

GENDER, DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

WOMEN, POLITICAL STRUGGLES AND GENDER EQUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Edited by Margaret Alston



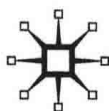
Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia

Edited by

Margaret Alston

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Editorial matter, selection, introduction and conclusion

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Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia

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The 'Gender, Development and Social Change' series brings together path-breaking writing from gender scholars and activist researchers who are engaged in development as a process of transformation and change. The series pinpoints where gender and development analysis and practice are creating major 'change moments'. Multidisciplinary in scope, it features some of the most important and innovative gender perspectives on development knowledge, policy and social change.

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Series Editor's Preface

Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia, edited by Margaret Alston, is a key contribution to the Palgrave series on gender, development and social change. The collection illustrates how women's activism can in one generation bring about major changes that are transforming women's lives now and in the future. The case studies in the book from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Pakistan show how women have broken through cultural norms and values that have oppressed women for centuries. Women have entered local and national government, changed legislation related to property, resources and wealth, and challenged and changed patriarchal systems. The collective efforts of women from grassroots to the educated political class have devised new livelihood strategies which have opened up life chances for millions of women. While the book shows the positive achievements, it does not shy away from discussing the deeply entrenched violence that all women face in South Asia. It underlines that a major obstacle for women's greater engagement in public life is the prevalence of violence against women even as they call for justice. Through careful research and analysis, the book helps to break the silence around the many layers of violence women experience in the South Asian context. The chapters expose horrific practice of rape and honour killings, the continuation of child marriages, dowry payments, limited inheritance rights and reduced control of assets. While this shadow remains, the important knowledge contained in the book is that women, against all odds, have achieved significant legal, political, social and economic changes over the last decades and in describing these successes, it points the way forward for South Asian women's continued active engagement in transformative politics.

Wendy Harcourt

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1

Introduction: Women, Political Struggles and Activism – Exploring the Lives of Women in South Asia

Margaret Alston

On 16th of December 2012, in the late evening of a balmy Delhi night, a young physiotherapy student boarded a bus with her male companion after an evening out at the movies. She had her whole life and a long professional career ahead of her – a career made possible by the efforts of her family, who had sold their rural farm land to move to the city to enable her to pursue her education.

What followed was a crime so horrific that the whole world recoiled. For several hours she was repeatedly raped, beaten, bitten and brutalized, and her friend bashed to unconsciousness. When the ordeal was finally over she and her companion were thrown naked off the bus where they lay until a passer-by called for assistance. Her injuries were so extreme that despite her courage, determination and will to live and despite her family seeking medical assistance in another country, she died some thirteen days later – her passing mourned by people across the globe, overwhelmed by the brutality and senselessness of this appalling act.

Protests erupted across India; mass rallies called for an end to the constant and shameful harassment and violence against women. Tear gas and water cannons were used against the protesters, marches were banned in Delhi and government ministers called for calm. Although the young woman's name was suppressed, she became known as 'Damini' meaning 'lightning' – a reference to an early Bollywood film and also, one suspects, as recognition of her case becoming a lightning rod for activism and protest. On the occasion of her death the Indian Prime Minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, referring to the widespread anger and protests stated

It would be a true homage to her memory if we are able to channel ... these emotions and energies into a constructive course of action. (Aljazeera News 2012)

This book emerges in honour of Damini as a constructive avenue to discuss violence against women and girls across South Asia, to alert the world to this challenge, to analyse and critique the political struggles in which women in the region are engaged and to celebrate their activism. We call on the global community to support the women of South Asia in their quest for equality, dignity and justice.

South Asia

South Asia is a large contained landmass that is home to one-fifth of the world's population – approximately 1.6 billion people, forming the most densely populated region of the world. The extent of the area known as South Asia is disputed but arguably comprises the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives (see Figure 1). The population is not homogenous across the countries that make up the region nor even within these countries' borders. It is an area that encompasses a complex diversity of geography, population, religions, customs, dress and circumstances.

Archaeological records suggest it was one of the first regions to be inhabited by modern humans, some 400,000 years ago and acted as a trade route to other parts of Asia and Europe (Majumder 2010; Mines & Lamb 2010). Its rich cultural history is evident from artefacts dating from approximately 2500 BC, and its vibrant trade routes are well-documented from 300 BC and beyond. Sanskrit – considered the oldest language in the world – evolved in this region at least 6,000 years ago, giving some sense of its rich cultural heritage. The key to understanding the area is the historical centrality of the trade routes through the region, both in ancient and more modern times, a phenomenon that has facilitated the transfer of ideas, language, culture, traditions and religion.

Religious diversity

Modern day South Asia is a mix of religions that either developed on the subcontinent or found their way to the region through the land and sea trade routes. Ancient Hindu texts written in Sanskrit confirm that the Hindu religion was prominent in the South Asia region from at least

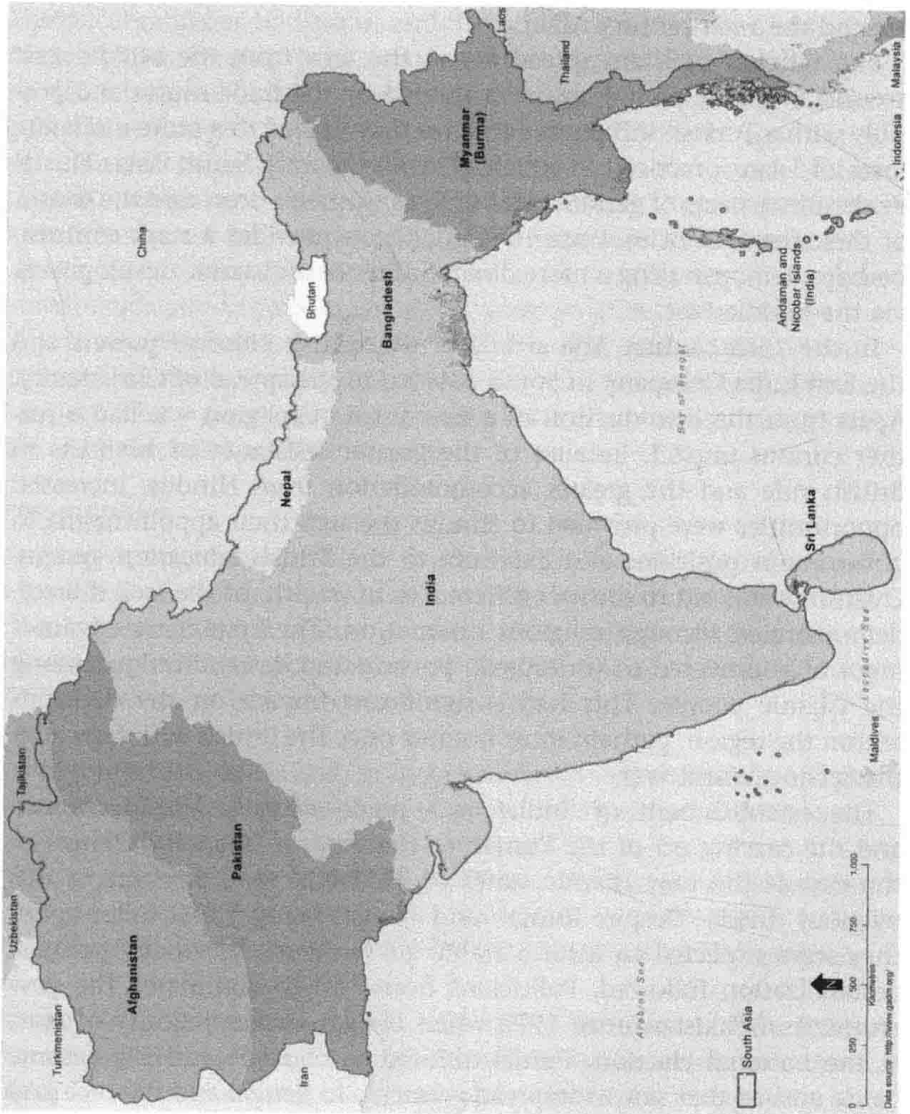


Figure 1 South Asia

2000 BC, and from the 5th to approximately the 14th centuries AD, Hinduism was the official religion in much of South Asia. Buddhism developed in the 1st millennium BC and coexisted with Hinduism for much of this period, becoming more dominant across South Asia from around the 14th century AD.

The religion of Islam spread across the area from the Middle East around the same period, again facilitated by the trade routes and possibly with a Turkish influence – a factor that has led to a more moderate form of Islam practiced in much of contemporary South Asia. This is evident in aspects of gender roles such as women's dress and the extent of their freedom of movement. Afghanistan provides a stark contrast, perhaps demonstrating a more direct influence on Islamic development via the Middle East.

In the 16th century, the arrival of the British colonial powers and the East India Company in South Asia led to the spread of Christianity. Apart from the introduction of a new form of religion – it had a further curious impact. Because of the greater resistance of Islamists to British rule and the greater accommodation from Hindus, increased opportunities were provided to Hindus through their appointments to government positions and exposure to the British education system. Over time this led to distinct differences in wealth, or the lack thereof, demonstrated through religious orientation. The systematic advancement of Hindus led to widespread poverty and destabilization among the Islamic people. This had a significant impact on the divisions within the region, perhaps most notable once the British withdrew after the Second World War.

The establishment of 'India' as a predominantly Hindu country and the carving off of the Punjab to the west of India and Bengal to the east as the new Islamic states of 'Pakistan' were artefacts of this religious divide. Despite Punjab and Bengal being 1,000 miles apart, they were expected to form a stable government. Inevitably political destabilization followed. Politicians from Punjab dominated the government of Pakistan until 1970 when Bengal won a majority of seats at the national election. Punjab refused to concede and a gruesome battle ensued that saw widespread genocide in Bengal and the rape and torture of hundreds of thousands of women. The entry of India to the battle against Punjab not only put an end to the war but also resulted in the separation of Punjab as 'Pakistan' and the establishment of the new country of 'Bangladesh' in the east, formerly known as Bengal. This is one of the most extreme evidences of simmering political tensions