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December 8, 2020

**Dreaming equality**

Much of the world rejoiced when Donald Trump was defeated by Joe Biden in the US presidential election. Church bells rang in Paris; people danced on the streets of Washington DC and banged pots and pans in celebration in New York City.

Some attention has been paid to the election of Kamala Harris as vice president. Not only is she a person of colour, she is also of South Asian and Caribbean origin. According to the Hindustan Times, when Ms. Harris’ election was confirmed, “Thulasendrapuram village in [the] Tiruvarur district burst firecrackers, distributed sweets and drew colourful rangolis”.

It is tempting to say to Americans: what took you so long? After all, both Pakistan and India have had female leaders. Indira Gandhi led India from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. Benazir Bhutto led Pakistan from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996. America seems an outlier in this respect.

However, I would argue that it is India and Pakistan that are behind, and America ahead: Ms Harris did not achieve her position because of the privilege having the right family affords. Rather, she came from a very humble background.

Kamala Harris is the daughter of immigrants to the United States; her mother was from Tamil Nadu and arrived in America in 1958 as a graduate student, a biologist whose area of research was breast cancer. Her father, Donald Harris, is from Jamaica, a professor of Economics who arrived in the US in 1961.

The Sixties and Seventies were a time of racial ferment in America. As a child, Kamala was part of a program called “busing”, in which students of colour were taken (via bus) to better schools in predominantly white districts. White children were similarly transported to schools in places where people of colour lived. The program’s intent was to ensure that schools were equally cared for, rather than be hampered by ‘soft’ segregation. Later, Harris went to a “historically black” university, Howard University. This indicates where she was at in American society: although her parents were educated and had good professions, nevertheless, there were racial barriers and gender divides. She began outside the mainstream and nowhere near the corridors of power.

In contrast, Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi’s backgrounds were elevated. Both came from aristocratic families and had the advantage of privileged families and education.

It is the question of how far you can rise given where you came from that indicates that America is ahead. I wonder if the people celebrating Kamala Harris’ victory in Tamil Nadu feel that it is easier for one of their young women to become vice president of the United States than it is to be prime minister of India. How easy is it for a young girl in the provinces of Pakistan, perhaps living in a small village, to raise her eyes to the future and imagine becoming prime minister of her country? Given the constraints on gender equality in both countries, I suggest that without the support of a privileged position, this is near impossible.

Yes: many politicians in America also come from privileged positions. The Bush family, for example, is wealthy and aristocratic. Donald Trump boasts about his supposed fortune. However, the supposed billionaire was thrown out by a man whose father was unemployed when he was born. What does democracy mean if power is passed backwards and forwards between various camps of privileged people, and is restricted to one gender? How can they relate to the struggles that people face in their lives?

The key word is empowerment: there is a substantial gap between the law and what actually happens. The law says that women are entitled to an education and to take up employment; however, as a recent case of a female Pakistani motorist who was gang raped showed, the law is not enough. A senior police official suggested that if the woman hadn’t been driving alone, she wouldn’t have been attacked, thus transferring the blame onto her. Note the gap: the law says rape is a crime, it does not hold the victim responsible. Until women are empowered by safety, fair rules, and education, a ‘Kamala Harris’ in India and Pakistan is unlikely to emerge.

I suspect that Ms Harris will step into her role with a clear idea of what America is, and how it treats women and people of colour. This will be a refreshing change from the current administration whose idea of these struggles are likely only from a distance if they care to think about it at all.

Similarly, Pakistan, India, or any country should not call itself progressive, nor be too comfortable with its own democracy, particularly if young women cannot follow or achieve such dreams. Empower these young women, and a wealth of talent and imagination will suddenly come into view.

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