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Culture and its influence on political leadership: A comparative study of Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto

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Abstract

Culture has long been ignored category in international politics. Systemic analysis by neorealist and neoliberal institutionalism dominated the discipline for quite a long time. Culture is a subject which demands local understandings of reality so that we can understand it in a better way. It does not mean that that is the only reality. But it focuses on the fact about many realities which has the potential to explain a certain phenomenon or activity. My aim in this paper is to understand the role of culture in the decision-making procedures of leaders of the states. This paper seeks to problematize the neorealist understanding of the state as a unitary and coherent actor. It argues that leaders from different cultures think differently. And for this, I will compare two leaders from South Asia, which includes Mrs Indira and Mrs Benazir Bhutto.

Keywords: Culture, Political leadership, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, gender

Introduction: Kenneth Waltz in his PhD thesis, which was published as a book titled *Man, State and War*, traces the causes of war. He analysed causes of war at three levels which were at the individual level, type of regime and anarchic nature of international politics. But at the end of the book, he gave much preference to structure over other levels of analysis. Later in his most celebrated book *Theory of International Politics (1979)*, his mode of analysis to explain every event in international politics was reduced to a structural level. My intention in this paper is to contest that systemic analysis by arguing that individuals are not just puppets of the great events? But if individual leaders are not just guided by the international events and structure, then what else does explain their behaviour? To understand the other factors in the decision-making of leaders, I will look into the critical aspects of society. Every society is different from other societies. Their living patterns, their thinking patterns, their expectations and perceptions are contextually dependent (Tilly 2006). Robert Jervis in his book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics (1976)* explains four levels of analysis to understand the decision-making process. These four levels are a higher level

of individual decision making, the level of bureaucracy, nature of the state and working of domestic politics and last focus on the international environment (Jervis 1976, p.15).

Explaining the behaviour of a statesman is not an easy task to investigate. There are many levels of explanations to explain a particular action. It includes issues of his/her motivation, his/her cultural setting, his/her group setting, his/her gender and historical association with a particular idea, institution and practice. But still, out of these complex realities, we have to find that what affected the most. During this process, we come to understand the problem of analysis of other explanation.

This paper will look into the importance of culture in shaping the behaviour or outlook of a leader. For doing so, two great leaders of South Asia, Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, are chosen for comparative analysis. These two women are chosen for comparative analysis over other women leaders for many reasons. These reasons range from both being the women, both belonged to political families, both belongs to South Asia, and both became the head of the states after the death of their fathers. But still the route to power for both leaders was different, and it was different because the culture of both countries took different direct after the independence in 1947.

Paper is divided into four sections. The first section will deal with the definitional aspects of the culture and its importance. The second part will deal with the life of Indira Gandhi and influence of culture on her decision making. In the third section life and decision-making process of Benazir Bhutto and influence of culture will be explored. The final section will conclude with the remarks that culture is an important part of explaining the behaviour of the leaders which has long been ignored by the scholars. India and Pakistan have many similar cultural practices which can bring them together, and this is possible if we explore the commonalities in our societies and leaders over anarchic explanation of international politics.

What is culture?

There are three understanding of culture. One understanding of culture, which includes scholar like Mathew Arnolds and his book *Culture and Anarchy*, explains culture as special intellectual or artistic endeavours or products, what today we might call “high culture” as opposed to “popular culture” (or “folkways” in an earlier usage). By this definition, only a portion – typically a small one – of any social group has culture and rest is potential sources of anarchy (Spencer-Oatey 2012, p.1)\

A different understanding of culture by Franz Boas dismisses the value judgments included in both the early analysis. For him the uniqueness many people and societies were the most important factor. Avruch writes that ‘Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organised, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or Enco dements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves.’ (T.Schwartz 1992; cited by Avruch 1998: 17)

Components of Culture:

According to Spencer-Oatey some of the key characteristics of the culture are as follows-

1. *Culture is manifested at different layers of depth*
2. *Culture affects behaviour and interpretations of behaviour*
3. *Culture can be differentiated from both universal human nature and unique individual personality*
4. *Culture influences biological processes*
5. *Culture is associated with social groups*
6. *Culture is both an individual construct and a social construct*
7. *Culture is always both socially and psychologically distributed in a group, and so the delineation of a culture's features will always be fuzzy*
8. *Culture is learned.*

Culture consists of many aspects of individuals, groups and individuals. It comprises language, traditions, belief systems, food habit, clothes, education, religion, role of man and women in a society and shared history. It has to have a sense of belongingness. All of these tools will be used to analyse the shaping of thinking patterns, world views, responses and behaviours from two leaders of the South Asia

Indira Gandhi and culture: many identities, belief system and practices and power game: Indira Gandhi was born in Nehru family, which was very political and affluent family of the nation during the freedom struggle. Her father studied abroad, and man participated in the freedom movement for the independence of the country. She also participated in the movements, but she was not much interested in joining the politics. After the death of her father, she joined the ministry also but was not clear about the future prospect her career in the politics. Her decisions of nationalization of banks, ending the privy pursue of the princes, entering into the war with Pakistan, imposing the emergency in 1975, and announcing the election only after two years, conducting nuclear test in 1974 in Pokhran and operation blue star, all were influenced by the national and political culture in which she was brought up and living. Before explaining these in details, some of the key aspects of her life need to be explored.

Indira Gandhi, daughter of the first Prime Minister of India, became the prime minister of India in 1967. Indira Gandhi, a girl with shy nature who liked to sit alone, was too hesitant at the time of becoming the prime minister of the largest democracy of the world. People who supported her in reaching to this post thought that she is a woman and does not speak much. She thought that she would be a Goongi Gudiya (a dumb doll). But she started asserting herself after becoming the prime minister. She went to the masses, got their support by popular policies like Nationalisation of Bank and ending the privy purse of the princes. She led Indira to the victory over Pakistan and got the image of Goddess Durga after that. She became the iron lady of the country. She became a mother, India. She was brought up in a democratic environment which always encouraged her to work for the country rather than for herself. But the same time she was becoming authoritarian by

destroying democratic setups within Congress party as well as in the country. She started perceiving any attack on Congress as an attack on herself. And she did what nobody did expect from a daughter of a Democratic leader by imposing national emergency on whole India. She lost the connection with masses who gave her mother Indira title. She was surrounded by the people who believed that Indira is India and India is Indira. But our point of research is why she behaved the way she behaved. What role did gender play in her decision making? Was she an authoritarian or dictator who did not respect any democratic values which she used to speak in every meeting and rally? Why did she impose emergency? Was emergency a technique to remain in power, or her motivation was something different?

To answer these entire questions, we have to go on the life of Indira Gandhi, Her cultural setting, people around him. We have to under the context in which decisions were taken to under the true nature or motive behind the decisions. Motilal Nehru and his house, where a lot of people used to come, worked as an ideal setting. He cared him a lot as she was the only child. Mother Kamala Nehru came from a traditional setting. Nehru's were well educated and used to speak English very regularly. Women in their houses used to consider English as a symbol of modernization. So they used to look upon her as not equal to them, especially Vijayalaxmi Pandit. Indira spends a lot amount of time with her mother, so she learned a lot of things from her especially simplicity. When her mother was not well, she used to care her a lot. During the age of 13 and 16, she was at the experimental school founded by Tagore (1931-1934), and her parents were in movements and jail. During this period only M. Gandhi was the closest person to her. Otherwise, she was alone.

She met Feroz Gandhi in London. And she decided to marry at an early age. This was the result of the loneliness of her life. She developed a habit of doing things which were suggested not to do. She was suggested not to marry and have children at an early age because there was a probability of bad health. But she took it as a challenge, married Feroz and gave birth to two children. She loved her role of housewife because she loved her children over other things in life. Once she decided to leave India and raise her children abroad (Sehgal, 2012). She rejected the proposal of Congress because she wanted to focus on her children. This can be an important point in gender and leader. If she would have been a man, then there would not have been any responsibility of this kind, and she would have accepted the role of the leader of the Congress.

She was given a mother India Image by the people. She gave more love than received. Her childhood did not receive much affection because most of the time her father was busy in politics and her mother was ill. Later she was forced not to meet Kamala Nehru because of her T.B. After marriage, she moved to his father's house at Teen Murti Bhavan, but then she had conflicts with his husband. In 1960 his husband died. During 1960-1964 she was too busy in taking care of her father. She left the Congress in 1960 over the issue of left government in Kerala and their policies of land distribution and state sponsored education. She forced Jawaharlal Nehru to take a decision against the left government, and on this issue they both had conflict. But she does not want to hurt Nehru, so she left the Congress

presidentship. Jawaharlal Nehru promoted her for the leadership of Congress because he has not been able to give equal space to Kamala Nehru in political life and other spaces.

Indira Gandhi was ice and fire. This statement has too much meaning. This means that she had two extreme behaviours during her tenure of political leadership. She was called Goongi Gudiya by Syndicate, and they thought that she would be just a puppet in their hands. But she did not like this adjective for herself. She took it as a challenge to her personality. She wanted to tell to herself as well to others that she is not a Goongi Gudiya that is independent of the syndicate, that she can take the decisions, that she can lead the nations. Measures like Nationalization of Banks and ending the privy purse of the princes were the part of this strategy to gain the support of the people, increase the mass base and sidelining the syndicate. These measures may seem authoritative to us, but at that time this was the only viable option for her.

Answering the question of her personal motivation of power and national power is always difficult to answer. But a close study of her personal life and decisions indicates that national goals were always on her primary list. Her decision to impose emergency was deeply influenced by her understanding that J.P and others are spreading lies against the government and this can lead to anarchy in the Nation. But during this period she became too much reliant on her son and his gang of guns. She lost the touch of the people in between. When people started questioning her government, her minister in corruption cases, she took it on herself. She was going through a personal emergency. She lost good advisors. And she just changed her personal emergency into a national emergency. Her love for her son Sanjay Gandhi made her blind to the realities. She did not listen to anyone.

She started destroying democratic institutions bit by bit. Judiciaries, choosing of chief ministers and then kerbing the freedom of the press were the measures she took. Freedom of press which was the most important sources to know the conditions and views of the people were out of her reach. But she was having a little faith in democratic values also. She thought that she could not completely destroy the democratic institution which came after a long struggle with Congress and other organisation. So she decided to have an election in 1977 in the hope that people still consider her as a mother.

She was termed as the only Man in the cabinet. She was too much realistic to the situations be it the Congress crises of 1967, 1971 war. But she was overconfident on the emergency and operation blue star. She was overconfident that whatever she is doing is better for the progress of the nation. Even she was so overconfident to her ideals that when her Sikh bodyguards were removed, she asked for them and later they only killed her. She believed in inclusiveness as well as exclusiveness. She believed in personal authority as well authority of the collective.

She was always ready to take the most difficult task. This happened because of her early up bring and experiences. She was very sure about controlling herself as well as the surrounding. Once she said, "I am one of those who always chooses the most difficult paths,

and between a straight road and a mountain road, I invariably go for the mountain road.” Ramchandra Guha considers her as an authoritarian patriot. She believed that whatever others are doing is not fruitful for the progress of country (Guha 2009). Nayan Tara Sehgal in her book *Indira Gandhi –Tryst with power-* argues that Indira was a lady with authoritarian instinct. She points out the radical transformation of a shy, reticent woman, about whom Nehru constantly worried, into a combative and egotistic personality that leant heavily on Soviet power. She argues that Indira Gandhi made unorthodox use of power and possessed a highly individual style of functioning. In this book, Nayantara Sahgal persuasively argues that authoritarianism was the inevitable outcome of Indira’s personality and temperament. Her leadership marked a drastic break with the democratic tradition of her family and Indian politics. During her regime, the political landscape of India underwent profound changes. The Emergency of 1975 - 77 was used to promote her son Sanjay as her ultimate successor. The entry of her elder son, Rajiv, into politics after Sanjay’s death, and his immediate political prominence showcased Indira’s essential belief in her family’s right to rule (Sehgal 2012).

Key events of Indira’s life, such as the atrocities during Emergency, Old Guard in Congress, her sons into power, Golden Temple crisis and, ultimately, getting killed in a ghastly fashion were centred around her only. And this shows that she was struggling with herself. When Sanjay became too much involved in the events, she decided to project herself again the only leader of the country. Because she was a woman and she chose to have children and then her responsibility was to take care of her children. That might be a case of her aloofness from an active role in politics in her early life. If she had been a man, she would have joined politics at an early age and then her early life and later political life would have been completely different. Like Sanjay Gandhi behaved differently because he was a man and her mother was a prime minister.

She always gave preferences to duty over her desires. One of the most striking examples can be traced back to her childhood when she burned her doll because the doll was made in the foreign country. She gave priority to the duty. This upbringing instilled her with the feeling to sacrifice for the nation. She used to love mountains because mountains are the toughest to survive. Mountains are about struggling; it is about difficulties in life. They symbolise sacrifice and duty. It gives you the strength and experiences. Once she said, “it is a privilege to have lived such a difficult life...Suffering builds so much” (Fallaci, cited in Carras 1978, p.47). For conducting duty she never thought about costs for that duty.

Being her women might have affected her conduct with her cabinet as well as a party member. A patriarchal setup surrounded her, and most of the people in the cabinet were male. She could not simply talk to a man as easily and confidently as her father could have. This lack of interaction, closeness, intimacy might have forced her to rely on herself more than anything. After the death of Feroz Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, Sanjay Gandhi becomes the source of personal stability for her that’s why she started to encourage her and stopped listening to others. This external constrained dictated her reserved style of behaviour. One of her cabinet minister ones said, “Don’t forget that... she is a woman in a

male-dominated society and one which retains its traditional outlook toward women. She could not simply drop in on people, the way her father did, or the way any other man might. He could also not go into another man's office, put his arms around him and say, 'Look here, I wonder if you could drop me a memo giving me your views on this, that, or the other thing.' She can't be too intimate with people. That explains a great deal about this question of trust." (Carras 1978, p.50) Motivation too much guided her rather than domination over others. For her power was not just for personal gains but the progress of the nation. Was she authoritarian or she just acted out of compulsion of the situation? If she was authoritarian after becoming prime minister; then why she was not authoritarian in her personal life.

Tracing the early life to find the roots of being a dictator or authoritarian ruler- do develop an authoritarian trait one has to live in a restrictive, paternalistic, stifling, or the repressive home environment, unresponsive parents and elders. (Mussen et.al 1969, p.483, recited in Carras 1978, p.64). That person has to feel a jungle environment of a threat without any security where the offence is the best defence, and preemptive attack is the basic strategy to manage the situation (Adorno et al. 1950, recited in Carras 1978, p.65). But childhood life of Indira Gandhi does not confirm to these realities. She got much love from her parents and elders also. Mahatma Gandhi filled the space for the desires to revenge by his love and doctrine of non-violence. Her family structure, environment social and political and does not confirm to the needs of a development of an authoritarian person. Both her mother and father fostered a democratic way of life within her. They gave her freedom to make her decisions. Nehru and his love for humanism would have impacted her in a positive way. A close study of letters between Nehru makes it clear that Nehru is suggesting Indira not to be too much reliant on power. He says in one of his letters, "The quest for over much power is a dangerous one, and it brings downfall and ruins to those who seek it.(Nehru 1962, p.390 recited in Carras 1978).

Emergency and Post Emergency elections-The roots of emergency can be found in her belief about the intentions of the others. She thought that opposition is doing a conspiracy against the government which can destabilise the country. She did not focus on true aspects of the realities of the time like poverty, unemployment and corruption by official and ministers. Every attack on Congress and its leader she took as it was an attack on her. Throughout her image has been of a democrat and she never wanted to destroy that image of mother Indira. These were her democratic values and her love for her democratic image which forced her to announce the election. She was confident that whatever measures she has taken during an emergency, benefited the people. She was sure of winning the election. But she made a huge mistake in these calculations. She forgot many things about democracy in these years. She forgot that listening to only his son is not democracy; there was no reflection of reality because she put a sensor on the press (Carras 1978). She rejected Tortures, brutalities, corruption did before and during the emergency. She believed that these are not good people and are enemies of the state (Carras 1978, 205).

A cultural analysis of her decision- From above descriptions about her life and her decisions, many things about her personality have become clear. And these personality

characters came from the cultural set up in which she was operating. She was not just simply responding to the challenges but responding to them by her perceptions. It is not just the reality out there. It is about what did she thought about those realities? A wrong perception of reality leads to wrong response. But it is not true that it will always lead to wrong results.

Explaining expulsion of senior leaders of the Congress- she belonged to a political family where she witnessed every aspect of political life. She knew it very well that syndicate promoted her only to control the politics and if she does not assert herself now, they can throw her out of the seat. Her intention was not just to remain in power but to lead the country out of current leadership crisis. This was the result of her early participation in freedom movements and her commitment to the national integration project under the leadership of Congress. It was her perception. In that process, she destroyed many democratic practices of Congress, but she thought it as the most practical solution for the time.

Explaining nationalisation of the banks- nationalisation of banks has two sides. One side believes that she nationalised the banks to get the support of the masses and another side believes that it was her commitment to the socialist ideal of her father which inspired her to do so. Whatever it was about one thing is clear that their policies were not taken out of international compulsions. Democratic participations of people, expectations from the Democratic leaders and socialist tilt inspired her to do many things which might not have done.

Imposition of emergency and calling the elections in 1977: Here again, her perception played a key role. She started to lose contact with people. Corruption was rampant, but she ignored it knowingly or unknowingly. She thought that those who are opposing her are not just opposing her are the enemy of the country. Her Democratic bringing up inspired her to announce the elections. It was not possible for her to imagine herself as a leader to whom nobody loves, and these were the outcome of the culture.

Benazir Bhutto- culture and her co-option with the fundamental sections- Benazir Bhutto was born in Karachi, Sindh on 1953. Her father belonged to a feudal class, and her mother belonged to an Iranian family but women of modern lifestyle who used to drive the car and wear modern clothes. Her mother Nusrat married her father Zulfikar, and later she adopted tradition lifestyle at home. Her father Zulfikar studied at Oxford and was influenced by socialist ideas of justice and revolution (Bhutto 2010). She went to Harvard for her studies where she learned a new style of life. Hanging up with new friends from the USA, participation in a demonstration for opposing the war in Vietnam gave her initial exposures of politics. But this was not the real politics which she has to face in coming days. Her father became the President and later Prime Minister of Pakistan after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Her father who was the champion of the civil liberties and the person with a socialist agenda tilted himself toward authoritarianism by banning the liquor in Pakistan and other measures. He did not give much space to the democratic demands of

the people. He suppressed protests with force. But he was a great leader also who bring more than 90000 soldiers back from India to Pakistan, A Leader who talked about self-confidence of Pakistan. But at the same time, he was operating among traditional set ups of Pakistan (Bhutto 2004). He was not able to provide education to a large portion of the population. Pakistan was going through abject poverty and mass unemployment. Fundamental forces have always been at play in Pakistan. Through madrasas, they were gaining support. Conditions of women were very bad. And in this situation Zia –Ul –Haq took over as the head of the head through a military coup. Sharia law was put into place. Conditions of people worse, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was arrested and later hanged (Bhutto 2004). Benazir and her mother tried to get support from all parts of Pakistan and world to save her life. In these entire situations, she started to participate in politics more actively, and she got a huge support from people in political rallies. Her motive was not just to get the of the power but to fight back for dignity. In 1988 she became the first women prime minister of Pakistan as well as any Muslim country. She was removed from office in 1990 but she again in 1993 became the prime minister of Pakistan. But again she was removed from the office on the charges of corruption and other irregularities. Her husband Asif Ali Zardari was also involved in politics during this period. She went to Dubai, and her husband was jailed for corruption charges. She again came back to contest election with a large popularity but killed in a bomb blast in 2007 (Stratton 2007) .

Benazir Bhutto and her life as a leader have left many questions to be answered for the scholars of international politics. And among them, one of the important questions is how much culture impacts her decision making procedure? Culture affected it at many levels.

One of the most important challenge before her was her identity of being women. Her identity of being women was not just enough but her identity of being a Muslim woman. In earlier days of her life, she refused to wear burka, hijab and niqab. But when she became the leader, she accepted some of the practices like covering her head with a scarf. She promoted education by building up new schools, but she did not contribute for the emancipation of the women in Pakistan. And the answer to this question can be found in the culture. Fatima Bhutto comments that she was not a feminist she was just fighting for the seat of control. As a leader of the country, she had to get the support of every section of the society, so she did not attack the interests of the fundamentalist. She did not speak against the injustices done by fundamentals in the name of Islam. A woman who completed her studies in universities like Oxford and spoke for the freedom of women was convinced by fundamentalist not to ask questions.

Like Indira, she was also the daughter of a prime minister, but both had different experiences regarding people and democracy. Indira had more experience of political life from her childhood, and it was easy for Indira to function in a democratic environment, but for Bhutto, there was a completely different reality. She has witnessed her father been hanged by a military dictator. She had seen that mistrust of the people. So she became more cautious than Indira.

So for her survival in the Politics of Pakistan, she gave up her commitment to liberal ideals of liberty and freedom. In second term her concern was to remain in power. This clearly shows the influence of the culture.

Conclusion: From the above analysis, it is clear that culture has a bigger role to play, in domestic as well as in international politics, than assumed. Cultural demands or says cultural constraints provides and limits the policy option of a leader. In a democratic set up of elections, leaders are concerned about the demands of the people, and to in this process, the cultural demand of the people limits her/his policy option. If Pakistan had not been a Muslim dominated society with a large amount of illiteracy, she would have done something better for the women, but culture limited her choices.

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