

## PRINT MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN 2009 INDIAN ELECTIONS

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the issue of print media representation of women electoral candidates in the 2009 general elections. A woman has a dual role in a democracy both as a voter, and as a candidate. Male dominance in the formal political sphere is universal. The many barriers to political participation that women face exist at different levels, and they arise from socio-cultural values and practices that are firmly entrenched in systems and structures of society. The family still regards its female members as weak and in need of protection. It is a popular perception that politics is a 'dirty game' not meant for women. In addition to the social and societal prejudice, women in electoral politics have to face the prejudice of one of the most powerful weapons of the political war i. e. the media. What do the Indian media have to say about the woman power? Are they misrepresented, marginalised and stereotyped? Or has there been a change? The objective of the study is to find out the answer to these questions through a study of coverage of women candidates in a broadsheet and a tabloid newspaper by looking at the difference in the perspectives and the coverage of women as compared to men.*

***Keywords:** Elections, politics, woman politician, media, newspaper coverage, representation.*

### **Introduction**

“...Thus a woman communist standing for a seat in Bengal was not sure whether to wear crumpled saris, which would certify her identity with the poor, or wash and iron them, to better appeal to the middle class audience.”

Says Ramchandra Guha in his book ‘India after Gandhi’, commenting about the first general election held in independent India in the year 1952. This comment perhaps, is indicative of how Indians and particularly the mass media perceive the female political candidate.

Despite striking advances over the last century in women’s social and political rights, and in attitudes about women in politics, press coverage of women candidates is not much better today. When we talk about woman political candidates, there is a sharp difference in the way they are portrayed in the media. Whereas a man is defined by his

ideology or the lack of it and the work done by him during his tenure, a woman, more often than not is defined by the way she dresses and looks, and sometimes by the company she keeps. In case of a man, his family background and how he fulfils his duty towards his family becomes secondary whereas in case of a woman it is of primary importance and she is held responsible for the action of her children and husband.

Just like there are 'women authors', 'women artists' and 'women filmmakers', there are 'women politicians'. This is a subtle way to discriminate against the second sex, to marginalise women, to alienate them from the mainstream thus making them the 'other' or a 'political outsider'.

“A man enters public life and not the slightest attention is paid to the fact that he is a man. A woman runs for office and there is more interest in the fact that she is a woman than in her qualifications for the job she seeks... The woman label follows her around like a faithful dog...she is a woman candidate, not merely a candidate as a man is. If elected she becomes the woman this or that, not simply the title. Where the masculinity of her confreres is taken for granted, her femininity always causes mild surprise and is good for an old fashioned debate on whether women generally are not miscast when assuming the roles which have heretofore been reserved for the other sex”

Maria Braden, 1996.

It is not that the coverage of women politicians is blatantly sexist or that the media always deliberately portrays and perpetuates typical stereotypes pertaining to women. It is difficult for media persons, both males and females to think against the stereotypes that have been ingrained for centuries. Also it becomes easy for the masses to understand the news better if it is moulded according to stereotypes. This bias is sometimes so understated that it becomes very hard to pin down and thus eradicate.

It is sometimes said that any publicity is better than no publicity. In today's world of media debates, SMS polls and 'trial by media,' zero media coverage might mean the end of political career of the candidate. In this scenario, the question that one needs to ask is whether biased publicity is better than no publicity or total omission. The coverage of US elections showed us that even though the U.S. is ready for an African American president, it is not yet ready for a woman president. Sarah Palin was made a laughing stock and a voyeur's delight and Hilary Clinton, once she was out of the Presidential race was totally ignored.

The world's largest democracy viz. India has concluded its fifteenth Lok Sabha elections. What do the Indian media have to say about woman power? Did the media just focus on their saris and shoes? Were they misrepresented, marginalised and stereotyped as always? Or has there been a paradigm shift? My objective is to find out the answer to these questions and look at the differences in the perspectives and the coverage of women as compared to men. I hope it will give an insight into whether adequate coverage in the media helps to win elections or not.

## **Media and politics**

“The daily persuasion of journalists reflect and become our own.” Michael Schudson, Sociologist, 'Discovering the news',

The attitudes of voters are moulded by the media 'gatekeepers' and the media 'agenda setters,' who not only decide on what and who to talk about but also how to talk about them. There are many reasons why media plays a very important role in the political process.

- Politics and political process is fairly complex. The common man is not very conversant with the nitty-gritty of the political process nor does s/he have the time to study about it. A simple way to learn about politics is through the media.
- Most voters do not devote a lot of time to gather information about candidates or issues. They combine learning and information from past experiences, daily life, the media and political campaigns. Here media becomes the primary tool which shapes and moulds public opinion.

- In addition, it is impossible for a political candidate to meet each and every person of the constituency because of distance and sheer numbers. Thus the candidate depends on the media to inform and educate the public about them. In this scenario the media does not mirror the society but moulds it.

With interpretative reporting dominating today's newspapers, the views of the media persons have become very important. The reporter is no longer an objective observer but an active player in the news story. The questions they ask, the way the news report is edited, the body language of the reporter, the time allotted to each candidate, the angle and caption of photographs, the headlines – everything builds up a positive or negative image of a particular candidate as desired by the media.

### **Women in Indian political scenario**

Indian democracy is a representative democracy where politically relevant groups are defined by gender, ethnicity, region, socioeconomic status, age, or education. Inclusiveness and representation of each group is very important for the functioning in order to ensure that each group has a voice in the policymaking process. Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women in government and administration facilitates the articulation of different perspectives on political issues, where elected representatives are not just 'standing as' women but also 'acting for' women as a group (Phillips, 1995, 1998; Mansbridge, 1999).

### **History or 'herstory'?**

'History is made every day; her story struggles to reach the back page.': Karen Ross

The Indian Constitution which came into force in 1950 incorporated the principle of equality for all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, or sex, twenty five years before the World Conference in Mexico, and twenty-nine years before the UN General Assembly's Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979. According to Jana Everett, the campaign of the Indian women's movement for political representation had two phases: in the first phase (1917-1928) the issue was female enfranchisement and eligibility for the legislature; in the second phase (1928-1937) it was liberalisation of the terms of enfranchisement and increasing female representation in the legislatures. (Everett, 1981).

### **The Political Barriers**

Male dominance in the formal political systems is universal, but the degree of dominance varies from country to country. The many barriers to political participation that women face exist at different levels, both formal and informal.

By and large, in the entire Indian subcontinent, the social structure still regards its female members as weak and in need of protection throughout their lives. It is a popular perception that politics is a 'dirty game' not meant for women. Illiteracy and lack of access to information about political processes like - how and where to vote, further limits women's participation.

Sometimes when women raise their voices, challenge the authority of men, or devote time and resources for political activism, they often risk provoking the violent anger of male relatives, neighbours and community leaders. In general the attitude is to devalue women's remunerated work, and promote her role as wife and mother.

In spite of all these barriers women who dare to venture into the uncharted territory of politics face discrimination by their male colleagues, voters, establishment, administration, media and family and neighbours. They are subjected to vigorous gate keeping process by the party members before they can contest. In a significant number of cases, women candidates complained that they were fielded in losing constituencies where the party was in a weak position and male candidates were reluctant to contest.

Diane Kincaid observed that, between 1920 and 1970, American women legislators assumed political roles after the deaths of their husbands. The same is true with women leaders of South Asia. A woman leader derives her legitimacy for leadership from being a close relative of a dead leader, as a wife or a daughter. This phenomenon of catapulting women as leaders from 'dynastic' families, and offering limited options to the women for contesting elections was termed as 'over-his-dead-body' syndrome.

After crossing all these hurdles, when women do become a part of the formal political process as members of elite political groups, they are usually assigned to soft portfolios 'appropriate' for women's concerns.

Women activists believe that in a male-dominated scenario adequate political representation will equip women with power to change and redefine the political agenda and articulate women's interests.

### **Women politicians and media**

"It is surprisingly difficult to get it right in the eyes of the media... Women are never the right age. We're too young, we're too old. We're too thin, we're too fat. We wear too much make up, we don't wear enough. We're too flashy in our dress, we don't take enough care. There isn't a thing we can do that's right." Dawn Primarolo Labour MP, UK.

Today's media is confused about the right way to portray women. Traditionally women were a part of the 'private sphere.' They were in charge of 'hearth and home' and their primary function was to reproduce and nurture. With the advent of feminism, the traditional woman expanded her horizons into the 'public sphere.' The media continued to portray her in her traditional spheres but at the same time could not ignore her new identity. They tried to amalgamate this dual persona of the modern woman and created a new superwoman who single-handedly takes care of both the private and public spheres.

There is a saying in Bengali which roughly translates as 'one who cooks also braids her hair'. It means a woman should be able to fulfil her role as a nurturer who cooks and feeds her family and at the same time look presentable and well groomed. Thus the physical aspect of a woman is never overlooked. It also means that whatever new roles and responsibilities she takes on, she cannot disregard her primary role. She may be the supreme power in the political arena, doing a good job of running the country but she has to look well groomed and be responsible and fulfil her role as a mother and wife. Any deviation from these roles and she is labelled as unladylike, a vamp, or a bimbo. So she must not only focus on the election mandate while addressing a public meeting but also on what she will wear – a crumpled sari or an ironed one.

### **The story so far**

'If women leaders are described in a common way in the news despite these differences, this suggests that the media are viewing women through a sex stereotyped lens.' Pippa Norris, 1997

Claims have been made that woman politicians are simply less often referred to in the media. The U.S. media monitoring group, "Women, Men and Media" reported that in 1994-1995 female sources were likely to be ignored by TV correspondents and front page references to and photographs of women declined. This was described as the "symbolic annihilation of women".

The difficulties encountered by women In India have been listed in numerous investigations and studies. According to Buch, 2000; Kumari and Kidwai, 1998, these obstacles are due to strong patriarchal structures of the society and the uniqueness of how democracy works in India, where tradition, caste and community are paramount. There are clearly differentiated expectations in the media and the wider community about the interests and competencies of

male and female candidates, states Khan (1994). Khan also found that women in Senate races received less coverage and that this was true in both marginal and secure seats.

Similarly, Pippa Norris (1997) confirmed that women leaders were less visible in the news although the difference in the amount of coverage compared to what their male counterparts received was not that great. Norris also found that, women leaders were covered in fewer stories going by the measurement of daily stories per leader.

In New Zealand a research by Motion (1996) found that successful women politicians were often portrayed as lacking feminine characteristics and resembling their male colleagues. A series of interviews with British MPs stated that most of the women believed that their outward appearance was the subject of considerably more attention than it was for their male colleagues. The emphasis is often on their sexual appeal – or lack of it. (Mohammadi & Ross, 1996).

In her study examining the image(s) of women in the Israeli Parliament, Dalia Liran-Alper (1994) found that women got less representation; they were characterized as emotional and aggressive; the emphasis was on irrelevant issues like external appearance and family status, feminine aspects rather than professional success, and social and welfare issues. She explains the nature of media coverage through the paradigm(s) of “symbolic annihilation,” i.e., “absence of women,” “trivialisation” or “condemnation” and secondly through the dichotomy of “public man and private woman” that “defines man as a being who acts and earns his right to exist publicly whereas a woman is judged, and defines herself, in terms of her private roles”.

Gertrude J. Robinson and Armande Saint-Jean (n.d.) in their study on the media portrayal of Canadian women politicians they identify different kinds of narrative patterns over a period of 30 years. The ‘traditional’ narrative (before the year 1970) primarily highlighted their biological and family relationships (such as wife/widow or appendages of powerful husbands) and overlooked their training and professional qualifications.

A study conducted by Carroll and Schreiber (1997) on media coverage of women in the U.S. Congress concluded, that newspapers portrayed women in Congress “as agents of change who are making a difference despite having to struggle against sexism and to juggle family lives and careers”.

## **Methodology**

The previous Lok Sabha elections are significant, since during the year 2009, the highest numbers (59) of women candidates were elected. To understand the approach of the Indian press towards women politicians in India, I chose two newspapers, ‘The Times of India,’ Bangalore edition and ‘The Bangalore Mirror,’ as samples. The dates were, from March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, the date of announcement of election until 21<sup>st</sup> May, a little after the announcement of results and preliminary formation of government. I have chosen top five men and women politicians after taking a stock of the news reports published about them within the time period. I have looked into the number of articles published about men as compared to women. I have also looked at certain representative articles about some important woman politicians published during this time period and analysed how they are presented in the press.

### ***Powerful women in 2009 Lok Sabha elections***

Women leaders have always had a role in the rough and tumble of Indian politics, from Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant in the independence struggle to Indira Gandhi, the second woman in the world to become prime minister. Following are some women who have played key roles in the recently concluded election.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, once voted the world’s sixth most powerful woman by Forbes, is arguably the most powerful political leader in the country. She is credited with energizing the party and leading it to a surprising victory in the 2004 election. In 2009 she has won again from Raebareilly, UP.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, the daughter of Sonia and Rajiv Gandhi is also one of the important players. Though not a candidate, she is the darling of the media and masses.

Mayawati is a dalit leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party and chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. She enjoyed a massive following among lower caste Hindus, tribes and other backward classes.

J. Jayalalithaa is a former film star, convent school-educated high-caste Hindu and leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu.

Mamata Banerjee, is the leader of Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. She has won from Kolkata Dakshin (South) Constituency.

In addition, I have also considered Mallika Sarabhai, a new entrant into the political arena. Her stature as a renowned danseuse and cultural activist is well known. She was contesting against the political heavyweight Mr. L. K. Advani. It was interesting to note how the media pitched them against each other.

**Less coverage, less substance**

Table 1. Politicians mentioned in the Times of India

Women	No of mentions	Men	No of mentions
Sonia Gandhi	222	Manmohan Singh	269
Mayawati	164	L.K.Advani	253
Mamata Banerjee	47	Rahul Gandhi	198
Priyanka Gandhi	39	Narendra Modi	125
J.Jayalalitha	15	Lalu Prasad	124
Total	487 (33%)	Total	969 (67%)

Table 2. Politicians mentioned in the Bangalore Mirror

Women	No of mentions	Men	No of mentions
Sonia Gandhi	93	Manmohan Singh	115
Mayawati	54	L.K.Advani	110
Priyanka Gandhi	23	Rahul Gandhi	85
Mamata Banerjee	15	Narendra Modi	52
J.Jayalalitha	15	Lalu Prasad	41
Total	200 (33%)	Total	403 (67%)

Women candidates consistently received less press coverage than equivalent men running in the same race. In total women candidates are mentioned half as much as their male counterparts in both the newspapers. Surprisingly the percentage ratio of male female coverage remains consistent in both the papers.

Even in case of photographic coverage the percentage ratio maintained here would show slightly more coverage to women. Thus we see that an overall consistency is maintained both in the coverage of candidates mentioned in articles as well as coverage in pictures and caricatures.

Table 3. Pictures of Politicians in the Times of India

Women	Pictures & caricatures	Men	Pictures & caricatures
Sonia Gandhi	28	Manmohan Singh	19
Mayawati	13	Rahul Gnadhi	25
Priyanka Gandhi	8	L.K. Advani	21
Mamata Banerjee	6	Narendra Modi	16
J. Jayalalitha	2	Lalu Prasad	15
Total	55 (36%)	Total	96 (64%)

It is evident that the front page is the most important section of the newspaper. But this being election time, a separate section called 'Dance of Democracy' was created in order to give news about elections. Naturally most of the election news was found in this section. The discrepancy between coverage of men and women is observed in all the sections of the newspaper. Everywhere be it front page, nation page or editorial page the space given to men is much more than the space occupied by women. The tabloid newspaper is also no different the consistency in discrimination is visible here as well. This supports the theory of 'partial annihilation' of women. This is discrimination through omission or reduced visibility.

Table 4. Coverage of men and women under different sections

The Times of India	Men	Women	Bangalore Mirror	Men	Women
All that matters	27	21	Bangalore Talking	12	5
Bangalore Times	24	12	Business	5	
Dance of Democracy	367	185	City	25	16
Editorial & letters	86	37	Nation	134	79
Front page	171	90	Views	61	21
Lead India	17	2	Front page	6	3
Special Report	16	4	Inside outside	18	9
International page		2	State	1	1
Open Space	2	1	Poli Tics	8	3
Times Business	8	2	Vote Maadi	93	57
Times City	14	9	Etc.	2	1
Times Global	7		World	2	1
Times Life	9	3	Your connect	7	1
Times Nation	206	104	The Sunday read	3	1
Times Region	2	1	South masala	1	1
Times Sport	5	1			
Others	8	13	Others	25	1
Total	969	487	Total	403	200

In addition to the above quantitative analysis a qualitative preliminary discourse analysis of select few articles are done in order to reveal the ideological construction of gender relations between men and women. A combination of discourse methodology of van Dijk, Bell and Fairclough is used for this purpose.

Though elusive and difficult to define, ideologies are socially shared and used by groups and their members and consist of social functions, cognitive structures and discursive expression and reproduction (van Dijk, 1997)

### **The politician wears Prada: Portrayal of women candidates**

With women politicians, objectification is almost always the rule. Even women in positions of considerable power, such as previous prime ministers like Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher, were put in a frame as 'women' leaders. More often than not media coverage suggested that there was very little that was traditionally feminine about these women and nothing very similar about them apart from their shared gender.

### **Doting on appearance**

While covering women candidates there is a clear demarcation between 'us' and the 'other'. 'Our' in this case represents patriarchy which remains the dominant ideology of media and 'their' represents the marginalised feminine. Not only does the press skimp on important issue coverage, it is also more likely to include irrelevant information. Coverage of how women candidates look or what they wear -- while ignoring such observations about men candidates.

Priyanka Gandhi, or '*the People's Princess*' is the darling of media but they cannot look beyond her physical appearance,

“...she has personal qualities that attract media attention, apart from her looks and resemblance to Indira Gandhi...The Congress party is seen to have realized the public response Priyanka evoked as she appeared in Rae Bareilly and Amethi wearing Indira Gandhi's saris.”

Another article in The Times of India, March 6,

“That seems a long way off from the girl who wore “Janpath ke kapde”, remembers Kamal Aggarwal, a former Hindi professor from Delhi's Jesus and Mary College, where Priyanka studied in the early 1990s.”

Priyanka Gandhi is portrayed in reflected glory of her illustrious grandmother both in terms of her looks and borrowed attire.

Talking about Sonia Gandhi's Campaign, Sushil Rao, TOI, says,

'From Sonia Gandhi to local politicians, everyone's shaking a leg...last week when she kick started her campaign... she decided to dance. Linking her arms with local tribals, Sonia matched their steps even as an exuberant Union minister for women and child development Renuka Chowdhury tried to physically pull CM Y S Rajasekhara Reddy into the celebration...Roja, who sizzled on screen in her earlier avatar as a filmstar, did some of her own hip shaking at a public meeting a week ago. The other day, Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) leader and former minister Nayani Narasimha Reddy (of not insignificant girth) and Warangal MP Ravindra Naik were unstoppable when they danced at a party meet.'

The whole picture is of a group of politicians dancing, celebrating and making merry thereby watering down the seriousness of the situation. There is a clever play and pun of words in '*kick starting the campaign*' and '*shaking a*



*leg*'. The mention of the former film star Roja is lewd and downright derogatory with use of words like '*sizzling on screen*' and '*hip shaking*'. There is also unflattering mention of the '*girth*' of Nayani Narasimha Reddy. Men, however are portrayed as reluctant participants, forced by women, (*Renuka Chowdhury tried to physically pull CM Y S Rajasekhara Reddy*) to partake in this spectacle of politics.

Reporting about Sonia Gandhi's campaign in Karnataka, N D Shiva Kumar, reported on 24<sup>th</sup> March,

"Sonia spoke in Hindi, and her speech went untranslated. In the event, the people had a glimpse of '*gora amma*' (fair mother) — a hark back to the days when similar crowds would spontaneously turn up to see "*Indira amma*".

The press never stops mentioning the physicality of women, be it their considerable girth or their fair complexion. Like Priyanka Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi is also projected in the reflected glory of her illustrious mother in law.

Jug Suraiya in his article titled 'Behenji and Bane-ji' on 1<sup>st</sup> April, is openly critical about both Mayawati and Jayalalitha,

"As her nickname suggests, is Mayawati the archetypal 'Behenji', crass and vulgar in her manner of dress and general social department? With her 350-kg birthday cakes and diamond jewellery, Mayawati is obviously not a believer in the efficacy of social and sartorial understatement. But then neither is Jayalalitha, another would-be PM, who is renowned for her larger-than-life cut-outs and a fanatical following which includes supporters who have had her image tattooed on the insides of their eyelids so that they may be able to gaze upon their revered Puratchi Thalaivi even when their eyes are shut. Yet Amma does not invite the same scorn and loathing that Behenji does."

'With her over-the-top style and her unabashed ambition to become prime minister — indeed, her party manifesto has that as its single-point agenda — Mayawati offends our sense of sanctimoniousness. Instead of mouthing platitudes about aam aadmi and the downtrodden, she has the honesty to be upfront about what she is: a Dalit, and a doubly disadvantaged woman at that, who is hungry for power to reverse the tide of thousands of years of oppression. Mayawati represents revenge against our righteousness, our hypocritical belief in our moral superiority. Maybe that's why Behenji is our real Bane-ji.'

An upper class columnist from an elite newspaper takes on two women from very different backgrounds pitching them against each other. There is a conscious effort to pitch 'us', the elite, upper caste, city bred, convent educated, upper middle class and understated sophisticate against 'them', the hoi polloi, *dalit*, small town, vernacular government school educated, lower middle class, '*crass and vulgar*' who invite '*scorn and loathing*'.

One notices a very clear divide between the ingroup designator 'our' where we share a '*sense of sanctimoniousness, righteousness*' and a '*hypocritical belief in our moral superiority*.' Though the lexicology and the explicit meaning in the second paragraph is outwardly positive like '*honesty*' and '*upfront*' the implicit meaning is overtly negative. She clearly belongs to the 'outgroup'. She is honest about her '*hunger for power*' and '*upfront*' about wanting to take '*revenge*'. The last line is a pun where her sisterhood (*behenji*) may cause misery or death (*bane-ji*).

On April 19<sup>th</sup> in an article titled, 'Advani vs Natrani,' Pankaj Upadhyaya talks about the battle between L.K. Advani, the Prime Ministerial hopeful, and renowned dancer and actress Mallika Sarabhai. The term '*natrani*' is a derogatory reference, which may mean a dancing queen or drama queen. In this case it is also a pun about the organisation run by the Sarabhai mother and daughter duo. This article reeks of gender bias:

"You have pitted in a contest here a serial yatri who rebelled against his Parivar and lived to tell the tale; and a serial rebel whose biggest strength is her rebellious streak and her illustrious parivar. Ladies, gentlemen, welcome to what is possibly the most entertaining contest in this Lok Sabha election — prime ministerial aspirant Lal Krishna Advani Vs dancing queen Mallika Sarabhai.

Oops, sorry! There is a third candidate in the fray too — and he is a far more serious threat to Advani than Mallika. Why? Because he is a Patel, Suresh Patel, the Congress candidate from Gandhinagar. Patels in Gujarat are known to vote enbloc and swing elections.

Well, that is where Mallika nudges out Patel to bag top billing in this blockbuster. Tough luck, Sureshbhai. We know you cannot sport a new, giant bindi everyday. Ear-rings are out too. You will not colour coordinate your car with the clothes. And dancing? For Christ's sake! But Mallika is dancing. She is also singing. And so are her supporters, draped in the campaign colours — white, red and purple. They are all very good at it, having performed street plays and stage shows for years with Mallika. It all makes for pretty pictures, great copy and colourful visuals for television audiences.”

The mention of Advani as a *'serial yatri who rebelled against his Parivar and lived to tell the tale'* implies courage and survival against all odds whereas labelling of Mallika as *'a serial rebel whose biggest strength is her rebellious streak and her illustrious parivar.'* Portrays her as defiant and basking in the reflected glory of her family. Advani is mentioned as *'Prime Ministerial aspirant'*, a positive nomenclature against Ms. Sarabhai's *'dancing queen'*. Even the lesser known Suresh Patel is portrayed as a more serious candidate by virtue of his caste. The mention of *'giant bindis', 'earrings', 'colour coordinated clothes, cars and co-workers'* is a classic example of outgroup polarisation where the *'other'* appears as insignificant entity making a show biz out of the serious business of politics.

In another article titled *'Charming Deekri'* about Mallika Sarabhai, we don't have to look too hard to find gender bias and trivialisation of women.

*'The name — Sarabhai — works too. Her father Vikram Sarabhai, who gave India its first pace programme, is a revered figure in Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar. Her mom, Mrinalini, is a famous dancer. Some of the biggest institutions here were propped up and nurtured by the family, the latest is Natrani, a centre for performing arts in Ahmedabad. And then there is Mallika, the charmer. Her easy, affable style clicks instantly with her audiences. And she knows when to be a Gujarati deekri (daughter); when to switch to Mallika Sarabhai, a postgraduate from IIMA; and when to break into a dance. When we caught up with her in Vastrapur in western Ahmedabad (part of Gandhinagar constituency) on Wednesday evening, she was holding forth in chaste Gujarati on how common people need a voice. The small living room of this middle class house was packed with people and they all nodded in agreement when Mallika spoke. When she emerged from the house and saw a few journalists waiting for her, she was a different Mallika. "Hi, guys," she said waving her hand. The next second, she had crossed the road and plunged into a group of women waiting for her. As she held their hands and laughed loudly, throwing her head back gaily, the group could have been mistaken for her arts circle friends. But then, one has to ask this question — is any of this bothering Advani or his poll managers?'*

Firstly there is the framing of her identity as a *daughter* of illustrious parents, and then her portrayal as a *'charmer'* which actually stands for *'chameleon'* who changes swiftly from a *'Gujarati deekri (daughter)'* speaking in chaste Gujarati with a group of common middle class people, to *'a postgraduate from IIMA'* greeting journalists with *'hi guys'* when the situation demands. The report ends with the rhetorical question – *'is any of this bothering Advani or his poll managers?'* implying whatever she does the winner will always be the man.

### **Gender specific words**

In addition women were identified by the use of gender specific words. References to her family and children cropped up more than once. Their private lives are in constant scrutiny. Women are stereotyped as soft and

crumbling under pressure. They are also known as unsure decision makers, who are not able to take charge and heavily dependant on men. The renowned columnist Shobha De on 3<sup>rd</sup> may asks,

‘Why did Sonia push Rahul, the reluctant debutant into the fray, when Priyanka ought to have been the obvious choice? Maa ki mamtaa? A mother’s blind spot for the beta? It may remain one of those annoying mysteries.’ In another article she writes, ‘Mummy can persuade the reluctant debutant to join the cabinet (portfolio of his choice), take over from her and run the party, or simply wait it out till Manmohan Singh gracefully moves over (health reasons cannot be argued against, after all) and hands over the gaddi to the heir.’

Sonia Gandhi is a merely a mother who is waiting for her son to come of age politically, till then she is simply a caretaker of the ‘*gaddi to the heir*’. The portrayal of Sonia Gandhi as typically Indian mother doting on her son ignoring the more deserving daughter is an implication of pitching one woman against another. She is emotional, blind and biased.

Saira Kurup, (10<sup>th</sup> May) writes,

“For years, she was seen as inheritor of the family crown. But Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has made it known that she would rather make cupcakes for her children than make political hay of her lineage....She’s extremely articulate and very measured for her age. She holds a lot of potential for the Congress in her own right and not just as Rajiv Gandhi’s daughter...She’s the archetypal image of one playing a supporting role and she does it impeccably. Her two props include, first, confining herself to the two constituencies in UP and second, when she’s there, harking back to the past, drawing upon the image of Indira Gandhi and providing a link to the previous generation. Her naughty reference to her grandmom’s nose must have brought an instant smile of recognition to several faces.”

The press, in a very calculated way propagates the image of a sacrificing woman though she is much more deserving. The clever juxtaposition of positive words like ‘*extremely articulate, very measured, lot of potential*’ with typical feminine traits like ‘*making cupcakes for her children*’ and ‘*archetypal image of one playing a supporting role*’ continues to hold in higher esteem, the role of a female as a supporter rather than a player. In addition the press never forgets to mention her lineage and background.

In a report on April, 23, it was stated that, addressing a BJP rally in Bansaon, Tripathi called Mayawati and Mulayam a pair of “*nagin and naag*” (a male and a female cobra). In another article on 10<sup>th</sup> May Mayawati is mentioned unflatteringly,

“In a bid to widen her acceptability, UP CM and BSP supremo Mayawati has transformed herself from ‘*dalit ki beti*’ to ‘*sarvsamaj ki behan*’. While campaigning in the Muslim-dominated Rohilkhand region on Saturday, Mayawati aggressively wooed the minority community by projecting herself a perfect candidate to lead the nation.”

In an attempt to gain acceptance the female candidate moulds herself according to the demands of the patriarchal society building up a relationship with them, shifting her affiliation from the subaltern ‘*other*’ ‘*dalit ki beti*’ (daughter of the downtrodden) to the universally acceptable ‘*sarvsamaj ki behan*’ (sister of the society). As a female candidate her efforts to persuade the voters is seen as ‘*aggressively wooing*’ the Muslim minorities. The combination of the two lexically opposing words implies an undesirable feminine trait.

### **Didi, Amma or Behanji!**

Despite the prevailing patriarchy most of the countries of Indian subcontinent treat women with some respect. This is obvious in the effort of the media to build up a relationship with them and addressing them as *elder sister* (Didi for Mamata Banerjee); mother or daughter (amma for Jayalalitha) and sister (Behanji for Mayawati). Sonia Gandhi

was generally not given the status of a relative (though she was sometimes called ‘Gora Amma’, the fair mother) probably because she still remains a foreigner at the grassroot level. Her daughter Priyanka on the other hand was called the people’s princess by the media or Gudiya (doll) by Narendra Modi. ‘If Priyanka objects to being called old, I will call her ‘gudiya’ and Congress, Gudia Party’ he said. Though a lot of newsprint was wasted on this controversy, it is not really derogatory.

To aptly sum up, I quote this article from a rival newspaper which belongs to a different group but reflects more or less the same sentiments.

“The outcome of this endgame is linked to women... The struggle for survival in a world of powerful men has taught them the fine art of using a whimsical temper as a weapon. But the presence of women politicians at the top does not imply that women have emerged as a political constituency.”

Yogendra Yadav, The Hindu, front page, Wednesday, May 13, 2009

### **A final thought**

‘Women and power are like water and oil – they simply do not mix.’

Julia Baird

The general conclusions that can be drawn from the above study are that women receive less representation in media; the coverage associates them with domestic/private concerns (i.e., family and children) even when they are active in the public sphere, thereby indicating what their primary concerns should be; women get to be identified with social, welfare and women’s issues an extension of — their domestic roles; the media are more concerned with women’s personal characteristics, traits, feminine aspects etc.

It is important to talk about the way in which media portrays women politicians because the way a public figure is projected in the media denotes how the public perceives them. If the spotlight of media is harsh, discriminatory, stereotyped and unflattering then it will deter more and more able women from venturing into politics for the fear of unfavourable media gaze. Ultimately democracy will suffer from a lopsided and male centric point of view.

One concern is that women may be less likely to run if they feel their appearance will become the subject of public dialogue. And voters may conclude that candidates with more physical descriptions should not be taken seriously.

Also if the public has to make informed choices in a democracy then it becomes the duty of the media to go beyond the external physical appearance, attire and family history of the candidate and focus on issues, ideologies and performance. All this matters because the media images of women add to the perception that many already hold that women are outsiders in politics. Parliament is not seen as their natural home, they are intruders and outsiders. For female candidates aspiring to run for elected office, a media strategy plan that compensates for bias is essential.

Firstly, to overcome the press’s tendency to ignore their policy positions, women should run campaigns that emphasize issues. Secondly, candidates should project an image of rationality and minimize emotional expressions to overcome the press’s heightened attention to this. Thirdly, women candidates and their supporters should monitor the media and be vocal against coverage that is sexist, unfair or biased. And finally, women should frame their candidacies as normal, natural and common in order to overcome the mainstream press’s tendency to portray them as unusual.

We should not tolerate press bias just because women can overcome it. India prides itself on being a free and equal society in the world. But for that to be true, people must have equal access to power. Only then can we strive to advance towards a stronger and gender balanced democracy.

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