

India's Women Politicians Are a Breed Apart

Though India has a woman president, house speaker, and women incumbents lead two of the country's three biggest and most powerful states, the country still faces major obstacles on the road to gender equality.

by Carlo Pizzati

The Indian states West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu combine 360 million people. Women govern two of the three, with a third only recently defeated but still a powerful political figure. Each woman has a dominant personality that she is unafraid to use, even ruthlessly. All of them are veteran insiders and controversial figures who tend to get their way.

When it comes to gender and politics, the Indian political landscape couldn't differ more markedly that that of Italy. Italy has never had woman prime minister and among European states has the lowest percentage of

women in parliament. By contrast, the prevalence of women in high places in India is striking. The country's president is Sonia Gandhi, the longtime leader of the Congress Party and by far the most powerful politician in India. The House speaker is a woman, as is the leading opposition figure, and several key governors.

At first glance, based on politics, India would seem to have attained gender equality. But it's an illusion.

In reality, India is deeply spiritual state whose two main religions, Hinduism and Islam, have little patience for full-scale equality between men and women. But politics is seen as a separate realm, in part because of the way women portray themselves. There's no doubting the clout of female leadership in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and until recently Uttar Pradesh. These states are major players that manage large sums of money and award major infrastructure and development contracts. That women have long been in their forefront demonstrates India's unique ability to merge traditional roots with remarkable social and personal innovation. It's as if the 1.2 billion people concentrated in a country author Salman Rushdie once described as a runny nose on Indian Ocean had a unique way of expressing female power, demonstrating the way a woman can reach the pinnacles of power without her sacrificing femininity but emphasizing the universal values of sisterhood and the maternal.

Glamour Mom

In India, notions of the maternal are fundamentally tied to guidance. It is no wonder Jayalalitha Jayaram, the chief minister of south India's Tamil Nadu, where Madras (now Chennai) is located, is nicknamed "Amma," or mother. The big black coat she wears, she jokes, is lined ballistic missile-resistant material to ward off attacks. The coat has yielded another nickname, "Batwoman."

Jayaram, a former Kollywood star (the Hollywood of Tamil Nadu), owes a debt to her husband, MG Ramachan-

dran, a major star went into politics and evolved into a regional legend known only as MGR. He died in 1988.

MGR'S charm and charisma endures more than two decades after his death. The streets of Madras and Tamil Nadu in general are dotted with posters of the actor in his youth, dressed as cowboy, a dandy, an everyday man, Maharaja, and finally in the arms of Jayalalitha, the woman who was first his lover and later his wife. Jayalalitha's background contains its fair share of hard knocks. After the death of mentor and protector Ramachandran, she had to struggle hard for power. She had it, lost it, and recently again wresting it from the hands of the opposition Dravidian Munnetra Kashagam (DMK), which is led by nemesis Muthuvel Karunanidhi, who had worked tirelessly to have her banished into political limbo. He failed.

But her return hasn't quelled controversy around either her person or her methods. On the contrary, the controversy has only widened. She is alleged to have repeated-

Mamata Banerjee, alongside students, pays homage to Nobel Prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore in August 2011, on the 70th anniversary of his death.

ly hired armed thugs to maintain order. Throughout the 1990s, stories of judges, lawyers, political opponents, journalists and public officials threatened or brutalized were legion. In 1995, a lawyer called to testify in a corruption case against her ended up in a hospital after crowbar-wielding assailants broke his arms and legs. She's been indirectly implicated in some high-profile murders.

Jayalalitha's rationalizes the raft of allegations against her in terms of a more general climate of systematic violence. She had to defend herself, she says, from the exploitation and injustice that emerged from the envious male power establishment. She's an avenger, not vexatious, someone who seeks to right wrongs, at least that's how she tries to portray herself to her constituents. She mixes politics and religion to personify empowering Goddess Kali, who destroys the illusion of reality along with Shiva. Jayalalitha is no stranger to shaping personality cults. Like many of her male counterparts, she attempted to create one around her person from the beginning of her political career. She once had herself filmed riding a lion. On another occasion she was a Mother Mary figure saying, "From now on, history will history will be



Ap Photo / R. Kumar Singh



Ap Photo / B. Das

her story.” These traits have led political commentator and marketing experts to insist she suffers from a kind of divine personality disorder, after decades of projecting herself in supernatural terms.

While the bourgeois middle class felt threatened by Jayalalitha, she worked tirelessly to enlist support from her state’s extensive poor population, many of them profoundly ignorant. She turned middle class pomp and excess into an advantage among those who loved to loath it. She also burnished her own legend, getting her supporters to erect statues and cardboard posters in her honor and scatter them strategically through the intersections of downtown Madras. Also 1990s, she invited 100,000 people to the wedding of her adopted son (a sizable marriage crowd even in a state of 60 million inhabitants).

But critics failed to understand was the underlying logic of the wedding. In essence, she invited tens of thousands of the poor and dispossessed to attend the lavish Madras wedding at state expense, an ostentatious act, except that was fundamental in helping her to cultivate the Mother Goddess “Amma” image, a good luck charm who helps the poor. Her strong sense of fashion and style has also been helpful. One Indian magazine, writing about the female heads of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, nicknamed her the “glamourista.”

The Sister Poet

Call her Didi. Older sister. Indian fashionistas call her look eco-chic, based on her slightly baggy cotton sari. Mamata Banerjee is the chief minister of West Bengal, considered among India’s poorest states. Its capital, Calcutta (now Kolkata) has for centuries been the archetype for urban misery, with images of streets teeming with the poor and dying. Though Calcutta and West Bengal are in fact weighed down by human misery, they also both boast potent aspects of the modern, including new buildings and thriving industry. In 2012, Mamata was named among “Time” magazine’s 100 Most Influential People. “She has emerged as a populist woman of action — strident and divisive but poised to play an even greater role in the world’s largest democracy,” the magazine wrote.

Underneath its veneer of advancement, West Bengal is nonetheless still most known as a home to poets, artists, writers, a place where the ability and willingness to express artistic feelings counts. Mamata, for example, insists that she’s a poet. She’s not a very good one but that’s



Sonia Gandhi. AP Photo / R. Kumar Singh

irrelevant. Her vehemence is what matters, and it works. Her political clout makes it almost inevitable that local papers newspapers, at least those that back her, publish her poems on their front pages. Like Jayalalitha, she focused her career more on creating an avenging deity image than on the virtues of conventional politics. Every Thursday, thousands of poor people still line up outside her house to receive the “Prasad,” or sacred, meal. Her constant casting of herself as one of the poor, a champion and herald, has led critics to say she suffers from Poor Person Syndrome or SPP. She in fact comes from a middle class family and earned a college degree.

Loyalty can never be a defect, at least not political loyalty, and, early on, Mamata became obsessed with eliminating the strong Communist presence in her state. She’s both loved and hated for having casting herself as the state’s lone, noncommunist anti-poverty champion.

But she’s also a shrewd operator who’s not above changing sides. She recently threatened to topple the Indian government by demanding the firing of the country’s transport minister, one of her loyalists, for pushing ahead on legislation calling for an increase in state train prices (an increase which, while unpopular, had long been foreseen and was considered economically vital). The minister resisted his mentor for several days, insisting that the increases were vital to maintaining national sister, but finally gave up. Big sister Mamate took his place.

Sister Wikileaks

Kumari Mayawati had served four, non-consecutive terms as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh atop the Bahujan Samaj Party (Majority Party), which represents the Bahujans or Dalits, known for centuries as “untoucha-

bles,” until losing elections in March. Though has long been a Dalit icon (and also referred to as “little sister”), she more recently fell afoul of U.S.-generated Wikileaks cables. According to dispatches sent from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Mayawati had no fewer than nine cooks (in fact two cooks and seven waiters) and two personal tasters (to weed out any food poisoning attempts). It didn’t end there. The leaks also suggested she’d sent a private jet to Mumbai to pick up a pair of sandals on a whim. “This in a state where 56 million people earn less than \$1 a day and more than 300,000 go to bed hungry,” wrote the BBC.

She denied the allegations, calling Wikileaks founder Julian Assange a “fool” (Assange responded saying that he hadn’t written the incriminating memos, merely made them public). “The more she’s demonized by the chattering classes, the more popular she becomes among her constituents,” says biographer Ajay Bose, who also adds a note of caution. “It would help if she went through with some concrete measures on their behalf.”

In 1993, at age 39, she became the youngest chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and the India’s first Dalit chief minister. Her success demonstrated that a woman didn’t necessarily have to spend time in the political boy’s club before making a bid for power. Her mentor was a man, Kanshi Ram, the party founder. But Kanshi handpicked her, going to her house (she’d only recently obtained a teaching degree) and telling her: “I’m going to make you a leader who has a raft of assistants and helpers.”

That’s just what happened. Never married, with no children, Mayawati may have earned her “sister” label at least in part based on her martial status and lack of any direct dependence on men. She explained that she never had time for family life or a relationship, not if she wanted to focus on a political career. As a result, she never married.

Critics say that over her four terms in office covering more than a decade she spent \$500 million to build statues of herself or elephants, the symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party, India’s fourth-largest. She was ordered to cover all of them ahead of recent elections, and lost.

Her enemies have long regarded her as an unscrupulous and corrupt political operator ready to strike amoral deals to ensure her ambitions. She defended radical Hindu nationalist, Narendra Modi in a wink toward Communist leaders in hopes of forming a coalition government

led by the Congress Party. “I prefer to be known as a leader of all communities,” she says. “And every community has its poor and unemployed.” She speaks from experience. Born into a community of tanners, the Chamar, who according to the Hindu code of purity couldn’t even share cups of tea or water wells with the upper castes, she made herself into a rags-to-riches story. In 2007, “Time” said, “she represents the best and worst of the messy behemoth that is Indian democracy.”

But for many Dalits, Mayawati was a kind of holy presence almost single-handedly responsible for transforming the face of dilapidated Uttar Pradesh, finally allowing untouchables to report crimes and abuse against them without fear of reprisal and to seek state assistance and subsidies long denied them.

Over the years, her image has been tarnished by repeated corruption allegations. In 2008, India’s Central Bureau of Investigation accused Mayawati and her relatives of illegally amassing €2.2 billion worth of private residences, including New Delhi villa. Some say she allowed herself to become India’s Evita Peron.

A Long Road

The presence of holy mothers, of big sisters and little ones, of a female president and house speaker, would seem to suggest gender egalitarianism, at least in politics. But it’s an illusion.

India’s parliament is only 10 percent female just slightly less than the number in Italy. Tellingly, however, these women are so deeply involved in securing and expanding their own power base that they find little time to work toward more ample and inclusive empowerment.

There’s another, thornier question, concerning the nature of female power, which often seems like an imitation of the male variety. The battle for women’s rights in India began in the 19th century with Rammohan Roy’s effort to end the chilling “sati,” the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of her husband. Despite efforts by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and feminists such as Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde, female feticide, suicides deriving from dowry blackmail, the practice hasn’t vanished. Equally insidious are unwritten laws forbidding the rise of women to leadership roles in universities and national media. What all this means, in the final analysis, is that the meteoric rise of number key women in politics sets no precedents for the rest of society. ●