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# A STAR IN THE MAKING

by Zanita Careem  
Sunday Island Features Desk

**S**ri Lanka which gave the world its first woman prime minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, has now elected her daughter Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga to the same august post.

The daughter of two distinguished prime ministers, she has created history by becoming the third prime minister from the same family. By her courage and eloquence she is now a leader in her own right. She has inherited the mantle of her late father and her mother but she has shown by her relentless struggle for the restoration of democracy in the face of enormous and daunting obstacles that she is a woman of no ordinary mettle. Like in many countries, especially in Asia, women in politics have often taken over from a parent or an assassinated husband. And Chandrika Kumaratunga is no exception.

Tragedy was no stranger to her. Thirty-six years ago she witnessed the tragic scene of her father being gunned down while she was a mere nine-year-old. Later she witnessed the tragedy of her husband when an unknown assassin killed her husband leaving her widowed with two children. But this double trauma only strengthened her determination to eradicate the vicious circle of the politics of violence. And she became an activist in pursuing this concept.

Chief organiser of the SLP in Attanagalle, Deputy Leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Vice President of the People's Alliance she is now on the threshold to end era of gun culture dominant in our society for the past 17 years.

Chandrika Kumaratunga is now poised to blaze a new trail for women to open a new vista in the annals of

history. In retrospect, we must reflect on what has been achieved by other women prime ministers both nationally and internationally. The most important fact that emerged from the success of women prime ministers is that their feminism had much to do for their success.

Mrs. Bandaranaike, Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi, it may be said had family tradition and Eastern socio-mores to guide them to success in their relevant societies. The added hidden factor is that intuition and instincts play a large part coming easily to women.

The Prime Ministers grew in stature as persons maturing in their second term in office to the highest. Perhaps being nurtured in the corridors of power and Eastern norms of morality and sentimental syndrome did help but in the last resort it was their innate ability that helped them to establish an identity of their own.

Myths abound the exercise of power by feminine leaders. It can be a myth of compassion like that of the mother figure for Sirimavo Bandaranaike it can be the myth of machism concept in Golda Meir; it can epitomise the alleged intolerance of dissidence by the imperious Indira Gandhi. But where adulation had no competence to feed upon, it not only refused to create a myth as with Maria Estela Peron with whose ouster Peronism also lost its compelling grip on the Argentinian imagination.

In the case of Pakistan's 42-year Benazir Bhutto, who donned her father's liberal democratic mantle she has courageously fought dictatorial rule over the years to establish her hold in the Pakistani psyche.

She also survived personal tragedy, imprisonment and exile to emerge as a force to be reckoned with in the turbulent politics of her country. Meanwhile in Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina is the powerful opposition leader.

**W**omen in politics have often taken over from their husbands or famous parents. But can women make it on their own? Yes of course!

They need not necessarily ride the crest of a wave that is caused by the untimely death of their husbands or fathers. They are capable enough to achieve success on their own. Consider Margaret Thatcher. She made it on her own. And she became one of the celebrated prime ministers in the world.

felt that being a woman added to her womanly prowess of... Unlike a man there were dimensions beyond political efficiency and experience which could encompass the ability to create not merely to

"being exposed to atomic radiation and lingering death." The impact won headlines. Sirimavo Bandaranaike's first accession to power was accidental. One can even say that continuance for a full electoral term can also be expected in the circumstances in which a myth is sought to be perpetuated in the person of an associate close to the founder.

Although she lost in the elections five years later in 1965, she led the opposition in 1970 and brought it back to power and became the Prime Minister for the second time. Neither her defeat in 1965 nor her victory in 1970 could be related to any feminine failings or attributes.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike created headlines by becoming the first woman Prime Minister in modern times. Indira Gandhi's rise to power from 1966-1977 as leader of world's largest democracy seemed to confirm there was a pattern in the Asian ethos which made it possible for a woman to reach out to power and for men to accept it. If the vast majority of women were illiterate they were not the less vocal

proceeded to use her charm when needed — as the then opposition leader admitted ruefully.

Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom struggle called for the equal participation of women which perhaps was what gave to modern women their first taste of political freedom and social emancipation. What has distinguished the attitude of the women prime ministers has been their utterly natural assumption of equality.

Neither Sirimavo Bandaranaike or Indira Gandhi has even mentioned that being a woman has hampered their style/what they had to do to prove their credibility was to defy not their femininity but derogatory status as wife of an outstanding husband and daughter of a legendary patriot.

The fact that Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is a woman should not in any way be beyond her skills to be a consummate political leader. Like her predecessors beginning with her own mother, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and many others in the fray it is now for Chandrika to be a trail blazer for millions of women.

Chandrika to be a trail blazer for millions of women here and abroad. Her magnificent leadership, her impeccable and restrained dignity her undoubted state-manship and above all that indefinable element called charisma are well writ and have been substantiated unequivocally.

It is a matter of time before she will be the conduit to realise the aspirations of the nation and symbolise that women are equal to men at any level of life — mentally and temperamentally.

She should come to symbolise the political and democratic aspiration of her people, give voice to the innermost longings as she represents the hope for the future.



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HER PARENTS..

daughter of former Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Hasina has stamped her personality indelibly on Bangladesh politics by her resolute nature to vindicate her father's avowed goals. Khali-za the present PM of Bangladesh is striving valiantly to raise the living standards of the nation, one of the poorest in South and South, East Asia.

Except for Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher and Tansu

iller of Turkey who had neither a family name nor tradition to bolster their image other women prime ministers have to contend with the myth of inheritance. For Sri Lanka in September 1959 the assassination of Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike thrust his wife Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike to power winning the distinction of becoming the world's first woman prime minister in July

1960. Even when she succumbed to the persuasions of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party which was reeling under the loss of its leader — her husband, she had decided to campaign on behalf of the party for the oncoming elections but not to contest a seat. "I am not seeking power", she said, "I have come forward to help the SLEP candidates so that the party can contribute to the

politics of my late husband." Yet there were not only the imperatives but other compulsions which made her step into her husband's shoes or rather sandals. The over-riding concern was to revive the democratising effect of the loss of an innovative and dynamic leader.

However the landslide victory which brought her to power was attributed to the magic of the esoteric Bandaranaike name. But she exploited the situation with her own skills and restrained dignity. In office she quickly shed her shy retiring manner but not her femininity. In fact she used it with the confidence of a woman and without the hang-ups of the militant suffragettes who feel that they have to deny that they are more equal to men. Sirimavo like Indira Gandhi, later

At the Belgrade Conference of Non Aligned Nations Sirimavo Bandaranaike rose to speak not only as the leader of a nation but as a woman and mother as well. The issue was abstract but the reference was pointed personal and humanistic. "I do not believe for one moment there is a single mother in the world", she said who can bear to contemplate the possibility of children