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All in the Family?
Gender, Caste and Politics in an
Indian Metropolis

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ALL IN THE FAMILY? GENDER, CASTE AND POLITICS IN AN INDIAN METROPOLIS¹

“Women are not a community, they are a category”

Towards Equality: Report on the Status of Women in India, 1974

“...the word “category” sometimes seems appropriate because it has the advantage of designating both a social unit...and a cognitive structure and of showing the link between them.”

Pierre Bourdieu *Masculine Domination*²

INTRODUCTION

Writing at a time when the reservations for women in rural *panchayats* (elected rural bodies) and urban local bodies were implemented only in a few Indian states, Indira Hirway warned, “it is also necessary to get disillusioned about the role of representative participation in the country. It is important to realize that representative participation may not lead to mass participation in our kind of socio-economic structure.”³ This early cautionary voice must be remembered in the sobering decade that has passed since the passage of the Nagarpalika Act of 1992, or the 74th Constitutional

¹ A version of this paper was written for the lecture tour of universities in Brazil in October 2008, which was sponsored by SEPHIS, Amsterdam. I am grateful to Marina de Regt, Jacqueline Rutte and Alyxandra Gomes for making this tour possible. I am very grateful to Juana Maria Pedro, Eleana Maura, Antonadia Borges, Ana Alice Alcantara and other “crazy women” of the Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre al Mulher, and Alyxandra Gomes for the interest they took in planning and organizing the lecture tour at their respective universities/institutes. My grateful thanks to the audiences at each university, who overcame the barriers of language with their questions and comments, and pressed me to rethink some of the issues that are presented in this revised version. As to the patience and verve of all those who translated my talks and responses, a special salute.

Except where other sources are acknowledged, the paper is based on a study of women corporators in Bengaluru which was part of a larger UNIFEM sponsored project on “Gender and Urban Governance in Two Cities” of which I was the Bengaluru coordinator. The study, initiated by Mary E. John, then at Jawaharlal Nehru University, compared the experience of reservations for

Amendment, which mandated 33 per cent quotas for women in urban local bodies.⁴ Despite the hyper-visibility of a few women in the Indian Parliament, voluble women ministers, a woman Prime Minister for close to 16 years (Indira Gandhi), and now a woman President (Pratibha Patil), there has been no steady march of the Indian woman from *panchayat* to Parliament. There have not been, to paraphrase Evelyn Hust, “a million Indiras now.”⁵ This is something of a paradox in the changing Indian political scenario for at least two reasons. India shares with Brazil the advantage of a diverse and prominent women’s movement, though, as Ana Alice Alcantara notes, this “has succeeded in putting women’s demands on the table, but ... has failed to open formal political spaces to women themselves”⁶ apart from what is mandated by law. At the same time, in India, the rule of upper castes and classes within a historically dominant political formation (the Indian National Congress) has been decisively, even irreversibly, challenged by the emergence of powerful regional parties led by the *Dalits* (lit: broken or oppressed castes) and Backward Classes (including non-dominant castes) in State Legislatures and

women to urban local bodies in the cities of Delhi and Bengaluru. See Mary E. John “Women in Power? Gender, Caste and the Politics of Urban Governance”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42: 39 (September 29-October 5, 2007), pp. 3986-95. In this paper, I primarily use material from interviews done with 59 current and past Bengaluru corporators of both sexes in July-August 2002, as well as some quantitative data on voters and their preferences. Most interviews were done by C.K. Veena, D. Tharamathi, and P. Sudarshan. A fuller report of the project is in Mary E. John “Gender and Urban Governance in Two Cities: A Report Summary” (mimeo). I am grateful to Mary John, S. Anandhi, and Manabi Majumdar for critical and constructive comments on this paper.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 8.

³ Indira Hirway, “Panchayati Raj at the Crossroads”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24: 29 (1989), pp. 1663-67.

⁴ A similar percentage was reserved for women in rural *panchayats* under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

⁵ Evelyn Hust, *Women’s Political Representation and Empowerment in India: A Million Indiras Now?* (Delhi: Manohar, 2004).

⁶ Ana Alice Alcantara, “Women and Politics: The Brazil Paradox” www.opendemocracy.net/article/5050/political_representation_brazil, 11-03-2008; accessed August 1, 2008.

the Parliament, despite the reassertion of upper caste power enabled by the emergence of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Conspicuous by their absence in this reconfigured public political space are women. The current Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) has 45 women out of 543 members, less than 10 per cent of all elected representatives.⁷ In the state of Karnataka (of which Bengaluru is the capital) where state elections were held in May 2008, a mere three women were elected to the 224-member Legislative Assembly (only 108 women candidates were fielded out of 2242 in all).

Interestingly enough, this abysmal record of fielding, supporting and ensuring the success of woman candidates to State legislatures and Parliament comes in the very state, Karnataka, that pioneered the policy of reservations for women to rural and urban local bodies in 1983, long before the Indian Government made it the national law.⁸ In 1992, seats in the lowest tier of government (rural panchayats and urban local bodies) were reserved for women by the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution. The provision which ensured that “not less than one-third of total number of seats in each urban local body shall be reserved for women” raised hopes of quick gains in the state legislatures and the Parliament as well.

Such hopes have been betrayed by the repeated refusal to discuss the Women’s Reservation Bill within Parliament. First presented as the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill, in 1996, and re-presented four times since then (most recently in May 2008) vociferous protests from male, and some female, representatives of certain political parties have dashed hopes of an easy resolution. At the same time, as every Indian election has shown, all parties, whether from the left, right, or centre, show utter contempt for their own poll promises, none of them fielding more than 5 per cent of women candidates, and barely making their win feasible. Therefore, in the recent suggestion that all parties be obliged to field at least 33 per cent of women candidates, which has been accepted by the

⁸ Manasa, “Karnataka and the Women’s Reservation Bill”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35: 43 and 44 (October 28, 2000), pp.WS 49-53.

Election Commission (along the lines of what has been accepted in Brazil), we may detect the widespread conviction that the fielding of women candidates is a handicap which, unless it is shared by all parties and mandated by law, will become too great a political risk.

To place too great an emphasis on the demand for higher numbers of women in representative bodies, however, is to risk too simplistic an answer to the deep seated reasons for the absence of women in political institutions. For one, as Gail Omvedt has shown for the South Asian context, there can be an inverse relationship between the higher proportion of women representatives and their social status in different regions. In her comparison of the five South Asian states, she has shown that Pakistan has the best representation of women in legislatures and Parliament, (21.2 per cent) and Sri Lanka holds the worst record on this score, although it is the latter country that women enjoy the most equalitarian gender relations of all South Asian countries.⁹

Representation in formal political institutions, moreover, is but one aspect of the field of politics, and one might add, the realm in which prevailing social relations are sustained and reproduced, or modified, rather than challenged or overturned. Beyond the sphere of formal political representation are oppositional movements, those committed to broader and more thoroughgoing social change. The highly visible, heterogeneous, though today somewhat weakened, Indian women's movement, is among those movements whose goal is a transformation of existing gender relations, in and through more democratic practices. The prolonged controversy over the Bill has therefore led to serious, and even divisive, rethinking among Indian feminists on the strategies that are to be pursued to achieve greater political representation of women in legislative bodies, without compromising on a democratically forged, transformative, political agenda. In other words, there is a growing concern and recognition of the possibility of women's issues being used to submerge other forms of discrimination. The Indian women's movement is therefore forced to rethink the very strategies that were forged with such enthusiasm in

⁹ Gail Omvedt, "Women in Governance in South Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly* 40:44 and 45 (October 29, 2005), pp. 4746-52, esp. 4750.

the mid 1970s, given the rise of forces and parties that are committed to undermining democracy.

Another of the dilemmas with which the Indian women's movement is faced is the ambiguous success of its demands and programmes. The Indian state has proved remarkably adept in its capacity to "mainstream" and tame feminism's charge as a way of harnessing women's agency to new ideals of "governance." The overuse of the term "empowerment" in its plans, policies and programmes is a symptom of the ways in which the state has appropriated and recast the language of feminism, and turned "liberation" into a dubious goal. Governance, after all, has come to replace the language of "development" in India since at least the 1980s. The state now positions the woman as the more reliable debtor, the more dependable purveyor of health programmes, or the more efficient manager of resources, all in ways that burden the rural, and in some cases, urban, Indian woman with new goals and responsibilities, without lightening any of her earlier ones. Feminist analyses have revealed a different picture: to take just one example, Joint Forest Management (JFM) Programmes which have been publicized with great verve as a way of involving poor peasant women in meeting their bio-mass needs in a sustainable fashion have decidedly benefited the state, not women.¹⁰ Similarly, micro credit programmes have encouraged the formation of neo-liberal, individuated female consumer-subjects, which thwarts, rather than fosters, the hope of a radical reordering of gender relations.¹¹

The time has come to ask why a measure that was so full of hope when reservations were mandated in local bodies, now evokes terror among the leadership of many Indian parties, and has sown dissension among feminists themselves. The reservation of seats for women in rural panchayats and urban local bodies was not, at least in

¹⁰ See Madhu Sarin, "Gender and Equity Concerns in Forest Management" in Nitya Rao and Luise Rurup (eds), *A Just Right: Women's Ownership of Natural Resources and Livelihood Security* (Delhi: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1997), p. 309.

¹¹ For instance, see "Gendering Governance or Governing Women? Politics, Patriarchy, and Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala" (Final Report), CDS, Trivandrum, 2008.

Karnataka, accompanied by the same degree of panic that has been generated by the new bill.¹² Neither has there been, as many studies have shown, and as we shall see below, virulent opposition to the idea of reservations for women from either people or parties.¹³ The biggest fear since the late 1990s has been that a reservation of seats for women will reinforce elite domination, rather than extend democratic practice. A scrutiny of the way in which the policy of reservations for women and lower castes has thus far worked in urban local bodies would therefore yield crucial lessons for rethinking feminist politics and indeed the modalities of Indian democracy. Among the most cited reasons for denying reservations to women in legislative bodies are: that only elite women will benefit from reservations; that women are mere “proxies” or place holders for men in their family; that their inherent disabilities make women unsuitable for the daily grind of politics. Rather than querying the veracity of these misogynist statements and reasons, a fresh enquiry will turn attention to the pervasive influence of these claims. Reservation of seats for women certainly increases the visibility of women in political life. Does it substantially alter the existing political process or advance women’s interests? In other words, is there a correspondence between the enlarged presence of women in representative bodies and enhanced democratic practice or gender justice?

Clearly, we need to know more about how the policy of reservations has worked at the lowest tier of political institutions, namely the rural *panchayats* and urban local bodies, where it has been in place for more than a decade now. This article reviews the mandated presence of women of all castes in the Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BMP: Bengaluru City Corporation) on two planes. Has the presence of women transformed or challenged

¹² Mary John has, however, shown that the case of Delhi presents a contrast to Karnataka, since the measure to rotate seats reserved for women was opposed in court by several political parties. “Gender and Urban Governance in Two Cities”, p. 4.

¹³ See for instance, Rajeshwari Dasgupta, “How Gendered was Women’s Participation in Election 2004?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39:51 (Dec, 18, 2004), pp. 5431-36, esp. 5435.

the ways in which the institutions function, or have women been accommodated and absorbed into existing modes of doing politics? Furthermore, has the new opportunity for political participation in public life transformed the ways in which women practice politics, and redefined their abilities and political goals, so that the demand for gender justice is raised within the wider realm of metropolitan politics? The answers to these questions may not only unsettle the arguments of the fiercest opponents to women's reservation, but raise some uncomfortable questions for the shape and style of feminist struggles and goals.

The article is divided into five parts: in the first, I discuss briefly the kinds of challenges that have been thrown up by the Women's Reservation Bill to the Indian parliamentary system, particularly in terms of how the hierarchies of caste have become inseparable from the "women's question" in most parts of contemporary India. It also provides a brief history of the specific conjunctures at which the category of "woman" became available as a way of blocking or evading the democratic demands of other castes/classes in the late colonial and post independence periods. The second section relates the history of women's presence in the Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, until the time of the passage of the 1983 act when seats were first reserved for women. In the third section, I discuss how questions of caste and gender reconfigured the 1996 and 2001 elections and with what meaning for the future of democratic politics. The fourth section attempts to assess whether women in the reconstituted urban local councils have remained corralled within, or have exceeded, the simple realm of numbers, or the domain of enlarged representation. In the last section, I turn to the ways in which the insights generated by such an empirical analysis challenge the assumptions of the state, the fears of critics and opponents, and even the hopes of the feminist movement in order to draw some lessons for the larger question of the relation between reservations and democracy. "Gender" here is deliberately invoked over the category of "women", to denote not only the changing sets of relations which determine and make possible the meaning and content of male and female participation in public political life, but also its exclusions, the modalities by which power is exercised. However, the category of

“gender” also serves the purpose of making the woman visible.¹⁴ In the Indian context, as I argue throughout, such a set of relationships cannot be delinked from the grid composed by the axes of class, caste and religious affiliation.

WHEN DID THE CATEGORY OF “WOMAN” BECOME POSSIBLE?

Though widely reviled as a misogynist figure of speech, one of the “terrifying” images that was conjured up by the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) leadership during the late 1990s discussions on the bill to reserve 33 per cent of the seats to the legislatures and parliaments were the “*par-kati mahilaen*” (“short-haired women”, signifying urban, westernized and deracinated upper caste women), who would undermine the new found gains of the Other Backward Classes.¹⁵ The figure of the “*par-kati mahilaen*” and the caricature of the “*biwi-beti* (wife and daughter) brigade” that would triumph at the polls tapped into long standing male caricatures of educated, urban woman,¹⁶ but also warned against renewing the grip of upper castes over representative politics. Was this fear entirely misplaced?

A brief turn to the history of the demand for “separate electorates” is instructive. National women’s organisations that emerged in the early decades of the 20th century, such as the Women’s

¹⁴ On the limits of ‘gender’ as a category in political analysis, see Stephanie Tawa Lama Rewal, “Fluctuating, Ambivalent legitimacy of Gender as a Political Category”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 36: 17 (April 28, 2001), pp. 1435-40.

¹⁵ On the rise of the Backward Classes in north India, see most recently, Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). Jaffrelot’s work remains strategically silent on the Women’s Reservation Bill.

¹⁶ On the fearful figure of the westernized woman, there is a large and luxuriant literature. See for instance, Rosalind O’Hanlon, *A Comparison between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India* (Delhi: OUP, 2000); Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India: New Cambridge History of India Vol. IV.2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Early Twentieth Century Kerala* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

Indian Association (1917), the National Council of Women in India (1925) and the All India Women's Conference (1927), first demanded that women be enfranchised on the same terms as men, under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, and argued against the sex disqualification for membership.¹⁷ During the hearings of the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928, all important political groups campaigned for "an extension of women's franchise and increased representation of women in the legislatures", though the Congress argued against reserved seats for women, in opposition to another group of Indian women. It is not surprising that the most vociferous voice against separate electorates for women was that of Sarojini Naidu, the Congresswoman who wore all the marks of privilege as an upper caste member of the Congress, and was made President in 1925. On the other side stood Muthulakshmi Reddi of the WIA, herself born to a Devadasi (women who were temple dancers) family, who insisted on reserved seats "to represent the women's point of view."¹⁸ Since constitutional negotiations were occurring in an atmosphere of communal tension and extremist violence, all the women's groups came together to reject "special expedients to ensure women's membership in legislatures."¹⁹ Even those who were in favour of reservations, such as Radhabhai Subbaroyan of the AIWC, however, refused to address the communal (inter-community or inter-caste relations) question, and when the Communal Award of 1932 explicitly awarded reserved seats to women (2.5 per cent of seats in legislatures), it was done on communal grounds.

Why did the demand for separate seats get diluted by women themselves in this period? As Mary John has argued, women's reservation issues were deferred in the light of the threat posed by demands for separate electorates for minorities and Untouchables in the early 1930s: this first led to the Gandhi-Ambedkar face-off, and

¹⁷ Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (1981; reprint Delhi:Heritage Publishers, 1985), pp. 105-7.

¹⁸ Mary E John, "Alternative Modernities? Reservations and Women's Movement in 20th century India", *Economic and Political Weekly* 35: 43 and 44 (October 28, 2000), pp. WS 22-9, esp. 24.

¹⁹ Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, p. 120.

the compromise of the Poona Pact.²⁰ Also, and more importantly, the women's decision to support merit and merit alone was a "strategic choice in favour of formal equality [which] was not unrelated to their own social, educational, and individual advancement." The solidarity of the category of "woman" thus became a useful tool in countering the demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables, in the name of standing above "artificial communal hedges". The surprising unity of women, including by this time Muthulakshmi Reddi, in espousing "equality and no privileges" was no doubt due to the extraordinary influence of Gandhi.²¹ In the Government of India Act of 1935, 41 seats were reserved for women under different communities, and in the first elections after the Act, in 1937, only 56 women candidates entered legislatures, of which 5 were nominated.²² The protracted struggles to keep women as a category above other kinds of "divisive" categories were the first signs of the Indian elite woman's strategy of invisibilizing privilege, and retaining the right to represent all of Indian womanhood, while the insistence on abstract languages of political rights also served to neutralize the dangers of women in legislative bodies. The confidence with which elite women rose above "gender", a task more difficult for women of the lower castes and classes, was starkly revealed.

These considerations therefore became an important legacy for the Indian women's movement in the immediate post independence

²⁰ John, "Alternative Modernities?", p. WS 25.

²¹ The castes that lay outside of the four-fold varna system were, through the period of colonialism, "named" in a variety of ways that indicated changes in their political/socio economic status vis-à-vis the upper, dominant castes as well as changes in self perception. Thus, colonial administrative terms included Depressed Classes, and Other Non Hindus. In southern India, the "Untouchable" castes gave themselves the name of Adi Dravidas and Adi Karnatakas in the early 1920s, as a way of claiming a more dignified status than was offered by derogatory *jati* terms. M.K. Gandhi offered a new name, "Harijan" or people of God from the 1920s. After the Government of India Act of 1935, a new administrative category "Scheduled Caste/Tribe" was introduced, (and continues to be in use to the present day) so named for the schedule under which sub-castes eligible for preferential treatment were listed. "Dalit" is the term that the previously "untouchable" castes gave themselves when they formed political organizations in the 1970s.

²² John, "Alternative Modernities?", p. WS 27.

period, leading to what Mary John has called the “constitutional resolution of the women’s question.”²³ The unitary category of women’s rights in the new Indian constitution came in handy as a way of compensating for the loss of Muslim women’s membership and as a way of disavowing the rights of untouchables. The removal of all sex disabilities to either voting or standing for election in the new constitution pitched India into a very small league of nations that ensured such rights to women without a fresh struggle.

After the new Constitution came into force, how was the demand for reservations reconfigured? The founding document of the Indian women’s movement, *Towards Equality*, a report written in 1974 to assess the status of women since independence, noted with dismay the appalling proportion of women who had entered political life. While admitting the importance of reservations for *panchayat* councils which went beyond mere tokenism, however, the committee called for “statutory women’s *panchayats*” to ensure greater female participation in the political process. However, the majority of the members of the committee rejected the need for reservations for women in legislatures and parliament, by exceptionalizing the experience of women in India. Thus, women in India had “always been” supported by men in their quest for equality, women had been competing as equals since 1952, and perhaps most important, women were not a minority or backward group: in the famous formulation of the 1974 report, “women are not a community, they are a category.”²⁴ In one sense, the authors of the report were reluctant to depart from the nationalist legacy of deferring women’s particular demands in “national” interests. This served to not only to mask privilege, but

²³ John, “Alternative Modernities?”, p. WS 27. The obvious reference here is to the now famous article by Partha Chatterjee “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 233-53. On the question of why Chatterjee’s schematic formulation has remained influential despite new feminist historical research that contradicts or challenges it, see Nair “The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History” (forthcoming, *Economic and Political Weekly*).

²⁴ *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (Delhi: Government of India, 1974).

also relegated the woman to the second tier of citizenship by secular means: there was no need for a sex disqualification clause when the “neutrality” of the party system would ensure that few women would succeed in politics!

There was some rethinking on the question of reservations by the time of the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000, when reservations to *panchayats* (village level government), Zilla Parishats (district level government) and urban local bodies were strongly recommended, and political parties were urged to field at least 30 per cent of women candidates. Here too, no mention was made of higher representative bodies or of quotas for Other Backward Classes within quotas. By the 1990s however, pressure had grown for the logical next step of implementing quotas for women in legislatures and the Parliament. The Constitution (81st Amendment) Bill, 1996, therefore said in its statement of objectives:

Having provided for reservation for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, it is now proposed to provide reservations for women on the same lines in the House of the People and the Legislative Assemblies by amending the constitution. The majority of the parties are in favour of making such reservation for women.²⁵

Far from being embraced enthusiastically by the national and regional parties, however, the Women’s Reservation Bill was fiercely attacked not only as unfeasible to implement,²⁶ but an undemocratic inroad into the gains that had been made by male OBCs (Other Backward Classes). More important, the Bill divided feminists themselves, some of whom made the argument against reservations for women.²⁷ Gail Omvedt²⁸ and Madhu Kishwar²⁹ have been

²⁵ *Constitution (81st Amendment Bill, 1996* as cited in *Seminar* 457, p. 57.

²⁶ On the demographic implications of the policy, see S. Irudaya Rajan and J. Retnakumar, *Economic and Political Weekly* 40: 39 (September 25, 2005), pp. 4190-92.

²⁷ One of the most useful analyses of this debate is in Nivedita Menon, “Elusive ‘Women’: Feminism and Women’s Reservation Bill” in *Economic and Political Weekly* 35: 43 and 44 (October 28, 2000): WS 35- 44.

²⁸ Gail Omvedt “Caste and Women’s Reservation”, *The Hindu*, June 17, 1997.

²⁹ Madhu Kishwar, “Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 31:43 (October 26, 1996), pp. 2867-74.

among those feminists who raised critical objections to the need for reservations; Kalpana Kannabiran³⁰ and more so, Malini Bhattacharya were among those who defended reservations but recognized the privileges that might be reinforced, with some even regarding “caste based arguments” as a defence of male domination.³¹ This radical separation of caste and gender hierarchies however is no longer tenable. Nivedita Menon’s intervention in the debate recognized that each of these positions worked with a unified category of “woman” which was untenable in the Indian context: while feminists should aim to go beyond quotas and towards an unmasking of representational strategies that reinforce privilege, she also suggested that Indian feminists cannot balk at the idea of quotas within quotas, or conclude that the abstract realm of rights cannot be invoked in such a context.³² Rather than seeing divisions based on caste, region or ethnicity as signs of “backwardness” or even “difference” feminists would do better to address all these as forms of *discrimination* on par with gender discrimination to be addressed within a democratic framework. The history of governmental intervention in the transformation of caste/gender relations in Mysore/Karnataka history in the 20th century serves to highlight the both the prospects and limits of posing the goals of caste and gender reform as opposed rather than complementary.

KARNATAKA’S EXPERIMENTS WITH THE CATEGORIES OF CASTE AND GENDER

Karnataka represents a unique space from within which to pose the question of the relation between caste and gender afresh due to the long history of caste based reservations within educational

³⁰ Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran, “From Social Action to Political Action: Women and the 81st Amendment”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 32:5 (February 1-7, 1997), pp. 196-197.

³¹ Malini Bhattacharya, “Democracy and Reservation” *Seminar: Empowering Women* 457, pp. 23-4. My own writing at that time affirmed such a standpoint, though I have since revised the position: see, Nair “An Important Springboard” in *Seminar: 457*, pp. 42-45.

³² Menon, “Elusive ‘Women’”, pp. WS 35-44.

institutions, and government jobs. In the early 20th century, caste became an important, and indeed sometimes the sole, ground on which modern institutional forms were imagined, produced and sustained by the Mysore (as the most important part of the Karnataka state was known) state. The appointment of the Miller Committee in August 1918 was an attempt to systematically institute a set of workable guidelines for reservations for non-Brahmins. The principal recommendation of the committee was that the proportion of “at least half of the higher governmental posts, and two-thirds of the lower appointments” be filled with candidates from communities other than the Brahmin, with due preference being given to the Depressed Classes when qualified candidates were available.

The Miller Committee Report, on which the Government Order of 1921 was based, was a breathtaking document simply because of the optimism with which it believed that state intervention, in the narrow sphere of government appointments, would transform the prevailing social order of Mysore. It is equally striking that the report remained silent on the question of women. The entire discussion of the new opportunities to be made available to caste communities in Mysore was gendered male, for it unquestionably assumed the proper subject of caste discourse, and not just its leadership, as male. What then was the caste of women, except as the objects that were trafficked between families, and as they embodied the boundaries of community law? Yet, if the language of rights appeared only secondary in the discussion of communal equations in the state, with a number of demands for both material and symbolic gain being framed in terms of “entitlements”, a far more direct invocation of rights was evident in early 20th century discussions of the status of women in Mysore. Why was the rhetoric of rights more appropriate to the discussion of women’s status, especially when it appeared to produce once more a unified category (i.e. Hindu society) that had so strenuously been dismantled by the discussions on caste? The question could be reframed to ask: were the women of Mysore, as subjects of reform, assigned the role of unifying what had been fractured on other registers?

The “women’s question” was the site on which Mysore bureaucrats and Congress nationalists alike felt free to declare their

“liberal” credentials, often through illiberal and arbitrary measures. The authority exerted by the state over the realm of the family was in part aided by the unquestioning manner in which nationalist and state reform initiatives were accepted by the nascent women’s movement in Mysore at this time.³³ Despite a long and fairly explicit engagement with the question of lower caste prerogatives in the emerging bureaucratic and social order, the Mysore Maharaja was far more reluctant to shed his prejudices against empowering women. He would not accept that women be made eligible for membership in either of the two assemblies and considered the extension of limited franchise to women as more than adequate.³⁴ Two women members were nominated to the Mysore Legislative Council in 1930, following the Brajendranath Seal committee’s constitutional reforms of 1923, and only in the next round of constitutional reforms (1940) did women get a total of 11 seats. It was clear that the category of women was used in its “unifying” sense, as opposed to the “divisive” qualities of caste: nominated members like K.D. Rukmaniamma categorically denied the need for “reservations for women on a communal basis.”³⁵

The post independence scenario in Mysore, which was to become Karnataka in 1973, was somewhat different. Despite a weak presence of the women’s movement in that region, and little or no demand for reservations for women, Karnataka became the earliest state to introduce a system of reservations for women to *panchayat* and urban local bodies. It was already implementing a system of reservations for women which was shared by all caste groups by

³³ Etienne Balibar identifies the family and the school as the two primary sites for the formation of national consciousness, “The Nation Form” in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.), *Race, Nation Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso Publications, 1991), pp. 86-101.

³⁴ Bjorn Hettne, *The Political Economy of Indirect Rule: Mysore 1881-1947* (Delhi and Malmo: Curzon Press Ltd., 1978).

³⁵ Hettne, *The Political Economy of Indirect Rule*, p. 111. A more elaborate discussion of the related trajectories of caste and gender reform measures in Mysore in the early 20th century is in my book *Mysore Modern: Essays in Social, Political, and Cultural History* (forthcoming).

the time of the 1992 Nagarpalika Act. In other words, caste based reservations to local bodies had already been conceded when women's reservations were implemented. The 1992 Nagarpalika Act, did not mandate the reservation of seats for OBCs, and even such states as Tamil Nadu, which had a robust history of Non-Brahmin assertion, has not implemented such quotas.³⁶ Indeed, the reservation of one third seats for women was mandated while the reservation of seats for backward classes was only optional. How then does Karnataka refigure the debates on reservations for women?³⁷

Women had been a token presence in the Bengaluru municipality after 1949, when the Cantonment and the City were united in a single Corporation, their numbers rarely exceeding 10 per cent in the council. Between 1954 and 1963, there was an experiment with double member wards, in which one of the two seats was reserved for the "weaker" sections, and women also gained. Between 1949 and 1996, there had been only one woman Mayor, Indiramma, although women were sometimes chosen as deputy mayors in council.

There were many gaps in the electoral process, since the City Corporation was suspended from 1966-70, 1973-1983, again during 1989, and from 2006 to the present day. The city, which had 50 wards in 1949, when the two municipalities of the Bangalore city and Bangalore Civil and Military Station were joined, expanded to 63 wards in 1963 and 87 wards in 1983, of which 17 were reserved for women. In that year, the Karnataka government took

³⁶ See Archana Ghosh, "Women's Reservations and Electoral Politics in Urban Local Bodies: An Analysis of Chennai Municipal Corporation", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 10: 1 (2003), pp. 117-41. In fact, the TN Urban Local Bodies Act 1998 only speaks about reservation for SC and ST in all Urban Local Bodies but not for Backward Classes. The question of quotas for Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu appears to have been naturalized under different party fractions. I am grateful to Archana Ghosh for this information.

³⁷ Only a handful of states have implemented reservations for OBCs in municipalities; they include Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

the unprecedented step of mandating reservations for women up to 20 per cent in municipal wards, thereby transforming city level campaigns and elections.³⁸ The 74th Amendment to the Constitution or the Nagarpalika Act of 1992 (operationalized in 1993) extended these benefits nationwide and provided for the reservation of one third seats for women in urban local bodies. By the time of the 1996 elections, the number of wards in Bengaluru had expanded to 100, and it remained the same for the 2001 elections.³⁹ Each ward covers a population of 30-50,000.

Although the 74th Constitutional Amendment only reserved wards for the SC/ST populations and for women, and not for OBCs, Karnataka, with its long history of reservations for Backward Classes,⁴⁰ was among the few states that also instituted a complex system of reserving wards on a rotational basis for two categories of Backward Classes, respectively called Backward Class (A)⁴¹ and Backward Class (B),⁴² with the General category accounting for the rest. Thus, while a total of 18 per cent of all seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, one third of all seats were reserved for Backward Classes who were divided into two categories: BC (A) and BC (B), of which the first enjoyed 80 per cent of the reserved seats in that category. Women were allotted one third of seats in all these categories, totaling 35 seats.

However, since the Karnataka Municipal Councils Act (1976) does not specify modalities of decision making on the contentious question of which wards are to be reserved under the system of rotation, both the profile of the ward and the relative strength of

³⁸ K. Subha, *Women in Local Governance* (Jaipur: RBSA Publishers, 1994), pp. 57-60.

³⁹ The Council has been suspended since 2006: a redrawing of constituencies is currently under way.

⁴⁰ See G. Thimmaiah, *Power Politics and Social Justice: Backward Castes in Karnataka* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993).

⁴¹ The caste list under this category included Golla, Kuruba, Thigala, Sali, Yadava, Nayanaja Kshatriyas and others, in addition to Muslims.

⁴² The caste list under this category included the dominant Vokkaliga, Lingayat, Reddy, and Banajiga castes, while also incorporating income criteria.

political parties became crucial.⁴³ The “statistical principle” was not followed even in the case of SC/ST wards, where demographic profiles could be used. As the Chief Electoral Officer at the BMP admitted, the choice was at the discretion of the Government before each election. This left the council and the councilors no power to challenge the decision, even though “it was a political decision” made by parties.⁴⁴ Wards themselves are divided into old (developed) wards, with budgets of Rs. 30 lakhs, partially developed wards with budgets of Rs. 50 lakhs, and newly added wards with Rs 80 lakh budgets, though all are eligible for substantially higher grants and budgets under individual heads. However, there is no necessary homogeneity within wards: new wards could contain agricultural pockets as well as well planned BDA colonies, and are interspersed by slum developments and garbage dumps. As we shall see, although there were no discernible patterns in the wards that were allotted to women, there are wards that have been jealously guarded from the “intrusion” of women’s reservation thus far. Narendra Babu’s constituency (Nagawara) was among those chosen for reservation, which he worked to retain as a general ward.⁴⁵ Similarly, Visveswarapuram, for instance, which is among one of the oldest “maintenance” (therefore, already developed) wards in the heart of Bangalore city, managed to return the same councilor, P.R. Ramesh, in three successive elections of 1990, 1996 and 2001, even when it was changed from being a BC (A) ward to a General ward.

⁴³ The Act specifies in Sub. Sec 1: “For purposes of election of Councillors Government shall, by notification, determine:

1. The wards into which the city shall, be divided and the extent of each wards;
2. The number of seats allotted to each ward which shall be one;
3. The number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, Backward classes and Women and the wards in which such seats shall be reserved.

(1-A) No notification under Sub-section (1) shall be called in question in any court of law.”

<<http://karsec.gov.in/reservationrules-fs.html>>, accessed July 8, 2008.

⁴⁴ Interview with Shashidhar Murthy, Chief Electoral Officer, BMP, October 11, 2002.

⁴⁵ Interview with Pushpalata, June 11, 2002.

The enhanced system of reservations from the early 1980s dramatically altered the profile of female presence in the council.⁴⁶ The two rounds of elections held under the new law, 1996 and 2001, heightened the visibility of women corporators, who also regularly occupied the posts of Mayor and Deputy Mayor, as well as membership of important standing committees.⁴⁷ Yet, many women corporators have largely been portrayed, particularly by the media, as mere surrogates or “proxies” or place keepers for other males in their family – usually husbands, but also fathers and sons.⁴⁸ The “proxy” argument has often overshadowed arguments based on inherent capabilities, and has in turn become the most important in an arsenal of reasons for denying women a place in legislative bodies. As we shall see however, the situation is considerably more complicated than such sweeping generalizations have made out, and therefore has important consequences on the nature and impact of reservations for women.

Bengaluru has also seen an unusually high degree of civic activism among its middle class residents, who have reshaped the meaning of “neighbourhood”. Since the 1980s, women have been warmly welcomed into certain kinds of civic activism, particularly after the emergence of Residents’ Associations. These associations were a continuation of the old rate payers’ associations in many ways, though their concerns and membership are strikingly different. The associations became a way for far flung layouts to seek and secure basic city services such as water supply, electricity, or bus services. By the mid 1990s, the nascent activism received a further boost following a state sponsored initiative, called Swabhimana. This initiative was an effort to develop new non-governmental institutional forms to enhance citizens’ participation in ward level politics. One of the earliest groups existed in Malleswaram, and the idea of building

⁴⁶ In 1983, one voter contested the Government’s decision to reserve 17 seats for women under the new act in the Karnataka High Court, but was unable to stay the election. Subha, *Women in Local Governance*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ The BMP follows the Standing Committee system which is headed by the Mayor, though decisions are made in several separate committees.

⁴⁸ “Who Mans Women Corporators’ Wards?” *The Hindu*, October 17, 2006. This is only a representative example of the kind of writing that was “inspired” by women councilors in Bangalore.

up a city wide forum came up in conversations between UN- ESCAP representatives and the then Corporation Administrator, A. Ravindra.⁴⁹ In 1995, the Chief Minister Deve Gowda officially launched the Swabhimana forum, which paved the way for nearly 150 such organizations by the late 1990s.

The flowering of associations based in the neighbourhood, particularly since the 1990s, has occurred at a time when concerns about service delivery in the city have crowded out any other definition of political involvement particularly by the middle classes.⁵⁰ There is a noticeable shift away from an older engagement with politics, to a mode of circumventing the political process which is generally regarded as corrupt, bureaucratic, and largely aimed at protecting the poor. Much of the work in resident associations is voluntary, part time, and does not normally follow any rules of representation or election. Middle class women have been noticeably active in these forums, in what is seen as an extension of their role as housekeepers to the neighbourhood as a whole, since this form of activism is largely associated with garbage clearance, park maintenance, and community activities in middle class residential localities. Women have also been remarkably successful in entering the sphere of civic activism by actively intervening in maintaining the strictly residential profile of the neighbourhood. Residents' Associations regularly retain parks and open spaces for the exclusive use of middle class residents of the area, through the use of gates and locks. Moreover, Residents Associations closely follow and attempt to enforce zoning laws, when they are violated with impunity. In 1997, women of Lal Bahadur Shastri Nagar, for instance, took the law into their own hands by closing down a liquor shop following the suicide of a young woman, and were applauded for their act.⁵¹ Finally, the

⁴⁹ James Heitzman, "Local Democratic Participation" (unpublished mimeo, 1997).

⁵⁰ I have discussed this phenomenon at some length in "'Social Municipalism' and the New Metropolis" in Mary E. John, Surinder Jodhka and Praveen Kumar Jha (eds.), *Contested Transformations: Changing Economic and Identities in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Tulika, 2006), pp. 125-146.

⁵¹ "Lal Bahadur Shastri Nagar Bahadur Kelasa", *Slum Suddhi*, September-November 1997. Similarly, the residents of Kempapura Agrahara managed to shift out a liquor shop by agitating against it.

members of Residents' Association normally do not include the local slum/poorer colony residents as members, and succeed in maintaining a strictly middle class profile.

The activism of women in these associations appears to strengthen gender stereotypes, which demands political behaviour from women that is markedly different from male counterparts: thus, women are praised for their capacity to steer away from corruption, for an inherent interest in procuring results. Do Residents' Associations represent then a form of anti-politics? Such a reading is tempting when we consider that the preferred mode of transaction of these organizations is through the bureaucrat or official rather than the elected representative. Elsewhere, I have discussed the new institutional bases of such activism, and the activities themselves as a form of "social municipalism", a managerial approach to the city that attempts to circumvent the more tedious turns of representative politics.⁵² Similarly, Stephanie Lama Rewal has, in her analysis of Delhi associations, characterized these as forms of counter democracy, contesting and clarifying but not blocking the realm of electoral politics.⁵³ An opportunity for an interface between corporators and Residents' Welfare Associations was provided by the Ward Committees instituted by the Nagarpalika Act. Ward committees were to consist of elected councilors as well as local experts and two members of local organizations via a system of nomination. Predictably, while RWAs have pushed for these committees, corporators have tended to see them as encroachments on power, and have largely resisted their constitution.

⁵² Nair, "'Social Municipalism' and the Indian Metropolis". Asha Ghosh also discusses the new experiments with institutional forms in Bangalore, focusing in particular on the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) which functioned between 1999 and 2004. See "Public Private or Private Public? Promised Partnership of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force", *Economic and Political Weekly* 40: 47 (November 19, 2005), pp. 4914-22.

⁵³ Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, "Neighbourhood Associations and Local Democracy: Delhi Municipal Elections 2007", *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:47 (November 24, 2007), pp. 51-60, esp. 59; see also in the same issue, Marie Helene Zerah "Middle Class Neighbourhood Associations as Political Players in Mumbai", pp. 61-68.

Although there have been wide-ranging and detailed studies of the impact of reservations on Panchayat Raj Institutions, amounting to no less than a cottage industry of works, attention has been turned to the workings of the Nagarpalika Act only more recently. The studies on rural women's participation in the local bodies however raise useful questions and critiques that can form a necessary starting point for an enquiry into the urban local bodies.

Predictably, a large number of studies have focused on the blocks to women's participation in public political life, even when it is mandated by law. The figure of the "the proxy woman" as we have already seen, dominates such discussions, although constraints posed by the hours of work, the distance to work, and the discouraging hurly-burly of politics are also acknowledged.⁵⁴ Moreover, there continue to be unrealistic expectations of women, often from women themselves, which reinforces gendered ways of thinking about the suitability of women to local political work. It need therefore come as no surprise that many officials as well as some corporators, emphasize the importance of continuous "training" of women and men for positions of responsibility.⁵⁵ However, since most studies also point to the uncertainties of re-election for more than 90 per cent of women in *panchayats* since an election "is a one time affair,"⁵⁶ training programmes could have little cumulative effect. In the urban

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- ⁵⁴ See Manu Bhaskar, "Women Panchayat Members in Kerala: A Profile", *Economic and Political Weekly* 32: 17 (April 26, 1997), pp. WS 13-21; Hirway "Panchayati Raj at the Crossroads". See also Nair "An Important Springboard"; V. Vijayalakshmi and B.K.Chandrasekhar "Authority, Powerlessness, and Dependence: Women and Local Governance in Karnataka", mimeo (Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change: 2001). Most recently, see Bilkis Vissanjee, Shelly Abdool, Alisha Apale, and Sophie Dupere, "Women's Political Participation in Rural India: Discerning Discrepancies Through a Gender Lens," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 13: 3 (September-December 2006), pp. 425-50.
- ⁵⁵ Interview with Shashidhar Murthy, BMP, 11 October 2002. See also, "Training and Empowerment of Women in Local Bodies", Committee on Empowerment of Women (2002-3), Thirteenth Lok Sabha, Eighth Report, <http://164.100.24.208/ls/committeeR/Empowerment/8th/report.html> (accessed July 14, 2008).
- ⁵⁶ V. Vijayalakshmi and B.K.Chandrasekhar "Political Representation: Its Practice in Local Governance" mimeo (Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change), p. 10.

setting, the uncertainties of the rotation system only enhance the futility of such planning.

The fact that women may occupy positions of formal authority without enjoying substantive power has been so well recognized that it casts into the shadow the more important question of what it is that accounts for male success in politics, and which of the handicaps that are faced by women are also faced by men. Here, the studies of rural *panchayats* are instructive for they have uncovered the institutional spaces which matter to both electoral success and participation in rural decision making. However, the conditions in urban local bodies can be distinctly different especially for women, who may not face the crippling disabilities of surveillance to the same degree.⁵⁷ Moreover, there is a great deal of unevenness to the kinds of institutions that may matter in an urban setting compared with the rural setting. Finally, there are far larger populations that are served by councilors in cities, with far more complex problems, than is true for the rural *panchayat*. In the section that follows I hope to go beyond listing the handicaps faced by women, focusing instead on the ways in which urban local governance is gendered, to produce relationships that distribute the resources by which men and women participate in public political life, in systematic and far from unpredictable ways.

Bangalore, with a population of nearly 7 million, is spread over approximately 500 square miles, and presents a striking contrast to many other metropolises such as Delhi or Chennai, for a number of reasons. It has the most extensive and complex system of reservations of all metropolises. The profile of the corporators elected following the Nagarpalika Act was therefore quite distinct. Compared to Delhi for instance women were on the whole younger than men, and corporators were generally more youthful and inexperienced compared with their Delhi counterparts.⁵⁸ Unlike Chennai, more than

⁵⁷ See for instance, Ghosh, "Women's Reservations and Electoral Politics in Urban Local Bodies" and Archana Ghosh and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Democratization in Progress: Women and Local Politics in Urban India* (Delhi: Tulika, 2005).

⁵⁸ John, "Women in Power?", p. 3988.

half of the corporators were political novices of which most were women.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, those with longer political careers came from the upper or dominant castes. Among Muslims women were more highly educated than men.⁶⁰ Educational levels were very mixed in Bangalore and Chennai, as were occupational levels, and almost 75 per cent of women in Bangalore declared themselves as housewives.

THE POSSIBLE POLITICS OF GENDER AND CASTE

Consider these three vignettes from the lives of women corporators of Bengaluru, 1996-2001. Padmini Reddy (ward: Pulakeshi Nagara, year elected: 2001) confessed that she was only the *de jure* councillor, while her husband was the *de facto* corporator. In her words, "I had no intention of entering into politics. When my ward was chosen as a women's reserved ward, my husband was the real functionary. Therefore he gave me a chance to enter politics."⁶¹ Padmavathi Gangadhara Gowda (Yediyur, 1996), who entered politics in 1983, when seats were first reserved for women, gave her husband the credit of having been brought into politics. Yet as she has already won three elections, and was made Mayor for a term, she would now work towards winning an election for her husband.⁶² Finally, there is the case of Mamta Begum (Shivajinagar, 1996, 2001) who was actively involved in several school, hospital and shop committees and contested and won for the second time, despite a writ petition filed by male community heads which challenged the reservation of a ward for women in a predominantly Muslim area.⁶³

One might ask: which of these examples would be the truest representation of what the system of reservations for women has achieved? Would it be those women who are content to remain "proxy" politicians and allow the men of the family to do the work (a surrogate mode)? Or would they be women who are "masculinized"

⁵⁹ Ghosh, "Women's Reservations and Electoral Politics in Urban Local Bodies."

⁶⁰ John, "Women in Power?" p. 3988.

⁶¹ *Slum Suddhi*, October 1998, pp. 1-10.

⁶² Interview with Padmavathi Gangadhara Gowda, June 14, 2002.

⁶³ Interview with Mamta Begum, July 3, 2002.

and mimic men in power, while relying on male partners, if only in the short term, to serve the ward they represent? Or would the woman who successfully converts other forms of associational capital into electoral gains be the dominant model? The question, if posed in a way that seeks to make singular choices between these extremely varied scenarios, would only succeed in establishing a very partial truth.

Instead we might ask: are there resources that are indispensable to both men and women, and if so, how are they differently accessed? What are the opportunities for rising above gender considerations for both men and women, and for women of upper castes/classes as opposed to lower castes/classes? What is the possible politics in a setting where the dynamics of caste and class are already part of the political common sense to which a gender based politics is seen as either a nuisance or a threat?

(i) The Party

The political party is clearly among the most important organs that mediates and structures the political life of corporators, and this holds true for men as well as women. The support of the party was critical to the success of both men and women candidates. It has been repeatedly noted that even independent candidates who win sometimes move over to mainstream parties in order to sustain their careers and to secure larger budgets and amenities for their wards. In the 1983 elections, independents (men and women) who constituted nearly 59 per cent of those who contested, were barely able to win two per cent of the seats.⁶⁴

Many women corporators who joined the council in 1996, such as Ratna Gopal Reddy (Jeevanbimanagar, 1996),⁶⁵ Bharati Shivaram (Kempapura Agrahara, 1996),⁶⁶ and Nalini Basavaraj (Pattabhiramanagara, 1996)⁶⁷ and J.N. Nirmala attributed the success

⁶⁴ Subha, *Women in Local Governance*, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Interview with Ratna Gopal Reddy, June 4, 2002.

⁶⁶ Interview with Bharati Shivaram, June 22, 2002.

⁶⁷ Interview with Nalini Basavaraj, June 11, 2002.

of their campaigns to the support of the party and of particular MLAs. A striking reference in a number of interviews with men and women corporators was to an important political figure, usually an MP (Member of Parliament) or MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) who could start the person off on his or her career. The word “godfather” was often used by both men and women to describe the senior politician in question. However, as we shall see below, the “corporator-turned-MLA” could also pose serious difficulties to first time corporators, especially if he/she was from a different party.

The party, moreover, made crucial decisions about whether women could be allowed to contest from general wards. G. Padmavathi (Sriramamandira, 1996/Prakshnagar 2001), a three term councilor, shifted from the Janata Dal to the Congress I, and also shifted constituencies, since the latter party chose her to stand from the neighbouring Prakashnagar ward, when it was reserved for women. Parties also could deny women who had developed an appetite for council work a chance to contest from particular wards.⁶⁸ Mahadevamma (Kamalanagar, 1996), a reluctant entrant who eventually developed an enthusiasm for ward politics, was offered a second chance in 2001, though in a different ward. In other words, both men and women made decisions about whether or not to change parties and wards to enhance their chances of winning under a system of rotating reservations: a wide range of considerations, and not just gender, determined the “winnability” of the candidate.

(ii) The Family

It is among the commonplace assumptions that women are disabled by domestic duties in their child-bearing and rearing years. The naturalization of the family as a hierarchical space not only favours and frees the males of the family, but consolidates male power outside the house as well. The assumptions become the main reason

⁶⁸ P.N. Chandrakala (Peenya Industrial Estate, 1996), who wanted to contest from her ward even when it was made a general ward, was refused a ticket. In part, there was the hostility of the Vokkaligas (land/asset owning dominant caste) to a Golla (shepherd caste) being given the opportunity twice. Interview with P.N.Chandrakala, June 10, 2002.

why women are denied opportunities to participate in politics. As Suryanarayana (Sampangiramanagara, 1996) baldly stated:

If women enter into politics it will affect their family.... For men, no problem, men can go anywhere, men can do anything, but women cannot behave like men.⁶⁹

Or in the words of a more dismissive critic of women in public life, Anwar Sherief (Kaval Byrasandra, 1996):

Reservation of one third wards for women is a problem: what can women do? Women are not mobile. They don't even know their area lanes, crosses and roads properly....

Women councilors shift their responsibility to their husbands. Their husbands, even though they commit mistakes are not seen in the public. Women councilors don't have enough time to complete household work and they also have to sleep at home. So they are nominally there.⁷⁰

It is far less frequent to think of the family as a resource in building a political career. Yet feminist research has established that the family is the most important resource for both male and female councilors in cities like Mumbai.⁷¹ While there were a considerable number of men who acknowledged the importance of the family in helping them enter and play a role in politics, Anwar Sharief accepted, the sphere of the family offers ambivalent possibilities to women in politics.

There were several councilors who saw the advantage of being identified as "family women", and therefore worked alongside their men in the political sphere. Padmavathi Gangadhara Gowda, who served three terms as a corporator (1983, 1990, 1996) actively sought the support of her husband as a way of learning the ropes of ward politics. By the end of two or three years, she became quite adept at handling issues on her own. Seeking the support and help of the husband (or other males) is seen as an added advantage since it provided the ward members with two "councilors" whom they can approach with their problems. Vijayalakshmi Keshavaraju (Ejipura,

⁶⁹ Interview with Suryanarayana, July 3, 2002.

⁷⁰ Interview with Anwar Sherief, July 1, 2002.

⁷¹ Ghosh and Lama Rewal, *Democratization in Progress*.

1996) said that her husband wanted to contest the elections and put her up as a surrogate, taking care of the ward for the first two years. After she found her feet in politics, they worked together “like two councilors” through a division of labour that was quite popular amongst corporators: she did office work, and he did the area work.⁷² Nalini Basavaraj admitted that her husband’s influence in the Janata Dal party won her the seat and got her the prestigious Chair of the Appeals Committee.

Indeed, keeping the post of councillor within the family was considered as important as winning the seat for the first time. Mahadevamma (Kamalanagar 1996)⁷³ took the support of her son in all her ward work, and he went on to triumph in the 2001 election, even as an independent. The redistribution of domestic roles was interesting: she took over the family business of running a restaurant, leaving her son Shivaraju and husband free to do ward work, since “ultimately it is in the family.”

The presence of men alongside women did not necessarily imply their dominance: Lalitha Srinivas Gowda political career drew on her husband’s support, but her proximity to the then Chief Minister S.M. Krishna was well known. Similarly, Ratna Gopal Reddy, corporator of Jeevanbima Nagar, struck out an independent path and developed a credible relationship with her constituency: therefore, it was she, rather than her husband, who was put up as a candidate when the ward was declared a General Ward in 2001.

It is revealing that many of the women interviewed did so in the presence of their spouses. The persistent use of the “plural” by women who succeeded, or were succeeded, by male corporators was revealing. Councillor Chinamma’s (Banswadi, 1996) husband answered the question about any perceived discrimination against women by saying: “we have never felt any discrimination because we are a woman councilor. Everyone was good to us.”⁷⁴ Introspection

⁷² In the words of Lalitha Srinivasa Gowda, “What is wrong in working jointly especially when it ensures better service?” Interview with Lalitha Gowda (Srinagar, 1996), July 23, 2002.

⁷³ Interview with Mahadevamma, July 9, 2002.

⁷⁴ Interview with Chinnamma, July 17, 2002.

following the defeat of her brother-in-law in the 2001 election, when the ward was reserved as General Ward, led to the conclusion that she could have contested and won again.

Undoubtedly, the family was the crucial primary training ground for both men and women who aspired to a career in politics.⁷⁵ Women frequently assisted the men in their families to execute ward work: one such example was the wife of Sathyanarayana⁷⁶ (Basavangudi, 2001). For those women corporators who felt unsafe about being seen alone at late night functions, city festivals where there was drinking by males, or construction or repair work which was organized at night, a family male was a useful presence.

At other times, though less frequently, family men could seriously impede a woman's career. There were men who thought nothing of retiring women to the kitchen after the election was won, and spoke for them during the interviews. In at least two cases, men refused to allow the women to speak, although the protocols of permitting women to stand for elections and attend the council were observed. Women themselves sometimes withdrew from the political process out of a sense of loss of family life, and out of anxiety for the political ambitions of men, revealing the ways in which the ideology of the family subordinated women ambitions to those of men.

In some instances when a woman's ambitions exceeded the designated role of "proxy", the result was ceaseless hostility of male family members. Zaheeda⁷⁷ (Neelasandra 1996) faced active hostility from her brother-in-law who had encouraged her at first, but soon discovered it was impossible to retain control of the position. Every attempt was made to harass her through the party and through the Muslim community leadership, by claiming that she should not have been allowed to stand.⁷⁸ Yet, despite the sometimes claustrophobic

⁷⁵ Archana Ghosh and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Democratization in Progress: Women and Local Politics in Urban India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2005). Also, Tawa Lama-Rewal, "Fluctuating, Ambivalent Legitimacy of Gender as a Political Category", *Economic and Political Weekly* 36: 17 (28 April 2001), pp. 1435-40.

⁷⁶ Interview with Sathyanarayana, July 22, 2002.

⁷⁷ Interview with M. Zaheeda, June 25, 2002.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

influence of the family over women in particular, only three of the 36 women who won the elections in 2001 were in fact related to sitting or former corporators. They included Vijaya D. Muniraju (Janata Dal, S Chandra Layout), Geetha Sadashiva (BJP, Kempe Gowdanagar), and Pratima Raghu (BJP, Sir C.V. Raman Nagar).⁷⁹

No doubt, the family played a more crucial role in deciding the career of women politicians: though family support was usually understated by men, there were no known instances of family burdens delaying or impeding their careers. For women, the family could function as both a source of support and as an impediment. Women were clearly more subordinated to the ideology of the family than men. However, as the recent results of the Bengaluru Corporation elections held in 2001 showed, fielding a wife or daughter is no guarantee of a man's re-election to the same ward, which was determined by a far more complex set of factors due to the system of rotation.

(iii) Stage in Life Cycle

At which stage in her life cycle could a woman conceive of a career in politics? By far the biggest category of women corporators in both Delhi and Bangalore were housewives, and women from Bangalore were generally less highly educated, and included one illiterate.⁸⁰ Unlike the trend noted in most other places, however, where women enter the world of politics only after their child bearing/rearing years had ended, 80 per cent of the Bangalore women corporators were between the ages of 21-40, compared to 50 per cent of the men.⁸¹ However, many women corporators commented on either being burdened by child bearing and rearing responsibilities, or on being relieved of such responsibilities by paid and unpaid assistance. Most women acknowledged that the multi-generational family was an advantage, though that depended on the status of the woman in the family: many had to fulfill their domestic duties before coming to the

⁷⁹ Interview with S. Raghu, June 10, 2002.

⁸⁰ Mary John, "Women in Power?" p. 3988.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

council. As Padmavathi Gowda insisted, “If the daughter becomes a councillor, parents adjust very well. But a daughter is a daughter and daughter-in-law is a daughter-in-law. Ayyo! I have seen it all.”⁸² One woman councilor, Pushpalatha⁸³ (Rajajinagar, 1996) whose husband won the seat in the 2001 election was happy to return to full time domesticity, though she was assisted in her work as councilor in interesting ways: so supportive were her parents in-law that they decided to cut the hair of her three children to make for easier maintenance! Mahadevamma, who did not dream of becoming a councilor, took an active role in politics with the help of her son, claiming that she was relieved from housework by the presence of a daughter-in-law at home. Conversely, a woman corporator said that her in-laws were quite hesitant to support her initially, and even when they did, were far more proud of their son’s achievements.

In none of the interviews with the male corporators were such concerns expressed at all. Only for women did the marital status play such an important role in defining her career prospects. Clearly, though the system of reservations did force men to share public political power with women, no comparable rearrangement of domestic duties or responsibilities was achieved. In fact, in both public and private spaces, women were scrutinized and judged in ways that bore no parallel in men’s lives.

(iv) Sexuality

Being elected to the corporation council was no guarantee that women would be shown equal or more respect. Instead the public glare placed them under the special burden of performing their chastity. There was a yearning to be recognized as a “desexualized” being in the observation of Padmavathi Gowda, who said “Men never understand that women are also ‘elected councilors’ and that they represent people like men do.” Or as Vydehi put it, “a corporator is neuter gender.” Such wishful thinking apart, women are vulnerable as always already “sexed beings”, to counter which their performance

⁸² Interview with Padmavathi Gowda, June 14, 2002.

⁸³ Interview with Pushpalata, June 11, 2002.

of “dutiful wives/daughters” became crucial. Padmavathi Gowda described this performance in an interesting way:

There are some women who stay in the corporation from morning till evening. They make the mistake of getting into vehicles of all those who offer, go for meals, coffee with all those who invite her. Women may have a good intention, but others think she is “social.” According to our Hindu Culture, it is not [good to be] social. ...It is all in women’s heads. “Family Women” retain their respect even after their term. ...It is necessary for women to be seen as “good women” coming from “family background.”

The call for a constant wariness on the part of women was clearly one that many did not heed, and there were women who were freer in their movements, such as Mamta Begum and Vydehi, who used a two wheeler to travel her constituency; one councilor even hired a driver for her two wheeler. But the easiest threat to a woman’s career was to make insinuations about her sexuality, and even women’s achievements were attributed to a skilful use of sexuality. Deputy Mayor, Shahtaj Khanum (Gurappanapalya, 1996) was maligned by being turned into a “figure of speech” for what was widely perceived as “inappropriate” public behaviour. Others were robbed of their achievements: Shantakumari (Mudalpalya, 1996/2001), among the most capable of women corporators, was rumoured to have obtained her second ticket because of her relationship to the party secretary and/or the MLA. One corporator who was accused of having had a close relationship to the party president was escorted to and from the council meetings by her husband. The win, and subsequent murder of D. Shaila (Hombegowdanagar, 2001), cast shadows on her “godfather” Chandrappa, who had put forward, and then thwarted the young woman’s political ambitions.⁸⁴

(v) Associational Politics: Caste and Community

Both male and female councilors explained that their interest in politics was awakened by their experience of what was broadly defined as “social work”: they claimed that representational politics

⁸⁴ Interview with D. Shaila, June 12, 2002.

provided them with new opportunities to continue their “social work”. In many instances this appeared to be a phrase that included a wide range of organizations, from the religious society to the trade union, from the neighbourhood-based to the workplace-based organization. In their analysis of the functioning of women in *panchayats*, Vijayalakshmi and Chandrasekhar had noted that caste associations played a crucial role in the choices made by political parties, but that these associations were gendered exclusively male. In the urban setting, caste associations, and indeed considerations, were crucial only up to the point of election, receding in importance as actual ward work was under way. Nevertheless, in cities too caste, language, and religious associations, and even trade unions, were hyper-masculinized preserves. Membership of neighbourhood associations was vital to building a political presence in the area and in building strong ties to the local. In particular, language associations, Ganesha societies, Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sanghas (Fans’ Associations of Rajkumar, a prominent Kannada actor), smaller trade unions, and assorted youth groups were useful. Mamtaz Begum was involved in several school committees, and received the support of the Beef Sellers’ Association, Mutton Seller’s Association, in the Shivajinagar area. Members of the BJP, for instance, were well served by the cadre-based organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh/ Rashtriya Sevika Samiti. In Malleswaram, the RSS knew all those residing in about 130 apartment buildings, and were able to assist Vydehi (Shivanagara, 1996), herself a member of the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti for 25 years, in her campaign. G. Padmavathi was leader of the all male Autorickshaw Union for several years.

In this list, women’s associations did not figure as prominently, and probably lacked the power to influence electoral outcomes compared to other kinds of associations. The new types of Resident’s Associations too, which I have discussed above, did not make their presence felt in the field of representational politics.

The principle of rotation considerably reduced, but did not eliminate, the hold of caste associations in an urban setting: P.N. Chandrakala who represented Peenya in 1996, was harassed because she was both poor and came from a Backward Class (BC-A category) in an area dominated by Vokkaligas. On the other hand, being from

the regionally dominant Vokkaliga caste was cited as a definite advantage by Padmavathi Vijaykumar of the Malleswaram ward.⁸⁵ However, the number of Backward Caste councilors far exceeded the number of wards that had been allotted to them. The striking preponderance of Other Backward Classes in the arena of local politics spoke of a stable political identity that was both challenged and strengthened by the policy of reservations for women.⁸⁶

The space for mobilizing the religious community to promote or deny women their place in the council elections was available largely to the Muslim or Christian minorities, since the primary spaces for the mobilization of Hindus were caste and language associations. The solidarities of community organizations could be used to go against the interest of the women, as in the case of Mamtaz Begum and Zaheeda, as noted above. The community leaders, at the behest of the one who had lost, objected to the reservation of the ward for women, since it was un-Islamic for women to work outside the home.

In addition to being discriminated on grounds of gender, women were not immune from the difficulties posed by the politics of caste in the city. In a ward that had a large Brahmin population, Vydehi's loyalty to the ideology of the BJP helped her win with ease, by using the RSS, the network of temples, and other local religious organizations. Most women lacked access to these modes of political engagement before they won the election.

(vi) The Press

Most women and men were equally vulnerable targets of the small press, which they claimed filed scurrilous reports that were difficult to retract or contest as libelous, and were designed to extort money from them. There was general antipathy to modes of reporting on the activities of councilors, both in the mainstream and smaller newspapers and journals. However, several men and women

⁸⁵ Interview with Padmavathi Vijayakumar, June 10, 2002.

⁸⁶ In Parliament too, where no such reservation policy exists, OBCs occupy a high proportion of seats.

councilors singled out specific tabloids, such as *Hai Bangalore*, as the one that thrived on harassing councilors, some of whom, such as Padmavathi Gangadhara Gowda, actually paid up in order to recoup their honour.

RETHINKING THE “PROXY WOMAN”

By now it should be clear that “the proxy woman” is too simplistic a category to understand or explain the experiences of women under the present system of reservations. To deny the “proxy woman” the centrality that she has occupied in many discussions of women’s participation in the political arena is not to deny the existence of such women altogether. The semiotics of campaigns in women’s wards themselves were richly suggestive of the dependence of women on men: posters for Vijaya D. Muniraju, a Janata Dal (S) candidate from Chandra Layout in 2001 featured her husband looming over her shoulder, while an audio cassette laid ample stress on the woman’s surname. Thus the voter was not allowed to forget that the previous corporator was really being “represented” by his wife. The publicity campaign of Pratima Raghu, corporator since 2001 of C.V. Raman Nagar, similarly advertised the achievements of the previous corporator who was her husband, and his links with the central party leadership.⁸⁷ A young unmarried woman, J.N. Nirmala who represented the Subrahmanyannagar ward (2001) allowed her father, an active BJP worker, to launch and run her campaign, and he continued to perform the role of corporator since she was a student.⁸⁸ So visible was the phenomenon of de facto power being wielded by some men that one woman corporator coined the term “General Power of Attorney” (GPA) holder for those who worked on behalf of women concerned. These men made promises to voters, completed ward works on hand and generally remained most visible as the corporator, on behalf of, and less frequently, along with the elected woman. G. Padmavathi said, “Husbands would have instructed women to speak about particular topics [in the council] and would be watching from

⁸⁷ Raghu has since stood for and won a seat in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly.

⁸⁸ Interview with J.N. Nirmala, July 29, 2002.

outside. If she doesn't or cannot, [he would] immediately call her outside and question her. This is a very bad habit."

However, despite wildly varying estimates, proxy women accounted for no more than 20 per cent of those who take their place in the council, since there were women who, as we have seen, shared their work with males in the family in interesting ways, with women attending meetings, and running the home office, while ward work was done by the husband, father or son. There were therefore at least two other identifiable modes by which women engaged with the political process in urban local bodies. Innumerable women worked in tandem with their husbands or other male members of the family. There were instances of women such as Pushpalatha (Rajajinagar, 1996) whose husband Rajanna (Rajajinagar, 2001) took time off his own job as a bus conductor, and later gave it up altogether when he became the councilor in 2001. Pushpalatha not only campaigned for her husband but also continued to work to fulfill his political ambitions. Rudramma (Geleyara Balaga, 1996) and her husband Nagaraju (Geleyara Balaga, 2001) managed to retain their ward between them for ten years. Lalitha Srinivasa Gowda (Srinagar, 2001) held a daily "court" in her house, flanked by her husband, on throne like chairs. This is a significant, and not unusual, example of women who flaunted their power, but also leaned on males in their family for support or legitimation in public life.

The other end of the spectrum consisted of a significant number of women who functioned independently. G. Padmavathi won the 1990 and 1996 election from the Sriramamandira ward, built up a formidable reputation as a councilor, and stood for and won the 2001 election from the neighbouring ward, Prakashnagar, when it was reserved for women. The former corporator of Shivanagar, Y.G. Vydehi, relied on her long years as a teacher and as a member of the Rashtriya Sevika Samithi to get elected and serve as a corporator. N. Shantakumari of the Mudalapalya ward in west Bengaluru, who won the election in 1996 when it was a women's ward, managed to retain it even after it was converted to a General seat, in spite of her rival suggesting in public that only her relationship to Congress leaders V. Somanna and D.K. Shivakumar secured her the nomination.

Ratna Gopal Reddy, Padmavathi Vijayakumar, Shantakumari and Zaheeda were well acknowledged as among the fiercely independent councilors. Kavita Jain (Srinivasangar, 1996) a member of the BJP, came from a community whose men did not usually participate in political processes, but became a vocal (if somewhat unpopular) corporator. The case of Marimuthu Adimoolam (Sagayapuram, 2001) is an indication of the opportunities provided by the reservation process for both men and women to convert power of an informal kind into electoral power. Marimuthu was an illiterate woman who was implicated in the liquor scam of 1981, which led to the deaths of more than 330 people. She was acquitted of all charges in 21 cases, and, although she is a local “rowdy sheeter”, went on to become a corporator for the Sagayapuram ward in 2001. Her work as a corporator won her the informal title of “godmother.”

Rotation as a principle evoked ambiguous responses from both men and women precisely since it distributed opportunities on the one hand, and undermined the relationship that councilors could develop with their voters on the other. As the career of Mamtaz Begum, three time councilor and the first Muslim mayor of Bengaluru, showed, women could accumulate capital that would stand them in good stead over time. Indeed, the dissatisfaction expressed by a large number of the corporators about the rotation of seats every five years makes it clear that women too developed both a taste, and the stamina, for politics. Many felt that a minimum of two terms was necessary “to complete the work that they had begun.” Still, there were very few women who were untransformed at the end of the term even when they had no previous political experience. Many women councilors spoke of the need to develop a thick skin, a loud voice and boldness in dealings to survive in urban local politics: no wonder Marimuthu was singled out for admiration by Anwar Sharief. The contradictory ways in which femininity, or the lack of it, was deployed in these interviews indicates that there were no stable ways in which the experience of the political category of “woman” was understood or envisaged.

Stephanie Tawa Lama Rewal makes the argument for maintaining a distinction between “inheritors” and “proxies”: as she importantly points out, all inheritors are not proxies, and all proxies

are not inheritors.⁸⁹ In Bengaluru, as we have seen, many ‘inheritors’ were men, though all proxies were women, many of them first generation politicians in the families. This is a crucial distinction that is borne out by the discussion so far: for one, there is no guarantee that using women as “place holders” pays off politically, given the multitude of factors that determine electoral success. Neither is there any guarantee of the seat returning to the man whose place has been held by the woman for a term. In other words, this discussion makes the convenient shorthand of the “proxy” woman far more difficult to invoke in any serious assessment of women in political power.

IS THERE A CATEGORY OF “WOMAN”?

The report of Margaret Alva, Chairperson, Committee on the Empowerment of Women, 2002, which once more lists a predictable series of difficulties that women experienced in making their presence felt in rural and urban bodies,⁹⁰ nevertheless said, “Reservation of one-third seats for women in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies has generated awareness amongst women members, who had the latent desire to have a say in public affairs and did not want to be dominated by males.” The report relied heavily on a unified category of women, and cited among the success stories of the move to “empower” women, the Self Help Groups for micro finance, and the Kerala model of Kudumbashree, despite serious feminist critiques of the programme.⁹¹ This study makes clear that the State’s interest

⁸⁹ Lama Rewal, “Reservations for Women in Urban Local bodies: A Tentative Assessment” in Lama Rewal (ed.), *Electoral Reservations, Political Representation, and Social Change in India: A Comparative Perspective* (Delhi: Manohar/Centre De Sciences Humaine, 2005), pp. 189-207.

⁹⁰ The list included: illiteracy; inadequate awareness of their powers and duties; burden of household work and employment; discouragement from men; aversion to public activities; social/religious constraints and local custom; economic dependence. “Training and empowerment of women in local bodies”, Committee on Empowerment of Women, (2002-3) Thirteenth Lok Sabha, Eighth Report, <<http://164.100.24.208/ls/committeeR/Empowerment/8th/report.html>>, accessed July 14, 2008.

⁹¹ J.Devika, “Between ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Liberation’: The Kudumbashree Initiative in Kerala”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 14: 1, January 2007, pp. 33-59.

in “empowering” women needs to be viewed with caution, while the advantages of reservation have to be understood and extended in meaningful ways only by refusing the singular category of “woman” which is unmarked by considerations of caste, ethnicity, or class. As I have shown throughout, gender based disadvantages were quite often offset by the class or caste advantages exercised by women, through the assistance of family and kin networks, or through the party or its organs. All women on the other hand clearly laboured under specific, structured disadvantages, only some of which may be addressed by an exclusive focus on “training in modes of governance” that governmental reports and scholarly studies routinely emphasize. Most importantly, “woman” was not available as a singular category before the 1970s, and therefore there is no legacy or impact of those who may have served before the time of reservations: Prema Cariapa’s career through Council politics, her experience of serving as Mayor, and her rise to a Rajya Sabha seat is considered a personal, and somewhat unique achievement, instead of being sedimented as part of the political common sense. She is a good example of someone who has been enabled by class status to rise above gender. The post reservation scenario is vastly different: jostling the political space with the proxy woman is the strident regality of Lalitha Srinivas Gowda, the efficiency of Shantakumari and Padmawathi, and the resilience of Mamta Begum and Zaheeda Begum. In 2001, Zaheeda Begum contested in the Sagayapuram ward against Marimuthu Adimoolam and lost; she claimed to have learned the hard way that the candidate’s ability mattered less in local politics compared to the power of money and the support of the party.⁹²

It is certainly an achievement of the women’s movement since the 1970s that the question of gender inequalities is taken

See also, J. Devika and Avanti Mukherjee, “Reforming women in Malayalee Modernity: A Historical Overview” in Swapna Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *The Enigma of the Kerala Women: A Failed Promise of Literacy* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007), pp. 102-130; Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen, “Family Structure, Women’s Education and Work: Re-examining the High Status of Women in Kerala” in Swapna Mukhopadhyay and Ratna Sudarshan (eds.), *Tracking Gender Equity under Economic Reforms* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).

⁹² Interview with Zaheeda Begum, June 25, 2002.

seriously at all. Yet there is an urgent need to recognize that the unified category has limited uses, and in the Indian context, cannot be seen in isolation from other structures of discrimination, such as caste or ethnicity. As one of the most thoughtful corporators, Shivaraju (Kamalanagar, 2001; son of Mahadevamma, 1996) put it, the system of reservations serves to distribute opportunity much more than it makes a difference to styles of governance. “It brings about respect for different communities, that is all.”⁹³ Many lower caste women and men councilors indeed testified that they would not have had an opportunity to contest at all had it not been for the system of reservations. Therefore, although the official report on the empowerment of women refuses to mention the difficulties presented by caste (except as it is inseparably linked in “Scheduled Caste”) and the production of differently endowed capacities in women, the Karnataka example has uncontrovertibly shown that the two categories are inseparable and cannot be understood in isolation.

However, there is no adequate language for analyzing caste in urban areas, where its presence and depth are quite different from the functions it performs in rural areas. Caste affiliations, and even caste associations, can and do ensure the candidate’s victory, but thereafter it is not clear what weight caste status continues to have. There were some who spoke of the strength of the Kuruba lobby both within and outside the council, as it was materialized in the grant of higher amounts to Kuruba legislators. I have already noted the instances when councilors spoke of the active use of caste identities to trounce opposition candidates that cut across party divisions. What is striking is that there was overwhelming confirmation from SC and Backward Class (A) councilors, that, but for reservation, they could not have enjoyed even one term in the council. In other instances, the system of caste based reservations was seen as “limiting” the opportunities for the exercise of “merit”: at least one councilor questioned the win of an SC from a General Ward.

The difficulties of disentangling caste and gender reservations are made quite clear in this extremely revealing statement of Suryanarayana:

⁹³ Interview with Shivaraju, July 9, 2002.

Thirty three (sic) women councilors were not able to influence the functioning of the BMP. Preference was given to male corporators during allocation of grants, [since] more funds were given to experienced corporators and less to inexperienced women corporators.

However, he continued, SCs and OBCs were able to influence BMP, citing the examples of “Raghu, Bharati Shivaram and Vasudha (Sanjaynagar, 1996).” What is unwittingly revealed are the ways in which casteness under a system of reservations serves as a crucial form of political capital for lower caste and class women corporators. This would require further investigation, but there is no doubt at all of the intersections of caste and gender as sources of power in the new system of reservations.

The question of women in councils has clearly not yet become as much part of the common sense of the local politician as caste-based reservations, particularly in Karnataka. Yet, barring a few – men such as Anwar Sheriff, or Suryanarayana, or the Bhovi (SC) ex-councilor Raghu, whose wife is the reluctant current councilor, who said that “reservation for women is unsuited to Indian culture” and “spoils the family base” – there was less active hostility from councilors of both genders to the question of reservations for women. As Mamtaz Begum said “Without reservations, women wouldn’t have got opportunity at all... there should be specifically caste based reservations for women, otherwise men wouldn’t let them come forward. Also among minorities, it is a must.”⁹⁴ “But for (caste based) reservations,” said Chinnamma, “I would not have got in”: since the Reddys (a BC (B) caste) of her area (Banswadi) voted en masse against her, narrowing her victory to a small margin.⁹⁵ P.R. Ramesh noted the visible difference, and not just in a pejorative sense, to the ways reserved candidates, including women, functioned in the council.⁹⁶

The question of reservations for Muslims, instead, brought forth vehement opposition from a large number of female and male corporators. There was a widespread feeling that unlike the categories

⁹⁴ Interview with Mamtaz Begum, July 3, 2002.

⁹⁵ Interview with Chinnamma, July 12, 2002.

⁹⁶ Interview with P.R. Ramesh, June 17, 2002.

of SC/ST, OBCs and women, Muslims were less “deserving” of reservations. There is clearly the danger that the *category* of woman once more can be deployed, not so much in the spirit of democratizing or equalizing opportunity as in blocking or denying other kinds of discrimination that are being faced by minority *communities*.

CONCLUSION: USING CASTE TO ENHANCE, NOT TRUMP GENDER

What then are the larger implications of such a study for the meaning and modalities of representative democracy, the value of reservations as a tool for ensuring equality of opportunity, and the kinds of demands that the feminist movement can and should make? It is amply clear that the system of reservations brought visibility and power to a wide range of women, many from the lower castes and classes, who found ways of retaining integrity and self worth through a number of strategies. It is also evident that women were by no means impervious to the demands and dubious influences of the system, of which they were *only sometimes the victims*. Above all, I have discussed in detail the kinds of resources that were drawn on by both men and women, though the distribution of such resources was uneven.

Were women councilors able to provide visibility, or offer solutions, to issues that concerned women? In an important study of women in Panchayat Raj institutions in Orissa, Evelin Hust distinguishes the mere “presence” of women in Panchayat Raj institutions from the exercise of “power” and from “empowerment”. Drawing on the discussion developed by Anne Phillips’ *The Politics of Presence*, Hust recognizes the importance of symbolic recognition, and while stressing the need for more vigorous advocacy for the disadvantaged, concludes that only a “politics of transformation” can hope to open up the full range of options.⁹⁷

Clearly in her assessment, as in many studies of women’s participation in local bodies, it is at the level of “presence” that reservations have made the most difference. Most of the women

⁹⁷ Hust, *A Million Indiras Now?*, p. 268.

corporators discussed above saw their primary commitment to the ward and while many did say that their ward members approached them to solve problems related to domestic violence, widow's pensions, funds from schemes for women, but a concerted focus on women's issues was not possible. By no means were the women councilors "feminist" in their approach to politics, though some of them were articulate in demanding respect for women councilors. In fact the widely held belief that women alone can represent women's interests found no support at all in electoral calculations, since women did not act as a "community" in the eyes of the parties and administrators.⁹⁸ Moreover, the axes of caste or gender became less important in the work done after the councilor was elected, since concerns moved on to budgets, committees and ward works which relied largely on the power of the party and its position within the council.

If anything, women labour under the burden of compensating for their being women, by relying on gender specific qualities to either remain outside politics ("politics is dirty" hence not feminine at all⁹⁹) or invoking other gender specific qualities that would place them on a higher plane than male corporators. The opinion that women were prone to be less, rather than more corrupt was pervasive, and repeated in interviews with both male and female councilors.¹⁰⁰ At least two councilors said, with passion and conviction, "Even the worst of women is better than the best of men."¹⁰¹ There were frequently voiced opinions about the ways in which women were better suited to the stresses and burdens of local bodies since they were more sincere and hardworking than men, and generally did not

⁹⁸ Stephanie Tawa Lama Rewal says in her study of Delhi women councilors that "Women do not want to make a difference. They want to be competent councilors and reliable party members." "Women and Urban Development: Do They Make a Difference? A Case Study of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi" in Evelin Hust and Michael Mann (eds), *Urbanization and Governance in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005), pp. 85-101, esp. 98.

⁹⁹ See Hust, *A Million Indiras Now?*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ See also, Hust, *A Million Indiras Now?*, p.239

¹⁰¹ According to Vydehi and Padmavathi Gowda, "Even the worst woman is better than the best man".

stray from their purposes.¹⁰² As Mamtaz Begum put it: “Rowdyism won’t be there if more women enter into politics. More work will be done.” Or as Vydehi claimed: “Women are not as corrupt as men. If women are there, funds are more likely to reach people. This is only possible if women work independently of their husbands.” Gail Omvedt too makes the somewhat debatable claim that not only are Dalit women less corrupt, women are “more inclined towards issues of environmentalism sustenance, balance, and equalitarian norms.”¹⁰³

Yet it is troubling, even anti-feminist, to rely on such essentializing ways of characterizing women.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, it is difficult to argue that women corporators substantially altered the idiom of power in the course of their campaigns, within the council, or in the ward. Campaigns differed little in pitch or reach from those initiated by men. Within the council, women rarely functioned as a group, following, as did the male corporators, the dictates of their party. Padmavathi Gowda said, “Speaking out in the Council was a skill that had to be learned. Only five out of 35 [women] spoke out.” Many testified that SC and OBC members vociferously protested when members were maligned on the basis of caste. When seriously derogatory remarks were made against Marimuthu Adimoolam in the Council, no similar expression of outrage or a demand for correction was raised by her women colleagues.¹⁰⁵ Women corporators did come together when the office of the youngest member of the Council, N. Indira (Sarvagnanagar, 2001) was ransacked by the supporters of Bharathinagar MLA, Nirmal Surana, on the grounds that she had not begun ward works for which tenders worth over Rs. 60 lakhs were approved.¹⁰⁶ Although all women councilors felt that they had been discriminated against in the clearance of projects and allocation of funds for wards represented by them, there was no concerted action in the council. As one newspaper report said, a senior woman corporator

¹⁰² For the number of Gujarati women who explained their abstention from politics in this way, see Visandjee *et al.*, “Women’s Political Participation in North India.”

¹⁰³ Omvedt, “Women in Governance in South Asia,” p. 4752.

¹⁰⁴ A number of feminist writers would be uneasy with an argument for the moral superiority of women. See Hust, *A Million Indiras Now?*, p. 270

¹⁰⁵ “When dog bites corporator”, *The Hindu*, October 17, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ “Study tour: corporators ready to bear expenses”, *The Hindu*, August 13, 2004.

affirmed that “there had always been trouble from the area MLAs, especially if they were ‘corporator-turned-MLAs.’”¹⁰⁷ These conflicts were enhanced when the MLAs belonged to a different party.

It is the realm of ward work that women faced their most serious challenges and also made the most visible difference. However, there was little if any trace of a feminist politics, or even women centred politics, and neither was it a stated interest of any women councilors to pursue such a goal. They expressed instead a striving to achieve the status of male councilors. Under the system of rotation, a complex grid of intersecting alliances is thrown up, which is reoriented at each election. As I have noted above, there are significant patterns in the assignment of wards, though they are not always easy to discern. Women, Dalits (SC/ST) and some BC (A) and BC (B) categories were assigned wards on the peripheries, namely relatively underdeveloped, commercially weaker and extremely heterogeneous wards. “Maintenance wards” are rarely reserved at all, or reserved for the candidate who might have won previous elections.

While all those who were interviewed claimed that rotation after one term seriously undermined their capacity to perform well, many argued in favour of rotation as a principle of allowing “common people to get a chance to serve”. This has been among the most important arguments, both from feminists and non feminists, against the reservation of seats for women in Parliament and Legislatures. However, as Archana Ghosh’s analysis of the Chennai Municipal Corporation has crucially shown, the reservation of wards for two terms made no difference to the fate of women councilors. In a council of 155 members, of which 53 were women, only 13 were nominated for the second time.¹⁰⁸ Ghosh demonstrates that most women aspirants in Chennai were not novices but those who had been recognized as party activists and political workers in the localities. Even more telling was the fact that none of the women were renominated from the same party, despite their reputation for

¹⁰⁷ “Who mans women corporators’ wards?”, *The Hindu*, November 8, 2006.

¹⁰⁸ Ghosh, “Women’s Reservations and Electoral Politics in Urban Local Bodies”, p. 129.

good work, and as in Bangalore, only those who changed their party succeeded in winning. She concludes:

There are several examples of such women candidates who, despite creating goodwill and confidence among the voters could not get the nomination, but dared to defy the party and contest the elections on their own...the unpredictable and rapidly changing political situation in different states does not guarantee that even if rotation is scheduled at the end of two terms, deserving candidates will not be considered for re-nomination by political parties.¹⁰⁹

The importance of such empirical studies is precisely in challenging some prejudices, and also some politically incorrect beliefs in the unity of women and their inherent capacity to perform better than men. Other studies have shown, most valuably, that the decision making roles and performance generally of women councilors in different cities have varied considerably, indicating that the reservation policy alone can only be the first step towards more dramatic changes, and the experience of women corporators in these early years cannot be judged too quickly.¹¹⁰ Reservations can only be the first step in a process and not a final feminist goal. Certainly the structure has been stretched to include women without altering its basic shape, although a concomitant de-masculinization of the public world of politics has not been altered or challenged.

Unlike what is commonly believed, this study has shown that the strategy of using women as “proxies” for men does not always work. While Bharati Shivaram’s husband lost both the elections that preceded and followed her win, and Chinamma’s brother in law lost after her win, Rudramma and Pushpalatha, by their victories and their ward work, paved the way for the success of their husbands in the elections of 2001. There is a serious danger of these nuances being lost in the generalizations that reservations for women have generated.

Ana Alice Alcantara describes a moment in 1988 when the feminists of Brazil united across party lines to demand a system of

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 131.

¹¹⁰ Ghosh and Lama Rewal, “Democratisation in Progress”.

quotas for women, although all they secured was an unenforceable obligation placed on parties to put up women candidates.¹¹¹ While Indian women have gained some visibility and power at the lowest level of government, the hopes of feminists in Brazil and India alike have remained unfulfilled to date. In India, the commitment to extending the policy of reservations to women in Parliament and Legislatures has been kept at bay on the grounds that the category of woman (normativized as upper caste/class) undermines achievements of lower caste male leaders.

Unlike the parity movement in France, which in its initial phases (1992-96) was watered down, co-opted, and manipulated by a centrist government, before a commitment to parity was accepted in 2000,¹¹² or the Brazil case, where a robust and all party feminist demand for quotas was translated into a weak, non-enforceable injunction on parties to field more women candidates, India enjoys the unique status of having guaranteed and implemented a full 33 per cent reservations for local bodies, while such reservations in higher legislative bodies has been actively resisted.

Different kinds of readings have been generated by the working of reservations in local bodies: at one end of the scale are the skeptics who note the depressingly low profile of women in local politics, and the hurdles they face, to suggest that such a legal insistence of women's participation can be counter productive. A sub set of these writers would also be dismayed at the poor overall impact that women have made to democratic functioning. There are others who see this as only the first step on a long road to parity or equality of opportunity in politics. And there are the incurable optimists, who have confronted the depressing truth of women in politics by making an argument for a "politics of presence" which produces a new visibility and potency to women in local bodies.

Despite the wide range of studies that have taken stock of how women have fared under a system of reservations, the intractable problem of their being pitted against non-dominant castes has

¹¹¹ Alcantara, "Women and Politics".

¹¹² Danielle Haase Dubosc, "Movement for Parity in France", *Economic and Political Weekly* 35: 43 and 44 (October 28, 2000), pp. WS 55-60.

remained. This paper has argued that the hierarchies of caste and gender are inseparable and must be acknowledged as such in both policy and political practice. Yet, even as feminist scholars and activists have engaged seriously with, and radically reworked, their adherence to any unitary category of “woman”, as the serious rethinking around the Women’s Reservation Bill has shown, there is no sign of a comparable degree of seriousness on the part of the masculinist leadership of the Other Backward Classes to take up and address “the women’s question.” The difficult challenge faced by the feminist movement is precisely in determining the extent to which an insistence on universals such as “gender equality” and “freedom from discrimination” works in the face of such intransigence.¹¹³ No easy parallels can be drawn from the experience of women in urban local bodies, but by way of a conclusion, the words of a corporator from the Nayanaja Kshatriya caste (BC (A) category) soundly affirm the value of reservations:

It is not just my wife getting a chance.... BC (A) women are not in politics. Women from a major community like the Brahmins had chances previously whereas women from backward communities were not inclined to enter politics.... [she] may not perform for 3 to 4 years or might not know the work, or someone else might work on her behalf...[but] finally she will know the worth of that power.

This is a clear indication that women have gained at the level of politics, what might not have been available to them at the level of the social, and is one of the many “paradoxes” that have been generated by a politics of “inclusion”.¹¹⁴ At the same time, if they have gained from caste quotas, there is no indication that the question of greater gender equality in politics is being taken seriously by caste leaders.

¹¹³ In concluding his analysis of masculine domination, Bourdieu similarly warns French feminists against confining their struggles to “parity” saying “these struggles are liable to reinforce the effects of another form of fictitious universalism, by favouring firstly women drawn from the same regions of social space as the men who currently occupy the dominant positions.” Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, pp. 116-7.

¹¹⁴ On the “Paradox of Inclusion” see “Gendering Governance or Governing Women?”, pp. 138-45.

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