

Continuity and Change in ASIA

Join us every Wednesday for an insightful look at *Continuity and Change in Asia*, a social studies-based program exploring political and social issues shaping Asia today and designed to encourage students to better understand the various issues shaping the countries and regions of East, South and Southeast Asia. This Newspapers In Education program is in partnership with the Asia Outreach Centers at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies. Series will run through Wednesday, June 7, 2006.

Activities

- 1: Choose one idea from this week's essay about South Asian women and research it further. Break into small groups and share your findings, then have a member from each group present your main points to the class for further discussion.
- 2: In The Seattle Times, find articles about women and their status in society across different cultures. You may need to search The Seattle Times archives for stories on the subject. Then create a mind-map http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_mapping illustrating what you have learned and what ideas you have for further research and inquiry on this topic.

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01061328_01 - 5/17/06



ARTICLE 5

Women's Rise to Power

The Paradox of South Asian Women

By Virginia Van Dyke, Affiliate Assistant Professor of International Studies, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington

In 1960, Sirimavo R.D. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the first woman prime minister in history. In 1988, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan became the first female head of state in a Muslim majority country. India and Bangladesh have also had women heads of state. Women leaders from South Asia have been prominent on the world stage; yet a closer examination of the status of women in South Asia presents a puzzle. With the exception of Sri Lanka, females in South Asian societies tend to have low literacy rates and high child mortality. There are concerns about "missing girls," a term which refers to the phenomenon that, in contrast to most of the world, fewer girls than boys are born and fewer girls survive to adulthood as a result of a preference for male children.

How do we explain this contradiction of powerful women leaders combined with women's relatively low status in South Asian societies? One explanation is the continued importance of eminent families dominating politics. Many women politicians have been wives, daughters, or widows of well-known male politicians, thereby continuing a type of dynastic rule.

There are, however, alternative routes to political power. A reputation based on accomplishments as

a film star, religious figure, or even as the leader of a criminal gang, can set the stage for entry into politics. In recent elections in India there were two prominent women politicians who became chief ministers of their states. One was descended from a family that had once ruled a Princely state and the other had achieved fame initially as a child protégé giving Hindu religious instruction and had then become a spokesperson for Hindu nationalism. They were dubbed by the press during the election campaign as the "Rani and the Sanyasi," that is, the princess and the monk.

A different path to power for a woman politician is illustrated by India's Mayawati, who rose to a position of authority solely through her own efforts in the political arena. She is the nationally known leader of a political party called the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which aspires to represent all of the lower castes in India. The BSP's most loyal constituency is that of the lowest castes, the former untouchables or Dalits. Mayawati's message appeals to these increasingly politically assertive, formerly marginalized groups as she attacks high caste groups for discriminating against those from the lower castes.

Mayawati has been Chief Minister four times in the most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh (which would be the fifth most populous country in the world if independent). While her party cannot claim a majority on its own, it does control a large percentage of the vote and so cannot be ignored by other parties.

Outside the realm of electoral politics, a number of women have achieved distinction as leaders in social movements and in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Environmental movements, women's movements and movements for prohibition (banning

alcohol consumption) have had woman leaders and active female participants. There are also organizations for women's empowerment that model self help and provide small business loans. One such group, organized and run by women is SEWA – Self Employed Women's Association.

In India, unlike the United States, there are affirmative action policies in place for women. In 1993, an amendment to the Constitution established that one third of the seats in the rural local level governing committees called Panchayats be set aside for women. While the effectiveness of this policy has been debated in the sense that it sometimes appears that these women are simply providing a front for a male member of the family, it does provide training for a new generation of women to take leadership positions. Further, there is an on-going political debate in India as to whether one third of the seats in the lower house of Parliament should be reserved for women; currently there are 45 women out of 543 members. If this proposal were to become law, considerably more women would be present in the national government than in the United States or in many countries in Europe!

Questions for discussion:

- What reasons does the author give for the contradiction of a few powerful women leaders versus the generally low status of women in South Asian societies?
- Describe some of the paths to power that women in India have taken.
- What impact has women's leadership had on Indian society?



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