The Protest, Transformation of the Public Sphere and Notions of Femininity; Women Experiences in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research analyzes women's participation in a sit-in organized by a mainstream political party, Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) in the capital territory of Pakistan. This sit-in continued for 86 days. Taking theoretical insights from Jurgen Habermas and Max Weber, this study looks at women's experiences during the sit-in. The research discusses how the women transformed this 'political sit-in' into the public sphere and created alternative discursive space/s to looked into/evaluate their social, cultural, economic and political conditions and voiced their narratives into the present masculine/ patriarchal political structure of Pakistan. Interpretivist' epistemology was a guiding methodological application for this research. The data come from 10 women participants. The thematic analysis helps the interpretation. Findings reveal that women exercised their agency as their religious duty, which in turn enabled them to develop their feminine social capital. Women transformed political sit-in into a distinct political space and challenged the traditional notions of Pakistani femininity. They lived in an open space for 86 days without their families, mostly taking decisions at their own, chanting anti-government slogans, having clashes with police, getting married and giving birth. Media facilitated projection, visibility and public support. Women' commitment to the change disrupted dominant stereotypes about women, their role and voice in Pakistan. Charismatic leadership instrumentalized religious teachings for persuading participants and the advancement of the political agenda of socio-political change in Pakistan.

Keywords: Protest, Transformation, Public sphere, Femininity, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan Awami Tehreek's (PAT) *Inqalab* March (March for revolution) from Lahore to Islamabad-the capital of Pakistan-was intended to restructure the entire political system of Pakistan, the introduction of a social security system for the downtrodden segment, and a grass rooting local government system in the country (Zaman, 2014). The march with hundreds of thousand participants converted into sit-in till the accomplishment of their demands. The protesters managed to camp themselves in front of parliament house. However, thousands of women, predominantly young, were perceptible in the march and the resultant sit–in and were quite "public" in the classical notion of masculine/ patriarchal political structure of Pakistan.

Pakistan, with its traditional social organization, represents a classical patriarchal society where males and females are socialized with entrenched gender ideology. The wider use of gender ideology in the feminist and Marxist literature denotes here the ideas held about male/female or masculinity/ femininity in socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The gender ideology in Pakistan is based on the biological differences between sexes (Ullah & Skelton 2012). This very essentialists understanding of gender divides the social world into public and private spaces. Private/ home becomes the ideal normative space for women to operate while men are associated with the public domain. This division is facilitated/ reinforced by historical, social, cultural, economic, religious and political factors (Millet, 1972) prevalent in society. Thus, politics becomes the public concern and male prerogative while ignoring women being out of concern (Bari, 2009; Philips, 1998; Rai & Sharma, 2000). Women's association with the private sphere and its requirements prevent them from politics (Holmes, 2002) and make it very difficult for them to enter into the public sphere (Arneil,

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1999). Smith (1990a) also highlights the gender division of the world into public and private spaces and wherein politics is believed as the male domain.

In addition to the feminist debate of public and private domains, Habermas' concept of the public sphere is quite useful to be engaged. Habermas' public sphere refers to relatively informal spaces and non-state-controlled institutional settings where individuals and groups freely assemble and discuss political and social issues and produce "public opinion" (Dillon, 2010). Our use of Habermasian model of the public sphere to contextualize the political sit-in by PAT refers common people getting together as public (Habermas,1989), the open discursive spaces where thousands of women lived for more than 70 days and engaged very actively in the political activities ranging from chanting anti-government slogans to practice fighting with police. They were interacting with other women of different cultures, language, and socio-economic backgrounds. The women, most of the time, were reciting verses from the Holy Quran, saying their prayers, and were desperate for listening to their leader's speech/address in the evening or at night. It is important to highlight that the key element in the PAT sit-in was the follower's adherence to their religious leader Dr. Tahir ul Qadri. It is also noteworthy that the aforementioned sit-in symbolized itself to the Egyptian revolution by renaming the Parliament square to Azadi square (Liberty square). With unshaken trust, conviction and adherence to religious charismatic authority, the women were very much ready to go to any extent and stay as long as their leader wished. They were keen to volunteer even their lives.

Religious references from Islamic history, the resemblance of this sit-in and hardships of the participants, particularly of women, with the holy battles, assurance of nobility of cause and admiration of the contribution, pledging elevated religious status hereafter and guaranteeing of revolution with the help of God created an environment of spirituality where religious interpretations were blended with political agenda of PAT under the strong influence of religious cum charismatic authority of the Dr. Tahir ul Qadri. Media took this opportunity and covered the event of the long march from Lahore to Islamabad and a resultant political sit-in. In the short history of the free media, this political activity was very meaningful for the media itself.

For media visibility, public resonance and legitimacy (Ferrer, 2019), highly competitive media (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) were fed with newsworthy events like frequent deadlines, nationwide strikes, marching forward to prime minister house and other important offices of government, taking control of national television, digging graves and wearing kafan (burial dress) and violent attacks on police and other agencies. The 24/7 presence of media were highly acknowledged and given credit to witness this historic movement of revolution and was also credited as a catalyst to foster the process of change.

It is once again mentioned here that the key focus of the paper is to analyze how these women in the political sit-in transformed the 'political sit-in' into the public sphere and created alternative discursive space to evaluate their own social, cultural, economic and political conditions and voiced their own narrative to bring about a change in the current masculine/ patriarchal political structure. It also focuses on how 'religious charismatic authority', in the Weberian sense, is advancing its political agenda to bring about social change in the current political structure of Pakistani society. Having said this, we deem it essential to locate this study in a theoretical framework in order to make a sophisticated academic sense of the study data. With this in mind, we took theoretical insight from Jurgen Habermas (1989) to consider this political sit-in as a political public sphere and analyzed that how it provided young women an opportunity to think about/evaluate their own social, cultural, economic and political conditions and voiced the political narratives of the young women, their visibility in the patriarchal politics of Pakistan. Max Weber's (1978) theory of charismatic authority helped us discussed the role of Dr. Tahir ul Qadri played while using religious justification in advancing his political agenda.

Methodology

The data for this paper comes from 10 females who participated in the PAT's 'Political sit-in' in Islamabad. The participants were literate up to graduation level. They belonged to middle class families. The participants showed their political affiliation with PAT. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. The reason(s) for adopting purposive sampling was that the respondents can purposively inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomena under study. Getting insight from Glaser and Strauss (1967) the respondents were selected to ensure their relevance to our research questions. Using semi-structured interview framework to explore views of

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respondents, the data were collected in the face to face in-depth interview sessions at the respondents' residents (Creswell & Brown, 1992). This framework allows flexibility, convenience, and more elaboration of the experiences. This also empowers the participants to reflect as they wish.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed inductively. The transcribed material was translated into English. Analytical induction and constant comparison methods were employed to find out similarities between the views of respondents and the development of the themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Multiple readings of the transcripts helped us identify themes, patterns, similar occurrences, and theoretical constructs. Refined data emerged into following themes;

The Political Sit-in as Feminine Social Capital

By feminine social capital, we mean the social network upon which women in the sit-in made their socio-political network and respectability in the wider patriarchal social structure. The political sit-in provided women a forum to collectively raise their voice in the male-dominated political domain. The study findings revealed how the sit-in provided women with a useful forum. A 24 years young girl said;

> "These 70 days long stay was really meaningful to me. These days, with many odds, gave me a bunch of nice people. I remained hungry, thirsty, happy, worried with all those, I really saw the world with their eyes actually. I would hardly think of losing them for the rest of my life. These sisters are my assets".

Similar views and feelings were expressed by another young (22 years old) graduate girl.

> "One of my "sisters" told me how to avoid the tear gas, how to run, to take shelter and what to do if hurt. She remained with me while we were under severe shelling. I think this political sit-in helped us find a variety of friends in need. I believe she is more than anybody else in my life".

This close proximity shared experiences, frequent interaction and sense of "we feelings" represent socio-emotional /soft social capital and enhance mutual trust (Ibara,1993) and help women to develop self-esteem (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000). Friendships, counseling, and modeling have the potential not only help to develop/enhance economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) but also building up wider alliances for political visibility (Fraser, 1992).

The political sit-in proved a platform of training and living skills, especially in a hard and difficult time. A 19 years young girl argued;

> "It was the first time in my life when I was out of home, with "sisters" (female participants) without my intimate family. I spent days and nights with them. I learned how to take care of myself and the people around me. I learned management skills from "sisters", I also learnt how to survive in odd situations, especially in a conflict".

Women move from their homes and their commitment and dedication are indicative of the high symbolic and practical value they had for political change and through women' participation, which contradicts a number of stereotyped notions about Muslim women and their place in society. Similarly, a university student shared her views as;

> "The seniors "sisters" trained me to be patient, confident and firm belief in leader to succeed. The extraordinary situations need exceptional skills to deal with. I think these skills will lead me in my daily life. I owe a lot to all those sisters".

These responses show how fruitful the sit-in was for these young girls. Conflict with law enforcement agencies and the uncertainty of how long they have to stay bestowed them with the opportunities and skills to face challenges and manage their daily lives.

Media as a Catalyst for Change

The role of media was criticized as well as appreciated. Media were criticized by some of the respondents for depicting women sleeping/taking rest in the sit-in when they were not properly covered. This depiction was criticized as "immoral". However, the majority of the respondents appreciated media and argued that media remained very dedicated and determined to showing cruelties committed by rulers. It also showed it to the wider community and the world. One of the respondents stated;

> "Media supported the government initially, and raised questions over Dr. Tahir ul Qadri but afterward remained with us and saw our true passion for the revolution, they were convinced. It supported us a lot. It projected us a lot and spread our message of peaceful revolution"

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Another respondent revealed that;

> "Media tried its best to find out some bad things/persons in political sit. They probed different women regarding their paid participation and criticized them for being alone, leaving behind family members but failed to find out something/ convincing them. Media were very helpful in projecting us to the world around us. It also facilitated us showing the real face of the rulers and showed how apathetic they are. The common people without food, water, shelter, and other arrangement were on roads and demanding their rights but rulers were giving no head to anything".

Similarly, a 22 years old student told;

> "Media stood up with us like a friend, a companion. Many female reporters faced hardships and miseries with us. They stood up in hot, in rain, day and night. They suffered from injuries, bore tear gas and rubber bullets and faced police torture. I think they were the part of this political sit like us resolving for a change".

Complaints against media were due to its coverage of individuals/incidents, not political agenda. Media for its 'newsworthiness' is concerned with events, not issues while the protesters want more attention and wider coverage of agenda (Gamson, 2004; Gans,1980; Bennet, 1990; Smith et al., 2001). However, media were appreciated for covering violent incidences, police torture, counter attacks by protestors (Myers & Caniglia 2004; Barranco & Wisler, 1999; Oliver & Maney, 2000), mediation between government and protestors (Koopmans, 2004) and projecting them united, determined for change (Gamson, 1995). The modern media is playing a very important role in creating/defining identities, discourses, challenging/contesting state decisions and political policies (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Skalli, 2006).

Creation of Transformative Spaces

Women' participation in this political sit-in is to be taken as a historic event in a traditional society like Pakistan where institutionalized norms of exclusion and marginalization restrict women only in homes (Ullah & Skelton, 2012). Traveling across the country, belonging to different socio-economic groups, speaking different languages, representing various ethnic identities but standing up for single cause to voice their issues and revamping of the system was very noticeable. Thus, Commonality of interests, experiences and shared goals transformed them into a collective identity motivated for social change (Roger, 2002; Tylor, 1989; Robnett, 2002; Whittier, 2002).

One of the respondents, a 22 years old university student stated;

> "We belong to different parts of the country, we spoke differently but our pain and miseries were the same. Our aim to get rid of this corrupt system was the same. We have the same passion to go to any extent. We have the same belief in our leader".

Another 25 years old girl told;

> "I belong to a rich family with ample resources and, apparently, I could not find reason/s to participate in this political sit but I believe it the only opportunity to become the voice of all those women living under poverty and subjected to different discrimination all over the society. I am representing them and challenging this status quo and I am ready to get our share out of this system".

Claiming equality with men and committed to women rights and empowerment, a respondent very enthusiastically stated;

> "We are equal to males; God has created us with utmost qualities. Our history (Islamic History) is full of women doing business, traveled to far flung areas, fighting wars and standing firm against cruel rulers. I am very much confident that we can win rights for poor and disadvantaged women. We can change the system".

These responses show women enthusiasm in the political sit- in. They were guarding Dr. Tahir Ul Qadri, providing food, fetching water, taking the security of sit-in and helping other participants in daily matters. Many young girls with scarf were wearing gas masks to avoid tear gas, having bag packs stuffed with water, edibles and were holding batons. They demonstrated their agency (Sholkamy, 2013) while discussing/ demanding rights and the toppling of the system and moving forward towards empowerment through the process of conscientization (Freire, 2004). This active and full of zeal participation of women in daily activities and their untiring demands for their rights can be a potential challenge to patriarchal politics in Pakistan.

Personalization of Political Sit-In

The whole discourse of political sit-in revolved around the religious turned political leader- Dr. Tahirul Qadri. Political demands of the restructuring of system and incorporation of social security systems were interpreted, evaluated and contextualized around the personal characteristics of Dr. Qadri (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Karvonen, 2010).

> "Dr. Qadri envisioned the revolution. He is a man of wisdom. He is the only sympathetic figure in Pakistani politics who can feel the pain and miseries of poor people. He is courageous, daring and capable of kicking this cruel, corrupt system away". It was narrated by a 21 years old girl.

Charismatic authority of Dr. Qadri remarkably persuaded women, the way he wanted. They broke down the traditional notion of femininity, got out of their homes all alone, stayed in for more than two months, bore difficulties, fought with police, got injured and some of them even dead but remained loyal to the leader. Charismatic power converted participants into followers and his words became rules/ obligations to be followed.

> "Dr. Tahirul Qadri is an exceptional personality. He is bestowed with extraordinary power. He is a specially blessed person. God has chosen him to guide and lead the people. I believe that he only can bring change in this society". It was narrated by a 22 years old girl.

> Dr. Tahir ul Qadri's personal characteristics successfully won the loyalties, devotion, and respect (Willner & Willner, 1965) of his followers. His religious references regarding the commitment of women with ideology, difficulties faced and selfless effort for (Geertz, 1966) powerless, voiceless people of Pakistan established him a religious, charismatic authority.

> "He is the true reflection of Islam. Islamic teachings are ingrained in his personality. His model of revolution is quite unique, he believes in love, peace and smooth transition- the actual version/philosophy of Islam. His political agenda is, in fact, the adherence of Islam". It was told by a respondent.

> Being the leading religious figure of "Sunni Muslims" of Pakistan, Dr. Qadri qualified for the rightful power to exert on his followers. This religious context of his charismatic personality facilitated the emotional relationship/bond with his followers. The charismatic power of Dr. Qadri persuaded participants into disciples taking it their religious duty to follow his dictum of socio-political change in Pakistan and thus, became monolithic believers of a "personality".

Contested Femininity

The patriarchal orientation of Pakistani society restricts women into the public sphere through entrenched gender ideology. Women's mobility is conditioned/ constrained by the strong socio-cultural notions of *Purdha* (veil), *Izzat* (Honor), sex segregation and violence (Asian Development Bank, 2000). The situation is more vulnerable in rural areas, where patriarchy is joining hands with feudalism and customs. A 20 years old girl said;

> "I was fetched with power and perhaps for the first time in my whole life I feel like controlling my own self and I was no longer a helpless female. I was also taking decisions and molding my days and nights. I was free to move, talk, making friends and analyzing what was happening around".

> Hundreds of thousand women from lower/middle class, most of them from rural areas came out of their homes, traveled hundreds of kilometers, predominantly from Punjab province but also from other parts of the country and even some of them traveled from the United Kingdom, Canada, Europe and spent two and half months in the open sky, burning days with temperature up-to 42 centigrade. They were doing laundry, getting married (three couples married during sit-in), giving births (two women gave births to baby girls in this sit-in), taking care of their young kids; nestling their newborn babies, sleeping on tattered mats, taking shelter under trees and in the containers when there were rain and thunderstorm but determined for revolution. They engaged in the violent contact with police, survived tearing gas and rubber bullets resulting in two dead and dozens injured.

> "There was no one to help us. I became a helping hand and facilitated many participants. For the first time, I took proud of being a girl. I was doing all things that I was not allowed in my home. This political sit-in inculcated a new spirit in me".

> We argue that women along with all their political engagements in this sit-in were also contesting their traditional and customized notions of Pakistani femininities which prevented them

participate in the public sphere. They were coming up with changed feminine outlook which helped them visible, asserting and voicing their political aspirations in the current political system

Conclusion

This study analyzed the political sit-in by PAT as a political public sphere and assessed women engagement in the political sit-in as an opportunity to create their political space in the patriarchal Political system of Pakistan. The findings reveal that women, despite strong gender stereotypes and religious disapproval from conservative segments, participated in the political sit-in and exercised their agency as their religious duty, which in turn enabled them developed their own feminine social capital, transformed this political sit-in into a distinct political space and challenged the traditional notions of Pakistani femininity while media with its own constraints facilitated women in projection, visibility, and public support. The ways in which these young women raised their voices and expressed their commitment to the political change disrupt dominant stereotypes about Pakistani women, their role and socio-political change in Pakistan. The study also reveals that charismatic, religious authority holds its grip very powerfully and managed the advancement of the political agenda of revamping the whole political system.

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