

# DOMESTICATION AND DEFEMINIZATION OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP

*Throughout the article, the author argues that women politicians will always be framed within the domestic context and that they will always be attached to their male family members. Then, if they are to go beyond that, they must remove their feminine identity and discard it in order to compete with men on an equal basis.*

Abeer Kapoor\*



\* Abeer Kapoor is a game designer, author and journalist. He is the founder of the Civic Games Lab, a games for social change studio in New Delhi.

**I**n March 2020, we held a play session of “The Poll: The Great Indian Election Game” which was developed with support from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, at a small girls’ school in Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh (UP), the most populous state in India. The game puts ordinary players in charge of their own political party, and this means preparing their manifesto, debating their policies and managing their money and campaigning as well. By doing so, we hoped to bridge the gap between regular citizens and politicians. Among the uses of the game has been to help schools set up their student councils, which is what we were doing on that day. One girl - after we’d played our game - came running up to us in disbelief and asked, “Can I be a politician too?” Is it really possible?”

It wasn’t the first time we heard this question. In schools and colleges across the country, the same question was asked. The young girls asked with great apprehension if it was possible for them to be public representatives. A closer look revealed that most girls don’t even consider becoming a politician. The dream is far away and unattainable. Throughout India’s history, it has slowly depoliticised itself, and as it takes active politics away from its citizens, it distances itself further and further from the imaginations of marginalized groups, especially women. Even though they make up 49 percent of the country, they have always been left out by a system rigged against them. Is it the many political parties fault, their decision making, ticket dissemination and campaign strategies are determined by electoral conditions that don’t see women representatives as viable options<sup>1</sup> or is it the fault of the media that dissuades young girls from being politicians by objectifying them, or simply diminishing their contribution.<sup>2</sup>

On 27 May 2019, as the newly elected Members of Parliament collected their identity cards, two of the youngest newly-elected parliamentarians were women, Nusrat Jahan (29) and Mimi Chakraborty (30). When they entered the Parliament complex to collect their identity cards as first-time MPs from Trinamool Congress (TMC), they uploaded a photo to Twitter. The two women are part of two minorities in India’s lower house – one of gender and the other of age. But when the actor-turned-politicians uploaded photos of themselves in parliament, they found themselves in the middle of a controversy, not for what they said, but for what they wore or rather what they didn’t wear. Both Jahan and Chakraborty had deviated from tradition and decided to opt for more western sartorial choices.<sup>3</sup> Both MPs were extensively

<sup>1</sup> Fatima Khan, “Political Parties Think Women are Weak Candidates but Data Doesn’t Say So,” *The Print*, 24 April 2019. <https://theprint.in/politics/political-parties-think-women-are-weak-candidates-but-data-doesnt-say-so/225607/>

<sup>2</sup> Lena Wangnerdsun and Amanda Haraldsson, “The Effect of Media Sexism on Women’s Political Ambition: Evidence from a Worldwide Study,” *Feminism Worldwide* (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Crux, “Why Trolling MPs Mimi and Nusrat for Dressing Up for Parliament is Problematic,” Youtube, 28 May 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbmXAHRfenQ>

trolled online. They were told that their clothes weren't appropriate for attending the Lok Sabha and that they were 'not on the sets of a film. Meanwhile, former Indian cricketer and an MP from the BJP, the party in power, Gautam Gambhir, had showed up wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, but no one thought that to be inappropriate.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, this anecdote illustrates the fact that female politicians are scrutinized more for their personal than for their professional decisions. Yet, this phenomenon is not unique to India.

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### ***Setting the Stage***

Are babies allowed in Parliament? The UK Parliament prohibits MPs to bring their babies in to the House of Commons.<sup>5</sup> There are already very few women in public office and such rules make it more difficult for them to enter politics. A study undertaken by Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has revealed that worldwide women represent only 24.5 percent of all seats in the lower house of Parliament. While in Asia women represent only 19.7 percent of all seats.<sup>6</sup> In India, between 1962 and 2019, only 617 women have been elected to Lok Sabha in the past five decades, in comparison to over 7000 men in the same period. In 264 constituencies across the country, women have never been elected to office. In the 2019 General Election, 670 women contested but only 63 won.<sup>7</sup> In the media, these abysmal numbers are attributed to a variety of reasons, including political will on the part of the party and the electability of female candidates.

<sup>4</sup> “Why Nobody Objected to Gautam Gambhir, Sunny Deol in T-Shirt, Jean?: Activists,” *Counterview*, 31 May 2019. <https://www.counterview.net/2019/05/why-nobody-objected-to-gautam-gambhir.html>

<sup>5</sup> “UK MP told she cannot bring baby into House of Commons, sparks debate online,” *The Indian Express*, 26 November 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-globally/uk-mp-told-not-to-bring-baby-parliament-sparks-debate-online-7640519/>

<sup>6</sup> Inter Parliamentary Union, *Global Parliamentary Report* (2020). <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/global-parliamentary-report>

<sup>7</sup> Sruthi Radhakrishnan, “New Lok Sabha has Highest Number of Women MPs,” *The Hindu*, 27 May 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/new-lok-sabha-has-highest-number-of-women-mps/article27260506.ece>

Several studies have shown that women receive fewer media coverage than men, and when they do receive coverage, it tends to focus on their appearance, attire, or marital status. If reporters do cover the issues and positions of women candidates, they focus on more ‘feminine’ issues such as ‘education’, leaving the more ‘manly’ issues such as gun control and defense for their men competitors.<sup>8</sup> In Indian media, as in other nations, men and women politicians and candidates are covered differently, posing a dangerous threat to the political future and public sphere of the subcontinent, where women are often reduced to stereotypes and caricatures. As a result, the body politic becomes stagnant.

There are several factors involved in the skewed reporting, including the absence of women from both the newsroom and the newspaper itself, which reinforces gender stereotypes. Women do not occupy leadership positions in any newspapers in the country, and only 20.5 percent of all English-language articles are written by women. Women write only 10 percent of all articles on ‘manly’ topics such as defense while 19.8 percent of all articles on politics are written by women. At the same time, only 11 percent of articles in the Hindi press feature bylines from women, and only 17 percent of those who write stories are women. Similarly, women’s presence in the news has declined, according to the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020, from 22 percent in 2010 to 21 percent in 2015 to 14 percent in 2020.<sup>9</sup>

Ashok Kumar and Purnima Sharma, from a recent study aimed at understanding the representation of female Indian politicians in India, interviewed 11 female politicians from 8 different states. Politicians were questioned about how they perceive their representation by the Indian media. The questions ranged from current political conditions for women to how they dealt with journalists and their coverage by local or vernacular media outlets. In spite of the small sample size and non-representative sample, the study raises interesting points. There was a consensus among the politicians that women play a smaller role in Indian politics. What is interesting is that all politicians claimed they got a spike in coverage during the elections, but after that there was no focus on their work. According to them, there is a clear difference in the regional press and their representation, while in the English press there is a clear bias towards men. All of the respondents were clear that reporters must adjust their approach to covering women.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kim Fridkin Kahn Goldenberg and Edie N., “Women Candidates in the News: An Examination of Gender Differences in U.S. Senate Campaign Coverage,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (1991), p. 180-199.

<sup>9</sup> *Who makes the News? 6th Global Media Monitoring Project*, GMMP, 13 July 2017, [https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG\\_FINAL20210713.pdf](https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL20210713.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ashok Kumar and Purnima Sharma, “What Women Parliamentaries Think and Perceive about their Coverage in Indian Media: A Study of 16th Lok Sabha,” *Communicator I LV*, No. 3 & 4 (2020), p. 88-98.

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### *Domestic Spheres*

A woman's body is intimately tied to that of the nation and to the idea of nationalism in India. Sugata Bose's 'The Nation As A Mother' traces the evolution of this thought – the intimate relationship between India's anti-colonial and nationalist movements of the early twentieth century and its association with identifying India as a mother or Bharat Mata (mother). This idea in many ways has framed the role that women have in politics and the public sphere, where their actions are bound by the conversations of purity and preservation of property.<sup>11</sup> As a result, women are relegated to their maternal duties, or what is perceived as more feminine domestic identities, reinforced by the male voter, political parties, and the media. A central theme here is the helplessness of women, who either rely on men for their well-being or for their political fortune. There are usually two processes at work here, the first being to link women candidates to the domestic and familial space of the voters, and the second being to create a narrative of insecurity around the safety of women. While the first seeks to legitimize the election of a woman, the other builds legitimacy for the election of only men.

Female politicians will never be seen as able legislators, but always by their domestic identities the wife, daughter, sister or mother of a man.<sup>12</sup> The domestic sphere follows women into election rallies and campaigns, and they are unable to detach themselves from their domestic roles, responsibilities or duties. At the state level, women most often become elected after the death of a spouse or parent. Pritam Munde competed for the seat of Beed, Maharashtra, where her father had been a two-time Member of Parliament. She needed to enter the fray in order to preserve her family's legacy, after having worked as a doctor for years. In the months following his death, she won the seat by more than 700,000 votes, a record-breaking victory. Pankaja, Pritam's elder sister, had been a leading member of the Maharashtra unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and had led its youth branch. In contrast to Hindu tradition, Pankaja lit the funeral pyre of her father, a task reserved for the men of the family. Pritam retained her seat in the 2019 General Elections in which the

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<sup>11</sup>Urvashi Butalia, "Mother India," *New Internationalist*, 5 March 1996. <https://newint.org/features/1996/03/05/mother>

<sup>12</sup> Khaled Ahmed, "Women Leaders South Asia Sheikh Hasina Benazir Bhutto Sonia Gandhi," *The Indian Express*, 4 May 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/women-leaders-south-asia-sheikh-hasina-benazir-bhutto-sonia-gandhi-5709651/>

BJP was faced with a tough challenge in the state, while her sister lost to her male cousin a few months later in the state-level elections.

Dimple Yadav is a two-time Member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh's Kannauj seat. Identity in politics is seen only as a daughter-in-law or wife<sup>13</sup> belonging to the state's first family. Newspaper articles only refer her to the daughter-in-law of Mulayam Singh Yadav, the patriarch of the Samajwadi Party or the wife of his son, former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav. The former MPs political identity has always been in relation to her domestic identity, and how it extends to the political party. In 2017, her identity shifted from being the 'bahu' or 'daughter-in-law' to being seen as the sister-in-law of the political party as she was called 'bhabhi'.<sup>14</sup> There was a marked change, which was followed by slogans including "Dimple Bhabhi Jeet Ki Chabi" (Dimple is the key to victory) and she was made to campaign extensively for the party and her husband. Nevertheless, this new momentum was also a result of her husband taking control of the party and establishing himself as its undisputed leader. Often, her more aggressive role was used to stand up to the men on the other side, and to protect the interests of both her party and her state.

However, the domestic and familial tag does not exclusively apply to women from first-families. In 2016, Smriti Irani, after an impassioned speech on nationalism in India's Parliament, the then minister for human resource development was dubbed 'Aunty National'<sup>15</sup> as a jibe by a leading newspaper. It was a speech that reflected the serious dichotomy of the female persona in India - where one can create a victim card to gain sympathy using anguish, self-admonition, and self-sacrifice. As part of her outrage, Irani used cultural idioms to chastise students for protesting and even used injury as proof that she would allow harm to come to her if she was wrong.

The newspaper's decision to mock the politician for her impassioned and gendered speech was problematic. The paper, used a photograph of her, looking very angry and in bold letters wrote the headline 'Aunty National'. This led to public debate where the minister locked horns with them, writing a long letter and signing it off as 'Aunty National' too. Over a period of time, she even adopted it using it for humour on Instagram.

<sup>13</sup> "UP Elections: Here is How Akhilesh Yadav's wife Dimple Yadav was beaten by sister-in-law Aparna Yadav," *Financial Times*, 3 February 2017.

<https://www.financialexpress.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections-2017/up-elections-here-is-how-akhilesh-yadavs-wife-dimple-yadav-was-beaten-by-sister-in-law-aparna-yadav/536617/>

<sup>14</sup> Rakhi Bose, "SP's Dimple Yadav, Only Candidate in Three Decades to enter Lok Sabha Unopposed, Aims for Hatrick in Kannauj," *News18*, 29 April 2019. <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/dimple-yadav-sp-kannauj-lok-sabha-elections-phase-4-samajwadi-party-akhilesh-yadav-2106447.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Regards, Adarniya Aunty National," *The Telegraph*, 16 June 2016. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/regards-nbsp-adarniya-nbsp-aunty-nbsp-national/cid/1492019>

Despite resistance and reinterpretation of the domestic roles of Indian female politicians, certain structural compulsions remain. In the aftermath of the riots in Muzaffarnagar, in India's most populous state, a campaign slogan ran through the affected region, "Agar bahu, beti aur gaai ko bachana hai, Narendra Modi ko lana hai. This fed into the hyper masculine campaign of the BJP-led NDA, which tapped into the stagnation and sense of insecurity that had crept into the nation. The Indian media, especially the regional press, do give credence to these feelings and emotions which push forward this hyper-masculinity.

Women are not given tickets to contest elections in India. They are seen as weak candidates who cannot win. In 2019 General Elections, The BJP and the Indian National Congress both individually gave 12 percent of their tickets to women.<sup>16</sup> Women need to fight two perception battles: one at the level of the party and another at the level of the media. In addition, the media did not exert enough pressure on the Indian Parliament to pass the Women's Reservation Bill, which would reserve 33 percent of all seats for women. According to a Google search, 7680 articles have been searched for in news articles on the bill that the Senate has debated for nearly 25 years, while economic reform bills such as the Goods and Services Tax have over 8000 articles.

### *Femininity and Defeminization*

Several Indian anchors, political party spokespersons and commentators actively push-forward patriarchal narratives. Through their channels, they undermine, insult, and character assassinate women leaders. It wasn't surprising when Raghav Chadha, the spokesperson for the Aam Aadmi, in an attempt to mock and take a 'pot shot' at his political rival and Indian National Congress State President Navjot Singh Sidhu, called him 'The Rakhi Sawant of Punjab'. Rakhi Sawant is a former model, actress and politicians from one of India's Other Backward Class (OBC). Sawant is a politician who has refused to defeminize herself and has tried to make it her advantage. She often referred to as a 'sex symbol'.<sup>17</sup> She started a political party called, Rashtriya Aam Party<sup>18</sup>, and she even claimed that her campaign will be hot, just like a green chilli, which is the party's symbol. The media's representation of Sawant as an over-the-top caricature, has enabled Chaddha to use her personality as a 'pot shot'. Sawant's political career has often been categorised within the entertainment

<sup>16</sup> Sruthi Radhakrishnan, "New Lok Sabha has Highest Number of Women MPs," The Hindu, 27 May 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/new-lok-sabha-has-highest-number-of-women-mps/article27260506.ece>

<sup>17</sup> "Happy Birthday Rakhi Sawant: controversies of the sex symbol." *Orissa Post*, 25 November 2019. <https://www.orissapost.com/happy-birthday-rakhi-sawant-controversies-of-the-sex-symbol/>

<sup>18</sup> "Rakhi Sawants Election Campaign in an Autorickshaw," Sify Movies (2014) <https://www.sify.com/movies/rakhi-sawants-election-campaign-in-an-autorickshaw-imagegallery-bollywood-oevrX6abgejsi.html>

section of the news rather than the political.<sup>19</sup>

However for a woman to be successful she must desexualize and defeminize her. Two Indian female politicians have held long, and successful careers by first identifying themselves as ‘sisters’ and adopting a persona that takes them away from their gender. Both of these politicians also feature in a list called, “Top 5 Indian Female Politicians Who Need a Fashion Makeover.”<sup>20</sup>

Firstly, Mamata Bannerjee, the Chief Minister of the India, has been seen wearing a ‘white sari’ for over twenty-five years – a symbol of mourning, purity and a certain female asceticism. Bannerjee isn’t married and is universally called ‘Didi’, an elder sister to the state. In many ways, the white sari represents her vow of a plain lifestyle and marriage to focus on the well-being of the state.<sup>21</sup> Even her slippers have become a topic of opinion. There was a suggestion in 2014 that she could use a little color to lighten up the overall atmosphere in her party. As she is inclined towards wearing sarees, she could try wearing the drapes with handloom borders.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Mamata is viewed as an activist, a woman who takes to the streets to fight injustice, fighting big corporations and the Communist Party of India, which she dislodged from power.

Similarly, Mayawati, also lovingly called ‘Behenji’ (sister) by her party workers, is the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and belongs to the – Jatav community – one of the most backward castes in India. She has been Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, four times. Her political career began, as a fiery orator who was noticed by Kanshi Ram, a social activist and the founder of the SP. Mayawati’s personality and persona is a revolution, her becoming Chief Minister in 1995 was definitely heralded as one, even by then Prime Minister Narsimha Rao. The one-school teacher has gone through several look changes, as a way to appeal to her target audience – India’s most destitute and backward community. Mayawati is a symbol of progress and aspiration for her voter base – India’s most socially and economically backward community. For her and her community, luxury items such as expensive Luis Vuitton bags are a source of pride. During the early 2000s, she ordered statues of herself holding a bag as a display of narcissism. However, she has over the years recast her image giving up her ponytail for a more man-like look, and

<sup>19</sup>“Rakhi Sawant Warns Raghav Chadha, Shares her Husband’s Tweet: ‘Stay away from me and my name’,” *The Indian Express*, 19 September 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/rakhi-sawant-warns-raghav-chadha-shares-her-husbands-tweet-stay-away-from-me-and-my-name-7517840/>

<sup>20</sup> Rashmi Mishra, “Top Five Indian Female Politicians Who Need a Fashion Makeover,” *India News*, 7 March 2014. <https://www.india.com/viral/top-5-indian-female-politicians-who-need-a-fashion-makeover-20146/>

<sup>21</sup> “Why Mamta Banerjee is always seen in white sari and thongs, know the truth.” *News Crab* (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Rashmi Mishra, “Top Five Indian Female Politicians Who Need a Fashion Makeover,” *India News*, 7 March 2014. <https://www.india.com/viral/top-5-indian-female-politicians-who-need-a-fashion-makeover-20146/>

her government is said to run in a masculine fashion.<sup>23</sup>

She has been called ugly, a eunuch, and several other names because she gave up all her morals for power. Her physical appearance has come under severe scrutiny, but there-in lies an interesting contradiction.<sup>24</sup> All slander she faces is due to her being a backward caste woman, which allows her forward caste detractors do not expect her to have expensive tastes, and they also see her as unfeminine as she exercises power and authority in her party.<sup>25</sup> Though she has been called authoritarian and dictatorial for over thirty years, she has managed to maintain power.

In the Indian politics, a woman must leave her familial obligations behind, and remove all signs of sexuality. If she doesn't, the media will portray her as such.

### **Conclusion**

Women in Indian politics are rarely seen, beyond their obvious femininity, or clothing, or personal appearance. Politically, they carry the domestic sphere and struggle to be given tickets to run in elections.

Despite the tide turning, it is turning very slowly - if you look at it from the other side for years, you might even think not much has changed. There are deeper structural issues in how the media portrays women, not just in India but around the world. Globally, female political representation is abysmal, and the media's coverage of women is declining drastically. Moreover, low female participation in the newsroom, stories with a gendered lens, or stories written by women and for women are rare. The press rarely mentions female politicians or their work.

In India, the press remains silent on issues ensuring female representation in the parliament. There are issues that have the potential to profoundly influence the political landscape, such as the Women's Reservation Bill India, that are not given enough coverage and are often simply ignored.

<sup>23</sup> Rashme Sehgal, "The Mayawati makeover," *Times of India*, 24 December 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Stuti Bhattacharya, "Why are Mayawati's Looks a Part of Political Discourse, if a Man's Aren't?," *iDiva*, 21 January 2019. <https://www.idiva.com/work-life/balancing-act/mayawati-called-a-eunuch-by-bjp-leader-sadhana-singh-why-is-she-always-commented-on-thus/17078963>

<sup>25</sup> Ananya Srivastava, "Mayawati is Popular Target to Demean, thanks to a Sexist and Misogynist Society," *FirstPost*, 21 July 2016. <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/mayawati-is-a-popular-target-to-demean-thanks-to-a-sexist-and-misogynist-society-2904516.html>