Traditionally, political science has painted a sombre picture of female political attainment. Women, it is said are less likely than men to take part in political activities and few who become politically active are primarily out of affiliative concerns. The low percentage of women in public offices can be as a result of their “situation” in society - a low socio-economic status and very little free time. Both of these variables are generally associated with low levels of political activism. A second explanation often argues that women are less politically involved due to the political sociolization of both men and women which hold that certain behaviour is appropriate for each sex. Women are expected to be oriented towards the family, displaying dependence, showing very low levels of aggressiveness. While legal barriers have been abolished, cultural norms still prescribe politics as a ‘man’s activity’.

Keeping the above analysis in mind if we turn our attention to the South Asian society we will find two contradictory images — one image is that of poor, illiterate, exploited, often veiled, confused female masses who are often victims of dowry death, bride burning and rape. Another image is that of powerful women leaders like Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandarnaike, Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sheikh Hasina taking the world on their stride. These two contradictory images give rise to a number question: How did these women leaders emerge as Prime Minister or President of their respective countries where women are still exploited and termed as ‘second class citizens’? Whether their kinship help in their emergence? Whether they have leadership abilities of their own? Why they are readily accepted by the people as Prime Minister or President?

In South Asian countries genderwise data on voting behaviour, political institution, etc. are not easily available, so one can imagine that availability of data on top female leadership is a far cry. In such a situation the comparative study of female leadership in South Asia is a challenging job. The lack of information particularly from some South Asian countries at times makes it very difficult to proceed with the research or give a definitive answer to all the queries but that these six leaders under study have many things in common, at the same time they differ in many ways which the open field for the comparative study.
Many may argue that leaders like Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandarnaike, are regarded as veterans in the field of politics and it would be premature to compare them with the new generation of women leaders like Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sheikh Hasina who are new comers on the main political stage but a closer scrutiny will reveal their similarities in their emergence, family background, etc. They were all politicised within their family environment and gained entry into leadership through family connections. But this is not to undermine their own capabilities who proved themselves to be tough and uncompromising in their pursuit of power. The main thrust of the study is to analyse the emergence and functioning of the aforesaid six female leaders of South Asia - how they mould their styles in terms of situational requirements, how they shape policies in keeping with the norms and values of the society? These wide spectrum of concerns are dealt in comparative ambience. The study is not a judgemental one to brand each leader as good, bad, worse but to recognise the capability of the leaders to respond to critical challenges facing the nation.

The thesis is not a biography of Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandarnaike, Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sheikh Hasina. My objective is to examine their emergence to politics, political ideas and performances in the expectation that as we understand their politics we will improve our understanding of women political leadership and also of South Asia as a polity.

The introductory chapter introduced the concept of leadership.

Chapter I deals with the theoretical framework as well as the choice of Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandarnaike, Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sheikh Hasina as women leaders, their relevance in the political scene, and major hypotheses revolving round the study.

Chapter II deals with the importance of South Asia as a region where out of the seven countries, four countries had or are having female governmental heads. The first part of Chapter II deals with the nature of society in four South Asian countries - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. All these societies are somewhat similar in nature as far as the position of women is concerned.
The Parliamentarians of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries in the Conference of South Asian Parliamentarians towards the Solidarity for Equality, Development and Peace, New Delhi Aug. 8-10, 1995 admitted that “because of lack of education, denial of social status, early marriage, early and excessive children, there is an overwhelming concentration of the disadvantaged women within South Asia.”

In the second part of Chapter II attempts have been made to explain and analyse the nature of politics in the four countries.

The social background and performances of the six women leaders are taken into account in Chapter III. All the six leaders belonged to the political first families of their respective countries with an illustrious father or husband in politics and all of them functioned or are functioning in a class or caste ridden developing societies where male supremacy is beyond question.

In Chapter IV the main thrust is on the comparative aspect. The six leaders though belong to different decades but they can be branded as leaders of 60’s and 90’s. Some have few years of experience and some are veterans in politics. They can be compared on a number of aspect - wide ranging issues - starting from their age at the time of assuming the office of Prime Minister or President to the reasons behind the end of their tenure.

To make the study more comprehensive attempts have been made to compare them with other important women leaders of the world.

In the concluding Chapter an effort has been made to answer the questions raised in the introductory Chapter along with testing the major hypotheses which establish that though these six women leaders get initial favour from their kinship they are undoubtedly leaders in their own right.