

The Politics of Access: Narratives of Women MPs in the Indian Parliament

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Based on extensive interviews with Indian women Members of Parliament, this article suggests that analysing subject narratives is an important method to understand the various routes taken by these women into parliamentary politics. This article pieces together life stories of Indian women MPs to reveal the complex layers of negotiations that women make to be successful. In making such an analysis, the article focuses on four avenues of access – family networks, social and political movements, the party system and the struggle over quotas for women. The article concludes that through narrative analysis we can understand better the importance of different strategies of political access in *specific* and embedded political, social and economic contexts and develop methodological insights into the broader issues of gendered access to politics.

Keywords: gender; representation; narrative analysis; Indian parliament

This article addresses the issue of the politics of recruitment of women to parliamentary politics in India and how we might study this.¹ There is a complex literature arguing for a greater presence of women in political institutions (Dahlerup, 2005; *IDS Bulletin*, 2010; Jonasdottir, 1988; Lovenduski, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; UNDP, 2005). While we cannot assume that more women in public offices (descriptive representation) would mean a better deal for women in general (substantive representation),² this literature suggests that there are at least four reasons for continued insistence on and analysis of greater representation of women in political life:

- (1) *the politics of presence* – without being sufficiently visible a group's ability to influence either policy making, or indeed the political culture of institutions, is limited;
- (2) *the politics of institutional practice* – once members of political institutions, how do women negotiate institutional practices and norms on an everyday basis? This helps us understand the gendered nature of representative politics 'in their institutional settings' allowing us to 'show how the constraints of real political situations affect the capacities of actually existing women politicians and vice versa' (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 9);
- (3) *strategies for accessing politics* – the successful strategies that women employ to access and function effectively in political institutions could be useful for others wanting to participate in institutional politics. The problem here is, of course, precisely that political women are an elite group – and might possess characteristics and abilities that are not widely shared. We can, however, examine whether some strategies, such as socio-political movements, open up new spaces where women might transcend their social positioning (Basu, 1992; Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Gopal Jayal, 2006; Kudva and Misra, 2008; Rai, 2007);

- (4) *connecting institutional and grass-roots politics* – is there a transfer of women from grass-roots politics to parliamentary politics? If so, how might the strengthening of one lead to higher representation of women in the other? If not, what can be done to change this? This, after all, was the hope of Indian feminists and policy makers when the quota for women in village councils (*panchayats*) was introduced in 1993 (Baviskar and Mathew, 2009; Rai *et al.*, 2005).

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy. The more powerful lower house is called the Lok Sabha (People's Assembly) and has 543 members. The upper house is called Rajya Sabha (States' Assembly) with 233 members. Representatives to the Lok Sabha are chosen on a first-past-the-post basis by single-member constituencies for the lower house, which is seen by some feminist analysts to be least conducive to the representation of marginalised groups in society. In the Rajya Sabha a single transferable vote system is used by state (provincial) assemblies (Vidhan Sabhas). Just over 10 per cent of MPs in the Indian parliament are women; the world average is 19.2 per cent and the regional average (Asia) is 18.5 per cent; this puts India at 96 out of 186 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union league table for women's representation in parliaments and 122 in the UNDP Gender Inequality Index (2008).³ India has been a good testing ground for assessing gender and representation where, on the one hand, social indicators point to women's subordination and exclusion and, on the other, vibrant women's movements struggle successfully for democratic routes to women's political representation. The Indian example is also useful because of its diversity – regional, institutional and cultural – which encourages us to use a varied political palate and where the issues of scale become critical: the relationship between national, provincial and local state formations is overlaid with that of ethno-linguistic, religious and regional party politics, making strategising for change highly complex. India also forms part of a region where struggles of women's representation have been strong and where histories of colonialism and post-colonial development have resulted in sometimes unpredictable outcomes for gender equality in politics (Rai *et al.*, 2005). The Indian example therefore allows us to address Vicky Randall's prescient query: 'Why have gender quotas been adopted in these [Latin American, East Asian and African parliaments] ... but not in politically progressive India?' (Randall, 2006, p. 65).

The arguments presented in this article are based on a study of 23 women MPs⁴ in the Indian parliament, conducted over a ten-year period in two parliaments – 1994 (the 10th Lok Sabha) and 2004 (the 14th Lok Sabha); a third of these were interviewed at least twice. The selection criteria for this sample were based on party political affiliations, religious and regional diversity, class and professional background and the generational span, both in terms of age and the time served in parliament (see Table 1). Most of the interviews were conducted at the MPs' homes – the senior MPs have an office attached to their government-provided bungalows – thus blurring the spatial politics of my research. The public and the private often overlapped when I talked to these women as they went about their daily lives – answering endless phone calls, giving orders to servants, keeping constituents waiting while they spoke to me at length – while at the same time often presenting a decidedly thought-out political response to my questions. I interviewed the MPs in the languages they were comfortable in (and which I could speak) – English, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

Table 1: Profiling Women MPs

Given names	Party	Educational level	Profession	Number of terms served (in X parliament)	Age	Marital status
MP1	Shiv Sena	BA	Agriculturalist, social worker, business person	3 (13, 14, 15)	37	Married
MP2	BJP	MA, LLB	Advocate	7 (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15)	66	Married
MP3	BJP	BCom, Diploma in Catering, Diploma in IT	Social worker, business person	1 (14) resigned w.e.f. 22.12.08	48	Married
MP4	J&K PDP	BA, LLB	Social worker	1 (14) resigned w.e.f. 13.1.09	40	Divorced
MP5	LJSP	'Intermediate'	Social worker	1 (14)	36	Married
MP6	Indian National Congress			2+		Unmarried
MP7	DMK	'Intermediate'	Not specified	1 (14)	33	Widow
MP8	BJP	MA (Sociology)	Social worker	1 (14)	59	Married
MP9	Indian National Congress	MA, BEd	Social worker	2 (14, 15)	54	Married
MP10	Indian National Congress/BJP					Married
MP11	Indian National Congress	BA, BL, Hon. Doctorate	Advocate, social worker, trade unionist	4 + 1 (13)	67	Married
MP12	CPM	BA, MA	Political activist	1	63	Married
MP13	BJP	MA (History) and PhD	Teacher	4 (10, 11, 12, 13)		Widow
MP14	CPM		Teacher, educationist, writer and artist	2 (9, 10)	66	Married
MP15	Indian National Congress	MA, PhD	Professor, teacher, writer, social worker	4 (10, 11, 13, 15)	63	Unmarried
MP16	BJP		Preacher	5 (9, 10, 11, 12, 13)	51	Unmarried
MP17	BJP	BA, LLB	Advocate	3 (11, 12, 15)	57	Married
MP18	SP	MA, BEd	Teacher	1 (14)	59	Married
MP19	(1) RJD	MA	Social worker, artist	3 (11, 13, 14)	52	Married
MP20	BJP					Divorced
MP21	Indian National Congress	BA, BEd	Social and political worker	2 (10, 11)	Deceased	Unmarried
MP22	CPI			6 (7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13)		
MP23	ShromaniAkali Dal	MA (Economics), MA (Sociology), BEd.	Teacher, social worker	2 (14, 15)	61	Married

Source: UNDP, 2005.

In her Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, Elinor Ostrom emphasised that explanatory complexity and chaos are not one and the same thing⁵ – that messy explanations reflect complex situations and can allow us to go beyond top-down, unconnected and disembodied policies. My plea in this article is somewhat similar – I have jettisoned neat explanatory models in favour of narrative analysis through which a more nuanced understanding of women's political representation may emerge.

Politics of Access: Analysing Narratives

Feminist theorising on equality in representation has been supported by scholarship on women's political recruitment, which has been primarily focused on state-led and party-based strategies on the one hand and sociological analyses of women's participation on the other. Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1995) have suggested that while socially embedded, the demand and supply model is a useful way of thinking about women's political recruitment. Demand can be seen in terms of 'available vacancies, perceptions of voter preferences and the attitudes of selectors. Supply is conditioned by the ambitions and motivations of potential candidates and their perceptions of available opportunities' (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 64). An increase in demand can expand supply and *vice versa* (Childs, 2004). This model, while useful, has been criticised for being too individual-focused in the rational choice tradition, because it does not allow for the social histories of the individuals involved in decision making and because it obfuscates the centrality of gendered power relations by focusing on actors involved in individual or institutional (party) decision making (Kenny, 2008; Liddle and Michielsens, 2007).

An alternative, sociological framework based on Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and field – the socially located subjectivities and the system of social positions – focuses on the hypothesis that performativity leads to entitlement, where performativity is embedded in the structures of social inequality; indeed that aspiration is the product of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972; Liddle and Michielsens, 2007). Politics is viewed here as a specialised field where, through representing competing world views, political actors seek to represent as well as transform their visions of the world. In this political field, representative politics can be best understood through understanding the practice of power, which generates an entitlement to power (Liddle and Michielsens, 2007, p. 675). It therefore makes more visible the socially embedded nature of politics – of party organisations, legal systems and discourses – which frame the constraints and opportunities encountered and negotiated by individual aspirants. However, while this framework helps to explain the reasons for the low levels of women's recruitment, it has little to say about what concretely might be done to address the inequalities that beset women in political life.

A third, less often invoked method for studying women's representation is that provided by narrative studies (Andrews *et al.*, 2008) – of analysing individual histories of women in politics. In this article I suggest, with Charles Tilly, that there are three different ways in which narratives, or stories as he calls them, prove helpful in explaining social processes:

First, in the available evidence about social processes, which commonly arrives in the form of stories people tell about themselves or others and therefore requires unpacking. *Second*, in the social behaviour to be explained, which often features storytelling and responses to it and *third*,

in prevailing explanations by participants, observers and analysts, which likewise borrow the conventions of storytelling (Tilly, 2002, p. 6).⁶

Narratives can either be event stories or stories of experience, which can represent as well as reconstruct stories (Squire, 2008, pp. 44–5); the latter are the stories that I focus on. The materials for narrative analysis are generally interviews but also sometimes visual representation of stories. Of course, individual narratives can be open to the problem of over-interpretation – of the gaps between the individual's self-projection and external scrutiny of their actions as well as our own biases. We can address this only if we 'pay attention to the microcontexts of research' through which stories take shape and are read (Squire, 2008, p. 59).

The importance of these micro-contexts became evident as I analysed interviews with the women MPs in the Indian parliament; through these I was able to identify three overlapping routes these women have taken to parliament: (1) family networks; (2) participation in social and political movements; and (3) membership of political parties. A fourth route that I discuss is that of quotas. This 'fast track' (Dahlerup, 2005) to increased representation, available to Indian women in local government, continues to be blocked to women at the parliamentary level at the present time. While discussing these access routes separately, it is important to note that they work together to provide women with networks and routes of access to parliament – family networks operate within political parties and parties benefit from family resources; participation in social movements is easier for women from political families and often maps on to families' political histories. However, social movements also open up spaces for women's participation in politics without such family support. Similarly, issues of work–life balance can only be addressed through analysing the family as well as party institutions, but I focus more on this issue when discussing family and kinship because this is how my interviewees commented on this problem.

Family Networks

Of course women should join politics. If good ladies join, we will have less corruption ... [women] have better qualities than men. She is less corrupt and has maternal tenderness [*mamta*]. Today's woman manages the home as well as outside [*sic*]. It is women's nature that even though she is equal to men she lets them think (for their sakes) that she is less than him.

This shows her moral high ground [*badhapan*] rather than her weakness (interview, MP5, 1 March 2006).

'Male equivalence' has been a long-standing explanatory category for examining women's access to public life (Currell, 1974)⁷ as well as a cause for worry about their autonomy. 'Out of the 58 women MPs who have made it to the new [2009] House ... [a]t least 36 of them – that's close to a depressing two-thirds – are close relatives of male politicians ranging from national leaders and chief ministers to lower-level politicians like MLAs and RSS pracharaks' (Puri, 2009). In this section I analyse the narratives of women MPs to emphasise the complexity that is often overlooked when 'the family' is invoked as the most important factor in women's access to parliamentary politics.⁸ What remains unexplored in this rhetorical scepticism and what I was able to identify by analysing these narratives is *how* families are important, *why* other routes into political life remain limited and *what* needs to

be done to engage political parties such that the gender inequalities within parliament are addressed. Thus, I would suggest, examining closely the stories of subjects has allowed me to build a bridge between the macro-level theorising on recruitment and the micro-level analysis of the politics of location and negotiation.

My interviews revealed that families support women in different ways – some through employing their political capital, others through helping with everyday housework or childcare, or through providing emotional support. The narratives analysed below also suggest that negotiating families is a complicated process, which at times demands social nous, determination and compromise and therefore agency of women who become and are able to sustain their role as MPs. They also show that in some cases the strength of patriarchal social mores delays the participation of women in political life and even inhibits them in developing a strong public profile.

Family continues to be an important factor in routes of women's access to national politics in India:

[My] father decided to serve in the State government; his parliamentary seat then fell vacant. Because this was my father's constituency, we could not put up any ABCD ... so some body suggested ... first they suggested my brother's name. He wasn't interested ... he is more artistic. So, someone said why not me; you can say I was the second choice ... I was by then divorced. I moved in with my father 1989 with my two daughters ... My father asked me; I wanted to please him. So I said yes. But I had no idea about what it would be like (interview, MP4, 28 February 2006).

In my 1994 sample of fifteen, for example, 43 per cent of women MPs came from 'political families', showing the importance of this factor in women's route to parliamentary politics. This figure did not change in my sample of 2005–6, the 14th Lok Sabha cohort of MPs. What this shows is that a significant number of women continue to access political life with the support, backing and contacts of the family – usually of the father or of the husband – and that as a consequence they are often influenced in their work by the male members of the family. The parties too are happy to accommodate this familial background in recruitment and selection in the assumption that political families have recognition value that will help the woman candidate perform better in elections and as an MP.

However, little attention is paid to how families are key supports for the everyday functioning and effectiveness of women in politics:

My big sister has helped me a lot. Her sons are studying in Delhi and live with me. My daughter was seven months old when I fought my election; my sister was like a mother to her ... I have a full time maid, of course, who looks after my baby, but without my sister I couldn't have managed (interview, MP5, 1 March 2006).

'Family support is essential [to the woman MP], otherwise she is tense and she breaks the family' (interview, MP17, 1 February 1994). Husbands play a key role in supporting women both materially and emotionally and mothers-in-law seem to play a key role in encouraging and validating the daughter-in-law's career in politics by providing practical support in looking after the household: 'first thing I did was to ask my mother-in-law. She supported me when I worked for the party, even late at night' (interview, MP8, 6 February 2006). Advising younger women wishing to join politics, one senior MP had this to say:

After marriage – 5–10 years – the woman should stay at home, look after the children, make a place for yourself within your new family; serve the family ... this way the woman also gains maturity in ideas and soberness of character. It is very difficult to join politics, to come out to be exposed – she will be able to deal with this; she will be more steady [if she waits]' (interview, MP2, 6 December 2005).

Gender roles within and outside the family are carefully negotiated for continued support of the family – 'so that they don't feel I am neglecting them for politics' (interview, MP8, 6 February 2006); social class and political ideologies also mediate these negotiations.

Support of their natal family, at times, does not compensate for the demands of their marital roles:

I was the principal of a high school ... I was asked to stand for election by the party of my father. I was reluctant to stand because I had two young daughters who needed me. My husband is a judge and I didn't want his promotion to the Supreme Court to be adversely affected by my joining politics. It was only in 2004 that I finally agreed to stand for elections – after my daughters had grown up and my husband had been promoted (interview, MP23, 19 December 2006).

Even though this MP did not say that she felt unable to stand for election before this time, her narrative clearly suggests that she had to negotiate carefully the familial space and to put her husband's career before her own. Because of this, she was eventually able to join politics (in part because of her father's position in the party) without challenging gendered family hierarchies. Similarly, as in the case of another MP, the mismatch between the demands or support of natal political families and expectations of marital families can be difficult to negotiate; her estranged husband contested a number of elections against her (interview, MP4, 28 April 2006). Perhaps because of these pressures, some women MPs have decided not to marry (interviews, MP6, MP16, MP15). One spoke of this decision as in part her way of negotiating to join politics or to serve her constituency:

I am not married. Many of my friends [in political life] are single. We are OK with each other. I am accepted now. Some would say [to my mother] why is she not married; but that was out of affection. I am happy now – there is so much else to do. I am happy with my work, friends and my life (interview, MP6, 2 December 2005).

Accessing politics is, of course, not the same as sustaining that participation over a period of time. Women from political families are better supported once they get elected: 'I have got a lot of support from my party because I was the only woman MP from my party; ... I know some MPs already because of my father being in politics. I was like a daughter or sister to most of them; they always supported me' (interview, MP1, 29 November 2005). For many women, family-based access was a launch pad for strong and long careers in politics (interviews, MP2, MP1, MP6); others failed to capitalise on the advantages that their political families provided and indeed suffered a backlash because of their affiliation to particular political parties (interviews, MP5, MP8, MP18).

Families are therefore socially differentiated, with different resources that they invest in supporting their female members. For some, their elite background is important in translating aspirations into candidacy, while for others it is caste – reserved seats for the lowest castes – that allows them to make claims on the party hierarchy and for still others it is long

service to the party. Families are also important in supporting the woman through the process of campaigning, constituency work and absences from home during parliamentary sessions, all of which are important in the sustainability of a woman's position as an MP: 'when I was campaigning ... some traditional people objected to my not wearing burka, but my father was very progressive' (interview, MP18, 16 December 2006). Finally, ideological and party grounds define families – women from families supporting left-wing parties might access politics on different *terms* than those from right-wing backgrounds. Both left- and right-wing cadre-based parties might provide women with an alternative route to parliamentary politics through participation in social and political movements.

Reflecting upon the narratives on the family of women MPs, I am struck by the fact that almost all of them get and value the support of their families. This observation raises the question, what happens when women wanting to join politics are not supported by their families? Do they have alternative routes to parliament? Categories of class, caste and political elites operative in party politics are important here – those women who do not get the protection and support of their families are vulnerable to reputational damage and find it difficult to make it in political life. What the analysis of the MPs' narratives also allows me to examine is *how* different families impact on women's chances to access parliamentary politics.

Participation in Social Movements

I became a member of the Bengal Provincial Students Federation (BPSF) in 1939 ... Later, I became the secretary of the Students Federation ... I also worked hard during the postal workers' strike of 1945 when I addressed my first political rally; I was very nervous as I was the only woman student speaker ... the Communist Party was banned in 1948 and [my husband] and I were detained without trial for six months ... I was elected to the West Bengal Assembly, in 1967 and then again in 1972 ... I was elected to the [Seventh] Lok Sabha in 1979 ... and have been the MP since then (interview, MP22, 12 December 1994).

In this section I analyse the importance of participation in social movements as a route to parliamentary politics. Social movements are inflected with different ideologies – nationalism, socialism and right-wing traditionalism; they have arisen in different contexts – colonialism, non-democratic historical moments; and have been representatives of different politics – working class, communist, right-wing *hindutva*, autonomous women's movements and caste-based mobilisations. Political parties play an important role in giving shape to these movements, and are in turn shaped by them. The narratives of my interviewees show how women have been able to develop successful strategies of negotiating the political spaces and opportunities provided by these movements in their own interests.

Social movements are the field of politics within which aspirant individuals develop their political networks and skills. This is particularly important in the context of India where the nationalist movement was an important mobiliser of women; Gandhi, in particular, brought ordinary women into politics through everyday, non-violent modes of protest (Chattopadhyaya, 1983; Joshi, 1989). Unsurprisingly, therefore, in the earlier parliaments, many women had strong links with the national movement, either through their families or directly.⁹ While national and communist movements both rejected special measures for

women in politics, all the mainstream political parties mobilised women through 'women's organisations' under the umbrella of the party such as the All-India Mahila (Women's) Congress (INC), the All India Women's Federation (CPI) and the Mahila Morcha (BJP).

Post-independence, the civil rights movement led by the CPM and the Anti-Emergency¹⁰ movement led by Jaiprakash Narayan (JP) in 1975–7 was an important political moment, which again brought students to the forefront of national politics. These movements appealed to students, and many young women such as MP14 on the left and MP17 on the right wing joined this broad oppositional movement and stayed on in politics:

I haven't got politics as my inheritance (*viraasat*); no one in my family was in politics ... I came to politics through the JP movement ... I worked as a lawyer on the Baroda Dynamite case. When elections were announced, I campaigned hugely for the Janata Party and came into the limelight. I was elected in the Assembly elections in 1977 – I was only twenty five and I became a cabinet member. So, it was the JP movement that brought me into politics. I went to get his [JP's] blessings (*aashirvad*) before I sat on the ministerial chair (interview, MP17, 1 February 1994).

Social movements provide the stage where political performance is crafted, rhetorical skills displayed, reputations made and 'stars' emerge and attract the attention of political parties through participative performance. In both the narratives above (MP22 and MP17) we note that class and higher education allowed some women to participate first in student and then party political movements, through which they were given the opportunity for skill development, making speeches, for example, which marked them as promising politicians for the party.

While the 1970s and 1980s saw the first wave of the Indian feminist movement campaigning against state and domestic violence against women (Basu, 1992; Kumar, 1989; Ray, 1999; Sen, 2000; interview, MP19, 1995), in the 1990s India's economic liberalisation and new social challenges saw the mushrooming of autonomous women's organisations which sought to distance themselves from party-based women's associations on three counts – the goals that they set themselves, the conceptual frameworks within which to understand women's subordination and strategies to counter these, and the organisational principles of these groups in contrast to party-based women's associations (Chakravarti, 2005). Most of the women MPs that I interviewed had links, some stronger and others rather tenuous, with the women's wings of their political parties but very few (largely on the left) with the autonomous women's groups. The 1990s also witnessed the rise of fundamentalism and saw the appropriation of slogans of the women's movement by communalist forces in Indian politics (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1869; Karat, 2005; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; interview, MP19, 1995). The BJP mobilised women not only as voters but also as members of its organisations. One senior BJP MP claimed:

We want to attract women in large numbers – through education, but also through encouraging their increased representation. For that we have recently made a provision in our constitution. Our ward unit would not be considered valid unless two women are office bearers. This is a rider that will help women to come forward (interview, MP17, 1 February 1994).

The BJP presents the inclusion of women as an important strategy to preserve *hindutva*, the Hindu way of life, which its leaders contend is safe in the hands of Hindu women. 'Although out of the 200,000 *kar sevaks* who went to Ayodhya for the destruction of the Babri Masjid, 55,000 were women, their role was mainly behind the curtain, cooking and feeding their male counterparts' (Flavia, 1995, p. 147). Symbolic empowerment of women thus becomes a particular but necessary project. 'For me, politics is not separate from religion ... Religious people have to fight social evils, and if they have to enter politics to do so, they should', said an MP who is a product of the rise of Hindu militancy in Indian politics and who was at the forefront of the movement that brought down the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya (interview, MP16, 27 January 1994). She entered politics with the patronage of Vijya Raje Scidhia, a woman leader from a princely political family at a time when the BJP was deliberately switching its political strategy to a militant mobilisation of the Hindu vote bank. Several BJP women MPs were participants in these communal movements either actively (MP16) or in traditional supportive roles (MP8, MP2): 'My family was an RSS family; my husband was also in the RSS ... I joined the VHP and went to Ayodhya in 1992' (MP3, 6 December 2005). In interviews several BJP MPs mentioned going to Ayodhya but only one spoke openly about it. Listening closely to this awkwardness allowed me to understand that their presence in Ayodhya was problematic for them – within the party it was a badge of honour but they were also aware that outside the party their presence and participation in a violent movement that brought down a medieval mosque in the name of *hindutva* was politically difficult. So they mentioned it but did not discuss it – participating in this moment of violence opened certain routes for them within the party; sustaining their public profile, however, required careful management of this participatory history.

The weak link between women MPs and autonomous women's movements poses difficult issues of representativeness of women in parliament. If the autonomous women's movements are not able to access, lobby and influence women MPs and if women MPs' contact with women's movements is through the party's women's wings, then the articulation of women's interests in parliament becomes difficult and largely remains contained within party agendas. Even such a radical and feminist MP as Brinda Karat could not raise her voice against her party's government in West Bengal, when it was accused of perpetrating sexual and physical violence against peasants agitating against their land being taken over in the interest of setting up industry (*The Hindu*, 2007).

Participation in Political Parties

[The reason why there are so few women in parliament is that] parties keep changing their view ... now even within our party [the Congress] women get unwinnable seats; then she loses and they [the men] start saying that women should stay at home. I say we can do both – look after the family and work in politics (interview, MP9, 3 March 2006).

The frustration with and dependence on political parties is evident in the narratives of women MPs. The dependence of women on the party leadership is clear in these narratives – changes in leadership can open new routes to parliament, while gendered institutional power can also thwart women. These narratives suggest that parties are complex and fraught terrains for women.

In the 14th Indian parliamentary elections in 2004, 1,351 candidates stood from 6 nationally recognised parties, 801 candidates from 36 recognised state parties and 2,385 individuals stood as independent candidates. In 2004, an average of 10 candidates stood per constituency, up from 3.8 in 1952, but down from 1996's extraordinary 25.6 candidates per constituency. The parties are historically embedded in the wider political and social relations. Women have not fared well within the party system, with only 12.8 per cent of women candidates winning their seats. At the national level Congress fielded the highest number of 45 women out of 417 candidates nominated, a mere 10.79 per cent. The BJP gave tickets to just 30 women of the 364 seats (8.24 per cent) it contested in the 543-strong House. Nor did the left parties nominate many women, with CPI-M nominating 11.59 per cent or eight women among the 69 seats it contested in these elections. Seventeen state and recognised parties did not field a single woman.¹¹ In total 355 women candidates were fielded by all political parties (national, state, registered [but unrecognised] and independents). Of these, 45 or 12.68 per cent won, while 67.32 per cent forfeited their deposits, highlighting the issue of women getting winnable seats. While 33.33 per cent of BJP women candidates won, the figure was 26.67 per cent for the INC. As a result of the discursive and legal shift that came about through the 73rd and 74th Amendments, many political parties have discussed and many have introduced some form of quota for women (Rai, 1997). The implementation of this policy, however, is variable.

Political parties are critical gatekeepers of parliamentary politics and membership. Research on the inner workings of political parties is not easy (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) but it is important if we are to map the routes to women's participation in representative politics. While I was not able systematically to research candidate selection, the narratives of some of the senior MPs show how complex and fraught this issue is.

Candidate selection is a difficult process in political parties. A long-term member of Rajya Sabha (four terms) and the Lok Sabha (one term) and of the General Secretaries of the Congress Party and a member of its Central Selection Committee for the Congress Party, pointed out that:

of eleven members of this Committee, five are women, but even then it is not easy [to influence the selection process]. Recommendations come from the State party committees and they are male dominated ... The more we pressurise them [to include more women] the less they are willing to accept women. The Party constitution has been amended to have thirty-three per cent reservation of seats for women, but they still come to us and say 'Madam, we can't win without these [male] names'. If we go against their choice and give a seat to a woman, they go back and pressurise her to withdraw her name by threatening not to help (interview, MP11, 7 December 2005).

This was confirmed by another MP also from the INC: 'Madam [Party President, Sonia Gandhi] has brought reservation for women in the party. This is important ... but even then it is difficult. She sends back the lists many times to the States, but they come back with the same old names ... there are still too few women'¹² (interview, MP6, 2 December 2005).

Inevitably, families figure large in party politics and the choice of parties. A few individual women have made a mark on party politics at the highest levels because of family and kinship networks (Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Vijaye Raje Scindhia). Among the

MPs I interviewed several have been recruited into party organisations because of the reputations and positions of their fathers or husbands (interviews, MP23, MP18, MP5, MP1). At the same time, many right-wing parties present a familial face to their members as a reassurance against what is widely regarded as 'dirty politics'. One MP was courted by three different political parties; she chose to join politics as a BJP candidate despite opposition from both her natal and marital family: 'BJP is more like a family (*parivaar*); they treat everyone like their sister/brother, mother/father. I felt that joining politics for the first time, such a party would be better for me – I will feel more comfortable' (interview, MP13, 27 January 1999). It was thus not the politics of the party that initially attracted her but the gendered political discourse of the family employed by the BJP.

Parties like to maximise their advantage in popular politics; some women were selected as parliamentary candidates to capitalise on the 'sympathy vote' after the murder of their husbands – one MP's police officer husband died while chasing dacoits in Bihar; another's husband was murdered by the police under suspicious circumstances:

I stood for election to seek justice for the killing of my husband. I was pregnant at that time; it was 2003. There was a knock on the door in the middle of the night. When my husband opened the door they shot him. I wanted to bring the murderers to justice; I knew AIDMK had ordered his killing. DMK gave me a seat – Tiruchendur; I campaigned with my new born baby in my arms and asked people to vote for me so that I could avenge my husband's murder. I won by a good margin (interview, MP7, 19 December 2006).

Women have also benefited through the patronage or policy initiatives of party leaders (interviews, MP6, MP9, MP19). Rajiv Gandhi was particularly important as a party leader in promoting women into parliamentary politics. 'I am a product [*sic*] of Rajivji. He had an astute eye [*parkhi nazar*]; he brought many good people into politics' (interview, MP9, 3 March 2006). One MP's story gave credence to the importance of the role of party leaders, but also points to the resentment that is generated among the local party leadership of women being 'parachuted' into parliamentary seats by national leaders:

I am a die hard Congress person because of my father. Our family has always been loyal to the Congress ... In Congress we are dominated by personalities and the party tends to reflect this in its working ... Rajivji brought me into politics after my father died ... Some senior leaders [at the state level] created problems for me – they said I was too young; also, because I had direct access to Rajivji, they didn't like that; they wanted the control and also because of my caste – I come from Scheduled Caste¹⁵ community ... But always, Rajivji was a big support (interview, MP6, 2 December 2005).

Some women have, however, risen successfully through the ranks of the party:

I was an active member of VHP [Vishwa Hindu Parishad] Durgavahini [women's wing of VHP], of which I was also the Chairperson in 1989 ... I then became District Secretary and then President of the Mahila Morcha and fought Municipal elections in Udaipur ... In 1999 I became the State President of Mahila Morcha and remained in that post for four years. It was then that I fought elections for parliament against [MP15]. The Party wanted a woman to stand against her. I won by 75,000 votes (interview, MP3, 6 December 2005).

Working in local party politics remains an important but fraught route to the national parliament for women. One MP suggested that women who do not come from political

families and those who have to 'rise from below' have a difficult time, that politics is 'dirty' and the reputation of women aspirants is often undermined:

I came through a different route – straight to the top [parliamentary politics], not through the mire [*keechard*] of local politics. So much character assassination goes on all the time at that level. Good families are able to protect their daughters; lower families are not. There are twenty-five competitors for each parliamentary ticket; there was the local group against me. That is why I say that reservation [of seats for women] is essential (interview, MP13, 20 March 2006).

This perception, and one assumes experience, of politics as 'dirty' is one important impediment to women joining politics. This suggests that (a) elitism is perpetuated through political families using their social capital to 'protect' their female members from the hurly burly of local politics and (b) ordinary families find it difficult to give such protection and therefore are reluctant to allow the women to engage in party politics on the ground.¹⁴

Of the total number of MPs I interviewed, 43 per cent have been elected to two or more parliaments. However, among those who left parliament after one term are also talented and well-regarded politicians who resigned to join regional politics because that is where the party needed them (interviews, MP20, MP4, MP3); it was clear in my interview with one MP that she really enjoyed local politics and that she and her family were well embedded in the local political landscape:

My whole family is in the *sangh parivar* (BJP). I became the first lady Mayor of Udaipur; the local elections were held after twenty two years ... there were many challenges before us; people expected a lot of an elected Mayor. I came on a reserved seat for women for a Mayor's post. I was a Mayor for five years – I worked really hard; that was my golden period (interview, MP3, 6 December 2005).

While family connections remain extremely important within party politics (interviews, MP1, MP4, MP6, MP11), charismatic personalities have sometimes forced their way into national party politics (interview, MP16), as they have through hard, long-term graft in regional party work, sometimes specifically in the women's wings of political parties (interviews, MP22, MP3, MP19).

Reservation for Women

BJP supports the quota bill ... Thirty three percent reservations for panchayats was passed by the same parliamentarians who oppose this Bill because at that time their own seat [*kursi*] was not going anywhere; they didn't think that their own seat might be under threat ... We [BJP] were in 1996 the first to demand reservation for women, but even in our party men are worried. They tell me 'Why are you doing this injustice to us, *behenji* [sister]? We will support all the other bills that you bring, just leave this one alone (interview, MP17, 2 December 2005).

In this section I analyse the debate on quotas as a route for women to parliament. The Women's Reservation Bill (WRB), which was first introduced in the Lok Sabha by the Deve Gowda government on 12 September 1996, was introduced for the seventh time in the upper house in 2010¹⁵ and passed amid extraordinary scenes of parliamentary disruption

on 9 March 2010, a day after International Women's Day. It has yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha and at least fifteen state assemblies before it can become law.

When I conducted my first round of interviews with women MPs in 1994, most of them were either hesitant in their support for or outright hostile to any reservations for women in parliament;¹⁶ one MP pointed out: 'I do not want the quota system – there will be a lot of heartburning among male colleagues, and they will not respect you, thinking you are a "quota-candidate", and question your ability. But if you achieve your place on merit then they will accept you as one of them' (interview, MP17, 1 February 1994). The arguments that she rehearsed were predictable – she placed her own achievements in gaining access to politics centre stage and suggested that as 'a quota woman' she would not be able to gain the respect of her peers in parliament or legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents. However, when I interviewed many of the same women MPs in 2005–6, most of them – cutting across the right–left spectrum – supported reservations for women: one said: 'We are fifty per cent of the population ... [they] should at least get a chance [to enter politics], to be empowered' (interview, MP1, 29 November 2005). What they were also clear about was the reason why it has taken so long for the WRB to be passed: 'the men are worried that they will lose seats' (interview, MP17, 2 December 2005).

What explains this change of attitude towards reservations? Party politics has inevitably been central to this shift. With the fracturing of the Congress-dominated politics, the rise of regional and identity-based political parties and the consolidation of coalition politics, the need to mobilise new groups of the electorate became important; in this context, women were an important group. No party wanted to pass off the chance to champion women's representation in parliament, even though they approached women's role in politics from very different ideological perspectives. Party leaders, often modernisers within their parties, have also been a factor as they have publicly taken a position in support of this Bill. Sonia Gandhi, for example, invested considerable political capital in seeing its passage through the Rajya Sabha in 2010 and all political parties supporting the Bill laid claim to the credit for enabling it. The continuing pressure of the autonomous women's movements also created a discursive shift in the media and, finally, the history of addressing social exclusion through formal quota strategies (the 9th Schedule of the Indian constitution) provided a template for legislation. Despite rhetorical support by many political parties, however, the Bill met with stiff opposition. By 1997, in protest against the Bill not being discussed in parliament, Geeta Mukherjee led a cross-party group of women to leave the parliamentary session with the words: 'We walk out in protest of the Eighty-First Constitution (Amendment) Bill not being taken up' (Lok Sabha Debates, 14 August 1997).

There is an extensive literature and political interest in the validity of quotas as a 'fast track' (Baldez, 2004; Dahlerup, 2005) to gender equality. While some worry about the normative issues of group over individual interests and issues of equal opportunities (Hassim, 2006), most feminist scholarship has focused on a 'virtuous circle of representation' wherein higher numbers of women in parliaments allow for a better convergence of descriptive and substantive representation (Hassim, 2004). Much has also been written about the quotas for women in Indian local government (Basu, 2008; Baviskar and Mathew, 2009; Kudva and Misra, 2008; Rai, 2007; Raman, 2002), which was a springboard for the introduction of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Indian parliament in 1996

(Gopal Jayal, 2006; Menon, 2000; Rai and Sharma, 2000). While there has been some concern about the elite nature of women's representation in parliament, and even some scepticism about the need for a quota (Kishwar, 1996) and the impact this might have, generally the literature reflects the support of feminist scholarship for quotas for women (Karat, 2005).

There have been significant differences among parties on the detailed provisions, primarily on grounds of caste representation and how this will translate into seats for women, thus addressing the issue of elitism (Rai and Sharma, 2000; womenutc.com, 2005). One MP articulated her party's (RJD) view: 'Reservation is important but our concern is that OBC women will not get to parliament through this ... just because they are not educated doesn't mean they are not clever and without ideas ... unless we have a quota within the quota these women will not come to parliament' (interview, MP19, 20 December 2006).

While the Bill has a long way to go before it becomes law the quota route to parliament is now at least a possibility for women. A fascinating civil society mobilisation is taking place around the passage of this bill. Will this build stronger bridges between women MPs of the future and women's groups involved in this campaign? The form that this campaign has taken is also interesting – a railway journey to mobilise support of the Bill, while resonant of political *yatras* (a synonym for journey which the BJP has appropriated in its campaigns to spread the message of *hindutva*), it has explicitly used the secular term 'Reservation Express'¹⁷ to indicate the voyage that women have to make – allowing for a broad coalition of organisations to support it.

Conclusions

Stories matter. They matter because they allow us to probe beneath macro-level political explanation to access the textured complexities of political life. Through the analysis of narratives of women MPs in India, I have been able to show how not only the structural challenges they face but also the everyday negotiations they make in order to access and then stay and work in parliament are important in accounting for the gendered politics of the Indian parliament. I have shown that the stories that women MPs tell about their journeys to parliament are varied and yet produce a coherent if complex picture of gender politics in India. They also tell us how some routes to parliament remain the same – for example the support of families – and how others have changed radically, in particular the approach to quotas.

The family remains a key source of support to women accessing parliamentary politics. But these stories allow us to examine the particular nature of this support – under the ambit of 'the family' many different incentives are operative and many diverse negotiations take place. Class, caste and religion all affect family assets as does the politics of the family itself – its ideological position and party preferences. However, these narratives strongly suggest that where women do not have 'political families' in the background, their participation in social movements can be crucial to their accessing political life. Through such participation they came to the attention of party leaders, who then promoted them. They also learned political skills through their participation in social movements – speech making, relating to 'ordinary people' and negotiating party politics.

However, while families continue to play an important part in the success of the MPs, we also decipher a growing support for quotas among my interviewees. This might reflect growing party support for quotas, but the narratives also show their belief that there has been opposition to the Bill in all political parties because of the threat it poses to male privilege in securing winnable seats to parliament. The discursive shift about gender equality in the wider polity is reflected in the comments that they make about quotas for women. We also notice that unlike in many other countries, such as the UK, the right-wing/left-wing divide on the issue of quotas does not hold; officially the BJP and the Congress as well as the Communists support the WRB, while the positions of the lower caste-based parties have been different, and at times hostile to it. These stories also reveal that, at the institutional level, very few political parties have rigorously implemented a party quota for women, but that some party leaders, particularly at the national level, have championed the selection of women candidates – many women speak of their success as ‘a gift’ from the leader, placing them in particular relationships of dependence.

A narrative approach to politics has therefore allowed me to develop an understanding of *how* the personal inflects the public and political as women make the journey to the Indian parliament. The messy negotiations of the everyday then become part of the stories of success, shape our appreciation of these disparate journeys and help us analyse the different factors that lie behind the success of women in accessing the Indian parliament.

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Notes

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- 1 This is one of the five key questions that I addressed in my research on Indian women MPs over a period of ten years: (1) the politics of access – what access routes had they taken into national politics? (2) The politics of definition – how did they define politics? Are there any significant changes in the rhetorical articulations of ‘politics’ across party boundaries? Equally critically, how do they define their own role in political life? (3) The politics of interests – are new political issues engaging them? For example, are they more aware of the rhetorical power of women’s equality discourse and how do they use it – or does party discipline continue to be the most important factor determining their political decisions? (4) The politics of leadership – what qualities of leadership do they value and are they able to see themselves and other women as leaders? Do they think they have different leadership styles from men? And (5) the politics of negotiation – how do they negotiate a highly complex political landscape? Who has been able to thrive rather than just survive, who has not been able to cope with the hurly burly of politics and who has flourished – and why?
- 2 There is a considerable amount of literature on this issue. See Beckwith, 2007; Celis and Childs, 2008; Reingold, 2006, among many others.
- 3 IPU, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>; UNDP, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Table4_reprint.pdf
- 4 I am, of course, aware that this study does not analyse the narratives of those who have *not* made it to parliament. However, through a close reading of the testimonies of the successful women MPs we can read off some of the obstacles that keep many other women out of political life.
- 5 http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2009/ostrom-lecture-slides.pdf

- 6 Tilly has also made a distinction between standard stories and technical accounts (Tilly, 2002), the first a sequential recounting and the second a descriptive and explanatory narration of events in a non-story mode. In my work, this distinction does not occur as the stories that my interviewees told me about their lives were not juxtaposed with narratives about their party organisations.
- 7 'Biwi [wife] brigade' token politicians' are terms used to emphasise 'male equivalence' in public political discourses, especially in the context of debates on reservation for women in parliament (Karat, 2005).
- 8 For example, the Nehru-Gandhi family has dominated the Congress party and national politics for over a hundred years, with both women and men benefiting from this family's political position – Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi were all prime ministers and today Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia and their son Rahul both hold key positions in the Congress party.
- 9 Smt. Subhadra Joshi, Smt. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Smt. Tarkeshwari Sinha (INC), Smt. Renu Chakravarty (CPI) and Smt. Sucheta Kripalani were all leaders in the nationalist struggle and became Members of Parliament.
- 10 In 1975, Indira Gandhi, then prime minister, declared a State of Emergency and suspended all civil rights. The pressure of the movement against the Emergency resulted in elections in 1977 when the INC was defeated and an opposition government was formed for the first time since India's independence.
- 11 http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/7066_738737,001600630004.htm
- 12 Sonia Gandhi's commitment to get the Women's Reservation Bill passed was one of the key factors in its passage through the Rajya Sabha.
- 13 The 9th Schedule of the Indian constitution provides a comprehensive quota for the lowest castes and tribes; hence lower-caste people are often referred to as from the Scheduled Castes.
- 14 See Sheela Reddy, Madam Pompadour's Chessboard, *Outlookindia.com*, 18 January 2010. Available from: <http://keepingcount.wordpress.com/2010/01/10/women-politicians-in-india-madam-pompadours-chessboard/> [Accessed 23 June 2010]. Interestingly, this frank exposure of sexual harassment in political life did not result in much public comment or mobilisation of women's groups' against this.
- 15 'Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA government re-introduced the bill in the 12th Lok Sabha in 1998 ... The NDA government re-introduced the bill in the 13th Lok Sabha in 1999 ... It moved the Bill again amid pandemonium in 2002 ... The Bill was introduced twice in Parliament in 2003 ... The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice, and Personnel recommended passage of the Bill in Dec 2009', *The Hindu*, 'The 14 Years Journey of Women's Reservation Bill'. Available from: <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/national/article223383.ece> [Accessed 23 June 2010].
- 16 One clearly supportive voice then was that of the late Geeta Mukherjee, MP, CPI.
- 17 See <http://www.reservationexpress.org/> for details.

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