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Mamata Banerjee
Redefining Female Leadership

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On Friday May 20 2011 thirty-four years of Left Front (LF) rule in West Bengal came to an end when Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as the state’s first woman chief minister. Having visited the Kalighat temple in south Kolkata on her way, Mamata Banerjee arrived at the Raj Bhawan (Governor’s residence) shortly before 1 p.m. Dressed in a simple white cotton sari with a blue border and wearing a tricolour uttariya (long scarf), she took the oath in the name of Ishwar (God) in Bengali on the Raj Bhawan lawns at 1:01 p.m., a time selected as auspicious by her family priest. According to The Hindu, Mamata Banerjee later,

In an unprecedented move . . . walked the distance of about half-a-km to the Writers’ Buildings, the State Secretariat, even as her security staff had a trying time controlling the thousands of admirers surging towards her. By the time she reached the Secretariat, the road in front of it had turned into a sea of humanity, with people breaking through the police cordons in a massive display of outpouring of emotions.¹

This chapter portrays and analyses Mamata Banerjee as a political leader, and simultaneously seeks to provide a broader insight into the phenomenon of female political leadership in India’s democracy.² Through a detailed empirical portrait of Mamata Banerjee, this chapter examines how Indian women with political ambitions carve out a career for themselves: How has Mamata Banerjee emerged as a political leader? To what extent is her political career and style of leadership comparable to that of other important female politicians? And how is female leadership popularly construed and understood in the context of West Bengal? In addressing these questions, relatively limited attention is paid to her party’s

². This article builds on an article in Norwegian (Nielsen 2010) published in Ruud and Heierstad (2010). I am grateful to the editors for encouraging me in transforming the Norwegian original into a publishable English version.
stated ideology, and her record of governance to date, but focus is instead on the significance of personal style and image, kinship terminology and popular religion in the production of Mamata Banerjee as a political leader. In the conclusion I reflect, in line with the editors’ introduction, on the extent to which the notion of vernacularization helps to make sense of Mamata Banerjee’s rise as a popular leader.3

If scholarly work on political leadership in the context of democratic India has until recently been in short supply,4 the absence of studies on women political leaders has been even more conspicuous.5 This is surprising given how the presence of powerful women political leaders like Mamata Banerjee often appears as something of a riddle or a paradox. Given the prevalence of patriarchal forms of social organization, discrimination against and the exclusion of women is widespread in several spheres of life. Indian women are on average less educated,6 earn lower salaries, and have very limited control over means of production and capital compared to their male counterparts.7 In some states, new forms of female foeticide have led to alarmingly skewed child sex ratios,8 a tendency which now asserts itself across India.9 Moreover, women’s access to public spaces is often restricted, and many formal political spaces tend to be predominantly male or masculine.10 Indeed, the practice of politics is itself often construed as a male

5. A recent anthology by Price and Ruud (2010) has sought to fill this knowledge gap through ten detailed case studies of individual leaders at various levels. Perhaps tellingly no female leaders are portrayed.
activity, frequently characterized by distinctly gendered forms of ‘muscular politics’ that exclude women. Overall, as Corbridge et al. have recently argued, India’s gender democratic deficit remains very wide.

Yet, Indian democracy cannot be characterized as a ‘government of the people, by men’. Certain states, such as Mamata Banerjee’s home state of West Bengal boast of a long history of women’s participation in a broad range of political or social movements, and the reservation of one-third of all seats at local levels of government, introduced in 1993, has meant that more than one million Indian women – ostensibly more than the rest of the world combined – are presently involved in making Indian democracy work at the grassroots. And at the higher echelons of the government, a group of high-profile female political leaders have made their mark on both Indian and international politics. In addition to Mamata Banerjee, this includes, of course, Indira and Sonia Gandhi, the Dalit leader Mayawati, Tamil actress-turned-politician Jayalalithaa and the present Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj.

The aim of this chapter is not to offer an all-encompassing explanation for the phenomenon of female political leadership, but rather to examine some of the more localized and contextual dynamics that go into the production of particular forms of female leadership, while seeking to retain a comparative perspective. The

17. It is important to keep in mind that while these leaders have a high political and public profile, women do in fact remain relatively few and far between at the very top of the political ladder. The number of female representatives in the legislative bodies in most of India’s states remains well below the global average of 20 per cent (Praveen Rai, ‘Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers’, Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 46, no. 3, 2011, pp. 47–55), and the proportion of female MPs has historically hovered between 4 and 8 per cent. The 10 per cent barrier was only broken in 2009.
first section of the chapter locates Mamata Banerjee in a broader context of power, gender and political leadership in democratic India by way of concrete examples that include, e.g. Mayawati, Jayalalithaa, Rabri Devi and Sonia Gandhi. The second section focuses in greater detail on Mamata Banerjee.

While often the target of detailed journalistic accounts, not much academic literature, barring a few exceptions, has been produced on Mamata Banerjee’s political style and tactics. It is likely that her reputation as an unsophisticated and unpolished political maverick has made her something of a pariah among academics. Scholars working on West Bengal politics often tend to dismiss her as an unprincipled populist undeserving of academic attention, and explain her rise to power as a consequence of the political vacuum created through the decline and failure of the Left in West Bengal. While not necessarily incorrect, this ‘vacuum theory’ of Mamata Banerjee’s popularity fails to engage with the substance of her political message and style of leadership. This is unfortunate since, as this chapter demonstrates, Mamata Banerjee has not only redefined the contours of West Bengal politics for better or worse, she has also in some ways redefined and expanded the boundaries of female political leadership. Born into a lower middle class and not particularly political Bengali family in Kolkata, Mamata Banerjee has managed almost single-handedly to build a political career for herself. She has done so by adopting a fiercely independent, confrontational, uncompromising and activist political style, driven by personal will and force. She, thereby, challenges the assumption, as do to a certain extent the likes of Jayalalithaa and Mayawati, that Indian female political leaders primarily build their careers based on family or kin relations with powerful and influential men.

Yet, while Mamata Banerjee’s personality has undoubtedly been important, one can only fully comprehend the nature of her political leadership if one takes into account the broader context and historical developments in West Bengal. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Mamata Banerjee’s political career, her strategies and tactics, and her impact on West Bengal politics.

18. Monobina Gupta, ‘The Paradoxical Figure of Mamata’, Kafila, 21 April 2011.
account the broader cultural and symbolic context in which it is formed, exercised and recognized. Elsewhere in this volume, Lars Tore Flåten draws our attention to how political leaders may ‘engineer’ or manipulate symbolic worlds to refashion themselves and their message to broaden their mass support base. While gender appears as relatively unimportant in Flåten’s study of L.K. Advani, in contrast, the symbolic or cultural world within which Mamata Banerjee has had to navigate is a distinctly gendered one. This gendered cultural world may simultaneously provide both sustenance for and impose barriers on female leaders.

SITUATING FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: POWER, KINSHIP, DYNASTIES

Much of the classical village politics literature, rooted in the rural sociology and anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized how power and influence in agrarian societies were intimately linked to the control of and access to the primary means of production in the rural economy, i.e. land. Village landlords would act as patrons by granting access to land, and by extending credits and other favours, to their clients, who would in turn lend their political support to the patron in times of political conflict, which typically played out within a locally dominant and numerically strong group of high caste land owners. In a patriarchal social system, where land ownership tends to be the prerogative of men, women had few available avenues for wielding political influence.

These power structures have since then increasingly crumbled. With the gradual deepening of democracy in India over the past several decades, more and more groups, including the formerly untouchable castes and Other Backward Castes (OBC), have been drawn into the ambit of institutionalized democratic politics. In the wake of this democratic upsurge, new forms and styles of political leadership have emerged at the local, state and national levels. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar use the label ‘the rise of the plebeians’ in Indian politics to summarize the considerable changes that are happening in the social composition of political leaders in terms of caste, class and occupational background. Yet, the gendered structure of political leadership at the state and national levels has proven less amenable to change. Here, female representation has increased only marginally, and within most political parties


women continue to be marginalized by the party hierarchy and structure, often because the parties assume that female candidates lack ‘winnability’. How then, do female political leaders reach the higher levels of political power and influence? Among the routes to political power available to women, the dynastic route figures prominently in both academic literature and media reports. While family members of deceased political leaders do not always emerge as leaders, the tendency towards dynastic succession is much more common. Both India and its South Asian neighbours boast several political dynasties that have included a number of high-profile female leaders, who have stepped in to shoulder the responsibility of carrying forth the dynasty’s political interests. Some two decades ago *India Today* reported during the run-up to the 1989 Lok Sabha elections that,

The list of candidates for the coming Lok Sabha and Assembly elections would make any geneticist conclude that human chromosomes have an as-yet unidentified political gene. The roster of fathers and sons, sons and mothers, sisters and brothers and sisters and sisters contesting simply goes on and on.

This tendency has not diminished since, and the practice of nominating the sons and daughters of powerful political leaders is well established and endorsed by the electorate. Political dynasties are collective repositories of considerable political exper-

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26. Cf. Prafulla Marpakwar, ‘Sonia Puts List of Ticket-seeking Kin on Hold’, *The Times of India*, 22 September 2009. See Patrick French, *India: A Portrait*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2011, for an illuminating analysis of the presence of dynasties in the 15th Lok Sabha. At the time of writing, the Lok Sabha included for instance Ajit Singh and Jayant Chaudhary, respectively son and grandson of Charan Singh; Dharmanendra Yadav, nephew of Mulayam Singh Yadav; Neeraj Shekhar, son of former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar; Dushyant Singh, son of present Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia; Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury and Mausam Noor, both relatives of former Railway Minister. A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury; and Abhijit Mukherjee, son of President Pranab Mukherjee. Lalu Prasad Yadav also appears to be grooming one of his sons for a career in politics (Raj Kumar, ‘Rahul and me? Helluva difference, he’s twice as old’, *The Times of India*, 24 October 2010), while in Maharashtra, the Thackeray family has recently inducted Aditya Thackeray, grandson of the late Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray, into politics. See Anupama Katakamand and Lyla Bavadam,’Initiation Rites’, *Frontline*, vol. 27, no. 23, 2010, pp. 33–6.
tise, knowledge and influence, and are often embedded in wider regional or national political networks and alliances. They facilitate the intergenerational transmission of political knowledge and skills through socialization so that both sons and daughters learn the formal and not-so-formal rules of the political game at an early age. In addition, having a well known surname like Bhutto or Gandhi facilitates almost instant recognition among large electorates and can provide candidates with dynastic connections with a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their rivals.27 Political dynasties, in addition, often have significant resources at their disposal, either in the form of personal wealth or qua links to the state. This allows them to carefully nurture their constituency/constituencies, and campaign extensively at the time of elections.28 Some of India’s most well-known female political leaders have belonged to such dynasties, most prominently Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. Interestingly, both of them, for a time, displayed a distinct disinterest in politics and have insisted that they only assumed positions of leadership out of respect for the family and in response to the demand of the people at large. For instance, just months before she was made prime minister Indira Gandhi wrote that, ‘It may seem strange that a person in politics should be wholly without political ambition but I am afraid that I am that sort of freak … I did not want to come either to Parliament or to be in Government.’29

Yet, while Indira Gandhi, without much ado, moved in to occupy the post of prime minister when it was offered to her, Sonia Gandhi declined for many years to lead the Congress party after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991. She only relented in 1998 after years of sustained pressure from party influentials who looked to her to salvage the party. Later, she turned down the offer to become prime minister of India after an intense campaign by the BJP that portrayed the Roman-Catholic Sonia as a foreign daughter-in-law (videshi bahu) unfit to govern Bharat. At the same time both Indira and Sonia have invoked their connection to the Nehru-Gandhi family during election campaigns and rallies, and their dynastic connections have clearly facilitated their entry into politics.30

Yet, while dynastic belonging has been important in elevating both of them to some of the highest political offices in India – Indira as prime minister and Sonia as the chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance and the National Advisory Council – few dispute the fact that they both went on to become established, skilled and ambitious leaders in their own right. Indira Gandhi was, for instance, widely praised for her determined and independent leadership of the nation during India’s involvement in the war in East Pakistan. And Sonia Gandhi is now increasingly recognized as a competent puller of political strings from behind the scenes. She is, in addition, presently engaged in securing the continuity of her political dynasty by grooming Rahul Gandhi for the role of prime minister at some point in the future.31

Thus, dynastic affiliation can function as a springboard from which women with political ambitions can gain entry into the world of democratic politics, and from there they can go on to use their own accrued political skills, talent and savvy to further their careers. But dynastic or kinship affiliation may also reduce female politicians to mere proxies, whose primary function is to keep the chair warm for a relative (most often the husband), who for one reason or the other has been temporarily sidelined. The job of the female proxy is to act as the formal decision maker on behalf of her husband and in accordance with his interests and instructions.32 Independent political action and initiative is discouraged, and in the event that her services are rendered redundant, for instance because her husband is able to return to politics and resume office, she is expected to cordially step aside and vacate the seat.33 In local level politics, it is not uncommon that influential families will field female candidates whenever the seat(s) they wish to contest are reserved for women. But proxy women may be found at the highest political levels as well. A case in point is Rabri Devi, who served as the Chief Minister of Bihar several times between 1997 and 2005. Her husband Lalu Prasad Yadav was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1977 on a Janata Party ticket. Lalu belongs to the numerically strong Yadav caste, which over the past decades has increasingly come to see itself as a natural caste of politicians, and the support of his fellow caste members was a decisive factor in making Lalu Chief Minister of Bihar for

31. Other members of the Nehru-Gandhi family, who have pursued careers in national politics, albeit on BJP tickets, include Indira Gandhi’s daughter-in-law Maneka Gandhi and grandson Varun Gandhi.
the first time in 1990.34 While Lalu would use his characteristic rustic charisma, keen political wit, and a colourful ‘politics of the spectacle’35 to build a political career for himself both in Bihar and Delhi, Rabri Devi kept out of the public glare. Yet, when corruption charges against Lalu emerged in 1997, he was forced to step down and subsequently jailed, and Rabri Devi was, to the surprise of many, installed as the new chief minister in his place. Prior to assuming the office of Chief Minister, Rabri Devi had never publicly expressed any interest whatsoever in politics. She had instead loyally performed her duties as housewife and the mother of the couple’s nine children. She was also poorly educated, seldom spoke in public, and could neither read nor sign official documents.36 Interestingly, Rabri Devi denied that her husband had had anything to do with her being elevated to the post of chief minister. In an interview she gave in 2000, the interviewer asked her if she had discussed the issue with Lalu before being sworn in. She answered,

No. Never. The party men made me the C[hief] M[inister]. They told me, ‘Chaliye (let’s go).’ I asked them, ‘where am I supposed to go?’ They said I have to reach Raj Bhavan for the swearing-in ceremony. I clung to my chair and I refused to go. I asked them ‘Why should I go?’ My party men said they now consider me their neta. I argued that I am only a housewife. I work within my home. I can only look after my children, I can’t manage the state. But they dragged me to Raj Bhavan. We are not greedy. The first time I came out of the confines of my home, it was to become the C[hief] M[inister]!37

While Rabri Devi clearly takes care to emphasize her desire to live up to the ideal of the caring, self-sacrificing mother and wife, who is dedicated first and foremost to her home and kin, few believe that her swearing-in was solely the result of intense grass roots pressure from party supporters. Tellingly, Rabri Devi explained that ‘the wife has a duty to sit in her husband’s chair to keep it warm. It is an old Indian tradition’.38 And while Lalu was jailed he frequently received visits from leading politicians, state ministers, bureaucrats and senior police officers.39 It was, thus, apparent that the state was being run from Lalu’s cell rather than from 1

37. The Rediff Interview, ‘My name will be there on the pages of history’, 23 February 2000.
38. Chaurasia, op. cit., p. 77.
Anney Marg in Patna. While Rabri Devi’s loyalty has won her praise from some quarters, where she is seen as the ideal *pativrata*, the loyal and devoted wife, others ridicule her as a *gungi gudiya* or *kathputali*, a stupid doll or puppet.40

Dynastic affiliation and kinship relations, hence, can be a double-edged sword. They provide women with a measure of political capital and knowledge that is otherwise not easily accessible. At the same time, the support and encouragement of family and kinship networks can be indispensable in overcoming traditional patriarchal barriers to female participation. Kinship and dynastic belonging can then function as the foundation from which women can access, shape and give direction to democratic processes. But kinship may also work to reduce women to mere political proxies or ‘token presences’ with little or no independent political agency.41

**FEMALE LEADERS BEYOND DYNASTIES**

While kinship relations often play a significant part in the making of female political leadership, India’s democracy is also home to a number of female politicians who have established themselves as leaders without the benefit of kinship. This category of women, who may be viewed as more or less politically self-made, includes the likes of Mamata Banerjee, Jayalalithaa and Mayawati. A brief comparison of these three women, current or former chief ministers is insightful to foreground both the similarities and differences between them in terms of political career and leadership styles.

Jayalalithaa had a long relationship both on and off screen with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) founder and leader, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) who first rose, with the help and votes from his millions of fans, to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1977.42 Jayalalithaa was the last in a long series of lead actresses starring in MGR’s film, and they acted together in more than twenty-five films, often with Jayalalithaa dressed in what many saw as outrageously modern and revealing clothes. Rumours were ripe that she was MGR’s mistress off screen, and among AIADMK supporters Jayalalithaa was simply known as *anni*, the elder brother’s wife. Upon MGR’s demise in 1987, a

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40. Spary, op. cit., p. 270.
battle for succession ensued between Jayalalithaa and MGR’s wife Janaki Rama-achandran. In accordance with the principle of political succession rooted in kinship, Janaki took over as chief minister, but after an extended power struggle within the AIADMK, Jayalalithaa managed to outmanoeuvre and sideline Janaki. Jayalalithaa became Chief Minister in 1991 and is now the undisputed leader of the AIADMK. She held the position of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 2011 till 2014.

Publicly, Jayalalithaa often makes a point out of demonstrating her fiercely independent and supreme political power. Many of her followers liken her to a veerangana, a warrior queen. According to anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee, beguiled by her charm and command, men have been said to stand awed in her presence. Self-consciously enigmatic and sparing in her utterances, Jayalalithaa projects the stillness of royalty, and her meetings and negotiations are discreetly arranged. . . . Her private life is closely guarded and her supporters are raised to great excitement by the prospect of an occasional glimpse. Haughty and imperious, surrounded by her coterie, Jayalalithaa demands exaggerated gestures of total loyalty, with ministers and bureaucrats known to prostrate themselves before her in greeting.43 She is also known to let visitors wait for hours, often in vain.

Mayawati’s rise to political prominence to a certain extent mirrors that of Jayalalithaa’s. Mayawati began as a Dalit activist and found her political mentor in Dalit leader Kanshi Ram. When Kanshi Ram founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984, he included Mayawati in the party’s core group, and the two went on to work closely for well over two decades. It was with Kanshi Ram’s blessing that Mayawati assumed office as chief minister in Uttar Pradesh in 1995, and shortly before his death, he officially anointed. Mayawati his successor. Mayawati too has cultivated an image of being a supremely powerful leader, for instance by throwing outrageously lavish birthday parties paid for at least partly by using state funds;44 but she has also retained some of her Dalit activist politics, for example by claiming and ‘filling’ public space with Dalit symbolism, viz., statues of herself, Kanshi Ram and Ambedkar, as well as of the BSP’s symbol, the elephant.

As the careers of Jayalalithaa and Mayawati illustrate, women may embark on an independent political career even in the absence of powerful kinship-based political networks, although both relied on the assistance of an influential male leader in the early stages of their careers. To an even greater extent, Mamata Banerjee is an example of a woman who has made a career for herself in politics

almost single-handedly. She did receive both political training and advice from influential male politicians (which is more or less inevitable in a male-dominated domain as politics) like Subrata Mukherjee, Siddhartha Shankar Ray and Rajiv Gandhi in the earlier stages of her career,45 but unlike Jayalalithaa and Mayawati she was not elevated into high office, nor did she inherit control of an already established political party or a clearly defined constituency.

The sections that follow examine how Mamata Banerjee has carved out a political career for herself at the highest levels of both state and national politics. Towards this purpose, certain aspects of her personal style of political leadership that were instrumental in securing for her a large political following are analysed. In some respects this style resembles what has been called ‘the activist style of leadership’ based on an anti-establishment, ‘pro-people’ and grass roots-based approach.46 The link between this style and the more general inscription of Mamata Banerjee into local cultural or symbolic universes is also scrutinized. This account begins with a personal description, reproduced from field notes, based on a face-to-face encounter with Mamata Banerjee in Singur in rural West Bengal in 2007.

**MAMATA BANERJEE’S POLITICAL STYLE AND CAREER**

The first time I saw Mamata Banerjee live was in December 2007 during the movement in Singur against the setting up of a Tata Motors car production unit. In order to establish the factory some 1,000 acres of farmland needed to be acquired at the behest of the LF government, but as local farmers proved unwilling to relinquish their land in lieu of cash, a local movement to resist the land acquisition soon emerged. Farmers formed the Singur Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (SKJRC), the committee to save the farmland of Singur in 2006, which Mamata Banerjee’s party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) both supported and increasingly also led due to its strong political and organizational presence in Singur.47 On this December day Mamata Banerjee had come to Singur to commemorate the first death anniversary of Tapasi Malik, a young girl and supporter of the SKJRC who had been raped and burned to death, ostensibly at the behest of local leaders of the

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47. As a fallout of the protest, Tata Motors decided to abandon Singur for greener Gujarati pastures in Sanand in late 2008. At the time of writing, the acquired land in Singur lay vacant and had not been returned to its erstwhile owners.
ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Tapasi Malik was now remembered as one of the movement’s martyrs. The stage was adorned with her photo and a *shahid bedi* (martyr’s column/memorial) was erected next to the stage.

I was conducting fieldwork in one of Singur’s villages at the time and had decided to attend the meeting. When I arrived at the field where the meeting was held, Mamata Banerjee had not yet arrived. However, several lesser political VIPs were already seated on plastic chairs on the dais. Some of them gave speeches, while others sang songs or read poetry in praise of the Singur movement. Gradually, more villagers started arriving, and when TMC supporters from other parts of the district began pouring in by bus, the crowd soon swelled to several thousand. But few paid any attention to what was happening on stage. Instead they drank tea, ate sweets and snacks, or gossiped in the shade. Suddenly, however, a cloud of brown dust rose in the distance, and a whisper of ‘Mamata is coming’ rapidly spread through the crowd. On stage, a leader of the Janata Dal (United) had just stepped up to the microphone, but as a large convoy of eight to ten cars, some with blue flashing lights, suddenly burst forth from the dust cloud, it was evident to everyone that this had to be Mamata Banerjee and her entourage. The Janata Dal (United) leader soon realized that all eyes were now turned towards Mamata Banerjee’s convoy, and he wisely chose to cut his speech short and simply return to his seat. He merely said: ‘Brothers and sisters. I have been given the chance to speak at the time of Mamata’s arrival. Therefore I will say just one sentence: I support your movement! Thank you.’

Mamata Banerjee emerged from one of the cars, and as a visiting anthropologist I at first had a hard time identifying her as one of the most influential political leaders in India. Short and stocky, without any make-up or visible jewellery, and dressed in a simple cotton sari with cheap *chappals* on her feet, she exuded none of the glamour or awe that characterizes for instance Jayalalithaa. And yet, the almost electric excitement in the crowd amply demonstrated that a leader of unusual stature and influence had just arrived. Accompanied by shouts of ‘Mamata Banerjee *zindabad!*’ she made her way towards the stage, palms pressed together and slightly raised in a gesture of greeting the crowd. Her security guards stayed near their cars, so the crowd could easily get close enough to get a glimpse of her as she approached the stage accompanied by Tapasi Malik’s mother. Once on stage, she took her time to personally greet all the political leaders assembled there, and almost like an attentive hostess she sent for more chairs when she dis-

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48. In outward appearance, Jayalalithaa has gradually and considerably ‘deglamourized’ herself after making the transition from acting to politics.
covered that there were not enough seats for everyone. She then sat down and encouraged two other leaders to continue with their scheduled speeches. When they were done she asked Tapasi Malik’s mother to speak, but the only words she managed to speak before she broke into a sob were ‘Tapasi Malik was my girl . . .’. Mamata rose from her seat and put her arm around Tapasi Malik’s mother and escorted her back to her chair before asking Tapasi Malik’s father to speak. He was more adept at the art of addressing a crowd and spoke for some minutes before sitting down with tears in his eyes. Only then did Mamata herself approach the microphone. She began at length by thanking the organizers for hosting this meeting, and the political VIPs for sharing the dais with her. Lastly, she thanked the villagers for spending their Sunday commemorating Tapasi Malik and listening to her. So far she had been speaking in a low and subdued voice, but it soon escalated to a much higher pitch as she began lambasting the CPI(M), the dominant constituent of the LF, whom she loudly and repeatedly accused of everything from corruption to murder, rape, arrogance, and fascism, when a democratic movement like ours rises the government must accept its demands. But in West Bengal the CPI(M) has grown only more and more aggressive. On my way here I passed an area all covered in red flags. There was a CPI(M) conference, very lavish. It must have cost crores of Rupees, all financed with money collected from the people. There was a time when the CPI(M) activists would go hungry and never have food to eat. Eight of them would share one bread. Earlier they would all starve, but now they have everything, big cars, big houses, everything. Crores of Rupees! They say they are best in everything: math, science, history. But they stand first in murdering Tapasi Malik; they stand first in corruption, in rape, in theft! The CPI(M) wants to control everything, but in reality it is they who are out of control.49

Mamata Banerjee continued in a similar vein for just short of half an hour, and while she sprinkled her speech with short excerpts from well-known Bengali poetry and songs, and made passing references to a range of local or regional political events, both historical and contemporary, the single unifying theme of her speech was how the CPI(M) terrorized and ruined West Bengal. She finished her speech by encouraging all those present to unite to oust the CPI(M) from power. After that, she handed over a bundle of blankets to local SKJRC leaders for them

49. I attended the meeting with my field assistant. We both took notes during Mamata Banerjee’s speech and transcribed them later the same evening. The excerpt here is a narratively structured synthesis of points she made during her speech.
to distribute among the needy, and announced that they would now honour Tapasi Malik with one minute of silence. She then left the stage to visit the home of the Malik family, after which she proceeded to visit the widow of a Mr Patra who had recently committed suicide because the land acquisition in Singur had hurled his family into poverty. It was very late in the evening when I caught a glimpse of her white Ambassador driving through a small hamlet on its way back to Kolkata.

Mamata Banerjee’s performance in Singur was in many respects representative of her political style. She is at once a gentle, caring and attentive leader, and a fiery, shrill and confrontational orator. This has made her a controversial political figure in the Indian political landscape. She often divides public opinion, and people tend to either love her or hate her. Consider for instance the following two descriptions of her, offered by two different journalists,

Ms Banerjee is a street fighting, rabble rousing, plain living populist politician living in a slummy red-tiled one storey home on the banks of a stinking canal in a run-down Calcutta neighbourhood. She turns out in cheap, pale, sometimes-tattered saris.50

If there is one honest political leader in India who has lived like a common person and the Indian oligarchs could never bribe her with money and other things, she is Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal.51

These two mini-portraits are quite representative of the way most Indians judge Mamata Banerjee: for some she is a shabby populist demagogue; for others she is the only honest and hard-working politician in an otherwise dirty and corrupt game of politics. Judging by the atmosphere that day in Singur, it was evident even to an outsider that the villagers assembled in front of her dais belonged to the latter group.

Mamata Banerjee’s political career began during her college days in the 1970s, but only really gathered momentum when she, as a candidate for the Congress party, defeated CPI(M) stalwart Somnath Chatterjee at the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. Her political standing and reputation continued to grow during the 1980s and 1990s when she, by her own admission, formed a special bond with Rajiv Gandhi.52 She was elected to the Lok Sabha several times, served as a minister for

50. Soutik Biswas, ‘Cheap Saris and Beauty Queens’, BBC News Online, 9 May 2004
a short while, and was elevated to the post of national leader of the Youth Congress. At this stage of her career Mamata Banerjee exemplified the type of female political leader who furthers her career and capacity for leadership by gathering experience and expertise within an organized party structure over a period of time. This enabled her to climb the institutional ladder towards ever more influential political positions. Yet, women who tread this institutional career path often hit a glass ceiling that prevents them from reaching the very pinnacles of the party hierarchy. Mamata Banerjee learned this the hard way when she, in 1992 and again in 1997, unsuccessfully sought to be elected as the leader of the Congress in West Bengal. By 1997, she had ostensibly grown so frustrated with life in the West Bengal unit of the Congress that she wanted to almost revolutionize it. Most state leaders, she believed, were corrupt and bribed by the CPI(M) to the extent that they had been reduced to a compliant ‘B-team’ of the communists. But when she failed to get elected as state party president, she soon announced that she would leave the Congress and form her own party, the TMC, as a radical and dynamic alternative to the ‘old’ Congress. Yet, ideologically the TMC is virtually indistinguishable from the Congress, and Mamata Banerjee frequently and with pride invokes the legacy of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

As is evident from her speech in Singur, Mamata’s principal political adversary is the CPI(M). In her eyes the CPI(M) established an authoritarian rule based on violence and terror, and killed democracy in the state. TMC’s political agenda is, therefore, founded on a single-minded, one-point anti-CPI(M) programme, which has allowed her to bring together the simmering discontent, which escalated during the more than thirty years of LF rule, and which culminated with the ouster of the LF in 2011. This conspicuously inclusionary programme has allowed her to enter into and break alliances with a range of political parties from the Hindu nationalist BJP on the right, through the centrist Congress, and all the way to the Socialist Unity Centre and various Naxal groups on the far left. While her critics see this kind of political manoeuvring as shamelessly unprincipled, her supporters most often take it as evidence of her superior skills as a political strategist.

54. The same ‘glass ceiling’ is at work when ministries are allotted. Women are mostly allotted ‘feminine’ ministries like women and child welfare, information and culture, or social welfare, while heavy-weight ministries like finance, defence, or home are all considered ‘masculine’ ministries (Rai, 2011, p. 54).
57. Mukulika Banerjee, op. cit., p. 301.
THE GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST

In terms of political style and oration Mamata Banerjee departs significantly from certain culturally informed ideas about how political leaders should comport themselves. Political leaders in Bengal have historically been recruited from the Bengali bhadralok, the respectable and educated middle class, and to this day the state assembly has a disproportionately high representation of legislators with a bhadralok background. A bhadralok is the embodiment of a particular combination of cultural capital, manners and dress code. A quintessential bhadralok is educated, refined, eloquent and with a good knowledge of English. He is a high caste Hindu, often a Brahmin, and has style, manners and dignity, although he will usually display a measure of modesty and moderation in public life. His uniform is the crisp white dhoti and kurta, and a genuine bhadralok will be well versed in the world of arts, literature and poetry. Virtually all of West Bengal’s chief ministers from B.C. Roy to Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya have conformed to this model of a bhadralok politician. Jyoti Basu, for instance, who served as chief minister from 1977 to 2000, was the son of a doctor and studied at some of the most prestigious colleges in Kolkata, namely Loretto, St. Xavier’s and Presidency. Having earned his honours in English he went on to study law in England, only to return and join the Communist movement in India in the 1940s. His successor Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who is the nephew of a well-known revolutionary poet, cultivated the bhadralok image to an even greater extent. He studied Bengali and Bengali literature, and also served as his state’s Minister of Culture. He is also known as an admirer of, and a contributor to, the world of theatre and poetry. He is a film buff and visits the culture and film complex Nandan often, and has translated the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Bengali.

While Monobina Gupta has rightly argued that Mamata Banerjee’s ‘lower middle class origins, her abrasive forthright style and jarring and unpolished language squarely place her outside the club of the genteel bhadramohila’, she is, in fact, not entirely without bhadramohila credentials. She has a Brahmin family background and holds a degree in law; she speaks decent English and has authored numerous books, both poetry and literature, and is also a painter. During the movements in Singur and Nandigram, she even managed to win over a good deal of the charmed circle of Kolkata’s urban artists and intellectuals long known for

59. Monobina Gupta, ‘The Paradoxical Figure of Mamata’, Kafila, 21 April 2011.
their sympathy with the Left (although she presently seems well on her way to losing their support again).

But in general, Mamata Banerjee compares unfavourably to the ideal of the *bhadralok* politician. Her educational credentials were irreparably damaged when she claimed to have what eventually turned out to be a non-existent doctorate from the non-existent but ostensibly US-based East Georgia University.\(^\text{60}\) Although she speaks and writes in English, she lacks the ease and fluency of the bonafide *bhadramohila*; and the quality of her English poetry is quite mediocre.\(^\text{61}\) As Dwai-payan Bhattacharyya has noted, most of her books are written in a style that fits a school essay, with occasional bursts of ornamental expressions.\(^\text{62}\)

Mamata Banerjee is also found wanting in terms of a *bhadramohila*’s manners and moderation in public life. As her speech in Singur testifies, the tenor of her political rhetoric is often characterized by angry and sweeping accusations against her political adversaries, and she is known for losing her temper at the most inappropriate moments. Yet, rather than trying to live up to the elevated *bhadralok* ideal, Mamata Banerjee has turned her lack of proper cultural capital to her own advantage, seeking to establish an alternative model for political leadership in which her simplicity and emotionality become assets rather than liabilities. In a very revealing foreword to one of her collections of poetry Mamata Banerjee writes, ‘I am afraid the collection may not find readers’ attention as far as the quality of verses is concerned, but I may expect appreciation for their simplicity and emotional content.’\(^\text{63}\) Similarly, as a painter she presents herself as ‘just a vagabond dabbling with colours’.\(^\text{64}\) Her paintings are (sometimes) appreciated by other artists sympathetic to her political agenda not for their inherent artistic quality, but for the ‘honesty and vibrant emotions’,\(^\text{65}\) or for the ‘passion, zeal and grit’\(^\text{66}\) that shine through her canvases. In much the same way, she seems to attract the voters’ attention not because of the quality of her ideology and political eloquence, but for her simplicity, passion and emotional content. In accordance with her party’s name *trinamul* (Bengali for grassroots), she portrays herself as a woman of the people with scant regard for power, middle class comforts and intel-

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\(^\text{60}\) Contrary to what is commonly accepted, Gupta suggests that the East Georgia University does in fact exist, but that it was not empowered to grant Ph.D.s (Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography*, Noida: HarperCollins, 2012, p. 29).


\(^\text{62}\) Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 1536.


\(^\text{65}\) Nandini Guha, ‘Mamata’s Paintings Rake in Rs. 92 Lakh’, *Hindustan Times*, 5 April 2011.

\(^\text{66}\) *Hindustan Times*, ‘The Dadaist in Didi’, 4 April 2011.
lectual pursuits. In her private life, she takes care to cultivate an image of being distinctly disinterested in urban middle class lifestyle. She continues to live in a house of modest size near one of Kolkata’s largest red light areas, and the adjacent party office is merely a small room with some basic furniture and without air-conditioning. By dressing in cheap and wrinkled cotton saris, wearing chappals and a simple jhola draped over the shoulder, she marks a clear contrast to the refined but also elitist bhadralok. Her staple diet is similarly simple and not unlike that of ‘ordinary’ Bengalis: rice and fish curry for dinner, and tea, biscuits, puffed rice and cucumbers as snacks during the day. This strategic simplicity of living has additional layers of political meaning. Her frugality sets her apart from the lavish and extravagant lifestyle enjoyed by certain politicians in other parts of India, including other mainstream women politicians. Mayawati, for instance, during her latest stint in office, was India’s richest chief minister with declared assets officially worth Rs. 86 crore. Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, was known to be one of the ‘poorest’ MPs in the 15th Lok Sabha before she returned to West Bengal to serve as chief minister, and her personal assets are worth only a couple of lakhs of rupees. Her persistent ‘poverty’, even after several decades in politics, sends the message to the electorate that she is not driven by a desire to maximize personal gain. Most Bengalis see politics as a dirty and immoral game, where corruption, deceit, and greed remains the order of the day. Seen in this light, Mamata Banerjee appears to possess a special kind of moral superiority, which has made her one of the few honest and incorruptible political leaders of the state in the minds of many.

At the same time, her simplicity breaks down the social barriers that might potentially otherwise exist between an urban, educated Brahmin politician and West Bengal’s electorate. During her speech in Singur, Mamata Banerjee spoke at length about how CPI(M) politicians who claim to stand by the poor, often seem more interested in personal wealth, urban comfort and cabinet berths. She, on the other hand, has no interest in fame and fortune. She claims to share people’s suffering and strives to meet people eye to eye; she listens sincerely to people’s concerns; and she conveys the dissatisfaction of ‘the people’ to the powers that be. This political style has also been described as a form of assertive populism. As Mukulika Banerjee has argued, Mamata Banerjee embodies a fearless willpower, which allows her to take up the grievances of the oppressed and in turn, challenge the bhadralok establishment. Through her powerful speeches and the force of per-

sonal example, she seeks to mobilize people to assert their own will and opinion in the face of intimidation by the CPI(M) cadre and assert their dignity in the face of middle class reproach.\(^{68}\)

Another important factor that contributes to reducing the social distance between Mamata Banerjee and her supporters is that she, unlike the leaders of the secular left, very actively uses and appeals to popular religion. As seen, she visited the Kalighat Temple on the day of her swearing-in ceremony; took the oath in the name of Ishwar; and relied on her family priest to suggest the most auspicious time for the ceremony. Her speeches and writings are generally ‘laced with quotations from religious scriptures’, refer to personal supernatural experiences, or draw heavily on the work of religious leaders such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.\(^{69}\) She also actively makes use of religious symbolism and appeals to religious identity, appearing in a hijab, offering namaz, celebrating Eid,\(^ {70}\) or joining the Christmas prayer in church as part of her campaign.

An important corollary of Mamata Banerjee’s simple and spartan lifestyle is her very physical kind of politics that profiles her as a fearless activist. If her preferred setting is not the parlour but the street or the village hamlet, her preferred form is definitely the activist’s confrontational style, and not the polished ideological debate. In her younger days, she was known to jump on the bonnet of cars if she wanted to have a word with the passenger, often a minister or an important politician. She has on several occasions been injured after clashes with CPI(M) cadre or the police. At the height of the Singur movement she even undertook a fast unto death in Kolkata, which she eventually called off after 26 days. To her supporters, this willingness to stand firm in the face of political opposition reinforces the impression that she is a dedicated leader who will remain true to her conviction, whatever the personal cost.

As an activist Mamata Banerjee’s emotionality becomes an asset. In the Lok Sabha she has on several occasions thrown her papers in the air in a fit of rage; she was once in a physical confrontation with a fellow MP, and she has on more than one occasion delivered spontaneous or impromptu resignations from one or the other ministry. In the eyes of her critics, this makes her an unpredictable and untrustworthy leader, but in the eyes of her supporters it once again demonstrates that she has an activist’s approach to politics: she is capable of genuine and deeply felt indignation, and is driven by sheer personal dedication and conviction. It also

\(^{70}\) See, e.g. Nielsen, ‘In Search of Development’ for an analysis of Mamata Banerjee’s campaign to attract Muslim voters and the role of religious symbolism in it.
demonstrates that she is willing to fight for those who support her, even if it means risking personal injury or giving up influential ministerial berths.

Being an activist entails being ‘active’, and in order to sustain her image Mamata Banerjee engages in significant travel activities. Even when she served for decades as an elected MP she spent most of her time in her home state. This was the case during her two stints as Railway Minister, one of the most important ministries in the central government. She tours West Bengal frequently and intensively, and makes a point of visiting places of public grievance, particularly where the state or the administration could or should have intervened to alleviate local suffering. During my on-and-off stays in Singur from 2007 to 2009 I must have ‘encountered’ Mamata Banerjee on more than a handful of occasions. She often came to speak at local political rallies, and took great care to comfort local villagers like Tapasi Malik’s parents, who had suffered personal tragedies as a consequence of their support for the Singur movement. Mamata Banerjee, thus, ‘stands by’ her supporters in a very literal sense: she is physically present when her assistance is needed; she shares in their sorrow and is there personally to inspire and motivate. But sustaining such a personalized activist image over long periods of time is a challenge. Mamata Banerjee is the TMC’s only star campaigner, and she is constantly in demand. During the 2011 state elections campaign she kept up a gruelling campaign schedule and participated in upwards of seven rallies per day for several weeks in a row. She also undertook a number of political padayatras (march/journey by foot) in Kolkata, anywhere between five and ten kilometres in length, in the hot months of April and May to campaign for TMC’s candidates. Incidentally, this style of campaigning also sets her apart from the ideal bhadralok politician. About Mamata Banerjee’s many padayatras in 2011, which attracted massive numbers of people, Gupta writes,

71. Such ‘ministerial absenteeism’ may, however, not be all that unusual. Madsen quotes former Minister of Agriculture, another large ministry, Ajit Singh as saying: ‘I only went to office two hours a day when I was in Delhi’. See Madsen, op. cit., p. 83.
73. To reach voters across the state she has begun distributing audio and video CDs featuring herself throughout West Bengal, and has sometimes addressed political rallies in some of the remote districts via mobile phone (Banerjee 2011).
Images of her energetic campaign on foot made for a stark contrast with Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee’s jeep *yatra*, waving at people from the confines of his vehicle. The dramatic contrast between the two images seemed to function as a revealing metaphor for the widespread acceptance of Mamata Banerjee as a popular leader of the state, and Buddhadeb as representing a party thoroughly disconnected from the masses.75

Mamata Banerjee is not the only female political leader who has cultivated an activist image. Mayawati, during the early stages of her career, emerged as an energetic and dedicated Dalit activist, and within the Hindutva camp, Uma Bharti is well known for her loud and confrontational anti-Muslim rhetoric through which she seeks to mobilize Hindus to join the fight for ‘endangered’ Hindu values and ways of life. To facilitate the spread of the message, recordings of Uma Bharti’s speeches are distributed and played to rouse supporters and public opinion alike. She also manages to curiously combine her adherence to an essentially conservative Hindutva agenda with a style of progressive feminist activism, condemning the oppressive regime of Muslim personal laws, burqa, and patriarchy from both the point of view of cultural nationalism and feminism.76 It is also noteworthy that the activist model of leadership that Mamata embodies is in itself essentially not gendered. If anything, it could be construed as a distinctly male style of politics that is based on prolonged and public physical activity that requires stamina, strength and the willingness to endure pain and hardships. Yet, a closer examination of ‘activist’ female leaders reveals that there tends to be additional and very gender specific aspects to their leadership. Uma Bharti, for example, lives a solitary and simple life as a *sanyasin* or *sadhavi*, while Jayalalithaa is sometimes seen as a *veerangana*. Similarly, Mamata often talks about her emotional attachment to her family and home, and of how she, as a responsible elder sister, was entrusted with bringing up and caring for her many younger siblings after her father passed away at an early age. She also lived with her ageing mother until she passed away in late 2011. Evidently, even the fearless activist needs to possess distinct feminine qualities. The gendered dimensions of Mamata’s leadership become even more obvious if we look at popular perceptions and media portrayals of her. Here the image of Mamata as *didi*, the Bengali term for elder sister, or Durga figures prominently. The next section closely examines how these two culturally informed notions of gender and

femininity, rooted in kinship and religious cosmology, work to define Mamata Banerjee as a figure of political authority among her supporters.

MAMATA AS DURGA AND DIDI

Dipankar Gupta has recently warned against ‘raising the cultural banner’ when explaining female political leadership in India. According to Gupta, there is a tendency to explain not only Indian female political leadership, but in fact most things Indian in culturalist terms. This, Gupta argues, only further mystifies and obscures the object under investigation, and therefore, one should do away with such ‘mystical symbols’ as Durga and shakti when examining female leadership.77 While Gupta’s critique is not without merit, it is certainly exaggerated. Ideas about power, authority and influence are everywhere shaped by the cultural context in which leadership is played out and exercised. In the case of Mamata Banerjee both her supporters and the media rely on religious cosmology and kinship terminology to describe her – she is likened to the Hindu goddess Durga – or simply referred to as didi.78

‘Mamata’ in Bengali means motherly love, a kind of love that is both protective and selfless. But among most Bengalis, Mamata Banerjee is not spoken of as a mother but rather, as a didi. In the villages in Singur where I stayed, Mamata Banerjee was almost universally referred to as didi in everyday parlance – only rarely would villagers refer to her by her full name – and everybody knew who didi was. In Bengali kinship terminology certain specific expectations are attached to the role of didi. According to Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas, the egalitarian love that siblings have for each other is supposed to be subordinated to a hierarchical love based on the differences in their age.79 The parental love that unites elder siblings with their younger counterparts, and the filial love that unites younger siblings with their elders, are both modelled after the hierarchical love that parents and children have for each other. Hence, an elder sister or didi is expected to show parental love towards her younger siblings, and should act

78. Kinship terminology is widely used to refer to female leaders. Jayalalithaa is for instance described as both amma (mother) and anni (elder brother’s wife) because of her relation with MGR. Indira Gandhi was of course known simply as Bharat mata (mother India), while Sonia Gandhi has been portrayed as both a ‘genuine’ swadeshi beti (Indian daughter) or a videshi bahu (foreign daughter-in-law), depending on one’s political standpoint. Mayawati is usually spoken of as behenji (respected elder sister).
almost as a proxy mother. A proper *didi* will dress her younger siblings, feed them and wash their hands and faces, set up their toys and play with them. She will look after their well-being, support them, protect them and nourish them. It is not too far-fetched to argue that many of Mamata’s supporters direct similar expectations towards her, and that their consistent use of the term *didi* denotes a special kind of intimacy. They too expect her to stand by them in their hour of need and help them deal with the challenges they face. In Singur, I asked one elderly villager to explain the role that Mamata Banerjee had played in their movement. He replied,

*Didi* many times came and saved us from police beatings. She has also sent us rice and money because the poor here had nothing to eat. She also arranged money to bail us out of prison, and made sure we got medical treatment if we had been injured. She has helped us in every way so that we did not have to bear any expense ourselves. She has come to this very village four or five times, and has come to mass meetings here maybe fifteen to sixteen times. Here, three movement supporters have died, and every time, *didi* came to their house with comfort and money. She has come here more often than anybody else, and although many organizations are in this movement, it is always from her party that the maximum support comes.

This point of view was widely shared in Singur, and Mamata Banerjee is well aware that people generally look to her for support, assistance and help. She herself says, ‘They love me because they know I will protect them if they have a problem. They come to me directly when they have a problem and I do as much as I can to help them sort it out.’

Mamata Banerjee is generally very approachable. In Singur, Sukumar, a landless labourer, told me of how, to get her attention, he had one day jumped onto the bonnet of Mamata Banerjee’s car as it passed through Singur. Mamata Banerjee had rushed out to see if Sukumar was OK, but once she emerged from the car, Sukumar hastened to ask her why she had never visited his village where there was much suffering and hardship. In his village, Sukumar explained, there lived mostly landless labourers, who were now chronically under-employed because the acquisition of agricultural land had rendered their labour redundant. ‘We need your help!’ he had pleaded. Mamata Banerjee immediately ordered her driver to head to Sukumar’s village and even scolded some of the local TMC leaders in public because they had failed to tell her about the problems faced by Sukumar

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and his fellow villagers. In the other villages of Singur, people often casually talked about the time when they had spoken to Mamata Banerjee. Initially, I expected that having had a conversation with such a political VIP would be a source of some pride and status, but gradually I realized that because it is Mamata Banerjee’s style to engage directly and personally with villagers wherever she goes, a good many villagers had in fact had such conversations, however short.81 Some who had met her described these meetings as having happened ‘face-to-face’, while others would speak of how she ‘always met you at your level.’ Many of them expected that when Mamata Banerjee came to the village she came as a proper didi, not just to talk, but also to listen and help. Kinship terminology, in other words, not only describes the character and nature of female leaders, it also carries with it certain expectations of how female leaders should behave and act. Yet, while kinship terminology defines and circumscribes the political space available to female politicians, conformity to and the successful manipulation or ‘engineering’ of such gendered kinship stereotypes can add to the stature of a female leader. Mamata Banerjee evidently seeks, both in manners, dress, and behaviour, to appear as a supportive and helpful didi. And for this she is rewarded by her supporters with respect, gratitude and votes.

At the same time, Mamata Banerjee’s supporters and the media often draw a parallel between her and the goddess Durga, the most popular of all incarnations of the militant mother-goddess. Such use of religious symbolism to describe female leaders is not uncommon. During the Independence movement, Subhas Chandra Bose explicitly incited women to emulate Durga and come to the rescue of the struggling nation, while Mahatma Gandhi, in contrast, invoked another female deity Sita, the epitome of wifely virtue.82 Later, Indira Gandhi was likened to Durga by the media, and renowned painter M.F. Husain painted a portrait of her, astride a tiger, slaying demons.83 The VHP-affiliated women’s organization, Durga Bahini explicitly draws on the imagery and symbolism of Durga, and calls its members, who undergo both religious, ideological and martial arts training, as Durgas. Here, Durga is upheld as a role model for female activism, and Durga Bahini’s members are expected to be strong and capable defenders of the Hindu nation.84 A more extreme

81. In contrast, having Mamata Banerjee’s personal cell phone number was a source of some prestige and status.
case would be Jayalalithaa. Jayalalithaa started representing herself as a goddess during an election campaign in 1991. Alleging that she had been assaulted by members of a rival party, she referred to the incident presenting herself as Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata. Years later, during Christmas, she appeared as the Virgin Mary on huge cut-outs all over Chennai, and in 1998 she was portrayed as Kali, wearing a garland of skulls depicting M. Karunanidhi, the leader of the rival party.85 In her home state of Tamil Nadu there are temples where she is installed as the central deity.86

To understand why Mamata Banerjee is sometimes compared to Durga, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the goddess’ characteristics. Durga is one of the most famous avatars of Hinduism’s unmarried goddess and the embodiment of uncontrolled *shakti*, dangerous, ferocious and hot-tempered.87 The legend of Durga tells of how the clever demon Mahishashura after prolonged meditation had tricked the gods into granting him immortality so that neither gods nor men could kill him. The immortalized Mahishashura then turned against the gods and banished them from heaven. He conquered both the heaven and the earth, and terrorized mankind. To overcome the demon, the Gods united their divine powers and created the invincible goddess of war, Durga, who astride a lion and armed with the gods’ most powerful weapons rode into battle against Mahishashura, whose immortality was of little use since Durga was neither god nor man. Durga defeated Mahishashura’s armies, vanquished the demon and restored order in the world.

Throughout her political career Mamata Banerjee has, due to her physical and activist political style, displayed a comparable fearlessness and persistence in her ‘battle’ against her political opponents. Many of Mamata’s followers make a very explicit and straightforward comparison between Mamata and Durga, and as per Mukulika Banerjee, ‘For them, she is Durga, the warrior queen, fearless and tireless in her defence of the underdog.’88 In Singur, the comparison between Mamata Banerjee and Durga was not always made in such straightforward terms, but the comparison definitely made cultural sense. Thus, when I asked a villager in Singur if one could compare Mamata to Durga he immediately agreed: ‘You are right’, he said, ‘like Durga she fights alone and with ten arms!’ Seen from this villager’s perspective Mamata Banerjee is willing to fight important battles on her own if need

be, and she fights hard. During street corner meetings and election rallies in Singur in 2011, Mamata Banerjee was often talked of as Bengal’s Durga. In metaphorical terms, it is usually the CPI(M) which occupies the position of the demon in the political universe. Thus, Tapasi Malik’s father in Singur is known to have kept an altar with a photograph of Durga, whose face he has replaced with Mamata Banerjee’s. The demon’s face has also been replaced by that of the former Chief Minister, CPI(M)’s Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

Mamata Banerjee’s political mission clearly mirrors that of Durga’s, for she wants to banish the CPI(M) from West Bengal, and restore order and democracy out of chaos. As Stephanie Tawa Lama has noted, the invocation of the Goddess translates a political endeavour into an almost religious mission, and the ongoing struggle is simplified as one of good against evil. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, among the results of this ‘mission’ or ‘struggle’ so far has been a considerable increase in political violence in the state after her assumption of office.

While Durga is powerful she is also potentially dangerous and unpredictable, and a figure of fury and destruction. Critics maintain that Mamata Banerjee’s temper and emotionality make her equally dangerous and unpredictable. Even fellow party members are known, from time to time, to be targets of her fury since she is known to have absolutely no tolerance for internal dissent in her party, where she rules supreme, and where her authority is hardly ever challenged.

In spite of her visible ferocious traits, Durga is a multidimensional character. As Tanika Sarkar has observed,

There is . . . a curious mismatch between how she looks and what she does. Durga is supposedly a warrior Goddess who has killed a dreaded asura. Yet the icons depict a smiling, matronly beauty, a married woman visiting her natal home with her children at her side – the archetypical mother and daughter, fundamentally at odds with the dying demon at her feet and the weapons in her hands.

Durga is, in other words, not just a fearless warrior but also an obedient married daughter, who during the annual festival of Durga Puja in Bengal, where it is the most important of all Hindu festivals, returns to her parents’ house, where she is

89. I am grateful to Aparna Das for this information.
received with joy and celebration and treated as a beloved and dear relative. According to the iconography of Durga Puja, Durga is accompanied by her four children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik, and so Durga is transformed from a vengeful goddess to a dutiful and loving mother, whose ‘anger and rage’ is no longer vindictive but protective. Therefore, to worship Durga is to seek compassionate motherly love, and here the images of Mamata as Durga and didi merge. Both as Durga and didi, Mamata is expected to be the caring, compassionate protector and provider.

As with kinship terminology, the use of religious symbolism to conceptualize female leadership simultaneously restricts and enables female political agency. Hindu symbolism and cosmology is the main source of social norms concerning women, and is in many respects distinctly patriarchal. The application of religious language on women politicians, therefore, subordinates them and restricts their agency, while also mystifying their authority and power. On the other hand, the strategic use of Hindu cosmology may also serve to enable women’s participation in politics. Urban middle class families, for instance, may be more willing to let their women engage in politics if the political agenda they espouse is founded on traditional religious values. Moreover, the instrumentalization of Durga in a political context can empower women as it legitimizes them as leaders in their own right. As the case of Mamata Banerjee shows, she may be held up as an ideal for emulation, and be used to legitimate a very confrontational, physical, fiercely uncompromising and even vindictive style of politics.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have identified several aspects of Mamata Banerjee’s style of leadership in order to shed light on her emergence as a popular political leader. Important among these are her personal grassroots activist style, and her success in gaining popular recognition and cultural legitimacy as a didi and Durga. When viewed in isolation, none of the elements can be considered unique to her – several other female leaders have relied on comparable styles, registers and cultural imagery. Yet, while the elements may not be unique, the combination of styles that she embodies, coupled with the fact that she has managed to carve out a political career for herself at the highest levels of Indian democracy, without any significant proximity to important male leaders, justify the claim that Mamata Banerjee

has in important ways redefined the boundaries of female leadership. In fact, this combination and the socio-political context that facilitated its emergence, may be so unique as to render Mamata Banerjee a statistical outlier, casting considerable doubt whether ‘the Mamata model’ can be made more widely available for emulation by women with ambitions for political leadership. Indeed, to my knowledge Mamata Banerjee does not see herself as a role model for other female politicians, nor does she have any explicit feminist agenda. Yet she does, to borrow a phrase from Stephanie Tawa Lama, point to a bridge between femininity and power, a bridge whose use might be restricted to few individuals and specific circumstances, but a bridge nonetheless.95

Can the rise of Mamata Banerjee, then, be seen as part and parcel of the gradual vernacularization, *pace* Michelutti, of democracy in the context of West Bengal? The answer would be both a yes and a no. The central tenets of Michelutti’s argument concerning vernacularization hold that when the values and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social life domains, tied to particular times, people and locations, interesting and unpredictable things can happen.96 The very meaning of democracy is likely to change, as indeed are the local conceptual worlds and practices in which it is embedded. Therefore, what we should expect to see, as Ruud and Heierstad point out in the introduction to this volume, is a plurality of ‘vernacularizations’ inflected by the particularities of place, identity and history.97 In a very visible sense, Mamata Banerjee has ‘pluralized’ political leadership in West Bengal by bringing ‘the vernacular’ into the halls of power, in terms of dress, manners, language, as well as the imagery, symbolism and idioms of kinship and popular religion that surrounds her persona. She has dented regional *bhadralok* elite hegemony and, as a self-declared populist standing neither on the left nor on the right, but on ‘the side of the people’,98 has carved out a space for new forms of populist leadership and politics in a state that has long been considered a bastion of the democratic centralism of the organized parliamentary left. What might complicate such a reading, however, may be the fact that the dominant *bhadralok* leftist political culture she has now dented, may of course be seen as no less ‘vernacular’. If anything, it can be considered the product of precisely the kind of process that Michelutti describes, in this case, the prolonged encounter between colonial modernity (and its discontents) and particular segments of Bengali society.

97. See also Ruud, op. cit., p. 52.
Yet while democracy within West Bengal does appear to have become more differentiated and ‘vernacular’ in new ways, it also appears to have become more like what we often find (or found not too long ago) in other large states in north India. Appeals to caste and community are now made more explicitly in political arenas; the honour and reputation of the supreme party leader appears as closely tied to the honour and reputation of her constituency, and is fiercely defended; a fairly high level of political violence and goondaism is the order of the day; and awarding one’s own through patronage while punishing one’s adversaries is the modus operandi of governance. In this sense, vernacularization may produce plurality in the particular, but conformity in the aggregate.

REFERENCES

———, ‘Mamata’s Khomota’, Seminar, no. 480, 1999b.


