Preface

“No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life.”

(Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 1944)

History has been witness to many revolutions for liberty, equality and democracy. The French revolution and American Revolution, abolition of slavery, emancipation of working classes and deliverance of peoples from colonial domination have been landmarks in mankind’s quest for a brave new world. In almost all such revolutionary movements the women’s question was not treated with the seriousness it really deserved and therefore did not get adequate focus.

It is generally accepted fact that women who constitute half the population of the world cannot be taken for granted when policy matters are discussed and finalized. In South, countries are predominantly rural, traditional-bound, culturally diverse region inhabited by a vast population that is dependent on primary sector activities based on land, forests, livestock and water. The region consists of seven independent nation-states with historical roots that are intertwined, geographical contiguity, social-cultural similarities, especially the patriarchal domination that subordinates women through kinship ordered structures and caste-class hierarchies.

Rural Muslim women in South Asia have much in common. “Can a woman be the leader of Muslims?” The study examines this question by focusing on the early years of Islam and Mohammed’s intention of creating an egalitarian society without slaves or sexual discrimination. Islam has enhanced women’s status and showered her with ample human rights which are her natural due. But the interpretations of Qur’an and Hadiths have been manipulated by a male elite whose power could be
legitimized only by religion, and political and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false interpretations of Hadiths and Qur'an that protected privileges for men while denying women's full participation in society.

Living under poverty implies poor nutrition, high illiteracy, children not enrolled in schools, high infant and maternal mortality, inadequate health care, no access to good drinking water, poor sanitation, lack of proper shelter and extreme vulnerability to shocks associated with natural and human events resulting in debt bondage and further deprivation. It is marked by a condition of both uselessness and powerlessness. These impinge on rural women more severely given their lower status in the patriarchal systems of rural South Asia.

But South Asian countries are making rapid progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The last quarter of the previous century had been associated with the resurgence of women's movements internationally across the South Asian countries. Some of the prominent international efforts began in 1975 with the first world conference in Mexico, with United Nations (UN) and its agencies playing a key role in fostering women's equality. The fourth world conference in Beijing held in 1995 was a hallmark, when the international communities accepted the need for a strong gender perspective in all areas of development planning and implementation.

In South Asia, democracy cannot succeed without strengthen the democratic system at the grassroots level by ensuring the representation of all sections of the society including women. In South Asia, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have taken initiatives for several changes in their Constitutions to enhance women's participation in politics at local level. The present study is an attempt to understand not only the role of Muslim women in decision-making at grassroots level but also in the rural development process.