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a journal which seeks to reflect through free discussion, every shade of Indian thought and aspiration. Each month, a single problem is debated by writers belonging to different persuasions. Opinions expressed have ranged from janata to congress, from sarvodaya to communist to independent. And

the non-political specialist too has voiced his views. In this way it has been possible to answer a real need of today, to gather the facts and ideas of this age and to help thinking people arrive at a certain degree of cohesion and clarity in facing the problems of economics, of politics, of culture.

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a symposium on

the political representation

of women in India

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The problem

AS of late 2021, India counted the largest *absolute* number of women elected to political office of all countries in the world. India also has one of the world's highest *proportions* of political offices currently held by women. The histories of Indian women as political leaders complement these rather remarkable statistics. India was led by a female prime minister far earlier than nearly all western democracies; a woman has led its ruling party; and many others – from Jayalalithaa to Mayawati to Mamata Banerjee – have led states larger than countries, sometimes for decades. This female leadership has turned traditional patterns of political dominance on their heads.

As of 1993, the Indian Constitution's 42nd and 43rd 'Panchayati Raj' Amendments marked a radical commitment to building political equality from the ground up – through their mandate of reservations for women as well as members of traditionally excluded castes. This commitment inspired a number of this issue's contributors to spend much of their professional lives studying India as the vanguard of the movement to solve one of the most intractable, and consequential, problems of our time: the contradiction between principles of political equality and manifest political, economic and social inequality along gender lines. Indeed, scholars, NGOs, and the Indian government alike have amassed a growing body of evidence that women's presence as political leaders has led to myriad positive social impacts.

While India's constitution is upheld as a model for its early, innovative political commitments to equality, yet, as many readers will know, major caveats typically come attached to each component of Indian women's

political progress. In fact, pessimistic narratives often undermine any enthusiasm that the aforementioned observations might otherwise inspire. Female elected politicians are said to merely reflect the fundamentally dynastic nature of Indian politics, in which a female heir tends to prevail over a political newcomer; the large numbers of women elected to office are seen as a consequence of heavy-handed reservation policies, rather than as an expression of changing norms; moreover, these officials are said to be proxies for more dominant actors or to not lead to any significant changes on the ground.

What are the existing barriers to women's meaningful political representation? What progress has been made, if any? Do reservations serve as an impactful way to restructure gendered power dynamics? Or do they create the conditions that reinforce patriarchal structures? To what extent does this under-representation owe to gendered differences in political ambition vs. systemic discrimination by parties or voters.

This issue of *Seminar* interrogates each of these questions. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more nuanced view on women's progress, impact, and remaining barriers faced in political office in contemporary India. As scholars of representation with a combined experience of decades conducting research on and in India, we believe that each perspective in this issue provides a unique lens to investigate what is a vast, dynamic landscape of gender and the practice of (electoral) power in contemporary India.

This issue includes contributions engaging with three types of questions—although several contributions straddle across these. We first include contributions about descriptive patterns of women’s representation in India. Where and why are women present in political office across India? What is the sociological background of elected female politicians and the content of their motivations to run for office? Contributions also provide historical perspective. What, if anything, has actually changed since over the past decades, whether due to quotas, local movements, national pressure, or other factors? Have we indeed not progressed beyond cosmetic shifts in the face of local elected representatives that were constitutionally mandated? Several of our contributors tackle these questions head-on.

Second, contributions describe the styles and strategies of women who *did* beat the odds and reached elected office. Once in office, how do elected women actually govern? What are challenges met by women in office, during and after elections? Do influential female politicians resort to specific strategies to exert power? How did various personalities (from Indira Gandhi to Mamata Banerjee) instantiate the idea of female leadership? Are women different as representatives of the ‘public’ – how do they reshape the purpose of public action? Lastly, when in office, who are women *able* and *willing* to represent?

Finally, contributions delineate the potential *effects* of having a woman in an elected office. A rich literature has, over the past twenty years, painstakingly outlined the many ways in which female political leadership, in India or elsewhere, may lead to a diversity of economic,

social, psychological, and political outcomes. Drawing on this comparative scholarship, contributions included in this issue ask a variety of questions about the short or long-term effects of female leadership. What, if anything, actually changes when political leaders are women? Are public budgets allocated in a drastically different way if they are negotiated and approved by women? Is the welfare of women, or the welfare of society as a whole, improved in any substantial way by the presence in office of a woman? Does the experience of female leadership change gender norms or beliefs about women? Is it in turn likely to affect the representation of women in the public eye - including in the media?

This issue appears at a crucial crossroads in the history of women’s access to political representation in India. While gender quotas for local representation have inspired much of our work, we are well aware that women remain under-represented in the country’s most decisive political institutions. This under-representation is consequential, at a time when social movements highlight numerous failures by the Indian state to protect and represent women’s interests, specifically in cases of pervasive violence against Indian women, in public and private spaces. We hope for this issue to feed the ever-recurring, as-yet unresolved debates about the need for gender reservations in the Lok Sabha and in state assemblies, and more broadly, about the state’s role in improving the welfare of women and society at large.

RACHEL BRULÉ,
SIMON CHAUCHARD, ALYSSA HEINZE,
MEKHALA KRISHNAMURTHY

Women's participation in Indian national elections

GILLES VERNIERS, ISHIKA SHARAN,
AISHWARYA SUNAAD

MUCH has already been written about women's representation in Indian national politics.¹ In this article, we add to existing contributions by examining recent data from India's 2019 general elections and use that data to identify changes and continuities in various

1. V. Dutoya, 'Une demande faire au nom des femmes? Quotas et représentation politique des femmes en Inde et au Pakistan (1917-2010)', *Revue française de science politique* 66(1), 2016, pp. 49-70. F.R. Jensenius, 'Competing Inequalities? On the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in Candidate Nominations in Indian Elections', *Government and Opposition* 51(3), 2016, pp. 440-463. doi:10.1017/gov.2016.8. P. Rai, 'Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(3), 2011, pp. 47-55. S.M. Rai & C. Spary (eds.), *Performing Representation: Women Members in the Indian Parliament*. (First edition). Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019. C. Spary, 'Female Political Leadership in India', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 45(3), 2007, pp. 253-277. doi:10.1080/14662040701516821. C. Spary, 'Women Candidates, Women Voters, and the Gender Politics of India's 2019 Parliamentary Election', *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(2), 2020, pp. 223-241. doi:10.1080/09584935.2020.1765987.

aspects of women's participation in politics as national electoral candidates.

Women's representation remains low: As Carole Spary recently observed, '[the 2019] election failed to make significant progress in increasing women's presence among election candidates and newly elected Members of Parliament, largely as a result of major parties' limited efforts to increase women's nomination as candidates.² With 14.4% of the seats currently occupied by women, India currently ranks 149 in the list of countries by proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.³ India's score is also lower than the average calculated by the World Bank for South Asia (18.9%). With 5.4% of women MPs, only Sri Lanka does worse.

The following chart, however, indicates that if the overall level of

2. Spary, 2020, *ibid*.

3. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>

representation of women in the Lok Sabha is low, it is nonetheless increasing. The rate of increase of women MPs (+2.8%) is the highest registered since 1984 (2.9%). 44 women were elected that year, against 30 in the previous election. In 2019, women's representation increased even though there were only 1.3% more women candidates compared to 2014. What accounts for the variation in representation is the strong overall performance of the BJP, which got 42 women elected out of 303 seats won, and a higher rate of nomination among Trinamool and BJD candidates, which led to seven and six women MPs to be elected on these two parties' tickets. Only six women won on a Congress ticket.

Landslide elections favour women's representation, as women candidates also benefit from the strong support obtained by their party. In 1984, the small increase of women representation came from the fact that most Congress women contestants won their seats (39 out of 44).

For most parties, the number of women candidates remains abysmally low. Many parties even failed to field a single woman candidate. National parties only do marginally better than state-based and local parties and few women run as independent candidates.

As noted by Jensenius, women's nominations tend to be higher in the 84 constituencies reserved for SCs and 47 reserved for ST than in the remaining general seats, since 1996.⁴ The 2019 figures confirm that observation, as women comprised 10.8% of all candidates in seats reserved for SCs, 14.3% of all candidates in seats reserved for STs, against 8.3% in non-reserved seats. Women make up also a quarter of all MPs elected in seats reserved for STs, 14.3% of MPs elected in seats reserved for SCs and 13.1% of all non-reserved seats.⁵

A comparison of these numbers by parties in the last two elections reveal some variations. While the BJP did increase women's nominations in

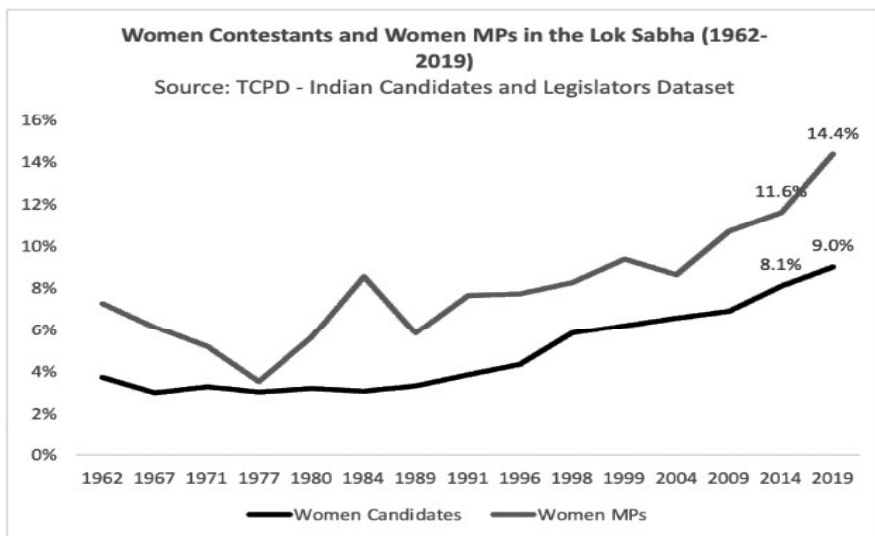
2019, it did so mostly in non-reserved seats and in seats reserved for STs. For the Congress, it maintained its previous ratio of women nominations in non-reserved seats but fielded significantly more women in seats reserved for SCs. Compared to Jensenius' data, which examined the distribution of nominations across reserved and non-reserved seats before and after 1996, women's nominations have increased across all categories of seats, but more so in reserved seats.

Percentages, however, can be misleading. Even though the share of women contestants fielded by Congress in 2019 was identical to 2014, Congress in fact fielded fewer women, as it contested fewer seats (421 against 464).

Among other parties, there are also significant variations. In Odisha, Naveen Patnaik fielded 6 of its 7 women candidates in reserved seats (3 SC and 3 ST), out of 8 reserved seats. In West Bengal, the Trinamool fielded 5 of its 17 women candidates in reserved seats (out of 12). By confining women's representation to reserved seats, unlike the Trinamool which distributed women's candidacy across seats' types, the BJD made the choice of increasing women's representation without diluting male representation in general seats.

In 2019, 47% of all women MPs were elected from only four states: Uttar Pradesh (14%), West Bengal (14%), Maharashtra (10%) and Odisha (9%). Large, populated states like Bihar or Gujarat, barely contributed. South India, which accounts for 130 seats in the Lok Sabha, only sent 11 women to Parliament.

These variations are consistent with state-assembly level data, which shows that southern states generally have a bad record in terms of women's



In 2019, 47 of the 78 women elected won on a national party ticket against 28 on state-based party tickets. Table 1 shows how skewed women's inclusion is in most parties, the Trinamool and the BJD being the exception among major state-based parties.

4. F.R. Jensenius, 2016, *ibid.*, p. 452.

5. G. Verniers, 'Verdict 2019 in Charts and Maps: Lok Sabha Has More Female MPs Than Ever Before, More Dynasts Too', *Scroll.in*, 1 June 2019. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/925313/verdict-2019-in-charts-and-maps-lok-sabha-has-more-female-mps-than-ever-before-more-dynasts-too>

TABLE 1
Party-wise distribution of women MPs and candidates in the 2019 general election

	Female MPs	% Female MPs overall	% Female MPs within party	Female candidates	% Female candidates	Total MPs
<i>National</i>	47	60.30%	13.20%	109	12.70%	355
BJP	41	52.60%	13.50%	55	12.60%	303
INC	6	7.70%	11.50%	54	12.80%	52
<i>State-based</i>	28	35.90%	15.90%	139	10.80%	176
AITC	9	11.50%	40.90%	23	37.10%	22
BJD	5	6.40%	41.70%	7	33.30%	12
YSRCP	4	5.10%	18.20%	4	16.00%	22
DMK	2	2.60%	8.30%	2	8.30%	24
BSP	1	1.30%	10.00%	24	6.30%	10
JD(U)	1	1.30%	6.30%	2	8.00%	16
LJP	1	1.30%	16.70%	1	16.70%	6
NCP	1	1.30%	20.00%	1	2.90%	5
NPEP	1	1.30%	100.00%	2	18.20%	1
SAD	1	1.30%	50.00%	2	20.00%	2
SHS	1	1.30%	5.60%	12	12.20%	18
TRS	1	1.30%	11.10%	2	11.80%	9
AAAP	0	0.00%	0.00%	3	8.60%	1
ADMK	0	0.00%	0.00%	1	4.50%	1
CPI	0	0.00%	0.00%	4	8.20%	2
CPM	0	0.00%	0.00%	10	14.50%	3
IUML	0	0.00%	0.00%	1	11.10%	3
JD(S)	0	0.00%	0.00%	2	22.20%	1
JMM	0	0.00%	0.00%	1	7.70%	1
RJD	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	6	14.30%	0
SAD	0	0.00%	0.00%	2	20.00%	0
SP	0	0.00%	0.00%	6	12.20%	5
TDP	0	0.00%	0.00%	3	12.00%	3
Independents	2	2.60%	50.00%	226	6.50%	4
Local Parties	1	1.30%	12.50%	252	10.30%	8
Grand Total	78	100.00%	14.40%	726	9.00%	543

Source: TCPD- Indian Candidates and Legislators Dataset, derived from ECI reports. This table excludes state-based parties that did not field a single woman candidate, such as AGP, AIMIM, AUDF, DMDK, INLD, JKNPP, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (M), MNNPF, PMK, RLD, RPI and SDF.

TABLE 2
Percentage of women contestants in parliamentary constituencies by seat category in the 2014 and 2019 general elections

	2014	2019	Change
<i>BJP overall</i>	8.90%	12.60%	3.70%
BJP - non-reserved	8.90%	13.10%	4.20%
BJP - reserved SC	9.70%	7.90%	-1.70%
BJP - reserved ST	7.30%	15.60%	8.20%
<i>INC overall</i>	12.90%	12.80%	-0.10%
INC - non-reserved	12.80%	11.60%	-1.20%
INC - reserved SC	13.00%	18.80%	5.90%
INC - reserved ST	14.30%	12.20%	-2.10%
<i>Other Parties overall</i>	9.60%	9.70%	0.10%
Other Parties - non-reserved	9.20%	9.00%	-0.20%
Other Parties - reserved SC	11.00%	12.70%	1.70%
Other Parties - reserved ST	11.20%	13.60%	2.50%

Source: Adapted from Jensenius (2017).⁶

inclusion in electoral politics. Recent state elections have even seen women representation drop significantly in Tamil Nadu (from 9% to 5%) and remain extremely low in Kerala, at 8%. Northern states tend to have slightly higher women's representation in state assemblies, particularly across the Hindi Belt (Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh) and in West Bengal. Women are practically absent from candidates' lists across the North East, in Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh. In general elections, the small number of seats allotted to smaller states alters that perception.

In this section, we look at various socio-demographic characteristics of women contesting on major parties' tickets and MPs, and compare them, when possible, to their male counterparts. Previous contributions

6. F.R. Jensenius, 'Competing Inequalities?' *Government and Opposition* 51(3), 2016, p. 454.

7. G. Verniers, V. Karthik KR, M. Kumar, and N. Agrawal, 'Tamil Nadu's New Assembly in 33 Charts: Lowest Women Representation in 25 Years, OBCs Dominate', *Scroll.in*, 10 May 2021. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/994446/tamil-nadus-new-assembly-in-33-charts-lowest-women-representation-in-25-years-obcs-dominate> G. Verniers, Basim-u-Nissa, M. Kumar & N. Agrawal, 'Is Kerala

tell us that female MPs tend to be more educated and wealthier, more upper caste, less likely to be farmers or from business.⁸ Women MPs and candidates are also more dynastic.⁹ The argument goes that parties attempt to mitigate the perceived weakness of female candidates by selecting them more harshly on conventional markers of winnability. Contrary to the argument often made by opponents to the Women's Reservation Bill, politics does not necessarily attract more elite women; it is simply the basis on which parties tend to recruit them.

On the education variable, data for the 2019 contestants shows that women were still by and large slightly more educated than men. Among major parties, 75.4% of all women contestants had a higher education

Really Inclusive? 33 Charts About MLAs in New Assembly Show There's Still Work to Be Done', *Scroll.in*, 13 May 2021. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/994691/is-kerala-really-inclusive-33-charts-about-mlas-in-new-assembly-show-theres-still-work-to-be-done>

8. V. Dutoya, 2016, op. cit.

9. K. Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party, and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2016.

degree and above, against 64% of all men. This is a higher proportion of women contestants with graduate degrees and above than in 2014 (71%), while the percentage of male contestants with degrees is identical. Among winners however, the percentage of male MPs with degrees is higher than women's (75.6% against 70%).

Again in 2019, women are more likely to be members of upper castes than men (33.3% against 29.2%), fewer are members of the OBCs (19.2% against 23.4%) and Intermediary Castes (14% against 16%); more women are represented among Scheduled Tribes (15.4% against 9%) and less among Scheduled Castes (12.8% against 16%). There are only two Muslim women represented in the Lok Sabha, whereas there are 19 men.¹⁰

In terms of wealth, we note that in 2019, men and women MPs were equally wealthy, with median net assets of 17.3 crore. In 2014, there was a gap of 4.2 crores on average between male and female MPs, according to affidavit data (ADR). The cost of entry in politics is

10. These figures do not consider subsequent by-elections.

TABLE 3
State-wise distribution of women candidates and MPs in the 2019 General Election

States	Female MPs	% Female MPs overall	% Female MPs within state	% Female candidates	Seats
Uttar Pradesh	11	14.10%	13.80%	10.80%	80
West Bengal	11	14.10%	26.20%	11.60%	42
Maharashtra	8	10.30%	16.70%	9.10%	48
Odisha	7	9.00%	33.30%	14.40%	21
Gujarat	6	7.70%	23.10%	7.50%	26
Andhra Pradesh	4	5.10%	16.00%	8.50%	25
Madhya Pradesh	4	5.10%	13.80%	9.10%	29
Bihar	3	3.80%	7.50%	8.90%	40
Chhattisgarh	3	3.80%	27.30%	13.90%	11
Rajasthan	3	3.80%	12.00%	9.20%	25
Tamil Nadu	3	3.80%	7.70%	7.90%	39
Jharkhand	2	2.60%	14.30%	10.90%	14
Karnataka	2	2.60%	7.10%	5.60%	28
Punjab	2	2.60%	15.40%	9.00%	13
Assam	1	1.30%	7.10%	9.70%	14
Delhi	1	1.30%	14.30%	9.80%	7
Haryana	1	1.30%	10.00%	4.90%	10
Kerala	1	1.30%	5.00%	10.60%	20
Meghalaya	1	1.30%	50.00%	11.10%	2
Telangana	1	1.30%	5.90%	5.60%	17
Tripura	1	1.30%	50.00%	13.00%	2
Uttarakhand	1	1.30%	20.00%	9.60%	5
Arunachal Pradesh	0	0.00%	0.00%	8.30%	2
Goa	0	0.00%	0.00%	16.70%	2
Himachal Pradesh	0	0.00%	0.00%	2.20%	4
Jammu & Kashmir	0	0.00%	0.00%	3.80%	6
Manipur	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2
Mizoram	0	0.00%	0.00%	16.70%	1
Nagaland	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1
Sikkim	0	0.00%	0.00%	9.10%	1
Union Territories					
<i>A&N Islands</i>		0.00%	0.00%	6.70%	1
Chandigarh	1	1.30%	100.00%	25.00%	1
D&N Haveli		0.00%	0.00%	9.10%	1
Daman & Diu		0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1
Lakshadweep		0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1
Puducherry		0.00%	0.00%	11.10%	1
Grand Total	78	100.00%	14.40%	9.00%	543

Source: TCPD - Indian Candidates and Legislators Dataset, derived from ECI reports.

now so high that it erases differences of wealth between men and women MPs.

The main variation between men and women MPs lies with their dynastic profile. As documented in a previous article in this journal, we found that ‘Thirty percent of all dynastic main party candidates are women, against 8% of all non-dynastic candidates’.¹¹ Overall, we found that ‘26.3% of MPs belong to political families, against 15.8% of their candidates’, and that

half of Congress and BJP’s women candidates belonged to political families.

This is consistent with previous findings that measured the prevalence of dynasticism among MPs.¹² Quoting Chandra, Bohlken, and Chauchard’s dataset (2014), Amrita Basu observes that ‘an overwhelming proportion of this small number of women parliamentarians – 58% in 2004, 69%

in 2009, and 43% in 2014 – have had family members precede them in politics, making them the group that is most dependent on dynastic ties for representation’.¹³ For 2019, the percentage is 50% (39 out of 78).

The difference with past recent elections is the fact that the BJP seems now more inclined to recruit dynastic

11. G. Verniers & S. Ammassari, ‘The Resilience of Dynasticism’, *Seminar* 720, 2019.

12. K. Chandra, 2016, op. cit.; K. Chandra & W. Umaira, ‘Democratic Dynasties’, *Seminar* (622), 2011.

13. A. Basu, ‘Women, Dynasties, and Democracy in India’, in K. Chandra (ed.), *Democratic Dynasties. State, Party, and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 137; pp. 136-172.

candidates than in the past. 47% of its women candidates belong to political families, against 13% of men. For Congress, the ratio of women candidates belonging to political families increased to 51%, compared to 2014, against 24% of all its male candidates.

The higher nomination of women by the Trinamool and the BJD also affects the percentage of women dynastic candidates. Four of the nine Trinamool women MPs belong to political families (against 35% of their female candidates), while four of the seven BJD women MPs belong to political families (against 57% of their female candidates).

In their 2011 article on dynasticism in Indian politics, Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira argue that parties with strong organizational structures, like the BJP, do not need to rely on the dynastic ties of their candidates.¹⁴ We find in 2019 that the increased competitiveness of electoral politics has brought parties that do have such strong organizational structures, such as the BJP or the Trinamool, to increasingly rely on dynastic candidates, particularly among women. This is in tune with an overall transformation of the ways the BJP recruits its candidates since 2014: more pragmatic, more inclined to host defectors or dynasts. Across states, the BJP has in part emulated the caste-based, elitist recruitment approach of regional parties.¹⁵

The fact that parties tend to apply their candidates' selection criteria more stringently on women compared to men, also accounts for the higher percentage of women dynastic

14. K. Chandra & W. Umaira, 2011, op. cit.

15. G. Verniers, 'Opportunism and Discontent: Party Hoppers in UP Politics, The Mojo Story', 2022, <https://mojostory.com/pov/party-hoppers-in-up-politics/>

candidates. Besides, nominating women relatives of male politicians is also a means to ingratiate men in the party by enabling them to expand their own family's political influence. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP often offers tickets to relatives of high-profile defectors who join the party, such as Sanghamitra Maurya, BJP MP from Badaun and daughter of former BJP minister Swami Prasad Maurya.

Finally, we also find, as Chandra et al. did, that smaller parties tend to mostly field dynastic women candidates, often directly related to party leaders. The RJD for instance, fielded spouses of three imprisoned former high-profile RJD representatives who could not contest.

Lastly, do women MPs' careers differ from men's? In this section, we look at individual MPs' career trajectories, drawn from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data's individual incumbency dataset. This dataset provides information on the number of times candidates in Indian elections have contested and been elected.

In terms of career length, women do not seem to be particularly disadvantaged. From 1977 to 2019, Indian MPs have served on average nearly two terms. The difference between male and female MPs is negligible, even though men are slightly more likely to serve two complete terms than women. The same observation applies for the number of times candidates contest.

Incumbent male MPs are also generally more likely to be re-nominated than incumbent female MPs. Barring in the late 1990s, the strike rate of women re-running incumbents is systematically lower than men (35% on average from 1980 to 2019, against 40% for men).

As a result of these variations, women are more likely to be new

entrants in politics. Barring two elections in the 1980s, the ratio of first time MPs among women has always been higher than men.

Few women finally belong to the 'stable political class', defined as the group of elected representatives who have been elected three times or more. Of the 543 Lok Sabha MPs elected in 2019, 120 belong to that category. Only twelve are women. Maneka Gandhi, elected eight times, is India's longest serving female MP, followed by Sonia Gandhi. Among the women candidates, only 18 contestants (out of 752) had served more than two terms, against 167 for the men. Women's professional politicians' strike rate (ratio of seats won to seats contested) is also slightly lower than men's (66% against 71%).

These figures have varied over time. In 2014, there were only eight women part of the stable political class: Sonia Gandhi (Congress) and Gawali Bhavana Pundlikrao (Shiv Sena) were the only two non-BJP women MPs who belonged to this category. The highest number was sixteen in 1999. For a country of India's size, that is a minuscule number of long-standing professional female politicians.¹⁶

We argue in this article that women's representation should not be only measured in terms of tickets and seats. Other sociological and political variables, such as caste, religion, political family affiliations, affidavit data and data on their career trajectories, are now available and can be used to assess their socio-demographic profile and their career

16. There are of course career women politicians active in state politics, in the Rajya Sabha or serving as party presidents, but their representation in these spheres of power tend to be even lower than at the national level. Only in local bodies do we find a large number of women, owing to reservations.

trajectories in greater detail. This information can help assess the impact women politicians can have on national politics, and the limits imposed by various political constraints.

Women's representation in India's Lok Sabha is not only very low, but also dispersed across states and parties, making their presence marginal within states and parties as well. While they face the same career constraints as men – short political longevity, high competitive pressure, high individual anti-incumbency – the fact that their base number is so low has a compounding effect on their political marginalization. In a country of 1.4 billion, there are only at the moment 12 women members of the Lok Sabha who can be said to be career or professional politicians.

Recent elections, however, have shown that a few political parties have made more space for women candidates, recruiting new candidates also outside political dynastic networks. As Mirchandani and Verniers have argued elsewhere, recent examples of gender inclusion probably stem more from strategic electoral calculations than from a moral standpoint, which is encouraging.¹⁷ Once parties recognize the fact that there is no risk associated with fielding more women candidates, and that including more women candidates can in fact pay off given the growing participation of women as voters, they may become less averse to nominating them. But for the time being, variations in women's representation are more a function of major parties' performance (landslide victories boost women's representation) than of parties' concerns for gender equity.

17. M. Mirchandani & G. Verniers, 'How Mamata's Trinamool Broke the Glass Ceiling for Women in Politics, 22 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.article-14.com/post/how-mamata-s-trinamool-broke-the-glass-ceiling-for-women-in-politics>

Women in rajniti and lokniti

MUKULIKA BANERJEE

OVER two decades ago, I published a paper in this journal entitled ‘Mamata’s Khamata’ and another one a few years after in which I compared the careers of Mamata Banerjee and Jayalalitha in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu respectively.¹ Given the severe disadvantage that Indian women face in gaining access to even standing for elections, leave alone winning them, it was fascinating to study the careers of these two prominent women who had successful and enduring political careers. These were among the first academic pieces to focus exclusively on female political leadership in India by examining both the style and substance of their politics.

In the 2000s, such a discussion was fruitful as these two politicians belonged to a very small club that included Indira Gandhi, Mayawati, Sheila Dikshit, and Sonia Gandhi –

1. M. Banerjee, ‘Mamata’s Khamata’, *Seminar*, August 1999, pp. 30-M. 35. Also, Banerjee, M 2004. ‘Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata Banerjee and Jayalalithaa Compared’, in Rob Jenkins (ed.), *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics across India’s States*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 285-308.

each of these women commanded the loyalty of masses of voters, they had either headed their political parties and/or been chief ministers of their states. It was worthwhile therefore to explore the specific factors that shaped their careers, and as I did in my 2004 paper, specifically explore the role of male mentors and relatives in influencing their careers. Mamata Banerjee stood out as the exception for having carved out her political career *sui generis* without the help of any man.

The invitation to contribute to this volume in 2022 exploring the role of women in politics was therefore a welcome opportunity to update the analysis from over twenty years ago. Sadly, though much has changed in Indian politics at the national and state levels, on the issue of women and representation, very little has. The biggest development has been Mamata’s defeat of the Left Front to become chief minister of West Bengal in 2011 and being re-elected to a third term in 2021 by defeating the BJP in a campaign led by Prime Minister Modi himself. As a politician, and as a woman therefore, Mamata has

successfully taken on and defeated the two biggest parties of ‘machine politics’ dominated by two of the most successful male politicians India has seen and she is now the only female Chief Minister in India.

This may be a hard act to follow for any politician, regardless of gender. But during these years of Mamata’s battles, no new woman mass leader has emerged elsewhere in India, and the ones who did exist are now a shadow of themselves.² Jayalalitha passed away in 2016 and no other female politician has emerged in Tamil Nadu; Sheila Dixit too passed away in 2019, Mayawati, once the chief minister of India’s most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, is now totally stymied by charges of corruption, reducing the number of prominent political women further; Sonia Gandhi’s illness has forced her to take a backseat in Congress politics and Vasundhara Raje dominant for some years as Rajasthan’s chief minister has to wait for the next state elections to try and regain power.³ In the realm of *rajniti* or institutional democracy, therefore, the presence of women representatives in national and regional politics has gone down further and there is not much to update the discussion with.

But what of the status of women in *lokniti* or democratic culture where they feature not as politicians but as ordinary voters? Here the picture is much more dynamic as there has been a startling trend since 2009, namely, a steady rise in women’s turnout in elections and this has now outstripped men’s turnout. While some explanations for this rise in women’s turnout have been offered by scholars, I will offer some additional explanations. In conclusion, I will briefly dwell on the

contrast between women’s roles in *rajniti* and *lokniti* to offer some further conclusions.

The participation of women in any democracy is closely observed by scholars because despite making up half the electorate, they suffer several structural impediments to both participation in politics and to aspiration to office. The absence of women’s suffrage and the near absence of women politicians in public offices in most older democracies until the 20th century are clear evidence of this fact. The right to vote was a hard won right and women’s participation in politics both as voters and as elected representatives remains a vital indicator of the health of any democratic culture. Some countries have done better than others and a study conducted in 2016 revealed that only in 21 out of 58 countries, including the US, women’s turnout was higher than men’s.³ Given the reported decline in voter turnout figures in most European and older democracies, the higher participation of women against this backdrop is significant.

India’s democratic record on turnout figures has been something of an outlier in many respects. First, overall turnout numbers have followed an opposite trend to many older and more prosperous democracies, with turnouts steadily *rising* from one election to the next. Second, turnout rates went *up* the more local the election, which too was unlike other democracies. Third, India too

3. See P. Norris, Women’s Power at the Ballot Box: Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, 2020. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf> See also, World Economic Forum, The Global Gender Gap Report, 2014.

had a significant ‘gender gap’ in turnout rates like other democracies, made much worse by one of the worst gender sex ratios in the total population, placing it 186 out of 194 countries by the World Bank. The 2011 Census reported 943 women for every 1000 men, indicating clear evidence for son preference and female foeticide. The issue of women’s participation in Indian democracy, considering these contrary trends, requires careful attention.

Women’s turnout in Indian elections started to rise steadily from the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and within ten years, it finally outstripped men’s turnout.⁴ This was a significant development because India’s ‘gender gap’ in voter turnouts was significant and in 1962, ten years after the first elections of 1951, the turnout of women was only 47%. But by 2014 it had gone up to 66% – an increase of 19 percentage points.⁵ The narrowing of the gap took place not just in southern and eastern states where the gender ratio is higher, but also in northern and western states where women’s population has historically been lower than men’s.⁶

The Election Commission of India data revealed that during this

4. A recent study assessing Mamata’s success, compares her not to other female politicians but India’s PM Narendra Modi and their common ‘populist self-fashioning of political asceticism.’ P. Ray Chaudhary, ‘The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India’, *Politics & Gender*, September 2021, pp. 1-36.

5. M. Kapoor & S. Ravi, ‘Women Voters in Indian Democracy: A Silent Revolution’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 49(22), 2014, pp. 63-67. S. Rukmini, ‘Women Voters Make Political Parties Take Notice’, *Seminar* 720, August 2019. https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_rukmini_s.htm

6. Men’s turnout grew by only 5 percentage points (from 62% to 67%) over the same period.

period while men's turnouts have remained much the same, more and more women have been voting with each passing election since 2009. The trend continued into the 2014 election when it continued to hold and by the national election in 2019 women's turnout outstripped that of the men's turnout.

Several scholars have offered explanations for this rise in women's turnout. The political scientists Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta suggest three factors – a self-empowerment hypothesis, increased female literacy and deeper penetration of media – as possible reasons for this recent upsurge.⁷ Others that have pointed out that women's decision making within households has grown, as have the number of women with bank accounts in their names, and they concluded that this maybe one indicator of growing agency and autonomy of women and this is reflected in their visibility at the polling booth. They also credit the concerted and innovative efforts of the Election Commission of India in trying to close the gender gap that greater media penetration has enabled.

Making elections safer and more respectful of women has also been the hallmark of the ECI right from its very first election until recently and some evidence is available to show that greater security in polling booths created a 2-5% increase in turnout of women in those booths. Lokniti-CSDS

7. 'States with a high gender gap are Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Gujarat. States with a moderate gender gap are Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Sikkim and Haryana. States with a low gender gap are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Goa and Uttarakhand.' Kumar and Gupta, 'Changing Patterns of Women's Turnout in Indian Elections', *Studies in Indian Politics* 3(1) 2015, pp. 7-18.

studies also showed that women's exposure to news media as well as their attendance at rallies and meetings had grown at a steady pace and these enabled greater participation at the ballot box.⁸

While these explanations are robust and convincing, I propose three further observations that may help explain the rise in women's turnout numbers since 2009. First, is that the number of women participating in elections has been rising at the same time that their numbers in the labour force has been declining. Thus, even as women were participating in fewer numbers in the economy, they were becoming more politically visible through their vote.

The second observation is to note that local elections were introduced in India from the mid-1990s onwards. We know from Lokniti data that Indian voters are most enthusiastic about local elections than national and regional ones and as we shall see, women feature more prominently as candidates in these elections. Thus the rise in women's turnout at elections is consolidated just as local elections become established.

The third observation to make is that women's turnout goes up as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) become prevalent across the country. Let us consider each of these developments in turn.

Data shows that women's labour force participation ratio (LFPR) in India has dropped significantly in the last two decades and research shows that this is caused by structural factors and unavailability of reliable gainful employment and negative economic shocks (such as demonetization of

8. Kumar and Gupta, *ibid*. See also M. Vaishnav, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/08/indian-women-are-voting-more-than-ever-will-they-change-indian-society-pub-7767>.

86% of Indian currency in 2016) that affect women's employment more than men's.⁹ Voting in elections on the other hand, is free and available to women and so my first explanation for the rise in women's turnout is that while women were being structurally shut out from the economy they embraced the opportunity to make their voices heard at the ballot box.

As I have argued elsewhere, elections and voting are intensely meaningful moments through which those who are the most disadvantaged in Indian society, whether in rural or urban India, make their voices heard.¹⁰ The ability to vote freely is in itself emancipatory and therefore many Indians vote not only to instrumentally support a party or candidate, but also because the act of voting *itself* holds meaning for them.¹¹ The setting of a polling booth is unlike any other public space in India – it is safe, orderly, and entirely devoid of social distinction, and is thus especially welcoming space for the socially disadvantaged. The experience of physically casting a vote thereby provides an extraordinary glimpse of political equality in sharp contrast to quotidian social inequality and brings 'meaning' to the act of voting for many. 'I like to vote' is what many women said when we asked them why they did.

This can perhaps explain why rural women, who are probably among the least advantaged, have consistently voted in higher numbers and more than

9. A. Deshpande and J. Singh, *Dropping Out, Being Pushed Out or Can't Get in? Decoding Declining Labour Force Participation of Indian Women*. IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Discussion Paper Series, August 2021.

10. See M. Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* Routledge India, 2014.

11. See M. Banerjee, 'Money and Meaning in Elections', *Modern Asian Studies* 54(1), January 2020, pp. 286-313 for a further elaboration of this idea.

urban women. Writing just after the 2019 national elections, Roy and Sopariwala noted, ‘a sharp spike in turnout among women voters in villages – up by 13 percentage points (from 53% to 66%) between 1971 and 2014, while the turnout of women in towns dropped by one percentage point (from 61% to 60%) in the same period. Women’s turnout in villages is now six percentage points higher than in towns and cities. This is a huge change from 1971 when the turnout of women in rural areas was eight percentage points lower than in towns’.¹² Thus, breaking down the women’s vote revealed that rural women vote more than urban women, which is related to my second explanation about the increase in women’s turnout.

This has to do with the third tier of democracy that was introduced through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1992. So, by the mid-1990s, many states in India were conducting local elections to urban and local bodies. Lokniti’s National Election Studies from the late 1990s onwards show that more local the election, the higher the turnout. In this tier of election, a third to half the seats were reserved for women and so local government did not suffer the same lack of female representation as in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha seats; India has some of the lowest proportion of female legislators when compared to other

democracies.¹³ (see Verniers in this volume.)

The picture at local levels of democracy, in contrast, is radically different. Here, both in urban municipal bodies and rural Panchayat ones, a third of the seats to 50% seats being reserved for women ensured that a great many women entered the electoral arena not just as voters, but also as candidates. Local elections thus had two key characteristics that made it attractive for women voters to participate. First, it made institutional democracy a lot more proximate, the candidate was often someone they would recognize and know by name. As Sircar and Schneider note in local democracy ‘the constituency is sufficiently “local” for political actors and citizens to have frequent interactions and significant amount of information about each other’.¹⁴ The reservation of seats for women in these local elections also meant that women candidates were suddenly a lot more visible.

Second, elections and government at the local level also made the state a lot ‘thicker’ and more accessible to ordinary voters. As a recent article comparing urban and rural local bodies show, these two features are especially true for rural India.¹⁵ This is largely because rural constituencies are smaller and so made the state and its representatives even

more visible and proximate. A combination of these factors resulted in more rural women voting than urban ones.

My second explanation for the growing turnout of women from 2009 onwards, would be therefore a growing familiarity with elections. At the local level, the much smaller scale made representation more tangible as indeed the relationship between an individual’s vote and the result. During research conducted during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, voters across India stressed that they always voted in Panchayat elections because in those elections ‘every vote counts’.¹⁶ As women tend to migrate much less and are more likely to be tied to home and hearth in single locations, the impact of local democracy is likely to be greater on them than on men. Greater exposure to candidates, electoral process and campaigns and the working of government at a proximate and local level therefore is likely to have made a greater impression on them and encouraged them to participate more.

By the 2009 national elections, voters in many states of India would have voted for at least two and sometimes three rounds of local elections. This was sufficient time for a greater familiarity and ease with the electoral procedure to set in and this may have then affected the higher turnout at all levels, including the Lok Sabha elections.

In this, they also proved Ambedkar’s prediction to be true when, as early as in 1919 he ‘made the case that suffrage could itself serve an instructive role and that participation

12. The turnout of men in rural areas, Roy & Sopariwala note, ‘has also shown a small increase of 1 percentage point (from 66% to 67%), while in urban areas men’s turnout has fallen by the same amount (from 65% to 64%) – as a result, today men’s turnout in villages is 3 percentage points higher than the turnout of men in towns and cities’. P. Roy and D. Sopariwala, ‘On the Rise: Women Voters in India’, *Significance*, June 2019, pp. 8-9 <https://rss.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2019.01271.x>

13. Attempts to redress that lacuna through Women’s Reservation Bill that would reserve one-third of seats in state legislatures and Parliament for women candidates, has yet to be passed in the Lok Sabha since March 2010.

14. N. Sircar and M. Schneider, Does Local Democracy Serve the Poor? Identifying the Distributive Preferences of Village Politicians in India. 2015, p 5. CASI Working Paper Series, Number 15-01 08/2015.

15. A. Auerbach and G. Kruks-Wisner, ‘The Geography of Citizenship Practice: How the

Poor Engage the State in Rural and Urban India’, *Perspectives on Politics* 18(4), December 2020, pp. 1118-1134.

16. Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* Routledge, 2014.

in political life would bring about consciousness'.¹⁷ The practice of voting in each election cumulatively brought greater confidence both in democracy's institutional structures like elections, but also its democratic culture of participation.

A third key factor that may have facilitated women's greater participation in lokniti may be linked to the proliferation and popularity of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) from the 1990s onwards. While the economic benefit of SHGs has been widely debated, they could have said to have had a positive influence on citizenship and 'civic growth' in India.¹⁸ I have shown in a recent paper how the creation of a common activity required by any SHG enabled horizontal solidarities to develop despite the vertical divisions of caste and class in society, and this created the capacity for civic action and collective action well beyond the activities required by the SHG itself.¹⁹ In my own research site, I saw how such collective action based on new found fraternity could directly threaten the entrenched interests of powerful men and even their electoral prospects.

Thus, SHG activity has been potentially generative of wider political participation because its activities often emphasized the importance of

17. See Chapter 7 in M. Banerjee, *Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021.

18. M. Banerjee, *Self-Help, Natalty and 'Civic Growth'* (forthcoming).

19. See also P. Sanyal, *Credit to Capabilities: A Sociological Study of Microcredit Groups in India*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014. Not all SHGs cut across caste of course, in many parts of India, they reinforced caste boundaries. But in West Bengal, the Left Front government made cross caste membership a qualifying condition of a SHG and proved that institutional intervention of this kind could be very effective in creating horizontal solidarities or 'fraternity' of this kind.

individual effort by every citizen, the need to build solidarities even with those with whom one shared no common identity of caste or age, the power of collective action and the importance of suppressing self-interest to favour a common good. Many women saw the act of voting as an example of such an activity and so the popularity of SHGs around the mid 1990s onwards may have also impacted women's greater participation in elections.

Taking all the above factors into consideration we can thus offer some additional explanations for the rise in women's voter turnout since the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. First, we note that women being shut out of participation in the economy may have motivated them to participate more in elections where it was possible. Second, familiarity with local government through newly introduced Panchayati institutions (PRI) grew in the decade before 2009 and would have made political participation more proximate and tangible. Reservation of a third to half the seats for women at this level of government also made voting, elections, and representation more accessible to women at the local level, and this may have then encouraged them to participate in elections more enthusiastically than at national and regional levels. And third, the decade before 2009 was also when SHGs have proliferated across India, and women's involvement in these groups created a new capacity for collective action and 'civic growth' that impacted how they saw their role in electoral politics.

Based on a recent IndiaSpend study, we see that the above factors may have also impacted women's role not just as voters in the realm of lokniti but also as candidates in rajniti. We learn

that the newly created 'armies' of SHG workers has incubated political ambition among their prominent participants and the experience of standing for elections in local Panchayat or municipal levels created ambition to stand for political office at higher levels too.²⁰ And we note that women voters do not necessarily vote for women candidates.²¹ Instead, women's growing participation in lokniti and their growing aspiration for rajniti has put pressure on public policy and campaign promises and a recent paper shows how the BJP benefitted from including welfare programmes in its delivery and campaign promise to attract women's votes.²²

Thus, while dominant political ideologies such as Hindutva become more misogynistic and patriarchal, women's representation at national and state level rajniti remains at abysmally low levels. Women's unemployment figures have also risen, but so has their participation as voters in lokniti. Despite being shut out of the economy, and having to live by deeply patriarchal social norms, women have emerged as an important interest group by making their presence felt at the ballot box, whom political parties need to keep in mind while framing public policy and election manifestos.

20. Rukmini S., 'Women Voters Make Political Parties Take Notice', *Seminar* 720, August 2019. https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_rukmini_s.htm

21. See R. Deshpande, 'How Did Women Vote in Lok Sabha Elections 2009', *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(39), 2009, pp. 83-87; and F. Jensenius, 'Competing Inequalities? On the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in Candidate Nominations in Indian Elections', *Government and Opposition* 51(3), 2016, pp. 440-463. See also P. Rai, 'Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(3), 2011, pp. 47-55.

22. R. Deshpande, L. Tillin and K. K. Kailash, 'The BJP's Welfare Schemes: Did They Make a Difference in the 2019 Elections?', *Studies in Indian Politics* 7(2), 2019, pp. 219-233.

Are husbands the problem?

RACHEL BRULÉ, SIMON CHAUCHARD,
ALYSSA HEINZE

ON the heels of reservations embedded in the 1993 Constitutional Amendment—the Panchayati Raj Act, a critical mass of women have entered local politics in India. While these gendered changes were rightly celebrated, they also quickly gave rise to a new term: *sarpanch-pati* (or *pradhan-pati*, depending on regions). The term implies that where women are *de jure* elected, their husbands *de facto* run the local state. Prime Minister Modi himself lamented this outcome, as he told a group of Panchayat representatives in 2015: ‘The law has given women rights in panchayats, they should also be given the opportunity to work.’¹ Then-Minister of Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi suggested a slash-and-burn approach in response to the problem, with harsh penalties for husbands: ‘If a woman doesn’t exercise her rights as *pradhan* she should be removed. The ‘pradhan pati’ should be jailed and completely barred from any kinds of decision making.’²

1. Times News Network, ‘PM Modi Seeks End to Proxy Rule, Says No More “Sarpanch Pati”’, *The Hindu*, 25 April 2015; ‘End “Sarpanch Pati” Practice, Says Modi’, 12 April 2016.

2. Ranjan Sweta, ‘Maneka Wants “Pradhan Patis” in Jail’, *GovernanceNow*, 21 August 2014.

Whether or not these statements have practical repercussions on the ground, this targeting of husbands already has legal repercussions in some states: in 2020, Rajasthan’s Panchayati Raj department, for instance, issued a new order dictating that where sarpanch patis are observed performing the duties of female sarpanches, the sarpanch will be removed from her elected post and ‘action [will be] taken’ against the husband.³

Such muscular governmental action may suggest that Sarpanch-patism—the tendency of male relatives to exercise power in lieu of duly elected female officials—constitutes the main hurdle to female-led government in rural India. Yet, drawing on our long-term study of these institutions in several hundred villages since 2018, we do *not* believe that the hurdles women face in exercising their legally mandated roles in elected government can be reduced to a problem of sarpanch-patism, nor that sarpanch-patism constitutes *the* central limitation to the ability of female local officials to implement better policies. Certainly, gendered hierarchies and patriarchal norms are pervasive in the daily

3. Times News Network, ‘When a Sarpanch Can Lose Her Job, Not His’, 6 June 2020.

interactions that constitute local politics. The 73rd amendment that mandated women's political representation has catalyzed deep resistance and magnified patriarchal control—empowering sarpanch-patis in *some* families. But it has also nurtured cooperation and support in other ways that actually reconfigure families,⁴ thus complicating the narrative.

More importantly, while patriarchal gender norms *within some households* constrain the emergence of effective female leadership, it is really the institutional design of local government that elevates barriers to women in politics, or enables the reproduction of existing barriers. Political institutions – from the structure of local elections, to the composition of committees to the very rules of deliberation – guarantee women's symbolic inclusion but also allow for substantive forms of structural inequality to proliferate. These inequalities affect women, but also elected officials with other characteristics, as they are not limited to intra-household dynamics. In that sense, the recurrent denunciation of sarpanch-patism by national elites obfuscates the multifaceted political negotiations taking place in gram panchayats to ensure that elected officials from all disadvantaged categories exercise the power they have legally acquired through elections.

This larger problem may be referred to as 'proxypolitics' – that is,

4. Mary John, 'Women in Power? Gender, Caste and the Politics of Local Urban Governance', *Economic & Political Weekly* 42(39), 2007, pp. 3986-3993. Rachel Brulé, *Women, Power, and Property: The Paradox of Gender Equality Laws in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2020; Simon Chauchard, *Why Representation Matters: The Meaning of Ethnic Quotas in Rural India*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

a perverse form of representative politics in which an elected official lacks either the will or the ability to perform her or his legally-required duties, leading another individual to perform them in that person's place.

In what follows, we thus detail how the sarpanch-pati narrative, while sometimes justified, ignores this larger frame of reference and as such, frequently overlooks how the dynamics of political institutions (in particular, politics *outside of the family*) prevent elected women from gaining influence, before offering suggestions for policy and public action.

As we raised at the onset, our goal is not to deny the existence of sarpanch-patism. Sarpanch patis do exist and frequently—though not systematically – do affect the ability of women to exercise power. In this way, popular discourse—though hyperbolic at times – is not without empirical grounds.

One illuminating example is that of Meena, a first-time sarpanch in Akkalkot taluka, Solapur district, Maharashtra, that one of us met.⁵ At 65 years old and with no formal education, Meena⁶ had never considered a political career until her husband, a member of the village

5. Prior to and during the development of our collaborative, joint project on sarpanch-pati-ism, Alyssa Heinze conducted independent, qualitative fieldwork on the subject between June 2018 and January 2020 in rural Maharashtra funded by a Fulbright grant, as well as other independent grants. The qualitative narratives cited here are a result of this fieldwork, and a separate paper (Alyssa René Heinze (2021) 'Beyond sarpanch pati: Institutional barriers to women sarpanchs' voice', *Working Paper*) discusses them in greater detail. This initial fieldwork, where Heinze received guidance from both Chauchard and Brulé, provided the foundation for the coauthors' joint, large-scale empirical investigation of the question of sarpanch-pati-ism.

6. All names have been changed to protect the identities of those interviewed. Interview by Alyssa Heinze on 12 January 2020 in Solapur district, Maharashtra.

council for the past 15 years, suggested that she contest the election. He had planned to run for the village council president seat, he explained, but it had come under reservation for women. Thus, as a workaround, he reasoned that it made sense to influence outcomes in the village council through advancing his wife's election.

Meena, in the final year of her 5-year tenure as council president, readily admitted that her husband 'looks after everything' relating to the council president role.⁷ Indeed, she explained, she was incapable of completing the administrative tasks required, by law, for the role of council president. This was not because of her lack of know-how or ambition – indeed, her experience managing her family's farm for decades had provided her entrepreneurial savviness, motivation, and independence. Instead, it was because she did not have sufficient networks in the village nor, shockingly, could she speak or write the local language.

Born on the Maharashtra border of Karnataka, Meena moved to Maharashtra for her marriage, but had not been taught the language of the state; in her day-to-day existence she spoke in her native language, Kannada. While her linguistic difficulties are rather idiosyncratic to this case, most women do face a social capital deficit, due to widespread social conventions which mandate women marry men from outside their natal village.

Even if stories like that of Meena are not uncommon, the presence of a sarpanch pati is not guaranteed when a given sarpanch seat is reserved for women. Indeed, there are many cases in which husbands or male family members do not interfere in the tasks of women sarpanches elected into reserved seats. The empirical evidence

7. 'Te sagle baghtaata' in Marathi.

we collected in over 360 Maharashtrian villages since 2020⁸ confirms both the existence of sarpanch-patis and the non-systematic nature of this phenomenon. In private interviews conducted with a mixed-gender team, 66% of the female sarpanches that our research team interviewed declared that they were the individual ‘making the most decisions related to the gram panchayat’ within their household (as a point of comparison, 87% of male sarpanches shared the same response).

Even if we take these self-reports with a grain of salt (a portion of these individuals may be exaggerating their role due to social desirability), it is in our view extremely unlikely that all respondents are falsely claiming independence. Besides, this pattern was later confirmed by gram sevaks (village secretaries) whom the research team interviewed. These local bureaucrats estimated that a similar proportion of elected officials may be proxies for other actors within their households: gram sevaks declared that the sarpanch in their village worked ‘completely independently’ from their relatives 62% of the time when the sarpanch was female, and 95% of the time when he was male. Yet, as we have already noted, the relative scarcity of sarpanch-patis does not prevent other forms of proxy politics.

Beyond the constraints women may face within the household, broad institutional constraints indeed limit the agency of elected female officials. In that sense, many of the obstacles that elected women face do not owe to regressive gender norms within the household but to design choices that allow social inequalities (gender, but also caste and class) to persist within the institution of local political councils

8. Data collection is ongoing and this is a partial sample.

(*gram panchayats*). Put simply, even if female sarpanches have relative agency within their own households, nothing guarantees that a local bureaucrat or an influential upa sarpanch (vice president), or even sometimes a ward panch, will allow elected women to exercise their power, since the current structure of institutions give these political officials, who are often elites benefiting from the *status quo*, significant leeway to do so.

The data from our survey confirm this intuition. As part of this study, we convened in each sampled village a group meeting between the three most influential members of the local government: the sarpanch, *upa sarpanch* (vice president), and *gram sevak* (village secretary, the highest-ranking village-level bureaucrat), as an approximation of regular, monthly meetings (*masik sabha*) over which the sarpanch should preside. We then attempted to measure the relative degree of voice and influence of each of these actors within the institution.

When we for instance asked the group for details about the sarpanch’s roles and responsibilities—a question we would expect sarpanches themselves to provide an answer to—female sarpanches were 14% less likely than male sarpanches to speak, even though their husbands were (by design) almost always absent from this gathering. Similarly, female sarpanches were significantly less likely to play a central role in a collective decision we asked each group to make about the village’s development priorities than their male counterparts, and more likely to be interrupted when they did.

Such gender gaps in levels of voice between elected officials within gram panchayats owe to substantial social inequalities between these officials and the other actors of the gram panchayat. While reservations provide

a mechanism for institutional inclusion, they do not automatically erase the disadvantages of those who benefit from them. Reservations bring people from marginalized gender, class, and caste backgrounds into institutions where these inequalities are often magnified. In that regard, sarpanches elected through reservations are abruptly thrown into power negotiations with other members that have more political experience, administrative skills, formal education, and social capital, among other advantages.

Women sarpanches elected through reservations, even without interference from their husbands, must surmount numerous hurdles to exercise their voice and political agency. Importantly, the relative inability of political institutions to flatten inequalities extends beyond gender to caste and class: other attributes of sarpanches can and do indeed compound or ameliorate gender gaps.

The qualitative research one of us (Heinze) conducted throughout our project⁹ further highlights these unequal institutional power dynamics, and provides intuition on the mechanisms allowing them to persist.

For example, during a gram panchayat meeting observed in November 2018, a village secretary seated at the front of the room, with a golden placard labeled ‘gram sevak’ in front of him, announced the meeting’s agenda and led the entirety of the meeting. Meanwhile, the sarpanch arrived late, and remained silent for the remaining 45 minutes of the meeting. When she arrived, she leaned backwards in her chair, with her arms crossed and eyes directed toward the ground. In another panchayat, a similar dynamic

9. A separate paper (Alyssa René Heinze, ‘Beyond sarpanch pati: Institutional barriers to women sarpanchs’ voice’, *Working Paper*) fully details these qualitative insights.

was present, except this time, the upa sarpanch led the masik sabha (monthly meeting where allocation of state funds and other crucial governance matters are decided) as if he were the sarpanch.¹⁰ Frequently benefiting from higher class status and more political experience than female sarpanches elected through reservations, actors such as the gram sevak and the upa sarpanch often challenge the political authority of the elected sarpanch.

These challenges are often enabled by a relative absence of procedural rules within the institution. Because official acts are relatively abstract, vague or unclear, it is for instance not always obvious to participants how deliberation over the design, funding, and implementation of policy initiatives is meant to occur, or in what order actors should intervene. This leaves room for dominant members of village councils and bureaucrats (village secretaries) to subvert the theoretically-central role of the sarpanch.

Other times, elites within these institutions find loopholes to openly subvert formal rules in order to exclude sarpanches elected through reservations. For example, one sarpanch described being systematically and intentionally excluded from her legal duties, to the point where her most basic legal prerogatives were lifted:¹¹ ‘I wish I could offer you tea, but I don’t have access to those funds,’ she excused herself when [Heinze] met her, before explaining that she had never seen the gram panchayat check book, despite its management being the joint duty of the sarpanch and gram sevak. In fact, the upa sarpanch, a powerful Maratha landholder who had 25 years of political experience, had

10. Masik sabha observed by Alyssa Heinze on 13 November 2019 in Pune district, Maharashtra.

11. Interview by Alyssa Heinze on 19 March 2019 in Pune district, Maharashtra.

colluded with the gram sevak throughout her four years in office, she explained, in order to control the sarpanch duties—including holding and managing the check book. Further, the sarpanch lamented, ‘on Independence Day it’s [the upa sarpanch] who hoists the village flag’ thus publicly claiming credit for village leadership.

Such attempts by institutional actors of the gram panchayat to confiscate the sarpanch’s power are not uncommon either: almost 25% of the female sarpanches we interviewed flat out admitted that they were *not* the ‘main decision-maker within the village council’. However, when subsequently asked who the main decision-maker was, only 12% of these female sarpanches later declared that their spouse was the main decision-maker; by contrast 33% blamed the gram sevak, and another 35% declared that another panchayat member had acquired undue influence and employed it to become the key decision-maker.

Even more shockingly, where female and lower castes sarpanches are elected indirectly,¹² institutional subversion is also common through imposed, informal ‘rotation’ systems. In such cases, members of the institution compel the elected sarpanch to resign prior to the end of their term, under the false pretense that other members need to be ‘given the chance’ to fill the role. For example, on 11 November 2019, during an interview with whom the panchayat samiti reported to be the female sarpanch of Jalwadi village, Heinze discovered that the woman she

12. Direct elections are when sarpanches are elected directly by citizens of the village. Direct elections occur when the sarpanch is first elected to a ward seat, and then the ward members collectively vote on who will be the sarpanch (within the realm of possibility afforded by the reservation status of the sarpanch seat). Maharashtra has toggled back and forth between direct and indirect elections for the sarpanch seat for the past several years.

was interviewing was, in fact, no longer the sarpanch of the village. ‘I was the sarpanch,’ she explained. ‘But I gave my resignation, and now Sujata Gole is the sarpanch,’ she continued. ‘Then, after one and a half years, Sujata will resign, and Priya Deshmukh will get a chance. The upa sarpanch decided it like this, so we all get an opportunity [to be sarpanch].’¹³

Heinze observed this phenomenon across numerous gram panchayats in rural Maharashtra where indirect elections took place. Indeed, when reservation for women was announced for a seat, village councils reached informal agreements in order to ‘fix’ the resignation of women appointed indirectly to the sarpanch seat after a given period of time, ‘giving a chance’ to all the women in the council to be the sarpanch.

The implications of such arrangements are that the sarpanches who are forced to share their tenure are unable to benefit from potential learning effects of being in office for extended periods of time, and thus face additional barriers to accumulating political agency. More often than not, it was powerful council stakeholders – the gram sevak or upa sarpanch – who were cited as enforcers of such arrangements. Forced resignations were not completely uncommon either: they occurred in approximately 40% of the 163 villages that we surveyed which had held indirect elections for the sarpanch position, and varied as a function of gender and caste. This meant, for instance, that almost none (fewer than 5%) of the upper caste men elected indirectly had to leave their seat mid-way, when over 55% of Dalit women were forced to do so.

If the problem of proxy politics extends beyond sarpanch-patism, how can the situation of female elected officials be

13. ‘Ashaa prakaare, pratyekaalaa sandhi milel’, in Marathi.

improved? While India is praised for its commitment to realize representative democracy, the current mechanism through which this outcome is to be achieved – reservations – is as impressive quantitatively as it is limited qualitatively: under the current system, many women are formally elected; few of them are however later provided with the requisite tools and broader infrastructure of allies to govern.

Change in favour of gender equal political power is thus only possible, we believe, if reservations allowing women to be included in these institutions are reinforced by measures to build *institutional support* for the political agency of women. Specifically, we argue that legislation is urgently required on three fronts: within the rules that structure local, democratic deliberation; within the bureaucracy that supports elected democratic officials; and within the state's explicit efforts to support officials upon their assumption of elected office. We explain each path to institutional reform.

First, our research uncovers significant gender bias in a core mechanism of democracy: oral deliberation amongst public servants – including elected officials and appointed bureaucrats. While our investigations focus on more frequent, decisive monthly meetings (*masik sabhas*), this reflects similar biases found in democratic fora open to all citizens: gram sabhas.¹⁴

While there may be others, our research identifies at least one path to remedying women's absence of voice: clarifying the rules of deliberation. Mandates on this front need not be heavy handed. Indeed, we find that a

simple move from the *status quo* of unstructured deliberation to a request that all members of the *masik sabha* voice their preferences during a collective deliberation increased sarpanches' influence on decision-making by at least 30% in our (ongoing) experimental work.

More careful specification of deliberative rules thus holds the potential to close a number of biases that the current framework of India's deliberative institutions enables, if not exacerbates. More generally speaking, beyond rules of deliberation, the challenges we listed above would require codes of conduct for all gram panchayat interactions that are both more precise and more cognizant of structural gender or caste inequalities, if these challenges are to be overcome. And, even more importantly, these codes would necessitate credible enforcement mechanisms, in order to ensure that they are not circumvented by those with political and social power. This is a productive area for much further research.

Second, while systematic interventions exist to increase gender equality in India's representative local democracy, little has so far been done to create a class of bureaucrats that would serve as proper allies of the newly elected sarpanches, whether they are female or lower caste.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that having a more diverse body of village secretaries may help solve some of the problems listed above. Female gram sevaks may, for instance, be better able to communicate and to be in touch with female sarpanches, as low levels of gender diversity within the bureaucracy may impede access for female elected public officials. Currently, a number of Indian states seek to address the dearth of female bureaucrats through implementing

gender quotas in the recruitment of gram sevaks and other local functionaries. This may constitute a promising avenue. Given women's lagging literacy (65.8% as compared to 82.4% for men nationally) and the stark gender gap in economic participation (32.6%), the second largest in the world according to the World Economic Forum (2021), a broader infrastructure for promoting women's professional advancement is required to ensure a pipeline for effective female bureaucrats as well as politicians over the long term.

Beyond identity, local bureaucrats will need to be better trained and incentivized to assist elected officials, if political reservations are to become truly transformational. This may require a complete refoundation of recruitment, training, and long-term mentorship strategies for bureaucrats to act as allies, particularly for elected politicians from traditionally-underrepresented groups.

Third and finally, recent reservations for women in panchayats do not erase the impact of women's long exclusion from elected representation. We know that the average length of time in politics for women is far shorter than for men. The Indian central government attempts to eliminate gender disadvantages in political experience through large-scale training programs for women, as do civil society organizations and state governments.¹⁵ Yet the success of traditional training programmes is limited at best, with many female representatives retaining little-to-none of the information imparted during what are typically infrequent, hands-off sessions.¹⁶ Here, we suggest

14. Paromita Sanyal and Vijayendra Rao, *Oral Democracy: Deliberation in Indian Village Assemblies*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

15. Sreeparna Chakrabarty, 'Training for Women to Break Free from Sarpanch Pati', *The New Indian Express*, 8 November 2015.

16. Female politician trainings observed and

considering the participatory feminist workshops embedded within enduring female peer support groups, such as those developed by organizations such as SEWA, The Hunger Project and Jagori. Indeed, building a broader empowerment infrastructure that is embedded in local networks for female friendship has a proven record of success in India.¹⁷ Preliminary field research that we have conducted jointly with Bhumi Purohit (another author in this volume) suggests that connecting first-time female elected officials with more experienced female politicians, and hence creating female solidarity networks, may yield promising results.

We have worked to identify the gender dynamics of political deliberation by a micro-level investigation of gram panchayats and the monthly meetings when the practicalities of local governance are decided, the *masik sabha*, in rural Maharashtra. This focus colours our recommendations for public policy and practice which also focus on policy opportunities to improve governance in local politics. Of course, support for women's representation in national elected government would also make a world of difference, as work by Clots-Figueras¹⁸ indicates. Overall, what we have learned from our research is that while sarpanch-patis do present significant challenges for women in office, to focus on these would be to ignore the more foundational problems implicit in the very structure of local political institutions, which aid and abet patriarchy in local *panchayats* as much as they do in the intimate landscape of the family.

interviews conducted by Alyssa Heinze in June-July, September 2018.

17. Erica Field, Seema Jayachandran, Rohini Pande and Natalia Rigol, 'Friendship at Work: Can Peer Effects Catalyze Female Entrepreneurship?' *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 8(2), 2016, pp. 125-53.

18. Irma Clots-Figueras, 'Women in Politics: Evidence from the Indian States', *Journal of Public Economics* 95(7-8), 2011.

Women's networks after elections

BHUMI PUROHIT

WHO you know does matter. And it especially matters when you are trying to get work done in a village. Once locally elected, the sarpanch must extensively coordinate between citizens, bureaucrats, politicians, and businesses. This fact, however, is often overlooked in our understanding of how local politicians get work done once they are elected, especially through institutions like gender quotas. Those elected through quotas may not have the same breadth and depth of networks in political and bureaucratic institutions as those elected without quotas, especially prior to running for elections. This is more likely to be true for women who run for office as women are less likely to participate in public spaces than men.

Since the advent of gender quotas in 1993, 33% to 50% of village council presidents (sarpanchs or pradhans) have been women. Once women enter politics, though, they receive limited help beyond the multi-day knowledge training on village council (gram panchayats) rules that everyone else also receives.¹ Thrown into the political arena, they must build networks and learn the intricacies of the political economy of rural governance. This involves a range of

tasks – learning the legalities of what they're allowed to sign off on, knowing which field and office-level bureaucrats oversee particular aspects of schemes, and knowing which businesses to approach for local tax collection, to name a few.

While those from political families can accrue knowledge and meet people more quickly than others, all women face an acute disadvantage. Social norms in most parts of India and indeed, many other parts of the world, prevent women from meeting one-on-one with those of the opposite sex without the presence of male guardians. When male guardians are present, women are ignored and treated as proxies rather than autonomous decision makers. As I highlight in this article, this dynamic is particularly detrimental to female sarpanchs, who have far fewer political networks than men.² As a result, they are significantly less likely

1. While trainings are available in most states, it is unclear if every state offers them to elected sarpanchs.

2. Scholars find that such gendered network gaps are present in other parts of the world such as Uganda (see Ana Garcia-Hernandez, Guy Grossman, and Kristin Michelitch, 'Gender, Networks, and Politician Performance: Evidence from 50 Ugandan

to receive help from bureaucrats in project implementation.

Who sarpanchs know – and how well they can use these relationships to understand state and national governments’ funding priorities – can influence how seriously they are taken by various actors within the rural political economy. In other words, *strong networks* can help sarpanchs understand government priorities for resource allocation and utilize these to their advantage.

At a micro level, differences in social networks may make it difficult for women to be taken seriously. As a young and motivated sarpanch in Haryana explained to me, she met the demands of her village by riding her trusty scooter to the block and district bureaucrat offices on a religious basis. These meetings – weekly ones to the block bureaucracy and monthly ones to the district bureaucracy – ensured government officials knew that she wasn’t a stereotypical ‘proxy’. Moreover, the conversations informed her of the ins and outs of informal government rules beyond the paperwork, such as which officials to approach for discretionary funds. Sure enough, when I asked the Block Development Officer in her area about the most effective sarpanch, he named her. As this example shows, two aspects of networks are important for sarpanchs: (i) knowing who is important in the governance ecosystem and frequently meeting with them, and (ii) using networks to obtain knowledge that is otherwise not publicly known.

At a macro level, these gendered differences in social networks may, at Subnational Governments with Women’s Reserved Seats’) and the Philippines (see Cesi Cruz, Julien Labonne and Pablo Querubin, ‘Politician Family Networks and Electoral Outcomes: Evidence from the Philippines’, *American Economic Review*, 2017).

best, lead women-led villages to receive funds slower than men-led villages. As many sarpanchs highlighted during interviews, delayed fund releases are a primary reason they approach the bureaucracy for help, which is typically in charge of signing off on fund transfers. It’s more likely that bureaucrats prioritize releases in constituencies where sarpanchs voice these concerns and are therefore able to directly address fund authorization problems.

If women do not have built in political capital from their networks – or the knowledge on who to approach to get such tasks quickly resolved – they may need to meet various bureaucrats and politicians many more times to get the same work done as men. At worst, differences in social networks may result in female sarpanchs systematically receiving fewer resources in areas where bureaucrats or politicians can exercise discretion (e.g., MLA LADS that are up to the discretion of MLAs or intra-village infrastructure funds in MNREGS which are up to Block Development Officers).

So how different are women and men’s networks? To find out, I worked with a team of surveyors to interview 1,051 sarpanchs in western and central Telangana in early 2020. Table 1 presents data on the strength of networks within the block bureaucracy, the district bureaucracy, and sarpanchs’ unofficial political party. While sarpanchs in most states,

including Telangana, do not officially run on a party ticket, they have to rely on the party and vice-versa to mobilize citizens and resources alike. Specifically, Table 1 shows how many individuals sarpanchs communicate with on a weekly basis at each of these institutions, either over the phone or in person. These numbers exclude the Block Development Officer, the District Collector, and the MLA – I present these data separately as the frequency of communication varies.

Overall, female sarpanchs have an average of 14.34 points of communication compared to men’s 16.78 points. While the difference is seemingly small, having even one fewer person to go to when problems arise can substantively influence everything from the kind of knowledge sarpanchs accrue to the time it takes to get work done in their villages, especially if that person is central to decision-making. The most notable network gaps are within the block bureaucracy and the party. Women have approximately 1.2 fewer points of connections than men in both areas. There are no substantive differences across gender in the district bureaucracy network. Both female and male sarpanchs speak to an average of 1.6 people in the district bureaucracy on a weekly basis (though the median for women is one person whereas for men it is two people).

Gendered differences in network quality also carry over to com-

Table 1 : Gendered Differences in Networks

Network Type	Gender	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
Sub-District Bureaucracy	Female	2.42	2.00	1.53	575
Sub-District Bureaucracy	Male	3.71	3.00	3.12	476
Political Party	Female	1.56	1.00	1.57	575
Political Party	Male	1.56	2.00	1.40	476
Total Network Quality	Female	10.36	5.00	12.54	575
Total Network Quality	Male	11.50	5.00	13.40	476
Total Network Quality	Female	14.34	8.00	14.04	575
Total Network Quality	Male	16.78	11.00	15.15	476

munication with three important individuals in particular – the Block Development Officer (BDO)³, the District Collector, and the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).

The BDO is the key point person for sarpanchs within the bureaucracy across India; she or he is broadly in charge of authorizing fund flows and managing rural development, and communication between the BDO and sarpanch is crucial to get work done.

In Telangana, an average of 24 sarpanchs work with one BDO to manage their village planning needs – a much smaller number compared to the average of 96 sarpanchs per BDO in the rest of the country. This smaller ratio presents sarpanchs with the possibility of more interactions with BDOs and yet, we see gendered differences. Whereas 87% of male sarpanchs report communicating with BDOs on a weekly basis, only 76% of women report doing the same. Women are much more likely to communicate with BDOs on a *monthly* basis instead (21% compared to 11% of men). While the figure seems high generally, communication refers to any kind of communication over the phone, over SMS (including in Whatsapp groups), or in person.

Whereas most sarpanchs communicate with BDOs on a weekly basis, communication with District Collectors and MLAs is typically on a monthly basis or even less frequent. Even then, gender discrepancies persist. Female sarpanchs are far less likely to talk to the District Collector (13% compared to 24%) or the MLA (52% compared to 63%) on a *monthly* basis than male sarpanchs.

One concern with these statistics is that they do not account for the

likelihood that the type of women who run and are subsequently elected for office are inherently different from men. I account for this possibility by measuring the effect of gender on networks while controlling for factors such as caste, education level, proxy status, dynastic status, and household income. Even with these controls, women have significantly fewer contacts in the bureaucracy and politics than men.

Why do these networks matter? Let's look at these dynamics from the perspective of a bureaucrat, namely the BDO. As important research from the Accountability Initiative and scholars such as Aaditya Dasgupta and Devesh Kapur have shown, block offices are vastly under-resourced. BDOs have far higher demands than they can meet with the staff and technology available, requiring them to exercise discretion in who they assist with the myriad of requests they receive, including from sarpanchs.

In my personal interviews, BDOs confirmed that networks weigh into their decision to determine which sarpanchs receive more help than others. As a young BDO quickly had to learn, 'What a BDO wants to do does not matter if the MLA can call the District Collector and tell them to task the BDO.' If a sarpanch is well connected to the BDO's superiors – especially the MLA or the District Collector – and can complain that the BDO is unhelpful, the BDO's reputational cost of ignoring a request from that sarpanch is high. The strategic thing to do, then, is to focus discretionary resources on sarpanchs who are well connected rather than ones who are not.

To systematically examine this dynamic, I ask sarpanchs in the aforementioned survey in Telangana: Thinking of the last few times you went

to the BDO for help with something, how often did they say they are unable to help? 8% of male sarpanchs reported they were denied help every time. For women, this number was almost three times as high – 22% of women reported that they were never helped.

These results hold when I control for demographic variables, proxy status, dynastic status, and party status. Even when controlling for these variables, female sarpanchs are still significantly and substantially less likely to receive help from BDOs, by almost eight percentage points.

Before I turn to alternative explanations for these gendered differences in aid from BDOs, it is important to highlight the significance of these differences. If sarpanchs' bureaucratic and political networks are important for BDOs – as I postulate they are – the effects could be multifold. For one, it could lead to a cyclical effect; if female sarpanchs anticipate that they won't receive help they may be less likely to approach the bureaucracy in the first place. If this is the case, only women who have networks may be able to obtain discretionary funds in their villages, but on average, women-led constituencies may receive fewer resources than men-led villages.

Additionally, in a 2007 paper, Lori Beaman and other economists found that voters perceive female sarpanchs to be worse leaders than male counterparts, even when women deliver services on-par with men. If women obtain fewer resources as leaders, voters may be less likely to re-elect these women into office, especially because they may attribute these issues to women as opposed to the bureaucracy.

But are women receiving less help from the bureaucracy because of

3. Telangana follows the Mandal Parishad system, and BDOs are known as Mandal Parishad Development Officers.

their networks, for other unrelated reasons? I further probe for two other possibilities that may explain the dynamic of female sarpanchs lesser help from bureaucrats than men. One, if women are new to politics, they may be going to BDOs with policy issues that can only be addressed by another

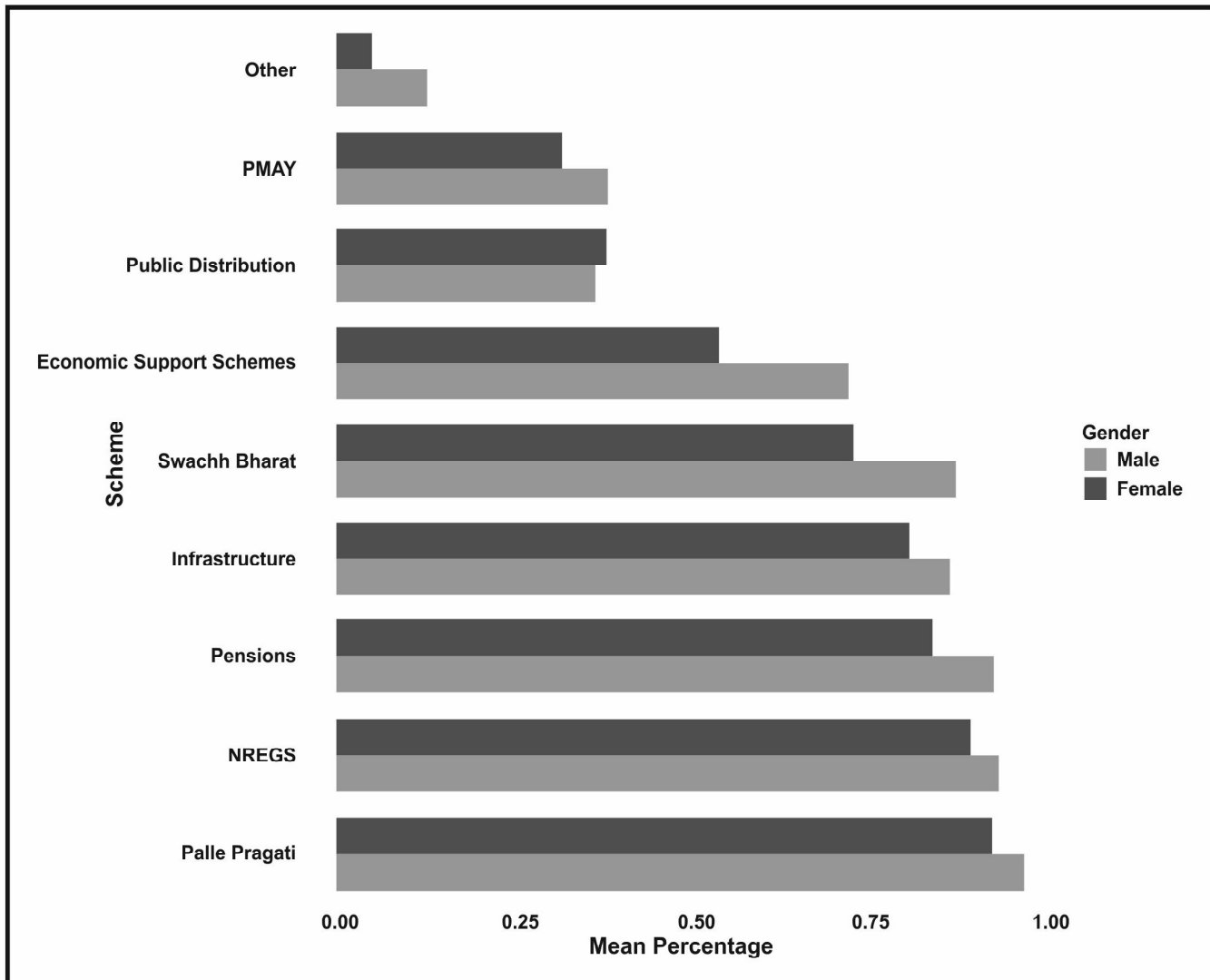
find that female sarpanchs approach the BDOs with the same requests as men as seen in Figure 1.

Female sarpanchs approach BDOs less frequently overall, but they are still most likely to approach them for help with Palle Pragati,⁴ followed by MGNREGA, pensions, and

discrepancy exists even though all sarpanchs are approaching BDOs with the same issues.

Another possibility is that female sarpanchs receive more help from female BDOs. We might expect this for two reasons. One, female sarpanchs might have an easier time

Figure 1 : Schemes for which Sarpanchs Request BDO's Help



bureaucrat. For instance, rather than going to a welfare officer for problems with a child nutrition scheme, women may be approaching the BDO. Another possibility is that women approach bureaucrats with more 'female' friendly schemes related to health, water, or sanitation. I account for both alternative explanations and

infrastructure problems. In other words, female sarpanchs approach BDOs less frequently than men regarding problems in their village and still get denied help at higher rates. This

4. Palle Pragati is a Telangana state scheme focused on overall rural development, including sanitation, health infrastructure, and power supply.

communicating with female BDOs given social norms are far less restrictive in same-sex communication. Two, female BDOs might be more sympathetic to the leadership challenges female sarpanchs face and therefore be more eager to help them.

I find that female BDOs are just as likely to refuse help to female

sarpanchs as male BDOs. While female BDOs are generally more willing to help all sarpanchs compared to male BDOs, they're no more likely to help women. This is reflective of the reality that BDOs face the same pressures from higher ups, regardless of their gender. Similarly, they face the same reputational cost for denying help to highly networked sarpanchs. We therefore see no differences in dynamics across gender of BDOs.

A look at women's election to the gram panchayat thus far has focused on the differential policies women can help promote. Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo's seminal 2004 paper, for instance, found that female sarpanchs focus resources on the needs of female citizens. With the exception of a handful of research⁵ however, many papers including the one by Chattopadhyay and Duflo do not mention the role of the bureaucracy in policy implementation – the main institution politicians must navigate to get policies implemented. While sarpanchs, regardless of gender, may have no trouble implementing policies that are heavily rule based (e.g., MNREGA), there may be differences in policies that are up to the discretion of various actors (e.g., MLALADS).

An extreme example of where networks may matter is best illustrated in Telangana. As of July 2021, District Collectors have suspended approximately 150 sarpanchs over a period of two years.⁶ under Section 37 of

5. See Rachel Brulé, *Women, Power, and Property: the Paradox of Gender Equality Laws in India*, or the paper by Farzana Afridi, Vegard Iversen, and M.R. Sharan. 'Women Political Leaders, Corruption and Learning: Evidence from a Large Public Program in India'.

6. The Hindu, 'Governor Urged to Intervene in Sarpanchs' Suspension', *The Hindu*, 21 July 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/fgg-flags-issue-of-sarpanchs-suspension-to-governor/article35448631.ece>

the Telangana Panchayat Act of 2018, whereby the bureaucracy is authorized to remove sarpanchs for various forms of misconduct, ranging from refusal to carry out government orders to misappropriation of funds.

While some suspensions are for legitimate reasons such as corruption, others are enforced by bureaucrats when locally elected leaders refuse to prioritize top-down policies of the state – whether they involve building electrical sub-stations⁷ or nursery programmes.⁸ Bureaucrats, of course, do not make these decisions in isolation. As the Forum of Good Governance has found, they are often influenced by local ministers or MLAs.⁹

At the end of the day, then, who sarpanchs know – and how well they can use these relationships to understand government priorities – matters. In other words, having strong networks can not only help sarpanchs avoid sanctions, but also obtain resources to get work done.

While I use evidence from sarpanchs to illustrate the nature of gendered networks in local politics, the problem may be larger. In fact, studies in other parts of the world illustrate that women are consistently excluded from the 'old boys club', making it more difficult for them to do the same level of work as men. For instance, research by Ana Garcia-Hernandez, Guy Grossman, and Kristin Mitchelitch shows that female district-level politicians in Uganda are more peripheral in legislative networks than men. Consequently, women are less likely to perform collaborative tasks

7. Ibid.

8. Telangana Today, 'Puvvada Directs Officials to Suspend GP Secretary for Negligence of Duties', *Telangana Today*, 16 June 2021. <https://telanganatoday.com/puvvada-directs-officials-to-suspend-gp-secretary-for-negligence-of-duties>

9. See footnote 6 for citation.

such as co-signing bills. As the researchers suggest however, these differences might not be reflective of women's capabilities, as female and male legislators perform equally well in individual activities that don't require networks.

Women may face similar challenges in Indian politics at state and national levels. Women already face a slew of problems getting elected as others in this issue highlight, but they are also less likely to be central to bureaucratic and political networks. While bureaucrats may not be able to explicitly refuse aid to female politicians at higher levels (higher level politicians can transfer or sanction these bureaucrats, after all), we may still see differences in how quickly bureaucrats respond to female politicians' needs.

While gender quotas have made extremely important strides for women in politics and society, further research is needed on the precise challenges to women's ability to govern at all levels of politics. If women have to face male dominated institutions such as bureaucracies and political parties, are they able to get the same work done as male politicians – and in the same amount of time?

Ultimately, a better understanding of the gendered political economy of the institutional framework that women must work with will allow us to find effective solutions to improve their efficacy as politicians. If the problem lies in women's networks, as I suggest, one such solution may be to train women on networking. Knowing whom to approach and how is not simple when millennia-old social norms guide gendered interactions. But the election of successful women around the world, and their effective ability to govern through strong networks, show us that overcoming these challenges is indeed possible.

When women's electoral representation matters

SOLEDAD ARTIZ PRILLAMAN

MORE than 1.3 million Indian women serve as elected representatives in government.¹ This is primarily driven by the Constitutionally mandated system of electoral reservation requiring at least one-third of local elected positions be reserved for women, with twenty of twenty-nine states having chosen to raise this to one-half of local elected positions. This represents the most extensive gender quota system in the world, and India joins more than 130 other countries that have institutionalized protections for women's political representation through some form of quota or reservation policy. These policies were motivated by the continued underrepresentation of women in

elected office, even when women had achieved parity of participation as citizens.

Today, women comprise less than 25% of legislators across the world. This severe under-representation of women is concerning in itself but also because it suggests that women's unique interests and distinct preferences may not receive fair representation in political bodies. Women's lack of presence in these institutions may lead to policies that fail to address women's needs and wants and may inhibit normative and social change. The institutionalization of quotas and reservations, therefore, seeks to rectify this under-representation of women in politics by increasing women's presence in political bodies – what political scientists often refer to as descriptive representation or the numerical representation of specific groups.

1. Rahul Bhatnagar, 'Take Five: "Elected Women Representatives Are Key Agents for Transformational Economic, Environmental and Social Change in India"', 2019. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/7/take-five-rahul-bhatnagar-india>

By increasing the presence of women, quotas and reservations aim to enable the greater representation of women's voices and demands in politics—what political scientists often refer to as substantive representation or the representation of a specific group's interests by political actors—as women are assumed better positioned to represent the interests of women. Even more, such policies have been lauded as having the potential to spill over into normative and social change through the empowerment of women and the demonstration of women's capacity as political leaders. We can, therefore, evaluate the efficacy of these policies, and particularly India's policy of reserving seats in local politics for women, in augmenting the physical representation of women in political bodies, in changing the nature of policymaking to align more evenly with women's demands, and in shifting broader attitudes and norms around women's political participation.

In the first domain, research has highlighted that once women command political office, they set in motion an acceleration effect that leads to even greater political representation. Evidence from municipal elections in Mumbai shows that after being elected under reservations, women often stay in political office even after the reservation has been removed.² Similar patterns attain for state legislative assembly members in India.³ More recent work suggests

2. Rikhil R. Bhavnani, 'Do Electoral Quotas Work After They Are Withdrawn? Evidence from a Natural Experiment in India', *American Political Science Review* 103(1), 2009, pp. 23-35.

3. Sonia Bhalotra, Irma Clots Figueras, and Lakshmi Iyer, 'Pathbreakers? Women's Electoral Success and Future Political Participation', *The Economic Journal* 128(613), 2018, pp. 1844-1878.

that there is even potential for women's upward electoral progression following their initial election through a reserved seat.⁴ There is additional evidence that women's electoral representation begets the political participation of female citizens, with several studies reporting increases to women's political participation following the election of a female leader in local government.⁵ This evidence aligns with findings from around the globe showing that quota and reservation policies largely succeed in accomplishing their principal goal of increasing women's descriptive representation in political institutions, and such results may even be suggestive of a change in the treatment of women as political leaders given the acceleration of women's electoral success even after the removal of quotas.

But does the electoral representation of women matter for politics, policy, and the lives of women? Evidence largely from local governments in India shows that policies shift closer to the preferences expressed by women, both with respect to 'gender' issues and more general service provision when women are elected as the chairperson of the local assembly. In areas more explicitly geared towards protections for women, gender reservations have been shown to increase women's property ownership and property rights in rural villages⁶

4. Tanushree Goyal, 'Local Female Representation as a Pathway to Power: A Natural Experiment in India', available at SSRN 3590118, 2020. Varun Karekurve-Ramachandra and Alexander Lee, 'Can Gender Quotas Improve Public Service Provision? Evidence from Indian Local Government', 2020.

5. Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India', *Econometrica* 72(5), 2004, pp. 1409-1443.

6. Rachel E. Brulé, 'Reform, Representation,

and increase the number of claims filed regarding gender-based violence.⁷ When looking at state legislative assemblies, female state legislators in India are shown to be more supportive of 'female-friendly' laws, including the Hindu Succession Act, which protects women's property rights.⁸

These findings from India align with global studies of the consequences of women's electoral representation, which show that greater institutionalized protections for women are likely only when women are represented in politics but may also require a critical mass of women to organize to demand such protections.⁹ While this suggests that women's electoral representation is a critical step in ensuring greater protections for women more broadly, it may not be sufficient if unmet by organized political action of female citizens.

Despite nearly three decades of reservations for women in local political office, everyday Indian women remain substantially less present in political institutions, particularly outside of electoral politics, than their male counterparts.¹⁰ The observed impacts of women's descriptive representation for their substantive representation in India may, therefore, represent only the

and Resistance: The Politics of Property Rights' Enforcement', *The Journal of Politics* 82(4), 2020, pp. 1390-1405.

7. Lakshmi Iyer et al., 'The Power of Political Voice: Women's Political Representation and Crime in India', *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4(4), 2012, pp. 165-93.

8. Irma Clots-Figueras, 'Women in Politics: Evidence from the Indian States', *Journal of Public Economics* 95(7-8), 2011, pp. 664-690.

9. Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights Around the World*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

10. Soledad Artiz Prillaman, 'Strength in Numbers: How Women's Groups Close India's Political Gender Gap', *American Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

beginning of the potential impacts of reservation policies. If women are able to mobilize in support of female elected representatives, we may see an even greater response to their demands. Recent upswings in women's turnout on election days bear the promise of such cascading effects. More research is needed to understand the conditions under which women elected representatives are best able to reflect the demands of women as a group and what role female citizens' political participation plays in this process.

Through the greater presence of women in deliberative and representative political bodies, reservations have additionally been shown to improve the provision of public goods, particularly public goods that disproportionately benefit women and children and have historically been under-provided, such as toilets, water, fuel, and healthcare. Women leaders are significantly more likely to invest in public goods both as a reflection of their preferences and in response to their socialized role as caretakers. Female village leaders in India improved the provision of water and roads in line with the preferences of the women in their communities¹¹, and female MLAs invested more in public health and education¹² (similar evidence has been found when looking across the globe).¹³

While women have been shown to want improved provision of public goods, broader societal expectations also enable and incentivize elected women representatives to deliver public goods. There is strategic value in leveraging women's political

participation for broader aims, potentially at the cost of women's agency and true substantive representation. In my experience working with women's groups across India, I have noted that many groups see their political responsibility as delivering development to their communities. While women, of course, desire improved development, there has also been an acknowledgment that such mobilization is less threatening to the men who hold power. On occasion, women have shared a desire to instead redress gender inequalities but recounted stories of pushback from elected officials and other political powerholders. For example, in one village, a group of women shared that they had approached the local government about a domestic violence case, stating that they would file a petition with the local courts. Instead, they were encouraged to handle the dispute informally, with the elected official mediating.

Since social norms privilege women's position as caretakers and since women have stronger preferences for public goods and weaker ties to the structures needed to deliver more particularistic goods, women's political participation may be condoned only if it is not seen as threatening to these interests of those who hold political power. Survey data with voters in Tunisia, however, shows that women are punished for investing in gender-based issues and rewarded substantially more for investing in public services more broadly.¹⁴ As a result, there is potential for women's electoral representation to become co-opted such that women are more responsive to the incentives and

demands of normative expectations as opposed to their independent desires.

Evidence of the impact of women's electoral representation on gender norms is, in fact, quite mixed. Studies of rural communities in India demonstrate that exposure to female elected officials can increase perceptions of women's capacity as political leaders, suggesting the potential for normative change.¹⁵ However, studies elsewhere have found the opposite.¹⁶ And alongside these potential attitudinal shifts, others have shown that female elected politicians in India face substantial backlash, particularly when they advocate for the interests of women.¹⁷

Despite all of the positive gains to women's descriptive and substantive representation in India, several questions remain as to whether the world's largest quota policy has led to meaningful normative and social change. First, this policy has failed to translate into entrenched female representation in other political areas, and women's political representation outside of reserved seats lags much of the rest of the world. In India, there are no political reservations or quotas for women outside of local branches of government. As a result, at present, only 14% of Members of Parliament and 7% of Members of Legislative Assemblies are women. Women's representation in the national Parliament has improved only marginally over the past six decades and remains markedly below that of Scheduled Castes¹⁸ despite

11. Chattopadhyay and Duflo, op. cit., 2004.

12. Clots-Figueras, op. cit., 2011.

13. Amanda Clayton and Pär Zetterberg, 'Quota Shocks: Electoral Gender Quotas and Government Spending Priorities Worldwide', *The Journal of Politics* 80(3), 2018, pp. 916-932.

14. Alexandra Domike Blackman and Marlette Jackson, 'Gender Stereotypes, Political Leadership, and Voting Behaviour in Tunisia', *Political Behavior*, 2019, pp. 1-30.

15. Lori Beaman, et al., 'Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?' *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124(4), 2009, pp. 1497-1540.

16. Amanda Clayton, 'Electoral Gender Quotas and Attitudes Toward Traditional Leaders: A Policy Experiment in Lesotho', *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33(4), 2014, pp. 1007-1026.

17. Brulé, op. cit., 2020.

18. Scheduled Caste is an official designation

occupying a greater population share. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, India ranks 148 out of 192 countries in terms of women's representation in parliaments.

Second, more than 60% of Indian residents in 2014 reported the belief that men make better political leaders than women.¹⁹ This suggests a series of open questions on how to achieve political gender equality, the answers to which will help us understand whether the system of electoral reservations for women in India has succeeded in long-term political change and how women's true substantive representation can be achieved.

When will women have proportionate levels of electoral representation absent institutional protections? The biggest challenge for women's sustained political inclusion is in electorally entrenching women's political power. In some regards, we would expect such electoral entrenchment to come easier in the Indian context, given the Constitutional requirement of reservations. The evidence referenced above suggests that this institution has enabled women's sustained political participation *even with low levels of political participation by women more broadly*.²⁰ However, women's representation in electoral institutions without reservations remains mark-

in India that identifies a group of castes that have been historically marginalized in social, economic, and political institutions.

19. R. Inglehart, C. Haerper, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen, et al. (eds.). 2014. World Values Survey: Round Six—Country-Pooled Datafile Version. <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>. JD Systems Institute, Madrid.

20. Outside of election days, women participate in politics at roughly one-third the rate of men.

edly low and, despite the greater likelihood of reelection post-reservation, my own analysis of data from several states suggests that fewer than 10% of unreserved seats in local governments are won by women. The inability of women to garner political presence outside of those positions explicitly reserved for them demonstrates the systemic challenges to the entrenchment of women's political position.

Such political entrenchment requires women's political inclusion in all institutions of political decision-making and authority. Women remain relatively absent in both party leadership and party machinery in India.²¹ They comprise less than one-third of IAS officers and are generally under-represented in authority positions in the bureaucracy.²² And, as noted previously, they remain significantly under-represented in both state legislatures and national Parliament. Reservations, therefore, have not led to a widespread cascade of women in all political spaces. Understanding and addressing the constraints to women in these different domains poses a first challenge to rectifying their under-representation. Further, much more evidence is needed to understand how these systems and how women's representation in each of these systems interact to either hinder or advance women's substantive representation.

For example, does increased representation of women in bureaucratic positions facilitate women politicians' performance and ability to execute on their and their group's interest? Additionally, in the most recent Uttar

21. Saad Gulzar, et al., 'Who Becomes a Party Worker?' *Working paper* 2020; Goyal, op. cit., 2020.

22. Bhumi Purohit, 'Bureaucratic Resistance Against Female Politicians: Evidence from Telangana, India.' *Working paper*.

Pradesh state elections, the Congress party pledged to voluntarily reserve 40% of tickets for women. Will such behaviour by parties enable greater electoral representation of women and even change normative beliefs?

Second, when will ingrained norms of women's lesser capacity in politics be overturned, and when will women be seen as equally competent political leaders as their male counterparts? Alongside persistent beliefs of women's lesser ability as political leaders lie concerns with the ability of the institution of reservations to ensure that the most qualified women end up as political representatives. Explicit concerns about the quality of women elected representatives have led several states, including Haryana and Rajasthan, to enact a minimum education requirement for political candidacy. While such policies may improve the quality of elected officials if education is a good proxy for quality, they also pose the potential to perpetuate politics as an elite institution and may disproportionately limit women's candidacy given historical gender inequalities in educational attainment. Further research is needed to understand whether amendments to quota and reservation policies help or hurt women's substantive representation in electoral politics.

Such policies may additionally allow us to understand whether gender-biased attitudes towards political leadership are rooted in long-standing inequalities in other domains, such as access to education, or whether they are rooted in more deep-seated psychological beliefs and broader power structures tying women to the household. If the former, then addressing gender inequalities outside of the realm of politics is likely to have important impacts on women's ability

to navigate political systems, and, in the interim, policies can be designed to remedy these inequalities for particular women. If the latter, greater thought about how to redress the entire system of gender inequality under patriarchal norms and institutions will be critical to fostering true normative change.

In my own research, I have observed that the patriarchal structures that tie women to their households also shape women's political lives. For many women, the household is the centre of their political network and the core of their political decision-making. So long as women's political lives are rooted in their household—an institution dominated by men under patriarchy—their distinct interests are likely to play second fiddle. Change, both with respect to women's political representation and in perceptions of their capacity, occurs instead when women band together and demonstrate the power of their voice. These patterns were evident through a study of women's Self-Help Groups in Madhya Pradesh: group meetings led to solidarity, which in turn led to collective mobilization and, ultimately, the greater representation of women's demands.

Finally, under what conditions are women elected representatives able to attain political influence and act as agents of their and their female constituent's interests? Many have questioned whether quotas and reservations have actually enabled women's political leadership, instead suggesting that male political elites often capture these reserved seats through proxy-ism.²³ If seats intended for female elected officials are co-

23. Radu Ban and Vijayendra Rao, 'Tokenism or Agency? The Impact of Women's Reservations on Village Democracies in South India', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 56(3), 2008, pp. 501-530.

opted by men, it is unlikely that descriptive representation will beget any meaningful representation of women's interests. The existence of proxy-ism is well documented in journalistic accounts of local politics in India, but we lack systematic evidence of the existence and scale of this practice. Documenting both the prevalence of women's co-optation from male family members and male-dominated partisan networks more broadly and the mechanisms to ensure women's agency will be of critical importance in understanding the pathways to women's substantive representation.

Despite its best intentions, democracy often elevates some voices above others. The systematic under-representation of women's voices can be seen throughout history and persists worldwide. Social and structural forces have united to generate a political system where women's limited electoral representation is but one outcome. In seeking to understand the under-representation of women in politics and the pathways to the true representation of women's interests and demands, a deeper understanding of the broader social and political system is necessary. Structural change is most likely when women's inclusion is ensured in all institutions and at all levels. While policies in one domain have shown great potential for forward movement, much more is possible if the issue of political gender equality and empowerment is seen as a multi-dimensional problem. Ensuring women's engagement and representation in all political institutions—electoral institutions, the bureaucracy, party structures, and as citizens—and creating incentives for all political actors to value women's voices bears the greatest promise at true social change.

From a gungi gudiya to an autocrat

SONAKSHI SHARMA

THE last year saw the release of six mainstream Bollywood films and web series, portraying female politicians either as protagonists or in key roles, these include *Madam Chief Minister*, *Thalaivi*, *Bellbottom*, *Maharani*, *Tandav* and *Family Man*. All of them were widely popular for having either a large viewership or critical acclaim or just for the controversies that surrounded their release.

This sudden rise in media showcasing female politicians follows an older trend of Indian cinema's engagement with the subject, dating back to when it was most uncommon for films to have female protagonists, films centred around the female politicians defied the norms and allowed female actors to take centre stage. These include *Aandhi* (1975), *Satta* (2002), *Gulaal* (2009), *Gulab Gang* (2014), *Revolver Rani* (2014) *Indu Sarkar* (2017). What are some of the popular imaginations of the female politician? What do these portrayals tend to miss? How do these portrayals shape, reaffirm or challenge the perceptions of women political leaders?

Today, one not only sees these political women in cinema but cinematic women in politics, the likes of which include Jayalalithaa, Smriti

Irani, Hema Malini, Jaya Bacchan, Moon Moon Sen, Nusrat Jahan, Kiron Kher, Jaya Prada, Urmila Matondkar. Cinema has become a launchpad for film stars to kickstart their political careers. While scholars have investigated how cinema became a tool through which male actors turned politicians (MGR, N.T. Rama Rao) projected images of themselves being generous, moral, brave and virile, to attract voters,¹ there is limited enquiry into the impact of cinema in furthering female politicians' careers. In fact, it has been claimed Jayalalithaa tried to actively erase her onscreen image of the seductive female lead, who wore revealing clothes by emphasizing her Convent school education and Brahmin identity, in order to appeal to voters who were relatively conservative.²

There is also an interesting contrast, that while male actors turned politicians have encashed on the

1. Sara Dickey, 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52(2), 1993, pp. 340-372.

2. Mukulika Banerjee. 'Populist Leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata and Jayalalithaa Compared', in Rob Jenkins (ed.), *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics Across Indian States*. Oxford University Press, 2004, p 290; pp. 285-308.

production of a larger than life persona generated on screen, female actors have leveraged their images as middle class housewives, emphasizing domesticity as non-threatening, empathetic and homely characters. Most prominently perhaps, is Smriti Irani, who before joining politics was popularly known as the lead in iconic television series *Kyuki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu thi*, which revolved around the story of an ideal daughter-in-law and ran for eight years. Similarly, Jaya Bachchan and Hema Malini joined politics when they began playing doting mothers and wives on screen in films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* and *Baghban*. Like onscreen personas have helped shape the political lives of these women, their real lives have also inspired the characteristics of the female politician in reel life.

Despite the increasing representation of women political leaders in popular imagination today, it seems these portrayals are wrecked with Bollywood cliches and caricatures, we see repetitive tropes in the narratives and stereotypical qualities in the female characters. In fact, four common archetypes of the female politician seem to be prominent onscreen, ‘the woman who is catapulted into politics’, ‘the gungi gudiya who begins to speak’, ‘the autocrat’ and ‘the mother’. These traits cannot simply be dismissed as idiosyncrasies of characters, created to fascinate the audience, but are intentional choices that convey, as well as shape the imagination of women politicians in popular culture.

To draw parallels with reality, Mukulika Banerjee has argued that the personality traits of female political leaders aren’t simply to be dismissed as individual quirks but serve to capture the imagination of the masses.³ They

3. Ibid.

have especially been effective where parties lack a clear ideology and a grassroots cadre, and instead rely on personality driven politics to mobilize voters. Similarly in the reel life of these women, even the most insipid forms of speech, their smallest of gestures, the most banal form of representations are ways through which these leaders (and creators) craftily engage in self making on the screen, utilizing and fortressing pre-existing ways of knowing the female politician.

In as much as these portrayals tell us about the imagination of female political leaders, there is a lot that they don’t tell. We rarely see women who enter politics without the help of others around them, like those who rise from the grassroots and make their own way through the party. There is also a limited imagination in the type of office these leaders occupy, all of these portrayals (except for panchayat) show women occupying the highest political office at the state or centre. There are no portrayals of female ward members, MLAs, spokespersons, party cadre. Would such representations sustain popular interest? Most importantly, what tends to be missed in these imaginations is the intersectionality of caste, class, religion and region with gender, since gender identity does not simply work in isolation from these other axis’ around which the character is often built.

In Aandhi, Raajneeti, Satta, Tandav and Panchayat there is no engagement with intersectionality, these depictions showcase the impact of gender and sometimes (very fleetingly) class, on their political lives. Madam Chief Minister uses caste as a gimmick to create Tara’s character, only Maharani does justice to exploring intersectionality and provides depth in the female politician’s character. Nevertheless, there is still value in

critically analysing what we do see in these circulating images of female politicians that dominate popular imagination today.

The disinterested female character, who is catapulted into politics to fill in for the disappearance of the husband, is a hackneyed repetitive trope in Indian cinema. In Raajneeti, the film ends with the widow of the male (lead) politician, Indu, being forced to contest elections after he is assassinated. Similarly, in Satta Anuradha, who has a great ‘indifference’ towards politics is suddenly forced to run for office on behalf of her politician husband, who has been jailed. In Maharani, Rani, the protagonist is seen living a mundane life in rural Bihar, cooking using a *chula*, washing utensils and milking the cows. After her husband is gravely injured in an assassination attempt and hospitalized, he shocks everyone by naming Rani as the next CM of Bihar.

The sharp transition of Rani from a dutiful housewife to the CM is marked by her being caught unaware, receiving garlands from party workers, while she holds a tray full of teacups, and begins to cry from shock! It is important to ask, why does this theme of ‘being shoved into politics’ continue to dominate the portrayals of female politicians? In real life, so many examples of female political leaders, who have paved their own path into politics exist today, so many have worked at the grassroots as party cadre and risen through the ranks, however, there seems to be no representation of female politicians in this way.

While these women are pushed into political office by the sudden demise/disappearance of their husbands, what follows is an interesting transition from being the ‘gungi gudiya’ (dumb doll) to indomitable leaders. A scene from

Maharani best captures this: we see the Speaker of Parliament getting ready for Rani's swearing in ceremony and speaking to his wife. His wife starts, 'Wow! The whole party was dumbfounded as Rani stole the chief ministership from under her veil', her husband responds, 'Rani is simply a puppet, the govt will be run by Bhima and Mishra, Rani Bharti is a gungi gudiya who will just put a rubber stamp on the files approved by them.' To which the wife quips, 'remember who else was considered a dub doll in politics?' (insinuating Indira Gandhi who was called the gungi gudiya of politics in her initial days).

And sure enough, by the end of the episode, Rani delivers a fiery speech in Parliament, justifying her suitability for the position. As another few episodes pass, the Speaker, while watching Rani take independent and strong stands in her role as the CM, wryly smiles to say, '*Gungi gudiyan bolne lagi hai*' (the dumb doll has started speaking).

Once in political office, we see these women transform in three different ways, depending on the kinds of power they possess and their personalities. First, where these women emerge all powerful and fuse into their parties; they command power even without being in office. This is visible in Thalaivi and Madam Chief Minister, as we see these women politicians transitioning from being proteges to becoming the face of the party. The second type of transition is where these women possess a temporary form of power, as long as they are in political office. In Satta, Tandav and Maharani these female characters emerge powerful and assertive but this is only by the virtue of the seat they occupy. Even then they have to continue to create a space for themselves as they often fight against their own party members to hold onto their positions.

Last, and perhaps most rarely represented form of transition is a third kind, a tentative type, where despite holding a post, the female protagonist is stooled in hesitation to adopt her post and leveraging her position to assert herself. This last kind is a much more nuanced understanding of gender and political office and warrants a deeper engagement.

In Panchayat, Manju Devi is the Pradhan of the village, simply because the seat is reserved for women and she has contested the elections as a proxy for her husband. So while on paper Manju is the elected representative, her husband performs all her duties and acts like the Pradhan in office. In the very last episode, however, Manju is encouraged by the new panchayat secretary to take her role more seriously. Starting with the small yet powerful act of hoisting the flag on the occasion of Republic day, which while rightfully her honour, has been done by her husband, for many years previously. She declares to her husband, that this year, she will hoist the flag. In her minor confrontation with her husband about this, we catch the first glimpse of Manju being strong willed and moving slightly towards embracing her role as the pradhan.

Next, we see her spending many hours memorizing the national anthem, with the help of the secretary. Even till the very last minute on that day, no one is sure if Manju will show up, while her husband readies to hoist the flag. In the meantime, the ceremony catches the attention of a stern female District Magistrate (DM), who at the sight of this, questions how Manju's husband can occupy her position, by creating an imaginary post of the Pradhan Pati? At this very moment, Manju arrives at the venue with five other women (who are the 'real' ward members). What follows is Manju pretending that she

always hoists the flag. A nervous Manju unfolds the flag and begins singing and the DM who sees through this charade, still encourages her when she finishes. Suddenly, Manju reassures the DM that from now on, she will try her best to execute her duties despite being semi-literate.

This last scene leaves the viewer confused, with these few moments of sincerity from Manju's side, but also keeps one wondering if she is just putting on a show for the DM and whether we'll actually see her occupy the post in the next season. It is this back and forth, the will she, won't she assert herself more, and fully adopt her role to come out of the shadows a new version of herself? Which leaves the viewer disconcerted, wondering whether Manju's story is one of celebration or of disappointment? Although Panchayat keeps the viewers guessing, it is this very negotiation, Manju's (slow) steps that are sometimes firm, sometimes feeble, which feels like a more authentic representation of reality than the overnight transformations of women when they come to occupy political office, from homely characters to indomitable leaders overnight and in some cases even autocrats!

Whether it is Aandhi, Satta, Family Man or Tandav, the female politician in office has been shown as an authoritarian figure. In Family Man, PM Basu, does not step down from her resolve of capturing the President of the Tamil government in exile, despite being warned that this would lead to a lot of unrest in the country. She again ignores the advice of her cabinet ministers when she insists on carrying on with diplomatic talks in a city, where she would be a sitting duck of an assassination plot that has been hatched against her. Throughout the series, we see her giving orders, often making decisions either

without taking those around her into counsel or by counteracting their advice. Her character is direct, strict and seems to strike some fear in those around her. She is shown to be more dictatorial than deliberative.

Similarly, in *Tandav*, the female PM, Anuradha makes decisions almost unilaterally, only trusting her secretary to know what she is thinking. In the first Cabinet meeting she convenes as the newly elected PM, she declares, '*mein portfolio batana chahati hoon*' (I am here to tell you the portfolios for each position) to which the senior most party leader rhetorically asks, '*Batana? Ya discuss karna?*' (are you here to tell us the portfolios or discuss), she reasserts emphatically 'batana!' (tell).

However, while these portrayals showcase such traits of women occupying office, one is left being apologists for their behaviour, justifying 'she needs to act this way to survive the male dominated set up of politics'. These representations show that in order for women to thrive in the androgenic space of politics, they must project 'hypermasculine traits', they cannot afford to delegate power, or be more consultative, but need to command respect by cultivating intimidating personas of disciplinarians and often even act impervious!

This set-up then merely reaffirms what feminist study scholars have already propounded by studying political leaders in real life, that the conception of an ideal leader privileges 'hegemonic masculine traits, such as aggression, assertiveness, rationality, and ambition.'⁴ Whereas, traits labelled as 'feminine', such as kindness, nurturing, emotionality, and warmth tend to be of less value. Research shows that women political

leaders then carefully negotiate between the two and project an image of themselves which is a mix between of these types of qualities.⁵ Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the popular imaginations of women politicians in media, that while showcasing the authoritarian leader, simultaneously visualize them as mothers.

'Par mera dil toh ek maa ka dil hai!' (But I possess the heart of a mother!) proclaims a teary eyed Basu, as she recounts her act of benevolence (signing off on a relief package for a flood hit state) for the people who had protested against her while she was campaigning there. This is the first time we see her animated with emotion, a break from her relatively composed and stern image. She continues, '*Zindagi ho ya raajneeti, jab bachon ko yeh lagna lagge, ki maa ki mamta unconditional hai, toh bacche sar parchad jaate hai*' (In life or in politics, when children begin to think that a mother's love is unconditional, they begin taking you for granted). The use of these metaphors highlight Basu's own understanding of the role as the PM, as a 'mother' to the people, who isn't afraid of showing some tough love.

Similarly, in some other depictions, the relationship between the female politician and her mothering role is conveyed more tacitly. In *Raajneeti*, when Indu becomes the CM, she almost simultaneously declares that she is soon to be a mother, as if the other face of being a woman politician is being a mother. In *Indu Sarkar*, the female politician is introduced to the audience several times as 'mummy' rather than the PM, through the mentions of her son, who is also a politician. In *Tandav* too, Anuradha's visualization as a mother is too important to her role as the politician, her whole ploy and sinister schemes to gain power, she justifies are to secure a position for her son.

More conspicuously, in the biopic based on Jayalalithaa, the film ends with the dialogue '*Agar mujhe maa samjhogey toh mere dil mein jagah milegi, aur agar mujhe aurat samjhogay toh....*' (if you think of me as a mother then I will have space in my heart for you, and if you think of me as a woman...) and Jaya looks threateningly at the party members. While in real life, Jayalalithaa's adoption of the role of the mother was evidently clear in the way she was addressed popularly, as *Amma* (mother), the fact that the makers chose to foreground this, again depicts the importance of the self-fashioning of the female politician as a mother, which seems to be recurring and paramount theme in both reel and real life of these women.

These portrayals of female politicians seem to emerge from familiar understandings and are authentic of what the public has seen in everyday life. Then the question arises, why and how do female politicians in real life project themselves as the mother/protector of the electorate? The example of Jayalalithaa has been studied by scholars and is the perfect case in point. Her self-expression as 'a mother'⁶ to the people is best explained by the kind of politics her party practiced, that of 'paternalist' or 'protectionist' populism. Narendra Subramaniam has argued that in this type of populism, the leaders project that they protect the community, especially the most disadvantaged by distributing benefits, such as 'freebees'.⁷

5. This is explored in Chaudhury, 2021, *ibid*.

6. Similar kin terms that showcase a relationship of paternalism have been adopted by other female politicians such as Mamata Banerjee, known as 'Didi' (elder sister), Mayawati as 'behenji' (elder sister) and Mehbooba Mufti is called 'bhaaji' (a Kashmiri term for elder sister).

7. Narendra Subramaniam. *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization, Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

4. Proma Ray Chaudhury, 'The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India', *Politics & Gender*, 2021, p 2; pp. 1-36.

This is particularly visible in the distribution of free lunches for public school children and ‘Amma’s canteens’ where food is served at a highly subsidized price by Jayalithaa’s party. Moreover, the distribution of these benefits are accredited to the ‘benevolence’ of the leader and the beneficiaries do not perceive them as entitlements. This ‘encourages supporters to assume an attitude of reverence and gratitude towards the leader’.⁸ For the female politician then, the carefully constructed image of her as a mother/protector is central for her to carry out the politics of paternal populism. Perhaps then while in real life the female political leaders cultivate a persona of themselves as the ‘mother’, this very commonly accepted and shared understanding of the female politician is used by filmmakers, and the trope of the mother gives birth to the female politician in reel life.

The power of popular imagination is yet to challenge and radically reimagine the female politician not as ‘being shoved into politics’, ‘the gungi gudiya who begins to speak’, ‘an autocrat’ or ‘a mother’. In this way, these portrayals make use of familiar paradigms about how these women gain and remain in power in order to create their characters on screen. At the same time, they assign agency to these female political leaders by exploring how they position themselves in order to leverage dominant discourses of leadership in gendered ways, by self-fashioning themselves as autocrats and mothers. Once these characters are established, these visualizations provide more nuance to unveil how they utilize the power of their position to challenge misogyny both at the personal and professional front, exploring if this change is permanent, temporary or sometimes just tentative.

8. Ibid., p 75.

The feminization of electoral politics

TARA KRISHNASWAMY

THIS question of reasonable women's representation in national and state legislatures is one that has plagued India for long. Even the Constituent Assembly that framed the Constitution, debated setting aside seats exclusively for women. The handful of female framers declined it, relying on the constitutional compact of equality of opportunity in political representation.

Seven and a half decades later, that having been proved illusory with the paltry presence of women in the legislatures, the question stays extant. Parties which serve as portals to legislatures are disproportionately filled with men in their ranks, leadership and election committees, elbowing out women from political socialization, growth and most crucially, electoral opportunities. Forget candidacy, the events of the Great Indian Election Tamasha, of breathtaking size, scale, and grandeur, are a testosterone rave.

Perhaps this is why male and female politicians across the spectrum support reservations as the only way forward to ensure women's representation. They are also influenced by the precedents of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, passed in 1991/92, due to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, that imbued rural and urban governments with at least one-third female representation. It also had an ancillary benefit; a steady pipeline of women who could conquer elections, tame administration, and rise from the grassroots.

Data from 1999 shows that the women winning local government elections have not been fielded in state and national ballots. Despite over 3 million (30 lakhs) women elected in the third tier over the last two decades, barely 8-10% female candidates have been fielded in the General Elections by political parties.

Electoral politics is sandwiched between an entry gate, the political party, and an exit gate, the ballot. The area in-between is almost exclusively an old boys club, neither bound by law nor self-regulation to be gender inclusive. Women in parties, on the other hand, wait in that wasteland that is an ever-winding queue for electoral nominations, leading mostly to a shut ticket-window. It is this evidence that triggered the citizens collective, *Shakti*, to look beyond a silver bullet approach of reservation of constituencies for women and discern that gender-representative ballots are essential to gender-balanced legislatures.

Shakti – Political Power to Women – or simply *Political Shakti*, was born in the Fall of 2018. Conceived as an electoral machine, it is a pan-India, non-partisan collective of volunteers with the express purpose of increasing women's representation in the state Legislative Assemblies, and also the Parliament. It took on the onus of championing women's political power via grassroots campaigns, with a multidimensional and intersectional

view of stakeholders in the electoral process. Shakti recognized that voters, political parties and their leadership, media, female candidates and their campaigns, electoral institutions like the Election Commission, Members of Parliament, and the government are all players who can legitimately impact women's representation, and therefore are objects of campaigns.

An inference from grassroots campaigns is that not laws nor self-regulations, nor the disciplining by electoral ombudsmen, nor internal power shifts, but instead, the female voter has been the most effective pressure valve on political parties. This essay delineates Shakti's campaigns, the politicization of the women voter, and its impact on 'gendering' the ballot.

The maiden grassroots campaign of Shakti that created a network and volunteer base nationally was a calendar-driven event. The Winter session of the 16th Lok Sabha was the last chance before the 2019 General Elections to champion the cause of women's representation to one of its key stakeholders: Members of Parliament. Volunteers designed the 'Call your MP' national campaign for 27 December 2018. Over 500 female and male volunteers from 21 states called Members of the Lower House of Parliament in a span of two and a half hours, demanding the tabling of the Women's Reservation Bill.

The languishing, decade-old Women's Reservation Bill may have lapsed, and a new one required to be drafted, but as a citizens collective, Shakti's primary leverage is one of raising popular demands, not drafting policy. It would be up to the people's representatives, the MPs, to assign a committee to draft a bill as required and negotiate a consensus, as a milestone towards the demand. That would indeed have been an ideal outcome. However,

while the bill was not tabled in that session, it was a landmark campaign in many ways. It was an adrenalin rush for volunteers who had never before spoken to an MP. It was a first for MPs too, who received synchronized calls from citizens with a common demand. And an unusual occurrence during Zero Hour the next day, when MPs, with no prior arrangement across parties, spontaneously echoed a just-surfaced public demand from Shakti's calls. Members who demanded the bill were from the Congress, CPI (M), AAP, TRS, BJD and also CPI, DMK, AIADMK, SP, TDP, JD(U) among others. In fact, ruling BJP MP Vinay Sahasrabudhe went on record to support the campaign and the bill in media.

Shakti campaigners learned some salient lessons. One, that individual Parliamentarians do not have the autonomy to pressure ruling government into action, even with a spontaneous issue-based coalition. Two, that Shakti cannot be a one-trick pony, carping on the bill alone. Women's representation finds itself bottlenecked on the trickle of women entering the electoral cycle. Campaigners need to mount pressure on political parties to increase the inflow, i.e. ensure that more female candidates are nominated to the ballot. 'Call Your MP' was also Shakti's first India-wide recruitment of volunteers who were raring to go.

Thereafter commenced a series of campaigns to increase female candidates fielded by parties for the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. Political parties had been fielding an average of 8-10% women in elections, a minuscule number.

Shakti petitioned parties with this demand, and hosted ground events in the 2019 election melas, but the 2020 Bihar elections posed a challenge.

Covid lockdowns forced campaigns to be creative without crowds and protests. The collective brainstormed and initiated the Selfless Selfie campaign: the 'selfie', a quint essentially selfish instrument would be repurposed for a collective political demand.

In 2020, Bihar had over 4000 female Mukhiyas, or elected chiefs of the Panchayats (rural governments). If a demand for increasing female candidacies could be augmented by them, it would be significant to political parties. The reasoning was that each Mukhiya was the voice of at least 1500 voters.

Volunteers and Shakti's partner groups, about 80 NGOs who joined hands for this demand, approached the Mukhiyas. They were asked to hold up a placard saying, 'I demand 50% female candidates on the ballot!', click a selfie and post it on the Shakti group. Once again, this was a first for the Mukhiyas and it captured their imagination. Hundreds of selfies poured in, some even from male Mukhiyas! This viral campaign made the pages of the print media, and the series culminated with the ruling JD(U) announcing 19% female candidates. This was unprecedented in the state. Other parties too fielded more women than before, the average going up from 8% to 10%.

Similar experiences were also encountered during Shakti's Lok Sabha 2019 campaigns. Both the ruling AITC of Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, and the BJD of Naveen Patnaik in Odisha, made announcements for 41% and 33% female candidates respectively, buoying the eventual representation of women in the Lok Sabha.

Despite such reaffirming outcomes, citizen campaigners cannot simply impute a linear causatum between their actions and end results.

In fact, there is rarely a singular cause and effect in political transformations. Shakti's conversations with party cadres, office bearers, elected representatives and political observers also revealed a multilayered web of decision making in parties. Even in other citizen campaigns, for instance, the sustained protests by lakhs of farmers for over a year for the repeal of the Farm Laws, impending elections and the plummeting popularity of the Prime Minister also obligated the outcome.

Shakti's March 2019 International Women's Day ground campaign in eight cities and 19 districts of nine states, targeted the constitutional gatekeeper of fair elections—the Election Commission of India. Hundreds of domestic workers, farmers, activists, IT workers, NGOs, students, lawyers and other women 'took the knee' on the streets, as a metaphor for a gender-imbalanced Parliament.

Slogans like 'EC neither free nor fair, Tickets to women are so rare!', and 'From man to man is a Manliament. What we want is a Parliament' rent the air in Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Odiya, Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi. No campaign had ever been waged against the Election Commission of India, even as this one appealed to them to recommit male-dominated nomination lists to political parties and foment a balance. Shakti knew that it lacked the authority to deny parties their contest despite gender-skewed lists but entreated them to rap the parties' knuckles. The ECI failed to do so.

Petitions were submitted to many party chiefs from 2018 to 2021, entreating them to field at least 50% female candidates. Party presidents incredulously responded with: 'Where are the women?' or 'Show me female candidates, they don't exist!' even as

they bragged about their voluminous female cadre in election campaigns. Warnings also emerged from conversations with female aspirants in parties that such would be the counter. For the next set of petitions, Shakti volunteers wisened up and took along a few female aspirants from the party and reminded them of local government victors. Pat came the response, 'But district secretaries must identify them as local leaders'.

District leaders claimed that women did not hold booth and block level lead positions and did not have a geographical base or party experience to deserve being nominated. Low level and mid-level female cadre conversations, however, deconstructed the intense patriarchy that blocked women from mobility. Even though some parties like the BJP and the INC made provisions for gender balance in office bearer positions, those lay vacant for the lack of male willingness to appoint women. There were cement walls at every turn, shutting women off from accessing power in political parties. In fact, sitting female MPs and MLAs were selfishly grateful to Shakti for being external spokespersons, pressuring party establishments on their behalf.

Political parties are entities based on electoral survival without which they have no tomorrow. Once they learn to win, they become entrenched creatures of habit, averse to change, and paranoid about retaining whatever power they have garnered. It is only when their survival is threatened by voter migration or regulatory changes that they are forced to adapt. For example, Indian voter affinities towards Hindutva politics have caused several parties to swing rightward. Similarly, when the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution were passed, reserving

33% of local government seats for women, political parties were forced to comply.

Then, and till date, the old boys networks that run most parties offer vigorous resistance to gender balance. In lieu of legitimate independent women, they derive vicarious power fielding wives or daughters of male aspirants. In fact, parties may legally field 100% male candidates since there are no laws to break or ombudsman to blink.

It is a puzzle then, why the JD(U) in Bihar, BJD in Odisha and AITC in West Bengal placed many more women on the ballot. Citizen pressure alone could not have ensured this. Indian law and institutions of democracy offer no solace to gender representation, and that is why the stance of these three parties is all the more intriguing. Interactions with political players within and beyond the parties during Shakti's Bihar campaigns shed some light. Several of the JD(U) female candidates were party office-bearers, multi-term representatives or people who switched from rival parties. However, about one-third are political greenhorns, connected to powerful men or political families. This is the same journey the multi-term female MLAs took in the past.

Female party cadres swear by party chief, Nitish Kumar's resolve towards women's empowerment to explain this. Nitish Kumar has a long history of gender-balanced socio-economic schemes. He was the first to boost the 33% reservation for women in local governments to 50%. He reserved jobs for women in the government and police force, helped women's self-help groups and education for girls.

Female voters have tended to lean towards the JD(U) and therefore the 19% election candidacies for

women could have followed naturally. However, all electoral decisions are based on attracting the vote and the link between incremental female vote share for a party already bagging the female vote, and the incremental female candidacies, are tenuous. The following table validates the volatility of his commitment to women's representation.

Male leaders and political

Mamata Banerjee of the AITC is also known for her female-oriented socio-economic schemes. She too attracts the female vote. She has been consistently above average on gender-balance in her candidate list as Table II shows. In her 15 years of leading the TMC, 62 women have been elected whereas the Left had just 111 women elected in 54 years. Her party has bagged the female vote, both in excess of their male vote in every

Mamata Banerjee's sympathizers believe that she is genuinely committed to a fair stake for women, including Muslim women. Her record of government schemes and five elections of increasing female candidacies, speaks for itself. Critics, on the other hand, point to incidents of violence against female candidates of other parties by AITC

Year	JD(U)	RJD
2005	8%	7%
2010	17%	7%
2015	10%	10%
2020	19%	11%

Source: Election Commission of India

observers add a dose of cynicism or, perhaps realism, about the JD(U). The electoral landscape of Bihar has been heavily mined by caste politics that it has hit a ceiling for returns. There are slim pickings along caste lines if the JD(U) is looking for a chunky slice of the vote bank pie; but the women's vote is significant.

Moreover, they also believe that it is a defensive strategy to keep men of certain castes away from electoral victory, which is the ultimate power grab. Women of those castes, coming from political families, are acceptable as they know their place; a station that is clearly lower due to their gender. What both the faithful and the cynical agree on is that it is his personal calculation for a package that woos the female vote. There is no institutional party mechanism to support women's representation.

election and compared to her closest electoral rivals, the Congress in 2011, the Left in 2014, the Left-Congress combine in 2016, and the BJP in 2019 and 2021. Many of her female candidates are experienced legislators or party office bearers. One-fourth are newbies, some of whom are lateral entries from fields like cinema, banking, and suchlike.

cadre and other crimes against women going unheeded. It is also said that rank newbies and non-members, especially public personalities, both male and female, get nominated so that she can groom loyalists, break factions, disenfranchise challengers and breed unquestioned obedience among the beneficiaries.

Year	TMC	Women's Excess Vote for TMC	
		Compared to men's vote for TMC (%)	Compared to nearest competitor's female vote (%)
2011 State	14%	0	4
2016 State	15%	6	12
2021 State	17%	4	13
2014 National	35%	5	11
2019 National	41%	6	10

Source: Election Commission of India, CSDS Lokniti, MyNeta

The West Bengal gender representation story has a longer arc.

It is worth noting that in the 2011 elections, when she nominated 14% female candidates, the incumbent Goliath fielded 40 women of its 213, amounting to nearly 19% women nominated to the ballot. It is well known that there is no party framework for gender-balanced candidate lists, but instead, largesse is a factor of Mamata Banerjee's personal propensities, as are vote bank calculations and intra-party power play.

There is a trajectory to women as electoral actors and their engagement as such, by political parties. This story begins with the granting of universal suffrage right at Independence in 1947, ahead of women's enfranchisement. The Constitution of India granted suffrage to all adults at Independence in 1947, ahead of women's enfranchisement in countries like Israel, Mexico, Belgium, and the People's Republic of China. However, during the preparation of electoral rolls, the Election Commission discovered that lakhs of registered female voters were nameless. They simply identified themselves as a man's wife or daughter, refusing to divulge their names to rank strangers preparing the rolls. The first elections held in 1951-1952, thus became infamous for disenfranchising 28 lakh women. This alone paints a picture of the scale and magnitude of the chasm in the politicization of women in democratic India.

By 1957, peer pressure saw 94% of all eligible female voters registered with due details in place. Nevertheless, women's voting percentage was in its 40s, with a nearly 17% gap against men in 1962. Lodged in the 50s, all the way up until 2009, it was the 2014 Lok Sabha churn that saw a narrowing of the gap against men to under 2% points.

Finally in the most recent 2019 General Elections, it soared ahead of

men's voting percentage by a sliver of 0.17% points. This photo finish took focused efforts from the Election Commission of India that ran voter registration and awareness camps for women, separated male and female queues at the booths, operated female-only voting booths, among other measures. A whole host of non-state organizations pitched in to raise awareness and enlist voters. The growth of female literacy over the decades also brought women to the polling booths.

In addition, political parties played a seminal role with their voter enlistment drives. There were 53 parties fighting the first Lok Sabha elections and today for the 17th Lok Sabha elections the number has burgeoned to 2293. While the vast majority of them come a cropper, hundreds have seen varying degrees of success across state and national elections in these seven and a half decades, and their voter recruitment drives benefit them electorally, even as they increase women's voting percentage. Up to this first milestone in the trajectory, political parties viewed women as voters and only voters. Soon they expanded their scope to women as mobilizers of the vote, realizing that women are door openers to get out the vote, while strange men going door to door turn off people.

The next milestone for political parties was of women as vote banks. They earned the women's vote through welfare schemes rather than manifesto promises, which are ephemeral. Women voters exacted their price, ahead of their endorsement.

M.G. Ramachandran, erstwhile Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was the progenitor of the women's vote bank. He earned it through his state-run

Noon Meal Scheme in the late '70s that delivered an increase in children's school enrolments by alleviating hunger. Subsequently, erstwhile Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh implemented a slew of schemes for economic rights of women, including amending the Hindu succession laws for an equal share of inheritance and, reservation in government jobs. Also, J. Jayalithaa of the AIADMK, cultivated a dedicated female vote bank through her health and economic welfare schemes for girls and women.

Parties in Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar have since employed similar tactics, delivering benefits to women before requisitioning their loyalty. The trajectory that began with a singular view of women as voters, progressed to women as mobilizers of votes, and then as a significant vote bank in several states.

The next phase was the deployment of women in election rallies, albeit minimally. Women were being enrolled in political parties since before Independence and masses of them led their own protests. However, in India's electoral democracy, they were 'used' in electoral rallies, sparsely and symbolically. As MP Kanimozhi of the DMK said to Shakti, 'Nobody wants you there. Nobody wants to see you or hear you. They need to show some colour for the vote, so they have you sit in the back.'

Women are solicited by political parties to join their women's wings in large numbers, in order to exude an aura of inclusivity and cross-demographic momentum. Public visibility of party-women en masse is only when the Women's Wings, as opposed to the main party, organize issue-based events. The journey of political parties brought them to the point where women are seen as active electoral campaign aides, though in small measure and tactically,

and not just as voters, or passive recipients of campaigns.

In 1999, there were a couple of oddball bumps. The TDP Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu announced 50 female candidates of 269 (18.5%) for the Andhra Pradesh state elections. For the General Elections at the same time, the Congress announced 16% female nominations. However, those remained one-off data points without extension either within or beyond those parties for a decade. Meanwhile, civil society threw up women's movements calling for greater devolution of political power to women. The first wave that campaigned for the Women's Reservation Bill were affiliated with the Left parties or the Congress while the current crop, including Shakti, Netri, and others, are non-partisan groups exerting pressure on political parties.

Grasping this responsiveness of political parties to voter pressure, Shakti released a WhatsApp friendly short film of less than 90 seconds for voter consumption ahead of the Bihar elections in 2020. It was later voiced over for the West Bengal, Assam and Tamil Nadu elections. The film conveys the lacunae in governance due to the lack of women with stark visuals that urges voters to assert their right to balanced legislatures.

Back to political parties, there seems to be a spurt of women on the ballot since 2010. The JD(U) fielding 17-19% female candidates twice since the 2010 Bihar state elections. The AITC standing 14-41% women since 2011, thrice in West Bengal state elections and twice in the General Elections. The BJD followed suit in 2019 with 33% women on the ballot. Most recently, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, General Secretary of the INC, announced that 40% of their candidates for the upcoming elections

in Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India, would be female. The trajectory that commenced with a lonely notion of women as voters soon journeyed to women as mobilizers, who drive votes beyond their own and now recognizes them as vote banks.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's campaign strategy in Uttar Pradesh is a peep into the next potential transformation. Women run women dominated electoral campaigns. Many female candidates across parties have had more women in their campaigns and attracted more women in the audience than their male counterparts, but India has not seen women as the mainstay of electoral campaigns.

It is today the theme in the Congress campaign in Uttar Pradesh – campaigns of, for and by women. Rallies entirely filled with women, messaging tailored for women, girls' marathons, press conferences entirely delivered by women, a manifesto solely for women and the campaign plank dominated by governance issues, gendered appropriately. While it is too early and too little to dub this as transformative, it is a marked divergence from run of the mill testosterone-pumped electoral campaigns.

Nine times in a span of eleven years, across two parties, the JD(U) and the AITC, and spreading to two more, the BJD and the INC, women have been sent to the fray at significantly higher rates by mainstream parties in large states – too many instances to be dismissed as aberrations. What is noteworthy though, is that they have not resulted from laws on electoral gender-justice or audits by ombudsmen. While voters in India have not been parochial about electing women, the win rate of women in the Lok Sabha elections time and again has superseded that of men; they have not shamed parties for their brazen

sidelining of women either. Voters have embraced nearly all-male legislatures without embarrassment.

This cadence could potentially have augured a tectonic shift had the decisions on increasing women's electoral capacities emanated from party rulebooks or policies. That would have signalled institutional transformation. Unfortunately, what is evident is that much of the munificence stems from three key co-ordinates: the propensities of the woman/man at the helm, aka, the party leader, electoral calculus on the female vote bank and organizational power play.

The women's vote bank inherited seamlessly from M.G Ramachandran to J. Jayalalithaa of the AIADMK was a deliberate electoral calculus. The legatees of the AITC, BJD and the JD(U) are all unknown. The absence of institutional mechanisms makes it impossible to predict whether the feminization of the ballot by this triumvirate will outlast the trio themselves. In the Congress, it is even more apparent that it is one leader's diktat or experiment in one state. The party establishment across other states does not toe the line.

Mapping myriad data points and Shakti's experiences, we can assert with confidence that the rise of women as electoral players is not derived from the transformation of political party organizational structures, or from institutional support, regulatory frameworks, or a moral compass for gender justice. What is causing this transformation of party behaviour is, in fact, the women themselves. It is women as a vote bank, rooted firmly on a bed of delivered governance benefits who are exerting irresistible pressure on political parties. In that sense, the ongoing feminization of electoral politics in India is a quintessentially a democratic phenomenon: blocs of voters moulding the decisions of political parties.

Populism, parliament, and performance

SHIRIN M. RAI and
CAROLE SPARY

IN our book, *Performing Representation*,¹ we set out to answer some theoretical and empirical questions about gender and representation through examining the role of women MPs in the Indian parliament. By locating the institution in its history, we also sought to answer the question about its representativeness. To do so, we reviewed and analysed the routes – sociological as well as electoral – women take to get to parliament and what they can do once they get to parliament. We examined their performances in parliamentary debates, in the committee system and as development agents for their constituencies. We also analysed how institutional norms need to shift if women MPs participation in parliamentary politics is to be sustainable. In this article, we reflect on our findings and on the current political landscape and how it affects

1. S.M. Rai, C. Spary, *Performing Representation: Women Members in the Indian Parliament*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019.

gendered representation in Indian parliamentary politics.

In our book we found that women's exclusion or marginalization in parliamentary politics is both formal and informal – it starts within the home with expectations of gendered behaviour norms and disciplining of women through the threat of or infliction of violence against women in public spaces – violence which is both physical and discursive. We also noted that the role of family becomes important in ways that are not often analysed – not only promoting women's careers but also providing everyday support to enable women to pursue their careers in politics and ensuring some protection against media trolling and violence (Chapter 2).² Structural violence then

2. See also A. Basu, 'Women, Dynasties and Democracy in India', in K. Chandra (ed.), *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016; S.M. Rai, 'The Politics of Access: Narratives of Women MPs in the Indian Parliament', *Political Studies* 60(1), 2012, pp. 195-212.

generates particular modes of political performance which are visible not just outside parliament but inside too.

We noticed that women are overlooked in the allocation of winnable seats for elections (Chapter 3), in speaking in parliamentary debates (Chapter 5), and in membership of important parliamentary committees (Chapter 6). Our research also showed that, despite the rigours of political life, most women we interviewed (we interviewed over 50 MPs, some multiple times) enjoyed being MPs; they wanted to continue to serve their constituencies and to participate in policy debates in parliament. Of course, we also found that the political ideologies that they ascribed to matter greatly, which means that the formulations of women's interests and their relationship to the state and nation are differentially mobilized by individual political actors (women MPs) and by political parties. Our research also revealed that their habitus – class, caste, education, and family connections – mitigate or militate against their performative labour in parliament and their constituency work (Chapter 4).³

Our institutional analysis suggested that political parties are one of the most important actors in addressing women's representation in political institutions and that they are failing women. Further, we argued that institutional constraints do not always allow women MPs to pursue a woman-friendly politics; parliament itself is a gendered institution that needs reform for women to be able to participate fully and equally in its functioning.⁴

In our interviews we heard stories of how women seek to collaborate over specific gender issues such as the Women's Reservation Bill, and the challenges faced in doing so. While Barnes, in her study of Argentinian women MPs, is optimistic that collaboration will become institutionalized over time,⁵ we are less sanguine about this. Unless women assume and perform leadership role in many political parties and unless political parties in India, especially in the context of its first past the post system, open up to cross-party work more generally, we fear that cross-party collaboration will not be institutionalized.

Women MPs' subjectivation also matters; our interviewees were largely confident, educated, and articulate and they tried to generate a role for themselves as 'good MPs'. However, we also found that women MPs, contrary to received wisdom, are not less corrupt or more sensitive to the needs of their constituents, although reputational damage related to money is greater for women than male MPs. The media and the effectiveness of women MPs is then linked in complex ways.

Finally, although we showed how the parliament is a deeply gendered institution which does not support women MPs equal participation in parliamentary work, we argued that the 'decline of parliament' thesis, so prevalent in public discourse, was dangerous, as the parliament is a critically important mitigation to the increasing executive power and indeed the personalization of power of the Prime Minister. This also means

that the parliament needs to be put at the centre of our political analysis to reimagine its role as a gender-sensitive institution that plays its part in holding the executive accountable; not writing it off is critical for the health of Indian democracy.

If these were the key themes of our book, do they hold up in the changed circumstances of Indian politics since the massive majority of the Modi government's second term? We reflect on this question below after reviewing two significant developments since our book was published in 2019. The first is the 2019 elections and the large majority of the BJP, its authoritarian approach to institutional functioning, which has weakened the role of parliament in holding the government to account. We have also seen, on the one hand, an assertion of the states' political clout, and on the other, a systematic interference in state politics by the centre.

And the second is, of course, the pandemic and its human and economic consequences and how these have been mobilized by the government and the party in government to reshape the narrative about the nation, nationhood and citizenship to marginalized sections of Indian society and polity. In both instances, this muscular nationalism affects the working of all political institutions including the parliament, which is indeed being reshaped materially through new spaces and buildings.

Large majorities and populist politics tend to undermine the place of parliaments in political systems. When compounded by crises such as Covid-19, the urgency of remedial measures is often used to further strengthen the executive. This makes the need for a strong parliament even more important. Sadly, since 2019, the status of parliament under Modi's second

3. P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990.

4. S. Palmieri, *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Global Review of Good Practice*. Inter-

Parliamentary Union, Geneva, 2011; S. Childs, *The Good Parliament*. University of Bristol, Bristol, 2016.

5. T.D. Barnes, *Gendering Legislative Behaviour*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016.

term has resulted in bulldozing legislation, which has led to poor quality of debates in parliament and undermined the committees' scrutiny of legislation and, as in the revocation of Article 370, one party's ideological agenda has driven sensitive national legislation with impunity.

The pandemic and its painful human and economic consequences have been mobilized by the government and the party in government to reshape the narrative about the nation, nationhood and citizenship to marginalize sections of Indian society and polity. Such muscular nationalism has adversely affected the workings of parliament. Commenting on this undermining of parliament's deliberative and accountability role, MPs such as Mahua Moitra, have called this tendency a growing trend of fascism in the country.⁶ This has also reignited the 'decline of parliament' debate. In the following sections, we reflect on how this executive concentration of power is affecting gendered practices in parliament.

Performing Representation argued that numbers of women in parliament still matter, even if multiple other institutional dimensions and dynamics covered in the book affect the meaningful participation of larger numbers of women once elected to parliament. Our institutional focus sought to show how women's minority presence is even further stretched when considering intersecting identities, as well as party and partisan loyalties and party discipline, in and outside of the House. In focusing on how women reach parliament, we pointed to the role of party gatekeepers, among others, in limiting

6. G. Pandey, 'Indian MP Mahua Moitra's "Rising Fascism" Speech Wins Plaudits', BBC News, 26 June 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-48755554>

the opportunities for women's access to parliament by limiting their nomination as candidates in elections.

Not much appears to have changed in this regard. India marks 75 years of Independence in 2022. 2021 marked the 25th anniversary of the Women's Reservation Bill, first attempted in 1996. As has been well documented, the 2010 attempt at passing the Women's Reservation Bill took place at a time of fraught coalition politics. Since 2014, and with two successive single-party majorities, the BJP-led government has had multiple opportunities to pass the bill but has often cited the desire to achieve consensus on the bill. This appeal to consensus is somewhat disingenuous, given its disregard of any such consensus on other major legislation such as the farm laws of 2020 or the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which resulted in major constitutional ramifications, and provoked widespread protests around the country.

In other words, the BJP government has shown willingness to pass highly unpopular and controversial legislation with the potential to impact both the formal constitution as well as the 'idea of India', without consensus but not when it comes to the Reservation Bill. We are of course, not recommending that the Reservation Bill is forced through parliament, but that consensus building has not been the strong suit of this government and should be seen for what it is—a delaying tactic for passing this bill, which could fundamentally change the gendered profile of parliament.

In a recent interview with a national newspaper, former MP Brinda Karat remarked 'there are cultural reasons also within the BJP's ideology which baulks at bringing legislation as a right for women to be at least one-

third. So, I say today, it's good you have 78 women, it's the highest Indian Lok Sabha has ever had, but it's still just 14.4 per cent. If you would have the bill, there would be 180 women in the Lok Sabha. So where are the missing women? And why are they missing?'⁷

P rime Minister Modi's second successive general election victory in May 2019 did not radically increase the proportion of women in parliament, and reduced the presence of women in ministerial positions, though India did see its first woman Finance Minister with the appointment of Nirmala Sitharaman. Impatient with the lack of progress in legislated gender quotas, political parties such as the Trinamool Congress, the Biju Janata Dal, and the Congress party have brought forth their own voluntary party quotas to nominate a certain percentage of women candidates, keen as parties are to perform representative claims to an increasingly powerful and recognized group of voters, women. The latter have demonstrated an increasing tendency to turn out in greater proportion than before, and to vote differently to men, especially in some states, and within some social categories.

The more recent party gender quotas have been predominantly attempted by the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal in multiple elections, the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha in the Lok Sabha 2019 election, and most recently the Congress party in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections of 2022.

One of the arguments we make in *Performing Representation* relates

7. S. Choudhury, 'CPM's Brinda Karat Underscores Significance of Women's Reservation Bill in Conversation With HT', 11 September 2021. <https://www.hindustan-times.com/india-news/cpms-brinda-karat-underscores-significance-of-women-s-reservation-bill-in-conversation-with-ht-101631350987112.html>

to the skewed distribution of women MPs allocated to parliamentary committees. While there was a tendency to assign very few to no women MPs to some of the relatively more powerful committees, they were found to be in a majority in the parliament's joint Committee for the Empowerment of Women. We reflected on whether parties had assumed that women had 'situated knowledge' to aid them in this role, or because it was seen as 'women's work'. We also observed that many of the major bills that held women's empowerment as an objective, tended to be assigned to the committees associated with their ministerial jurisdiction rather than to the Committee for the Empowerment of Women. While this ensured that both men and women MPs were involved in scrutinizing those bills, it left the CEW with limited influence on legislation.

There is also the risk that committees with very few women as members might be tasked with scrutinizing draft legislation that would significantly impact women. A case in point is that the Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth, and Sports was recently tasked to review draft legislation to raise the marriageable age of girls, but only one woman MP was part of the committee (Sushmita Dev). Several women MPs commented that more women should be included in the committee reviewing the bill and asked the Rajya Sabha chairperson to include more women in the deliberations.⁸

Committee deliberation can improve the *representativeness* of the legis-

8. M. Sharma, 'Parliamentary Panel of 1 woman, 30 Male MPs to Review Bill to Raise Legal Marriage Age for Women', 2 January 2022. [https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/parliamentary-panel-1-woman-30-men-review-bill-raise-marriage-age-women-](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/parliamentary-panel-1-woman-30-men-review-bill-raise-marriage-age-women-1895131-2022-01-02)

lation, and citizens may feel more represented because of both the process and the outcome. This points to the inextricable links between democratic functioning and gender inclusivity. Parliamentary initiatives that seek to improve gender-inclusivity in committees, whether in terms of presence or interests, risk becoming window-dressing if the broader democratic functioning of institutional mechanisms and bodies like parliamentary committees is undermined. In turn, efforts to restore democratic functioning could more systematically integrate demands for gender-inclusivity which are an integral part of democratic functioning, rather than merely restoring the status quo ante.

Increasingly, the power and influence of committees in the Indian parliament has come under scrutiny because of the reluctance of the two successive Modi governments to refer bills to committees for review. It was estimated that only a quarter of bills were referred in Modi's first term, 2014-2019, compared to much higher proportions during the previous two successive UPA governments.⁹ Granted, committee referral can be used as an obfuscatory tactic to delay the passage of what might be already very well worked out legislation, especially if the legislation in question has been reviewed before, and the

1895131-2022-01-02; India Today, 'Priyanka Chaturvedi Demands More Inclusive Panel to Review Legal Marriage Age for Women', 3 January 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/priyanka-chaturvedi-parliament-committee-legal-age-of-marriage-women-1895371-2022-01-03>

9. C. Roy, 'An Expert Explains: Roles and Limitations of Select Committees, Parliamentary Panels', *Indian Express*, 22 September 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/an-expert-explains-roles-limitations-of-select-committees-and-other-parliamentary-panels-6604092/>

circumstances have largely not changed in the intervening period.¹⁰ But committee deliberation is a way to work through the implications of complex legislation for different groups affected, and to develop broader consensus and trust in that legislation and the process.¹¹

Opposition women MPs have been vocal in opposing the government in parliament. We have already referred to Moitra's speech. Disruptions to chamber debates are also a frequently used method to vocalize opposition in the Indian parliament. When the executive dominates the legislative agenda, MPs often turn to disruption particularly if the executive makes little space for deliberation and scrutiny of draft legislation or to make their voice heard and confront the government on major political issues. For many years, the Indian parliament has taken a reasonably accommodative approach to such disruptions¹², but has in some notable cases suspended members from the sitting of the House, and even forcibly removed them (recall the recalcitrant opposition to the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha in March 2010, despite bipartisan consensus).

In recent years, suspension has become more common. But controversially, at the start of the Winter 2021 session, the government successfully moved a motion to suspend 12 Members of the Rajya Sabha for disruptive behaviour in the chamber

10. A former Lok Sabha Secretary-General also recently noted that reform to parliamentary committees was 'long overdue'. (PDT Achary, *The Wire*, 6 September 2016. <https://thewire.in/government/parliamentary-standing-committees>).

11. P.B. Mehta, *Indian Express*, 22 September 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/parliament-monsoon-session-farm-bills-modi-govt-railroading-the-bill-6605281/>

during an incident towards the end of the *previous*, Monsoon 2021 session which included physical altercations. As does much legislative disruption, the incident split public and political opinion, with one narrative blaming the government for bulldozing legislation through parliament and stifling opposition voice, and another criticizing the lack of decorum in the chamber and waste of public money in running the parliament.

Shiv Sena MP Priyanka Chaturvedi was one of the 12 Rajya Sabha MPs suspended. She responded to the suspension order by resigning from her recent appointment as host of a parliamentary channel show where she was due to interview other women MPs about their journey to becoming parliamentarians.¹³ In her resignation letter, she claimed responsibility for speaking for, and showing solidarity with, the interests of the other women parliamentarians who had been suspended. She joined other suspended MPs in a dharna within the parliamentary precinct in the traditional spot – in front of the Gandhi statue.

Trinamool Congress MP Dola Sen was also among those suspended for the rest of the Winter 2021 session and had been earlier suspended for a day during the Monsoon 2021 session for

disrupting parliament over allegations the Indian government had used Pegasus software to monitor opposition politicians. In an interview about her earlier suspension, she argued: ‘The parliament and the assembly is the place to hear the opposition. If the democracy of opposition is curtailed to an extreme extent, the opposition has the right to shout slogan protesting this undemocratic attitude’.¹⁴ Sen’s interviewer, senior journalist Sunetra Choudhury, remarked to Sen that after covering parliament for many years, she was struck by hearing a woman’s, rather than a man’s, voice loudly protesting in the chamber.

Sen commented on the performative labour involved in disruption, attributing her loud voice to her parents and her spirit to her party leader, but also acknowledging her background as a trade unionist, which has equipped her with the skills and experience to make her voice heard. Thus, even though Indian women MPs have historically been criticized as not speaking up in parliament, we see three opposition women MPs – Moitra in the Lok Sabha, and Chaturvedi and Sen in the Rajya Sabha, bringing their respective positions, clout, skills, and experience to the chamber to perform democratic opposition in various ways.

Since the publication of *Performing Representation*, India experienced (together with countries around the globe) the Covid-19 pandemic, which, as noted above, produced a sense of crisis and urgency in the country, with thousands dying and the economy suffering. It is important to understand how the crisis has been mobilized for political purposes, and how was parliament affected by the pandemic in its everyday functioning?

The Inter-Parliamentary Union’s guide on Covid-19 and gender in parliaments, for example, points to questions of whether women parliamentarians are enabled to participate and lead, and whether gender is mainstreamed, in parliamentary decision-making on the pandemic; whether policy and legislation to deal with Covid-19, and its oversight, is gender-responsive; whether adaptations to parliamentary working, for both MPs and parliamentary staff, during the pandemic are gender-sensitive; and how MPs and parliaments can raise awareness about the gendered impact of the pandemic and initiatives to address this impact.¹⁵

It is well documented that the pandemic disproportionately affected women, who work in the health care, domestic work and tourism sectors. ‘In India, 17 million women lost their jobs in April 2020, raising unemployment among women by 15% from a pre-lockdown level of 18%. These women are also 23.5% less likely to be re-employed compared to men in the post-lockdown phase (Dutta 2021). The Institute of Social Studies Trust (2021) found that among those who could retain their jobs, around 83% of women workers faced a severe drop in income, 66% experienced an increase in unpaid care work, even though middle-class women were better able to cope by buying in labour of other women.’¹⁶

We also know that the pandemic was weaponized against the Shaheen Bagh activists. Research at the global level has also sought to answer whether

12. C. Spary & R. Garimella, ‘Managing Disruptions in the Indian Parliament: Interview With Mr Ravindra Garimella, Lok Sabha Secretariat, Parliament of India’, *Democratization* 20(3), 2013, pp. 539-552. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2013.786549

13. Indian Express, ‘Suspended Shiv Sena MP Priyanka Chaturvedi Steps Down as Sansad TV Show Host’, 6 December 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/suspended-shiv-sena-rajya-sabha-mp-priyanka-chaturvedi-sansad-tv-7657180/>

14. S. Choudhury, ‘The Parliament Protester’, *On the Record*, 6 August 2021. https://on-the-record.simplecast.com/episodes/the-parliament-protester-8shdV0_C

15. IPU, ‘Gender and COVID-19: A Guide for Parliaments’, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva, (n.d.). <https://www.ipu.org/gender-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments>

16. R. Kaur and S.M. Rai, ‘Covid-19, Care, and Carelessness’, *Countercurrents*, 17 June 2021. <https://countercurrents.org/2021/06/covid-19-care-and-carelessness/>

women leaders were somehow more effective at responding to the pandemic, particularly the public health emergency, including subnational women leaders in India.¹⁷ Some stories about panchayat women members emerged to suggest that they coped well during the pandemic¹⁸ but none that we could find about women MPs. We also found no research on whether women MPs were disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of their care responsibilities and lack of domestic help during the pandemic.

As we outlined in our book, family is a great source of support for women MPs. How did the lockdowns affect family networks and were women MPs left to cope with domestic work and their parliamentary responsibilities such that their constituency and parliamentary work was adversely affected? Further, was the gendered impact of the pandemic reported upon in parliament during the pandemic? Early in the pandemic, outside of parliament, women active in multiple levels of government, public service and community work in Maharashtra had raised concerns of rising domestic violence in the context of lockdown, creating a ‘shadow pandemic’ according to one senior woman MP.¹⁹

Within parliament, the Committee on Empowerment of Women observed that the ‘Covid crisis has

17. J. Piscopo and M. Och, ‘Protecting Public Health in Adverse Circumstances: Subnational Women Leaders and Feminist Policymaking During Covid-19’, *Gender & Development* 29(2-3), 2021, pp. 547-568.

18. D. Goswami, ‘Elected Women Leaders of Gram Panchayats: Critical Roles in Covid-19 Response’, India Water Portal, 17 June 2020. <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/elected-women-leaders-gram-panchayats-critical-roles-covid-19-response>

19. K. Iyer, ‘Maharashtra Lockdown: Women Politicians Begin to Discuss the “Shadow Pandemic”’, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/women-politicians-begin-to-discuss-the-shadow-pandemic-6414187/>

disproportionately affected girls, especially their education...[and recommended]...concerted and urgent efforts to mobilize the return of girls students to schools and sustain their regular attendance’.²⁰ In the Ministry of Education’s submission to the committee they had expressed concern that the pandemic would ‘reverse the gains’ made in girls’ education and that girls’ often had less digital access to remote learning and less physical access as a result of closure of hostels.²¹ But more research needs to be done on these questions, specifically how the gendered impact of the pandemic has played out in and through parliament.

The Indian parliament is an important institution at the centre of the representative claims of Indian democracy. Despite many attacks on its position within the political system, it has survived and even thrived. However, the parliament is also a gendered institution that does not allow women to participate in its functioning equally with men. As our work showed, this marginalization does not mean that women do not participate in the everyday work of parliament, but perhaps they cannot find the space to do so to the best of their abilities. The parliament is at a crossroads – the power of the executive, its muscular nationalism and right wing ideology have pushed many debates about gender equality to the sidelines. We need to be alert to this dangerous reshaping of the political landscape and its consequences for democratic functioning of India’s political institutions.

20. Committee on Empowerment of Women, Empowerment of Women Through Education with Special Reference to ‘Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao Scheme’. 17th Lok Sabha, Fifth Report, December 2021, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, 2021, p 61.

21. *Ibid.*, p 39.

Surviving a thousand cuts

AKSHI CHAWLA

IN 2021, Hathi Singh, a 45-year-old man in eastern Uttar Pradesh, broke his 25-year-old celibacy vow to get married.¹ His reasons were not emotional, but political. Singh had been wanting to get elected as his village's Sarpanch for over a decade but had not succeeded so far. And in 2021, the seat got reserved for women. Singh's mother was too old to contest, he did not trust other women relatives, so he got married in haste, just in time so that whoever he married could contest the poll – while he could, apparently, run the show if she won.

As luck would have it, Singh's wife lost. But the very idea that Singh could arrange a potential match (within a day) just to gain power by proxy is symptomatic of a range of issues that Indian women face in politics. And that range begins with what men like Singh think of women, of marriage, and of politics.

In deeply unequal democracies such as India, political power can be a means for individuals and groups to get better access to resources, rights and influence. Getting elected brings with it not just power, but also acts as a hedge against everyday struggles of

1. R. Dikshit, 'UP Man Gives up celibacy vow, marries to field wife in election', *The Times of India*, 31 March 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/man-gives-up-celibacy-vow-marries-to-field-wife-in-election/articleshow/81768048.cms>

ordinary citizens. But for women, political power is no insulator to their usual struggles against misogyny and patriarchal control. If anything, political power seems to sometimes amplify and exacerbate the kind of control and violence that women face in their households and the public sphere at large.

India's politics included women right from its birth as a modern republic. From the constituent assembly to the first government, Indian women reached several milestone positions fairly early. Yet, the country's politics continues to not just be predominantly occupied by men, it is also a very hostile space to women, and more so to women who have risen to power on their own without any familial ties, and those from marginalized communities - Dalit women, Adivasi women, Muslim women.

This hostility can take many forms – from outright violence to sexism and abuse, disinformation campaigns, attempts at character assassination, to subtler and more covert barriers including social and cultural norms, a patriarchal media gaze, expectations of 'balancing' politics with the household and family duties. These hurdles spare women at no level, from the village to the Chief Minister's office or even a Member of

Parliament, and at no stage. So much so that overcoming these barriers often becomes akin to surviving a thousand battle cuts.

Misogynistic incidents and sexist comments about women politicians abound in India. Male politicians often lead the charge, be it on the floors of Parliament or state assemblies, in campaign rallies and speeches, inside party meetings, or on social media—with impunity and without any shame linked to it. They have called women colleagues all kinds of names—from a demon with ‘no values or characteristics of women’,² a ‘prostitute’³ to a ‘jersey cow’.⁴ They have told women, ‘You are so beautiful. How can you say such things?’⁵ when the women raised an issue affecting people in their constituency. The youngest mayor in the country has been mocked for being an ‘LKG child’ by a male Opposition politician.⁶ Women

2. Press Trust of India, ‘UP BJP MLA: Mamata Banerjee is like a demon, has no values of a woman’, *The Indian Express*, 14 January 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-mla-surendra-singh-mamata-banerjee-is-like-a-demon-has-no-values-of-a-woman-6216113/>

3. Express Web Desk, ‘Mayawati remark: uproar in Rajya Sabha over UP BJP leader Dayashankar Singh’s comments: Jaitley says he is personally hurt’, *The Indian Express*, 21 July 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/mayawati-prostitute-sex-worker-bjp-up-dayashankar-singh/>

4. ET Bureau, ‘Congress recalls Modi’s “Jersey cow”, hybrid calf remarks while condemning Mani Shankar Aiyar’, *The Economic Times*, 15 May 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/congress-recalls-modis-jersey-cow-hybrid-calf-remarks-while-condemning-mani-shankar-aiyar/articleshow/69334603.cms?from=mdr>

5. A. Tewary, ‘Nitish Kumar should address issues I raised at NDA meeting: Nikki Hembrom’, *The Hindu*, 4 December 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nitish-kumar-should-address-issues-i-raised-at-nda-meeting-nikki-hembrom/article37845219.ece>

6. TNM Staff, ‘BJP leader calls T’puram mayor Arya Rajendran “LKG student”, her

have been dragged into a discussion about permission to enter a temple’s sanctum sanctorum, with a male politician wondering out loud ‘if the sanctum sanctorum was like the bedroom’ of a sitting woman MP ‘to be open for anybody to enter’?⁷

‘There has been so much mud slung at me,’ J. Jayalalithaa, a former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu who died in 2016, told television host Simi Garewal in an interview⁸ in 1999. ‘I’ve had to face so many brickbats, I’ve had to face so much vilification and slander. If I had been an academician, if I had been a lawyer, no one would have said such nasty things about me. But when it comes to [being a] politician, the questions are so downright demeaning, insulting, humiliating. In the normal course, no one would put up with that kind of questioning, but as a politician, anyone can say anything about you [and] you have to take it.’

‘If you are a wife, automatically so much respect is given to you. People talk about you, refer to you with respect, but such wasn’t the case with me’, Jayalalithaa (who was not married) explained further. In that statement, Jayalalithaa captured a striking feature of India’s politics. As scholar Amrita Basu (2010) noted in her essay on Gender and Politics, ‘women’s access to power is still mediated by their relationship to male kin, and is often indirect and symbolic.’⁹ Further, wrote Basu, since many women politicians do not come

reply is viral’, *The News Minute*, 18 June 2021. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/bjp-leader-calls-t-puram-mayor-arya-rajendran-lkg-student-her-reply-viral-150912>

7. TNM Staff, ‘Khushboo condemns BJP leader’s obscene comments about Kanimozhi’, *The News Minute*, 30 January 2021. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/khushboo-condemns-bjp-leader-s-obscene-comments-about-kanimozhi-142434>

8. Full interview available on the Youtube Channel ‘SimiGarewalOfficial’ here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZOar04g4zk>

9. A. Basu, (2004) ‘Gender and Politics’, in

from grassroots women’s movements in the country, ‘their connections to male family members assume paramount importance’.

Misogyny occurs at all stages of political journeys – starting from women aiming to enter politics, during the drafting of candidate lists, and election campaigns. But it does not go away even after women get elected or even reach the top. After Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the government’s budget in February 2022, an upper house MP alluded on Twitter¹⁰ that she was selected for the position because of her experience in the ‘sales’ department. In an interview, Sitharaman said¹¹ she did not want to respond to that but told TV anchor Navika Kumar that these are comments other women politicians face too. ‘This is just this attitude, that I can do anything, say anything, and get away,’ she observed. ‘One thing is sure... for everything a man does, women will have to do [it] twice more harder, twice more apparently, and twice more with greater involvement to achieve the same level of appreciation, recognition.’

Among the cacophony of these deplorable remarks, no attention is paid to how they may impact the women who are spoken about. ‘Why should women be expected to have thick skin? Why can’t we expect men

N.G. Jayal and P.B. Mehta (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2010.

10. S. Singh, ‘MP Jawhar Sircar apologises for mocking Nirmala Sitharaman’s past over govt disinvestments’, *Republic World*, 2 February 2022. <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/politics/mp-jawhar-sircar-apologises-for-mocking-nirmala-sitharamans-past-over-govt-disinvestments-articleshow.html>

11. Times Now, ‘FM Nirmala Sitharaman: Does Rahul Gandhi even know the definition of poor?’ *Times Now* (Frankly Speaking), 3 February 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFDjK8lLbJs>

in politics to be more sensitive?’ Priyanka Chaturvedi, now a Rajya Sabha MP asked as she participated in a panel discussion¹² in 2019 on whether Indian politics was still a man’s world. She said sexism was much worse within a political party than outside. ‘It happens first in your own party before others start talking about you.’

Over half (58%) of Indian respondents who were interviewed in a study by UN Women in 2014¹³ on the prevalence of violence against women in politics in India, Nepal and Pakistan identified ‘members of the same political party’ as perpetrators of violence against women in politics. ‘One of the key barriers to women’s political participation and presence in public life is the profound patriarchal and autocratic nature of political parties,’ the study had noted. ‘We talk about #MeToo as a movement. No woman politician has [yet] had the guts to speak about how lecherous men in public life can be,’ observed Shaina NC, a politician in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the same panel¹⁴ that Chaturvedi was speaking in. ‘I think the time has come for us to speak about the occupational hazards of speaking in a meeting at 2 o’clock at night where there are 30 men and you are the only woman.’

The abuse and violence is not exclusive to politics but similar to how men in Indian society treat women in general, and especially women who

attempt to claim their space or assert their rights as equal citizens. Within political parties too, women - few in numbers - are exceptions rather than norms, and their male colleagues often work to ensure that it stays this way.

Garewal asked¹⁵ Jayalalitha if it was worse for women in politics or in the film industry (Jayalalitha had been a popular actor in the Tamil film industry before she joined politics). ‘Both are equally bad, but in films, a woman is an essential commodity,’ Jayalalitha answered. ‘Whether you like it or not, you need the glamor that women can provide. In films, you can’t do without them. In politics, [however], you can do without them, [and] they try very hard to do without them.’

March 8, 2010 was the 100th International Women’s Day. The Indian Parliament was in session, and in the Rajya Sabha was the Women’s Reservation Bill, which proposed to reserve 33% of the seats in Parliament and state legislatures for women. The stage was set for history to be made. Instead, pandemonium broke.¹⁶ Members from the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) argued that the bill would harm the interests of marginalized caste and religious communities. Mulayam Singh Yadav, then SP chief, claimed¹⁷ that the bill was a ‘conspiracy to prevent Muslims, Dalits, and backward classes from

entering Parliament and state assemblies’. He even went on to say that if the bill were passed, it would ‘fill Parliament with the kind of women who invite catcalls and whistles.’¹⁸

Those opposing the bill entered the well of the house, tore the bill papers, broke a microphone, and created chaos to stop the bill from passing. Nand Kishore Yadav of SP even tried to attack Chairperson Hamid Ansari by attempting to climb the podium. He uprooted the mic and threw stationery placed on Ansari’s table, an NDTV report from the time said.¹⁹ Shabir Ali of LJP even said,²⁰ ‘We will cross all limits of protest over this issue.’

In an interview in 2021,²¹ political leader Brinda Karat who was an MP at the time, recalled the day: ‘There were very ugly, physical attacks which were sought to be made on the [Speaker] and women of all parties stood as a sort of wall around him in that drama. The person just behind me stood on a table and smashed the glass and he had a bleeding arm which was dripping blood on the table next to me...’

The optics from 2010 form an apt metaphor for Indian politics to this day – a space predominantly occupied with men, and one that works in various ways to keep the numbers of women few and on the margins.

18. Asian News International, ‘Mulayam draws flak for his “sexist” remark on women’, *The Indian Express*, 24 March 2010. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/latest-news/mulayam-draws-flak-for-his-sexist-remark-on-women/>

19. NDTV, ‘Unruly MPs hold up women’s bill’, *NDTV*, 8 March 2010. <https://www.ndtv.com/photos/news/unruly-mps-hold-up-womens-bill-6988#photo-73767>

20. Ibid.

21. Hindustan Times, ‘Women’s reservation bill: 25 years later’, *Hindustan Times* (On the record), 10 September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dy6QpFOZdw>

12. MoJo Story, ‘Is politics still a man’s world: Priyanka Chaturvedi, Shaina NC, Shama Mohamed’, MoJo Story, 3 December 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHhJT9vgQ6Y&t=1133s>

13. UN Women, Violence against women in politics. 2014. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/6/violence-against-women-in-politics>

14. MoJo Story, ‘Is politics still a man’s world’, op. cit.

15. Full interview on the Youtube Channel ‘SimiGarewalOfficial’, op. cit.

16. NDTV, ‘Unruly MPs hold up women’s bill’, *NDTV*, 8 March 2010. <https://www.ndtv.com/photos/news/unruly-mps-hold-up-womens-bill-6988#photo-73767>

17. Press Trust of India, ‘Women’s reservation bill dangerous: Mulayam Singh Yadav’, *DNA*, 7 March 2010. <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-women-s-reservation-bill-dangerous-mulayam-singh-yadav-1356277>

Speaking in an Instagram Live in March 2021, poet and politician from Tamil Nadu, Salma, shared that she had ‘lost an assembly election narrowly because the workers of her own party, the DMK – heavily dominated by men – were not supportive of a woman candidate.’²² In the UN Women study from 2014, Pramila Nesargi, an ex-MLA from Karnataka, said that women candidates ‘may be subjected to threats within her political party when a senior leader may decide against canvassing for her.’²³

The attacks do not stop at verbal comments. In 1989, Jayalalithaa, then the Leader of the Opposition in the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly, was attacked²⁴ in the house by Durai Murugan, then a minister in the DMK government. Jayalalithaa’s saree was torn and she was hit on her head. ‘Nothing really was worth the humiliation’ of that day, Jayalalithaa recalled²⁵ in the interview with Garewal. The incident happened in the presence of then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. ‘All his MLAs and ministers physically assaulted me – one even tried to pull at my saree,’ she said. ‘They pulled at my hair, [even] tore out some of my hair. They threw chappals (slippers) at me, they threw papers and heavy books on me. That day I left the

assembly in tears, but I was also angry.’ ‘I have never read any report of such a shameful incident happening anywhere else. I don’t think this has ever happened to any other woman in politics. That was a bad experience,’ Jayalalithaa added.

While it may have been an exceptional incident at the time, violence against women in politics has occurred time and again. When major constitutional amendments in 1992-93 paved the way for thousands of women to be elected to panchayats and municipalities, there was also backlash. And women from marginalized communities – especially Dalit women – have faced a rather severe brunt.²⁶

Dalit women sarpanches have been prevented from hoisting the national flag, made to sit on the floor during Panchayat meetings²⁷, and even attacked and murdered. In 2001, Menaka, President of the Urapakkam panchayat in Tamil Nadu, was hacked to death in front of her office.²⁸ Menaka was a Dalit and was killed by real estate mafia for denying them land and instead redistributing it among the poor. Her own party men had colluded with the mafia. In December 2021, a Sarpanch in Maharashtra’s Raigad

district was sexually assaulted and brutally murdered.²⁹ The accused confessed to the crime, saying he had a grudge against her. In 2015, Geeta Prahlad, the sarpanch of Mohda village in Raipur district of Chhattisgarh, was killed by her own brother for lighting the funeral pyre of her mother, a wish her mother had.³⁰

The violence is not limited to the local level. In the infamous ‘Guest House’ incident³¹ from 1995, members and elected leaders of the Samajwadi Party walked into a BSP meeting in an attempt to prevent them from withdrawing support from their coalition government in Uttar Pradesh. The meeting was being presided over by Mayawati, the general secretary of the BSP at the time. The BSP MLAs were attacked and detained and coerced into giving their support. Reports from the time suggest that Mayawati was attacked, her room was vandalized, she was abused using sexist and casteist slurs,³² and her clothes were torn – she had to lock herself up in a room to protect herself.³³

Even though the news media should critically report on and question [mumbai/maharashtra-man-held-for-raping-killing-woman-sarpanch-in-raigad/article7066434.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/chhattisgarh-woman-sarpanch-killed-for-lighting-mothers-pyre/article7066434.ece)

22. A. Chawla, ‘What the dismal number of women elected this time tells us’, *The Indian Express*, 6 May 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/what-the-dismal-number-of-women-elected-this-time-tells-us-7304761/>

23. UN Women, Violence against women in politics, 2014, op. cit.

24. S. Rajendran, ‘The iconic image of Jayalalithaa looking through her torn saree, photographer remembers’, *The News Minute*, 6 December 2016. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/iconic-image-jayalalithaa-looking-through-her-torn-saree-photographer-remembers-53901>

25. Full interview on the Youtube Channel ‘SimiGarewalOfficial’, op. cit.

26. B. Rao, ‘Tamil Nadu’s women leaders live, work in the shadows of violence’, *IndiaSpend*, 21 April 2018. <https://www.indiaspend.com/tamil-nadus-women-leaders-live-work-in-the-shadow-of-violence-95289/>

27. A. Nagaraj, ‘Denied a chair, Dalit women confront discrimination on Indian village councils’, *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 4 January 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-women-politics/denied-a-chair-dalit-women-confront-discrimination-on-indian-village-councils-idUSKBN2991QK>

28. B. Rao, ‘Tamil Nadu’s women leaders live, work in the shadows of violence’, op. cit.

29. G. Mendonca, ‘Maharashtra: Man held for raping, killing woman sarpanch in Raigad’, *The Times of India*, 30 December 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/navi->

30. P. Dahat, ‘Woman sarpanch killed for lighting mother’s pyre’, *The Hindu*, 4 April 2015. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/chhattisgarh-woman-sarpanch-killed-for-lighting-mothers-pyre/article7066434.ece>

31. R. Tiwari, ‘The story of the guest house’, *The Indian Express*, 16 January 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/mayawati-akhilesh-yadav-sp-bsp-alliance-guest-house-attack-5540258/>

32. The Quint, ‘1995 guest house scandal: How Mayawati, Mulayam turned arch-rivals’, *The Quint*, 19 April 2019. <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/mayawati-mulayam-singh-guest-house-scandal#read-more>

33. R. Tiwari, ‘The story of the guest house’, op. cit.

the misogyny, the Indian media—also dominated by men³⁴—often fails to do so. Instead, it ends up often reporting on politics and on women in politics from a patriarchal gaze. A disproportionate emphasis goes to appearances,³⁵ women’s clothes,³⁶ and their personal lives. Women politicians are routinely addressed by their first names in news articles and even during interviews, even as male leaders are addressed more formally.

An interview³⁷ of Lok Sabha MP Mahua Moitra by anchor Karan Thapar for *The Wire* is representative of several of these challenges. Thapar told Moitra that he had ‘rarely seen a woman MP who is so well dressed’ as her. In her reply, Moitra did not mince her words. She said, ‘This is a question I get all the time, and sometimes it annoys me... It seems almost silly that I get asked about my clothes when there are so many in the country who have [just] three or four sets of clothes. So, it seems frivolous that we spend so much time discussing this.’

Thapar also questioned Moitra on her relationship with her party boss Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister

of West Bengal: ‘Both you and Mamata (Banerjee) are strong-willed, determined women. Do you get along with each other? Or do you clash as well?’ The question reflects a popular stereotype that two strong women may not get along with each other.

The formal news media is not the only problem. As social media has become a critical site of political discussion, it has also become a site where outspoken women become targets of misogynistic disinformation campaigns. In 2020, a study by Amnesty International India³⁸ found that one in every seven tweets that mentioned women politicians in India was ‘problematic’ or ‘abusive’. ‘People should know what women in politics endure, what they have to put up with and how unequal it becomes for them. It is such a tough battlefield, so to speak. Really I do believe that Twitter is my workplace,’ Shazia Ilmi, a member of the BJP told Amnesty. ‘But if my workplace were to be a battlefield, all the time, would I be able to contribute to the cause that I represent, easily and with fairness, if I am constantly being attacked for being a woman.’³⁹

Despite all these, women carry on to carve their space. They persist with grit, but find tactics to help them survive the many challenges that are thrown their way. One of the ways that India’s politics can transform is if women build grassroots capacity within political parties, finds Tanushree Goyal. In her research, Goyal⁴⁰ found

38. Amnesty International India, *Troll Patrol India: Exposing online abuse faced by women politicians in India*. 2020. Available at: https://decoders.blob.core.windows.net/troll-patrol-india-findings/Amnesty_International_India_Troll_Patrol_India_Findings_2020.pdf

39. Ibid.

40. T. Goyal, ‘Local Female Representation as a Pathway to Power: A Natural Experiment in India’. 1 May 2020. <https://ssrn.com/>

that ‘in state constituencies with more women in local politics, local women politicians experience greater career progression, and state women politicians are more likely to get renominated.’

Pointing to the interlinked nature of politics in India, where political leaders at one level can support or sabotage politicians at other levels, Goyal (2021) observed:⁴¹ ‘[W]e see male dominance across levels, which sustains a ‘bad equilibrium’ that keeps women out of politics... [and] this bad equilibrium breaks through female-led party building, that is, when women organize successfully inside political parties, inside the structures of power.’

India has seen some women politicians taking the initiative to widen the space for other women to enter and rise in politics. Under Jayalalithaa’s leadership, her party All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) became the first to reserve a third of organizational positions for women. While women are nowhere close to having parity within the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee, they occupy a relatively larger space as compared to the norm otherwise. The party also put forth over 40% women as candidates for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Writing in *Article 14*, Gilles Verniers and Maya Mirchandani (2021) observed:⁴² ‘Unlike other women chief ministers who work in a quasi-

[abstract=3590118](http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3590118) or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3590118>

41. A. Chawla, ‘Why women’s presence in political parties is crucial to closing the political gender gap’, *#WomenLead*, 13 April 2021. https://womenlead.substack.com/p/why-womens-presence-in-political?utm_source=url

42. G. Verniers and M. Mirchandani, ‘How Mamata’s Trinamool broke the glass ceiling for women in politics’, *Article 14*, 22 March 2021. <https://www.article-14.com/post/how->

34. UN Women, *Gender representation in Indian newsrooms*. Full report 2021. https://uploadsssl.webflow.com/6113c2e0f67a66749c146bf4/611a7dafd07bb30c0a763f2e_Gender2020.pdf

35. India TV News Desk, ‘Most beautiful women in Indian Parliament’, *India TV*, 5 January 2015. <https://www.indiatvnews.com/politics/national/beautiful-women-in-indian-parliament-18171.html>

36. Asian News International, ‘Sitharaman goes bright yellow for budget presentation’, *ANI*, 1 February 2020. <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/sitharaman-goes-bright-yellow-for-budget-presentation20200201113711/>

37. The Wire, Mahua Moitra, the 1st time MP taking India by storm, reveals the woman behind the politician’, *The Wire*, 25 September 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBZGjwfg67c>

exclusively male environment, Mamata has surrounded herself over time with women contributing to party work or to the cabinet. Five of her 42 ministers are women, some holding several important portfolios or portfolios not immediately connected to women's issues, like agriculture, fisheries, SMEs or land reforms. Her party's organization includes large numbers of women officeholders, and many women play a prominent role in campaigns.⁷

As this piece is being written, the state of Uttar Pradesh is holding polls for its legislative assembly. The share of women contesting the 2022 polls is better this time, than previously, because the Congress announced that 40% of its candidates would be women. Led by Priyanka Gandhi, the Congress is fighting the election under the slogan of '*Ladki hoon, lad sakti hoon*' (I am a girl, I can fight).

Women leaders have also called for greater unity across partisan lines to be able to change the way politics is for them. In the panel discussion mentioned earlier, Shaina NC lamented how often senior women leaders are not the most supportive of other women, especially younger women just starting out. Indian National Congress politician Shama Mohammad shared⁴³ that male members of the party often try to pit woman against woman, and recounted that when Chaturvedi was also in the Congress, they made a pact that if and when any male colleague would try to instigate either of them against the other, they would share what was said with each other.

For India's women politicians to be able to claim their full space, a lot needs to change, and not all of this can be

driven by the women themselves. Being a political leader requires an individual to lead a very public life—to care for issues beyond the household, and to be constantly in public gaze and scrutiny. For women, who are socialized very early to prioritize their roles as mothers, wives and as caretakers, being in politics means deviating from established cultural and social norms – and the deviation exposes them to added scrutiny, judgment, and even the burden of guilt. Women politicians continue to bear the burden of managing household responsibilities along with their duties as elected legislators.

If social norms continue to perpetuate a gendered division of labour in the household, they also continue to contribute to the stereotype of a political leader being a man. While large-scale research is missing, there is some evidence to indicate that this stereotype gets internalized fairly early in life, leading to a gender gap in political aspiration and ambition.⁴⁴

Social and cultural norms often change over longer periods of time, but having a more sensitized media and popular culture can accelerate that process. What can change sooner is political parties' exclusion of women. Quotas for women in legislatures can push parties to field more women. Internal policies of parties to put forth more women candidates can improve representation even otherwise. Similarly, sensitization of male leaders, internal codes of conduct, no tolerance of misogynistic comments in political institutions and during campaigns can all contribute to making our politics truly democratic and representative.

44. M. Shevika, 'Why isn't a career in politics aspirational for girls and women?' *India Development Review*, 28 January 2022. <https://idronline.org/article/gender/what-holds-girls-and-women-back-from-a-career-in-politics/>

Books

PERFORMING REPRESENTATION: Women Members in the Indian Parliament by Shirin M. Rai and Carole Spary. Oxford University Press, 2019.

WOMEN, POWER, AND PROPERTY: The Paradox of Gender Equality Laws in India by Rachel E. Brulé. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

WHEN Pamela Paxton included women in defining democracy, she found that incorrect operationalizations (which often measured only male suffrage and political rights) affected scholars' measurement of transition dates to democracy, their descriptions of the emergence of democracy, and their understanding of the causes of democratization.¹ What happens if we include women's behaviour when defining what representation means? What happens when we recognize that women are constrained and freed in different spaces in different ways, because they are embedded within many identities and structures beyond their gender, and they have interests that pertain to many of these groups?^{2,3,4}

These questions bring together a way to read two recent books on representation in India: *Performing Representation* by Shirin Rai and Carole Spary (2019), and *Women, Power, and Property* by Rachel Brulé (2020). At first glance they take very different approaches to studying women representatives in India, but in fact provide a way of redefining representation without the male gaze.

Brulé studies the effects that women's representation in *gram panchayats* has on the enforcement of gender-equalizing legal reforms for women, while Rai and Spary study women's representation in Parliament through a framework of

1. Pamela Paxton, 'Women's Suffrage in the Measurement of Democracy: Problems of Operationalization', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35(3), 2000, pp. 92-111.

2. Maxine Molyneux, 'Mobilisation Without Emancipation', *Women's Interests, States*, 1985.

3. Susan Franceschet and Jennifer M. Piscopo, 'Gender Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina', *Politics & Gender* 4(3), 2008.

4. Beth Rein Gold and Kerry L. Haynie, 'Representing Women's Interests and Intersections of Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in US State Legislatures', in Maria C. Escobar-Lemmon and Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson (eds.), *Representation*. Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 183-204.

'politics and performance'. While they appear as different frameworks that study different institutions and come to different conclusions about women's representation in India, reading them together offers insights into a new approach to studying representation—one that could re-theorize what it means when women are included in our observations of representational behaviour.

Rai and Spary's ambitious tome, *Performing Representation*, delves into the performances of women Members of Parliament (MPs). Some of their primary contributions to the field are in the many dimensions that they cover, as well as the study of representation through a novel 'politics and performance' framework. A central question of the book is: 'Does the persistent underrepresentation of women in Parliament affect our reception of the performance of representation and the claims to being a strong democracy in the broader politics of the country, and if so how' (p. 5)? Unlike gram panchayats, where quotas ensure that women are represented at higher proportions, there are no quotas in Parliament. Rai and Spary study how women perform in such a situation of scarcity.

'Performance and politics' is an institutional approach, but the analytical magnifying glass is placed in particular on the symbolic, the discursive, the aesthetics, and claim-making around the ways in which rules and procedures play out within Parliament. This framework is used alongside narrative research and ethnographic literature to guide their analyses. In particular, they study gender and representation at three levels: first, they consider the pathways that women take to getting selected for election; second, they interrogate how intersecting social structures (class, caste, religion, education, and profession) affect women's ability to perform their duties and garner resources; and third, they interrogate how women are (not) able to negotiate the pressures of their public and private roles. Their analysis focuses on 23 women in a 10-year period in two Parliaments—the 10th Lok Sabha (1994) and the 14th Lok Sabha (2004), and on both women and men MPs between 2009-2016.

Drawing from its nuance, description, and complexity, I make a few observations about what this book teaches us about women's representation in India. First, the authors show specific ways in which

‘scripts of womanhood’ enter into how women behave in Parliament. In other words, expectations about how women should and should not behave based on the roles they play in their homes and communities shape both their own behaviour, and the way that other MPs interact with them, in Parliament.⁵ Women do not automatically represent the interests of ‘women’ or even of particular types of women – for example, ‘women MPs temper overt critiques of Indian patriarchal society with more conciliatory tones to manage conflict and backlash’ (p. 165). They must take care to not be overtly conflictual,⁶ which is another example of a learned behaviour that is used as evidence for essential difference. There is no escape – ‘women in politics are very much made aware of their position as women when they enter the political field, whether they like it or not’ (p. 166).

Second, the ways in which political institutions work in concert to amplify or mitigate structural inequality – for elections, the incentives of political parties – are important to studying how and where women representatives have space to maneuver.⁷ Spary and Rai explore the importance of party political support in recruitment, re-nomination and re-election of incumbent women MPs over successive parliamentary terms. As one woman MP says, ‘Parties keep changing their view... now even within our party women get unwinnable seats – she loses, then they say women lose, then they [men] start saying that women should stay at home; I say we can do both – look after the family and work in politics’ (p. 305). Studying representation within just a single institution misses important parts of the puzzle of how the presence of women representatives does or does not translate to different modes of governance.

5. ‘Parliaments’, as Rai and Spary paraphrase, ‘like other institutions, are gendered – in their rules as well as in the performance of these rules; in the norms they support, aesthetics they present, in their leadership, and the everyday dramaturgy’ (Rai and Johnson, 2014, p. 299).

6. Conciliation, compromise, and adjusting is a key script of many performances of womanhood [some refs]. As Goetz (1995, 12) summarizes, ‘to be a woman in an organization where most of one’s professional colleagues and hierarchical superiors are men, comes with a sense of “trespassing”, of not exactly belonging, because of one’s difference from the male norm’ – and this results in particular behaviours of women who professionally enter such spaces, and of their male colleagues. Anne Marie Goetz, ‘Women Development Workers: Implementing Rural Credit Programmes in Bangladesh’.

7. This observation is in line with other work on representation – e.g., Jensenius (parties clump marginalized people together due to electoral incentives, which has adverse effects on certain marginalized groups), Purohit (bureaucrats matter for politicians’ work and in particular ways for women sarpanches).

Finally, Rai and Spary use qualitative codes in studying the performance of women and men politicians, helping us to go beyond dichotomous studies of success and failure. For example, their study of how women’s contributions in parliamentary debates are received and interpreted (in Chapter 5) delineate seven different response-types (promoted, lauded, acknowledged, prevented, ignored, silenced, or delegitimized). While some of these response-types may also be used in response to men politicians’ contributions, others may not be and there may be asymmetric effects on how representatives do the work of representing based on gender. By typologizing response-types, inquiries into the dynamics and nature of representation can be addressed in future research on representation.

Rai and Spary provide us with leverage into seeing that when women are in power, they may be performing politics in a different way than we are used to categorizing ‘types of representation’. This is because women negotiate complex institutional and social terrains and gender role performances. Performance as a framework adds a valuable, descriptive and conceptual approach to a field dominated by quota-inspired natural experiments to interpret effects of women’s representation while often using narrow definitions of what such representation actually means or looks like. It brings us vital insights into how women traverse the fraught terrains of being political representatives.

Brulé’s book, *Women, Power, and Property*, takes a very different perspective from Rai and Spary’s: she investigates the effects of women’s representation through local-level quotas. Her approach to politics is centred on economics, bargaining, and intrahousehold negotiations. Her central empirical argument delineates a causal relationship between women’s political representation and their economic power (in particular, land ownership). Perhaps even more than the causal inferences, Brulé’s theory on *how* women’s representation impacts enforcement of their economic rights and subsequent welfare prompts some of the most intriguing questions and ways forward for thinking about the study of representation.

The argument of *Women, Power, and Property* is that political power through quotas transforms: ‘simply reserving the highest elected position in a given village government for a woman can set in motion seismic waves that unsettle this entire system’ (p. 9). Brulé argues that quotas for women in local-

level councils lead to the enforcement of their property rights, which can also lead to backlash and resistance from family members and negative externalities like lower rates of daughter births. However, quotas also transform resistance into support through ‘integrative bargains’ in societies with moderate socioeconomic inequality, where Brulé theorizes that there is more potential to coordinate around new social norms.

A key element of Brulé’s theory focuses on marriage negotiations – particularly around dowry – as a critical moment for women to acquire land inheritance from natal family. Here, women *sarpanches* – gatekeepers – may come in as catalysts and facilitate ‘integrative bargains’ between unmarried daughters and their family members. She argues that in a simultaneous decision-making model of bargaining, ‘a brother may be willing to cede significant inheritance rights if his sister simultaneously offers not only to deny any groom who demands dowry but also to choose a marriage that enables her to share a duty of caring for elderly parents. The brother benefits by offsetting the loss in exclusive property rights by minimizing other monetary obligations (to transfer land for dowry) and social obligations (shared care for elder parents)’ (p. 46). Brulé also posits that there is an overall welfare gain for the household – ‘the family has avoided selling valuable ancestral land to pay for a daughter’s dowry and is able to distribute inheritance rights equally to a daughter and son, without reducing a son’s quantum of inheritance’ (p. 46). Her argument contributes to study of women’s representation in three ways. First, its focal point centres around a negotiation between family members around the institution of marriage – a critical point for women. Second, it expands the repertoire of governance actions of representatives to also being behaviours inside of what was often considered ‘private’ space of the household (and thus out of the realm of public politics). Third, it leads us to put our analytical gaze on the social norms within which representation is deeply embedded.⁸

Brulé’s theory of ‘integrative bargains’, and the role that women *sarpanches* play in them, forms the backbone of the causal story of the book. It bears food

8. The crux of Brulé’s book, which I have not focused on here due to space constraints, is empirical: To test her gatekeeper theory, Brulé uses linear regression models and data from the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS) dataset from 2006/9 covering rural households across 17 Indian states. She complements her quantitative analysis with an impressive 500 individual interviews across Andhra Pradesh, Haryana,

for thought for the overall study of democratic representation. Conceptually, is the hypothesized mechanism here – women *sarpanches* helping families to compromise and negotiate – equivalent to ‘enforcement’, or is this a wholly new type of political behaviour on the part of representatives? Do natal families really want to give their daughters land when the economic tradeoffs are equal for the sons and other members of the family? And how much agency does the average daughter have in negotiations – for example, the choice to give up dowry (what of parents who begin to save up for dowries from the minute they have a girl child)?⁹ In this social milieu, would the natal family prefer to distribute inheritance rights equally as long as there are no economic costs? Further study of non-economic preferences here is perhaps as important as understanding the economic ones. Brulé’s theory lays out fascinating areas for further research by shining a light on the very household and community spaces and institutions (such as marriage) that particularly matter for both women citizens and women representatives.

These studies prompt us to think about what the representation of women by women means, in two different institutions and through two different methodologies. In considering these works together, we come away with fruitful inspiration to interrogate the ‘traditional’ way of thinking about politics. The books

Maharashtra, and Delhi. Her empirical findings are that across India, where there are reservations, women are more likely to inherit property and less likely to get a dowry. She also finds evidence of higher levels of intrahousehold violence, intrahousehold conflict between parents and children, and lower rates of married daughters living close to their natal households, for women who gain property after marriage. A striking finding is that exposure to quotas lowers the proportion of daughters that mothers bear by 5-20 percentage points, which Brulé conceptualizes as backlash to women’s representation, and hence a ‘paradox’ of gender-equalizing reform. Overall, Brulé presents a helpfully complex picture: female representation in *gram panchayats* both leads to the enforcement of gender-equalizing economic reforms but also has unexpected negative externalities.

9. At what point would they sell off ancestral land (would it be just before marriage, or would it be many years before?), or to choose a husband whose household is closer or further from her natal household (do young women get to exercise such voice in the marriage market if they negotiate? How prevalent do we expect this level and type of negotiation and choice to be?) As Brulé references from Chowdhry (1997), ‘The only ideal and *izzatwala* (honourable) pattern of inheritance is acknowledged to be by males from males. This means basically that daughters and sisters who are potential introducers of fresh blood and new descent lines through their husbands are to be kept from exercising their inheritance rights. With the result that the most virulent objection to the breach of caste/community taboos in marriage comes from the powerful landowning castes of the village’ (quoted on p. 1025, Brulé 2020).

illuminate that when women enter traditionally male spaces, they behave (and ‘represent’) differently than men politicians. This is because women representatives face challenges unique to their position in Indian society – for example, they must ‘compromise’ and ‘adjust’ inside of political institutions order to be taken seriously. They also encourage others to compromise, and this becomes part of their governance style. In effect, women ‘do’ politics differently – not because they are essentially different, but because they have very different constraints both inside and outside of the political institutions that they enter and negotiate. Scripts of Indian womanhood, and its intersections with the other social structures they are embedded in, follow women wherever they go. When thinking about what happens when they enter political institutions, conventional views of representation have no way of assessing how compromise enters a female representative’s actions.

After reading Brulé and Rai and Spary’s studies, we might ask: how can we study the politics of representation without a male gaze?

1. When are political institutions forced to see inside families, and when do they still find ways to turn a blind eye? Feminist judicial scholar Catharine MacKinnon has written extensively about the fiction of ‘private’ spaces.^{10,11} Much of women’s subordination is reinforced through the way that the state chooses to define what is private, and hence explicitly chooses not to regulate, privileging group or family norms over individual rights. It is not a coincidence that the space in which women face the most violence and subjugation has always been that which the state deems as the ‘intimate’ and the ‘private’. Brulé shows us, however, that when women are sarpanches, new focal points and spaces could become ‘public’. For example, marriage negotiations between family members and between families – traditionally in the realm of ‘private’ and ‘community’, could come under the state’s purview in some circumstances. How can the state make those circumstances more readily available? What actors are replaced (e.g., traditional caste elites) when it does?

As James Scott says in *Seeing Like a State*, ‘we must never assume that local practice conforms with

state theory.’¹² This is especially true for women’s lives – which the state often chooses not to see by deeming the spaces they spend the majority of their lives in as ‘private’. What happens when the state – through women representatives – observes different focal points in its citizens’ lives than it traditionally has (because it has only seen and mapped the society that it governs through men representatives’ and bureaucrats’ eyes)? This is a ripe area for further research.

Conversely, the state may also be completely resistant to making such observations, even when thrust directly before it. As Rai and Spary show, familial support matters deeply for women MPs’ recruitment and career trajectories in Parliament, but party institutions and Parliament do not change their tactics to ‘see’ this and support it. Women MPs often do not want to be the spokespeople for ‘women’s issues’. Though the family could become a new focal point because of women MPs’ entry into the institution of Parliament, various institutional rules, procedures, and norms of operating prevent that from happening. Understanding when the state ‘sees’ a new aspect of citizens’ lives, versus when it continues to designate it as ‘private’ space is central to our understanding of how the state operates and governs and an important avenue for further studies on women’s representation.

2. We need new typologies to characterize and describe ‘the work that politicians do’ when women are also politicians. Much of what politicians do happens in society, and outside of political institutions. Women representatives may engage with the citizenry – not just other women, but also men – differently than men representatives do. For example, a social script that many women are expected to follow is one of persuading and encouraging compromise in complex emotional and social negotiations between family members. This is a particularly valuable skill to have as a mediator in disputes and negotiations between citizens - many of which are between family members. While men sarpanches may also get involved in different types of disputes, women sarpanches involve themselves – their role in negotiation facilitation – differently.

The counterfactual to the woman sarpanch intervening in marriage negotiations in Brulé’s book is the man sarpanch either intervening in a different way, or not intervening at all. Regardless of how

12. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. Yale University Press, 2008.

10. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Harvard University Press, 1987.

11. Catharine A. MacKinnon, ‘Sex Equality Under the Constitution of India: Problems, Prospects, and ‘personal laws’, *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 4(2), 2006, pp. 181-202.

widespread and effective the negotiation actually is, the fact that women representatives may get involved in this way in citizens' lives is a different manner through which politics happens on the ground. Thus, women representatives may negotiate and act differently not only inside, but also outside of the political institutions that they become part of. How do we characterize all the new, 'non-traditional' (perhaps non-male is a better descriptor) forms of 'political work' that women sarpanches may be doing? What new forms of representation and state responses may come out of asking this question?

3. How do we look beyond hegemonic male models of leadership? Theories of women's representation need to more explicitly use the logic of gendered constraints to describe what kinds of agency women choose to exert and where, based on both institutional parameters¹³ and the scripts their societies and households expect them to play. Women have agency, but what, how, and when they choose to strategize, and how they exercise agency are different from what we have seen or theorized about before within political institutions. Women are most frequently inside of their homes, and sometimes in smaller community spaces. Historically, we have not seen the 'ways' of representing that women perform in political institutions because it has not empirically existed. Since this is a very recent phenomenon, I believe we are still using old theories about what men representatives do to study what women representatives are doing. What if instead, we theorized based on the scripts that women follow in their households and communities and the constraints that the new spaces they are entering (e.g., Parliament, *gram panchayat*) impose? Women perform within rigid constraints in gendered political institutions, and how they perform is different based on institutional history and rules/procedures.

For example, Rai and Spary illustrate how women have to perform according to their gender roles to be recognized, accepted, and heard in Parliamentary spaces. Their analysis interprets that women are more likely to perform 'service' than 'leadership'. However, 'service' is often also seen in the performance of male politicians and the organizations that support them. The RSS, of course, stands for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and the concept of 'seva' and the man 'sevak' has a long political history in India.¹⁴ So how is the

13. These are key, as Alyssa Heinze's (forthcoming) ethnography of women sarpanches in Maharashtrian gram panchayats shows.

14. R. Srivatsan. 'Concept of "Seva" and the "Sevak in the

performance of 'seva' of the women Parliamentarians in Rai and Spary different from that of men parliamentarians? It is likely different in different spaces (e.g., in front of fellow Parliament members in sessions, versus in front of citizens), and in its particular performance (e.g., distributing services to the poor,^{15,16} versus taking care of families and family members' sensitivities¹⁷—both different forms of service). It may also be different based on the other social structures that women are embedded in—for example, caste.¹⁸ Investigating the history of gendered roles and scripts of elected officials in different Indian communities would help us understand how women representatives expand the repertoire of political behaviour in various spaces.

A feminist, historical understanding of representation is an important first step for theorizing and testing hypotheses about the effects of women entering and staying inside of political institutions, and in studying institutional rules, norms, and procedures. While we know a lot about how women's reservations and descriptive representation correlates with various outcomes in particular contexts, we know much less about how women's presence has the potential to change how the state sees and governs, what spaces it governs within, and what political institutional procedures and norms may be helping or hindering the expanded repertoire of political behaviour and representation that results when women representatives enter the picture. Delving into the assumptions, mechanisms and performances that Brulé, and Rai and Spary highlight in their absorbing works inspires us to approach studying representation from a fresh lens: one which casts aside a scholarly

Freedom Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(5), 2006, pp. 427-38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4417766>.

15. Tariq Thachil, 'Embedded Mobilization: Nonstate Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India', *World Politics* 63(3), Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 434-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23018777>.

16. Soundarya Chidambaram, 'The "Right" Kind of Welfare in South India's Urban Slums: Seva vs. Patronage and the Success of Hindu Nationalist Organizations', *Asian Survey* 52(2), University of California Press, 2012, pp. 298-320. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.2.298>.

17. Swati Dyahadroy, 'Exploring Gender, Hindutva and Seva', *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(17), 2009, pp. 65-73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40279187>.

18. Manuela Ciotti, 'Resurrecting Seva (Social Service): Dalit and Low-Caste Women Party Activists as Producers and Consumers of Political Culture and Practice in Urban North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71(1), [Cambridge University Press, Association for Asian Studies], 2012, pp. 149-70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41350057>.

male gaze and expands the boundaries of what democratic representation actually is.

Surili Sheth

PhD Candidate, Political Science
University of California, Berkeley

GENDERING MINORITIES: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity by Sherin B.S. Orient
Blackswan, New Delhi, 2021.

Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity by Sherin BS is a critical intervention on the intersection of gender politics and minority politics, with a particular focus on debates in Kerala. The book analyses the entanglements of multiple identities such as minority, religious and gender in situating the agency of Muslim women's position in Kerala.

Primarily, Sherin BS questions the metanarratives surrounding the Muslim women's question in Kerala, which is abstractly centred on the binary of oppression and resistance. Here, Muslim women are categorized as victims who need saving from the patriarchal male culture of the minority Muslim community. This has become a hegemonic discourse across the whole range of the political spectrum, exemplified in the pan-Indian discussions on the Shah Bano case and further reflected in the mainstream feminist discourse in Kerala.

Second, Sherin BS problematizes the appropriation of gender discourse by the Hindu nationalists and other Islamophobic forces to systemically vilify the Muslim community. Sherin BS's approach opens a new pathway to identify and think through these entanglements of power, subjectivity, and freedom in contemporary feminist discourse in Kerala through a post-foundationalist framework. Sherin BS's task is not to abandon the foundation of feminism but to identify the changing foundations and contingencies of feminist politics to extricate the complex and ever-evolving subjectivity of minority Muslim women.

The first chapter is a historical reconstruction of Muslim women politics in Kerala by mapping the history of Muslim women's political and spiritual participation. The singular emergence of Muslim women agency is traced from the premodern Indian ocean world to 20th-century Islamic reform movements. The author mainly explores the evolution, continuity and discontinuities of matrilineal traditions and practices of Muslims in Kerala and further argues that Muslim women's agency is a central constitutive feature of the Muslim community's political existence

in Kerala. Sherin BS analyses two key figures: Arakkal Beevi, ruler of the Arakkal Kingdom, a Muslim dynasty in Kannur, and Beema Beevi, a saint-preacher who hails from Trivandrum in order to show how the historical role of Muslim women as rulers and spiritual leaders has been crucial in the formation of Islam in Kerala.

The second chapter explores Muslim women's agency in the context of Islamic reform movements in Kerala by rethinking the politics of gender, modernity, and religion in Kerala. The reformist efforts of Hindu upper caste males are widely considered the driving force of Kerala's so-called progressive cultural space. The socio-political engagements of anti-caste, non-Brahmanic leaders like Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru have also received recognition within mainstream discourse after the emergence of subaltern movements. However, the Muslim reformist movements were sidelined in the historiography of the reform movements of Kerala. Muslim identity itself is marked as backward and regressive in mainstream narratives, and it has been reproduced through the images of uncivilized, patriarchal Muslims in popular movies and literature, despite their social mobility and renaissance through education and transformative encouragement and acceleration of women's participation in various fields of society and politics (p. 91). As Sherin BS rightly points out, the uniqueness of Muslim reformist movements is completely ignored in the existing narrative of the Kerala renaissance.

Through this systemic ignorance, the 'burden' of patriarchy – which is universal to all reform movements – is misconstrued as the exclusive problem of Muslim others to make space for the progressive claims of modern Kerala. The otherization of the Muslim community in Kerala happens through a selective invocation of gender discourse. For instance, the early Muslim women reformist intervention of Haleema Beevi is deliberately excluded from the mainstream reformist rhetoric in Kerala. This is served to construct a patriarchal minority community that is less progressive, less gender sensitive and less secular compared to an ever-evolving progressive Kerala society. But the books show that Muslim women activists were involved and reconfigured gender relations within the Muslim community in the light of Islamic theological and political language over the last hundred years. Sherin BS summarizes: 'In their engagement with modernity, Muslim women attempted to accommodate the newly defined cultural space, redefining and internalising modernity integrated with

the spiritual strength of Islam, which is usually construed as the antithesis of modernity.’ (p. 127)

The final chapter is based on the contemporary debates on gender and Islam in Kerala. Sherin BS critically reviews the Malayalam novel *Barsa* (2007) by Khadija Mumtaz. The novel has received wide recognition in the Kerala public sphere as a critical feminist literary text to popularize gender issues within Muslim communities. Sherin BS observes that the reception of the novel is coupled with the post 9/11 context of Islamophobia and discourse on Islamic fundamentalism in Kerala (p. 166). Mumtaz develops a critical insider perspective to address gender issues within the Muslim community. However, Sherin BS argues that Mumtaz’s critical reflection homogenizes Muslim women’s lives in a singular narrative of oppressed Muslim women and fails to engage with the operations of Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia in producing the gendered narratives of Muslims and Islam. The third chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of other literary and political narratives in the academic spheres of Kerala.

Sherin BS’s broader aim is to reimagine the Muslim women’s question from a minority inclusive framework rather than exclusive gender discourse. One of the possible drawbacks is its focus on the minority status of Muslim women and its clubbing with the religious identity of Muslim women subject. Her analysis oscillates between the tensions of minority studies and Muslim women studies. However, the religious questions of Muslim women demand an autonomous interrogation considering the recent shifts in Muslim women studies across the globe. Nevertheless, Sherin BS’s reading is a rare attempt in contemporary scholarship to trace the construction of Muslim women in the history and politics of Kerala.

Ummul Fayiza

PhD candidate, School of Law
University of Warwick, UK

WAITING FOR SWARAJ: Inner Lives of Indian Revolutionaries by Aparna Vaidik. Cambridge University Press, UK, 2021.

AFTER a long silence that followed the works of David Laushey and Manini Chatterjee on Bengal revolutionaries, a clutch of serious historical studies has begun to appear in recent years: on the Ghadr Party, on the Hindustan Socialist Republican Party, and, above, all, on Bhagat Singh. They explore new

territory: women comrades of revolutionaries, the literature they wrote and inspired, popular lore and representations in different media – to mention just a few themes.

Vaidik’s monograph makes several important departures within this stream, and I will begin with two very major ones. Despite the lure of Bhagat Singh’s image, she chose to focus on Chandrasekhar Azad: a somewhat forgotten and shadowy comrade of Singh who began his political career with the Congress, then joined the Hindustan Republican Party and eventually migrated into the HSRA and became their chief logistical organizer. Long overshadowed by Singh’s charismatic image, Azad, however, seems to have gathered some recent valorization during the 2017 celebrations of Independence which I should mention. Central government televised portrayals tucked away the socialist and atheist Singh somewhere in the middle of a long line of revolutionaries. But Azad is placed at the head, with the *janeyu* prominently displayed.

Vaidik forms a bridge between the less-known HSA and the HSRA. She also encompasses several other political formations in North India, as she tracks Azad’s colourful career. In between, he had also joined a monastic order in order to procure its funds for the revolutionary cause: an ambition which he gave up in disgust when the chief monk refused to die soon, leaving Azad as his successor. Vaidik’s narrative allows us many such fascinating and unexpected glimpses into revolutionary lives. It is also populated with an impressively large cast of characters who surrounded Singh and Azad, in all their mutual interactions and relationships.

Vaidik chose Azad as the central figure in order to clear up a somewhat distorted image of the HSRA as a gathering of committed socialists alone – an image created by Singh’s later turn to Marxism. By turning the focus on the non-socialist and determinedly brahmanical Azad, she is able to bring out the political diversities among the comrades. She could, perhaps, also have added something about their religious and caste thinking. She does mention the Arya Samaj linkages of several figures but what that meant for them is not quite clear. She also mentions that Azad never abandoned his brahman identity: but what else did this involve apart from the ever visible *janeyu*? Indeed, since the times were beginning to swell with vicious communal antagonism, one wonders if they had thoughts about inter community relationships. The influence of Bankimchandra’s *Anandamath* was, as she points out, enormous in creating an example of

armed patriotic ascetics. But Anadamath also contained the first communal hate speeches which were extremely powerful: how did the revolutionaries respond to that? Anadamath, moreover, portrayed the persistence of love and even occasions when desire did find an outlet – punishment, however, was deferred till the mission was accomplished. How did the stern celibacy of revolutionaries resonate with those passages?

The last of the HSRA group to be apprehended by the police, Azad was a master of infinite disguises – Vaidik’s term for him is *bahurupiya* or a professional entertainer who can assume multiple personas. We have heard a lot about how Bhagat Singh eluded the state as he went around as a Sahib. It seems Azad’s range was even broader. In fact, the book begins with a very interesting account of his travels as he assumed dizzyingly pluralized personalities: from a *sanyasi* to a mechanic. One would have liked to know a bit more about methods of police surveillance which eventually tracked him down.

Despite Vaidik’s disclaimer that Bhagat Singh is not the chief protagonist of her narrative, he does often share centre stage with Azad. Moreover, both lives are intricately interwoven with many others: Sachindranath Sanyal, Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan, to mention just a few. In fact, Vaidik could have emphasized the unique presence of a Muslim among these revolutionaries which practically never happened in other armed groups. A Bengali Muslim later wrote how he was spurned by the terrorist organization which he had wanted to join. The pledge in the name of Kali, and the elaborate Hindu initiation ceremony stood in the way: perhaps also strengthened somewhat by communal distrust. In this context, I find it somewhat surprising that the initiation ritual is missing in Vaidik’s work, as are the words of the pledge they took.

The second critical departure lies in Vaidik’s emphasis on the quotidian life of revolutionaries. She makes a very important point. We remember this group as young men who are hungry for action: throwing the bomb, raiding homes and trains, shooting the Sahib and the final embrace of martyrdom. Vaidik, however, reminds us that the moments of actual action were few and far between, and they were also brief. Most of their time as revolutionary conspirators was spent in waiting – preparing and disciplining themselves endlessly for action. Those activities occupied the bulk of their political life which, in any case, was remarkably short-lived: cut down by

arrests, prison or the gallows. In fact, Azad was the only one of his group who could evade arrest for a long time after Saunders’ killing.

The revolutionary-everyday was a time for bodybuilding through an exacting regime of exercises, supervised by Azad. But it was also a time for intense reading – as Vaidik shows, the HRA and the HSRA members were surprisingly voracious readers of world revolutionary literature. Vaidik provides us with an exhaustive catalogue of what they read, and it really surprised me to find so many of the pre-Bolshevik Russian Narodnik and anarchist classics among them. Bengal revolutionaries, in contrast, read more of the Irish literature. A question, however, remains. Did they read them all in their complete English translations, or did they use abbreviated versions, or even brief summaries of these works in other books. Chernyshevsky’s *What is To Be Done* – a very important resource for Bhagat Singh, as Vaidik shows – in particular is a large and multilayered tome and it is surprising that Bhagat Singh could have procured an unabridged translation. It would have added to this important aspect of their intellectual life if we had more information about what they made of their rather eclectic readings that came out of conflicting political perspectives: Narodniks themselves had multiple strands, even apart from the Bolsheviks and Anarchists. What accounts for the different preferences of the HSRA members, for clearly Singh and Azad belonged to quite different political stocks? Did they read the books selectively?

A significant point that emerges from the book is the breadth of their political thinking – in contrast to Bengal’s Anushilan and Jugantar who, in this phase, were preoccupied with methods of assassination alone. In this regard their manifesto is really remarkable because it visualized independent India quite precisely as a loose federated republic instead of a tightly centralized unitary state. Vaidik could have explained the preference more fully.

Vaidik reveals that there was more to the revolutionary-everyday than plotting the killing and the dying. It is delightful to read about their jokes and quarrels, their love for the cinema and for Chaplin, their ability to compose songs and to sing, their impatience with the meager diet in dens where Azad ensured that the hard-earned funds would be kept aside for those destined to be sent for action first. Suddenly we recall that these were young men with a sense of humour, a capacity for great mutual affection, occasional bouts of greed for milk and sweets. Their banter is especially captivating and the stories they made up about how each would be caught

and die according to his favourite foible are hilarious rather than black gallows humour. One would have expected a bit more about their political discussions and arguments but, perhaps, the sources – memoirs, biographies and recollections – do not allow for that. One also misses a fuller discussion of the mutual perceptions of Gandhians and revolutionaries about each other.

In fact, Vaidik's narrative actually lends itself to an interesting contrast and comparison between Gandhian and revolutionary ideas. Both shared a similar preoccupation with dietary regimes, about sacrifice, about asceticism and renunciation of desire, about the detailed art of self-discipline. Like them, Gandhi, too, believed that the ascetic patriotic body should also be virile: strength lies in perpetually cultivating and repressing male potency.

Vaidik, however, points out an interesting contrast with Gandhians: the easy camaraderie among revolutionaries and the lack of hierarchy and a command structure. That, too, is very different from the Chittagong revolutionaries for example where members had to abide by the orders of Surya Sen all the time even when these irked them.

One wonders what actually lay behind the absolute sexual self-abnegation of these healthy young men who enjoyed – even when they rarely had them – some other pleasures of life. Did their dread of family life and marriage come from an anterior fear of heterosexuality that drove them into the celibacy pledge, rather than the notion that abstinence provides moral and physical energy? Vaidik has pointed out the possibility of homoerotic vibes.

There is a relative neglect of their relationship with their families which they left behind to face the undoubted wrath of the British. What did they feel about the parents and siblings they had abandoned, many of whom would have depended on them in old age?

Let me close this with one of the most striking aspects of the monograph: the eroticism which framed the image of revolutionary death. If they did control their impatience for the day of action, it seems they could barely control their longing for death. They hungered for the kiss of the noose, they called the gallows their chosen and beloved wife, they imagined how death would come to them, they thought of death as marriage. Apart from the aura of patriotic martyrdom which surely drove them to this path, what else was involved in this dream of death – for young men who had barely known life as yet? Or was it precisely because life and its manifold beauties and

possibilities were still unfamiliar that they could embrace the certainty of death so ardently?

The book is a pleasure to read, combining, as it does, rare analytical acumen and important insights with a very wide range of readings on global revolutionaries. Written in a captivating manner, it recreates revolutionary manhood in its diverse plurality, in its profoundly human qualities, with its fun, foibles and problems – instead of merely freezing the characters in gestures of deathless heroism and martyrdom. All this, however, without subtracting an iota from their limitless courage and idealism.

Tanika Sarkar

Professor of History
Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

THE DREAM OF REVOLUTION: A Biography of Jayaprakash Narayan by Bimal Prasad and Sujata Prasad. Penguin Random House, Gurugram, 2021.

Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) saw many dreams but had his share of nightmare visitations too. His dreams were going rather well in the early years of his political life but at the end the nightmares came crashing through.

JP's best, perhaps also his happiest, days were when he was Jawaharlal Nehru's close companion and trusted ally in the 1930 and early 1940s. He was a dependable *enfant terrible*, and a great backup source for the restless socialist wing in the pre-Independence Congress party. Nehru and he had similar dreams, but JP's failing in those days, and later too, was that he believed in them in his waking hours as well. Time and again, there were rude knocks on the door, but JP did not heed them.

While his first disagreements with the Congress began with Sardar Patel, Rajagopalachari, and Rajendra Prasad in pre-independence times, Nehru disappointed him as well in Independent India. Reluctantly, but firmly, he often criticised Nehru for not being vigilant enough on human rights and for letting authorities physically attack working class strikes. Congress's record after 1948 did little to cheer JP and he even complained how in Uttar Pradesh the party was turning 'fascist' as it was unmindful of workers' rights to protest and strike.

The Partition years were difficult for JP to accept, but he did not fault Nehru for that. What he could not ignore was when radical measures, as he saw them, were cast aside by Congress under Nehru, for the sake of political expediency. Though this left him bitter, he still

nursed an emotional and ideological affinity with Nehru. If one were to go by the letters they wrote to each other, this feeling was profoundly mutual. Their disagreements never became acrimonious and his daughter inherited this goodwill till she blew it with the Emergency.

For a full-bodied awareness of all this, and much more, we are lucky to have a sensitive, detailed, and critically appreciative biography of Jayaprakash Narayan by Bimal Prasad and Sujata Prasad. This father-daughter effort is, of course, a tribute to JP, but this volume is also a daughter's tribute to her late father, Professor Bimal Prasad, and what a fine tribute it is to both.

It was JP's ideological restlessness that led him to continuously scan the political horizon for a safe and friendly harbour to dock. The two ports he instantly, and instinctively, stayed away from were the ones that were outright communal or bourgeois right wing and, of the two, his distaste for the former was greater. He opposed all forms of communalism and like Nehru, he saw majority communalism as a greater threat. That one begets the other was not entirely lost on him. This is why he openly condemned the Muslim League too for fostering exclusiveness and non-involvement with the upsurges that were enveloping British ruled India.

Later when the Ranchi riots broke out in 1967, JP was livid with rage at the way massacres were carried out. Unsparing in his criticism he angrily remarked, 'There must be something terribly wrong with our upbringing, with the religious beliefs that have been inculcated in us, the education that is being imparted, the group attitudes that are being developed by assiduous propaganda to make it possible for human beings to change suddenly into bloodthirsty monsters.'

The authors of this volume adroitly highlight JP's rare gift to see subtleties of shade where others saw just black and white. It is this that set him apart from most intellectuals around him and also made him a perennial political misfit. For example, his criticism of the two nation theory took a turn quite unlike the usual argument that spoke of goodwill and historical conviviality. Instead, JP raised a theoretical issue when he questioned the convergence between nation and state in the minds of many commentators.

Accordingly, JP drew attention to the fact that Britain was one state but had several nations like the Scots, Irish and Welsh in it just as French, German and Swiss coexist in Switzerland. Why then, JP asked, can't Hindu and Muslim nations live amicably in a single nation state? The idea of 'two nations' was not debunked, as is often the case. The complication JP's problematic raised was: 'Why should this multiplicity (or diversity) matter

when it comes to making a unified nation-state?' Yes, there may be more than one nation in India's nation-state, so what? Once this issue was placed upfront, the tenor of the debate underwent a drastic change.

It was this ability to view several established opposites as subtleties that probably explains why JP found it difficult to drop ideological anchor and settle down. His student years in America opened his mind to high political theory which he read as avidly as he did Steinbeck and P.G. Wodehouse. He came back to India a socialist but soon disassociated himself from Soviet style communism. JP astutely recognized that the idea of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was a bogus one and that this doctrine was never there in any of Marx's works. JP could have well added that in the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx had clearly said that communists should never form a party; a warning that Leninist Marxists simply ignored.

Later, when he was drawn to Mahatma Gandhi, non-violence for him was not an inviolable dogma. At one point he even felt that should there ever be a Gandhian state, the 'Stalins of Gandhism' would make a mess of it just as Lenin's successors had mangled the Soviet Union. Again, by viewing social facts as a subtle engagement of passions JP could justify why a bayonet wielding soldier deserved humane treatment in a prisoner of war camp.

The Gandhian streak in JP lingered for long in spite of his equivocations on non-violence. What appealed to him most was the sense of self sacrifice for the larger good which he felt was so quintessentially what the Mahatma preached. To that end JP organized a voluntary band of young activists who would combine philanthropy with social uplift to energize redistribution of wealth but without cataclysmic outcomes. It was never violence versus non-violence, or socialism versus capitalism, in their pure and absolute terms that attracted JP. For him it was important to work along the cracks and interstices of these ideological blocks and thus render them meaningful to everyday people.

This is why when Naxalism was growing in India in the 1960s, JP found himself reluctantly supportive of their spirit of rebellion as there was so much injustice in the countryside. However, he was critical of the CPI when it asked its followers to come to a protest meeting for land redistribution armed with sticks and spears as he felt this was an unwarranted justification of violence. His involvement with the Bhoodan Movement clearly indicated where he stood on violence versus non-violence, but that did not blind him to the injustices that the poor routinely faced.

This probably explains why JP stayed for as long as he did in the Congress though he had leading figures in it level serious charges against him. At one point in 1932, JP was even called the 'Congress brain'. JP's political involvement became even more tricky as his advocacy of partyless politics was expressed time and again while he himself was an integral part of a party. Later in the closing decades of the 1950s, JP passionately embraced Gandhian values and even advocated village republics and self-sufficient agro-industrial communities. Sadly, these high sounding views stayed as vague and impractical as they were when originally formulated by Gandhiji in *Hind Swaraj*.

There was then space for Marx and for Gandhi, just as there was space for the idealist in Nehru but also for the feisty Ram Manohar Lohia. The Congress Socialist Party had a diverse membership base. At one extreme there was Swami Sampurnanand, who was inspired by Vedantic ideals, and then there was Minoo Masani, an avowed Fabian. JP had no hesitation in straddling both these dimensions, as long as there was unanimity on the ideals of socialism.

It was not just Soviet style communism that JP found abhorrent, but he also disagreed with the easy equation of calling acts such as that of bank nationalization socialist. More importantly, for JP socialism could claim a legitimate place only after it had first ushered in democracy. His insistence on this principle comprehensively separated him from the communists of his time. People may accuse JP of being untidy in many of his political positions, but not on this one.

Though JP did fall out in the post-Independence years with Nehru and Lohia, for different reasons, of course, he never deprived them of his affection. He left the Congress fold to establish the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) in 1952 to underline the importance of achieving socialism without violence and Bolshevik conspiracies. Later, when he found the socialists were getting no traction, particularly with reference to labour and land struggles, he quit the PSP. He now readied himself to dive into Gandhian politics and this is what led him to Vinoba Bhave and the Gramdan-Bhoodan movement.

Predictably, he soon found fault with this approach too as it was far too subservient to goodwill and less inclined to apply pressure. In his heart, he had not forsaken the Congress altogether either. Initially, JP was on Indira Gandhi's side and even congratulated her when she became the prime minister. He was all praise for her in the way she handled the Bangladesh crisis. In his letters to her, he addressed her as 'Indu'. Soon, however, 'Indu' became 'Indira' and then 'prime minister' in step with his mounting criticisms against

Indira Gandhi's policies. His disenchantment with her began with bank nationalization and then climaxed sensationally with the Emergency of 1975. When JP was incarcerated post-Emergency in 1976, he wrote that the treatment meted out to him then was much worse than the way the British treated him in Lahore Fort jail.

JP's dream years were in the 1930s and early 1940s when he was seen as Jawaharlal Nehru's chosen one and likely successor. His escape from Hazaribagh Jail in 1942 was a sensation and it made him an immensely romantic figure. Gradually, his differences with Nehru resulted in JP drifting towards a more socialist position, hence his PSP affiliation. That was not the end of it, there were other disappointments on the way. After his born again Gandhian attachment to Bhoodan movement waned, he was tempted to abandon politics altogether.

The decade of the seventies was when JP scripted both his dramatic rise and fall. In 1974, he found himself as the leading mascot of the Bihar agitation to dissolve the Assembly. He rather cherished this position for he felt that he could finally realize his dream of 'total revolution'. But he was really deluding himself. It did not take long for this vision to become a dreadful disappointment as it broke into several pieces along predetermined party lines. Even Morarji Desai, as prime minister, ticked off JP when the latter queried about inner party decision making. It was JP, after all, who had given credibility to and buoyed the Janata Party and now he was being rudely sidelined. The dream of 'total revolution' soon dissolved and became his nightmare.

This biography of Jayaprakash Narayan by late Professor Bimal Prasad and his daughter, Sujata Prasad, is a labour of love to the dreamer who had to meet a tragic end for he dreamt too hard. Though the story this biography relates is sympathetic to JP, it is far from being hagiographic. The many errors of judgement that JP made, his naivete with regard to the Bhoodan movement, and indeed his unrealistic expectations of the Janata Party are presented unadorned. It is also a touching and painstaking effort by a daughter to bring her father's efforts to fruition. Professor Bimal Prasad had envisioned the book, had done the ground work for it but, sadly, did not live long enough to finish the project. It is to Sujata Prasad's credit that she brought to a fine conclusion what her father had started. With this book, JP lives again!

Dipankar Gupta
Retired Professor, School of
Social Sciences, JNU, Delhi

Comment

Agents of change

WHILE Covid-19 continues to cause medical, physical, social and psychological havoc across the globe, another significant aftermath of this pandemic has been the exposure and unveiling of the gross inequalities with which women of colour operate. Cases of domestic violence, unequal pay, underrepresentation and discrimination have made headlines across the world. Women, children and minorities have suffered exponentially more than others and with geopolitical unrest, the privilege and equity gap consistently seem to be widening. However, on the flip side of the spectrum, we see hope in the fact that young women of colour, specifically from the global south, are leading movements of change; they are occupying important positions of power and becoming increasingly important in conversations about policy and development. These young women of colour are making two important arguments – we are here to make change, and we are done taking no for an answer. ‘We had to let leaders know we’re not going to be intimidated by the very systems that seek to silence us.’¹ ‘We have the privilege to engage in the global world which our mothers did not have [so, we are driven to make change now].’²

To examine the motivations driving these women, we interviewed 11 women of colour. These women are the first generation of women, who have had exposure to the global arena through various means including education, employment, immigration and others, in their locales and families. These women have local roots and global aspirations for change; and so, we asked them

simple questions to understand what about the current moment and context is empowering them to take action – what is driving you? Why do you do what you do? And why now? We wanted to understand the ways in which this pandemic has facilitated, if not ignited the fires which are prompting them to act, and the answers we got are the light at the end of this dark tunnel that is Covid-19.

Our interviewees, aged 16-30, based in countries across the world ranging from Kenya, Nigeria, India, USA, Canada, the UK and others, belonged to different professions and were at different stages in their early careers. We spoke to students, actors, lawyers, trainees, public policy workers and businesswomen; and we found that their unique positioning and intersectionality, as the first generation of women in their families to have access to the global space and resources, empowered them to aspire for change *in this global*, and use it as a means to facilitate change in their local, everyday lives. Our interviewees were inherently linked to global paradigms in that they each had a story that connected them to these larger paradigms – the means encompassed many factors including but not limited to immigration, education or even digitalization. ‘We now have the space to talk – there is a global public space. This [online] camaraderie between women across the world is so great because it creates a big platform for engagement.’³

Arguably, global institutions of power, are and have been, created by white men to facilitate and further the interests of white men – these include political bodies, governmental institutions, the law and its courts, businesses and financial institutions, and, even academic settings. Women of colour, both in the global north and global south have been the exceptions to the norm in these global settings, as they are often the only ones in the room occupying seats that represent the BIPOC population. In local settings and communities, women of colour are crushed with patriarchal and oppressive

* **Vishakha N. Desai** is Senior Advisor for Global Affairs to President Lee C. Bollinger of Columbia University, Chair of the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University; **Shagun Sethi**, Programs and Operations Manager at Pontoka ESG Advisory, Director of Global Leadership, OneShared.World; **Sandi Gendi**, student at Queens University, Director of Global Leadership, OneShared.World

1. Vishakha Desai, Sandi Gendi, and Shagun Sethi, ‘Somehow, Still I Rise’, Unpublished, n.d.

2. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

3. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

traditions and expectations. These include the burden of marriage, childbirth, homemaking, and traditional stereotypes which push them towards certain kinds of work – service, nursing, teaching, and sexist contexts which facilitate abuse, including weak laws against rape and sexual assault, domestic violence and general settings which push women away from feelings of safety, which in turn, push them away from work. However, It is in this in-between space, the ‘new global’, the space between the global landscape and the local reality, the new public space, in which young women of colour (especially those from the global south) are emerging and finding their strength and voice. We found that when these women inhabit this ‘in-between’ space (between the global and the local), they gain the agency to find increased opportunities and equality in their daily lives.

We argue that this new global space has been ushered in the wake of Covid-19 – when work and education found a space online, walls of nationalism broke down, and created a new public space, an online/digital community, which empowered young women to step beyond their local roles and expectations and enabled them to participate in global conversations and on global platforms. While digital communication and platforms have existed long before the pandemic, the context of the pandemic and shift of all prominent institutions to online modes of operation, enabled minorities to engage with and work more frequently on these platforms; and unlike conventional public spaces, the digital public space was one that had the room to accommodate more people, given the nature of its abundance, thereby empowering more young women of colour to act. ‘I do what I do because I decided to stop being passive. Even a little change in the world or my community is worth the effort. I don’t want to remain a critic forever; I saw what I did not like and decided to take action.’⁴ With this, another notable change is that young women of colour are no longer the exception and their individual success is no longer the ‘newsworthy’ element of their work – instead it is this wave of equality and the large-scale increase in young women of colour that is the defining factor of this generation. With this influx, we see a need for public spaces and communities which have the ability to empower and enable. ‘The global is becoming the local – there is a new space created which allows for lines to be blurred, consistency to be fostered!’⁵

In the paradigm of representation and opportunities, there is an inherent hierarchy of socio-

4. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

economic privilege. At the top of this ladder are white, Euro-American men, who benefitted from and occupied important positions over the past three hundred years. White, Euro-American women come soon after, as they too have benefited from the oppression of the global south (Colonization, Slavery). Women of colour fall at the last rung of this ladder, as they face oppression not only because of the colour of their skin, their indigenous features and socio-economic status, but also because of their gender. Of course, within women of colour too, there is internal intersectionality and difference based on various factors including, but not limited to, economic and financial status, education, location, political context. Women of colour in the global north also differ from women of colour in the global south, with respect to access to opportunities, treatment in educational and professional organisations, among other factors.

However, in our research, an important finding was that those who have multiplicity and intersectionality in their identity, refuse to be defined in any one way, they refuse to be put in stereotypical boxes, and instead thrive on the multiplicity that globality allows. ‘The perception of “Who I should be” has helped me understand “Who I want to be” – I constantly strive to dismantle the beliefs and stereotypes attached to being a South Asian woman, because I am that, and so much more.’⁶ Women of colour who have been traditionally defined and put into stereotypical roles, can be seen breaking these stereotypes through digital platforms and movements ushering social, political and economic change. We have found that ‘While generational norms are currently being challenged by today’s society, this new generation of Women of Colour are changing their environments around them by breaking barriers for one another and for the next generation of women of colour to come.’⁷

With this dramatic rise in the number of young women of colour occupying important positions, driving movements from their local spaces and participating in global spaces, we see a need for a new sisterhood, a global community that has the potential to support young women of colour to come together, to collaborate, to support each other, to find mentorship, to find resources and rise up together as a group of women.

**Vishakha N. Desai, Shagun Sethi
and Sandi Gendi**

5. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

6. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

7. Desai, Gendi, and Sethi.

In memoriam

Gerson da Cunha 1929-2022

Why was I sitting in a darkened hall watching Toni Patel rehearse Rajika Puri as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*? I do not remember. But I do remember the doors of the auditorium opening behind me and Gerson da Cunha sweeping in, clad in his trademark white chikan kurta, carrying a portfolio of some kind, trailing busyness. He stopped when he saw me, ‘Dear boy,’ he said. ‘Do you mind if I ignore you? I am almost late.’ I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes to four. ‘Gerson,’ said Rajika. ‘The Gerson!’ He acknowledged this with a bow. He smiled at Toni Patel. ‘Do you need a minute?’ she asked. ‘To gaze upon all of you, yes,’ Gerson said. ‘Mislike me not for my hurry.’ There was a little flurry of laughter and after taking a turn around the stage and stamping a bit in a corner, he returned, in character, as Morocco.

‘Mislike me not for my complexion...’ The voice, that voice, rolled out into the dark theatre. It was a voice that held a knowingness, an acknowledgement of its own greatness. It was also a voice that acknowledged the Englishness of the lines for its diction was precise, the pentameter was treated with delicacy and suddenly, I was back in college, back to being ‘the whining schoolboy, with his satchel/and shining morning face, creeping like snail/unwillingly to school.’ There were many Gersons around and this man, the man with the voice and the undeniable stage presence was only one of them.

* This piece first appeared in Scroll.in

I remember meeting him in Imtiaz Dharker’s flat in London, decades later. Time had done some damage, so much that I began to admire the courage it must have taken to get himself on a plane to yet another film festival; I actually helped him pack his bags. We had a great lunch on that rainy day in late May and he told some elegant stories. I suggested that he should write a memoir. He said that he thought that would mean being self-important. Instead, Imtiaz suggested a series of essays, and she drew him a graphic, a design for the whole.

She remembers that day too: ‘It was a diagram of how he might plot his autobiography, the many pillars of his life and the web of connections between them. Before Gerson came we would draw up a list of plays and he went to everything. We all know he had a voracious appetite for theatre, but on his last visit we discovered that the Barbican Arts Centre downstairs reserved places for wheelchair users and then he was unstoppable. It was truly a case of “Where there’s a will there’s a wheelchair”. When he was home, over breakfast or dinner, he wanted to read and hear poetry. I will always think of him at this table, reading the lines by Jackie Kay on my chandelier of poems: “The dead don’t go till we do, loved ones./ The dead are still here/ holding our hands”.’

Imtiaz’s drawing – another passion Gerson and I shared – looked like a grove of trees, a metaphor for the many lives he had led: as ad man, as dramaturge, as social communicator.

Many years later, I was at work on a book on the painter Mehlli Gobhai and I thought it would be a good idea to meet one of his oldest friends. I called Gerson on his landline because everyone knew that his mobile was with his driver. 'Talk about Mehlli, dear boy?' he said, 'Any time after twelve.' That was the time he rose from bed, a nocturnal animal if ever there was one. He had his breakfast and we chatted. He illuminated Mehlli in a few sentences ('Have you ever noticed that he came back from the US after decades of staying there without a trace of an accent?') and suddenly we were talking about Gerson. I am used to this but this time, I had the good sense to come home and make notes.

Gerson told me that his mother had wanted him to be a doctor and so when he finished school he had joined the science section at St. Xavier's College. It was here that he encountered the men and women who would make up his circle of friends for the next seventy years of his life. It was also here that he would start acting in earnest. 'Every year, the college would put on a play that was staged on the feast of St Francis Xavier. That year, there were such a plethora of talent that it was decided that there would be two one-act plays instead of a full-length one.' He told me about Mehlli playing the angel of death and about himself as a spy with a broken leg, awaiting his death. And then suddenly he was off.

'I finished college and wrote off to the University of Nottingham; I did not want to be a doctor but I had enjoyed chemistry and thought I might make it as a researcher or something of that sort. I got a letter back saying that the university was swamped with demobbed soldiers so could I wait a year and then they would be glad to have me. I was walking in the Fort when I saw a huge signboard on Alice Buildings for Reuters. John Turner was the head; he and his wife Mavis were friends of my parents. I had a year to kill and so I went to meet him and he said that if I had nothing better to do with myself, I should join them. And so I did.

He worked there a while, he says and then 'I got my annual leave from PTI and went off for a Catholic retreat at St Joseph's in Bangalore. Jeetu Parekh was there and he said, "On your way back, drop in at Mahabaleshwar. I did and he announced that Niranjan Jhaveri was there and we were all to go for a night drive with some young women who were their friends. They were daughters of industrialists and so they had a car. There we were, Niranjan, Jeetu and I and these two young industrielles. We stopped at Kay's Point and Niru pretended to drive off the edge of the cliff. The young women squealed in mock horror and he

stopped. One of the young women protested that she was not going to allow such shenanigans and grabbed the keys. We got out of the car, stretched our legs and enjoyed the coolness of the night, the stars, the shapes of the hills. We made our way back to the car. The land was uneven and lit only by the headlamps. Then the young lady who had the keys said, "Oh my," in a startled voice and vanished from sight. She had fallen a thousand feet from Kay's Point. We called and shouted but there was no reply. When we started to think rationally, we realized that the only thing to do was to drive back to town, roust the citizenry out of their beds, muster up some help from among them and come back. Only she had the keys so it was decided that the three of us would walk back to town while one of us would stay behind in case she should call or turn up miraculously. The others turned to look at me so I agreed to stay. They left and soon after the car's headlights dimmed and went out. The darkness was complete, encompassing, velvety and still. You must remember that Kay's Point was also famous for tiger sightings. They returned hours later and some hardy locals made the descent using ropes and brought her body up. She had died almost instantaneously.'

He mopped up the last piece of his fried egg with toast.

'I don't know if it was the retreat or that moment when a young life was extinguished so abruptly but when I came back to PTI, I realized I had stopped learning. I wasn't being allowed to cover the things I wanted to cover, to talk about the real problems. And so I quit. I was again at a loose end. The chemical dreams had quite faded and one day, I went to meet Mehlli. We were going out for lunch and he was already at J. Walter Thompson. He was a star, an art director who had found his match in Josephine Tuor, the best copywriter in the business. She was married to the head of Sandoz, hence the Tuor. Do you know how she landed the job?'

I confessed ignorance.

'Mark Robinson worked with JWT. He had a great voice and he and I and Josephine were doing a show together for All India Radio. We had rehearsed and were waiting to record the programme. We had a colleague Ananda De whose girlfriend, Nell, had left for England on the Anchorline's *SS Corfu* that day. Michael said, "And so Ananda must have been waving as the ship parp-parped on its way out of the harbour. What line of poetry does that remind you of?" Josephine did not hesitate: "Elegy to a Country Churchyard," she said. My jaw dropped. Michael raised his eyebrows.

Josephine intoned: "The Corfu tolls our De of passing Nell." She got a job in copy immediately.'

'You must write an autobiography,' I began.

'Too self-important,' he said. I thought back to the Imtiaz drawing. 'I was thinking of essays about the experiences I have had, not about me,' he said. 'That might suit me better.' There were plenty of experiences.

Gerson moved to Lintas where he would create a culture that encouraged creativity, that favoured people over processes. Shyam Benegal remembers that when he came to Bombay for the first time he worked in an ad agency for two or three months and 'applied to Lintas when I heard there was a vacancy. I didn't expect to get a job but I did know Alyque Padamsee through the Theatre Group. I had worked with Alkazi there; someone told them I could do make up. I don't know who it was but I was doing their faces. Making a horrible job of it, if truth be told, but no one complained. I just got lucky, I suppose. And when there was a vacancy, someone suggested I go meet Gerson. He talked to me five minutes and said, 'You've got it.' I said, 'That's it?' And he said, 'Well, you wanted a job? You got the job.' But oddly it was he who sat me down a couple of years later and said, 'You could spend the rest of your life here. And I know you want to make films.' He got me into Lintas and then he encouraged me to leave again and that's how I joined Sylvester da Cunha's ASP (Advertising, Sales, Promotion) and met Dr Verghese Kurien...'

Naveen Kishore, publisher of Seagull Books, who knows everyone worth knowing, remembers the ad-man: This was back in the day when I was doing audio-visual presentations and being paid the glorious sum of 1500 rupees a day for my time. Pretty good money for the 1970s. I remember being hired by Lipton for my theatre lighting razzmatazz to help create a special audio-visual for their soon-to-be launched tea flamboyantly named Top Star! The Lipton account was handled both by Clarion and Lintas. This was a Clarion assignment.

'I remember and we had a jingle that was sung by Donald Saigal and Pam Crane. The audio-visual was at the Taj Coromandel which was supposed to be by way of a treat for the marketing guys. I had six elaborate projection screens set up with the help of Western Outdoors who were the only ones who had Kodak projectors at the time. I remember using a battery of 32 slide projectors! And so the slides lit up, the packaging which was all silver foil and magenta was unveiled in a burst of stage smoke and moving beams of light, and then a spotlight caught the stadium where the marketing

manager was standing and he began his spiel. And so forth. It all went off smoothly and afterwards, I was relaxing backstage with the crew I had brought down from Calcutta and the legend walked in. Gerson himself. "Who was responsible for putting this together?" he asked. I knew who he was of course, one of the big guys at Lintas, so I put up a finger like a coy schoolboy. He said, "Jolly good show, young man. And if it hadn't been for that reversed slide in the thirty-sixth minute on the left screen, it could have been a Lintas show". Demolished! 'He was right of course. There was a reversed slide but in the hundreds of slides we had on all those screens, I thought I was the only one who noticed it. And that it would slip by. And it almost did. No one else caught it. Except *The Gerson*.'

Everyone had a Gerson story. Roger Pereira was a boy of twelve when Gerson (at the age of 22) came to his school to judge a competition. 'He was the exact fit for a role model for me, for anyone in the world of communications.' Bachi Karkaria remembers that when she needed someone to balance off her telling of the Nanavaty case which had been played as 'Upright Parsi Naval Officer is cuckolded by Sindhi Playboy', Gerson came to the rescue, telling her of how Prem Ahuja was actually a very nice guy. 'There were these stories about how Ahuja would feed women some yellow powder that would make them susceptible to him,' Karkaria said, over the phone. 'But when I told Gerson about them, he laughed and said, "Ahuja had no need of potions and powders. He had charm enough".'

Takes one to know one.

If anyone knows all the Gersons, it would be Uma da Cunha, who should in her own right be better known as one of those who has worked relentlessly, espousing the cause of Indian cinema abroad. They were married for 'Fifty three years, not counting the time that he kept me waiting. It took a stupendous push to get him to walk down that aisle, I have to tell you. My father finally had to administer that push. "Don't hurt my daughter," he said and Gerson, poor fellow, walked down that aisle to what he saw as a loss of freedom,' she said.

It wasn't. Gerson once told me a story about himself walking down a boulevard in Paris. 'Rather enjoying the sight of myself as a flaneur, really. And in a window, I spotted a face, such an interesting face, I thought immediately, "Uma should like to have that face on record," and I turned around to say something and it was Uma!' She was almost as surprised. "What are you doing here?" she asked but when the surprise died down, we went and had une demi-tasse together.'

‘He was a flamboyant man when I met him, a typical ad-man,’ says Uma. And here it is important to remember that in those days, the admen were larger than life. ‘If you had to be somebody in those days, you had to be in advertising,’ says Bachi Karkaria. ‘And theatre.’ Uma agrees. ‘He was used to the spotlight, he revelled in it. And I found that a little difficult to take. But then he went to Brazil and came back a different person. He was more thoughtful, more introspective. And the humanitarian streak he had in him had broadened and deepened. He turned outwards from himself and that was when I fell in love with him again.’

*

That stint in Brazil marks the beginning of a Gerson who connected with the city in a way that few others did. He was always available for a cause, he would always show up. When he died suddenly, a shocked friend from Bandra reported, ‘He was expected to come to a meeting in Bandra tomorrow.’ A pause and then, ‘He was the only SoBo chap who would make it all the way out here.’

I couldn’t believe that Gerson was gone. I had received an email from AGNI (Action for Governance and Networking in India) signed by Gerson – just one of the many hats he wore through decades of social service – detailing all the monies received, from the three-figure donations to the large chunks of change that his friends had made over to the organization with which Gerson hoped he might enthuse the youth to take a greater role in the democratic functioning of the state.

‘He was a little disillusioned towards the end,’ said his long-time friend, the writer Saker Mistry. ‘But that didn’t stop him from doing what he could. We would go to those evenings at his home and often we were told that Gerson was off to some meeting somewhere in the North of the city and was on his way home by train, or something like that.’

For Mistry, those evenings harked back to the salons of Paris, the at-homes of the Bloomsbury Group. ‘A motley crowd,’ Mistry remembers. ‘People we knew, of course, and extraordinary people whom one would ask in one’s snobbish way, “Who on earth is that?” only to discover that Gerson had found someone else who interested him and who he had invited over. Because there was a largesse about him, that’s the only word I can think of.’

The largeness of Gerson, his barrel chest, his episcopal personality...

‘Did you know he was called the Bishop?’ Mehli asked me once. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Something to do with Jean Valjean?’

Something to do with Charles Correa actually. It is said that Charles Correa saw Monica at a party and later asked Gerson to take him over to see her. The lady was busy but her maid went in and told her that there were two very handsome men waiting, one was very tall and the other looked like a bishop. No wonder then that the sculptor Fredda Brilliant used him as her model for the youth of India standing by Ram Manohar Lohia on his way into Goa. Those were the glory days for this small band of golden boys and girls. This Gerson da Cunha probably saw his city as a Paris of the East, just as his maternal grand-uncle J. Gerard Da Cunha had. He lamented its death in *Seminar*:

‘How does the Bombay of the Thapars, the world class city of mathematician and physicist Homi Bhabha, economist and journalist Sachin Chowdhury, architect and urban planner Charles Correa (his great but doomed Twin City across the harbour!), painters Husain and Raza, thinkers and constant visitors Vikram Sarabhai and D.D. Kosambi, industrialist J.R.D. Tata and the less-known folk who manned the vital support systems of the more famous names, how does such a city become a provincial backwater which is what Mumbai is today? How does a physically magnificent city by the sea become a decaying, slum-ridden megalopolis shambling towards destruction?’ (<https://www.india-seminar.com/1999/481/481%20de%20cuhna.htm>)

The 1950s were indeed a beautiful time but only if you were a part of the beautiful people. This was not something the tribe saw or accepted. There were families scrabbling to make a living, refugees scratching at the rockface of the city, there were shortages and millworkers were doing twelve-hour shifts.

‘Nostalgia did not get in his way,’ says Padmini Mirchandani, long-time associate with whom he and Bal Mundkur would put together *Ad Katha*, a ‘book’ the story of their lives in advertising. ‘His memory of what the city had been like powered his determination to improve it.’

But although we knew him from Bombay First and from AGNI, Gerson thought of himself differently. At another meeting, just after the Brazilian government had honoured him with the Order of Rio Branco, he seemed mildly pleased. ‘You know, of all this, the only thing that matters to me is that I managed to reduce the mortality rate of infants in Brazil?’

I nodded. Surely there should have been more about it in the papers? ‘If he sought out the spotlight in his youth,’ said Uma da Cunha, ‘towards the end, he

developed an aversion to it. After the award, when people wanted to feature him or interview him, he would ask me to fob them off.’

Much later I heard that Pooja Vir, the hospitality consultant, was working with Gerson and I heaved a sigh of relief. That was another story someone was saving. When the fell news came, that Gerson took ill in the morning and was gone by noon, I called Pooja who was distraught. We talked the next day and she said sadly that it had been an idea that she should work with Gerson on ‘what we would never call his autobiography. Instead, we called it his scrapbook. He was supposed to talk to me and I was supposed to make notes but we found quite soon that it would not work. He needed to be doing this on his own, he said, and so we called it off.’

Vir’s was a family connection (her mother is Padmini Mirchandani), a village connection, the little village of Old Bombay clinging to the fringe of the Oval Maidan. When the Oval was ‘cleaned up’, Gerson was delighted. When I pointed out that it could hardly be considered a public space when it had been fenced in, gates locked at night, he was unimpressed. I pointed him to *Why Loiter* by my friends Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, about how women feel much safer in a park with no barriers around it, but he argued that it was about the park. I said a public park could not be a public park if the public could not use it. He maintained that all use is mediated by some agency or the other. But we agreed to disagree on that.

We disagreed about many things but not about sectarianism and the city, not about the cacophony of raised voices and thinning skins, not about the collapse of a way of life that had been cherished before 1992, the annus horribilis of the city by the sea. He wrote a book of poetry and I approached it gingerly, wondering whether it would be embarrassing and found instead that he had written poems, on the death by depression of a friend, on chickoos and these startling lines:

Absolution may lie here at last,/atop this throat of land between/bolts of silken water smoothed out among islets. It is here they lurk/flat in concealment, the lessons I must learn. The cure of quiet distancing. Never owning more/than I could lose as daylight lets the sun go with punctual grace. /Here is pardon without penance,/the forgiveness in understanding/that I must accept or never leave.

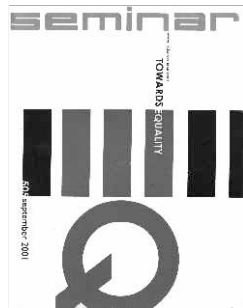
(Pardon without Penance)

seminar with a critical edge...



457 September 1997

Empowering Women
a symposium on
political reservations
for women



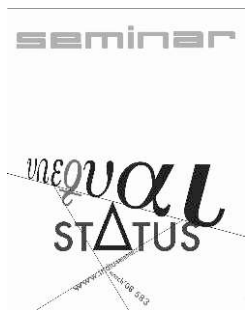
505 September 2001

Towards Equality
a symposium on
women, feminism and
women's movements



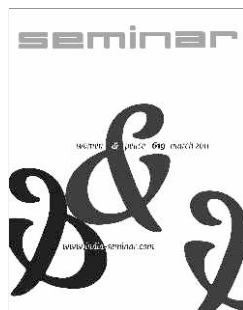
540 August 2004

Celebrating Women
a symposium on
women who made
a difference



583 March 2008

Unequal Status
a symposium on
new challenges before
the women's movement



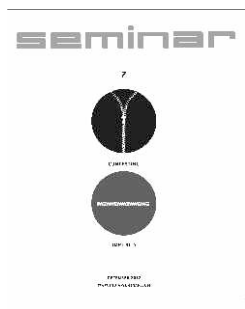
619 March 2011

Women and Peace
a symposium on
the role of women in
post-conflict situations



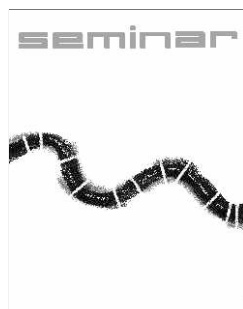
622 June 2011

Dynasty
a symposium on
lineage and family ties
in subcontinental politics



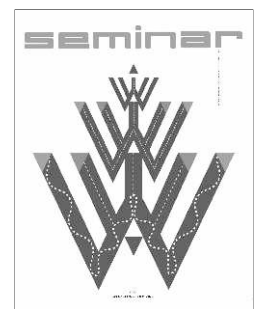
700 December 2017

Contesting Impunity
a symposium on
why sexual violence on
women is unaddressed



707 July 2018

Ahmedabad: The City and Her Soul
a symposium on
how women imagine
and negotiate public spaces



746 October 2021

Women Who Inspire
a symposium on
some women who are
role models in our society