state religion, and challenged the military's abrogation of democracy. It took up issues like rape, dowry and *fatwa* deaths, trafficking in women, unequal wages and the exploitation of female labour. In the late 1980s a coalition of 20 organizations, the Oikkyo Baddha Nari Samaj (United Women's Forum), put forward a 17-point platform demanding, among other things, the ratification of CEDAW, a uniform civil code and an increased female quota in the civil services. This platform laid the groundwork for the emergence of other groups, such as Shommilita Nari Shomaj (the Collective Women's Platform), which opposed state violence, and the Jouno Nipiron Birodhi Protirodh Mancha (Platform against Sexual Harassment)

One of the major struggles of the women's movement has centred on the issue of reserving parliamentary seats for women. A system of reservation existed at Bangladesh's founding but no longer does. The women's movement sought to increase the number of reserved seats for women to 100 and to have women directly elected to them, rather than being appointed by parliamentarians as was the practice in the past. The United Women's Front, Okkiyoboddho Nari Samaj, a forum of about 20 organizations, was the first to demand in writing the introduction of direct elections for reserved seats for women in 1987, and other women's organizations followed suit. The Pairaband Declaration on 9 December 1995, the birthday of pioneer feminist Begum Rokeya, called for an increase in the number of reserved seats for women to be directly elected, and a 10 per cent compulsory nomination of women candidates by political parties.

The framers of the Bangladeshi constitution included a provision that provided for reserved seats in parliament in order to ensure "a minimum representation of women". There were several flaws in this system. It effectively confined women's candidacies to the reserved places and excluded them from the general seats. Parties felt that, since they were nominating women to reserved seats, they did not have to incur the risk of nominating them to stand in the general constituencies. And it enabled parties with a numerical majority in parliament to control women's seats.

The best evidence of the failure of this system as traditionally practised is the low representation of women in the 1973 and 1979 elections, when parties nominated very few women to contest seats. In the parliamentary election of 1973, women made up only 0.3 per cent of the total candidates; in 1979 they accounted for 0.9 per cent. When women contested general seats, the percentage rose to nearly 1.3 per cent in the 1986 election and to 1.5 per cent in the 1991 election. General seats clearly confer greater power and claims of political leadership. Najma Chowdhury observes that, "Instead of contributing to women's political agency and autonomy, [quotas] accentuated [women's] dependence in politics and reinforced their marginality" (1994:112).

Understandably, the women who have occupied reserved seats have felt at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the regular MPs for a number of reasons: they are entirely dependent for their nomination and election on the ruling party and its directly elected, predominantly male, MPs; because they are not directly elected by a constituency, the women lack both a mandate and a power base. Prominent female politicians such as Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina and Matia Chowdhury (Minister for agriculture under the Awami League government) all entered parliament by winning general seats.

The tenth amendment to the constitution, passed in 1990, declared that there would be 30 reserved seats for women until the year 2000 (out of a total of 330). In April 2001, the provision reserving seats for women in Bangladesh's parliament expired. With the opposition engaged in a lengthy boycott of parliament, the provision was allowed simply to lapse, and the parliament elected in October 2001 did not have any reserved seats. Women's rights activists were hopeful, however, that when the matter was brought up again in parliament, the government would fulfil an earlier promise not simply to renew the existing provision, but to increase the number of seats reserved for women and open them up for direct election. In polls undertaken by the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) in the late 1990s, citizens expressed a strong preference for direct election to seats reserved for women.

Despite hunger strikes and massive protests by women's rights activists demanding directly elected seats, in early 2004 the government's proposed constitutional amendment to increase the number of reserved seats from 30 to 45 disregarded the claim. As before, these seats would be filled by indirect election, distributed among political parties on the basis of their respective strengths in parliament. The women's movement strongly condemned the amendment that was finally passed in parliament on 16 May 2004.

V.A.

## *the jama'at-i-islami*

Ironically, the restoration of democracy in 1991 led to the growth not only of the women's movement but also of the religious right. As described earlier, with the relaxation of the restriction on religious parties, the Jama'at-I-Islami became a key player in the 1996 and 2001 elections. One

of the keys to explaining its success was that it functioned as a political party while retaining some of the attributes of a religious movement. As a political party, the Jama'at practised flexibility and the ability to compromise. For example, although it opposed women's political leadership and did not nominate a single woman candidate for direct election, it supported Khaleda Zia's becoming prime minister on two different occasions, in 1991 and 2001, in order to bring the BNP to power. It has also sought to expand its constituency by taking up the interests of the groups it was cultivating. To achieve women's support, it spoke out against violence against women and criticized the Awami League government for failing to protect women's honour. Its 1996 election manifesto promised to increase women's employment, end the dowry, stop violence against women and support their inheritance rights. Recently it has sought to extend its class base of support to poor uneducated women (Shehabuddin 2004).

What I describe as the “movement dimension” of the Jama’at is founded on a completely different set of principles from its party programme. One part of this appeal is located in claims to be more moral and honest than other parties precisely because the Jama’at has not been tainted with the exercise of power. The Jama’at presents itself as being concerned with the larger, loftier goal of freeing the downtrodden from violence and oppression. Its claims to be a more honest and moral party than others has met with some support. Another, quite different source of its appeal rests on organizing repressive actions that punish those who depart from its dictates. It has fostered collaborations between mullahs and village headmen to bring charges against those who stray from religious dictate. The most infamous of these was the fatwa on Taslima Nasrin that led her to go into hiding in 1994.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that the Jama’at’s very conservative views on gender become apparent. The Jama’at considers purdah the most important marker of Islamic identity for women. Although it supports some women’s employment, it opposes forms such as factory work that will bring women into contact with men. It opposed a uniform civil code and supports religious, customary law. It supports family planning but not birth control (Shehabuddin 2004:163).

The Jama’at does not have to win elections in order to be extremely successful. It has spread its influence both by affecting the electoral prospects of other political parties and by organizing in an activist fashion at the grass-roots level.

To conclude this discussion of Bangladesh, the women’s movement finds itself confronting a series of dilemmas and challenges. Overall it is committed to strengthening secular democracy in Bangladesh as the foundation upon which women’s advancement must rest. It has done this by opposing military regimes, supporting elections, and pressuring political parties to create greater possibilities for women to engage in electoral politics. But it is not always evident how the movement should actually pursue these goals. While the Awami League is the most secular of the political parties, it has relied on the Jama’at’s support to be elected to office. Moreover, some military regimes, like the one headed by Zia, were actually more attentive to women’s rights than many civilian governments. Nonetheless, reliance on the state does not provide a good alternative to reliance on political parties, as the debate over reservations shows, for there is always the risk that women will become increasingly dependent on the state and so lack of autonomy and voice.

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7 Nasrin’s book *Shame* depicts the plight of a Hindu family that comes under attack by Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government charged Nasrin with blasphemy, thereby forcing her to flee the country.

## VI.

## india

Women's relationship to movements and parties in India is a lens on the complex character of Indian democracy. This section will begin by locating women within democratic processes in India by examining women's relationship to the party system. It will discuss three of the major political parties, each of which has approached women and women's issues in very different ways: the Congress

party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). In discussing the BJP in some detail, I will lay out one of the major arguments in this section, which concerns the relationship between parties and movements. I will argue that party-movement combinations have been especially effective in organizing women, and will provide some historical and contemporary examples of such combinations. In this context I will examine emerging alliances between the women's movement and political parties over the issue of reserving parliamentary seats for women.

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy, with a strong multiparty political system. The lower house, the Lok Sabha (People's Assembly), has 545 members and the upper house, the Rajya Sabha (States' Assembly), has 250 members. Elections are regularly held and are free and fair. With the passage of time, moreover, India has arguably become more democratic in some ways, if less in others. While the BJP, which was just defeated in the 2004 election, has pursued some very undemocratic policies, its ascent marks the demise of a one-party-dominant system and the creation of a multiparty system in which small ethnic and caste parties at the regional level have come to play an increasingly important role. With the growth of competitive party politics, parties have increasingly sought women's votes, often by appealing to their interests and addressing their concerns in party manifestoes. Women have joined the ranks of religious and caste groups as candidates for "vote bank" politics. Women's voting rates increased from 37 per cent in 1952 to a high of 68 per cent in 1984, although they fell to 47 per cent in 1991 (Kumari and Kidwai 1998:2).

As we shall see, however, political parties have often approached female vote banks in an opportunistic manner. They have made numerous promises in party manifestos that they have not fulfilled. Their record in nominating women to run for political office is very poor. Not surprisingly, women are under-represented in parliament and in higher-level decision-making bodies of the government and political parties.

Political parties and elections are where much of the real drama of Indian politics occurs. Parties that hold a majority of seats in the national or state parliaments form the national or state governments and control government resources. Parties thus devote substantial political energy to contesting and winning elections. What began as virtually a one-party system has evolved into a multiparty form, with three main political tendencies: centrist, centre-left and centre-right. Within this framework there are at least four potentially significant national parties and many regional ones competing for power. The four with significant national presence are the Congress (I), the Janata Party, the BJP and the CPM. While the CPM is a left-leaning party and the BJP is a religious, right-leaning one, both Congress (I) and Janata are more or less centrist parties. They have at times entered into coalitions. For example, the Janata Party joined forces with the CPM and other smaller parties in the 1996 election to form the United Front and formed two short-lived, left-leaning governments.



The Congress (I), usually referred to as Congress, was India's premier political party until the 1990s. To briefly summarize, the Congress Party built its electoral network by establishing a patronage system with "big men" across India who would mobilize electoral support for it during elections. Once in power, Congress would channel government resources to them, further enhancing their local position and ensuring their support. The supposedly socialist, pro-poor Congress Party thus came to be internally dominated by high-caste, wealthy Indians.

In the early 1950s, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at its helm, Congress was the unquestioned ruling party of India. Over the years, especially since the mid-1960s, this hegemony has come to be challenged. By the time Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assumed power in 1966, India's old Congress Party had begun to lose its political sway and anti-colonial nationalism was fading. The spread of democratic politics mobilized many poor, lower-caste citizens who depended less and less on village "big men" for political guidance. As a result, numerous regional parties started challenging Congress's monopoly on power.

Indira Gandhi sought to reverse the decline in Congress's electoral popularity through mobilizing India's vast majority, the poor, by promising "alleviation of poverty" as the core of her political programme. This promise struck a popular chord, propelling Indira Gandhi to the top of India's political pyramid. The Congress Party formed all governments from independence to 1989, with just one interlude when the Janata Party held office (1977–1980). Between 1989 and 2004, however, Congress headed the government only from 1991 to 1996. During that time the party had lost some of its traditional constituencies among the poor, lower castes and Muslims. The 2004 election reversed this trend. Defying electoral forecasts, Congress defeated the BJP and formed the national government.

The Congress-led nationalist movement entailed extensive women's participation, both at elite levels and among the rural poor. Many of the most prominent women leaders in India in the post-independence period first became involved in politics through the nationalist movement. Women's disenchantment with Congress reflected in heightened form widespread reasons for the party's decline. At its founding and under Nehru's leadership, Congress had been committed to social democratic redistributive reform and poverty alleviation. This commitment waned in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the party moved to a centrist, right-wing position. In the process it lost support among poor men and women.

Even more significant from women's perspective was Congress's waning commitment to secularism. This was a vexed issue from the earliest days of independence. Congress first tried to pass the Hindu Code Bill providing equal rights to men and women within the family in 1944, but met with so much opposition it could not pass the bill until 1955, and then with numerous qualifications. The party further undermined its secular credentials in the late 1980s with the infamous Shah Bano issue. Shah Bano, an elderly Muslim woman, sought maintenance from her husband under the Indian Penal Code, and when a judge ruled in her favour, the orthodox Muslim community vigorously opposed his decision. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi appeased it in 1986 by passing the misleadingly titled Muslim Women's Protection of Rights in Divorce Act, which denied Muslim women the right to demand maintenance from their husbands beyond a three-month period. Other incidents during this period brought the credibility of Congress into question. To the extent that women's rights were inextricably linked to the secular democratic framework, a growing chasm developed between the Congress Party and the women's movement.



The CPM, founded in 1964, is an offshoot of the Communist Party of India, which was formed during the colonial period and has existed nearly as long as the Congress Party. Though the contemporary CPM has a national presence in that it nearly always has elected representatives in the Lok Sabha, its political base is concentrated in two of India's states, West Bengal and Kerala. These states have often been ruled by the CPM, and they frequently elect Lok Sabha members who run on a CPM ticket. The CPM will have its first opportunity to influence the national government as a result of its strong performance in the 2004 national election. It will be providing support to the new Congress-dominated government at the centre.

The CPM is a disciplined organization, with party cadres and a hierarchical authority structure. Other than its name and internal organization, however, there is nothing communist about the CPM; rather, it is a social democratic party like the British Labour Party or the German Social Democrats. Within the national parliament, CPM members often strongly criticize government policies that are likely to hurt the poor. On occasion the CPM joins with other parties against the BJP, as it did in the 1996 election by joining the United Front. Where the CPM runs state governments, for example in West Bengal and Kerala, it has provided a relatively honest and stable administration. It has also pursued a moderate but effective reform programme ensuring the rights of agricultural tenants, providing services to those living in shanty towns, and encouraging public investment in rural areas.

The former Communist Party and, after its split in 1964, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the CPM all had strong women's organizations that were quite active in mobilizing women. However, these organizations were unequivocal in subordinating issues concerning gender to those of class inequality. This began to change in the early 1980s. The growth of the autonomous women's movement, followed by the growth of the religious right, led some of the younger Communist activists to raise questions of gender inequality more forcefully. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), which was affiliated to the CPI, came to play a more significant role, and in 1981 the CPM formed the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). Unlike its predecessors, AIDWA accepted members who were not affiliated to the CPM; it collaborated actively with autonomous women's groups and took up questions of violence against women.

The Congress Party's decline created a vacuum that the right-leaning, Hindu nationalist BJP was well positioned to fill. The BJP found in Indian Muslims a convenient scapegoat for the frustrations of various social groups and successfully mobilized Hindus to create a religiously oriented political force where none had existed before. The party's fortunes began to rise after the 1989 election, when it emerged as the third largest party after Congress and Janata. In 1991, the BJP held the second largest number of seats in parliament. To further capitalize on the Hindu support it had been mobilizing, the BJP participated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid (a Muslim mosque) in Ayodhya in 1992, which resulted in over two thousand deaths across India, even in cosmopolitan cities like Bombay.

After an unsuccessful attempt to form a government in 1996 and a very brief stint in power in 1998, the BJP formed a governing coalition, the National Democratic Alliance, led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. It was more broadly based than previous BJP-led coalition governments because it attracted the support of regional political parties in various states. One reason for the greater strength of the BJP-led government in 1999 was its cultivation of a more moderate, centrist stance. In 1996, most political parties had shunned it as tainted by its militant identity. Three years later, the BJP went to great lengths to project Atal Behari Vajpayee as a moderate, centrist leader. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) platform shelved contentious issues that identified it with the interests of Hindus over and against those of religious minorities.

However, the BJP has not fully swung to the political centre or abdicated its militancy. It continues to retain strong ties to the cultural organization the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), and periodically demonstrates its commitment to constructing a temple in Ayodhya. Its handling of the Gujarat riots in 2002 revealed its reluctance to bring the guilty to trial either during the riots or in their aftermath for fear of alienating hard line supporters. Although the BJP has consistently proclaimed its attachment to secular principles, it has taken steps that undermine the conditions in which secularism flourishes.

One of the most important factors that prevent the BJP from abdicating its militancy is its ties to the RSS and a religious organization, the Visva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Despite their philosophic differences, the BJP has maintained a close relationship with both of these groups. The RSS has intervened to mend rifts within the party in various states, and has helped ensure that the BJP, unlike most Indian political parties, has never split. Moreover, it is hard to imagine a complete severance between the two organizations when the highest-ranking BJP members come from RSS backgrounds with which they maintain connections. RSS and VHP activists have regularly participated in the BJP's campaigns in state and general elections. Moreover, the VHP-engineered riots have polarized the electorate along Hindu–Muslim lines and expanded the BJP's electoral fortunes.

Women have played remarkable roles in Hindu nationalism. First, they are among the movement's most extraordinary orators. Vijayraje Scindia, Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara, were at the forefront of the movement in its most militant phase, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed they were in Ayodhya in December 1992, goading mobs to destroy the mosque. Their voices, on cassettes that the government banned because they were so incendiary, were filled with vicious anti-Muslim propaganda and injunctions to violence.

This association of women and violence is not confined to the leadership level. Thousands of “ordinary” women have been associated with violent Hindu nationalist campaigns. The Durga Vahini and the Rashtrasevika Samiti, the women's organizations affiliated respectively to the VHP and the RSS, train women to use rifles and wield lathis (large sticks). They have played an important role in the many riots that have taken place since the early 1990s, directing Hindu mobs towards Muslim localities, preventing the police from aiding Muslim families, and engaging in post-riot looting of homes and shops. Hindu women's organizations either participated in the violence in Gujarat in 2002 or at best failed to prevent it.

If Hindu women leaders and activists have departed from conventional female roles, the BJP has also presented itself as an advocate of women's rights. It has, for example, taken a strong stand in favour of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which would extend the same rights to men and women regardless of their religious backgrounds. It has expressed a commitment to reservations for women in parliament (about which more below). It has condemned sexual violence and supported the creation of more employment opportunities for women.

Indeed, although there are some differences between the 2004 election platforms of the BJP and the Congress Party, the similarities are more striking. The BJP took a lead in incorporating into the NDA manifesto promises to unveil a national policy on women's economic empowerment, which would ensure some means of livelihood for all women and would increase the incomes of all categories of working women. It commits itself to a national childcare plan, workplace flexibility, greater career opportunities, hostels for working women in every town, and the removal of gender disparities in education, wages and property rights. It promises to promote female self-employment and entrepreneurship; to enforce laws against female feticide, dowry, child marriage, trafficking, rape and family violence; and to introduce a bill reserving 33 per cent seats for women in parliament and state legislatures in the very first session of parliament.

The Congress Party manifesto covers much of the same ground as the BJP's. It also supports 33 per cent reservations for women in parliament, legislation curbing the dowry, raising the age of marriage and improving widows' conditions. It supports the creation of micro-credit schemes and producer co-operatives. In addition it devotes more attention than the BJP to decentralization through the *panchayats* (village assemblies) and complete legal equality for women. This includes giving women an equal share in matrimonial property by protecting their rights to matrimonial homes and by giving them equal rights of ownership of assets such as houses and land. Although the Congress manifesto devotes more attention to women than the NDA manifesto, it does not contain any provisions that the BJP would not support in principle.

What explains the ability of Hindu nationalists to support certain women's rights that most "fundamentalists" would reject? And what are the limits of the BJP's tolerance? What if any are the principles on which it refuses to compromise? When the BJP has taken up certain women's rights, such as the UCC, it has done so on grounds of political expediency. Its support for the UCC issue in the 1990s was in part a response to the Shah Bano issue. It was designed to signal that unlike the Congress Party, which was swayed by religious fundamentalists, the BJP was committed to secularism; and that unlike Muslims, who were committed to religious law, Hindus accepted secular law. Expediency has also meant that the positions the BJP women's organization assumes are often inconsistent. Although members of Mahila Morcha (a women's organization affiliated to the BJP) voice the party line on the Ram Janambhoomi movement, it is difficult to identify a single one of the vital issues before the women's movement—dowry, *sati* (the burning of widows), female feticide—on which the BJP holds a unified position.<sup>8</sup> Like all political parties it also makes certain promises that it does not keep. For example, it has not demonstrated a resolve to implement reservations for women that it pledged at election time. Contrary to what one might expect, neither all of its positions nor its actions on women's issues are conservative. This lack of consistency is also evident in the BJP itself. The party brought India to the brink of disaster over the question of where and when Ram was born. However it has not articulated a position on questions that many fundamentalists consider vital in developing a coherent worldview: how to govern the economy, reform the legal system or create a religious state.

The contradictions between the BJP's various positions are best explained by its combining party and movement identities. As a political party, the BJP is guided by an electoral logic that has entailed extending its support base from upper-caste, upper-class men to a much broader constituency that includes women and lower-caste groups. However, through its connection with the RSS and the VHP, the BJP also seeks legitimacy on the basis of a militant movement identity. The Mahila Morcha is responsible for electoral campaigns, whereas the Rashtra Sevika Sangh and the Durga Vahini, which are respectively affiliated with the RSS and the VHP, refrain from direct involvement in party politics. Their work entails educating girls and women in the principles of Hindu nationalism, and training them to fight for a Hindu state.

This combination of party and movement-based identities is key to Hindu nationalists' success for a number of reasons. With equal justification, some of the BJP's constituents support it as a party of stability and order, others as a party of movement and change, some for its secularism and others for its religious commitment. Combining party and movement approaches also provides a more effective means of influencing the state than either approach would in isolation. This combination of attributes has enabled Hindu nationalists to simultaneously work the state from within, through the BJP, while confronting it from without, through the VHP and RSS.

8 It was the Ram Janambhoomi movement, organized by Hindu nationalists, that in 1992 destroyed the sixteenth-century Ayodhya mosque, claiming that its builder, the Muslim emperor Babar, had destroyed a temple that marked the birth place of the Hindu deity Ram.

## VI.A.

*elections*

The tables below provide some very revealing information about women and political parties. As tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, the number of women candidates that political parties have nominated to run for office is very low, and did not increase much during the 1980s and 1990s

when the women's movement was extremely active and, with the decline of Congress and the growth of the BJP, a major party realignment was underway. The percentage of candidates from all parties who were women was 4.5 per cent in 1984 and increased in the intervening elections to 7.6 per cent in 1999. The proportion of female candidates who were elected in 1999, 8.9 per cent, was hardly greater than in 1984, at 8.2 per cent. The data highlights the extent to which women's under-representation in political office is a product of party biases, for women are much more likely than men to be elected. In 1999, women constituted 7.6 per cent of all candidates and 23.3 per cent of all candidates who were elected. Thus the small proportion of women who stood for office had a relatively high likelihood of electoral success. Similarly in the preceding elections in 1984, 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998, a far greater proportion of women (two to three times as many) were elected than were nominated to stand for office. The relatively small number of women in political office is thus more a reflection of biases by parties—that is, their resistance to nominating women—than of any bias among the electorate. On the other hand, it may be that parties put up women only in constituencies they were confident they would win. If they felt the electorate was less likely to vote for a woman, all else being equal, then if they wanted to increase the number of women MPs belonging to their party, it made sense to nominate women in seats where victory was more likely. That 61.8 per cent of women candidates were elected in 1984 fits with this explanation.

In 1999, 7.6 per cent of all candidates were women, and 8.9 per cent of all those elected were women, so women were slightly more likely to be elected than men. The second and third columns from the right make clear that women are somewhat more likely to be elected than men, but that this gap is decreasing over time (probably because parties are running women in less safe constituencies). Table 1 presents the figures required for a comparison between men and women.

TABLE 1  
PROPORTION OF MALE AND FEMALE CANDIDATES OF ALL POLITICAL PARTIES

Election year	Percentage of all candidates who were men (excluding independents)	Percentage of all candidates who were women (excluding independents)	Percentage of those elected who were men (excluding independents)	Percentage of those elected who were women (excluding independents)	Percentage of all candidates who were elected (excluding independents)	Percentage of women candidates who were elected (excluding independents)	Percentage of male candidates who were elected (excluding independents)	Percentage of independent candidates who were women
1984	95.5	4.5	91.8	8.2	33.5	61.8	32.2	2.5
1989	95.3	4.7	94.4	5.6	21.1	25.0	20.9	2.2
1991	95.1	4.9	92.1	7.9	16.9	27.2	16.4	2.8
1996	94.7	5.3	92.5	7.5	16.1	22.9	15.7	4.0
1998	93.1	6.9	92.2	7.8	18.9	21.3	18.8	4.0
1999	92.4	7.6	91.1	8.9	19.9	23.3	19.6	4.0

TABLE 2  
PROPORTION OF ALL CANDIDATES AND ELECTED CANDIDATES OF ALL POLITICAL PARTIES

Election year	Percentage of all candidates who were women	Percentage of all candidates who were elected	Percentage of those elected who were women	Percentage of women candidates who were elected	Percentage of all candidates who were women (excluding independents)	Percentage of those elected who were women (excluding independents)	Percentage of women candidates who were elected (excluding independents)	Percentage of independent candidates who were women
1984	3.0	9.7	8.2	25.9	4.5	8.2	61.8	2.5
1989	3.2	8.6	5.5	14.6	4.7	5.6	25.0	2.2
1991	3.6	6.2	7.9	13.7	4.9	7.9	27.2	2.8
1996	4.3	3.9	7.4	6.7	5.3	7.5	22.9	4.0
1998	5.8	11.4	7.9	15.7	6.9	7.8	21.3	4.0
1999	6.1	11.7	9.0	17.3	7.6	8.9	23.3	4.0

Both Congress and the BJP claim to be strong advocates of reserving a third of the seats in parliament for women. “We want to field more women candidates but there are few candidates”, BJP president Venkaiah Naidu claimed. However the data does not bear out his contention that women do not win elections. As table 3 shows, the BJP’s record of nominating women to run for election has been unimpressive. Women comprised only 5.7 per cent of its candidates in 1996, 8.2 per cent in 1998 and 7.4 per cent in 1999. Yet women were much more likely than men to be elected. The percentage of women candidates who were elected was 51.9 per cent in 1996, 46.9 per cent in 1998 and 60 per cent in 1999. The most reasonable explanation for the relatively greater success of BJP women is that Congress was more willing to run female candidates in constituencies where the party was unlikely to win.

The Congress Party has fielded more women candidates than the BJP, though their performance has been less impressive. The percentage of Congress candidates who were women was 7.9 per cent in 1984 and then hovered between 8 and 11 per cent between 1989 and 1999. The Congress Party nominated more women than the BJP in every election. However, a larger proportion of women candidates were elected from the BJP than from Congress. From 1989 onwards, between a quarter and a half of all female Congress Party candidates were elected compared with 52–60 per cent in the BJP. Because Congress nominated a larger number of female candidates than the BJP, the total number of women MPs in each is not strikingly different. However this figure masks significantly different rates of electoral success among women from the two parties.

TABLE 3  
THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP)

Election year	Number of candidates	Number of candidates elected	Number of women candidates	Number of women candidates elected	Percentage of candidates who were elected	Percentage of candidates who were women	Percentage of women candidates who were elected	Percentage of those elected who were women	Average margin of defeat for women candidates (%)
1984	224	2	9	0	0.9	4.0	0.0	0.0	32.2
1989	225	85	10	5	37.8	4.4	50.0	5.9	16.6
1991	477	120	26	8	25.2	5.5	30.8	6.7	42.5
1996	471	161	27	14	34.2	5.7	51.9	8.7	14.7
1998	388	182	32	15	46.9	8.2	46.9	8.2	15.4
1999	339	182	25	15	53.7	7.4	60.0	8.2	6.0

TABLE 4  
THE CONGRESS PARTY

Election year	Number of candidates	Number of candidates elected	Number of women candidates	Number of women candidates elected	Percentage of candidates who were elected	Percentage of candidates who were women	Percentage of women candidates who were elected	Percentage of those elected who were women	Average margin of defeat for women candidates (%)
1984	491	404	39	37	82.3	7.9	94.9	9.2	0.3
1989	510	197	56	15	38.6	11.0	26.8	7.6	13.3
1991	502	244	48	21	48.6	9.6	43.8	8.6	8.3
1996	529	140	49	16	26.5	9.3	32.7	11.4	12.5
1998	477	141	38	10	29.6	8.0	26.3	7.1	16.1
1999	453	114	51	14	25.2	11.3	27.5	12.3	13.5

In the 2004 election, party nominations of women to run for political office were consistent with previous years. Women made up 8.24 per cent (39/334) of BJP candidates, 10.79 per cent (45/372) of Congress candidates and 11.59 per cent (8/61) of CPM candidates.

## VI.B.

## women's movements and political parties

The major periods of social movement activism in the post-independence period preceded and then followed Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of national emergency (1975–1977) and flirtation with authoritarianism. A wide range of movements emerged, opposing deforestation, the violation of tribal land rights, the mistreatment

of slum dwellers and the oppression of the lower castes. Women and questions of gender inequality were at the forefront of these grassroots movements. During this same period, numerous urban feminist organizations were formed autonomously from political parties. They included the Samata Manch (Equality Forum), Stree Sangharsh Samiti (Women's Struggle Committee), Stree Mukti Sangathan (Women's Power Organization), the Feminist Network Collective, Stree Shakti Sangathan (Women's Power Organization), Purogami Sangathan (Forward Stepping Organization), the Forum against Oppression of Women, Saheli, the Progressive Organization of Women, the Women's Center, Kali for Women and Manushi. Although they addressed a range of issues, their primary concern was violence against women, as manifest in "dowry deaths", the rape of women by the police and security forces, and domestic violence.

Urban feminist groups were fiercely committed to retaining their autonomy from political parties, to prevent the lure of resources, influence and power from blunting their radicalism. However, while retaining their autonomy from political parties and staying out of the electoral domain—barring the collaboration of some groups with the communist parties—they worked closely with the courts and the bureaucracy. The grassroots movements with which women were closely associated were those of the poorest and most marginal groups (tribal groups, the landless poor, slum dwellers, subsistence agriculturalists), who generally had little electoral clout and no electoral aspirations. The urban feminist movement was primarily drawn to non-electoral issues such as violence against women.

Correspondingly, the most important gains women achieved were in the courts and bureaucracy, not in the electoral arena. The government appointed women to some key posts, and created bodies to investigate women's conditions and make recommendations. The National Commission on the Status of Women was the most significant of these. Working through these state institutions was associated with some important costs. Struggles that were lodged in the courts often remained there for a long time, legal battles diverted women's attention from grassroots struggles, and the focus on rights was associated with narrow constructions of women's interests and identities (Menon 2000). Nonetheless these battles provided women with arenas within the state in which they could seek redress while placing pressure on the courts and segments of the bureaucracy to address the conditions of marginal groups.

By contrast, both grassroots movements and the feminist movement put less effort into electoral politics and had less impact on it. Unlike a range of other social movements, the women's movement played a relatively small role in two crucial elections that removed the Congress Party from power (in 1977 and 1986). In 1977, the Gandhian Socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan organized the movement for total democracy that ultimately brought about the downfall of Congress and the election of the Janata party. A decade later, V.P. Singh resigned from Congress and formed the Jan Morcha (Peoples' Front), an avowedly "non-political" movement that brought new groups into politics and helped bring the National Front to power in 1989. It was during this period that the women's movement began to interact more closely with political parties and the state.



The past two decades have witnessed a confluence of two trends: on the one hand, attempts by political parties to foster closer ties to social movements and non-governmental organizations, and on the other hand, the attempt by some women's movement activists to work with parties and the state. Although the women's movement is not unified on the question of working more closely with the state, a broad cross-section of activists has moved in that direction.

One of the areas in which the women's movement has most closely interacted with political parties is to urge them to pass a bill supporting reservations for women at the national level. There has been a great deal of debate within both the women's movement and political parties about the desirability of reservations for women in the Legislative Assembly and Parliament. The urban feminist movement largely supports reservations but political parties have not actively supported them, despite their claims to the contrary. While the urban feminist movement may be national in appearance, however, it is highly localized in practice. Thus while segments of the women's movement might support the passage of the bill, they do not rival the influence of political parties over the form it should assume or the effects it will have.

Three successive governments, dating back to 1996, have supported the 81st Amendment Bill guaranteeing at least 33 per cent of reserved seats for women in parliament and the legislative assembly. However, although most political parties have endorsed the bill in their election manifestos, they have not supported its passage in parliament. It was defeated most recently in December 2000, when a range of parties expressed either ambivalence or opposition to it. As a compromise measure, Home Minister L.K. Advani supported the Chief Election Commissioner's proposal to require all political parties to reserve 33 per cent of seats for women contestants. Critics fear that political parties will nominate women in unwinnable constituencies. Thus far, parties' records in nominating women candidates have been poor. In the 1996 parliamentary election, for example, women comprised less than 15 per cent of the total number of candidates put up by political parties. Women constitute only 10–12 per cent of the membership of political parties (Rai 1997:105).

Political parties have been more resistant than the general public to state and national-level reservations for women. A survey by *India Today* indicates that 75 per cent of women and 79 per cent of men favour the active participation of women in politics, and 75 per cent of men and women favour reservations in legislative bodies (Rai and Sharma 2000:159). Interestingly, the left-leaning parties have often opposed the bill on grounds that it does not take account of caste inequality. The Janata Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal (Laloo Prashad Yadav), Samajwadi Janata Party and Bahujan Samajwadi Parties have all rejected it because it makes no provision for reservations on a caste basis for Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The women's movement largely supports the bill. Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran, two prominent activists, argue that it is important to look beyond the actions of the elites who have supported the 81st Amendment:

at a deeper level, the reason why this negligible group is able to speak out so loud and clear is because masses of underprivileged women have a far more important political presence that over runs and refuses to be contained by the vote bank politics of mainstream parties.

(Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1997:197).



Opposition to the 81st Amendment from some segments of the women's movement partly reflects a distrust of political parties. One worry is that quotas could form a ceiling rather than a minimum to be improved upon; another is that women candidates might be pliable because of their dependence on male party leaders (Kishwar 1996:2867–2874). An even more significant worry is that reservations treat women as a homogeneous group, which increases the likelihood that the “biwi brigade” of educated, upper-class, upper-caste women will be elected, particularly because the bill does not provide for sub-quotas of OBCs (Menon 2000; Raman 1995).

## VI.C.

*women's leadership*

Few women have been elected to parliament with solid support from a constituency committed to women's advancement, and women MPs have been relatively ineffective in challenging gender inequality. The representation of women in parliament has not increased much from

the 4.7 per cent (or 22 women) in the first parliament (1952–1957). The largest proportion ever was 8.1 per cent (44 women) in the parliament elected in 1984. Between 1991 and 1996, 49 women were elected to parliament (5.2 per cent). Women occupied 4.1 per cent of the 22 per cent of parliamentary seats that were reserved for scheduled castes. Most of them were upper caste, and two were from Scheduled Tribes. Most women MPs are middle-class professionals.

The power of women MPs is generally very limited. Because they are expected to support the party line rather than formulate their own agendas, they have accorded low priority to issues concerning women. There seems to be little regular contact between women's groups and women MPs. The exception here is that the women's wings of political parties liaise with women MPs, who can thus become conduits between the party's leadership and its women members. They are also consulted from time to time by the party leadership on issues regarding the family and women's rights. But non-party women's groups do not seem to approach women MPs.

The women's movement is at an even greater remove from the smaller and more exceptional group of female party leaders. Consider the roles of some women who have emerged as power brokers within Indian politics today. They include the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, who was positioned to become prime minister in 2004; Jayalalitha Jayaram, who heads the regionally based All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) from the southern state of Tamil Nadu; Mamata Bannerjee, the head of the Trinamul Congress Party of West Bengal; Mayavati, twice chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and Rabri Devi, the chief minister of Bihar. Three of these women, Gandhi, Jayalalitha and Mayavati, were directly responsible for the downfall of Bharatiya Janata Party governments. At Gandhi's prompting, Jayalalitha withdrew her party's support from the central government. Mayavati hammered the last nail in the coffin by voting against the government in a critical parliamentary vote, thereby necessitating a new election.

All these women, with the possible exception of Mayavati, rose to power as appendages to men rather than through movements or institutional channels. Rabri Devi only emerged from her role as housewife and mother of nine children when her husband was imprisoned and she replaced him as chief minister of Bihar. Jayalalitha was the mistress of actor-turned-politician M.G. Ramachandran, whom she succeeded as chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Sonia Gandhi is the widow of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi's popularity precipitated a backlash against her. The BJP engaged in a vicious smear campaign that directed attention to her foreign origins, leading her to withdraw her candidacy for prime ministership.

India's women leaders may be important symbols of the nation and its parts, but lacking the support of movements, they have not become powerful in their own right. In the absence of such support, their connections with male family members assume paramount importance. Nor do these women share common values, ideas or agendas. Their role in bringing down the BJP government may be as close as they will ever come to collaborating. Their deepest commitments are to their parties and to themselves, not to the collective interests of women.

However, there is enormous opportunity in a possible alliance between the women's movement, as it seeks out a national presence and a role in the state, and the small number of party women who are staking out independent positions. It is precisely such an alliance that is needed to address the problem that Gail Omvedt identifies when she describes the women's movement as anti-political (Omvedt 1993:310). There is no question that the farmers' movement and the caste-based, ethnic and religious nationalist movements have all had a much bigger impact than the women's movement on electoral politics. The question of how to engage in elections selectively and creatively poses an important challenge for the women's movement.

## VI.

## conclusion

This paper opened by asking about the relationship between women and parties and between parties and movements. What becomes striking is the dearth of scholarship on these relationships on the one hand, and their political significance on the other. Even when parties have neglected women's interests, they have profited from employing gendered imagery, drawing on women's votes

and using women in electioneering. Within this broad context, there are some important differences among political parties. The first is ideological. Left-of-centre parties are more apt to address questions of gender inequality, but not necessarily to have better representation of women in leadership positions. Leftist parties are most apt to commit themselves in principle to the eradication of gender inequality, which provides a normative standard to which their party leaders can appeal. Women's movements are also most apt to seek out alliances with leftist parties and then pressure them to hold to their stated commitments.

The second critical basis for differentiating among parties with respect to their stance on women cuts across ideology; it concerns nationalism. Nationalist parties, most of which are ethnically and religiously based, have been especially effective in mobilizing support through gendered appeals. Often the actual number of women involved in these movements, particularly in leadership positions, is relatively small, but their symbolic presence is enormously significant.

The biggest obstacle that confronts any serious attempt to challenge gender inequality through the party system is that parties draw on women's participation as individuals, not as members of a group that has suffered discrimination. Women's participation in party politics further undermines their sense of collective identity. Not surprisingly, those women who have achieved positions of political power in South Asia do not owe these positions to political parties. Nor have parties lived up to their commitment to addressing gender inequality. Such commitments have only emerged when movements that have identified themselves with women's collective identities have worked closely with political parties.

The discussion underlines the shared repertoire of ideas that circulates within South Asia. This cross-fertilization began with common histories of colonialism and, to some extent, nationalism. Even today there are many ideas and practices that are common to the four countries. The normative commitment to relegating women, particularly middle-class women, to the private domain of home and family and excluding them from party politics is pervasive throughout South Asia. Political parties have generally accepted these views and functioned as the gatekeepers of male-dominated systems of power. These patterns have generally only been challenged when women's movements are strong enough to pressure parties to represent women and women's interests better. For them to do so generally entails the existence of a democratic context.

All four countries have relatively strong women's movements that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of a broader civil society response to authoritarian state practices. Women's movements have grown in response to particular domestic challenges, above all the attempts by states to undermine democratic rights and practices, and regional and international influences.

In all four countries, women's movements have played a critical role in placing women at the forefront of the political agenda. However, they have devoted less attention to working with parties through the electoral system than to other arenas. Many women's struggles have been waged in the courts and in bureaucracies. Women's movements have generally not developed alliances with political parties or with women MPs. There are exceptions to this rule, however. In India and Sri Lanka, leftist political parties and their women's organizations have had closer relationships than centrist and rightist parties with autonomous women's movements. Moreover women's movements have become more receptive to alliances with political parties and more interested in influencing political processes than they were in the past. This may be related to the growth of ethnic and religious nationalism, which has posed a direct challenge to women's movements and led them to seek alliances with secular, democratic parties. International influences may also play an important role. Many Western funding agencies have sought to strengthen civil society organizations in response to neoliberal policies that have weakened states. In Bangladesh, for example, many foreign-funded NGOs engage in broad-based democratization work that entails collaboration among NGOs, social movements and political parties.

One issue that women's movements have taken up in all four countries is the demand for the reservation of parliamentary seats for women at the national level. This demand has encountered different challenges in each country. In Bangladesh, the women's movement has sought to prevent the state from controlling reservations, and demanded that reserved seats should be directly elected. In India, the women's movement has encountered the challenge of accommodating caste inequality within reserved seats for women. Notwithstanding the complexities surrounding the question of how reservations should be implemented, women's movements concur overall in their support. There is potential for South Asian women's movements to jointly formulate certain demands, such as making it legally mandatory for political parties to allot 33 per cent of tickets to women members.

The major differences among South Asian countries concern the characteristics of their political systems, which offer very different opportunities for women's political engagement. In general, the stronger democratic institutions and practices are, the greater the opportunities this affords women to achieve representation through the party system. Among the countries we have examined, Pakistan is at one end of the continuum. Democracy has been intermittent, the military and organized religion have played active roles in politics, and civilian political parties are weak and compromised. As a result, the women's movement has not sought alliances with parties and has for the most part located itself outside, and often in opposition to, the state. India is at the other end of the continuum. A long history of democracy, numerous and varied political parties, and regular, open elections have ensured that political parties have sought the support of the female electorate. Although this has often resulted in expedient appeals to women's interests, it may have also increased women's awareness of their leverage. Women's movements are coming to form alliances with political parties around a range of issues.

However, democracy presents its own challenges. The very alliance between certain civil society groups and political parties that is a product of democracy has also led parties to co-opt the demands of autonomous women's groups. One human rights group, the Mother's Front in Sri Lanka, collapsed when the SLFP took up its demands. The success of the movement and the party were thus inversely correlated. In India the very willingness of the right-wing BJP to take up the Uniform Civil Code has led the women's movement to shelve the demand temporarily in order to avoid being too closely associated with the party.

A related problem is that the very growth of civil society associated with the spread of democracy is also responsible for the growth of conservative parties and movements. Alongside the growth of non-governmental organizations committed to women's rights in Bangladesh, there has been the growth of organizations of Muslim clerics, which sometimes also receive outside funding, that have attacked what they deem to be Westernized NGOs. Indeed in all South Asian countries, right-wing groups, often ethnic and religious in character, have an enormous capacity to mobilize women's movements while undermining women's advancement. This is one of the critical challenges that women's movements acting in concert with leftist and secular parties must confront.

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