

Gender and Political Parties in India: Pathways to Women's Political Participation?

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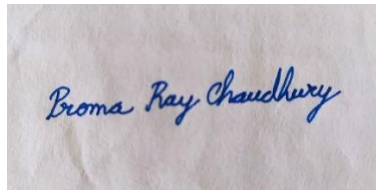
Thesis submitted for the Award of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Law and Government Dublin City University

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January 2022

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Signed:

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Date: 22/10/2021

Acknowledgements

Writing a doctoral dissertation while located far away from the university space amidst the circumstantial challenges of a raging pandemic is a singularly unforgettable experience. I am most grateful to my supervisors, Prof Eileen Connolly and Dr Kenneth McDonagh at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University (DCU), for their consistent support throughout the PhD programme. Their insightful feedback and encouragement facilitated the conduct of research. I am indebted to the EU Marie Skłodowska Curie Global India ETN (European Training Network) fellowship (Grant No.- 722446) for the generous financial and research support throughout the PhD. While the fellowship provided a great degree of material security in form of funding for academic conferences, workshops, research visits, and fieldwork trips, it simultaneously offered a unique opportunity to participate in a promising network of early career scholars and established academics based in different universities as well as development practitioners in Europe and India. I am also very grateful to the School of Law and Government, DCU, for the wonderfully supportive research environment sustained in the department and also for the great opportunity to develop my pedagogical skills by lecturing undergraduate students. I am especially grateful to Dr Diarmuid Torney, Dr Erika Biagini, and Dr Maura Conway for their helpful suggestions for my research.

I am extremely grateful to Prof Tania Verge (UPF Barcelona) for introducing me to the approach of feminist institutionalism; to Prof Emmy Eklundh (Cardiff), Prof Mark Devenney (Brighton), and Prof David Howarth (Essex) for their helpful feedback on my research and discussions on Discourse Analysis and Populism. Special thanks to Prof Srila Roy (Witwatersrand) for her generous support with the first journal publication out of this thesis. I am also grateful to the participants, attendees, and discussants of the

several conferences and workshops I have presented my research at, such as the Cambridge Gender and Sexuality History Workshop, the ECPR Summer School on Political Parties at Aarhus University, the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis, among others.

I am very grateful to the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), a non-academic partner with the Global India, for allowing me to be a part of the ongoing public campaign for the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill by the Lok Sabha of the Indian Parliament. I am also grateful for my association with Political Shakti and BehanBox in the direction of facilitating women's political inclusion in India.

I am extremely grateful to my interviewees at the three political parties for their generosity with time and resources. The thesis presented me with a wonderful opportunity to cultivate friendships with women political aspirants and to witness their struggles as well as their resilient commitment to a political career.

Most grateful to my dearest friends, Veronica Mkilanya, Tapasya Narang, Thomas Ricard, Srijata Roy, Aurelie Sicard, Anish Tiwari, and Fiona Bolger for being my home away from home in Dublin and also my consistent link with Dublin while being located in India in the last years of the PhD. I am also most grateful to Cihnnita Baruah, Rahul Ranjan, Tanvi Deshpande, Arpita Chakraborty, Abhismita Sen, Sejal Das, Indranil Das, Brittany Anlar, Inci Öykü Yener-Roderburg, Sreshtha Das, and Salwa Yahya. Thank you all for your constant support and invaluable friendship, particularly during the dark days of the Covid second wave. Special thanks to my amazing therapist, Dr Alokanda Mukherjee, for supporting my mental health through the PhD. Lastly, I am especially grateful to Maa, whose unceasing enthusiasm to survive and thrive, despite the struggles of being a widowed single mother, continues to inspire me to no end.

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List of Abbreviations

- AIDWA- All-India Democratic Women's Association
- AITC- All-India Trinamool Congress
- AIWC- All-India Women's Conference
- BJP- Bharatiya Janata Party
- BJS- Bharatiya Jana Sangh
- BSP- Bahujan Samaj Party
- CCT- Conditional Cash Transfers
- CEDAW- Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
- CPI- Communist Party of India
- CPI(M)- Communist Party of India (Marxist)
- CPI(ML)- Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
- CPI(Maoist)- Communist Party of India (Maoist)
- DMK- Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
- INC- Indian National Congress
- I-PAC- Indian Political Action Committee
- LDF- Left Democratic Front
- MARS- Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti
- NDA- National Democratic Alliance
- OBC- Other Backward Classes
- PBMS- Paschim Banga Mahila Samiti
- PBGMS- Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti
- PRI- Panchayati Raj Institutions
- RSS- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
- RJD- Rashtriya Janata Dal
- SC- Scheduled Caste
- SP- Samajwadi Party
- ST- Scheduled Tribe
- UPA- United Progressive Alliance
- VHP- Vishwa Hindu Parishad

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Thesis Abstract

Gender and Political Parties in India: Pathways to Women's Political Participation

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This thesis examines the role of political parties as avenues for the political mobilisation, participation, and representation of women. It conducts an in-depth case study of the state of West Bengal in India to examine the gendered institutional cultures of political parties and the obstacles and opportunities that these shifting cultures present for women's political participation. Among the several political parties operating in the state, the thesis focuses on three significant political parties- the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Under the approach of Feminist Institutionalism, the thesis primarily adopts a qualitative interpretive research method, involving Discourse Analysis of party documents and other political texts and semi-structured interviews of women party leaders and ground-level workers. With this, the thesis seeks to uncover the representation of women in the gendered institutional cultures of each political party as well as to delineate how the women party members articulate their sense of institutional belonging and constitute their political subjectivities. The thesis contributes to the corpus of academic literature on women's political representation as well as on the phenomenon of continuity and change in political institutions in South Asia through its specific focus on the gender regimes governing the institutional cultures of the political parties in West

1. Thesis Introduction

Introduction:

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of India as a global actor of significance, inducing keener international observation of its socio-economic and political indicators. The chronic underrepresentation of women in the higher spaces of political decision-making illustrates the serious challenges that India faces in its journey towards achieving gender parity. While the introduction of gender quotas in rural and urban local government has substantially enhanced the political representation of women and other historically marginalised identities, the absence of and continued resistance towards reservation for women in national and state legislative bodies leads to disproportionately low numbers of women lawmakers. Such political underrepresentation of women is juxtaposed to a recent surge in women voters and the emergence of women as a prominent electoral constituency with distinct political and policy preferences.

This thesis offers a qualitative feminist institutionalist study of the gendered institutional cultures of three political parties in the state of West Bengal, India: focusing on how the party cultures represent women and condition their participation in politics, on women party members' experiences of belonging in such institutional cultures, and the cultivation of their political subjectivities. Set in the context of women's underrepresentation in Indian legislatures, such qualitative study of the institutional belonging and political self-makings of women party members will generate a comprehensive appraisal of the institutional practices which condition and limit women's participation in India's electoral democracy.

In the recently concluded elections- such as the General Elections (2019) and the West Bengal Assembly elections (2021), women voters have played a decisive role in securing electoral victories which has led competing political parties to invest in welfarist schemes in order to attract the support of women electors. Despite the increasing visibility of women in the election agendas and policy programmes of political parties, women political aspirants continue to be underrepresented and relegated to the periphery of Indian party politics with the exception of a few powerful women leaders.

Feminist research on women's political representation in the Western context has pointed out the critical 'gatekeeping' role that political parties play in regulating women's access to political participation (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995) in modern democracies. In recent decades, feminist institutionalist scholarship (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Krook and MacKay, 2011) has illustrated the gendered character of the institutional practices that govern women's recruitment and candidate selection by political parties. Such research has also reflected the conceptual turn in the fields of New Institutionalism and feminist research towards the gendering of formal institutions.

Located within the wider field of gender and political institutions, and the more specific context of party politics in India, this thesis intends to contribute to the existing literature with its research on women's participation, representation, and leadership within political parties in Indian electoral democracy. It builds on the existing feminist institutionalist literature (Krook and MacKay, 2011; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016; Kenny and Verge, 2016) on gender and political parties. The feminist institutionalist scholarship on political parties being primarily focused on themes such as the political recruitment of women, few studies have engaged with the affective dimension of women's experiences of belonging in political party cultures which, in turn, reflect larger historical constructions of gender prevalent in the society they inhabit. In the Indian context, while

there have been a plethora of scholarly interventions in the area of women in social/political movements (Lalitha *et al.*, 1989; Tanika Sarkar, 1991b; Butalia and Sarkar, 1995; Basu, 1998, 2005; Menon, 1999; Nivedita Menon, 2000; Roy, 2006a; Kumar, 2011; Sinha Roy, 2011), there is a scarcity of existing literature on the gendered institutional continuity and change in political parties as well as on women's representation and participation in political institutions.

In recent decades there have been immersive ethnographic single-party based studies on women in the Shiv Sena by Atreyee Sen and Tarini Bedi (Sen, 2007; Bedi, 2016) and the Bahujan Samaj Party by Manuela Ciotti (Ciotti, 2017). There have also been ethnographic and oral history scholarship on women in revolutionary and parliamentary communist parties and political movements (Basu, 1989; Roy, 2006a; Sinha Roy, 2011; Bandyopadhyay, 2012; Panjabi, 2017; Loomba, 2019). This thesis builds on such research and extends the scope with its comparative enquiry of gender regimes in three ideologically diverse political parties in West Bengal- the left-wing Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), the centrist-populist All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), and the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The in-depth focus of the thesis on the dynamic political culture in West Bengal will facilitate the understanding of how the gendered institutional norms and practices in a political party culture bear the influence of extra-institutional factors and macro-social and historical gender discourses. The comparative nature of the research in the thesis will assist in generating insights on the similarities and differences among the respective gendered institutional cultures of the three political parties as well as highlight the play of interdiscursivity among such party cultures. The thesis also contributes to the global feminist institutionalist literature with its gender analysis of political party cultures in a non-Western location. Finally, the study of the institutional belonging of women party

members will illustrate the negotiations that the latter undertake with the gendered power hierarchies and the social and institutional standards of appropriateness prevalent in their respective political parties.

Following the feminist institutionalist commitment to radical systemic transformation in politics in favour of women and other historically marginalised social identities, the thesis has adopted the interpretivist research method of Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001; Lazar, 2005; Hansen, 2006; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). It has combined the analysis of political documents- party publications, autobiographies and other published works of women leaders and news reports, and semi-structured interviews with women leaders and grassroots members of the three political parties in order to study the constitutive influence of the gendered discursive institutional ‘logics’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) on the articulation of their sense of belonging and their political self-makings.

Research Questions:

This thesis engages with the following primary research questions:

- 1> In the context of politics in West Bengal, India, how do the three political parties (CPI(M), BJP, and AITC)- identified as gendered cultural institutions, frame women as political actors?
- 2> How do women party members articulate their sense of belonging and cultivate their political subjectivities in the institutional spaces of the parties?

The first research question shall discuss how political party cultures secure their institutional continuity while conditioning and constraining the opportunities for

women's political participation and leadership through their respective formal institutional rules and informal practices. It will focus particularly on the symbolic representations of women in the respective party cultures as well as on the state and quality of women's representation in the party organisations. To this end, the thesis studies the historical development of the three political parties and the evolution of their respective gendered ideological regimes through its analysis of party documents and other literature.

The second research question focuses on women party members' articulation of their perceptions of the party cultures, their experiences of belonging in such cultures, and their political self-makings in relation to the hegemonic gender discourses governing their respective parties. This is done through the interpretivist study of the narratives offered by women party members and leaders in their interviews with me. Set in the context of women's critical underrepresentation in Indian politics, the thesis has integrated the two research questions in order to generate insights on the institutional practices through which political parties in India perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of women from positions of political power.

Case-selection in brief:

The selection of West Bengal as the site for in-depth case study in this thesis has been informed by two primary considerations. The first is my immersive familiarity with the Bengali language and the gendered historical development of its political culture that constituted a substantial advantage in the conduct of field interviews as well as analysis of party documents and other literature. In particular, the element of familiarity allowed me to locate the subtle linguistic manoeuvres suggesting disaffection with the party

culture that my interviewees undertook. The second consideration is the contextual particularity of socio-historical and political circumstances in West Bengal. The region's experience of British colonialism and the subsequent proliferation of religious and social reform movements in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the region's pioneering role in the rise of nascent anti-colonial nationalism and Hindu nationalism, the struggle for independence and the traumatic experience of Partition and mass displacement that accompanied independence from British colonialism, the long political and cultural hegemony of Communist parties in several decades after independence, the radical rupture in the Communist hegemony after the electoral victory of the AITC, and the recent rise in Hindu majoritarian presence make the state a site for interplay and mutual contestation among a variety of political ideologies. Each of these ideologies support distinct discourses on gender, caste, class, and religion while interacting with each other in a shared space. The three political parties studied in this thesis represent three such ideological positions: the CPI(M) representing left-socialism, the AITC representing centrist-populism, and the BJP representing Hindu right-wing majoritarianism. The study of the gendered institutional cultures of the three parties will offer a comparative advantage to the thesis in its in-depth case study of gender and political parties in West Bengal, India.

Structure of the Thesis:

This thesis is divided into six chapters and a general conclusion. Chapter one offers a review of the literature on gender, political institutions, and women's political representation alongside the existing literature on women's participation, representation, and leadership in Indian politics: illustrating the state of the literature and highlighting

the gaps in the said literature that the thesis intends to contribute to. Among other themes, this chapter focuses on the New Institutional approach of Feminist Institutionalism which serves as the research framework for this thesis. The chapter points to the historically exclusivist foundations of modern democratic political institutions and correspondingly of women's marginalisation in such institutional spaces. This chapter also argues that in the context of women's underrepresentation in Indian electoral democracy, there is a critical scarcity of available literature on gender and political parties in general and women's representation, participation, and leadership within political parties in particular. Discussing the gap in the existing literature, this chapter states the contributions that the thesis intends to make through its study of the gendered institutional continuity and change in the political party cultures and of the institutional belonging and political self-making of women in the parties.

Chapter two outlines the methodological framework that supports this thesis and the particular research methods that inform the collection and coding of data for this thesis. Underlining the post-positivist nature of the research enquiry, this chapter discusses the interpretivist methodological framework which aids in generating mid-range theorisations on everyday meaning-making by actors in an institutional or social space and also underlines the affinities between feminist institutionalism and interpretivism. The chapter also reviews the different approaches to the research method of Discourse Analysis such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Feminist CDA, and Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis, highlighting the ways through which this thesis has used feminist poststructuralist Discourse Analysis and the 'logics approach' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) in particular to illustrate the functioning of gendered discursive logics in the formal rules and informal institutional practices of political parties. This chapter also covers the case study approach, the selection of West Bengal as the site for in-depth case

study, the analysis of political documents and semi-structured interviews, and concludes with a self-reflective discussion of ethical and practical research limitations.

Chapters three, four, and five present empirical research on the gendered institutional cultures of the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP respectively. They offer a gendered perspective into the historical development of the three parties, the organisational structures and practices of the parties, and the quality of women's representation in the different units of the parties and in ministries whenever the parties have been in government. Chapters three and five also discuss the gendered ideological foundations of the CPI(M) and the BJP respectively. Chapter four on the AITC presents a detailed interpretivist engagement with the gendered populist self-fashioning of the AITC leader- Mamata Banerjee, as a political ascetic. The lack of a strong ideological foundation and the personalised character of the AITC necessitate the discussion of Banerjee's political leadership. In the three chapters, the thesis traces how the three parties use formal regulations and informal institutional practices to maintain systemic continuity, resist the prospect of institutional change in favour of women and other marginalised identities, and contain disaffections and contestations through the play of gendered discursive 'logics'- or rules governing institutional practices.

Chapter six offers empirical interpretivist research based on semi-structured interviews with women members of the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP on the different routes access of women party members to a career in politics, their perceptions of their respective party cultures, their experiences of institutional belonging and political self-making. The discussion of interviews in this chapter is informed by the insights on the institutional cultures of and women's representation in the three parties in the three preceding chapters. Attempting an integrated thematic analysis of the narratives of women party members from the three ideologically variant parties, this chapter illustrates

the constitutive influence of the larger gender discourses prevalent in the shared, interdiscursive social space on the development of the respective party cultures. This chapter also reflects on the influence of gendered discursive logics and extra-institutional factors on women's articulations of belonging, exclusion, and discrimination in the institutional cultures of their respective political parties as well as on how the women cultivate themselves as political subjects. The chapter argues that the institutional goal of maintaining systemic continuity in political parties requires the sustained creation of antagonistic tropes of political femininity and the institutional privileging of one particular trope over another that broadly mimics the larger historical gender constructions hegemonic in the macro-social ecology inhabited by the political parties.

An integrated comparative analysis of the three party cultures, and the state of women's representation in the parties alongside the institutional belonging and political self-making of women party members is attempted in the general conclusion of the thesis that also signposts the themes and areas which offer potential for future research. The general conclusion discusses the similarities as well as key differences among the gendered institutional cultures and organisational practices in the three parties. With the objective of locating the hitherto underexplored formal and informal institutional practices through which political parties in West Bengal define the careers of women party members and influence them to constitute themselves as political actors, this thesis also offers broader insights into the gendering of modern political institutions as well as on women's participation and leadership in such institutions.

2. Review of Existing Literature

Introduction:

This chapter offers a review of the key academic interventions on the field of the gendered study of political institutions and women's political representation in the West as well as in India. Among other things, it explores in particular the approach of Feminist Institutionalism that constitutes the theoretical framework of the thesis, and the concepts of institutional belonging and self-making that the thesis has adopted to analyse the narratives of women members of the three selected political parties in West Bengal. In its review of the existing literature on women's political representation, participation, and leadership in India, the chapter also discusses the particular contributions that this thesis will make to the existing literature.

This chapter is categorised under two broad sections. The first section offers a discussion of the academic dialogues and debates on the themes of gender, institutionalism, and women's political representation. The second section engages with the existing literature on women's political participation, gender quotas and representation, and leadership in India. The theoretical and empirical interventions in the fields of gender, institutions, and women's political representation, has to date focused primarily on politics in the Global North. The engagement of the first section of this chapter with the major theoretical and empirical interventions will be useful for the analysis of the gendered institutional party cultures and women's political participation in the later chapters. The second section is distinct from its preceding section chiefly due to its analytical focus on and sensitivity towards the contextual specificities that characterise the literature on women's participation and leadership in Indian politics- as the in-depth discussion on the concept of political asceticism demonstrates. In spite of

such apparent divergences, themes such as gender quotas and women's political leadership are explored and engaged with in both the sections, with the second section being attuned to the particular ways in which the discourses on gender quotas and women political leaders have played out in the post-independent Indian political culture- an instance of which is the sub-section on the debates around the Women's Reservation Bill in India.

Review of Literature on Gender, Institutions, and Women's Political Representation:

Gender and Institutions:

The extensive usage of 'gender' as a frame of reference in feminist political science (Lovenduski, 2015) as well as in contemporary policymaking may often occlude its conceptual evolution in time. The conventional understanding of gender as the social attribute of sex posited a causal relation between the two (Acker, 1992) and situated the former in individual dispositions. The dismantling of the biological determinism of sex (Connell, 1987) and the successive questioning of the causal relation between sex and gender also led to a reconfiguration of gender as a dynamic 'process' (Connell, 1987)- initiating a contextual and relational approach (Kenny, 2009) to the concept. This perspective imagined gender as 'practice' (Connell, 1987), with the connotation that masculinities and femininities were continually reconceived through interaction with the social order. Conceptualised as a verb, gender was a matter of 'doing'- 'a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment' (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 126) that went on to assume symbolic significance; producing ossified identities. The 'interactional' element in gender also relocated the concept from individual dispositions to social

structures, and institutions (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This ‘leap’ (Connell, 1987) from the individual to the institution served to broaden the scope of feminist inquiry which now sought to analyse the complex structuring of gender relations and their intersections with other categories of social signification such as race and class in institutions (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995). Following this characterisation of gender as practice, this thesis explores the constitutive influence of gender in conversation with class, caste, and religion on the subjectivities of women members who inhabit the institutional cultures of the respective political parties in West Bengal.

While the focus on institutions illustrated the processes through which gender relations were constituted, it also turned the attention of feminist literature away from catch-all concepts such as patriarchy- reflecting, at the same time, post-structuralist reconfigurations of power, gender, and sexuality. Michel Foucault’s analysis of ‘the capillary functioning of power’ (Foucault, 1975, 198) in society marked a shift from earlier conceptualisations of power (Hobbes, 1904) which located the latter in the figure of the sovereign (Foucault, 1984), to the conformist, modern-day ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1975). Through the act of decentring power, Foucault highlighted its pervasiveness in social institutions as well as its ‘productive’ role in the articulation of social identities (Foucault, 1980). His formulations on ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1984) illustrated the ordering of society under hegemonic structures of knowledge and discourse. Despite concerns with regard to the prospect of resistance to hegemonic discourses under the Foucauldian scheme¹, Foucault’s radical interventions on how the

¹ While Foucauldian and other poststructuralist thinkers (Foucault, 1978) have cautioned against the reification of subject-categories such as ‘Woman’, it has been critiqued by feminists such as Nancy Hartsock (Hartsock, 1989), Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1983), and Linda Alcoff (Alcoff, 1988) among others, primarily on the ground that the poststructuralist dissolution of stable identities robs women and other

constitution of subjectivities was itself an effect of power as well as his illustration of the intricate manoeuvres of power in institutional contexts (Foucault, 1975) have influenced feminist reflections on gender relations substantially. In its interpretive study of the informal party practices which condition the institutional cultures of the three selected political parties in West Bengal as well as of the articulations of institutional belongings on the part of women party members, this thesis is informed by Foucauldian theorisations on the effect of power on the constitution of subjectivities. While the analytical focus on the gendered institutional party cultures will offer a perspective on the functioning of exclusionary structures which frame and condition the participation of women and other historically marginalised identities, the engagement with the institutional belonging and political self-makings of women party members will illustrate the nature of the agency exercised by the women. Following Naila Kabeer, however, the thesis understands agency as inclusive of not only autonomy but also a variety of deliberate practices such as bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, or even reflection and analysis (Kabeer, 1999, 4) and is cognisant of the co-constitutiveness of agency and structure. The twin concepts of institutional belonging and self-making used in the thesis will highlight such co-constitutiveness through the exploration of how expressions of agency by women party members are embedded in their historical location in the peripheries of the institutional party cultures.

The idea of gender as a dynamic process that unfolds in micro-social institutional contexts; involving constant reiteration of identities and relations is augmented in Judith Butler's theoretical contributions on 'gender performativity' (Butler, 1993, 1997). In a

historically oppressed social categories of the space for collective resistance against identifiable oppressors as well as of discourses of social justice and freedom to appeal to.

similar vein as the Foucauldian disruption of stable identities, Butler problematised the given-ness of biological sex primarily by grounding it in language and discourse (Butler, 1993). Gender too, is stripped of inherent essence, and is characterised as ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time’ (Butler, 1988) through repeated performances. The employment of theatrical tropes and the critical significance of repetition in gender performance within Butler’s scheme reflects the influence of the anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of ‘ritual social drama’² (Turner, 1980), the characterisation of the body as a ‘historical idea’(quoted in Butler, 1988) developed by the existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty³, and feminist existentialist Simone De Beauvoir’s historicisation of the category ‘Woman’⁴(Beauvoir, 1956). The necessity of repetition and ‘re-enactment’ of dominant social and cultural normative structures for their continued materialisation is where Butler located the possibilities of subversion and change- ‘the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style’ (Butler,

² In his essay, *‘Social Dramas and Stories about Them’* (Turner, 1980), Victor Turner explicated the criticality of rituals in sustaining social integration with the aid of the theatrical metaphor of performance. The repeated performance of rituals serves to legitimate the prevailing norms of a given society. Butler adopts this concept of social drama in her analysis of gender to understand the collective nature of social performances that are carried out by individual bodies which are ‘always already’ gendered (Butler, 1988). Through the trope of performativity, Butler attempts to mediate the conflicting claims of structure and agency upon individual actions.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of the body as ‘a set of possibilities’ and a ‘historical idea’ in his work *‘The Phenomenology of Perception’* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) posits that instead of being a natural entity vested with predetermined meaning, the body acquires culturally-specific meaning historically and in time.

⁴ Beauvoir, in her iconic reflection on the category ‘Woman’- ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (Beauvoir, 1956), highlighted the historical contextuality that characterises the said category while at the same time, debunking the conventional myths associated with the natural-ness of femininity and womanhood. In her work, *‘The Second Sex’*, Beauvoir also undertook an exposition of how the category ‘Woman’ was accorded the place of the philosophical ‘Other’- marked by emotion, instinct and immanence to the human ‘Subject’ that was conceived of as ‘Man’ and was associated with reason, intellect and transcendence (Beauvoir, 1956). The feminine self was held as embodying sexuality whereas the male self was equated with a disembodied, rational human subjectivity.

1988). Through the trope of performance, Butler mediated the claims of structure and agency upon individual actions. Thus, the performance of gender is not just a matter of individual choice, and neither is it an overarching structural imposition. As she articulated it with the assistance of theatrical analogy.

‘Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.’ (Butler, 1988, p.526)

The significance of the ‘culturally restricted corporeal space’ in the reproduction and reiteration of gendered identities by individuals cannot be overstated. Within the scope of this thesis, it has aided substantially in the conceptualisation of the gendered institutional cultures of the respective political parties and the exploration of the relationships between these institutional cultures and particular actors- the women party members, inhabiting such cultural spaces. In this way, this thesis has attempted to undertake the ‘leap’ from gendering individuals to institutions that R.W. Connell highlights in her exposition of ‘gender regimes’ (Connell, 1987).

Defining gender regimes as ‘the state of play in gender relations in a given institution’ (Connell, 1987), Connell argued that these regimes are inhabited by multiple masculinities and femininities that are not always marked by stark binaries. For instance, in her study of the gender regimes of states, Connell traced the historical elevation of a particular mode of masculinity- that embodying instrumental rationality- at the dawn of industrial capitalism that was accompanied by a parallel suppression of other masculinities as well as homosexuality (Connell, 1987). The state plays a constitutive

role in the mediation of the patterns of gender relations; primarily with its powers of designation of social categories and distribution of resources. This perspective is developed further by Nancy Fraser in her debunking of the myth of gender-neutrality espoused by social welfare regimes (Fraser, 1989). The distribution of welfare in such regimes, Fraser argued, was predicated upon a traditionalist gendered segregation of labour and spaces. By sponsoring the 'breadwinner-caregiver' model that equated the breadwinner with the male and the caregiver with the female, the welfare regime endorsed the economic primacy of the male breadwinner and situated the female caregiver to the arena of unpaid domestic labour. In the event of the caregiver working outside the domestic sphere, her wages were considered to be supplementary to that earned by the breadwinner (Fraser, 1989). The interdependence of such and other gender archetypes constituted by a particular regime at a given historical moment sheds light upon the nature of social order and mechanisms of control.

The criticality of context in the understanding of gender relations in society necessitates the exploration of broader dynamics of gender that transcends the boundaries of particular gender regimes, proposed Connell (Connell, 1987). Highlighting the inter-relationships and the complementarity among the gender regimes of different institutions in society, she drew attention to the functioning of the 'gender order' (Connell, 1987). Gender as a practice, is held to contribute to the continuity of particular institutions as well as to the reproduction of the larger social order. This perspective on the linkages between different institutions in society finds support in Susan M. Okin's theorisation of gender injustice in the family. Tracing a vicious cycle that connects the labour-market, the consumption-market, and the family, Okin illustrated how traditionalist expectations about women's childrearing and domestic responsibilities influence the labour-market against women, leading to inequality in purchasing power between men and women,

which in turn, perpetuates unequal power relations within the family (Okin, 1989). Such insights into the inter-institutional dynamics of gender extend the scope of feminist enquiry from an isolated focus on the constitutive inequalities in the family⁵ (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1993). In its interpretive discourse analysis of the gendered institutional cultures of the respective political parties, this thesis acknowledges the criticality of context and is cognisant of how such institutional cultures are shaped and reproduced in conversation with hegemonic macro-social discourses and historical constructions on gender, caste, class, and religion in the region of West Bengal.

Subsequent feminist research on the play of gender in institutions has approached the theme from a variety of disciplines- including organisational theory, political science, and sociology, among others (Acker, 1990; Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995). Joan Acker, introducing the term ‘gendered institutions’, drew attention to the pervasiveness of gender in the everyday functioning of society- ‘gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life’ (Acker, 1992). Acker argued that a fundamental divide between production and reproduction and a prioritisation of production characterise the positioning of institutions in industrial capitalist societies- the family, therefore, is undervalued vis a vis the industrial workplace (Acker, 1992). Underlining the significance of practices and customs in social institutions, Acker listed four ways in which these practices underscore the reinforcement of gender norms in an institution. First, there are the formal regulative

⁵ Referring to the Social Contractarian tradition of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau among others, Carole Pateman, in her work *‘The Sexual Contract’* argues that the social contract, which is claimed to have laid the foundations of liberal constitutional government, is preceded by the sexual contract which institutionalises the complete obeisance of the wife to her husband in all spheres of existence. The medieval English doctrine of Coverture could be an instance of such sexual contract whereby a woman’s legal identity, rights and obligations were subsumed by her husband upon marriage (Pateman, 1988).

frameworks that ‘control, segregate, exclude, and construct hierarchies’ while the second are the generation of ‘images, symbols, and ideologies’ which serves to legitimate the institutions (Acker, 1992, p.567-8). The principle of gender-neutrality in institutions and the idealised figure of the leader constitute instances of the second mechanism. Recent feminist scholarship on candidate selection in political parties substantiate Acker’s argument- the conventional model of the ‘ideal candidate’ subscribed to by political parties seems to exemplify the ‘local man’ (Kenny and Verge, 2016). Third, Acker identifies the ‘processes of interaction’ (Acker, 1992, p.568) among members of an institution that involve the performance of gender. Fourth, there are the ‘internal processes’(Acker, 1992, p.568) that the members undergo in their project of generating gender identities that approximate the idea of acceptability in the institution. Acker’s scheme captures the deeply embedded nature of gender in social institutions as well as the contextual particularities of each institution. It also assists in exposing the androcentric premises supporting organisational myths such as ‘bureaucratic rationality’. Subsequent developments in feminist research have involved explorations of the gendered cultures of the parliament (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995), the bureaucracy (Ramsay, Karen and Parker, 1991), the military (Cockburn, 2010), among others. While exploring the articulations of institutional belonging and political self-making by women members of the three political parties in their interviews, this thesis has focused on the informal norms and expectations around appropriateness and acceptability that govern the gendered workplace cultures in the parties.

Studies such as the above have contributed substantially towards establishing the spatial, temporal and historical specificities of gender processes and relational matrices in the respective institutions. As authors Chappell and Waylen argue, each political institution functions in accordance with its own ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Chappell and

Waylen, 2013). These specificities are of course accompanied with the contextual variations in the nature of the institutions themselves. The comprehensive knowledge and immersive familiarity that is required in order to conduct gender analysis of particular institutions situated in specific spatio-temporal and cultural contexts tend to limit the scope of the analysis into in-depth, single-case studies, making cross-institutional and cross-cultural comparisons problematic (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). Therefore, even as the recent years have seen an interesting cross-country feminist institutionalist comparative analysis of the gendered process of candidate selection (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016), for instance, such works structure themselves upon the existing literature on the cases selected. The dependence on the existing literature underlines the restricted scope for large-scale, cross-cultural comparative feminist institutionalist research endeavours.

Aside from underscoring the historical specificity and complexity of gender regimes operative in particular institutions, the preference for in-depth, single-case studies also serves to highlight the feminist privileging of contextually-specific theories over socio-political meta-narratives. Inspired by the Historical Institutional focus on mid-range theories (Thelen, 1999), the recent body of Feminist Institutional scholarship disavows allegiance to grand political theories in favour of contextuality (Kenny, 2009; Hinojosa and Gurdíán, 2012; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). This thesis is also committed to such prioritisation of mid-range theories which, coupled with the feminist preference for methodological pluralism, have aided it significantly in its exploration of informal, culturally-specific structures of power, hierarchy and inequality that condition the formal institutional framework of the political parties. Such emphasis on contextual specificity and interdisciplinarity also contribute substantially towards decolonising the field from its Eurocentric conceptual anchoring.

This section has discussed the conceptual evolution of gender into a practice and has explored the discourse on the gendering of institutions. It highlighted the criticality of the larger social and historical context which are inhabited by institutions and the informal practices of power, hierarchy, and interpersonal relations that go on to establish the gender regimes that govern the institutional cultures of formal institutions. The following section takes forward the discussion on gender and institutions, focusing on the dialogue between feminist political science and New Institutionalism, leading on to the emergent interdisciplinary field of Feminist Institutionalism in particular that constitutes the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Feminist Political Science and New Institutionalism:

The ‘transformative agenda’ (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010, 582) of feminist political science entails a commitment to influencing institutional change in favour of women’s political representation alongside its principal focus on the gendered dynamics of institutional continuity. This commitment; also reflecting the influence of poststructuralism and critical theory, makes feminist political science a field characterised by methodological pluralism (Kenny, 2013)- that involves a conscious subversion of academic disciplinary boundaries. Feminist political research in the recent decades therefore, has been marked by the interweaving of conventional positivist and quantitative methods (Kenny, 2013) predominant in political science with qualitative interpretive methods such as ethnography, discourse analysis and narrative interviewing prevalent in other social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics and psychology. The poststructuralist characterisation of language as a constitutive dimension of gendered power structures (Butler, 1997), for instance, influenced research

on the gendered foundations of hegemonic discourses such as that of security and foreign policy in the work of Lene Hansen (Hansen, 2006) on the Bosnian War.

Alongside the challenging of disciplinary boundaries, feminist political research has also sought to align itself with broader shifts within the field of political science. The ascent of New Institutionalism, influenced primarily by the ‘institutional turn’ in political science, had its roots in the challenge to the behaviouralist movement of the 1960s (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). Responding to the behaviouralist preoccupation with individual agency, new institutionalism revives ‘an older concern for institutions’ (March and Olsen, 1984)- underlining the criticality of structures- formal and informal- in shaping the behaviour of individual actors. Regardless of the lack of agreement on a clear definition of the field, new institutionalism ; through its different streams, primarily attempts to highlight the constitutive manner in which institutional structures and individual actors influence each other (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). Authors Peter A. Hall and Rosemary Taylor categorised the new institutionalist literature into three schools- rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Drawing upon the influence of behaviouralism, rational choice institutionalists seek to understand the strategic behaviour of individual actors participating in formal institutional environments such as that of the United States Congress (Hall and Taylor, 1996). The primary thrust of rational choice institutionalism remains calculative individual behaviour. Historical institutionalism, developed parallelly with rational choice institutionalism, studies the broader phenomenon of institutional evolution, focusing upon the ‘path dependence’ of institutions and mechanisms of institutional continuity (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). It also recognises the significance of power distribution in maintaining the stability of institutions (Hall and Taylor, 1996). The development of the

third school of new institutionalism- identified as sociological institutionalism, can be traced to organisational theory. A distinguishing feature of sociological institutionalism is its expansive definition of ‘institutions’; which includes not only formal regulations and rules but also informal socio-cultural norms, conventions and symbols (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Also significant is the sociological institutionalist interpretation of culture itself as an ‘institution’ that shapes the cognitive faculties and subjectivities of individual actors within institutions- providing normative codes of behaviour and conduct (Hall and Taylor, 1996). In the recent decades, the new institutionalist literature has been marked by the ascent of yet another school- that of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008). Traversing both micro and macro-levels of analysis (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010), discursive institutionalists focus on the constitutive power of ideas and discourse upon the behaviour of individual actors in institutional contexts. The role of institutions in ‘constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning’ (Schmidt, 2010) is critical in discursive institutionalist research. In its exploration of the hegemonic norms of acceptability and appropriateness that govern gendered behaviour and interpersonal relations among the members of the selected political parties in West Bengal, this thesis has been influenced by insights from sociological, historical, and discursive institutionalisms.

While the different schools within new institutionalism have richly contributed to theorisations on the different dimensions of institutional politics, a concern for institutional continuity has been identified as a significant point of convergence (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010) for all the schools. Preoccupations with path dependence, for instance, makes historical institutionalism susceptible to prioritising institutional stability. While notable exceptions within historical institutionalism, such as the work of Kathleen Thelen and James Mahoney (Thelen and Mahoney, 2010) have explored the

prospects of institutional change⁶, the primary thrust of new institutionalist research has been towards comprehending the ‘stickiness’ of self-perpetuating institutions (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010, 577). The interaction of feminist political science with new institutionalist literature in the recent years has yielded mutually beneficial results. While the feminist approach reconstitutes new institutionalism by placing gender as a central research concern- resulting in more sophisticated insights into gendered interactions and meaning-making that lie at the core of institutional continuity, the complex interactional dynamics within and beyond institutions enriches the conceptual repository of feminist political science (Kenny, 2009). The feminist approach contributes substantially towards the stream within new institutionalism that focuses upon institutional change and the play of power relations within institutions (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). The rise of Feminist Institutionalism- an eclectic methodological framework with a distinct critical focus, in the recent years, has been regarded as the result of the feminist engagement with new institutionalism. Enhancing the field of empirical research on women’s political representation, feminist institutionalism has proved to be a useful methodological tool to explore the informal gendered norms and power relations that constitute the ‘internal life’ of formal political representative institutions. This thesis has adopted the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism in its interpretive research on women’s belonging and political self-making in relation to the gendered institutional cultures of the three

⁶ Thelen and Mahoney, in their influential book on institutional change, identify four processes of institutional change: *displacement* (the complete replacement of existing rules with new rules); *layering* (the co-habitation of new rules with old ones with the new rules being placed above or beside the old ones by means of amendments); *drift* (the shifts in the effect of existing rules due to exogenous circumstances); and *conversion* (the deliberate reinterpretation of existing rules by strategic actors) (Thelen and Mahoney, 2010)

political parties. The following section discusses in detail the framework of feminist institutionalism.

Feminist Institutionalism:

Reflecting the inherent heterogeneity within broader feminist praxis, feminist institutionalism is distinguished by the pluralism of research methods endorsed by it. In a similar vein as authors Mona Lena Krook and Judith Squires who argue, ‘there is no distinctive feminist methodology’ (Krook and Squires, 2006), the feminist institutionalist framework often involves interdisciplinary methodological dialogues – selecting methods most suited to comprehend the particular research problem at hand (Childs and Krook, 2006, 44). Its eclectic methodological approach contributes substantially towards addressing the limitations of the conceptual devices of demand and supply⁷(Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995)- developed by authors Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski- that had been predominant in feminist political science, while preserving the principal research concerns of the former- such as political recruitment and candidate selection.

⁷ In their groundbreaking work on political recruitment in British parliamentary politics, authors Norris and Lovenduski studied the internal party processes and politics that accompany the phenomenon of candidate selection. Exploring the distribution of power within British political parties, the authors focused on dynamics between the national and local tiers of party organisation. Identifying parties as the ‘main gatekeepers’ (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995) of political recruitment, Norris and Lovenduski developed the models of *demand* and *supply* to explain the process of candidate selection. While the *supply* model hypothesises that the selection of candidates depends upon the supply of aspirants- determined by time, financial resources, and ambition, the *demand* model argues that skewed representation of socially disadvantaged groups in the Parliament reflects the social prejudice of candidate selectors in the parties. Even as the authors make an analytical distinction between the two models, in practice, it is argued, the two intertwine at each stage of candidate selection. Although the authors acknowledge that the models do not operate in isolation from wider the socio-cultural and political environment, critics have argued that their subsequent applications of the models posit simplistic and straightforward premises (Kenny, 2009). Critics of the demand-supply models have also pointed out that the complex avenues such as institutional culture; through which gender dynamics and power relations shape the process of candidate selection and political recruitment within the political parties cannot be fully explored under such conceptual models (Kenny, 2009).

Adopting Norris and Lovenduski's characterisation of political parties as 'gatekeepers' (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995) of political recruitment, feminist institutionalist research on political parties has primarily focused on the phenomenon of candidate selection (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). As a significant component of their research, feminist institutionalist authors have sought to unveil and analyse the range of formal rules, informal norms and abstruse processes that constitute what authors Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh have termed as the 'secret garden' (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988) of party politics. The chief limitation that accompanies such a research project is of course the limited access to the obscure processes that precede the selection of candidates for elections within the 'inner world' of political parties (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015), making the traditional reliance on quantitative methods such as statistical survey inadequate. This has necessitated feminist institutionalists to turn to a range of qualitative research methods including but not limited to case study, in-depth interviews and process tracing (Childs and Krook, 2006). While the adoption of such qualitative methods has undoubtedly enriched the framework, it does not seem to have exhausted the potential for better understanding of the wider discursive network shaping gender relations and power asymmetries within formal institutions such as political parties.

The influence of earlier feminist insights into the contextual specificity of gender dynamics in particular institutions (Acker, 1992) has been retained in feminist institutionalist research. The element of contextuality- in terms of space, time and gender, has necessitated the adoption of interpretive research methods such as discourse analysis under the feminist institutionalist framework- which in the recent years has been integrated into what is known as the Feminist Discursive Approach (Kenny, 2009).

Institutions and their dominant gender regimes (Connell, 1987) constitute the behaviour of individual actors, argue feminist institutionalists, while holding that the

repeated performance (Butler, 1997) and materialisation of dominant gender norms by the actors themselves are necessary for the sustenance of the institutional cultures. The criticality of performance in the reproduction of hegemonic gender orders also hosts within it the potential of their subversion by individual actors and thereby of shifts within the institutional culture. Coupled with this perspective is the conceptualisation of gender as a process (Connell, 1987) that incorporates idealised ways of practice and of being. Feminist institutionalist research therefore goes beyond prescriptive, solution-driven theorisations, and can assist in problematising the premise and operationalisation of popular institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas (Kenny and Verge, 2016).

Following author Joni Lovenduski's call for the 'feminisation of politics' through the 'regendering of everyday functioning of political parties' (Lovenduski, 2005), feminist institutionalist researchers have contributed towards the deepening of women's substantive representation in political institutions. Such studies on political parties; focusing primarily on political recruitment and candidate selection, have explored the operationalisation of formal rules and regulations through informal practices (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). These informal practices are, more often than not, rooted in the prevailing macro-social discursive formations of the societies that these parties operate in. Thus, the potential for generating universal theories on the process of candidate selection within political parties are considerably restricted due to the contextual particularities of the informal codes and practices (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). The historical institutionalist thrust for the development of mid-range theories (Thelen and Mahoney, 2010)- responsive to contextual specificities, in the place of grand universalist claims has therefore been a constitutive influence for the feminist institutionalist framework.

In the recent years, the particular focus on how gendered ‘rules-in-form’ (formal regulations) and ‘rules-in-use’ (informal conventions) interact with and influence each other on an everyday level (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Verge, 2015) has characterised feminist research on political parties. Introduced by Elinor Ostrom, ‘rules-in-use’ have been identified as ‘the dos and don’ts that one learns on the ground that may not exist in any written document’ (Ostrom, 2007, 23). Generally reflecting dominant institutional and extra-institutional informal social customs and conventions, the informal rules-in-use; alongside formal regulations, offer substantial insights for research on the gendered institutional cultures of political parties. Feminist Institutionalist scholarship, in particular, has pointed to the criticality of the dynamic ‘gaps’ between formal and informal rules as spaces with the potential for the subversion of gender-progressive formal regulations such as gender quotas as well as for stimulating resistance to traditionalist gender constructions (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Krook and MacKay, 2011; Kenny, 2013; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015).

Such immersive studies have been instrumental in comprehending the limitations of progressive legislations such as gender quotas. Even as they implement quotas for women, political parties usually field women candidates in seats that are deemed as electorally insignificant, reserving secure seats for male candidates in contexts where quotas are not accompanied by placement mandates or the rank order in candidate lists (Kenny and Verge, 2016). Feminist institutionalist research has highlighted that even where quotas do come with placement mandates and sanctions for non-compliance with the mandates (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016), parties try to hit the minimum target but do no more (Kenny and Verge, 2016). A study on the implementation of gender quotas at the level of rural local self-governments (Panchayats) in the Indian province of West Bengal by Esther Duflo and Raghavendra Chattopadhyay have demonstrated how women

candidates elected on rotating quota seats do not tend to contest again due to the huge running costs associated with elections (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004) despite the presence of strong political aspirations among them (Duflo, 2005). This is found to be particularly true among women belonging to the historically, culturally and socio-economically marginalised Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Duflo, 2005). Alongside this, across varying spatial contexts, political parties have been found to take advantage of loopholes in gender quota legislations- sabotaging the aim of substantive representation for women (Kenny and Verge, 2016). Feminist institutionalist research can assist substantially in unpacking such subterranean gendered dynamics of power and hierarchy within formal institutional processes such as candidate selection. Moving away from both celebratory portrayals of agency and reductionist explanations of structural determinism, feminist institutionalism underlines the co-constitutiveness of institutions and actors who inhabit them while endorsing systemic transformation and regendering of institutions in favour of women and other historically underrepresented social identities. This thesis has adopted the feminist institutionalist focus on the interactions between formal regulations and informal institutional practices for its study of the experiences of institutional belonging of women members of the political parties and of the cultivation of their political subjectivities. In the next section, this chapter reviews the developing discourse on women's political representation.

The Evolving Discourse on Women's Political Representation:

Corresponding to the 'institutional turn' in feminist political science were developments in the study of women's representation in formal political institutions of the West. Within this field, the concept of 'critical mass' posited that the solution to the

necessity of favourable legislation for disadvantaged social groups including women would be to increase the number of legislators and representatives belonging to such groups- the ideal being stipulated at 30%. Located within the discourse of the ‘politics of presence’ (Phillips, 1998)- that reiterated the significance of the gender and racial compositions of legislatures and other representative bodies, critical mass was a highly influential hypothesis among academics and campaigners for women’s representation alike. Originating from Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s work on gender dynamics in American corporations (Kanter, 1977), the concept was extended to parliamentary politics by Drude Dahlerup in her study of Scandinavian legislative politics (Dahlerup, 1988). The concept of critical mass has been critiqued, however, for its tendency to draw a linear correlation between sex/gender and political representation as well as for its failure to consider incongruities between the presence of women representatives and pro-women legislation by positing women as a cohesive group with unified interests (Grey, 1999). Such critical interventions have highlighted the disjuncture between descriptive and substantive representation of women (Childs and Krook, 2009) and other historically disadvantaged social groups in legislative politics. As authors Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook point out in their article on women’s substantive representation, a rise in the number of women representatives can; instead of increasing the scope for pro-feminist legislation, result in a greater diversity of ideological and policy concerns within the group (Childs and Krook, 2009). Related with an escalation in the number of women lawmakers is also the likelihood of reactionary sentiments from male representatives (Childs and Krook, 2009).

Aside from such empirical critiques, a theoretical reimagining of the boundaries of formal institutionalist politics in the lines of Carole Pateman’s work on Participatory Democracy can also assist in locating the constraints of the concept of critical mass. Pointing out the deep chasm between the formal, institutional discourse of equality in

liberal democracies and the substantial inequities experienced on the bases of gender, race and class, Pateman; in her work *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970), makes a case for greater political participation on the part of women through an expansion of spaces for citizen activism. Noting that the existence of a ‘participatory society’ (Pateman, 1970) is a necessary prerequisite for a democracy, Pateman also highlights the inadequacy of a representative democracy without vibrant citizen participation. Her recognition (Pateman, 1970) of the acute scarcity of leisure for women being a limiting factor for their substantive political participation could be read as a significant critique of concepts such as critical mass- which posit numerical increase as the solution to the gap in women’s political representation. Pateman’s prescient call for a fundamental reorganization of domestic work to the extent that it ceases to be women’s work alone (Pateman, 1970) gains in relevance especially in the light of recent feminist research on how informal customs in political parties such as late-night meetings exclude women party-workers from inner party circles (Verge, 2015). Besides underlining the flawed premises of critical mass, Pateman’s theoretical interventions also illuminate the degree to which informal societal norms, conventions and hierarchies continue to structure and influence participation in formal institutional politics.

The recent years have witnessed a significant conceptual shift in the study of women’s representation in Western political institutions. An increased focus on what authors Childs and Krook term ‘critical actors’ (Childs and Krook, 2009) characterises the recent transition from the emphasis upon critical mass. In their feminist institutionalist study of women’s substantive representation in legislatures, Childs and Krook choose to look for those political entities- ‘critical actors’- who ‘act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change’(Childs and Krook, 2009). While this concept seeks to counter the reductionist representations of ‘male’ and ‘female’ political subjects

in critical mass, it also attempts to revisit conventional understandings of ‘women’s issues’ (Childs and Krook, 2009). Among the principal contributions of the conceptual framework offered by the authors, the criticality of analysing the everyday gendered interpersonal interactions in the process of policy-making within formal political spaces is significant. Another important insight that can be derived from the authors’ call for exploring the functioning of substantive representation (Childs and Krook, 2009) is the idea that the latter is a continuous process instead of being a one-off agreement between the representative and the represented.

The idea of political representation being a process entails a greater emphasis upon accountability and what author Hanna Pitkin termed as ‘responsiveness’ (Pitkin, 1967) on the part of the representative. At the same time, Pitkin argues, the act of representation also necessitates the representative to exercise autonomous judgement (Pitkin, 1967). Influenced by Pitkin’s early theorisations, Constructivist theorists of political representation have in the recent decades sought to highlight the contextual nature of democratic claims (Saward, 2006) as well as to widen the boundaries of representation beyond formal electoral politics (Devenney, 2019). The constructivist author Lisa Disch reframes representation as a continuous process wherein ‘representative and represented’ are ‘linked not by a static correspondence but in a dynamic process of mutual constitution’ (Disch, 2015). Such theoretical reformulations of political representation can have far-reaching implications for the field of women’s political participation, chiefly by means of extending the boundaries of formal institutional politics. Moreover, the constructivist characterisation of the nature of democratic political claims that influence the relationship between the representative/leader and the represented as contextual and protean also has the potential to reimagine what is connoted by ‘women’s interests’; primarily by highlighting the

diversity of political subjectivities and claims within women and other marginalised social groups.

While constructivist theories of political representation can be said to complement the literature on women's substantive representation, critiques of the former- an instance of which could be found in the work of Mark Devenney (Devenney, 2019)- might also be useful to comprehend the micro-social operation of representation and policy-making in elected assemblies. Modern representative democracies function on what Devenney terms as the 'proprietary order'- hegemonic discursive formations sustained by hierarchies based on property, education and occupation (Devenney, 2019). In this critique, the politics of representation and the formulation of democratic claims are interpreted as being premised upon prevailing normative structures of social acceptability- derived from the exclusivist 'proprietary order'. Traditionalist social hierarchies and inequalities rooted in gender, race and class therefore constitute the framework of representative politics, effectively excluding large sections of the citizenry from the prospect and the aspiration to represent. This insight is lent credence when one considers feminist research on formal political institutions- Nirmal Puwar's incisive exposition of the everyday functioning of the British Parliament (Puwar, 2004), for instance, illuminates the channels through which gendered conventions of acceptability constitute the disciplining of bodies into political subjects in formal political spaces. Norms related to sartorial choice, behaviour, access and mobility govern the bodily dispositions of women parliamentarians in political spaces that are conceptualised as predominantly masculine domains (Puwar, 2004). While research on the themes of political representation and women's political participation in formal institutions have thus far been primarily exclusive; and can be seen as being divided by theoretical and empirical thrusts respectively, a closer collaboration and dialogue between the two

themes can yield promising insights into the gendered underpinnings of modern representative political institutions as well as offer potentials for institutional change. In its study of the institutional gendered workplace cultures of the political parties, this thesis focuses on the informal codes of appropriateness which condition and restrict the experiences of belonging and self-fashioning by the women members of the parties. The following section takes forward the discussion on the concept of belonging and its use in the study of institutions.

Institutional Belonging and Self-Making:

As Nira Yuval-Davis points out in her theoretical analysis of the concept of belonging: '(P)eople can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 199). The vast body of existing literature across disciplines on the concept of belonging explores it as a dynamic process- reflective of the networks and relations of power in society, and highlights the intersections between the individual and collective aspects of belonging (Ignatieff, 1993; Castells, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This thesis has accessed the conceptual reservoir of belonging in order to analyse the interpretive meaning-making that the women members of the selected political parties in West Bengal undertake in relation to the institutional cultures of their respective parties and larger social and historical norms.

In their study of women managers in Spanish labour organisations (Rojo and Esteban, 2005), Luisa Martín Rojo and Concepción Gómez Esteban illustrate the 'double bind' that women in managerial posts often find themselves in- the traditionalist gendered roots of conventional models of managerial leadership render women constitutively unqualified for such posts. In order to conform to established professional standards of

efficiency, women managers are expected to work twice as hard as their male counterparts while de-feminising themselves. However, despite their efforts, women managers are faced with exclusion from professional as well as social peer networks in the workplace primarily due to their being perceived as aggressive and authoritarian. Similarly, feminist studies of political leadership have also highlighted the androcentric premises supporting idealised models of leadership. In her sociological study of British women parliamentarians belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, Nirmal Puwar argued, 'women in the privileged spaces of the political realm are matter out of place' (Puwar 2004, 11), drawing a causal relationship between the conservative perception of women legislators as 'space invaders' and the historical exclusion of the bodies of women and racial/ethnic minorities from the higher echelons of power in particular and from public spaces in general. Highlighting the strategies through which women in professional and institutional spaces are perceived as ill-fitting and unsuitable, Puwar lays emphasis upon the prioritising of reason in modern politics which is represented as being disembodied and corresponds with the undermining of emotions, affect and the body (Puwar, 2004). While the privileged positioning of the '(white) male body' contributes to it being equated with universal reason, the 'awkward and conspicuous form' (Puwar, 2004, 78) of the female body is held as being trapped in its own materiality. Women's belonging in spaces of political decision-making is therefore determined by their historical location in the peripheries of institutional culture. At the same time their experiences of belonging are conditioned by the intersections of race, gender, class and other social categories (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2007, 2011) that constitute their individual subjectivities. From the interviews conducted among the women members of the three political parties, this thesis has analysed their articulations of institutional belonging while being cognisant of the

influence of their respective social positionings and ideological affiliations among other themes. In the process, the thesis has also traced the ‘requisites of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 20)- the formal and informal codes of gendered behaviour and interactions which serve to regulate access to power and facilitate belonging within the institutional spaces of the political parties under study.

Alongside institutional belonging, this thesis has also adopted the concept of self-making for its analysis of the narratives offered by the women members of the political parties in interviews conducted with them. Underlining the productive influence of disciplinary power on the constitution of social identities (Foucault, 1980), Michel Foucault; in his later works, explored the linkages between the modern ‘technologies of the self’- micro-social practices that equip individuals to cultivate themselves (Foucault, 1980; Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988) and the larger historical developments in the state and society. The existing scholarship on self-making in South Asia reflects a transition in the postcolonial understanding of the self from locating it within the binaries of the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer domains’ (Chatterjee, 1993) or of the civil society and the political society (Chatterjee, 2004, 2011) to a more ‘processual’ (Chandra and Majumder, 2013, 6) ethnographic understanding of the self that attempts to transcend binaries. Highlighting the interconnectedness between the motivations and intentionalities of individuals and the external social, economic, cultural, political and historical context they inhabit (Chandra and Majumder, 2013) the recent scholarship on self-making in South Asia has explored how the self-making of socially-situated individuals reflect and in turn, influence the broader structural processes they find themselves in (Chandra and Majumder, 2013; Kamra, 2013; Nielsen and Waldrop, 2014; Gooptu, 2016; Majumder, 2018, 2019).

The following section offers a review of the existing literature on women's political representation, gender quotas, the symbolic representations of women's political leadership and women's access to political participation in India.

Thematic Review of Literature on women's political participation, representation, and leadership in India:

Gender Quotas and the Women's Reservation Bill:

The serious political underrepresentation of women⁸ (IPU, 2020) in the Indian Parliament and state legislatures as well as the contextual specificities of gender regimes governing each political institution in India can testify to the methodological advantages of a feminist study of political institutions in the South Asian context. While one-third seat reservations for women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1993)- introduced in the rural Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and urban municipal local bodies (ULB), contributed substantially towards expanding the political representation and participation of women in the spaces of local self-government, the lack of gender quotas in the Parliament and the state Assemblies, perpetuate women's underrepresentation in the higher spaces of legislation.

⁸ The figures indicating women's underrepresentation in the Indian national Parliament, for instance, sheds light on the crisis in the representation of women in the major political institutions of India. After the General Elections of 2019, India holds the rank of 143 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking (IPU, 2020) of the percentage of women in national parliaments in countries across the world- recording a poor progress from its previous rank of 149 from the 2014 General Elections. While the number and percentage of women parliamentarians in the present Parliament is the highest since Indian Independence- 78 women MPs out of a total of 542; constituting 14.39% of parliamentarians (IPU, 2020), women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the national Parliament and state legislatures.

Even as the prevalence of women's political underrepresentation has generated democratic claims, movements and bills for the institutionalisation of gender quotas in national and state legislatures, proponents of gender quotas have for long been facing resistance and backlash from diverse social groups and academic positions⁹ (Kishwar, 1996; Tripathi, 2012). The experience of the Women's Reservation Bill- which promises 33% quotas for women in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the Parliament and in the Legislative Assemblies of states, offers an instance of such determined resistance towards gender quotas in higher echelons of political decision-making in India.

The Women's Reservation Bill (The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2008) was passed by the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) of the Indian Parliament on March 9, 2010 (TOI Agency, 2010). The Bill, promising one-third seat-reservation in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) of the Parliament and in the Legislative Assemblies of states, has had a long and arduous journey; involving fierce resistance, political apathy and consistently determined campaigning by women lawmakers and advocacy groups. Despite being passed with 2/3rd majority by the Rajya Sabha- amidst dramatic and violent disruptions of parliamentary proceedings by its opponents, the Bill failed to gather a majority in the Lok Sabha and continues to languish in the House.

From its very inception in 1996 and during its later incarnations in 1998, 1999 and 2008, the Women's Reservation Bill has met with clamorous opposition while successive governments at the Centre have failed to gather support for it. An overview of the key features of the Bill is as follows (Sanyal, 2008):

⁹ Madhu Kishwar, in her critique of gender quotas, for instance, argues for a bottom-up social transformation to enhance women's political participation in the place of instituting reservation of seats for women through top-down legislation (Kishwar, 1996; Dhanda, 2000).

- 1> The Bill aims at reserving one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and in the State Legislative Assemblies.
- 2> One third of the total number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be reserved for women of those groups in the Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies.
- 3> The seats will be reserved on the basis of rotation.
- 4> Reservation of seats for women would cease to exist 15 years after the commencement of this Amendment Act.

Adhering to international conventions on Gender Equality such as the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), advocates of the Bill have pointed out the necessity of instituting quotas for women in parliamentary politics. Citing the positive outcomes of gender quotas in local self-government, studies on the performance of women policymakers in the units of rural local self-government- the Panchayats, suggest that political reservations impact policymaking (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004; Duflo, 2005; Brule, 2020).

Objections to gender quotas from different social sections primarily stem from an interweaving of misogynistic sentiments and demands for intersectional representation raised by parties and movements representing the disadvantaged castes and classes in India. A procedural argument against the Bill in its present form highlights that the provision of seat rotation will impede the political future of women candidates and undermine their accountability (Randall, 2006). The prospect of women representatives chosen through gender quotas becoming reduced to political tokens is another reservation expressed against the Bill (Randall, 2006). Among the most vocal critics of the Bill are

backward caste-based political parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). BSP leader Kumari Mayawati has called for additional quotas for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) without upsetting the existing quotas for SC and ST communities (Gilani, 2017). The leaders of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)- both parties espousing a socialist ideology and enjoying the core support bases of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar respectively- have offered stiff resistance to the promulgation of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Parliament; citing the bill as a device aimed at curbing the influence of backward castes and classes in the national legislatures (Randall, 2006). Characterising the proponents of the bill as upper caste, urban-educated, privileged women- a 'bobbed hair brigade' (Randall, 2016; Singer, 2017) that is not representative of 'poor, unattractive rural women' (Tripathi, 2012), backward caste-dominated parties have demanded the inclusion of sub-quotas for women belonging to minority social groups within the proposed 33% reservation quota. Alongside technical arguments against the Bill, an overarching discourse of misogyny and an unwillingness on the part of male parliamentarians to share power structures much of the resistance to the Bill. Frequently expressed derogatory comments by notable political leaders (Nandy, 2018) regarding political reservations for women illustrate the insecurities of male politicians around the prospect of expanding political space for their women colleagues.

In the face of continued resistance to and stagnation faced by the Women's Reservation Bill, certain alternative measures to ensure reservation for women in parliamentary politics have been suggested. Among these is the adoption of voluntary party quotas- a measure gaining in popularity among parties in recent times (Sanyal, 2008). Examples include the announcements of 33% and 41% of tickets for women

candidates by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) respectively in their candidate-lists for the 2019 General Elections (Uppal, 2019). Another alternative to the Women's Reservation Bill is the provision of dual-member constituencies (Sanyal, 2008). This would involve some constituencies to have two candidates- one of whom would be a woman. Criticisms of dual-member constituencies range from the possibility of the woman candidate being reduced to playing a superfluous role to the practical challenge involving a 50% increase in the number of parliamentarians that this measure would lead to.

Even as reservation of seats for women in legislatures continues to face resistance, gender quotas in favour of women have been instituted at the level of rural and urban local self-government in India. A growing body of literature (Kishwar, 1996; Dhanda, 2000; N. Menon, 2000; Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004; Duflo, 2005; Randall, 2006; Singer, 2007; Rai, 2007; Beaman *et al.*, 2009; Deo, 2012; Brule, 2020) around gender quotas in the rural Panchayats have sought to evaluate the functioning as well as problematise the premises and material impact of gender quotas. Wendy Singer points out, however, in her study of the Women's Reservation Bill (Singer, 2017), the paucity of dialogue among different works of research produced under the existing literature on gender quotas. While several of the research works on gender quotas have stemmed from experiences in activism (Kishwar, 1996; N. Menon, 2000; Deo, 2012), others encompass a wide range of methodological approaches- featuring quantitative statistical analysis (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004; Duflo, 2005), interviewing (Rai, 2012) and comparative inquiry (Randall, 2006). Author Rachel E. Brule in her recent work on women's political representation in rural self-government in India draws a positive correlation between gender quotas, women's property inheritance rights, and their bargaining power in social events such as marriages (Brule, 2020). In their works (Duflo

and Chattopadhyay, 2004; Duflo, 2005) on how political reservation for women affects policy-making at the level of local self-government in India, Esther Duflo and Raghavendra Chattopadhyay argue that, despite structural limitations and deep-rooted social biases operating against them, elected women leaders tend to exercise policy choices in favour of public goods that are conventionally perceived as ‘women’s concerns’ (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004).

Such narratives of women’s political accountability, however, need to be comprehended in the context of a long-dominant discourse governing the symbolic representation of women’s political participation in India. Rooted in the prevailing perception of women as relational beings- understood essentially in relation to other individuals such as children or community and the nation, this discourse identifies the political participation and representation of women as being primarily restricted to the sector of women and children’ development (Ciotti, 2017). Alongside the perception of women as relational, this discourse also characterises women as subjects in need of protection and enhancement (Rajan, 2003; Ciotti, 2017). In her work on the engagement of the postcolonial Indian State with women (Rajan, 2003), Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan highlights the gendering of citizenship by the Indian State as well as the process through which the state constructs women as a category. Rajan argues that the relationship between the Indian State and its women subjects is one of ‘custodianship’ (Rajan, 2003) rather than of citizenship. While underlining the inability of the Indian State to deliver justice to its custodians despite its formal constitutional claims of equal rights and liberties, Rajan raises the question of women, who with their cultural association with community and care, have been traditionally perceived of as being devoid of attributes such as rationality and individualism that defines the construct of the ideal citizen (Rajan, 2003).

The discourse of relationality and what has been termed as ‘representation by identity’ (Singer, 2017) can assist in understanding the phenomenon of allocating ministerial portfolios such as Women and Child Development to women legislators and the political consensus that marked the implementation of gender quotas at the level of local self-government. On the other hand, the strong resistance towards the implementation of gender quotas in legislatures reflects, among other factors, the traditionalist perception of women being unsuitable for the political representation of larger geographic areas (Singer, 2017). This thesis, through its critical examination of the institutional cultures of political parties as well as of the macro-social, cultural and historical developments shaping the evolution of the parties, also attempts to gauge the varying perceptions on gender quotas among the women members of the selected political parties.

This sub-section covered the discourse on gender quotas in contemporary Indian politics, focusing on the debates and deliberations surrounding the Women’s Reservation Bill as well as on the material impact of political reservation for women in rural local self-government. Alongside gender quotas, this sub-section also discussed how the symbolic construction of women as relational and as subjects in need of state protection in India continue to deprive women from assuming equality of citizenship and also perpetuate women’s underrepresentation in politics. The following sub-section takes forward the discussion on the symbolic constructions of women, exploring it in the context of women’s political leadership in India- focusing in particular on the discursive construct of political asceticism that the thesis has used to interpret and analyse the performance of populist leadership by Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal.

Political Asceticism and Women's Political Leadership in India:

The association of women with relationality and traditional feminine attributes have been located in studies on women's political leadership. As an explanation for the chronic underrepresentation of women in politics, feminist studies on political leadership have highlighted the gendered premises supporting idealised models of leadership. In such models, the privileging of hegemonic masculine traits such as aggression, assertiveness, rationality and ambition (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Sjoberg, 2013) and a corresponding devaluation of traits deemed feminine- such as kindness, nurturing, emotional and warmth (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Sjoberg, 2013) tend to relegate women as constitutively unfit for leadership roles. Contextualised studies on the gendered underpinnings of populist leadership (Rousseau, 2010; Meret, 2015; Geva, 2018) have examined the foundational influence of gender constructs and modalities peculiar to the particular discursive environment in which the stylistic performance of populist leadership is carried out. The normative status accorded to such discursive constructs generates standards for the political leadership which are often used by the followers and critics to interpret and evaluate the performance of populist leaders.

In the Indian context, this thesis has studied the West Bengali female populist leader Mamata Banerjee's performance of leadership through a particular discursive construct- political asceticism (Ray Chaudhury, 2021c)- that continues to extend its influence over several different, and often contending, political ideologies and cultural practices in India. Conventionally associated with monastic practices, the discourse of asceticism in India advocated a renunciatory, non-materialistic ideational approach towards life and involved a set of practices aimed at a rigorous disciplining of the body, mind and the self of the renunciate. Among these disciplinary practices, the significance

of *Brahmacharya*- loosely translated as celibacy, is critical. In traditional Hindu socio-cultural discourse, the ascetic- conceptualised as an upper-caste male, was accorded a special status outside the hierarchical socio-economic system of caste due to his having renounced society including the institutions of marriage and property as well as social conventions around the observance of caste (Alter, 1994; Thapar, 2010). Celibacy and the abjuring of *kamini* (women) and *kanchan* (gold/material wealth) (Sarkar, 1992) being theologically endorsed as means for achieving physical and spiritual harmony (Alter, 1994, 1996), the *brahmachari* (observer of brahmacharya) ascetic was often placed in the position of a social critic by virtue of his austere living and his perceived superior spiritual status (Thapar, 2010). The moral power ascribed to the ascetic has had a deeply influential and constitutive impact upon the different political discourses inhabiting the macro-social culture in colonial and postcolonial India (Alter, 1994; Dasgupta, 2014).

The body-politics of political asceticism and its privileging of moral authority derived from austere living has been articulated- in different ways and in combination with a range of other contextually specific cultural constructs in a diverse range of political thought and practices in India- including anti-colonial revolutionary extremism (Gordon, 1974; Heehs, 1993; Ghosh, 2013)- where asceticism was deployed to create the model of the celibate self-sacrificing martyr revolutionary, Hindu Nationalism (Sharma, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2007)- which through its use of the ascetic mode seeks to propagate ideals of Hindu supremacy, and even communism (Morris Jones, 1963; Dasgupta, 2014)- wherein the theological character of ascetic self-making is reframed into a secular one (Dasgupta, 2014). The influence of the ascetic mode has nowhere else been more apparent, however, than in the Gandhian discourse of non-violent civil resistance or *Satyagraha* (Alter, 1996). Illustrated by the life and politics of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the discourse of non-violent resistance presented a close interrelationship

between rigorous physical and spiritual self-discipline on a personal space and non-violent resistance in the national political space (Alter, 1996) that was mediated through the ascetic mode of moral force. The *performative* elements in Gandhi's personal leadership style- his demonstratively austere and indigenous sartorial and dietary habits- influenced by the discourse of Hindu widowhood (Sarkar, 2001), his adoption of hunger-strikes as a mode of protest as well as his strict observance of celibacy, established on a visceral level (Alter, 1996)- the paradigm of the modern political ascetic in India.

The discourse of political asceticism is a gendered one. The androcentric conceptualisation of the figure of the ascetic- whether in its religious form or in its politicised avatar, is accompanied by an emphasis upon the shunning of female company and material luxury. It is the strict avoidance of celibacy and austerity that accords a superior moral authority to the modern political ascetic. Even so, Gandhi's performance of political asceticism contributed towards affirming his image as a benevolent patriarch ('*Bapu*') to the nation. How does such a discourse perceive and represent women who aspire to political leadership? The orthodox symbolic representation of upper-caste Hindu women as primarily belonging to the private sphere of the home was the late-19th and early-20th century nationalist imagination of the '*grihalakshmi*' (domestic goddess) of the sacrosanct 'inner domain' that was to be kept free from the coloniser's reach (Chatterjee 1993, 120) and 'aestheticised' as well as sacralised as an embodiment of regional (Bengali) and national pride (Chakrabarty, 2000, 159-172). Such symbolic representations continued extending their influence into post-independent Indian social and political culture, despite the mass participation of women in the freedom struggle. Such a discursive construct assisted in sustaining the conventional gendered division of spaces (Basu and Jeffery, 1998; Basu, 2005; Phadke, 2011), resulting in the imposition of restrictions on the visibility, mobility and participatory potential of women. Instances

of women's political activism were represented under the frame of the unnatural under such a context and even non-militant, citizen mobilizations and struggles undertaken by women were perceived to be transgressive on one hand (Menon, 2004; Tejaswini, N. and Tharu, 2012) and at the same time, accorded a degree of moral legitimacy on the other- primarily by virtue of their perceived status outside the field of instrumentalist politics¹⁰. Even as women's participation in political activism was thus rationalised in the light of moral exigencies, it did not translate into advocacy for leadership roles for women in political movements. Similarly, the discourse of political asceticism privileges the moral leadership of the idealised figure of the outsider in politics who is predominantly male in embodiment. The Gandhian ethic of political leadership that privileged non-attachment to political power- generated a rhetoric of anti-politics in post-independent Indian political culture (Hansen, 2008; Reddy, 2018) and has often inspired popular movements against the perceived corruption and moral decadence of mainstream institutional politics. More often than not, such movements gather momentum around the idealised, male figure of a citizen activist, who represents the incorruptible political outsider by virtue of his austere personal lifestyle¹¹- an emulation of the Gandhian style of political

¹⁰For instance, authors Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana discuss the Indian media's extensive coverage of and fascination with the vigorous political mobilization by upper-caste Hindu women in the Anti-Mandal agitation of 1990 (Tejaswini, N. and Tharu, 2012).

¹¹ An instance of such citizen movements can be located in the India Against Corruption (2011) agitation against the then-ruling United Progressive Alliance national government that large numbers of middle-class citizens actively participated in (Reddy, 2018); centered around the austere figure of Anna Hazare-

asceticism. In this context, studying the performance of the ascetic mode of power through the rhetoric of anti-politics by female political leaders would offer interesting insights on their strategies of self-making as well as on their negotiations with conventional standards for and gendered expectations from political leadership.

Characterised by an ethical negation of instrumentalist ‘power’ politics, the rhetoric of anti-politics; through the ascetic mode of power, endorses a leadership model that claims to give voice to the moral indignation of the people against political corruption by the established elites and social decay while at the same time, propagating an imagination of the ‘people’ as a pure and righteous entity (Hansen, 2008), undivided by sectarian affiliations. Following the decades of state-led industrial development under the Nehruvian discourse of scientific temper (Nandy, 1990; Arnold, 2013; Mahanti, 2016) in post independent India, the succeeding decades witnessed a proliferation of culturally and politically influential ‘gurus’ (religious teachers) (Copeman and Ikegame, 2014) whose emergence marked what has been identified as a wave of New Spirituality (Gooptu, 2016)- preoccupied with the concerns of spiritual self-development, indigenisation and collective social service. The rise of New Spirituality has been concomitant with the retreat of the state and the ascent of the neoliberal mode of governance. The ascent of influential Hindu ascetic-gurus such as Swami Ramdev (Bhatia, 2011; Gooptu, 2016; Longkumar, 2018; Reddy, 2018) as national icons in citizens’ protests against corruption in the government and the rising appeal of Neo-Hindutva (Anderson and Longkumer, 2018; Reddy, 2018)- a contemporary version of the Hindu Nationalist discourse that

a veteran rural development activist and *Satyagrahi* (observer of Satyagraha), whose hunger-strikes in demand for an anti-corruption legislation sought to emulate the Gandhian style of resistance.

privileges an apolitical leadership model, in the past decade have been instrumental in reinstating the rhetoric of anti-politics in India.

In the recent years, the rhetoric of anti-politics- particularly its anti-elite vocabulary and its symbolic appeals to a homogenised body of people, has been appropriated by populist political forces on the right- exemplified by the leadership style of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as well as on the centre- represented by leaders such as Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Mamata Banerjee of the AITC among others. In particular, the ingredient of moralistic and anti-pluralist binary antagonism between the ‘righteous people’ and the ‘decadent elite’ that characterises populism (Müller, 2016; Riedel, 2017) resonates with the rhetoric of anti-politics. Banerjee’s usage of the ascetic mode in her self-fashioning as a political leader in particular, offers the space for a critical engagement with the gendered character of political asceticism as well as that of the ideal leadership model it endorses. In the thesis chapter on the gendered institutional culture of the AITC, an interpretive reading of Banerjee’s autobiography and some selected institutional texts from the AITC will highlight Banerjee’s cultivation of political asceticism, the rhetoric of anti-politics and other cultural constructs for her self-fashioning as a populist leader in the broader discursive field of West Bengali and Indian electoral politics. Underlining the feminist approach to the study of political leadership (Sjoberg, 2013), the parallel engagements with Banerjee’s autobiography, the institutional discourse of the AITC and with the perceptions of her leadership from her supporters and critics in the thesis will also assist in illustrating the interdependent relationship between leaders and their followers. This sub-section explored the discourse around the gendered symbolic representations of women political leaders in India- focusing in particular on the discursive construct of political asceticism which the thesis has adopted to interpret

Mamata Banerjee's populist leadership. The following and final sub-section reviews the existing literature on grassroots and elite women's political participation and the cultivation of their political subjectivities. The following sub-section also explores the role of extra-institutional factors such as family networks in conditioning women's access to political spaces and their political participation and locates the gap in existing literature that the thesis will address.

Women's Access to Political Participation:

Recent works (Ghosh and Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2005; Sen, 2007; Devika and Thampi, 2012; Bedi, 2016; Ciotti, 2017) on women's political participation have documented shifts in the dominant political culture with their qualitative and ethnographic studies of the strategies through which both grassroots and elite women politicians use traditionalist discursive structures in innovative ways to claim political space, visibility and authority. Atreyee Sen and Tarini Bedi, in their rich ethnographies on women members of the Shiv Sena- a Maratha-Hindu cultural nationalist right-wing political party predominant in the state of Maharashtra, identify the discursive strategies of self-representations used by the women in the metaphors of 'warrior women' (Sen, 2007) and 'dashing' (Bedi, 2016) respectively, as devices to augment their political presence. Engaging with the other end of the ideological spectrum, research on 'successful' women political leaders of the CPI(M) in rural local government in Kerala by J. Devika and Binitha Thampi underlines how deep expertise on matters pertaining to everyday local governance was valued by the women leaders as reason for their success (Devika and Thampi, 2012). At the same time, the authors also note the persistence of reluctance among women political leaders and local government office-bearers in

acknowledging ambition as the motivation for their political careers and discuss how ‘social service’ was instead more commonly chosen by the leaders to describe their work in politics (Devika and Thampi, 2012). Manuela Ciotti’s ethnographic research on the women of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a political party that draws its core constituency from the historically marginalised Scheduled Castes/Dalits, highlights the manifold discursive manoeuvres such as de-feminisation and the metaphor of ‘*seva*’ (service) through the uses of which elite and grassroots women in the BSP cement their positions within the party, resulting in the growing consolidation of women as a ‘distinctive’ political identity (Ciotti, 2017). Echoes of this particular phenomenon can also be found in the work of Shirin Rai, who in her article on the narratives of women Parliamentarians (Rai, 2012) traces the rising assertiveness of women politicians in demanding political reservations within the temporal context of reservation for other marginalised social groups in India including Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the post-1990s period. The increasing salience of women as an electoral constituency has been demonstrated particularly in the General and state assembly elections conducted in the recent years (Kamra, 2019; Spary, 2020; Ray Chaudhury, 2021b).

In the trajectory of post-independent India’s electoral democracy, networks of family and dynasty have critically influenced women’s access to elite spaces of political decision-making. The phenomenon of Political Dynasticism is a widespread attribute of party and electoral politics in India, to the extent that about 30% and 22% of the members of the Lok Sabha- the Lower House of the Indian Parliament belonged to political dynasties in the 2009 and 2014 elections respectively (Chandra, 2016, 14). Originating in the democratic electoral politics of post-independent India, political dynasties are characterised by the active presence of several members of a family in different layers of state and national politics (Chandra, 2016). Leadership in parties dominated by dynastic

leaders are often 'inherited' by their children or other close family members. While the existing scholarship on dynastic politics in South Asia (Malhotra, 2004; Mufti, 2008; Chhibber, 2011; Manikandan C. and Wyatt, 2014; K. Chandra, 2016; Rai and Spary, 2019) argues that the major beneficiaries of dynastic ties in Indian politics continue to be Hindu upper caste males, it also highlights the positive role played by dynasticism in terms of facilitating the democratic inclusion of underrepresented social groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), women and religious minorities. The high proportions of women MPs (Members of Parliament) with dynastic ties in the 2009 (69%) and 2014 (43%) Lok Sabha elections (Chandra, 2016, 52) attests to the significance of family networks in the recruitment of women in Indian electoral politics. As Kanchan Chandra points out, the criticality of dynastic networks in women's access to higher spaces of political legislation in India such as the Parliament is augmented particularly in the face of the absence of quotas for women in such spaces (K. Chandra, 2016). Family/dynastic networks, therefore, often serve the role of gender quotas in parliamentary politics.

The significance of family ties in the realm of party politics corresponds to the organisational weakness of political parties (DeSouza, Peter Ronald and Sridharan, 2006; K. Chandra, 2016) in India and the profitability or higher returns associated with holding state office (K. Chandra, 2016). The difference in the degree of organisational weakness among the diverse range of political parties in India, however, carries implications for the representation of women in these parties. The relatively stronger organisational edifices of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for instance, contribute to the overall comparatively weaker influence of dynasticism in these parties (K. Chandra, 2016), despite the persistence of clientelist brokerage politics

and dynastic ties in the local levels of party politics (Sen, 2007; Wyatt, 2010; Manikandan C. and Wyatt, 2014; Thachil, 2014b, 2014a; Bedi, 2016; Ziegfeld, 2016).

While family networks constitute a factor of decisive importance in women's access to political parties in India, their influence extends beyond formal institutional processes such as political recruitment and candidate selection. As Shirin Rai points out in her study of women parliamentarians in India (Rai, 2012; Rai and Spary, 2019), the support derived from family networks encompass a broad range of informal institutional requirements for women politicians. Such support may range from providing useful political connections and resources to assistance in domestic responsibilities traditionally associated with women- such as childcare and housework, and offering moral support (Rai, 2012; Rai and Spary, 2019). Within the institutional context of political parties in India, therefore, familial resources and support become critical in the face of the scarce availability of political capital for women party-members and the lack of institutionally mandated measures- such as day-care facilities and accommodative party-meeting hours (Verge, 2015), aimed at creating women-friendly workplace cultures. Alongside serving as a resource-pool and a support-system for women party workers and aspirants, family is also frequently deployed as a metaphor in institutional discourses as well as by party-members in their linguistic strategies of articulating their sense of belonging and the constitution of their political subjectivities.

While the recent ethnographic literature on women's political participation has delved deep into the lived experience (Scott, 1991) of women political workers at the elite and grassroots levels, any attempt at understanding the political institutions that the women inhabit also needs to examine the institutional cultures that the women members reproduce, negotiate with, and contest. Such a research perspective involves critical engagements with the significant documents as well as material practices through which

the propagation of hegemonic gender discourses is accomplished within these political institutions. Gilles Verniers in his article on ideological and material transformations in the Samajwadi Party (SP) argues that a study of party ideology and self-representation (Verniers, 2018) are insufficient in characterising the nature of a political party- due to the predominantly pragmatic operation of political parties in India, and that contextuality, sociological composition and political practices (Verniers, 2018) of the party are more reliable indicators. While acknowledging the significance of contextuality, material practices and sociological composition, and incorporating it into its methodology, the thesis diverges from Verniers' characterisation of party discourse and self-representation as 'poor markers' (Verniers, 2018, 45) of the institutional culture of a political party. As it shall be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on research methodology, the thesis; under the interpretivist method of Discourse Analysis, engages with documents and texts produced by the political parties to delineate the production of gender regimes within these parties, while at the same time, it also interprets relevant party practices that reproduce the hegemonic gender discourses. With the aid of Discourse Analysis, the thesis unpacks the linguistic strategies that institute dominant ideologies and discursive structures through party documents and self-representations.

While the existing literature on women's political participation and representation in India primarily incorporates research on gender quotas on one hand and women's participation in social movements (Agnihotri, I. and Mazumdar, 1995; Menon, 1999; Tejaswini, N. and Tharu, 2012) on the other, there is a critical scarcity of existing research on women's participation within formal political institutions. With the exceptions of immersive ethnographic studies on single political parties, there has been no institutionalist research on the phenomenon of gendered institutional continuity and change. Through its particular analysis of the populist leadership of Mamata Banerjee in

West Bengal, the thesis will contribute to the study of women political leaders in general and in India in particular. This thesis also seeks to contribute to the gap in the existing literature on gender and politics in India with the aid of the feminist institutionalist approach and the interpretivist Discourse Analysis of political party documents and party practices. With its focus on the institutional belonging and political self-making of women political party members, this thesis will also make a contribution to the field of feminist institutionalist research on gender regimes in political parties- adding an experiential dimension to the corpus of such research on candidate selection and political recruitment.

Conclusion:

This chapter has explored the developing dialogues and debates around a range of themes pertaining to the gendering of institutions and women's participation and representation in formal political institutions such as political parties in the West and India. It has discussed the contributions of the theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism that has informed this thesis, laying the ground for a feminist institutionalist engagement with the formal and informal norms and practices governing gendered institutional cultures of the three selected political parties in West Bengal in the subsequent chapters. It has also reviewed the existing academic literature and debates on women's political representation, participation, and leadership in India- reflecting on the enduring influence of larger social, historical, cultural conventions on women's access to the spaces of political decision-making in India. The following chapter discusses the interpretivist methodological framework that has informed the research conducted in the thesis.

3. Research Methodology and Method

Introduction:

Adhering to feminist institutionalism's commitment to methodological pluralism, this thesis has adopted an Interpretivist Research Methodology- incorporating Discourse Analysis of documents and semi-structured interviewing, to study the gendered practices through which the three selected political parties in West Bengal reproduce their discursive institutional continuity as well as to locate possibilities of institutional change. Herein the thesis also acknowledges that institutional dynamism in political parties does not necessarily connote change in the progressive direction of enhanced inclusion of women and other marginalised identities in party cultures.

The chapter is categorised into five sections. The first section outlines the interpretive methodological approach that informs the research conducted in the thesis- focusing on the method of Discourse Analysis in particular. The second section explores the research approach of in-depth case study and discusses the selection of West Bengal as a case in the thesis. The third section covers the analysis of party documents and other political text in the thesis while the fourth section focuses on the interviews conducted among women members of the three political parties. The final section discusses the ethical and practical limitations faced during research and the influence of self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher on the development of research in the thesis.

Interpretivist Research Methodology: Discourse Analysis

Integrating poststructuralist insights with the conventional institutionalist lens, this thesis broadly adopts an interpretive approach. Distinct from the Positivist school, Interpretivism goes beyond the study of quantifiable phenomena in order to look for the meanings and motivations behind the practices that human subjects engage in (Blaikie, 2010). Exploring the complex web of human motivations and everyday meaning-making in a social environment, interpretivism also prioritises the particularities of historical and spatial contexts. The privileging of the quotidian as a central research concern marks out the interpretivist approach, particularly in its eschewing of universal theories in favour of generating conceptual categories from within the space of everyday existence. Focusing on how individual subjects in a social setting make sense of their world and engage in routine material and symbolic activities, an interpretivist researcher tries to imbibe the insider view of the social environment rather than imposing an outsider's gaze upon it (Blaikie, 2010). The adoption of the insider perspective contributes substantially towards ethically distinguishing interpretivism from the imperialistic premises¹² underlying the more conventional methods favoured in political science, thereby also assisting in decolonising the discipline itself.

The interpretivist commitment toward generating theories from the dimension of everyday interpretations of the social space by its members highlights its affinities with

¹² Alongside the post-positivist critique (Henriques *et al.*, 1998) of how statistical research methods based on positivism tend to reduce complex human subjects into numerical data and intricately layered social phenomena into simplistic 'variables', positivist research is also critiqued for its Eurocentric premises stemming from the rationalist, liberal-Enlightenment ideology of linear, progressive development that also underlay the colonial-imperial discourse of European racial superiority over nations and communities of the 'non-West'.

the approach of ‘*abductive reasoning*’ (Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, 2008; Blaikie, 2010). Distinguished from the *inductive* thrust towards reaching generalisable conclusions from the observation of specific phenomena as well as from the *deductive* premise of a general hypothesis to kickstart research, the abductive approach holds the idea that social reality is constituted by the everyday practices of its participants (Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, 2008; Blaikie, 2010) and abandons the search for generalisable theories. While interpretivism studies how individual subjects engage in meaning-making, it also recognises the intersubjective (Blaikie, 2010) character of such activities- the shared nature of symbols, meanings, metaphors, and cultural practices. It is therefore a significant concern of interpretive research to explore the process through which members of a social setting partake in and reproduce common meanings and symbols from the shared cultural repository of the particular society. Importantly, interpretive research recognises that membership of individual subjects in a social setting involves the assumption of multiple social roles and identities, sometimes played at once (Schatz, 2009). This recognition is complemented with the aid of poststructuralist insights on the play of power relations that underlie the privileging of some identities over others (Foucault, 1980). An instance of how the thesis explores this particular strand would be the phenomenon where popular women political leaders in South Asia such as J. Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee, and Kumari Mayawati continue to be addressed in relational terms- *Amma* (mother), *Didi* (elder sister) and *Behenji* (respected sister) respectively.

Thus, while the interpretive approach does make use of broader conceptual categories of political science, such as power, structure and agency, it does not aspire to reaching generalised conclusions and generating universally applicable theories. This thesis adheres to the ethical preference for subjective meaning-making- reflecting it

particularly in its adoption of the method of interviewing women members of the political parties under study. Eschewing ‘predictive theorising’ (Schatz, 2009, 4) in favour of quotidian interpretations of social life, the thesis attempts to treat and analyse the interviews conducted only through the lens of conceptual categories such as power, agency and subjectivity while abjuring the imposition of universal theoretical and ideological frameworks upon them. It must be acknowledged here, however, that the constitutive limitation of the researcher’s own outsider perspective, value judgements and innate prejudices have certainly diluted the authenticity of representing the interviewee’s perspective (Geertz, 1973). This limitation gains in prominence and complexity when the ethical preferences and/or ideological allegiances of the interviewee and the researcher are at odds (Schatz, 2009). Such disjuncture between the ideological positioning of the interviewee and the researcher is a theme that has been encountered and dealt with in the thesis. Having pointed out the inherent limitations of applying the interpretive approach to the conduct and study of interviews, it also needs to be noted that the gulf between the interviewee and the researcher is not without some analytical advantage. Adopting the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s concept of ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur, 1970) to address the insider-outsider or the ‘emic-etic’ (Geertz, 1973) binary, political ethnographer Edward Schatz advocated the exercise of caution and critique on the part of the researcher- an ethic of ‘*suspicion*’- while conducting and analysing interviews and other text in order to detect subtle and obscure meanings and the play of power relations behind seemingly innocuous statements. The unbridgeable distance between the interviewee and the researcher can therefore become an analytical tool to augment the researcher’s interpretive study. This thesis, in its analysis of the interviews conducted, adopts this lens of critique and caution even as it tries to approximate a broadly empathic approach to the interviewees’ interpretation of their lifeworlds. The interpretive study of

documents, images, and macro-social historical shifts alongside that of interviews in order to fully comprehend the affective experience of belonging (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Eriksen, 2015) in the institution of the political party introduces in the thesis the element of *'ethnographic sensibility'* (Schatz, 2009). Marked by its inclusive character, ethnographic sensibility connects the two significant research activities of fieldwork and deskwork by treating both interviews and documents as texts to be analysed and interpreted. At the same time, the interpretive/ethnographic commitment towards subjective meaning-making serves to desist the researcher from outrightly invalidating inconsistencies encountered in the processes of interviewing or analysis- favouring what Dvora Yanow terms as the *'yes, and'* approach (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, 76). Harnessing insights derived from across disciplinary boundaries therefore, this thesis engages in contextually-rooted, mid-range theorisations on the reproduction and challenging of hegemonic institutional gender discourses within the political parties of West Bengal. In the following subsection, the chapter undertakes a detailed exploration of the interpretivist research method of Discourse Analysis, focusing on how the latter will serve to unpack the gendered institutional cultures of the three political parties studied in this thesis.

Discourse Analysis:

The discourse analysis conducted within the thesis is informed by the elements of institutional critique and systemic transformation. For its study of the gendered political party cultures, the thesis has borrowed from the conceptual arsenal of both Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis. In the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a discourse is understood as *'social practice'*

characterised by a co-constitutiveness between an event and the institutional and macro-social environment which hosts the event (Wodak, 1996). Discourse is, therefore, primarily understood as action (van Dijk, 1990) and its units of analysis ('texts') under CDA encompass varied forms of artefacts, including written text, images, and audio-visual content. The critical influence of historically contingent social and cultural circumstances in shaping the event to be analysed is highlighted in a popular definition of the term 'discourse' – 'text in context' (van Dijk, 1990). Texts, therefore, are not interpreted in isolation but with reference to their interrelatedness with a series of other texts¹³. Similar to the intertwined nature of texts, a discourse too, is not seen as existing in a self-contained sphere but as operating in close interrelationships with other discourses. This interconnectedness among discourses, termed as 'interdiscursivity' or as 'orders of discourse' (Fairclough, 2003), has been conceptualised by Norman Fairclough through the differences in genres and styles of discourses (Fairclough, 2003). Developing a three-tier model for conducting CDA of texts, Fairclough highlights the significance of the processes of production, distribution and consumption of the text (Fairclough, 1995) in CDA. Following Fairclough's scheme of CDA, this thesis interprets the selected texts ('discursive units') in the light of the macro-historical context of the larger 'social practices' the text operates in (Fairclough, 1995). The reproduction of hegemonic gender regimes within the political parties shall therefore be comprehended in the context of their relationship with the broader social and historical constructions of gender norms in

¹³ Julia Kristeva's theorisations on '*intertextuality*' (Kristeva, 1980) constituted the conceptual foundation of discursive textual analysis. Under this perspective, any text exists only in relation with a body of other texts, and is thus an 'intertext'. Challenging the conventional view of a text as an autonomous, 'bounded' unit, and influenced by the post-structuralist argument that no text resides outside its interpretation, intertextuality illustrates how a text is 'always already' immersed in its historical, conceptual and linguistic environment.

the region of West Bengal. With the aid of CDA, the thesis aims to unveil the informal practices and processes through which dominant gender norms and hierarchies of power are legitimised within the parties.

Among the conceptual categories that constitute the bedrock of CDA, that of power occupies pre-eminence. In its study of power, the element of ‘social power’- exercised by groups and institutions, is prioritised over the power exercised by individuals (van Dijk, 2001). Highlighting the co-constitutiveness of structure and agency, the exercise of individual power is interpreted as an effect of institutional hegemony. Driven by the recognition that power, dominance and hegemony in society are institutionalised through the judiciary, the police, etc and ideologically sustained through the media, the education system, etc, Critical Discourse analysts seek to detect the abuses of power through the tool of privilege of access to discourse and communication (van Dijk, 1993). It is argued that the greater control a particular social group can exercise upon a variety of genres of discourse, the greater is its power and dominance (van Dijk, 1993). CDA thus offers a methodological framework which assists in the study of how power and dominance is exercised and abused in institutions by ‘power elites’ (van Dijk, 1993)- to the disadvantage of marginalised social groups, including women. The determination of meaning and the construction of knowledge through discourse involves the exercise of power through both formal and informal channels. Feminist research on gender norms governing ‘appropriateness’ (Chappell and Waylen, 2013) within British legislative institutions, for instance, have highlighted the androcentric premises behind the model of the ideal legislator (Puwar, 2004) or the ideal electoral candidate (Norris, Pippa and Lovenduski, 1995; Kenny, 2013; Kenny and Verge, 2016). Characterising an institution as a ‘speech community’ (Fairclough, 1995)- with its distinct genre of vocabulary, Fairclough draws attention to the processes through

which the institution and its 'subjects' (members of the institutions) influence each other (Fairclough, 1995). With his adoption of the term subjects in the place of 'participants' (Fairclough, 1995), Fairclough attempts to move away from the humanist ideal of autonomous individuality, displaying the influence of post-structuralism. Fairclough's assertion that 'discourse makes people, as well as people make discourse' (Fairclough, 1995), assists in the understanding of how subjects not only reiterate the prevailing discourse within institutions but also reinterpret and often transform the discourse in the process of performing it (Rathzel, 1997). Alongside studying the phenomenon of institutional continuity, CDA, therefore, can also support that of institutional change, furthering the cause of resistance to social injustice.

Even though CDA assists in detecting instances of resistance to and subversion of hegemonic discourses in institutions, it can be limited in its historical focus. As Fairclough acknowledges, CDA analysis can often fail to reflect upon the effect of larger historical processes (Fairclough, 1995) on the trajectory of institutions. The need for greater focus on the macro-historical phenomena of social transformation is underlined by Fairclough to address the inadequacies of CDA (Fairclough, 1995). It is to this particular end that the eclectic theoretical repository that constitutes the conceptual base of the thesis also includes streams within historical institutionalist literature that focus on the complex forms and dynamics of institutional change. A point of convergence between feminist discourse analysis and historical institutionalism is the tendency to examine gendered power regimes within an institution by locating the spatio-temporal and historical context of the latter. Under this framework, the dynamics of gender within a particular institution would therefore be understood with reference to hegemonic cultural mores that govern the macro-social ecology which the institution is situated in. This approach contributes towards historicising the institution and also assists in illustrating

the complex ways in which gender and other categories of oppression such as race, class and caste interact to constitute the social subjectivities of actors within institutions. The thesis has sought to incorporate this approach through its attention to the historical development of the three political parties and their women's fronts- particularly that of the CPI(M) and the BJP, in its study of their gendered institutional cultures, as well as through its focus on the influence of caste, religion, class, and other social locations on the articulation of institutional belonging by women party members.

A significant arena in which categories of identity as well as oppression effectively intermingle and construct political subjectivities is that of language. In post-structuralist theories (Butler, 1997), language; far from being an innocuous medium of social communication, is understood as a system of signification- the incessant functioning of which is critical to the reproduction of power-structures and hegemonic discursive formations in the social order. Language is seen as establishing the meaning of an object not with reference to any innate attributes of the object itself but in relation to what is understood as the 'Other' of the object (Derrida, 1967). Structures of power and hierarchy in society and language are placed in a co-constitutive relationship wherein the worth of the Self is articulated by means of devaluing that of the Other. Feminist discourse analysis, bearing the influence of the post-structuralist understanding of language as well as that of critical sociolinguistics (Wodak, 1997), reveals how the meaning of 'woman' is determined with reference to its being the constitutive 'Other' to 'man'(Hansen, 2006). Much like the process of othering that is foundational to the discourse of race (Fanon, 1968), the other-ness of gender is rooted in the devaluing of the category 'woman' in relation to the category 'man' (Hansen, 2006). Stepping beyond the post-structuralist identification of Self-Other binaries in language, feminist discursive research has also developed a complex understanding of language as a system of

meanings established by means of the strategies of linking certain attributes and counterposing them to another set of links. Thus, in her discourse analysis of gender dynamics in foreign policy articulations, Lene Hansen illustrates how the meaning of the category 'woman' is understood with reference to a dual process of conjunction with a series of attributes such as 'emotional', 'motherly', and 'simple' ('linking') and juxtaposition to a set of qualities associated with the category 'man'- 'rational', 'intellectual' and 'independent' ('differentiation') (Hansen, 2006). This strategy of linking and differentiation serves to highlight the ubiquitous presence of power and gender in the prevailing institutional discourse as well as in everyday interpersonal relationships. The strategy also demonstrates, as Hansen argues, the complexities involved in the constitution of gendered subjectivities by illustrating that other-ness is not only created with juxtaposed binaries of 'man' and 'woman' but also through variations of 'degrees' within the modes of masculinity and femininity (Hansen, 2006). The ideal masculine 'self' upheld in traditionalist gender regimes, therefore, is constituted in opposition to the feminine 'other' as well as to a whole range of masculine modalities. The feminist discursive approach, however, also problematises instances of transgression of gender-norms by individual actors- such as 'masculinised' behaviour by women politicians- by establishing how such transgressions end up reaffirming traditionalist gender binaries (Lazar, 2005). In its critical engagement with traditionalist leadership stereotypes and the self-makings that women political leaders such as Mamata Banerjee and women political workers cultivate in negotiation with leadership stereotypes, this thesis has been informed by the focus of Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis on the linguistic strategy of linking and differentiation.

Within the method of Discourse Analysis, the thesis has been particularly influenced by the empirical contributions of feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005). Firstly, Even

as the elements of institutional critique and the ethical commitment towards systemic transformation distinguish the method of CDA; and the contributions of the feminist movement and scholarship is sometimes acknowledged in mainstream CDA literature (van Dijk, 1993), the corpus of CDA research has hitherto been dominated by white, male authors (Lazar, 2005). In contrast, research under feminist CDA is usually conducted by a majority of women authors on diverse spatial contexts (Lazar, 2005) - marking a departure from the eurocentrism of mainstream CDA. Secondly, the centrality of gender in feminist CDA assists in demonstrating the distinct processes through which gender permeates the everyday practice of social relations, alongside other categories of oppression (Lazar, 2005). Thirdly, the distinctly political character of feminist CDA enriches the critical core of CDA- feminist insights into the reproduction of hegemonic structures of power and oppression within institutions and in society themselves constitute what has been identified as ‘analytical resistance’ (van Dijk, 1991; Lazar, 2005). The empirical engagement of feminist CDA under the framework of feminist institutionalism with women’s substantive representation in legislatures and political parties is an instance of such politically committed research which is informed by an emancipatory focus. Feminist CDA therefore, assists substantially in furthering the agenda of radical systemic transformation by promoting a closer relationship between theory and practice (Lather, 1986) and aiding in the advocacy for the enhancement of women’s political representation.

While post-structuralist theorisations on gender, power, language and subjectivity inform the conceptual and methodological framework of the thesis, the latter also seeks to underline the material practices that follow and in turn, shape the hegemony of gendered linguistic structures within the political parties. The criticality of linguistic signs and discourses does not, therefore, foreclose the possibility of studying the ‘materiality’

of gendered bodies (Connell, 2002). Through a study of the impact of hegemonic gender discourses and disciplinary technologies on the bodies and self-makings of the women party-members, the thesis attempts to trace the strategies through which the women negotiate with and reconstitute the gender regimes of the parties. This focus on material practices and processes contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of modern institutions of the state vis a vis the social.

An important point of convergence among the schools of New Institutionalism and Critical and Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis is the acknowledgement that the realm of social practices in a particular context transcends the scope of formal rules and regulations (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). Focusing on the gendered nature and implications of informal party codes and practices, Feminist Institutional research on political parties in the recent years has highlighted the useful category of ‘rules-in-use’ (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Verge, 2015; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016; Kenny and Verge, 2016; Lowndes, 2020). Corresponding to the analytical focus of New Institutional literature on formal and informal rules is the category of ‘social logics’ used in Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis, 2000; Laclau, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Categorized under the methodological approach of the Logics of Critical Explanation developed by Jason Glynos and David Howarth, social logics- a concept originally proposed by the post-Marxist scholar Ernesto Laclau in order to designate the system of rules that hold a discursive system together (Laclau, 2005), are understood as a device for ‘characterising a particular social practice or regime’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 137). As examples of social logics, Glynos and Howarth offer the ‘logics of marketisation’ and the ‘logics of spatial segregation’ which sustained the

Thatcherite neoliberal order in the United Kingdom and the system of apartheid in South Africa respectively (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 137-9).

Under the ‘logics approach’ of Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis, social logics are complemented by the categories of ‘political logics’ and ‘fantasmatic logics’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Distinct from the self-interpretations offered by actors inhabiting a particular discursive system (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), the logics approach offers the researcher a strategy for the analysis of ostensibly coherent regimes, including institutional cultures. While social logics bring to light the grid of rules that structure the systemic consistency and continuity of a particular institution, political logics illustrate the construction and challenging of antagonistic frontiers and tensions that lie at the heart of regimes and institutions. Indicating the possibilities of institutional change through the contestations of existing social binaries and boundaries, political logics can be a useful analytical category in the context of women’s symbolic representation in the institutional cultures of political parties.

Complementing both social and political logics is the final category of fantasmatic logics which aids in the analysis of the emotional identification and attachment that subjects located within a particular discourse forge with the governing discursive order in the system. Drawn from the Lacanian theorisation on the significance of fantasies in structuring reality (Zizek, 1989; Glynos and Howarth, 2007), fantasmatic logics highlight the ways in which fantasies sustain the apparent cohesiveness and the hegemonic character of a discursive system while concealing antagonisms, dislocations and contestations in the system (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Freistein and Gadinger, 2020). In its study of women’s institutional belonging in the three political parties, the thesis has applied the logics approach for identifying and characterising the informal gendered codes that condition women’s representation and participation within parties (social

logics); for locating the gender binaries and antagonisms that undergird the institutional cultures of the parties (political logics); and for assessing the appeal and the affective ‘grip’ of hegemonic gender constructions in the self-makings of women party members (fantasmatic logics).

This section has traced the interpretive methodological frame that supports the thesis as well as the method of Discourse Analysis which has been adopted by the thesis for its critical analysis of the historically contextualised structures of power that condition the political self-makings of women members and leaders of political parties. Through its engagement with the interpretivist focus on subjective meaning-making by socially situated actors, this section has laid the groundwork for the empirical study of the formal and informal gendered norms and practices that constitute the institutional cultures of the three political parties and women’s representation and belonging in such cultures. The following section discusses the approach of in-depth case study that has been selected by this thesis- focusing in particular on the case of West Bengal.

Selection of the Case:

The interpretive concern for contextual specificity makes it ideally suited for in-depth case studies that aim at immersive explorations of everyday understandings of social life in a given social setting. At the same time, the commitment towards contextuality establishes close affinities between the interpretive approach and that of feminist institutionalism. As it has been argued in feminist research on institutional gender regimes, the processes through which dominant gender discourses are reproduced within institutional spaces vary distinctly in accordance with the characters of the institutions themselves as well as with their particular macro-social and historical

locations (Lovenduski, 1998; Childs and Krook, 2006; Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Following the feminist institutionalist preference for contextually specific, mid-range theorisation, the thesis adopts the in-depth case study approach- exploring the gendered institutional culture of political parties in West Bengal; with reference to the particular socio-cultural environment and historical circumstances that have shaped the trajectories of the parties and their gender regimes.

In the field of institutionalism, the case study approach provides nuanced and in-depth insights (Flyvbjerg, 2006) into the dimensions of continuity and change experienced by particular institutions situated in specific contexts. Under the case study approach, emphasis is placed upon triangulation of insights derived from one method of research with another- such as document analysis and interviewing in this thesis- in an attempt to augment the credibility or trustworthiness of the research. The study of a given phenomenon within a particular context in case study involves tracing changes over time. Historical institutionalist research based on case studies, for instance, offer complex insights into the processes of institutional continuity and change over time while also studying the particular institution with reference to its specific historical context and macro-social environment (Thelen, 1999, 2004; Thelen and Mahoney, 2010).

Unlike statistical methods, the case study approach desists from treating individual subjects participating in the particular context as quantified entities and aids in a deeper understanding of the motives and intentionality behind the behaviour and actions of the subjects. Within the practice of case-selection, the necessity of familiarity with the spatio-temporal context, particularly while engaging with wider social and cultural norms, is of critical significance (Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). The element of familiarity gains in further importance in the context of feminist research on continuity and change in gender discourses. As has been discussed in the previous sections, the

dimensions of power, and linguistic and symbolic structures exercise a foundational influence upon how hegemonic gender discourses are materialised, reproduced and contested within a given context. Immersive familiarity with the subtle play of linguistic ambivalences in the case under study therefore contributes substantially towards generating mid-range theories on the influence of gender discourses on actors in an institutional space. Another dimension of the practice of case-selection is the choice between typical and atypical cases. While the logic of representativeness privileged by statistical methods often propels the latter to veer towards typical cases- those which exemplify the phenomena under study. Case study research, on the contrary, favours atypical cases- those which seem to challenge a conventional hypothesis, primarily due to the richness of information and complex depth of observations offered by them (Flyvbjerg, 2006), something that random sampling of typical cases seldom provide access to.

The thesis, in its selection of the case of West Bengal, has sought to take both the element of familiarity and the preference for atypical cases into consideration. As a researcher hailing from the state of West Bengal, mine own deep familiarity with the Bengali language, the particular historical trajectory and the social, cultural, and political norms and conventions peculiar to the region has been significant in the selection of West Bengal as the case to be analysed. The comprehensive knowledge and immersive familiarity required in undertaking a feminist institutionalist engagement with the gendered institutional cultures of the political parties often tends to limit the focus of the study to single-case studies (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016). Mine own inhabitation in the lifeworld of the Bengali language has been of immense value particularly while conducting interviews for the purpose of research. As will be discussed in further detail in the analyses of the interviews, my familiarity with the

nuances of the language has aided me substantially in grasping the subtle yet powerful use of linguistic ambivalences and symbolism by the interviewees- providing me with a window onto the experiential dimension of belonging in the formal institutional space of the political parties.

Alongside the element of familiarity, the peculiar historical and political trajectory of West Bengal testifies to the uniqueness of its contemporary politics. The formative early cultural influence of British colonialism and the social and religious reform movements on the imaginations of gender, race, caste and class in the anti-colonial nationalist discourse (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001), the enduring impact of the partition of undivided Bengal in 1947, the predominance of communist praxis in the post-independence history of the region, and the radical transformation of the political scene with the electoral defeat of the communist Left Front in the recent past mark the singularity of West Bengal as a region playing host to the interplay and jostling of several different ideologies. Each of these ideologies offer distinctive discourses of gender intertwined with those of caste, class, and religion that constitute the institutional cultures of the political parties in the region. While the parties can be marked by their characteristic gender regimes, the discursive frameworks they each adhere to do not exist in isolation, however. Within the context of contemporary West Bengal's political culture, these gender discourses interact with one another- often reflecting and absorbing elements from rival discourses. Aside from the interdiscursivity of gender in the state, the political culture of the state itself has undergone an almost paradigmatic shift in the recent

decade from a primarily left-secular¹⁴ hegemony to centrist-Populism¹⁵ and has also witnessed the rapid recent surge in right-wing politics¹⁶. The respective ideological locations of the left-socialist Communist Party of India (Marxist), the centrist-populist All-India Trinamool Congress, and the Hindu right wing Bharatiya Janata Party has informed the selection of these three political parties by the thesis. The lingering influence of pioneering social and religious reform movements in late-19th and early-20th century Bengal and of women's mass participation in civic and armed anti-colonial freedom movements on women's education and political socialisation marked the region's political culture. West Bengal's early implementation of the provision of reservation of seats for women in rural and urban local self-governments under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1993) respectively had considerably extended the mass participation of women in elections¹⁷, political campaigning and local governance.

¹⁴ West Bengal had been governed from 1977 to 2011 by a coalition of parliamentary communist and socialist political parties termed as the Left Front. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] played the dominant partner in the coalition.

¹⁵ The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) party, that successfully defeated the 34-year old communist Left Front government in Bengal in 2011, and has been governing the state for a second consecutive term at present, could be characterised as a Centrist-Populist party- distinguished by its refusal to adhere to either Left or Right-wing political ideologies.

¹⁶ The recent state level and national level elections have witnessed a substantial rise in seats won by the Right-wing political party- the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). This is significant in the context of the party's erstwhile status as an electoral minority in the state. In the recently concluded General Elections to the Lower House of the Indian Parliament (2019), the BJP won 18 out of the 42 parliamentary seats from Bengal, in a massive surge from its previous record of winning 2 seats in the 2014 General Elections. Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-wins-18-of-42-lok-sabha-seats-in-mamatas-citadel/articleshow/69483598.cms>

¹⁷ Authors Duflo and Chattopadhyay record in their empirical study on the impact of political reservations at the level of rural local self-government in West Bengal, a substantial increase of 36% in the ratio of elected women in the Panchayats (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004) during the post-1993 elections held after instituting the political reservations.

The case of West Bengal therefore presents an interesting site for undertaking critical engagement with the diverse discursive representations of women in the significant political parties of the state. The parallel exploration of the three political parties over time as well as by the integration of document analysis with semi-structured interviewing would also provide the thesis with considerable comparative advantage within the in-depth case study of West Bengal. In the following section, the chapter outlines the interpretive engagement of the thesis with documents including party publications and other political texts.

Document Analysis:

With the aid of the method of Discourse Analysis, this thesis has undertaken an interpretive study of documents for the purpose of understanding the reproduction of hegemonic gender constructions and systemic continuity within the three political parties of West Bengal. The category 'document' in this thesis is inclusive of both written text and images in circulation; constituting the 'discursive units' which have been interpreted with reference to their historical and macro-social contexts (Fairclough, 1995). The documents analysed in the thesis range from political party publications, significant policies undertaken by parties in power to published autobiographies and memoirs. The thesis recognises documents not only as bearers of information but also as reflecting particular ideological and discursive constructions (Prior, 2004), primarily those that are hegemonic in the macro-social ecology that these documents inhabit. At the same time, documents are sites of contestation (Prior, 2004) and constitution of subjectivities. As Lindsay Prior argues, the order of things in documents, the prioritisation and highlighting of certain things over others and 'how such systems of visibility are tied into social

practices' (Prior, 2004, 80) are critical signposts for the analysis of documents. In this thesis, documents are interpreted through the aforementioned approach of 'ethnographic sensibility' (Schatz, 2009)- integrating insights derived from fieldwork and deskwork. The interpretive Discourse Analysis of party documents and other political texts would assist in understanding the linguistic structures through which hegemonic gender discourses are constructed, perpetuated, and reproduced in the political parties.

For its study of the gendered institutional cultures and women's representation in the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP, this thesis has consulted and analysed a variety of party documents and other texts authored by party leaders and ideologues. For the CPI(M), the thesis has engaged with the party's official self-description, the Party Constitution, the Party Programme, Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks, and the Rectification Document, alongside works authored by senior male and women party leaders such as EMS Namboodiripad, Kanak Mukherjee, and Brinda Karat on women's representation and participation in the party. For the AITC, the thesis has undertaken an interpretive study of the party's official self-description, the Party Constitution, a polemic tract by the party known as 'Maa, Mati, Manush' (Mother, Soil, People), and the autobiography of the party leader Mamata Banerjee- 'Struggle for Existence'. For the BJP, the thesis has engaged with the party's official self-description, the Party Constitution, and party pamphlets on the foundational principles of the BJP, on the theme of post-partition refugees in West Bengal, and on immigration from Bangladesh to West Bengal, alongside works authored by the ideologues of Hindu Nationalism such as V.D. Savarkar, D.D. Upadhyay, and M.S. Golwalkar. The party documents have primarily been collected in person from the respective West Bengal headquarters of each party and downloaded from the respective official websites of the

CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP. Some documents were also offered by interviewees from the CPI(M) and the AITC.

With regard to the documents selected for the purpose of interpretive Discourse Analysis in the thesis, a question might arise as to the inclusion of an autobiography for a study of formal institutions such as political parties. Dialogues between feminist writing and literary theory (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2003) in the recent decades have led to a distinctly feminist reframing of the autobiographical genre. A reason behind the feminist privileging of autobiography lies in the traditionally androcentric, detached and rationalistic style of both theoretical writing and formal policy documents. Autobiographies composed by women, on the contrary, are often marked by their deeply emotional and personal character and style (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2003). Alongside the rationalistic objectivity that characterises mainstream theoretical and policy documents, the voices of women, along with other disadvantaged social groups, have historically been under/unrepresented in the former category. The distinctly embodied nature of the autobiography lends it conducive to interpretive studies on the motivations and intentionality of its author. Through a feminist engagement with autobiographies, it is possible to delineate the author's experiential narrative of the 'evolution of the self' (Paul Ricouer, quoted in Chanfrault-Duchet, 2003)- an element that can rarely be found in policy documents and other formal political text. While the narrative style that accompanies an autobiography is marked by a 'sequential ordering of events'(Patterson and Monroe, 1998) that conventionally traces the author's 'life-story' (Chanfrault-Duchet, 2003) in a chronological fashion, women's narratives are often characterised by ruptures in the chronological continuity- with the complex interweaving of the past, the present and the future in a nonlinear process. Such ruptures have been noted in the interpretive analysis of Mamata Banerjee's autobiography (Banerjee, 1998)

in the thesis. The device of the narrative, whether located in autobiographies or in interviews, is extremely useful in illustrating the author/speaker's worldview and their particular interpretations of events and the social reality they inhabit. Narratives underline the agency of the author/speaker (Patterson and Monroe, 1998) as well as highlight their discursive makeup and ethical perspective. The element of agency is particularly significant while considering that narratives are marked by creative reinterpretations of past events as well as manipulation. This ingredient of subjective meaning-making gains in further significance in the context of autobiographies authored by political leaders. The thesis, through the interpretive Discourse Analysis of documents such as party publications, autobiographies, other texts as well as of semi-structured interviews of women leaders and party-members, focuses upon the creative fashioning of the authorial self and the constitution of political subjectivities. Through the interpretive exercise, the thesis reflects upon the affective experience of belonging (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006) in the gendered institutional cultures of the three political parties articulated by the women party members. In the following section, the chapter outlines the manner in which this thesis has conducted semi-structured interviews of women party members and leaders.

Interviews:

Research interviews aid in the triangulation and authentication of insights derived from the analysis of formal documents of institutions while also highlighting the more informal and obscure processes and practices that are not covered by documents. Feminist institutionalist research on candidate selection, for instance, has relied upon interviews in order to access the informal processes and gendered discourses that precede and influence

the phenomenon of candidate selection (Bjarnegård, 2013; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2016). This thesis has conducted interpretive Discourse Analysis of semi-structured interviews held among women leaders and members of the three selected political parties in West Bengal. The choice of semi-structured interviews in the thesis has been informed by the conduciveness of such a mode of interviewing to flexibility and openness in interviewer-interviewee conversations while retaining a semblance of order to such conversations. In the particular case of elite interviews- of prominent women leaders in the parties, semi-structured interviewing has been helpful in retaining control of the topics and themes that were discussed.

The interviews have been analysed and interpreted with reference to party documents and other written text as well as the broader social and historical constructions (Fairclough, 1995) of gender, caste, class, and religion in the Bengali political culture (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001). The analysis of the interviews has been categorised and reflected upon under specific themes that have been identified during the process of analysis. This thesis has dedicated a chapter entirely to the interpretation of the interviews and autobiographies composed by women political leaders, primarily for three reasons. Firstly, the feminist commitment of the thesis informs this privileging of women's narratives under the context of the historical underrepresentation of the voices of women and other marginalised social groups in political theory. Secondly, the thesis has sought to analyse the interviews and documents through the lens of conceptual categories such as power, structure-agency and subjectivity and displays a preference for contextually specific, mid-range theorisation. Thirdly, as it has been hinted upon before, these narratives serve to highlight the informal spaces and processes that remain undocumented but that which nonetheless are of critical importance in constructing and propagating hegemonic gender regimes within institutions.

I have conducted forty semi-structured interviews in the state of West Bengal intermittently in three phases: between May 2018 to July 2018, November 2018 to January 2019 and December 2019 to March 2020. The planned final round of interviews could not take place due to the adverse circumstances caused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews have encompassed the temporal span of approximately two years, allowing the thesis to document and respond to political shifts on the ground. The interviews have primarily been conducted in the urban and peri-urban vicinities of Kolkata and its suburbs. Covering women members across different layers of the party hierarchy, the interviews have attempted to be representative of the experiences of women situated at the grassroots as well as in the higher echelons of the party structure. Access to the interviewees have been primarily devised through snowballing- the initial contact being forged at the local level, although the difficulty of access to the higher level of party leaders often necessitated reaching out to influential local power-brokers and bureaucrats. Similarly, references from intermediate level party leaders were often needed to counter the lack of openness at the local level. The difficulties of access would be further discussed in the following section on research limitations. Initial contact was primarily made through phone calls and the interviews were generally held at party offices although on some occasions the interviewees wished to meet at a café or at their residences, and some of the interviews were conducted on the telephone. All of the interviews were held in accordance with the convenience of the interviewees. Due to the scarce use of email as a mode of communication in the given context, hard copies of plain language statements in Bengali and English (wherever applicable)- explaining the aim of the project and that of the interview in lucid terms were provided to the interviewees before the interview began. Further clarifications and explanations required by the interviewees were provided orally. Consent for the interview as well as for the audio

recording of the interview was derived orally as most of the interviewees expressed reluctance to provide their signatures in written consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees had been promised before the interviews as well as maintained during the phase of analysis. The original names and surnames of the interviewees have been changed in order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. The recording of the interviews was done in an audio recorder and was accompanied by the taking of handwritten notes. All of the interviews, except one, were conducted in Bengali. The format of the interviews being semi-structured, a template for the questions was prepared, and has been attached as an appendix to the thesis. However, the template was deliberately kept flexible and open-ended, so as to accommodate the narratives offered by the interviewees, other themes raised by the interviewees, and the particular circumstances behind each interview. Hence, the questions that were asked did not always conform to the order established in the template, although similar questions were asked during all or most interviews. The audio recordings of the interviews have been translated from Bengali to English and transcribed using the digital software for qualitative research- NVivo, and the transcriptions were used to conduct Discourse Analysis of the interviews. In the following and final section, the chapter explores the limitations encountered during the course of conducting research for the thesis while also covering the ethical challenges involving self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

The role of ethics in the Research and the Limitations of the selected approach:

Influenced by the ethical commitment of feminist institutionalism and the interpretive method of Discourse Analysis towards critique of prevailing structures of

power, the thesis has sought to highlight the hierarchies of gender identities and relations that underlie the apparent neutrality of formal political spaces such as political parties. The agenda of deepening women's representation and systemic transformation of institutional cultures in political parties has driven the thesis to advocate for closer affinities between theory and real-world implications- a 'praxis-oriented research' (Lather, 1986). The ethical concern for addressing the historical underrepresentation of women's perspectives and experiences in political theory and empirical research informs the emphasis that this thesis places upon critical, interpretive engagement with interviews conducted among women members and leaders of the political parties. In the process of analysing the interviews, the identities of the interviewees have been safeguarded and kept strictly confidential. The consent of the interviewees was derived before each interview; and permission was also sought and obtained for the audio recording of the interviews. The wish of the interviewee to not record any statement or part of the interview has also been respected. No financial transactions were made before, during or after any interview. The data comprising the transcripts of the interview has been digitally stored in Google Drive and shall be held on to until five years after the completion and submission of the Doctoral Dissertation, following which the data shall be destroyed. The promise made to the interviewees that the data gathered from the interviews shall not be used for any other purpose than academic research has been and shall be fulfilled. The results of the thesis would be made available to the interviewees should they wish to access it.

Inevitably, the thesis has limitations. The difficulty in gaining access to the inner world of political parties constituted a primary limitation. The prevalence of secrecy with regard to the internal functioning of the parties and the caution exercised by most members of the parties made it extremely difficult to gain access to party meetings. The

occasional entry to a party meeting was often met with scorn and sometimes with condescension. The lack of openness and transparency in the political parties functioning in the given context also made it difficult for me to collect party documents. It is true, however, that some parties proved to be more open to outside observers such as myself both in terms of providing access to contacts and documents.

The research for the thesis was also complicated by the scarcity of existing literature and template for research on women's participation in the formal institutional spaces such as political parties in the South Asian context. Such scarcity also characterised political party publications that are explicitly concerned with women's representation and participation in the parties. While the CPI(M) has consistently published pamphlets, reflective pieces, and broad programmatic documents on women and gender, it was nearly impossible to come across such literature in the case of the BJP. The literature produced by the AITC was primarily characterised by repetitive content in favour of its chief leader- Mamata Banerjee, even as the policy framework of the party in power in West Bengal did offer explicit discussions on themes such as women's educational empowerment.

Another factor that limited my research was mine own location as a researcher based in Dublin, far away from the research-field of West Bengal in India, with the implication that I could not stay in regular contact with my interviewees. This vast geographical distance led me to conduct my fieldwork intermittently- in two phases, with the time in between the phases of fieldwork spent in analysing documents. The intermittent nature of my fieldwork, however, provided me with the advantage of reflective distance from the field and the space to conduct interpretive analysis of the interviews and other textual documents. Since March 2020, the fieldwork for this thesis- including both interviewing and collection of documents, has been seriously hindered due

to the Covid-19 pandemic. I was not able to conduct the final phase of interviews due to the lockdown. In 2021, the disastrous advent of the second wave of the pandemic further obstructed my research as my mother became critically ill and hospitalised from Covid pneumonia, and I myself also tested positive for Covid. Due to these unforeseen adverse circumstances, I could not interview the women party members and leaders who contested as candidates from their respective political parties in the recently concluded Assembly elections in West Bengal.

Alongside ethical considerations and constitutive limitations involved in the operational aspects of the research, this thesis has also sought to maintain a sense of self-reflexivity- being conscious of the insider-outsider dichotomy (Geertz, 1973) discussed previously, on a discursive-ideational level. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher assumes critical significance while interpretive social research is being conducted. While mine own subjectivity, lived experience and familiarity with the Bengali linguistic lifeworld has been of immense assistance in understanding the historical trajectory and macro-social reality shaping the gender regimes of the political parties, in forging contact with the interviewees, and in interpreting the interviews, I have been conscious of the ways in which my particular social location; i.e. my privileged upper caste, middle-class, Hindu, urban, English-educated subject-position, might have influenced my relationship with the interviewees. It could not be denied, for instance, that my upper caste (Brahmin) surname seemed to have augmented my credibility before the interviewees, as did my university identity-card from Dublin, Ireland. My identity as a woman, however, proved to be both an advantage- in terms of establishing trust and rapport with the women interviewees, and a disadvantage- I was often not considered a mature enough researcher by several party-members of the higher echelons due to my gender and age. My study of the belongings and political self-makings of the women party-members, therefore,

became intersubjective - the articulations and interpretations offered by the interviewees became inextricably linked with their impression of mine own subjectivity while my positionality affected my engagement with their interpretations. The influence of my ideological positionality was particularly critical while I conducted and analysed the interviews of BJP women identifying with the Hindu Nationalist ideology of the party. Liz Stanley, in her work on biographies, argues for the need for an ‘intellectual autobiography’(Stanley, 1993)- documenting the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher in feminist research. While the unavoidable influence of the researcher’s own value-judgements and subjectivity in interpretive social research could be regarded as a constitutive limitation, the attitude of self-reflexivity and criticality could be an ethically significant intervention into the limitation while also highlighting the empirical and theoretical advantages of good research practice.

Conclusion:

This chapter discussed the broad framework under which the thesis has conducted research on the gendered institutional cultures of the selected political parties. Its aim has been to outline and explain the methodological and ethical advantages of the interpretivist methodology used by the thesis. In doing this it demonstrates how the experiences of belonging articulated by women political actors, can generate contextually-specific, mid-range theorisations with the potential for wider significance. The chapter also discussed the choice of the in-depth case study approach and underlined its suitability for research on the contextually specific informal social and cultural codes governing gendered behaviour in party politics. The following chapter in this thesis offers an interpretive exploration of the gendered institutional culture of the Communist Party of India

(Marxist) (CPI(M)) in West Bengal, focusing in particular on the participation and representation of women in the party over time.

4. Democratic Centralism and Women's Emancipation: The Gendered Institutional Culture of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Introduction:

Echoing the standard mode of party organisation in Communist parties across the world, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) has a cadre-based structure. The party was founded on the ideological principles of Marxism-Leninism and has participated in Indian parliamentary democracy since its foundation in 1964. Situated within the discourse of the larger communist movement in pre- and post-independent India, the CPI(M) was founded as a consequence of an ideological split in the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPI(M) is a national party which has governed the states of Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura. In West Bengal, the 34-year-old rule of the CPI(M)- dominated Left Front had enjoyed the status of the longest running democratically elected Communist Party rule in the world, until 2011 when it was defeated by the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) under Mamata Banerjee.

Unpacking the gendered institutional culture of the CPI(M), this chapter analyses the party's history, organisation, and ideological structure- tracing the participation of women and their descriptive and symbolic representation in the party organisation, government, and the existing party literature while also highlighting the formal and informal institutional practices through which women party members are excluded and marginalised. The chapter is divided into three broad categories. The first offers an engagement with the historical development of the party- covering its foundations in the colonised Indian Subcontinent, its experience of participation in post-independent India's

electoral democracy, the contributions of women communists since the party's early days and the development of the party's women's front particularly in West Bengal, and a gender analysis of the existing party literature and academic works on the party. The second section discusses the CPI(M)'s organisational structure and practices as well as of its women's front- the AIDWA, through a close reading of the party constitution and other documents, focusing on the representation of women in party units and the communist organisational principle of democratic centralism and its gendered consequences. The final section explores the ideological discourse of the CPI(M)-engaging with self-reflective party documents on the status of women in the party and the evolution of the CPI(M)'s relationship with feminist concerns.

Historical Development of Party Culture in the CPI(M):

The CPI(M) is an inheritor of the Communist movement in India that had begun with the foundation of the undivided Communist Party of India on December 26, 1925¹⁸ at Kanpur in colonised British India (Surjeet, 2005; B. Chandra, 2016; Tricontinental, 2020) . The transnational character of the Communist movement and the party was reflected from the very beginning in the ideological inspiration of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 and the subsequent foundation of the Soviet State (USSR). Activists associated with the Communist movement had participated in armed revolutionary struggles against the British colonial state and were subjected to heavy repression, banning and conspiracy trials- prominent instances of which were the Meerut

¹⁸ Some versions trace the foundation of the undivided Communist Party of India to October 1920 in Tashkent (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2019).

Conspiracy Case (1929) and the Kanpur Conspiracy Case (1924) (Sarkar, 1989; Surjeet, 2005; B. Chandra, 2016).

Recognising the necessity and potential of mass organisations in furthering the Communist movement, the undivided Communist Party of India was deeply associated with the development of political fronts for farmers (the All-India Kisan Sabha), students (All India Students Federation), writers (Progressive Writers Association), and theatre artists (Indian People's Theatre Association) among others. During the Second World War, women activists associated with the Communist party formed the *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti* (Women's Self-defence Association) (MARS) in undivided Bengal. The MARS- led by Communist Party leaders such as Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakrabartty, Bela Chatterjee, and Kanak Mukhopadhyay among others, contributed substantially towards organising working class women in Bengal on issues such as sexual exploitation, women trafficking, famine relief¹⁹, and anti-fascism (Basu, 1989; Marik, 2013; Panjabi, 2017). Oral historians of the Tebhaga Movement such as Kavita Panjabi have argued that MARS's mobilisation of women from the marginalised castes and classes in Bengal laid the foundation for rural women's participation in militant peasant struggles such as the Tebhaga Movement (Panjabi, 2017). Through their extensive participation in famine relief, activists of MARS politicised care work, strengthened the foundations of communist organisation and contributed towards including freedom from hunger in the discourse of civil liberties in India (Panjabi, 2017). A counter is offered by Amrita Basu

¹⁹ The Great Bengal Famine of 1943- orchestrated by the exploitative agricultural and distributive policies of the British colonial state during the Second World War, had caused the deaths of approximately 3 million people in undivided Bengal and the displacement of millions more. The impoverishment of the rural peasantry during the famine had led to a mass migration of rural men, women and children to the city of Calcutta where many died out of starvation on the streets and many women were subjected to trafficking.

who contends that the MARS had limited influence beyond urban centres such as Calcutta and that it was a ‘passive spectator’ to complaints of sexual abuse and domestic violence raised by women from the rural marginalised caste and tribes against the feudal landlords and their own husbands (Basu, 1989, 218).

As India came closer to political independence, Communist party activists- women and men, participated in notable peasant movements (1946-7) such as the Tebhaga movement in undivided Bengal and the Telangana Movement in the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad which were launched against oppressive and exploitative agricultural practices of the feudal landholders. In the years following independence, in West Bengal, which was then reeling from the effects of the famine, the partition (1947), communal riots, and the arrival of a huge number of displaced refugees from East Pakistan, the CPI organised a mass movement for price control and redistribution of food grains among the starving population- the ‘*Khadya Andolon*’ (Hunger Movement) under the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee in 1959 (Franda, 1971). The movement saw a mass participation of women from the marginalised classes and castes and was brutally repressed by the then state government.

Ideological disagreements within the CPI with regard to the prospect of Communists cooperating with the national bourgeoisie in India as well as to international political developments such as the growing strategic ties between Nehru’s India and the USSR, the conflict between Communist China and USSR, and the border tensions between India and China, soon culminated in a split in the party in 1964 (Overstreet and Windmiller, 1959; Mitra, Enskat and Spiess, 2004; Surjeet, 2005; Bhattacharyya, 2016). The pro-China faction which was also against the idea of Indian communists cooperating with bourgeois political parties went on to constitute the CPI(M) while the pro-Soviet

faction- termed 'rightist' and 'revisionist' by the members of the CPI(M), stayed in the CPI.

The growth of factionalism within the undivided Communist Party bore a critical influence on the development of mass organisations which had been controlled by the party from their very inception. In the pre-Independence period, women's organisations under the party such as the MARS had been associated with the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)- a cross-class association for women affiliated with the Indian National Congress and founded in 1927. The MARS's links with the AIWC had assisted women communist activists to establish broader networks with women leaders across class, regional, linguistic, and ideological barriers as well as to influence policymaking (Basu, 1989; Sen, 2010). The MARS, however, severed ties with the AIWC in 1949 while characterising the latter as a representative of the interests of elite women (Basu, 1989). Analysts of women's activism in the CPI such as Amrita Basu have regarded the event as detrimental to the development of a universal feminist consciousness among communist women and as illustrative of the lack of autonomy among mass organisations under the CPI (Basu, 1989, 218). In this regard, Manikuntala Sen- a founding leader of the MARS, argued in her autobiography that the leaders of the AIWC in Bengal displayed Communist-phobia by being actively against the MARS's proposal to reduce the membership fee of the AIWC to 4 annas (25 paisa INR) per annum that would help in opening the association to working class women (Sen, 2010, 57).

After the MARS-AIWC separation, women communists formed the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in 1954 under the leadership of Geeta Mukherjee (Basu, 1989; Marik, 2013). The NFIW's sphere of influence was, however, limited compared with that of the AIWC. In West Bengal, the MARS gave way to the *Paschim Banga Mahila Samiti* (PBMS) (West Bengal Women's Association) in 1959- the latter

reflecting the shifting political terrain in post-partition West Bengal (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Women communists continued to work within the PBMS until 1971 despite the ideological split within the undivided CPI and the formation of the CPI(M) in 1964. Factionalism and the split, however, had managed to cast its shadow on the ideological foundations of and interpersonal relations in the PBMS. Reflecting on the impact of the CPI-CPI(M) split on the women's association, Kanak Mukherjee- a founding leader of the PBMS and of the CPI(M) contended that a section of women communists displayed 'revisionist' tendencies by supporting cooperation with the Indian National Congress and by promoting 'apolitical', privileged women as leaders within the PBMS (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, 147). Mukherjee's charges of elitism and revisionism against some of her comrades in the PBMS echoed the characterisation of pro-Soviet communists in the undivided CPI by the members who went on to constitute the CPI(M). Following the CPI-CPI(M) split, women communists affiliated with the CPI(M) such as Kanak Mukherjee formed the *Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti* (PBGMS) (West Bengal Democratic Women's Association) in 1981. The PBGMS, popularly referred to as the Mahila Samiti, presently functions as the state unit of the CPI(M)'s national mass association for women- the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)-founded in 1981. The magazine of the PBGMS, *Ekshathe* (Together) is an influential medium which communicates the perspectives of the party and also offers a space to women authors within and beyond the party. From its very inception, however, the PBGMS remained firmly under the control of the CPI(M) and its lack of autonomy reduced the mass association into a subordinate of the party (Basu, 1989; Ray, 1999). The dominant discourse of the PBGMS largely echoed that of the CPI(M) whose long association with power and governance since 1977 in West Bengal deemphasised the focus on oppositional movements for social justice. Despite the constraints within which

the PBGMS had to function, the association is credited with organising successful, state-backed campaigns to promote female literacy and curb domestic violence (Ray, 1999) in West Bengal.

Founded in an adversarial political climate, the organisational discourse of the CPI(M) in its early days reflected the party's response to the then persistent threats of political repression, banning and incarceration of members across India. In the states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, the CPI(M) experienced further divisions within as radical communist members within the party such as Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal denounced parliamentary democracy in India in favour of Maoism-inspired militant peasant uprisings aimed at establishing communist rule in the country, subsequently forming the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)). This faction- later designated as the Naxalites- participated in and led the Naxalbari Uprising (1967)- an armed peasant insurrection against exploitative feudal landlordism at the remote village of Naxalbari in Northern West Bengal (Banerjee, 1980; Basu, 2000; Bandyopadhyay, 2012). The CPI(M), meanwhile constituted the United Front government in West Bengal (1967) and was a partner in the brutal state repression of rural and urban Naxal activists during the late-1960s to the 1970s (Banerjee, 1980). In 1977, the CPI(M), along with other communist parties committed to parliamentary democracy, went on to win the state assembly elections in West Bengal and formed the first Left Front Government under Jyoti Basu and continued to win seven successive state elections until 2011.

While in power, the CPI(M)-dominated Left Front government undertook several progressive measures such as the land reforms- through 'Operation Barga' (1977) (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2003; Roy, 2014) which offered tenure security over land to sharecroppers, decentralisation of rural governance- through elections to the three-tier Panchayat system in villages (1978), the patronage of Self-Help Groups (SHG) to further

women's economic autonomy, and the introduction of political reservations for women in rural local self-government- through nomination at first and subsequently announcing 50% quotas for women in Panchayats (Correspondent, 2010). Despite the persistence of cultural bias against women in leadership positions in rural Bengali society, reservation for women in rural panchayats under the Left Front regime not only effected a deepening of rural democracy through the undermining of feudal norms and relations but also influenced the delivery of public goods in favour of women's distinct policy preferences (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004; Duflo, 2005). While the Left Front regime had not initially planned on targeting women in particular for its adult literacy program, enthusiastic responses from rural women to the program encouraged the government and the PBGMS to focus more on the women beneficiaries of the literacy drive (Ray, 1999). In their reports, leaders of the PBGMS such as Mrinalini Dasgupta underlined the necessity of educating young girls and women in order for them to develop a sense of independent personhood (Ray, 1999).

Such progressive gains in government however were rarely translated into a greater inclusion of women within the party or a rethinking of the prevailing gender norms shaping the institutional culture of the CPI(M). As it shall be explored further in the section involving a gendered analysis of the party's ideological foundations, the positions taken by women members of the PBGMS/AIDWA on issues such as sexual violence and abuse broadly followed the official 'party line' which in itself continues to be reflect orthodox gender constructs.

Analysts studying the developmental policymaking of the Left Front regime in West Bengal have underlined the delicate balance that the CPI(M) sustained during its terms in government between the party's stated ideological commitment to revolutionary political and social transformation and the instrumentalist demand of winning elections

and governing (Mallick, 1993; Bhattacharyya, 2009a, 2016). The result of sustaining such a balance between ideology and electoral pragmatism was reflected in the CPI(M)'s preservation of revolutionary ideals at the level of party rhetoric and a privileging of political expediency designed to expand the party's electoral base at the level of everyday governance in a parliamentary democratic system (Bhattacharyya, 2016). An instance of such compromises with the party's revolutionary ideals for electoral benefits can be located in the Left Front government's accommodation of resistance from rural middle-class peasants to extending the land reforms project of the government to the unpropertied rural lower classes and castes (Khasnabis, 1981; Mallick, 1993; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2003; Ruud, 2003). The rich electoral dividends secured for the Left Front coalition and the CPI(M) in particular from its developmental policymaking as well as from its instrumentalist political choices contributed towards a deepening stability of party-controlled delivery of public goods and governance in rural West Bengal (Roy, 2014; Bhattacharyya, 2016).

The long period of political continuity (1977-2011) under the CPI(M)-led Left Front in West Bengal was characterised by the political sociologist Dwaipayan Bhattacharya as a 'party society' and as a state of 'permanent incumbency' (Bhattacharyya, 2004b, 2009a). The exceptional stability of the Left Front regime in the face of the prevalent electoral volatility in other states of India has been attributed by political analysts to several factors including the CPI(M)'s sophisticated organisational machinery that incorporated flexibility and decentralisation at the local (block and *gram panchayat*) level (Kohli, 1990; Chatterjee, 1998; Barman and Ghoshal, 2021) and also co-opted existing caste norms (Ruud, 2003); the pro-poor and welfarist measures of the government (Bhattacharyya, 2009a); and the CPI(M)'s everyday mediation at the local level between the government and the marginalised population- termed as 'political

society' (Chatterjee, 2004). As Bhattacharya argued, within the 'party society', the CPI(M)'s complete control over local institutions of governance such as Panchayats in rural West Bengal enabled the party to function as the sole mediator between the citizens and the government. The party's intricate organisational network alongside its rhetoric of secularism and social justice also aided in sustaining its hegemonic presence even within the sphere of families and intimate spaces of citizens across religious, caste and class affiliations (Bhattacharyya, 2009a). CPI(M) leaders at the local level were often approached to mediate and help settle family and marital disputes. The links between women's Self-Help Groups and the party's women's front in West Bengal- PBGMS or the Mahila Samiti, assisted women members of the party to maintain vigilance over issues concerning women's safety and autonomy within and outside the spaces of home and family. Women activists of the Mahila Samiti would regularly participate in protests over cases of domestic violence, dowry deaths and sexual abuse (Ray, 1999; Bhattacharyya, 2009a; Marik, 2013). At the same time, however, the stern control of the party over the PBGMS placed a constitutive limitation over the latter's scope for engaging in protests and agitations against the state (Basu, 1989; Ray, 1999). The PBGMS's commitment to gender justice was particularly tested when incidents of sexual violence happened under the watch of the Left Front government (Karat, 1991; Tanika Sarkar, 1991a). Even as the CPI(M) as a party in power aided the PBGMS with funds, visibility and publicity, and access to human resources (Ray, 1999), the PBGMS's subordinate position vis a vis the CPI(M) particularly during the long decades of Left Front rule had the effect of restricting the space for autonomous feminist women's activism in the urban field of Kolkata and the rest of the state (Ray, 1999).

While the 'party society' under the authority of the CPI(M) had contributed substantially towards deepening rural democracy in West Bengal through the dismantling

of older feudal structures of oppression and had also facilitated women's political participation at the local level, its suppression of oppositional forces and the general stagnation in the government's pro-poor policies ended up in the alienation of the marginalised classes and castes from the CPI(M) (Samaddar, 2008, 2013; Bhattacharyya, 2009a).

The hegemony of the CPI(M)'s party society experienced a sharp rupture in 2006-07 with the popular outrage against state repression of the anti-land acquisition protests by farmers at Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal. These protests which began as nonpartisan opposition to the Left Front's policy of acquiring fertile agricultural land for industrial purposes, soon came to be associated with the demand for a '*poriborton*'-change, in government, and the AITC under Mamata Banerjee- who emerged as the face of the proposed change, defeated the Left Front in the 2011 state elections.

Since 2011, the CPI(M) along with other partners of the Left Front coalition continues to see a consistent fall in their vote-shares. In the 2006 state elections, when the Left Front under Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had won a landslide mandate of 235 out of 294 seats, the CPI(M)'s vote share was 37.13% (Election Commission of India, 2006; Chatterjee, 2016). During the 2011 state elections, the CPI(M) won only 40 seats and had a vote share of 29.6% (Election Commission of India, 2011; Bardhan *et al.*, 2014). The 2016 state elections saw a further drop in the CPI(M)'s electoral fortunes- it won only 26 seats and its vote share came to 19.75% (Chatterjee, 2016; Election Commission of India, 2016). The recently concluded General Elections (2019) to the Lok Sabha (Lower House) of the Indian Parliament- which marked the ascent of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the key opposition to the AITC government in West Bengal, the CPI(M) could not win even a single parliamentary seat and its vote share dropped to 6.28% (Ghosh, 2021). The CPI(M) presently faces a struggle for existence and political

relevance post its debacle in the recent 2021 Assembly elections. Prior to the elections, the party had, along with its partners in the Left Front, forged an alliance with the Indian National Congress and the newly-launched Indian Secular Front (ISF)- a coalition of Muslims, Dalits (Scheduled Castes), Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) and other marginalised social groups (Press Trust of India, 2021c) created by the popular Muslim cleric Abbas Siddiqui (Bhattacharya, 2021a).

The CPI(M)'s strategy of allying with an identity-based party such as the ISF represents a critical shift (Dasgupta, 2021) from its established ideological position of privileging the politics of class and redistribution over that of identity and recognition. Such a shift could also be observed in the CPI(M)'s recent overtures towards LGBTQ rights associations (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021b) and the presence of Queer Pride flags at the party's grand election rally on the Brigade Parade Grounds in Kolkata (Basu, 2021). The Bengal unit of the AIDWA/PBGMS in its 28th State Conference (2019) declared support for LGBTQ rights and organisational reforms in the association to favour the inclusion of younger members (Das, 2019). The recent years have also seen initiatives within the party to promote the younger generation as well as women members by fielding them as candidates even in seats perceived to be difficult for the party in the 2021 state elections (Chakraborty, 2021). The party did not, however, manage to win any seat in the West Bengal *Vidhan Sabha* (legislative assembly), making the newly elected Assembly the first one since India's independence to not have legislators from any communist parties. The consistent electoral decline of the CPI(M) since 2011 has also borne adverse implications for the PBGMS/AIDWA in West Bengal. Even though the members of the CPI(M)'s women's front continue to engage in movements for gender justice- registering their opposition to the policies of the AITC government in the state and the BJP government at the centre, the AIDWA Bengal unit functions amidst a general

scarcity of resources- both financial and otherwise, and the overall support that it was habituated to receiving from the CPI(M) during the heydays of Left Front rule in West Bengal.

The historical development of the Communist movement in India and the location of the CPI(M) in it continue to inform and condition the party culture and the participation of women in it. The theoretical contributions of leading international historical communist icons such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai and Mao Zedong among others are regularly cited and discussed within the CPI(M) to defend and reflect on the party's position and record on gender politics and women's participation in political activism (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005; Karat, 2005, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2016). During their interviews with me, the mass participation of women in civic and militant socialist-communist movements such as the MARS, the peasant struggles in Tebhaga and Telangana, and the *Khadya Andolan* was mentioned by women members of the CPI(M) as having inspired them to commit to the communist ideology. Women and male members of the party recalled with fondness the long historical tradition of transnational solidarity among communists, and the institutional memory of the participation of Indian communist leaders from the undivided Indian Subcontinent in the Communist International. Experiences of participating in international communist women's symposiums and conferences in Soviet Russia and the People's Republic of China were also reflected upon by senior women leaders of the undivided CPI in their memoirs and autobiographies (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, 2006; Sen, 2010). The foundational influence of internationalism on the party culture distinguished the perspectives shared by the women interviewees on

issues of nationalism and patriotism- a theme that is often taken up by right-wing political parties such as the BJP to delegitimise communists²⁰ in India in the recent times.

Alongside the long historical memory of communist participation in social and political movements in India, the institutional culture of the CPI(M) has also been deeply conditioned by ideological splits that occurred within the undivided CPI as well by those that took place later in the CPI(M) itself. A persistent focus on revisionism and vigilance against perceived failures to approximate the ethical standards of an idealised communist subjectivity informed the CPI(M)'s institutional culture and its engagement with the members of its affiliated associations particularly in the earlier decades. Such preoccupation with doctrinal purism although is by no means exclusive to the CPI(M). The Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) (SUCI(C))- a communist party located on the far Left of the CPI(M) and opposed to the Left Front, also privileges the 'fundamental tenets' of Marxism laid down by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels over what it perceives as the revisionist organisational practices of other communist parties including the CPI(M) (Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist), 2021). Among women interviewees from the CPI(M), concerns regarding revisionism and idealised standards of communist subjectivity were primarily privileged by senior party members while the relatively junior members preferred to focus more on the contemporary themes of the intersection between neoliberalism and communalism and the corresponding increase in class, caste and gender inequalities in India.

²⁰ In the recent years, key functionaries of the ruling party at the Centre- the BJP and of its affiliated Hindutva associations have consistently termed Indian communist activists and other dissidents of the government as 'anti-nationals' for not subscribing to the BJP's ideology of Hindu Nationalism (Ganguly, 2019; Pal and Sharma, 2021).

While women in the historical development of the Communist movement in India in general and of the CPI(M) in particular do find mention in the official literature of the party, such mentions are primarily characterised by a tendency to represent the women as nameless martyrs and victims of state repression. As opposed to the male founding figures of the CPI(M), women communist activists and leaders such as Mallu Swarajyam, Kanak Mukherjee, Geeta Mukherjee, etc. are rarely mentioned by name in official party histories (Basu, 1997, 1999; Surjeet, 2005; Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021) which are marked by their overwhelming focus on ideological debates and dialogues between (predominantly male) communist leaders. In the recent years, the party has attempted to reflect on the gender-blind character of the CPI(M)'s official historical narrative and has produced documents that record the contributions of women in communist movements such as the Tebhaga and the Telangana Movement as well as introspective and self-critical texts on the gender gap in different levels of the party hierarchy (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 2019; Central Committee, 2010). The following section on the CPI(M)'s internal structure and the descriptive representation of women in it will explore the extent to which such self-criticism on the part of the party leadership has translated into an enhanced inclusion of women and a re-gendering of the party's institutional culture.

While the official party literature, for a long period of time, has been distinguished by an invisibilisation of women's presence and participation in the development of the broader communist movement and that of the CPI(M), historical works authored by women leaders in the party have sought to address the gender gap by recording detailed historical information on women's activism in the Indian communist movement (Chakravartty, 1980; Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Such works by women communist leaders offer substantial insights on political initiatives taken by women leaders in the party and

during movements on meetings held and rallies hosted. In this regard, feminist oral historians of the communist movement such as K. Lalitha et al and Soma Marik have underlined that such works authored by women communist leaders accord visibility to the hitherto invisibilised women in communist movements (Lalitha *et al.*, 1989; Marik, 2013). At the same time, they argue that such works primarily serve as ‘contributory histories’ (Lalitha *et al.*, 1989, 21) which while highlighting the presence of women in the movements, desisted from being critical either of the persistence of orthodox gender norms within the communist movement or of the centrality of the male communist figure in the revolutionary scheme. Instances of women’s activism were analysed and evaluated primarily for their ‘contributions’ to the broader communist movement (Chakravartty, 1980; Lalitha *et al.*, 1989; Marik, 2013) instead of their critical value in interrogating enduring structures of power and hierarchy within the movement and the party.

The existing academic literature on the CPI(M), particularly in the earlier decades, reflected the gender-blindness of the party’s official literature. Scholarly works; mostly male-authored, on ideological debates and power struggles within the party- the CPI-CPI(M) split, debates on hegemony, political economy, and the role of the national bourgeoisie, and on communist peasant movements such as the Tebhaga movement, have been characterised by an overwhelming focus on male communist leaders and a corresponding erasure of women’s interventions into the theoretical debates and political movements (Bhattacharyya, 1978; Nigam, 1996; Alam, 1998, 2009; Basu, 2000). Some historical works on the intersections between parliamentary communism and insurgent communist movements in West Bengal do acknowledge women’s presence and participation (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Basu and Majumder, 2013). Discussions of women’s activism in such works is, however, reduced to either as statistical counts of nameless victims of police firing or as similarly nameless beneficiaries of the Left Front

government's pioneering welfarist and decentralising initiatives (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Basu and Majumder, 2013).

In the context of the prevailing underrepresentation of women's voices in the existing official and scholarly literature on the CPI(M), the memoirs composed by women communist leaders (Parulekar, 1975; Mukhopadhyay, 2006; Sen, 2010; Bandyopadhyay, 2012) and feminist oral historical studies (Roy, 2006a, 2006b; Donner, 2009; Sinha Roy, 2011; Marik, 2013; Loomba, 2019) on the experiences and life-narratives of women communist activists have undertaken a necessary regendering of the history of communism in India. The memoirs offer a window onto the ways through which their authors created spaces for themselves 'as women' (Marik, 2013, 80) while negotiating with existing structures of power and hierarchy within the communist movements and the party. Within the body of oral historical literature, studies by Ania Loomba, Srila Roy, Mallarika Sinha Roy, Henrike Donner and Soma Marik constitute critical interventions into the inner world of communist revolutionary movements such as the Naxalite movement through their exploration of informal gender norms, stereotypes and conventions that governed interpersonal, romantic, sexual and family relations in such revolutionary movements. Their engagements with the life-narratives of women communist activists offer vital insights into the ways through which women in Indian communist movements and parties have cultivated their political subjectivities in conversation with other discourses of femininity such as the liberal feminist, and the cultural nationalist (Loomba, 2019). In particular, such studies illustrate the contentious relationship that communist women in India- especially in the earlier decades, sustained with liberal feminist positions on sexuality and gender roles.

Spanning the historical development of the communist movement in India and that of the CPI(M) in the context of West Bengal, this section followed the organisational

trajectory of women communist activists while also reviewing their representation in the official literature of the CPI(M) as well as in the existing scholarly literature on the party. The discussion on ideological dissonances in the undivided CPI which caused the foundation of the CPI(M) and which continued to engineer further splits in the CPI(M) itself illustrated the enduring influence of ideology on the political participation of communist activists. At the same time, it also underlined the extent of party control over and the corresponding lack of autonomy in mass associations affiliated with the CPI(M) such as the MARS, the PBMS, and the PBGMS. The discussion of the CPI(M)'s experiences as a party in political movements as well as in governance in the state of West Bengal highlighted the character of the hegemony exercised by the party at the level of the everyday and the party's efforts to find a middle ground between its stated ideological goals of revolutionary social and political change and the compulsions of electoral politics. The constrained autonomy which the PBGMS had to function with during the long rule of the CPI(M) in West Bengal illustrated the party's compromise in favour of electoral pragmatism. The following section on the organisational structure of the CPI(M) will focus on women's representation in the party, exploring further the gap between the party's cherished principle of self-reflection and the prevailing institutional practices.

Organisational Practices and Gender in the CPI(M):

Governed by the principle of Democratic Centralism, the CPI(M) has a firm hierarchical structure that is ostensibly dedicated to the revolutionary goal of establishing 'socialism and communism' through the 'state of dictatorship of the proletariat'

(Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). The Party Constitution was adopted in 1968. Article II of the party constitution designates the CPI(M) as the ‘revolutionary vanguard of the working class of India’ (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021) and underlines the Marxist-Leninist ideological foundations of the party. The structure and organisational units of the CPI(M) are laid down in the party constitution from Articles XIV to XVIII. The highest organ in the party is the All-India Party Congress (Article XIV (1)) which is convened every three years by the Central Committee. Since the CPI(M)’s foundation in 1964, there have been 22 Party Congresses- the most recent one being held in 2018. Among the powers constitutionally vested with the Party Congress, a significant one is that of revising and altering the Party Programme- a document drafted in 1964 that outlines the ideological position of the party on a range of issues such as socialism, anti-imperialism, state structure, and people’s democracy (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964; Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). The Party Congress redrafted the Party Programme in 2000, addressing changes in the international and national political landscapes- particularly the impact of neoliberal economic policies on the working class, and expanding the Marxist analysis of the ‘women’s question’ by recognising the intersectional character of women’s subordination and exploitation in contemporary India (Surjeet, 2000; Karat, 2014).

With the Party Congress being the highest legislative organ in the CPI(M), the party constitution establishes the Central Committee as the executive authority (Article XV). The Central Committee- elected during a Party Congress, is tasked with the implementation of the party constitution and serves as the highest decision-making organ in the party between two Party Congresses (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). In the spirit of the party’s self-perception as the ‘revolutionary vanguard of the working class’, the Central Committee is vested with agenda-setting powers concerning mass

movements, mass organisations affiliated with the CPI(M), and the party's internal organisational matters including the affairs of lower units such as the State and the District Committees and the party's finances (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). Within the Central Committee, executive authority is further concentrated in the Polit Bureau (Article XV (5)) which is composed of members elected from among the Central Committee. The Polit Bureau is headed by a General Secretary who can serve up to a maximum of three full terms, with the provision of a fourth term under special circumstances. The General Secretary of the CPI(M); along with other members of the Polit Bureau, is elected by the Central Committee at the conclusion of a Party Congress and represents the party at major political fora. The present General Secretary of the party is Com. Sitaram Yechury- elected during the 22nd Party Congress (2018). The Polit Bureau is assisted by a Secretariat- elected from among the Central Committee members, in the execution of everyday affairs of the party.

At the subnational level, the highest unit of the party is the State Conference which elects a State Committee, and the District Conference at the district level which elects the District Committee (Article XVI). The State and District party units are composed in a similar fashion as their All-India counterparts, with their authority extending over their respective states or districts. The basic unit of the CPI(M) is the Party Branch (Article XVII). Party Branches are composed of a maximum of 15 members. The Party Branches are organised both on the basis of occupation and/or local area in accordance with Central Committee regulations. Identified as the 'living link' between the party and the 'masses' of workers, peasants and other social sections, the Party Branch occupies a crucial role in facilitating the inclusion and training of new recruits from among local 'militants and sympathisers' of the party, in implementing the decisions taken by the higher committees, and in attracting the support of the local 'masses'

(Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). Unlike the decentralised party units in the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), State and District Committees in the CPI(M) do not enjoy the autonomy to constitute additional party units between the District Committee and the Party Branch. Any initiative to create new party units, such as the Zonal Committees, needs to be done according to the regulations of the Central Committee (Article XVI (3b)).

A considerable section of the party constitution is devoted to underlining the rules and regulations involving party membership (Articles VI- XII). The procedure to become a member of the CPI(M) involves a series of stages and requires a substantial degree of involvement on the part of the aspirant as well as consent from committees higher than the Party Branches. Unlike parties such as the AITC and the BJP which in order to expand their electoral bases, have in the recent years made their membership entry rules very flexible²¹, the CPI(M) maintains a principled stand on membership entry even in the face of electoral losses. Membership statuses are subjected to annual check-ups (Article VII) by each party committee and those members who are found to have been insufficiently involved in party activities are dropped from membership. The party constitution lists a range of duties that a member is expected to carry out (Article XI). These duties range from ensuring the members' participation in the daily activities of the party to inculcating a communist consciousness among the members. To achieve the latter, the constitution requires the members to study Marxism-Leninism, to adhere to the party unity and discipline, to cultivate friendly relations with their comrades within the party, to place the

²¹ The BJP's successful 'missed call' campaign on the eve of the 2019 General Elections led to a massive increase in the party's membership- 180 million (2019). The party has since then being termed as the 'World's Largest Party' in terms of membership, beating the Communist Party of China (Varghese, 2019; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020a; Bhattacharya, 2020a).

party above personal interests, to practise introspection and self-criticism, and to engage in vigilance against the ‘enemies of the working class and the party’ (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). Similarly, the constitution also provides for the rights of members (Article XII) which involve the right to elect party committee members and to be elected to them, to engage in policy and organisation-related discussions, to criticise decisions of a party committee during party meetings, to appeal against the decisions of a party committee to the higher party committee and also against disciplinary action initiated against them (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). In case of differences of opinion among members on a decision made by a party committee, the constitution, however, states that despite the provision of appealing to the higher committee, the concerned party member is required to carry out the decision. In such cases, the constitution privileges the practice of resolving differences through the ‘test of practice and through comradely discussions’ (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021).

The organisational structure of the pan-India women’s front of the CPI(M)- the All-India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), is similar to that of the party itself. Founded in 1981 and governed by its own constitution, the AIDWA describes itself as a federal body with branches at the subnational level, working towards ‘organising the masses of women in town and villages of India and of building a powerful broad based women’s movement for the uplift and betterment of the lot of the women as a whole’ (AIDWA, 2021). Articles 6 and 7 of the AIDWA constitution recognises the All-India Conference- to be held every 3 years, as the highest unit of the association (AIDWA, 2021). The Conference elects a Central Executive Committee (CEC) which is tasked with the responsibility of implementing the decisions taken by the Conference between two sessions of the Conference. The CEC elects a President, a General Secretary and other office-bearers and also constitutes the Central Secretariat. The present President of the

AIDWA is Malini Bhattacharya. Scholars such as Elisabeth Armstrong have documented the AIDWA's pioneering contributions to the Indian women's movement, particularly in the movements against dowry, domestic violence and rape (Armstrong, 2013). The AIDWA has also been a prominent participant in the struggle for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and state assemblies (Karat, 2005, 2014). Armstrong argued that the AIDWA's membership varies widely among states- depending on the legacy of women's activism in the states, and is marked by the distinctive historical trajectories of the regional units (Armstrong, 2013).

The state units of the AIDWA such as the PBGMS in West Bengal also have organisational units similar to subnational structure of the CPI(M). The basic unit of the PBGMS is the local committee which is under the authority of the district and the state committees (Ray, 1999). The Report on the State Organisational Plenum conducted in 2016 in West Bengal underlined the necessity of expanding the membership of the women's front and emphasised upon the indispensability of women whole-timers for the party as well as the AIDWA Bengal unit/PBGMS (CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee, 2015; Press Trust of India, 2015). The Plenum Report also suggested the PBGMS to streamline the committees, to work at building resilient local organisation particularly in areas marked by political violence, and to do away with zonal committees in order to allow more authority to the district leaders (CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee, 2015). In particular, leaders of the higher committees of the PBGMS were directed to desist from engaging in religious rituals and to campaign against religious superstition (CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee, 2015). While the Plenum Report acknowledges that the higher leadership in the CPI(M) have been unwilling in their initiatives to facilitate women's inclusion in the party, through its several suggestions it placed the responsibility of expanding women's involvement in the party on the women's

front and at individual women members instead of the higher party leadership (CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee, 2015).

A review of the CPI(M)'s organisational structure as laid down by the party constitution highlights the centralised nature of party command. State, district, and local units of the party are subject to the overarching authority of the Central Committee and the Polit Bureau in particular. Even with the presence of a system of checks in the form of inner-party discussions (Article XXI) and the provision of appeals in cases of disciplinary actions against party members (Article XIX), the institutional privileging of centralisation for ensuring unity in a party that is ostensibly committed to the ultimate goal of revolution distinguishes the CPI(M). Composed and adopted during a time when members of the nascent CPI(M) had to operate under hostile political circumstances, provisions in the party constitution such as the reorganisation of party committees into smaller, tightly knit units (Article XV 14) in the case of large-scale, emergency arrests of party leaders represent the enduring traces of the party's experience with and response to state repression. The final goal of revolution that the CPI(M) is ideologically committed to is cited frequently in party documents (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964; Karat, 2010; Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021) as the rationale for the organisational thrust on party discipline and the principle of democratic centralism. Developed by Vladimir Lenin as an organisational principle for the newly constituted Communist party in response to the repressive Tsarist autocracy in Russia, democratic centralism sought to bring two hitherto antagonistic party principles- democracy and centralised command, into a dialectical conversation. Under democratic centralism, the element of democracy is seen as safeguarding the freedom of discussions among the different layers of the party hierarchy, the right to voice criticisms, and collective decision-making in the party. The element of centralism is held as ensuring the party's

unity and discipline in the struggle against the bourgeois state apparatuses by centralising and streamlining the chain of command in the party and guaranteeing the effective implementation of the collective decisions by all units in the party (Communist Party of Soviet Russia (CPSU), 1921; Alam, 2009; Karat, 2010).

Like other Communist parties in India (CPI, 2021; CPI(ML) Liberation, 2021), the constitution of the CPI(M) establishes democratic centralism as the guiding organisational principle of the party. Article XIII of the party constitution defines democratic centralism as ‘centralised leadership based on inner-Party democracy under the guidance of the centralised leadership’ (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). In the spirit of intra-party democracy, the constitution provides for all units of the CPI(M) to be elected. Party committees, particularly those at the higher levels, are expected to listen and engage with opinions from the lower party committees and grassroots members of the party. The committees are required to function on collective decision-making and free and honest discussions along with criticism and self-criticism are to be encouraged within the ‘internal life’ of the party (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021). Such institutional arrangements to stimulate democracy in the party culture are combined with constitutional provisions designed to reinforce party discipline and unity such as Article XIII (b) which states that the minority, the lower party units, and the individual is to be subordinated to the majority, the higher party units, and the collective respectively.

The privileging of the collective over the individual and the higher party units over the lower ones under democratic centralism in the CPI(M) is complemented by the institutional preoccupation with discipline and the corresponding punitive measure of expelling errant and deviant members. The constitution recognises expulsion as ‘the severest of all disciplinary measures’ (Article XIX (6)) (Communist Party of India Marxist, 2021) and also suggests corrective measures such as warning, censure,

suspension and removal from party posts which are aimed at ensuring discipline in the party. Besides ideological ‘deviance’, the party can undertake disciplinary actions against range of anti-social behaviour. The constitution particularly identifies ‘strike-breakers, drunkards, moral degenerates, betrayers of Party confidence, guilty of grave financial corruption’ (Article XIX (10)) as deserving of such disciplinary action. While the constitution allows the right to appeal against disciplinary measures in usual cases, party committees under extraordinary circumstances are given the right to summarily expel members for ‘grave anti-party activities’ (Article XIX (13)). The CPI(M)’s expulsion of its veteran leader and eminent Parliamentarian late Somnath Chatterjee in 2008 for defying the party’s command²² is often considered as an instance of the party’s unsparing disciplinary regime (Press Trust of India, 2018).

Expulsion from the party has also been used to restrain the voices and political ambitions of dissident women members. The CPI(M) had expelled its popular and senior woman leader, architect of land reforms, and once-frontrunner for the Chief Ministerial post in the state of Kerala- K.R. Gowri Amma on the charge of ‘anti-party activities’ in 1994 (Surya, 2021). After it successfully ran the 1987 assembly elections projecting her as the Chief Ministerial candidate, Gowri Amma was bypassed in favour of E.K. Nayanar. Gowri Amma’s case also illustrates the prevalent institutional discrimination against women belonging to marginalised castes in the party. In the recent times, the case

²² The CPI(M)- an ally of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the Centre in its first term (2004-2009), had fiercely contested the India-United States Nuclear Deal (2008) to the extent of withdrawing support from the UPA coalition. When a special session was convened where the government faced a trust vote, the CPI(M) leadership including the then General Secretary Prakash Karat asked the party’s veteran leader and the Speaker of the Lok Sabha (Lower House)- Somnath Chatterjee to step down and vote according to the party line. Chatterjee refused to obey the party command, citing the ‘independent and unbiased’ position of the Speaker in the Parliament. The CPI(M) leadership expelled him a month later for ‘seriously compromising the position of the party’ (Press Trust of India, 2018).

of Jagmati Sangwan's expulsion offers another instance of the CPI(M)'s use of disciplinary measures to silence dissident voices. A renowned social activist, the General Secretary of the AIDWA (the All-India Women's Front of the CPI(M)), and a Central Committee member of the CPI(M), Jagmati Sangwan had registered her vocal protest against the party's decision to forge a pre-poll alliance with the Indian National Congress (INC) for the 2016 West Bengal Assembly elections under the argument that the political-tactical line of the CPI(M)- revised in 2015, forbade electoral alliances with the INC (Correspondent, 2016; Manoj, 2016). The party leadership quickly expelled her for defying party discipline with her act of walking out in the middle of the Central Committee meeting in protest (Correspondent, 2016; Manoj, 2016).

Apart from expulsion and other punitive measures, the CPI(M) leadership have also cited the party's professed commitment to an anti-personalised institutional culture in order to rationalise the exclusion of women from leadership positions and ministerial portfolios. The exclusion of K.K. Shailaja- the popular health minister in Kerala's Left Democratic Front (LDF) government headed by party veteran Pinarayi Vijayan, from ministerial portfolio, constitutes a recent instance of such marginalisation of strong women contenders for leadership by the party. Praised widely by the international media for her efficient management of public health crises such as the Nipah Virus outbreak (2018) and the Covid 19 pandemic (2020-), Shailaja emerged as a popular leader in the 2021 state assembly elections in Kerala, her popularity rivalling that of the Chief Minister himself (Kochukudy, 2021; Reghunath, 2021). Even after winning by the record margin of over 60,000 votes, Shailaja was- contrary to popular expectations, kept out of the new LDF ministry in Kerala. While the health ministry was allotted to another woman candidate- the newcomer Veena George, Shailaja's exclusion from the cabinet despite her proven competence was widely interpreted in the national media (Ghose, 2021;

Kochukudy, 2021; Reghunath, 2021) as a deliberate tactic to curb her Chief Ministerial prospects. During her term as health minister in the previous ministry, Shailaja held daily press conferences regarding the Covid 19 pandemic which had become highly popular. Within a few days, she was sidelined in favour of the CM Vijayan himself (Reghunath, 2021). Drawing a continuum between K.R. Gowri Amma and K.K. Shailaja's political exclusions, commentators have traced the CPI(M)'s consistent record in marginalising strong women contenders from leadership posts in Kerala (Kochukudy, 2021; Philip, 2021; Reghunath, 2021). The party's defence of its decision to exclude Shailaja was articulated by Pinarayi Vijayan who underlined the CPI(M)'s policy of allotting ministerial portfolios to newcomers and the party's principled stance against the privileging of individual leaders over the organisation (Kuttappan, 2021; Staff, 2021). Critics, however, continued to point at the party's implicit encouragement of Vijayan's own personality cult as an "*Irattachankan*" (double-chested leader) during the 2021 election campaigns (Ghose, 2021; Philip, 2021), which was perceived to be under threat from Shailaja's rising popularity. Such instances highlight the ways through which normative principles and constitutional provisions have often been used in party practices to silence, marginalise and exclude women- particularly those who have cultivated a popular support-base, from leadership positions within the party organisation and in governance.

Both the organisational principle of democratic centralism and the logic of total conformity to party discipline being integral to the cultivation of the revolutionary communist subjectivity were reflected heavily in the narratives of women party members during their interviews with me. As it will be discussed in the chapter on the interviews, a steady inculcation of discipline and constant vigilance involving austerity of lifestyle, engagement with communist literature, connection with the 'masses', and sexual

puritanism was regarded by the interviewees as essential to the sustenance of communist morality.

While the principle of democratic centralism is staunchly defended and upheld by the members of the CPI(M) as indispensable to the integrity of the party, critics such as Javeed Alam and Amrita Basu have identified democratic centralism as responsible for the dearth of intra-party democracy and the underrepresentation and subordination of women and other marginalised identities in the party respectively (Basu, 1989; Alam, 1998, 2009). Claiming that the principle is not intrinsically flawed, Alam argued that organisational discourse in the communist parties of India including the CPI(M) has privileged the element of centralism over that of democracy in practice by concretising the former by defining the relationship between higher and lower party units, and emphasising duties of members, party discipline and unity (Alam, 2009). In contrast, the element of democracy has been kept definitionally vague, adversely affecting the autonomy of lower party units. Alam also argued that the undermining of democracy in the party's organisation is reflected particularly in the restricted flow of information from the higher to the lower party units with the consequence that the communist parties became resistant to dissent and new perspectives and democratic centralism became a means of 'arriving at and enforcing the "correct line"' (Alam, 2009, 39). The higher party committees and the central leadership of the CPI(M) being dominated by upper caste Hindu males, democratic centralism has had the effect of marginalising the voices of women and other underrepresented social identities in the party (Basu, 1989; Alam, 1998). In her study of women's activism within the CPI(M) in West Bengal, Amrita Basu states that democratic centralism informs the unequal relationships between the party and its women's front (PBGMS), and the upper caste, upper class, educated women leaders of the PBGMS and the low-income, lower caste, underprivileged grassroots women

members of the front (Basu, 1989). Such constitutive inequalities contribute to the general marginalisation of women members in the party. The overarching authority of the higher party committee was also reflected in the manner in which talented women leaders were taken away from the women's fronts to the mainstream party organisation, leaving spaces such as the PBGMS weakened. Arguing that the PBGMS members find it difficult to express dissent from the mainstream party leadership often because it is their husbands who occupy the latter positions (Basu, 1989), Basu holds democratic centralism and the party's subscription to the orthodox heteronormative family structure at the level of practice responsible for subordination of women party members at home as well as in the party.

Such critiques of the CPI(M)'s organisational principle and practice can be useful while considering the state of women's descriptive representation in the party; both at the national and the subnational levels. Since its foundation, the CPI(M) has had five General Secretaries- each for 3 to 4 terms, all of whom have been male. The present Central Committee- elected at the 22nd Party Congress, is composed of 94 members. A total of 14 seats out of the 94 have been allotted to women in the Central Committee of which 1 remains vacant. Only 2 of the 17 member Polit Bureau elected by the Central Committee are women- Brinda Karat and Subhasini Ali. In the Central Control Commission, only 1 out of the 5 members is a woman. At the subnational level too, a picture of women's underrepresentation emerges. The West Bengal State Committee at present has 88 members of whom 14 are women- amounting to 15.90%.

In the sphere of governance, even as the successive Left Front ministries led by the CPI(M) leaders Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (1977-2011) have been credited with expanding the space for women's political participation and leadership in rural local government through their effective implementation of the Panchayat system,

such commitment to women's political inclusion at the grassroots level was not reflected at the higher realms of political decision-making. Only 1 out of the 30-member council of ministers (3.3%) in the first Left Front ministry in 1977 was a woman (Munshi, 2005). Through the successive decades, this proportion increased to about 8.3% of female representation in the council of ministers (Munshi, 2005). The last Left Front Council of Ministers (2006-2011) had a total of 3 women out of 44 ministers, among whom only 1 was part of the cabinet- Rekha Goswami. The other two- Debalina Hembram and Bilashibala Sahis, were ministers-of-state responsible for the Backward Classes welfare and Forest departments respectively. In the successive Left Front ministries, women have been allocated portfolios such as social welfare, refugee rehabilitation, agricultural marketing, backward classes welfare, public education, and municipal affairs and urban development (Munshi, 2005). Portfolios deemed politically rewarding such as home, police and finance, however, had remained male preserves.

The party's record on the representation of women in its candidate-lists for successive state assembly elections in West Bengal is also worth considering in this context. While the landmark 1977 elections which brought the Left Front into power saw only 2 women contestants from the CPI(M) out of a total of 232 candidates (Lokdhaba, 2021), more women were fielded as candidates over the decades even as the numbers continued to be insufficient. In the recent times, the party had fielded 26 and 33 women as candidates in the 2001 and 2006 Assembly elections respectively; of whom 17 and 27 had won (Lokdhaba, 2021). The winnability of women candidates in these elections was also connected with the party's overall good performance. In the 2011 elections where the CPI(M) was voted out of power, the party had fielded 41 women candidates- the highest number fielded by it thus far, of whom only 5 managed to win (Lokdhaba, 2021). In the 2016 Assembly elections, 19 women contested out of whom 5 won (Lokdhaba,

2021). The recently concluded 2021 Assembly elections where 21 women from the party contested, witnessed a major electoral debacle for the CPI(M) as well as for its partners—the Indian National Congress (INC), and the Indian Secular Front (ISF), in the *Samyukta Morcha* alliance. The CPI(M) had fielded a number of educated, young female and male newcomers as candidates whose entry into politics generated positive speculations about the party’s electoral revival (Chakraborty, 2021; Dasgupta, 2021). However, the party failed to make a mark in the election which saw the support of women, Muslims, ST and SC voters contribute to a landslide in the favour of the incumbent AITC government (Bhattacharya, 2021c; Daniyal, 2021; Ray Chaudhury, 2021b; Roy, 2021; Sircar, 2021; Tiwari, 2021). The CPI(M)’s record on fielding women as candidates is marginally better than the state of women’s representation in the different Party Committees at the central and state levels as well as in governance in the context of West Bengal. However, when viewed from a comparative lens, the party stood behind²³ the AITC as well as the BJP in the 2021 elections on the number of women candidates fielded. While in the BJP, reservation of seats for women in every unit of the party is laid down in the party constitution (BJP, 2017) and the AITC has taken up voluntary party quotas to field more women as candidates (Verniers and Mirchandani, 2021), the CPI(M) has not adopted any such measures for institutionalising gender quotas within its own spaces, despite its women leaders engaging in pan-India movements for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and state legislatures.

This section on the organisational structure, principles and practices of the CPI(M) has located the channels through which the ‘social logic’ (Glynos and Howarth,

²³ The AITC and the BJP fielded 48 and 38 women candidates respectively (Lokdhaba, 2021).

2007) of centralised party command is reproduced in the institutional spaces of the party, focusing in particular on the implications that such logic holds for its women members who are underrepresented in the higher leadership of the party. The discussions on the different units which compose the organisational hierarchy in the party, the duties and rights accorded to members, and the criticality of discipline and unity in the party have underlined the extent of centralisation in the party as well as the enduring traces of the CPI(M)'s commitment to the ultimate end of a communist revolution. Influence of the latter on the organisational principles and practices of the party is also illustrated through the discussion on democratic centralism which privileges the majority over the minority and the individual over the collective. The section also highlighted how punitive measures against deviant members have often been used to curb ambition in and dissent by women members even as the institutional preoccupation with generating conformity to party discipline has found acceptance among members in the party. The discussion on women's underrepresentation in various national and subnational party units, in successive Left Front ministries in West Bengal, and in the candidate lists of the party for Assembly elections in West Bengal demonstrated the material impact of principles such as democratic centralism which contribute towards marginalising women and other oppressed social categories from positions of power in the CPI(M). The following section offers a study of the CPI(M)'s gendered ideological foundations through a critical interpretive study of party documents and other texts authored by women party members.

The Gendered Ideological Foundations of the CPI(M):

Exploring the dominant institutional discourse on ideology in the CPI(M) through a gender lens, this section conducts an interpretive engagement of the party's official self-

description (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021), the Party Programme (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964; Surjeet, 2000), the Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks (dec 2005) (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005), On Rectification Campaign (Central Committee, 2010), along with works authored by senior party leaders such as EMS Namboodiripad (Namboodiripad, 1975) and recently, Brinda Karat (Karat, 2005, 2014, 2017). These party documents and other literature would facilitate an appraisal of the CPI(M)'s evolving position on gender inequality, women's subordination, feminist principles.

Claiming the revolutionary legacy of the undivided Communist Party of India, the CPI(M) describes itself as 'the foremost Left force in the country' (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021). The official self-description of the party- a brief document of 375 words available in English on the CPI(M)'s central webpage, presents the historical circumstances behind the birth of the party in 1964 as a 'struggle against revisionism and sectarianism' that had played out at the spaces of national and the international politics (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021), referring to the ideological divisions within the undivided Communist Party in India which in turn was partly derived from international tensions between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The CPI(M) sees itself as having been vested with the responsibilities of safeguarding the 'scientific and revolutionary tenets of Marxism-Leninism', applying them 'independently' to the contextual uniqueness of Indian society and polity, and developing strategies for a transformative 'people's democratic revolution' (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021). Highlighting the Indian context and its own autonomous positioning, the party seeks to offer a counter to the charge of communist parties in India being insufficiently attuned to the cultural specificities of Indian society often levelled against it by its political opponents in the right and the centre. While distinguishing itself

from other parliamentary and non-parliamentary communist parties in India, the CPI(M) also underlines its commitment to lead a broader Left democratic coalition with like-minded parties against feudal and business interests. The official self-description of the CPI(M) concludes with the recording of the party's participation in electoral democracy since Indian independence, highlighting its long experience of governance in Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura.

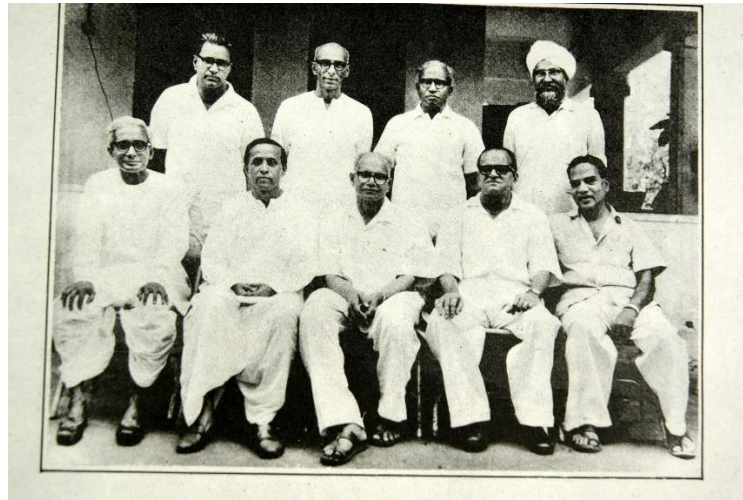


Figure 1: Image of First Polit Bureau of the CPI (M). Source:
<http://cpim.org/page/about-us>

The black-and-white all-male image of the party's first Polit Bureau that accompanies the CPI(M)'s self-description (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2021) complements and reflects the document's gender-blindness. Even as the text does not mention any of the significant male or female leaders of the party by their names, the image contributes substantially to the invisibilisation of the pioneering women communist leaders of the CPI(M). In her foreword to the booklet published by the CPI(M) to commemorate 100 years of the foundation of the undivided Communist Party of India, Polit Bureau member Brinda Karat observed the existence of a similar invisibilisation of the contributions of women communists in the official histories of the party (Communist

Party of India (Marxist), 2019). While the CPI(M)'s self-description remains gender-blind, successive documents produced by the party and reflective pieces authored by the party leaders in their individual capacity do demonstrate a growing sensitivity towards the intersectional impact of exploitative structures that women in India are faced with at the level of the everyday (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964, 2005; Namboodiripad, 1975; Surjeet, 2000; Karat, 2005, 2014; Central Committee, 2010). The Party Programme- adopted in 1964 and subsequently updated- refers to the economic exploitation of working class women by highlighting how living wage, equal pay and workplace dignity continue to elude women labourers (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964; Surjeet, 2000). The document presents the CPI(M)'s thesis on the exploitation of women in Indian society: 'women are exploited at different levels, as women, as workers and as citizens' (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964, 22). The Programme also recognises the newer forms of exploitation, precarity, and oppression of women that accompany economic liberalisation (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1964; Surjeet, 2000).

Drawing a continuum between interventions on the exploitation of women in classical Marxism and the different dimensions of gender inequality in contemporary times, the CPI(M)'s stated position on women is explored in considerable detail in the document 'Party's Perspectives on Women's Issues and Tasks (dec. 2005)'. The lengthy document is divided into four parts. Part I offers overview of the Marxist approach to the 'Women's Question' (Engels, 2010; Zetkin, 2021)- covering Friedrich Engels' theorisations on the origins of the family, gendered division of labour, and the dialectical development of the forces and relations of production throughout history (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005; Engels, 2010), the status of women under capitalism, socialism and the recent era of neoliberal capitalism. Part II identifies the multiple and

overlapping categories of oppression- economic exploitation, caste discrimination, and communal violence that women- particularly belonging to the rural and urban working class, continue to face in India (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005). Parts III and IV discuss the CPI(M)'s stated position on women's subordination, the status of women within the organisational structure of the party and in the states where the party has been in governance and offers suggestions on how to facilitate a greater political inclusion of women in the different committees of the party (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005).

Elaborating on the party's thesis on the exploitation of women as women, as workers, and as citizens, the document highlights the oppression that women in Indian society encounter on the basis of their gender, class and other social positions. Recognising that despite formal constitutional promises of equality, Indian women do not enjoy the rights of equal citizenship in practice, the document underlines the CPI(M)'s consistent support in 'contrast with the vacillating positions of other parties' (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 12) for the introduction of reservations for women in the spaces of political decision-making. The pioneering initiatives such as land redistribution in the names of women, and reservation for women in the Panchayat system, by the CPI(M)-led governments in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura are used to validate the party's endorsement of gender quotas in the Parliament and state legislatures.

In its review of the participation and representation of women in the organisational units of the CPI(M), the document adopts an introspective tone and underscores the necessity of addressing the critical underrepresentation of women in the several Party Committees and mass organisations affiliated with the party. In the lines of the On Rectification Campaign (Central Committee, 2010)- an introspective text published in 2010 by the then Central Committee of the party, the document identifies

three major areas which need to be addressed in order to increase women's representation in the CPI(M): expanding party mobilisation on 'women's issues' such as dowry and domestic violence, increasing the recruitment of women into the different organisational units of the party at the higher and grassroots levels, and eradicating the tendencies of social conservatism, sexual harassment and chauvinism among male party members (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005; Central Committee, 2010). Facilitation of the political training and education of women party members is underlined as a necessary initiative, as is increasing the number of women whole-timers in the party. The document also displays sensitivity towards the informal attitudinal obstacles that affect the quality of political participation by women party members. Such obstacles include their underestimation by their male comrades, the lack of support system for childcare and other domestic responsibilities, and the lack of will and initiative by the central leadership of the party to include women as electoral candidates, into the higher committees in the party and to promote them as leaders (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005). The document's critique of the established practice of senior male party leaders inaugurating and officiating in conferences organised by the women's mass organisation- the AIDWA (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 18), is another instance of informal party practices that are seen as undermining women's autonomy in the party.

The documents- Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks (dec 2005) and On Rectification Campaign (2010), constitute a commendable initiative on the part of the CPI(M) to undertake a reflective critique of the formal and informal organisational practices that perpetuate women's underrepresentation in the party. Even so, their characterisation of problems such as lack of women's representation in the different committees of the party as 'women's issues' limits them from developing a comprehensive assessment of what such problems communicate about the gendered

institutional culture of the party. While the documents correctly identify the informal cultural and attitudinal barriers that constrain women's political participation and representation in the party, they underline that the party's commitment towards women's political inclusion is part of a larger project of mobilising the rural and urban working class towards the goal of revolutionary social and political transformation. Throughout the texts, class- both as a category of exploitation and as a site of revolutionary consciousness, is privileged and prioritised, even as they acknowledge the 'double burden' of class and gender exploitation that working class women face:

'The Party's main work is among the basic classes and the Party gives priority to organizing the poor exploited sections of our society. It is necessary while taking up the class issues of women of these sections the Party and mass organizations under its leadership must also identify, and address the issues of gender oppression, in other words all the problems arising out of the double burden that this section of women face.'

(Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 14)- Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks (dec 2005)

'There is an erosion in the primacy of the working-class outlook of the Party. This stems from a reformist outlook, parliamentarism and a tendency to adjust to bourgeois values.'

(Central Committee, 2010, 71)-
On Rectification Campaign (2010)

Notwithstanding their overarching privileging of class, the documents- particularly Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks (dec 2005), represent the party's self-criticism of the established tendency among its members to dismiss cross-class problems such as domestic violence and dowry as having bourgeois origins. Facilitating better

coordination among the AIDWA, other mass organisations under the party and non-communist women's organisations is suggested as a measure to address the said tendency.

'There was a wrong understanding among several comrades including among women comrades. This was that struggles on issues like domestic violence or dowry were of secondary importance. According to those who held this view, a Left women's organisation must concern itself only with issues directly related to the problems of "toiling women". There was a tendency to underplay the oppression of women within the family sphere to dismiss it as a "non-class issue" and one that is of concern only to "bourgeois feminists". This understanding still persists among certain sections of the Party.' (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 14)

Such rethinking of the party's position on issues of gender subordination contributes to a considerable extent towards decentring the primacy of class in the party's ideological commitment to revolution. This shift in the institutional discourse of the CPI(M) is however, diluted with a consistent anti-feminist stance that can be found in party documents which in turn draw their inspiration from the writings of eminent party leaders (Namboodiripad, 1975; Tanika Sarkar, 1991a; Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005). In a 1975 article titled 'Perspective on the Women's Movement', party veteran leader EMS Namboodiripad offered an overview of the different categories of social and economic oppression such as class, caste and gender that women in Kerala in particular and in India in general have had to encounter through history (Namboodiripad, 1975). Namboodiripad's awareness of inheriting the privileges of an upper caste Brahmin male identity in Kerala society is brought out in his reflections on the subordinate status

of women in his family and community. Even while advocating for greater social and economic equality, right to education, and political participation for women in India, Namboodiripad adopted an anti-feminist position- to the extent of characterising feminism as 'even more dangerous' (Namboodiripad, 1975, 7) and insidious than male chauvinism for the project of women's equality:

'Working for such a real integration of the movement women's emancipation and the joint movement for democracy and socialism we have to carry on a relentless struggle as much against and petty-bourgeois 'feminism' as against male chauvinism. The one (male chauvinism) is direct looking down upon any movement equality between men and women and is therefore clearly visible to everybody. The other however appears on the surface to be more 'radical'; adopts a 'leftist' and 'revolutionary' garb; it is therefore even more dangerous to the integration of the women's movement for their equality with men, and the common movement of the working people for ending all forms of precapitalist exploitation and, along with it, liquidating capitalism.' (Namboodiripad, 1975, 7)

Arguing that the only way for women's organisations to be successful in ensuring equality for women would be to open their doors to both men and women, Namboodiripad insisted upon following the 'correct perspective' that 'the struggle for equality is part of the revolutionary class struggle which the working people have to wage, the struggle which culminates in the division society into an exploiting and exploited class' (Namboodiripad, 1975, 8). Namboodiripad's thesis represents the classical Marxist privileging of class relations and conflicts over other social categories

as well as its suspicion towards feminism. As Heidi Hartmann pointed out in her essay ‘The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more progressive union’ (Hartmann, 1979), defining women as part of the working class in classical Marxism had the effect of subsuming the complexity of gender relations into relations between the working class and capital.

While the institutional discourse of the CPI(M) has evolved over time to undertake self-reflection over its earlier attitude of neglecting the informal cultural barriers to women’s political participation, it continues to retain its resistance to feminism. An instance of such anti-feminist position can be located in The Party’s Perspective on Women’s Issues and Tasks (dec 2005) which criticises a section of the contemporary feminist movements in India for their ‘exclusively anti-male ideologies’ (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 13) and their opposition to organised socialist movements. The document also attacks efforts by such movements to create separate trade unions for women which, it is argued, would adversely affect worker solidarity and assist the interests of capital. To counter such ‘divisive’ practices, the party sees itself in the role of a ‘guide’ to the several mass organisations including the women’s organisation on appropriate strategies for conducting movements (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005, 13). The exercise of hegemonic authority over the PBGMS in West Bengal by the CPI(M) state leadership can be regarded as an illustration of the party’s perception of itself as a guide to mass organisations.

The resistance of the CPI(M) to feminism as well as to initiatives by non-communist women’s organisations to form separate trade unions for women seem inexplicable for a political party professing commitment to women’s equality and the development of their autonomy (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005; Karat, 2005, 2014). The party’s attack on feminism ignores the plurality and diversity of feminist

movements while giving in to the popular sexist caricature of feminism as ‘anti-male’. While the CPI(M)’s critique of the appropriation and depoliticisation of feminist ideas by neoliberal regimes and of the marginalisation of rural Dalit, minority and working-class women’s voices in the urban, upper-caste, middle and upper class dominated mainstream Indian feminist movements are significant interventions, the party’s blanket and misleading dismissal of feminist movements as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘anti-male’ represents the barriers that obstruct the development of solidarity and alliance between feminisms and organised socialist parties.

The complex relationship that the CPI(M) shares with feminist concerns is illustrated in the development of the party discourse surrounding patriarchy and sexual violence. While they have voiced strong opposition to domestic violence on women, leaders of the PBGMS in West Bengal have argued that rape is perpetrated by ‘abnormal men’ who are held to be driven by ‘temporary insanity’ (Ray, 1998, 27). The controversies surrounding the rapes of three women health officials at Bantala and the gang rapes of three Bangladeshi refugee women at Birati in West Bengal in 1990 can highlight the party’s perspective on rape and other kinds of sexual violence. While the then Chief Minister of West Bengal and veteran CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu courted controversy with his comment on one of the Bantala rape survivors who had died, ‘Why did she go there? No one in her senses would’ (Bhabani, 2014), the then General Secretary of the PBGMS- Shyamali Gupta, authored a statement on the Birati gang rapes which was published in the CPI(M)’s official weekly newspaper. Gupta cast aspersions on the moral character of the rape survivors, stating that the gang rapes were the consequence of quarrels among the men of whom the rape survivors were mistresses (Tanika Sarkar, 1991a). Although the party and its leaders later distanced themselves

from the statement, critics pointed out the CPI(M)'s implicit endorsement of Gupta's position through its publication in the party's official newspaper (Tanika Sarkar, 1991a).

The party identifies patriarchy as essentially connected with the economic structure of a society and underlines that the exploitation and subordination of women have exaggerated under the capitalist mode of production (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2005). In her study of the AIDWA, Elisabeth Armstrong highlighted how both the CPI(M) and the AIDWA leadership preferred to use the phrase 'male chauvinism' over 'patriarchy' during the 1980s as the latter, in their opinion, presented a threat to solidarity between working class men and women (Armstrong, 2013, 58). The founding leaders of the AIDWA such as Kanak Mukherjee contended that in according primacy to patriarchy, movements for women's emancipation faced the risk of being limited to cultural movements and isolated from 'people's movements' and causes such as trade unionism. Mukherjee attributed the feminist critique of patriarchy to western imperialist designs:

'Now the imperialists are also throwing a challenge to the healthy democratic women's movement. . . . These feminists, though of various views, pose the woman's question as opposed to men's and hold the patriarchal system of society responsible for the exploitation of women. Thus, they try to divert the class struggle into a struggle between men and women. This breeds hatred in the family, conjugal life and social life, and leads to the isolation of the women's movement from the mainstream of the people's movements.' (Mukherjee, 1989, quoted in Armstrong, 2013)

Despite the scarcity of trust and agreement among women activists of the AIDWA and independent women's movements, the decades following the foundation of the AIDWA saw successful collaboration over a host of popular movements against dowry, rape and domestic violence (Kumar, 2011; Armstrong, 2013). Over the years, AIDWA leaders such as Brinda Karat have undertaken a rethinking of the organisation and the party's suspicion towards feminism and its earlier characterisation of patriarchy (Armstrong, 2013). Commenting on the subordination of mass organisations such as the AIDWA to the CPI(M) leadership, Karat held that 'it is very necessary to further ensure the independent functioning of the mass organisation' (Karat, 2014, 4). In the face of an increasing mobilisation of women in favour of an ascendant Hindu right wing majoritarian politics, Karat has pushed for a greater collaboration among left-leaning and independent women's movements and associations while also arguing for deeper self-reflection with regard to the persistent marginalisation of rural women agricultural labourers and Dalit women in Indian women's movements:

'Personally, I feel, however, that the women's movement has not yet been able to sufficiently centralise the agenda of rural women, particularly women agricultural workers, at the national level... An area where I think that the united movement needs a stronger intervention, although there have been concerted independent efforts by different women's organisations, is on the question of caste oppression and challenging caste structures and the values generated by upper caste ideologies, traditions and stereotypes' (Karat, 2005, 11-13)

While women continue to be underrepresented and marginalised in party committees and governance under the CPI(M), the ideological discourse of the party has

in the recent times shown promises of institutional change in favour of facilitating the political inclusion of women even as suspicion and resistance towards feminist approaches persists. The institutional discourse of the party demonstrates introspection on the structural and cultural barriers that obstruct women's political participation. The extent to which such introspection at the ideational level will translate into a regendering of the party's institutional culture in favour of women remains to be seen.

Conclusion:

Through the discussions of the party's historical development, organisation, and ideological structure, this chapter has attempted to illustrate the formal and informal gendered principles and practices that ensure the reproduction of institutional continuity in the CPI(M) while also locating possibilities of institutional change in favour of women. The party's positioning as a parliamentary communist party sharing space with a variety of other, non-communist, 'bourgeois' political parties in India's electoral democracy distinguished the development of its institutional culture from non-parliamentary communist parties. A consequence of such positioning has been the tenuous balance that the CPI(M) has had to sustain between its ideational commitment to the telos of a revolutionary political and social transformation and the pragmatic compulsions of participating in electoral politics and holding on to political power. The exploration of the CPI(M)'s relationship with the PBGMS/AIDWA in West Bengal and the limited autonomy which the PBGMS had to operate with offered an instance of such compromise that the party and its women's front undertook with revolutionary ideals.

The party's balancing between ideational allegiance to revolution and electoral pragmatism has had gendered implications in the sphere of governance- illustrated both

in the expansion of women's political participation in local self-government and in the PBGMS's lack of autonomy. In the sphere of party organisation, the commitment to a revolutionary telos has been used to reinforce the 'social logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of centralised party command and unity, which in turn has routinely been used to exclude women party members and leaders from positions of power. The discussion on the gendered consequences of an organisational principle such as democratic centralism and associated disciplinary measures such as expulsion demonstrate the ways through which higher units of the party- primarily dominated by upper caste men, exercise hegemonic authority over the lower units, and actively marginalise women and other party members belonging to the lower castes and classes. The absence of formal constitutional provisions or voluntary initiatives in favour of introducing quotas for women in the organisational units and election candidate lists of the party even while the CPI(M) has consistently endorsed gender quotas in legislative spaces illustrated the gap between ideational commitments and party practices.

The section on the CPI(M)'s historical trajectory discussed the participation of women communists in building the social base of the party since its early days and also underlined their erasure and invisibilisation in the party literature and a substantial section of the academic literature on the CPI(M). The third section on the ideological discourse of the party engages with the CPI(M)'s evolving perspective on gender and the underrepresentation of women in the party. While the interpretive exercise involving party documents and other texts demonstrated the party's awareness of and self-reflection over the informal barriers in its institutional culture that obstruct women's participation in party activities, the opposition to feminism and the flawed characterisation of the latter as 'anti-male' in the documents underscored the persistence of orthodox sensibilities in the CPI(M)'s institutional discourse. The chapter on interviews with women members of

the CPI(M), the BJP, and the AITC will explore further the institutional thrust towards a revolutionary telos and the idealised communist subjectivity- exploring what such idealised subjectivity demands from its women aspirants and how the latter negotiate with it. A comparative consideration of organisational practices such as the status of the women's wings, attitudes towards gender quotas, etc. in the three parties will be attempted in the thesis conclusion. The following chapter offers a gender analysis of the institutional culture of the AITC: focusing in particular on the personalised authority of the party leader- Mamata Banerjee.

5. Female Populist Leadership in a Personalised Party: The Gendered Institutional Culture of the All-India Trinamool Congress.

Introduction:

Often characterised as an ‘inchoate body’ (Gupta, 2012, 2), the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) fits the profile of a personalised (Rahat and Kenig, 2018), charismatic leader-driven political party. Its inception is solely attributed to its chairperson and the present Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. The AITC underwent a struggle for existence for thirteen years after its birth on January 1, 1998, until 20 May, 2011 when it assumed power after defeating the long-reigning Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M))-led Left Front government. The party’s foundation was the consequence of a personal decision made by Banerjee to break away from her membership of the Indian National Congress in 1998. The act of displacing the thirty-four-year-old democratically-elected communist regime from the seat of power in 2011 had bequeathed the AITC and Banerjee with instant renown around the world. Since then, the party has amplified its vote-share from 38.93% in 2011 (Election Commission of India, 2011) to 44.91% in the 2016 (Election Commission of India, 2016) Assembly elections, escalating to a record 47.94% in the 2021 Assembly elections (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b). While in 2011, the AITC had won 184 seats out of a total of 294 seats in the Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) and was in alliance with the Indian National Congress (INC), it managed to improve its performance in the 2016 elections- capturing 211 seats while contesting on its own. In the recent times, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as the chief electoral rival of the AITC, bagging 18 Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 General Elections and around 40% vote share even as the AITC won 22 seats

and increased its vote share by around 5% (The Wire Staff, 2019). Facing the state assembly elections in April-May 2021, the AITC competed with the BJP, and an alliance between the Left Front, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Indian Secular Front (ISF). Securing a third term for Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the AITC won a landslide mandate of 213 seats out of a total of 291 while riding on the personal charisma of Banerjee and the rhetoric of Bengali nativist pride (Gupta, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Lahiri, 2021). Analysts of the 2021 election results have credited the party's win to Banerjee's cultivation of women's support through her patronage of a host of welfarist schemes directed at enhancing women's educational and employment opportunities as well as to the AITC's selection of women as candidates (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b; Roy, 2021; Sircar, 2021).

This chapter explores the gendered institutional culture of the AITC while being cognisant of its personalised character, focusing therefore on Mamata Banerjee's performance of leadership and the kind of party culture such leadership has influenced. Categorised into two broad sections, the chapter conducts interpretive engagements with the key themes that frame and constitute Banerjee's self-making as a female populist leader in the context of contemporary Indian democratic politics on one hand, and with the formal organisational structure of the AITC, women's representation in the party organisation and governance, and the AITC's gendered policy orientation on the other. In its concluding section, the chapter traces the broad logics that inform the gendered institutional culture of the AITC.

From ‘Didi’ to ‘*Banglar Nijer Meye*’: Mamata Banerjee and the Making of a Female Populist Leader

This section traces the gendered framing of Mamata Banerjee’s populist leadership and self-making by undertaking an interpretive analysis of selected party documents and Banerjee’s autobiography. Informed by the feminist approach to studies of leadership (Sjoberg, 2013; Meret, 2015; Geva, 2018), the discussion of Banerjee’s self-fashioning will assist in understanding the gendered and personalist institutional culture of the AITC. Through its study of the ways through which gendered discursive constructs such as political asceticism, nativism and religious iconography are adopted by Banerjee, this section seeks to highlight the interrelated processes of Banerjee’s self-fashioning and her party’s populist construction of the ‘people’ of Bengal whose leadership is claimed by Banerjee. For the discussion on Banerjee’s leadership, this section analyses the AITC’s official self-description (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018a), a party document called ‘Maa, Mati, Manush’ (‘Mother, Soil, People’) (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018b), and Banerjee’s autobiography ‘Struggle for Existence’ (Banerjee, 1998). While the party’s official self-description would highlight the reach of Banerjee’s personalistic authority over the AITC, the document ‘Maa, Mati, Manush’ - derived from a slogan coined by Banerjee herself during a mass movement against the Left Front regime, illustrates the AITC’s usage of Hindu religious iconography in constituting and reinforcing Banerjee’s style of leadership. Banerjee’s autobiography complements the party documents with its focus on her management of emotions and populist self-making.

Born in an underprivileged family at Kolkata in the state of West Bengal, the conventional narrative of Mamata Banerjee’s stormy political life is usually tinged with high emotions. A popular student leader at her college days, Banerjee’s organisational

and oratorical skills aided in her swift ascension through the ranks within the Indian National Congress (INC)- her parent party. Banerjee's early crowning achievement, at the age of 29, happened to be her victory over the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) heavyweight Somnath Chatterjee in the 1984 Parliamentary Elections. Her parliamentary career, spanning several decades, involved the deliverance of impassioned speeches on subjects close to her heart; often at the expense of critiquing the ruling INC²⁴, and an abundance of dramatic moments²⁵- both in the parliament and on the streets.

Breaking away from the INC party in 1998, Banerjee founded the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and went on to defeat the 34-years long democratically elected Communist (CPI(M)) rule in West Bengal in the year 2011. At present, the AITC governs the state under a third term with Banerjee as the Chief Minister. Distinguishing itself from its political rivals- the left-wing CPI(M) and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the AITC's official discourse frames Banerjee as an alternative, apolitical leader who represents the will of the Bengali 'people' in opposition to the established political elite (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018a). Referred to universally as '*Didi*' (elder sister), Banerjee's political identity reflects the tradition in South Asia of addressing popular women political leaders in relational terms- *Amma* (mother), *Didi* (elder sister) or *Behenji* (respected sister). Performing her leadership under the Indian

²⁴ Among her activities against her own party's (then INC) government, her demanding the resignation of the then Union Home Minister, her questioning the then Union Finance Minister over the rise in prices, a sit-in before the Union Industrial Minister's office, as well as her open campaign against the misuse of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (1995), are significant (Gupta, 2012).

²⁵ From throwing her shawl at the then Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan for neglecting Bengal in the Rail Budget allocations (1997), to exchanging blows with Samajwadi Party MP Daroga Prasad Saroj (1998) due to the latter's opposition to the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament, Banerjee's parliamentary stints have always been marked by high-octane drama and frequent resignations (Gupta, 2012).

context of critical underrepresentation of women in the higher echelons of politics²⁶, Banerjee's populist self-making claims legitimacy by combining her performance of political asceticism with other cultural constructs, such as nativist political rhetoric and Hindu religious iconography.

The AITC government's pursuance of Conditional Cash Transfer schemes targeted at ensuring educational opportunities for low-income girl students, financial support for housing among low and middle-income families, and food security for citizens living below the poverty line, among others has augmented the party's electoral support-base among substantial sections of women in West Bengal, as demonstrated most recently in the 2021 Assembly election results (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b; Roy, 2021; Sircar, 2021). The success and international acclaim achieved by several of these programs has entirely been credited to the personal achievements of the AITC supremo-Mamata Banerjee, reifying her enduring popular image of a liberator of the disadvantaged sections of the society including women. An interpretive analysis of the AITC's official self-description (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018a) would serve to underline the centrality of Banerjee's personalistic authority in the AITC.

The document is brief and contains 494 words in five paragraphs. The overwhelming focus on the person of Banerjee sets the tone of the document and also highlights the personalist and populist character of the AITC itself. The mention of 'numerous movements' and 'interest of the people' seems to give the impression of a legacy in social movements more than that of a career in politics with reference to

²⁶ Following the General Elections of 2019, India holds the rank of 140 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking (IPU, 2020) of the percentage of women in national parliaments in countries across the world. At present, the Lok Sabha (Lower House) of the Indian Parliament has only 78 women MPs out of a total of 542; constituting 14.39% of parliamentarians (IPU, 2020).

Banerjee. Through the repeated use of the word, 'people', it seems to appropriate the vocabulary of the Left while at the same time it subsumes class-differentiations. Banerjee's political decision to break away from the Congress is shown in the light of a righteous war against the CPIM which in turn is painted as a brutal, vicious regime- a 'barbaric rule' and not as a mere governing party that she was a political opponent of. Her split from the party is shown as a moral decision, taken in the interest of 'the people' instead of a strategic political decision.

The second paragraph beginning with 'The time she chose'- attempts to rationalise her decision to break away from the Congress Party and to form the TMC right before the General Elections to the 12th Lok Sabha in the light of ethical necessity coupled with her strategic political skills- 'feel the pulse of the electorate', seemingly to deflect the charge of opportunistic defection levied on her by her detractors. Emphasis upon 'her work' alongside her being 'a politician of much experience and stature', shows an intention on the part of her party to construct her legacy being driven by her personal accomplishments instead of any illustrious family inheritances, particularly in the context of the predominance of dynastic politics in India (K. Chandra, 2016).

The third paragraph presents the formation of the new political party as an event of historic proportions. Exalted imageries are deployed to place the event in a historic continuum with revolutionary moments in the region's past (the Swadeshi movement, the freedom struggle, the epic electoral triumph of the Left Regime in 1977, among others). Every event, even the formation of the party logo, assumes an epochal significance and also highlights her deep personal contributions to the party. The significance of the logo ('saplings', 'grass root') is shown as embodying the philosophy of grassroots mobilisation of her party as well as that of 'secularism'- the famous couplet by the Bengali bard Nazrul Islam is quoted for this purpose. This serves to highlight how the party attempts to claim

the region's legacy of religious syncretism and at the same time, debunk the Left's cultural monopoly on secularism. A surface comparison of the AITC's logo with the CPI(M) logo- sickle, hammer and star- reveals an interesting distinction. While the CPI(M)'s logo represents the classes of the peasants (sickle) and of the workers (hammer), the AITC logo, on the other subsumes the classes into an undifferentiated category of a 'people'. The party's journey is represented as her personal journey. The document begins and ends with her rivalries with the CPI(M). The abundance of military metaphors as well as those of death can also be noted- 'field', 'till her last breath'.

The document exudes a sense of historic destiny, above and beyond civic political participation. It is a concise expression of her individual struggle against the Left regime. At the same time, it also seeks to effectively undercut any enduring popular appeal of the Left. In the given document, two entities in the form of Mamata Banerjee and the Left Regime are pitted as confronting binaries; forever locked in a conflictual relationship.

About the Party

Mamata Banerjee had carried out numerous movements in the interest of the people over a period of time, but simultaneously she was realising that to take her movement ahead, she needed a separate platform to raise her voice against the barbaric rule of the CPI(M). Being with the Congress party was becoming a hindrance. It was this idea and need which gave birth to the Trinamool Congress on January 1, 1998.



The time she chose was the end of the 11th Lok Sabha and the beginning of the 12th Lok Sabha. As a politician of much experience and stature, she understood that it was the right time to

history... A new epoch will start", said Chairperson Mamata Banerjee. On the day of the inception of Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee sketched the logo of the party which signifies 'grass root' (two saplings on the grass). She thought if the Election Commission approves the logo then she will achieve two goals: one, the launch of her party and two, of simultaneously taking the philosophy of the party and explaining to the people her deep



thought behind the logo, which was the message of secularism, "Ek e brinte duti kusum, Hindu Musalman, ekjon tar noyonmoni onno ti tar pran"(two buds on the tree. Hindu and

This was a challenge for any political party as it was not easy to go to people with a new party and ask for their valuable vote. On that day, Mamata Banerjee made a conviction and went to people and said that if they elect her party in the elections, she will stand beside the people till her last breath. The people of this state did keep her trust and faith. That day the people of Kolkata(S) elected her and sent her to Parliament. Since that very day, the people of Kolkata(S) have always stood beside Mamata Banerjee and she too kept her promise and stood beside the people in all situations.

Mamata Banerjee's struggle phase is unending and has faced strong opposition from her rivals, but nothing has deterred her during these 14 long years from her conviction of standing beside the people. During these long years,

Figure 2: Image accompanying the AITC's official self-description. Source:

<https://aitcofficial.org/the-party/>

The document is accompanied by two images. One- a close side-profile of a pensive Banerjee, while the second is the image of a woman wearing a bright orange sari and carrying an AITC umbrella. She is surrounded by several men, looking at different directions. Most of their faces are blurred out, however. The camera seems to focus on her as she stares intently at a distance, possibly listening to an AITC leader's speech. All around her are AITC flags and the rally is taking place at a busy juncture. The working-class woman is the focus of the shot. She is shown nestled under an AITC umbrella, with an optimistic look on her face. The men too are covering their heads from the sun with AITC flags. The use of bright colours and a sunny day signify hope. The two images can be interpreted to form a continuity wherein the pensive look in Banerjee's face seems to be connected to the woman and the men shown in the next image, implying her anxiety for the welfare of the people. At the same time, the images also affirm Banerjee's political self-fashioning as a benevolent leader by reiterating the gendered stereotypical association of women political leaders with behavioural attributes such as care and nurturing.

The AITC's official self-description illustrates the naturalisation of personalised leadership in the party's institutional culture. The constitutive influence of Banerjee's populist appeal is comparable with that of the ideological foundations of Hindu Nationalism and Communism/Socialism that support the party cultures of the BJP and the CPI(M) respectively, and therefore necessitates a deeper interpretive engagement with Banerjee's self-making as a populist leader.

Along with the analysis of party documents, this section also conducts an interpretive reading of Banerjee's autobiography, 'Struggle for Existence' (Banerjee, 1998). Tracing her origin to her humble, unprivileged family inhabiting a low-income neighbourhood in South Kolkata, her autobiography records her determination to

overcome the mounting impediments facing every step of her political career. Primarily known as a street-activist, Banerjee's politics is characterised by the frequent use of performative gestures and high emotions. This may be discerned from a reading of her aforementioned autobiography as well.

Covering the early phase of her career, and concluding in the foundation of the AITC, Banerjee's autobiography highlights the turbulent moments in her career. Her writing style being generally derided as 'a style that fits a school essay' (Bhattacharyya 2004, 1536) and 'poorly organised, meandering, (and) sloppy' (Karlekar, 1998), the narrative in her autobiography is conveyed in a non-linear fashion; with frequent ruptures and emotive articulations. Thus, in the midst of recounting her active involvement in organising the All India Congress Committee Session (AICC) in Kolkata in the year 1983, Banerjee makes a sudden detour into her childhood; and recollects the tribulations faced by herself and her family after her father's demise, and the present state of her extended family only to veer onto her electoral victory in her first parliamentary election campaign (M. Banerjee 1998, 16). Banerjee's recollection of her first parliamentary election win against her CPI(M) heavyweight rival Somnath Chatterjee in 1984 is expectedly laden with emotions and contributes to the crafting of her self-making as a 'street fighter' leader of the 'people':

'I did not enter the fray with the confidence that I would win- but I was determined not to give up an inch without fight. In the end I won- the red citadel crumbled... The common man's affection carved out my entry into national level politics- there was also the selfless love and affection of the people of Jadavpur'. (Banerjee, 1998, 17)

What distinguishes Banerjee's narration is the close intermeshing of the personal and the political- something that is routinely reflected in her public speeches as well, and a complex interweaving of the past, the present and the future. Her style of weaving together seemingly disparate moments, incidences and experiences facilitates in conveying a sense of continuity in the narrative, howsoever tenuous it appears. While her narrative style may give an impression of informality and resemble disorganised musings, the mobilisational capital that it contains needs to be identified. As the literary theorist Kenneth Burke points out,

‘[T]he basic function of rhetoric, the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents...; it is not merely descriptive, it is *hortatory* [italics original]. It is not just trying to tell how things are, in strictly "scenic" terms; it is trying to move people.’ (Burke, 1969)

Recognising the element of agency and interpretation that a narrative connotes (Reissman, 1993), Banerjee's autobiography needs to be read not as mere recollections of past events but as her particular interpretations of the events that are intended to mobilise her audience in her favour and facilitate her self-fashioning as an apolitical, anti-elite leader of the people.

Banerjee's reminiscences are peppered with extensive quotations from the speeches, songs and other works of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and other cultural icons from Bengal- a feature that recurs in most of her public speeches as well. Her appropriation of the late-nineteenth century Hindu religious ascetic-reformer Vivekananda's discourse of selfless social service (*'seva'*) as

a rationale for her frequent resignations from ministerial posts throughout her political career illustrates her performance of political asceticism:

‘[S]omeone had to remain beside the people constantly and with sincerity, like a sentinel. Love for the people made me give up my ministerial post and I assumed the role of the sentry.’ (M. Banerjee 1998, 44).

Adopting a simple yet passionate style of description, Banerjee appears keen to underline the renunciatory element in her politics to the extent of claiming to have no wish to join politics- which is described by her as a ‘dirty game of chess’- at all (M. Banerjee 1998, 3). Highlighting her ultimate allegiance to the wishes of the ‘people’, Banerjee posits herself as an outsider in politics- with no personal ambitions of her own, naïve and vulnerable to the cunning machinations of her erstwhile colleagues in the Congress Party and mortally threatened by her political rivals in the CPIM, with both factions often working in collusion against her;

‘... For the sake of becoming an MP, I would not give up my ideals, nor cast aside my integrity. My sacred duty was to protect this ideal and my belief in truth, both of which I have treasured since childhood and placed on the pristine altar of justice. Now, with the truth revealed, some may do penance for my early demise. I have heard that some persons have even sought shelter with a priest of the Tantric-order!... At first, with the congress flag held high, when I had raised the call “Vande Mataram”, impassioned and unfettered from the depth of my soul, I had not imagined that there could exist such harmonious co-relation between the Left and the Right. After this incident, I became cautious, for I had come under the

venomous ire of some so-called leaders. I realised that I would be facing tremendous hostility. To overcome this fearlessly, I would have to strike. I remembered Swamiji's words, in his "Call to the Nation" "Each one thinks his method is the best; but remember, it may be good for you alone. Food which is indigestible to one is digestible for another..." I realised that the alliance between the Left and the Right would not suit me.' (Banerjee, 1998)

Banerjee's world of political activism is hued with supernatural spiritual experiences, murderous intrigue, and her 'selfless love' for the 'people' of Bengal. As the paragraph above demonstrates, her decision to break away from the INC and constitute the AITC is also rationalised in the light of her professed selflessness. As her autobiography recounts her triumphing over the frequent conspiracies hatched by her political rivals, it is interesting to note that the latter are almost always, male. Banerjee's performance of political asceticism posited her against her orthodox male political rivals and contributed substantially towards providing her with popular support and legitimacy.

Aside from highlighting the renunciatory element in her politics, the autobiography also illustrates her characterisation of social welfare and development as 'human values' above and beyond the perimeter of political ideologies. Banerjee's attempted depoliticisation of the discourse of socio-economic development serves to subsume class and other sectarian differentiations within the discourse on one hand; and contributes towards establishing her as a mass leader beyond ideological boundaries on the other.

Like her politics, Banerjee's writing is also marked by unabashed display of emotions- an attribute that distinguishes her 'non-gentrified' (Gupta, 2012, 3) political

style from the restrained rhetoric of the upper middle-class *bhadralok*²⁷ male leadership that helmed the Left Front government. A factor that set her apart from her rivals happened to be her lack of proficiency in the English language- something that made her an object of ridicule among her detractors and the mainstream media and made her out as an oddity amidst the urban Bengali penchant for Anglicised vocabulary. In her autobiography, Banerjee reflects upon the obstacles she encountered during her early days as a parliamentarian- such as her requests being repeatedly ignored by the Speaker of the House during Question Hour (M. Banerjee 1998, 113) as well as her personal insecurities regarding her emotional persona and lack of command over English (M. Banerjee 1998, 114-15). She also put forth a critique of the elitist colonial-era moorings of the old guard among the Indian political leadership by categorising the Anglicised elite parliamentarians as ‘first class citizens’ while identifying herself with the ‘second class citizens’- ‘ordinary’ parliamentarians who lack ‘smartness’ and ‘glamour’ (M. Banerjee 1998, 115). Her early insecurities as a parliamentarian regarding her emotional persona as well as her command over English are brought out in her autobiography. Her politics; despite her upper-caste provenance, it could be said, echoes what the political scientist Yogendra Yadav hails as the ‘Second Democratic Upsurge’ (Yadav, 2000) in Indian politics- marked by the ascendance of a new leadership in Indian politics that is non-

²⁷ A phrase conventionally used to identify elite and upper middle-class English educated, primarily upper-caste, urban Bengalis who emerged in the early-nineteenth century Calcutta (Chatterjee, 1993), the *bhadralok* has been associated with the attributes of erudition, civility, gentility, and conformity to the Victorian-era morality espoused by the British colonial masters. The foundational influence of the *bhadralok* model- particularly the preoccupation with Western education (Bhattacharya, 2005), restraint and civility- continued to structure Bengali political culture during the freedom movement as well as the period after independence including the long duration of Communist Party rule.

elitist in character and primarily belongs to the vernacular-speaking backward castes and classes.

‘Perhaps I am writing excessively about my thoughts. In truth, my pent-up thoughts wish to pour out at the touch of the pen. This cannot be denied.... There are some members whose appearance may lack smartness, who do not speak English with the anglicised accent; but these members are very active and make honest attempts to speak for the welfare of the people. However, these members rarely get the opportunity. It occurs to me repeatedly that Members are divided into two distinct classes. There is a special group of members who, while addressing the Chair, keep their main focus on the press gallery, for the sake of publicity. The other “ordinary” class lacks “glamour”; hence they are less important. It seems that they are there to mark their presence only. This makes me feel very sad and reminds me of the concept of “first class citizen” and “second class citizen”. In spite of their good intentions the ordinary members do not receive the “importance” and the people of their constituencies think them as ineffective Parliamentarians.’ (Banerjee, 1998, 115)

Alongside communicating her anti-elite political style, Banerjee’s autobiography also recounts the several different instances of lethal attempts on her life by her political opponents (Banerjee, 1998)²⁸, which are seared in the popular consciousness by the virtue

²⁸ Banerjee narrates several such incidences in her book, and they are widely corroborated by newspaper reports. The murderous attacks that she identifies as being orchestrated by thugs affiliated with the CPIM as well as the state police included early attempts to run her over with a car, fracturing her skull with batons (1990) during a peaceful political protest, beating and dragging her out of Writer’s Building- the seat of the executive in Bengal for claiming justice for a raped tribal woman (1993), and most recently,

of extensive newspaper coverage and diligent memorialisation²⁹ by her party every year. Her writings and speeches abound in references to active conspiracies against her- the copiously used phrases being ‘web of conspiracy’, ‘blueprint’, and ‘victim’ among others (Banerjee, 1998). These have also contributed to the creation of an image of paranoia and theatricality that she is often associated with among her critics. It is perhaps her lived experience that compels her to describe her political career consistently through military metaphors. Her narrative makes substantial use of Hindu mythological tropes to convey the state of mortal peril that her rivals- both within and outside the INC, often put her in; ‘(T)hey make blue prints to kill me- their battlelines encircling me (like *Abhimanyu*³⁰)’ (Banerjee, 1998, 163).

Banerjee’s writings and speeches also connote a strong religiosity. Her open admission of spirituality in the form of persistent invocations to divine figures and the use of Hindu religious rhetoric runs contrary to the espoused atheism of the Communist leadership. Banerjee’s performance of populist leadership involves an intermeshing of the figure of the political ascetic with her image as an embodiment of a distinctly Bengali divine Mother Goddess. Alongside Banerjee’s autobiography, this section also includes

beating and manhandling her during her 25-day hunger strike at the Singur anti-land acquisition movement (2006) that had incidentally propelled her to power.

²⁹ An instance of this is the Martyr’s Day Rally organised by the AITC on 21st July of every year commemorating the killing of 13 Youth Congress volunteers agitating under Mamata Banerjee’s leadership by the state police in 1993.

³⁰ Abhimanyu was a prominent character in the ancient Sanskrit epic Mahabharata- a valiant warrior who died young in the battle of Kurukshetra while being trapped by and fighting seven great warriors all by himself. His tragic story has seeped into the Hindu lifeworld and has become a trope for indomitable courage in the face of obstacles but it is also used to refer to an innocent victim of adverse circumstances. Banerjee’s characterisation of herself as an Abhimanyu may be read as an attempt to provide an ethical dimension for her political struggle.

an interpretive analysis of a document sponsored by the AITC- '*Maa, Mati, Manush*' (Mother, Soil, People) (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018b) which illustrates the use of Hindu religious iconography and nativist rhetoric for her self-fashioning as a leader of the 'people' as well as for facilitating the populist imagination of the 'people' as an undifferentiated and righteous entity (Hansen, 2008).

The party document '*Maa, Mati, Manush*' (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018b) demonstrates the foundational influence of Bengali regional pride and the iconography of the Mother Goddess. The title is derived from Banerjee's eponymous slogan for the anti-land acquisition movement at Singur village in Hooghly district of West Bengal (2006) that had propelled the AITC to power in 2011. The document subscribes to an organic conception of the nation with the terms '*Maa*' (Mother) and '*Mati*' (Soil) reflecting the late-nineteenth century nationalist territorial imagination of undivided Bengal as a Divine Mother that was in turn derived from the *Shakta* tradition³¹ of the Hindu pantheon (Chatterjee, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2000; Sarkar, 2001; Ramaswamy, 2010). In this document, the deified body-politic is conceptualised as a nurturing maternal figure and its citizens are described as the 'children' of the Divine Mother (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018b). The document is a polemic tract and is characterised by the use of high emotions. Phrases such as '(F)allen people', 'restore its greatness and days of glory' turns a political party document into a messianic project. The document contrasts

³¹ The *Shakta* philosophy constituted a denomination within the plurality of discourses that constituted the Hindu belief-system, which accorded supreme Divinity to the Feminine Principle of Creative Energy (*Shakti*), primarily represented by the Goddess Kali. It has been especially popular in West Bengal and Bangladesh and incorporates an influential section of Tantric discourses as well.

an imagined past of magnificence with the present state of ‘inertia and confusion’. The phrase ‘belittling our past’ can be read as alluding to the alleged disregard for the icons of Bengal’s religious reforms such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda under the Left Front regime, while the ‘view of life that is alien’ connotes Communism and the Left Front regime’s promotion of international figures of inspiration such as Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh.

The gendered territorial imagination of the nation as a Divine Mother in the text is, as the latter passages suggest, an inclusive and syncretic one, and distinct from the concept of the ‘*pitrubhumi*’³² propagated by the Hindu Nationalist³³ ideologue V.D. Savarkar. The document refers to the anti-colonial freedom struggle, asserting that people- ‘*Manush*’- referred here in the first person as the ‘children’ of the Motherland, regardless of sectarian affiliations, collectively fought in the freedom struggle. The names of Mangal Pandey, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Birsa Munda, Rani Lakshmibai, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bhagat Singh, and Subramanya Bharathy are mentioned in order to demonstrate the diversity in the backgrounds of the icons of the freedom struggle. Interestingly, those of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are

³² A noteworthy aspect of Savarkar’s conception of nationhood is the importance he attaches to the internalization of patriotic attachment to the ‘*pitrubhoomi*’ (holy fatherland) as an essential criterion for belonging to the Hindu nation. His broad definition of Hindutva seems to be inclusive of Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs but not of Muslims and Christians as the holy land of the latter communities are said to be located outside the territorial boundaries of India. Thus, Savarkar conflates faith with nationality (Savarkar, 2003).

³³ The term Hindu Nationalism has often been used to describe a religio-political faction which is inclusive of a gamut of cultural (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*- RSS), religious (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*- VHP), political (*Bharatiya Janata Party*- BJP) and economic (*Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*- BMS) organizations which claim direct or subtle identification with the philosophy of *Hindutva* or ‘Hindu-ness’ as expounded in the works of V.D. Savarkar, and M.S. Golwalkar, among others. A chief attribute of the *Hindutva* discourse is the identification of the ‘Indian’ with the ‘Hindu’. It perceives the Indian nation as a ‘*Hindu Rashtra*’ or a theocratic Hindu state and preaches antagonism against Muslims and other minority religious communities.

omitted- possibly due to their association with the Indian National Congress (INC). Subhash Bose- the eminent freedom fighter and Congress rebel is mentioned. This, along with the fact that the AITC was founded at a public meeting held under Bose's renowned statue at the busy Shyambazar five-point crossing in Kolkata points out Banerjee's attempt to claim the legacy and political inheritance of Subhash Bose.

The paragraphs continue with the grand inclusivity, spirit of sacrifice and collective solidarity of the freedom struggle and bemoan the 'loss' of these values in present times. The 'ivory tower'- hints at the disconnect of the erstwhile popular Left Regime as well as the intellectual predilections of the Left leadership. Demonstrating the influence of the Gandhian discourse on *Swaraj* (self-rule), the passages lament the 'abandonment' of values resembles a spiritual sermon, and 'highest spiritual liberty' which, it is argued, was the true goal of the freedom struggle. The document propagates a familiar narrative of a lost golden age, a fall from grace, and the promise of redemption of a community. There is a strong allusion to an overarching moral corruption which according to the document was accompanied by ineptitude and sloth.

The next paragraph elaborates on the ethical corruption. It temporalises the society into a state of exigency and 'hour of crisis'. There is an invocation of crisis, and the Divine Mother is invoked to bring deliverance from the crisis as well as from the trappings of the ego. Such emotive invocation bears the influence of the Shakta discourse which venerates the Goddess Kali as the Supreme Deliverer from crisis and ego. The document then quotes the lyrics of the hymn Vande Mataram, that interestingly includes the controversial sections which were abjured by the Congress during the freedom movement due to its Hindu sectarian appeal (Sarkar, 2001).

In the continuing paragraphs, the present moment is considered to be an hour of crisis but a 'momentous hour' as well. It is shown as a decisive moment wherein the

people are called upon to choose between the existing powers who are described as ‘a few corrupt, indolent and self-aggrandising, petty and mean-minded people’ and a bright promised future. The powers that be refer to the AITC’s chief political rivals- the CPI(M)/Left Front leaders who are also shown as being out of time and belonging to the past. Antagonistic binaries are constructed where the CPI(M) is put in the side of falsehood. The people are called upon to make a ‘conscious’ and ‘deliberate’ choice. There is, yet again the complete subsumption of class, gender and other categories into the undifferentiated, homogenous construct of the ‘people’. There is a strong emphasis upon the very same ‘people’ awakening from sloth-induced slumber and taking the reins of their destiny in their hands while the Indian state is not mentioned anywhere in the document. The Divine Mother and not the State is invoked upon to provide sustenance and strength which indicates a neoliberal logic at work under the garb of spirituality as well as an endorsement of personalised populist leadership. There is a repeated exhortation to sacrifice. The text seeks to place the sacrifices and martyrdoms under the freedom struggle in a continuum with the present, thereby according moral legitimacy to present struggles. There is a telos of a redeeming future, but this vision is distinct from the Hindu Nationalist concept of a past of humiliation which is to be avenged in the present by means of violent action (Datta, 2010).

The document- ‘*Maa. Mati, Manush*’, seeks to augment the cultivated popular image of Banerjee as a crusader for the downtrodden and a leader of the ‘people’. Importantly, the document’s subtle portrayal of Banerjee as a divinely-ordained political representative also serves to reinforce her public persona of a protective and

compassionate *Didi* (elder sister) of the ‘people’³⁴. In the context of Bengali familial culture, the role of the elder sister has been recognised as that of a ‘proxy mother’ who is supposed to act as a caring intermediary between the parents and the younger siblings (Nielsen 2016, 124). Banerjee’s sacralised official image as a compassionate *Didi* to the Bengali ‘people’ thus contributes towards framing the scope of her leadership above and beyond formal political obligations as well as ideological framings while also underlining the criticality of the particular regional context in the performance of leadership by women leaders in India (Banerjee, 2004).

Alongside the *Didi* persona, Banerjee is also often more directly revered as an incarnation of the as the Hindu warrior Goddess *Durga*³⁵ by her followers and supporters. An instance of such deification of Banerjee was a giant cut-out poster of Banerjee in a depiction of the leader as *Durga* (Chatterjee, 2019) in a massive public rally on the eve of the General Elections in January 19, 2019. Emulating the popular visual representations *Durga* with ten arms equipped with a variety of weapons, the poster portrayed Banerjee with ten extra arms- each arm holding out a particular Conditional cash transfer scheme of the AITC government such as *Kanyashree*, *Rupashree*, and

³⁴ In South Asian cultural vocabulary, it is common to apply familial kinship terms such as *Didi*, *Dada* (elder/older brother) or *Kaka/Chacha* (uncle) to non-familial relationships.

³⁵ The Mother Goddess *Durga* is one of the several incarnations of *Shakti* (the Divine Feminine) who represents at once- the nurturing and maternal attributes as well as the protective and belligerent dimensions of *Shakti*. The most popular visual representation of the ten-armed *Durga* shows her mounted atop a lion and killing a demon with her trident while an arm of hers is raised in benediction. The ritual adoration of *Durga* or *Durga Puja* is the most significant annual religious festival of Bengali Hindus, and is also often seen as a syncretic cultural festival involving participation from other religious communities in Bengal.

Yubashree, among others. Appropriating the popular sentiments associated with the symbolism of *Durga*, the poster portrayed Banerjee as a deified maternal leader who represented benevolent welfarism as well as an unassailable moral power against her political rivals. Far from being an isolated event, ritual worship of Banerjee during *Durga Puja* has also been recorded at Nadia district in Bengal (The Hindu, 2016). Banerjee's association with the Durga iconography also extends beyond the symbolic frame, with policy consequences. The AITC government's electoral strategy of extending direct financial patronage to clubs organising Durga Puja every year across West Bengal and the recent rivalry between the AITC and the BJP over control of the clubs (Daniyal, 2019c; Bhattacharya, 2020c) offers an instance of such policy consequences.

While Banerjee's status as a single woman and her self-fashioning as an apolitical leader of the people with an austere personal lifestyle characterises her performance of political asceticism, her cultivated persona of a 'street fighter' as well as nurturing Didi and an embodiment of the Mother Goddess marks her negotiations with the demands placed by hegemonic masculinity and femininity in the performance of her populist leadership. The criticality of Banerjee's upper caste social positionality in her cultivation of the Didi persona is underscored in the ways through which such a persona is seen as representing the interests of the disempowered and the marginalised even while laying claim to the cultural inheritance³⁶ of the elite *Bhadralok* establishment she is considered an opponent of. In the recent years, responding to the electoral competition with an ascendant BJP in West Bengal politics, the AITC, in association with the political

³⁶ A significant component of Banerjee's leadership persona is her cultivated image of a self-taught intellectual with artistic inclinations. Banerjee is known to have composed poetry, music, paintings as well as novels, and some of her paintings have been sold at expensive rates (Jolly, 2016).

consultancy firm Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), undertook a refashioning of Banerjee's leadership style in order to reinforce her image as a representative of the common people as well as the defender of Bengali regional identity. The recent launching of public policy and administrative outreach activities such as '*Didike Bolo*' (Tell Didi), '*Duare Sarkar*' (Government at the Door), and '*Paray Paray Samadhan*' (Solutions at the Neighbourhood') have tried to establish and consolidate Banerjee's image as an accessible leader by forging direct and personalised administrative connections between her leadership and the voter-citizens. Party programs such as '*Banglar Gorbo Mamata*' (Mamata is Bengal's Pride') (I-PAC, 2020), and Banerjee's rebranding as '*Banglar Nijer Meye*' (Bengal's Own Daughter) (Lahiri, 2021; Ray Chaudhury, 2021a) presented her an icon of nativist pride against the New Delhi-based central leaders of the BJP such as Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. Along with appeals to the women voters of the state, the image of Banerjee as Bengal's Daughter also marks a shift from the 'street-fighter' aura associated with the older persona of 'Didi' towards a more vulnerable figure in need of defence from her supporters.

It needs to be noted in this context that Banerjee's use of religious and mythical idioms to characterise her political journey is conducted amidst the macro-social space of Indian politics which is also inhabited by other adherents of the ascetic mode of political power. Hindu right-wing political figures affiliated with the BJP such as Yogi Adityanath- the present Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur- formerly terror accused³⁷ and a present Member of the Parliament and Uma Bharti- a

³⁷ A prime accused in the serial bomb blasts that took place at Malegaon in the state of Maharashtra on September 8, 2006, Pragya Singh Thakur- known by the honorific 'Sadhvi' that is bestowed upon Hindu

former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, offer instances of religious renunciates who have joined electoral politics. Affinities with the discourse of Hindu Nationalism shape their performance of a militant Hindu political identity (Sarkar, 2001). While politicians such as Sadhvi Pragya and Uma Bharti also lay claim to anti-political moral leadership while adopting the ascetic mode of power in their self-fashionings³⁸, their religious rhetoric is distinguished by its Hindu supremacist appeal and espousal of violent resolutions to social conflicts (T. Sarkar, 1991; Butalia and Sarkar, 1995; Sarkar, 2001; Datta, 2010). In contrast, Banerjee's rhetoric of anti-politics claims to adhere to the Bengali nativist sentiment of religious syncretism³⁹ and against Hindu Nationalism, even as in the past decades, her political strategy included entering into alliance with the BJP to form a ruling coalition at the Centre during 1998-2004. Her use of religious rhetoric in politics and her close relationship with cleric-platforms belonging to both Hinduism and Islam seem to have facilitated a space for religious right-wing politics to thrive, claim her

female ascetics, contested during the 2019 General Elections, and became the member of the parliament from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh under the present BJP government at the center.

³⁸ Militant Hindu women politicians such as Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Pragya are distinguished by their preference for the traditional Hindu renunciate's saffron garb and short cropped hair.

³⁹ Bengal's tradition of religious syncretism is illustrated by the abiding popular acceptance of Hindu and Muslim religious cults and sects that do not conform to the norms and conventions of Brahmanical Hinduism and orthodox Islam respectively such as the *Bhakti* (devotion) cult, the *Baul-Fakir* (wandering ascetic minstrels) sects and the adoration of *Pirs* (popular Islamic spiritual leaders) across religious divide among others. It is also represented by the social reformist legacy of Raja Rammohan Roy, the *Brahmo Samaj*, the world-humanism of Rabindranath Tagore, as well as by the discourse of equality of all faiths propagated by Ramakrishna Paramhansa (Heimsath 1964).

critics⁴⁰. Constituting a clear departure from the political imagination of the Left Front regime- which was predicated upon a distancing from religion, Banerjee's politics reinstates religion at the heart of Bengali political culture (Gupta, 2012; Sumana Roy, 2012).

Banerjee's anti-elite political style is complemented by her underprivileged class background (despite her carrying a Hindu upper-caste surname) as well as a lack of political inheritance or a male mentor- something that distinguishes her from several of her prominent contemporary women colleagues in Indian politics such as Sonia Gandhi, Kumari Mayawati or the late J. Jayalalitha or women leaders of the past such as Indira Gandhi⁴¹. The discursive strategies through which women leaders other than Banerjee such as Jayalalitha and Mayawati established their authorities within their respective parties and laid moralistic claims to political legitimacy involved them invoking their close associations with and the patronages of their respective male mentors- M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) for Jayalalitha and Kanshi Ram for Mayawati. Both the female leaders cast themselves as the sole political heirs of their male mentors, seeking the protection of the their mentors' legacies to challenge potential contenders (Pandian and Geetha, 1989; Bose, 2008). While each of the three female leaders have adhered to

⁴⁰ In this interview to *The Week*; given shortly before the Assembly elections in 2016, CPIM leader Dr. Surjya Kanta Mishra blamed Banerjee for the growth of Hindu right-wing associations such as the RSS in Bengal in the recent years (Banerjee, 2016).

⁴¹ In her writings (Banerjee, 1998; Banerjee and Sengupta, 2012), Banerjee often expresses her gratitude to the senior INC leader and former Prime Minister of India- the late Rajiv Gandhi for mentoring her and facilitating the advance of her career during her early years in politics. Gandhi's endorsement of Banerjee within the INC, however, differed substantially from the direct, close and sustained mentorship that MGR and Kanshi Ram had extended to Jayalalitha and Mayawati respectively.

different political styles and crafted correspondingly varying leadership personas- Jayalalitha being perceived as a generous ‘Amma’ (Mother) with an affluent lifestyle, Mayawati embodying Dalit pride with her monumental statues, and Banerjee with her practice of austere living, a common preoccupation with personalised political authority characterises all the three leaders. In the context of the prevalence of dynasticism in post-independent Indian electoral politics (K. Chandra, 2016; Rai and Spary, 2019), the lack of male mentors and direct personal relations with charismatic male leaders brings out the uniqueness of Banerjee’s political trajectory vis a vis those of Jayalalitha or Mayawati even as all the three female leaders are referred to by their respective followers in relational and extended kinship terms.

While considering Banerjee’s populist leadership in West Bengal, all of the aforementioned attributes that constitute her political style- high emotions, anti-elite rhetoric, absence of political lineage, and lack of command over English, alongside the provision of an array of Conditional Cash Transfer schemes for different sections of the population under her administration have contributed substantially in augmenting Banerjee’s popularity among women, the rural and urban poor and lower middle-class sections of the population. Her personal involvement with the naming and propagation of these welfare schemes (Ray Chaudhury, 2020) has led the international acclaim achieved by some of the programs such as *Kanyashree* to be credited entirely to her personal leadership, reaping the AITC electoral dividends (Mishra and Aasaavari, 2016). The extensive audio-visual publicising of these schemes and their benefits (Ray Chaudhury, 2020) by the AITC government has contributed substantially towards deepening the reach of personalised politics in Banerjee’s administration as well as within the organisational space of the AITC. Alongside the policies of her government, Banerjee’s careful cultivation of an unadorned and austere sartorial style involving plain

white cotton saris, flip-flops, and *jhola* bags⁴² accompanied by her frugal lifestyle and dietary habits, have lent her moral legitimacy. In the AITC's official self-description, the party is conceptualised as a personal creation of Banerjee (All India Trinamool Congress, 2018a). The AITC's institutional discourse and public policy framework, therefore, also contribute towards enhancing Banerjee's personalised leadership and the element of moral superiority in her self-fashioning. At the same time, Banerjee's association with welfarist schemes- several of which were actually initiated under the Left Front government, also contributes towards the development of her image as an ideology-defying leader, particularly in the context of the persistent opposition to the communist Left Front government which marked a substantial part of her political career and subsequent ascent to power.

Banerjee's performance of political asceticism in combination with nativist rhetoric and Hindu goddess iconography reconfigures the archetypal figure of the male political ascetic through her self-fashioning as a female political outsider consistently at the receiving end of murderous conspiracies from her male rivals who are seen to represent the 'elite' political establishment. The abundant use of emotions in her writings and speeches further assists in reframing the idealised model of the rational and detached political ascetic while complementing the populist content in Banerjee's leadership. While Banerjee's leadership is marked by her practice of 'street-style politics' that is consistent with the idealised model of populist leadership (Rousseau, 2010; Geva, 2018; Maiguashca, 2019), the themes sentimentality and vulnerability- drawn from the

⁴² Jhola bags, or indigenous all-purpose handmade jute or cotton bags, have been associated with the socialist-communist intelligentsia sartorial style in Bengal and other parts of India.

repertoire of behavioural traits associated with conventional femininity, also form an integral part of her populist self-fashioning. In particular, the element of gendered vulnerability in Banerjee's political style- illustrated in the wide range of insults traded at her personal appearance, character, life-choices and identity as a woman by her critics at the CPI(M) and the BJP and her recent refashioning as Bengal's Daughter, can be seen as constituting a departure from the hypermasculine, 'strongman' models of populist leadership as well as from the stoicism associated with the political ascetic. The self-makings of other, male populist contemporaries of Banerjee in India such as Narendra Modi also involve a strategic management of emotions- Modi's narrative of having worked as a low-income '*chaiwala*' (tea-seller) in his childhood being an instance. Contestations of the cultivated populist self-makings of such male leaders, however, rarely involve gendered/sexualised critique as they do in the case of female populist leaders such as Banerjee. While being the subject of criticism, the prevalence of emotive articulations in Banerjee's self-fashioning also contributes towards reinforcing the mobilisational capital of her leadership. As the chapter on interviews will demonstrate, emotional moments in the cultivated narrative of Banerjee's personal life-struggles act as 'affective triggers' (Mayer 2014, 7) for her followers and supporters, shaping their ideas about and expectations from political leadership.

The following section engages with the gendered institutional culture of the AITC through its discussion of the party constitution (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998) and the gender policy of the party in governance in West Bengal, focusing on women's representation in the organisational units of the party, in candidate-lists, and in governance. The section will also illustrate the depth and influence of Mamata Banerjee's personalised authority in shaping the party culture of the AITC.

Organisational Practices and Gender Policy Orientation of the AITC:

While its political rivals- the CPI(M) and the BJP, are marked by their cadre-based organisations, the AITC has a personalised structure, with sweeping powers accorded to its chairperson by the party constitution. Under Art. III (A) of the party Constitution (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998), the National Working Committee composed of 19 elected members and the Chairperson occupies the apex of the party-structure while the Polling Booth Committee comprises the basic elected unit. Elected bodies such as the Ward, Town/Block, Assembly Constituency, District, and State Executive Committees constitute the remaining rungs of the party hierarchy. The tenure of every Committee is 5 years (Art X- Rule 9a). Grassroot membership in the party is open to all adults and the annual fee is kept at a minimum of INR 5 (0.059 Eur) as per Art. V (d) of the party Constitution.

The Chairperson of the party is accorded the highest executive authority (Art. XI A), with powers to decide the National Agenda (Art. XI A [iii]), to constitute new party blocks (Art. XI A [iv]), and to appoint party officials (Art. XI A [v]) among others (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998). The constitution (Art XIII) also allows space for the Chairperson to exercise decisive control over the National Working Committee by stating that among the 19 members of the committee, 9 would be elected as per the rules of the party while the remaining 10 would be appointed by the Chairperson and their tenures may be extended according to the Chairperson's wishes (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998). Even as the National Working Committee is recognised as the 'final authority' (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998) on matters pertaining to the interpretation and

implementation of constitutional provisions, such authority is in effect accorded to the Chairperson- presently Mamata Banerjee, consolidating her hold over the party.

While the constitutional provisions give the impression of a substantially segmented party-structure, an element that seems to distinguish the nature of the AITC, however, is the provision of a space for flexibility in the form of Art. XIX whereby all the units in the party are allowed to constitute additional units of their choice with the approval of the National Committee. This contributes towards decentralising the party at the local levels, as would be further demonstrated through the interviews conducted. This also distinguishes the AITC from the structure of its political rivals like that of the CPI(M)- which has a rigid hierarchical party-organisation and allows only its State Committees the autonomy of forming new party cells (Art. XVI 3b)

Such organisational flexibility is also underlined in the constitutional provision concerning quotas for women, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the different committees of the AITC. While the party constitution lays down that 33% seats and 20% seats in every Trinamool Congress Committee shall be reserved for women and SC-ST communities respectively (Art. X- Rule 9b), it also vests the ‘competent authority’ in each committee with the power to relax the minimum percentage of quotas for the said social categories (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998). Even as the AITC has been credited with ensuring 41% representation to women in its electoral candidate list for the 2019 General Elections (Uppal, 2019) as well as for fielding the highest number of women candidates among the contending parties in the recently concluded 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections (Verniers and Mirchandani, 2021)⁴³, such formal

⁴³ It is interesting to note that Banerjee’s persistent commitment to enhancing women’s representation in the party coexists with her fluctuating commitment to the passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill. Even as Banerjee was involved in dramatic acts of protests in the Parliament in favour of the Bill, her party

constitutional provisions defending quota relaxation render the party's commitment to gender parity and women's representation in party-positions entirely dependent upon the discretion of the party's Chairperson. The personalisation of executive authority within the party under Mamata Banerjee facilitates a culture of overarching deference of grassroots members to the party leadership within the AITC- a theme that is highlighted and discussed in the chapter on interviews of women party members.

Along with the hierarchy of committees, the constitution of the AITC also provides for 19 Associate Organs of the party (All-India Trinamool Congress, 1998) which includes the Trade Union Congress, Youth Congress, *Mahila Congress* (women's wing), Kisan Congress, and Minority Congress among others. Appointments for the key office-bearing positions in the associate bodies of the AITC happen at the discretion of the party Chairperson and are generally perceived to indicate degrees of personal association with the Chairperson. Such appointments also often serve as sites of contestation between competing lobbies and political aspirants, with serious political consequences. An instance of such contestation was Mamata Banerjee's creation of a separate youth wing- the Trinamool Yuba, of the AITC under her nephew Abhishek Banerjee in 2011 (All-India Trinamool Congress, 2011). Banerjee's promotion of her nephew along the ranks of the party and the growing speculations about the latter being geared up to inherit her political legacy (Bhattacharya, 2018) generated dissatisfaction among other prominent AITC leaders such as Suvendu Adhikari and Saumitra Khan who cited Mamata Banerjee's promotion of dynasticism in the party as a reason (Dutta, 2020; Sen, 2020) for their subsequent defection from the AITC to the BJP.

abstained from voting when the Bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha (upper house) in 2010 (Press Trust of India, 2010).

Appointments to the women's wing of the AITC, however, have rarely generated such public interest and speculation, even as the present president of the Trinamool Mahila Congress also serves as a Minister-of-State in Mamata Banerjee's ministerial cabinet. In my interviews with women party leaders, some interviewees who occupied public offices tended to distinguish themselves from the AITC women's wing in order to establish their 'seriousness' as political leaders while some others underlined the subordination of the women's wing units to the corresponding party organisational units. The women's wing of the AITC routinely participates in public campaigns around issues- such as price inflation, and the party's opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) (All-India Trinamool Congress, 2020; Team MP, 2020)- decided by the party Chairperson and the National and the State Committees and trains grassroots women volunteers (All-India Trinamool Congress, 2014b). For most women members of the AITC I had interviewed, the women's wing also serves as a 'safe space' for fostering collective solidarity, networks, and access to political capital. Even so, the stereotypical association of the women's wing with what is perceived in the mainstream party culture as 'women's issues' aids in its frequent marginalisation from the key decision-making spaces in the party hierarchy. Adding to the marginalisation, on the level of policymaking, is Mamata Banerjee's personalist association with the range of Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) schemes for women and girl children promoted by her government, which contributes substantially towards undermining the importance of women's wing members of the AITC. In the recent year, facing the 2021 Assembly elections, Banerjee announced the formation of a special party front- '*Bongo Jononi*' (Mother Bengal) that was aimed at mobilising women party workers (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b). This ostensibly apolitical front involved women party members reaching out to women voters across the state and conduct a positive campaign around the social welfare

schemes of the AITC government while highlighting the ‘rising crimes against women’ in BJP-ruled states such as Uttar Pradesh (The Telegraph Special Correspondent, 2019; Press Trust of India, 2021) and mobilising women against communal polarisation in West Bengal. The formation of such fronts formed key planks in the AITC’s election strategy against similar initiatives taken by the BJP to attract women voters. While such a front enhanced the opportunities for political networking and mobilisation for women party workers, its positioning as a political outfit that is distinct from the women’s wing of the AITC- with a separate set of leadership, had the material effect of undercutting the visibility and prestige of the women’s wing.

Banerjee’s patronage of the welfarist CCT schemes has reaped electoral dividends for the AITC, particularly among women voters in the state. While the AITC enjoys robust electoral support from women (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b, 2021a; Roy, 2021; Sircar, 2021), its representation of women in governance, presents an interesting case. The newly elected governing council of ministers (2021-26) in West Bengal is composed of 44 members, out of whom 9 are women, including the Chief Minister herself, who heads a range of ministries (Singha, 2021). Apart from Banerjee, the new cabinet has only 1 woman minister- Dr Shashi Panja, who heads the ministry of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare. This marks a substantial improvement over the preceding council of ministers (2016-21) which had a total of 4 women including Banerjee. The new council of ministers under Mamata Banerjee’s third term includes three women from the Scheduled Tribes- Sandhyarani Tudu, Birbaha Hansda, and Jyotsna Mandi, as well as one Muslim woman- Sabina Yasmin, and one woman from the Scheduled Caste- Seuli Saha, distinguishing it from the preceding governments in terms of the intersectional representation of women.

In the sphere of candidate-selection, the AITC has always fielded more women on an scale that is higher than those of its electoral rivals- the CPI(M) and the BJP, as well as from the national average (Verniers and Mirchandani, 2021). The 2016 State Assembly elections saw the party fielding 44 women candidates out a total of 294 candidates- amounting to 14.96%. Banerjee had personally declared the provision of a 50% quota for women candidates within her party for Panchayat elections- thereby extending the 33% quota brought on by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) in the AITC. As the Election Commission of India Report illustrates, the 2016 West Bengal Assembly elections saw 200 women (Election Commission of India, 2016) contesting alongside 1761 men from all the political parties in the fray. Out of these, however, only 40 women won, 29 among whom were members of the AITC. The increasing salience of women voter-base in the recent parliamentary and state assembly elections and its consequent transformation into a site of intense contestation between the AITC and an ascendant BJP, however, have influenced the AITC to announce extended voluntary quotas for women in its election candidate lists. For the 2021 state elections, the AITC had floated the speculation that it would announce the provision of 30-35% quotas for women in its candidate list (Das, 2021), in a similar way it had announced 41% reservation for women in its parliamentary election candidate list in 2019. The proposed gender quotas in the Assembly elections would have led to a two-fold increase in the number of women candidates from those in the preceding 2016 elections (Das, 2021). In practice, however, the party ended up fielding only 49⁴⁴ women out of a total of 291 candidates (Shukla, 2021), falling short of the proposed 30-35%. Even so, the number of

⁴⁴ The party had announced 50 women candidates of whom one- Sarala Murmu, the candidate from Habibpur, defected to the BJP shortly before the elections.

the candidates fielded by the AITC remained higher than those fielded by the BJP and the CPI(M) as well as by other regional parties such as the *Dravida Munnetra Kazagham* (DMK) in Tamil Nadu (Verniers and Mirchandani, 2021). Authors Gilles Verniers and Maya Mirchandani have argued in their recent study (Verniers and Mirchandani, 2021) on gender representation in the AITC that the party's policy of promoting women as candidates is located in its strategic recognition of the winnability of women candidates instead of ideational commitments to gender parity. This is borne out by the available statistics on women candidates in the 2021 elections. Out of the 49 women candidates, 33 have won the elections of whom 16 have been re-elected (Lokdhaba, 2021). During the election campaigns, women supporters of the party were consistently placed in the front row in Mamata Banerjee's public rallies wherein Banerjee would frequently address them as 'mothers and sisters' during her speeches. Banerjee also held massive women-led rallies in protest against price-rise which are being interpreted as having influenced the AITC's electoral victories in the BJP-dominated regions such as North Bengal (Ray Chaudhury, 2021b).

Such and other recent organisational initiatives catering to women party workers and voters taken by the AITC on the eve of the 2021 state elections also reflect the deep influence of the party's association with the corporate political consultancy firm- Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) (Bhattacharya, 2020; I-PAC, 2020b). The I-PAC's association with the AITC in advisory and executive capacity may be interpreted as a strategic counter to the BJP's association with the RSS.

The charismatic populist appeal of Banerjee as a representative of the marginalised sections including women is therefore accompanied by the relatively higher representation of women in ministerial and party positions. A consideration of the AITC government's welfare policy for women will illustrate the regime's attempt to balance

between its orthodox and progressive support-bases through the disjuncture between the stated objectives of two of the regime's popular CCT schemes targeted at young girls. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) schemes as a means of poverty alleviation and social justice in countries with higher levels of socio-economic inequality have seen substantial surge in popularity in the recent decades. In the Indian context, successive governments – both at the central and state levels have backed several CCT schemes for various marginalised groups. Within this, socio-economic and cultural advancement of women as a key policy theme has increasingly gained prominence in government agendas. This particularly comes in the wake of women emerging as a distinct electoral constituency (Kamra, 2019); reflected both in the higher number of women voters in recent elections (Bansal, 2019) as well as in the qualitative shift in favour of the deepening of women's voting autonomy (Kapoor and Ravi, 2013; Spary, 2020). While policies targeted at women's development generally claim adherence to progressive social discourse, they are also grounded in cultural contexts of gender inequality and societal conservatism. The complex gender norms that structure government policy in the present West Bengal government of the AITC is a case in point.

Among the two CCT schemes, the first- *Kanyashree* was initiated in 2013 and aims at encouraging more girl-students between the age of 13 and 18 to continue with higher education, and curbing school drop-outs and child marriage. It received first place at the UNESCO Public Service Awards in 2017 (Business Line, 2018) from among 552 project nominations from a total of 62 countries. At present, the scheme records over 7 million beneficiaries (Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, 2020). It includes both annual cash-benefits of 1000 INR and one-time financial grants of 25,000 INR to be paid to girl-students from low-income families. The second- *Rupashree*- a marriage assistance scheme modelled after a similar programme launched in the state of

Tamil Nadu (Correspondent, 2011), is targeted at low-income families intending to arrange their daughters' marriages after the latter attain adulthood (18 years of age). Launched in January 2018 as part of the State Budget, the scheme provides a one-time financial grant of 25,000 INR to what it designates as 'economically stressed families' (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, 2018) during the time of their daughters' weddings. The stated aim of this scheme being the alleviation of wedding expenses for disadvantaged families, it is premised on the orthodox as well as problematic representation of unmarried young women as a 'burden' on their families and can be seen as reinforcing the patriarchal practice of dowry. Notably, this is in sharp contradiction to the vision of the Kanyashree project that aims to facilitate higher education prospects for young women in West Bengal while deterring child marriage and associated risks of early pregnancy, maternal and child mortality. Offering low-income girl-students aged 18 years the prospect of higher education (Kanyashree) on the one hand, and marriage (Rupashree) on the other, the AITC's policy framework weakens the goal of women's economic autonomy. The potential implications that a policy like Rupashree holds for reinforcing the practice of dowry is noted in a study on the implementation of a similar scheme in Tamil Nadu (Sheela *et al.*, 2014). As the study shows, a substantial section of recipients tends to spend cash benefits on purchasing two-wheeler vehicles as dowry for marriage. These divergences between the two projects assume more clarity upon undertaking a comparative analysis of their guidelines.

Issued by the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, the Kanyashree guideline (Welfare, 2014) and the Rupashree guideline (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, 2018) are policy documents outlining the provisions, eligibility criteria, implementation, monitoring and grievance redress mechanisms. It is the thorough discussion on the rationale for CCTs and gendered

implications of child labour, trafficking, and child marriage and their monitoring apparatuses that render the Kanyashree guideline more comprehensive than the Rupashree guideline. While the Kanyashree guideline reflects the prevalent socio-economic discourse of development – as demonstrated by its frequent use of concepts like ‘feminisation of poverty’ (Welfare, 2014), the rather concise Rupashree guideline is marked by its technocratic tenor and terseness of prose to describe the policy and implementation designs, which has been undertaken without establishing a rationale for the scheme. In addition, whereas individual girl students constitute the direct recipients of cash benefits in both the schemes, the Rupashree guideline effectively identifies low-income families as the beneficiary units. This emphasis on families as units counters the Kanyashree guideline’s avowed objective of enabling individual girl students to forge ‘a sense of self, personal capacity and well-being’ (Welfare, 2014). The difference in their gendered approach is further underlined by their emblems:



Figure 3: (A) The Kanyashree emblem (Dutta 2018)

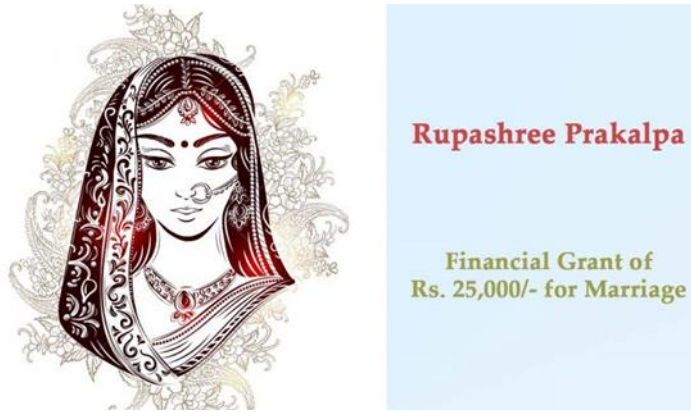


Figure 4: (B) The Rupashree emblem (ABP Staff Reporter, 2019a)

Image A- the Kanyashree logo features the visage of a young women studying a book with a cover that reads, ‘Study and Smile’ on one side and ‘*Egiye Jaa*’ (‘Move Forward’) on the other. The woman has a steady, brooding and determined gaze- pointed at the book and is adorned by a medal around her neck. Image B- the Rupashree logo, features a woman decked in bejeweled Hindu bridal attire with a demure, downcast gaze.

Within the AITC, the success and international acclaim of Kanyashree has entirely been credited to party supremo Banerjee, reifying her image as ‘liberator’ of marginalised social groups including women. This was reflected in interviews I conducted with AITC workers. Women members drew links between socio-cultural deprivations faced by aspiring low-income girl students and Banerjee’s empathic capacity to devise ‘ingenuous’ solutions. In contrast, women political workers of the left-wing Communist Party of India (Marxist) as well as the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party raised a range of objections to the CCT schemes. These included characterising the schemes as ‘giveaway of leftovers’ and ‘*Khairati*’ (charitable donations) to personally accusing Banerjee of ‘repackaging’ central government-sponsored schemes as those of the state government.

While the divergent and conflicting objectives of Kanyashree and Rupashree signal a fundamental incoherence at the level of policy-making, they also illustrate the government's attempts at simultaneously catering to the sentiments of its progressive and conservative support bases. Despite this disjuncture, a closer look at the naming of these schemes offers notable insights into the discursive commonality undergirding these frameworks. Both Kanyashree and Rupashree connote aestheticised Bengali adjectives for young women. Kanyashree denotes the charm of a young girl while Rupashree lays emphasis on her physical beauty. The Rupashree scheme highlights the channels through which socially conservative gender norms are reaffirmed even as its award-winning counterpart- Kanyashree, facilitates the challenging of those very norms. At the same time, traditionalist cultural representations of women as repositories of physical beauty and grace inform both frameworks. Illustrating the subterranean congruity between the two otherwise contradictory schemes helps to understand the ways in which hegemonic gender constructions weave into the practice of developmental policymaking, with resultant policies often mirroring socio-cultural conventions they claim to subvert.

With its discussion of the formal structures of gendered power and hierarchy in the party organisation and policy discourse of the AITC, this section has sought to trace the influence of personalised authority in the party culture in general, and on women's descriptive and symbolic representations in particular. Set against the chronic underrepresentation of women in political parties in India, the state of women's representation in the AITC certainly shows promise even as there is substantial room for improvement. The discussion on the gender policy orientation of the AITC government in West Bengal has offered an insight onto the inherent contradictions and strategic political calculations that characterise the gender discourse framing the welfarist CCT schemes credited to Mamata Banerjee. While the party constitution reinforces the

overarching executive authority of the Chairperson, it makes allowance for flexibility in gender and other quota rules by placing them at the discretion of the Chairperson and the rest of the party elite. The official portrayal of Banerjee as the sole representative of women and other marginalised sections coupled with her hegemonic authority over the party and the government serve to effectively undercut the status of the party's women's wing as well as that of other women party members. This marginalisation of the women's wing of the AITC is further complicated by the party's recent organisational overhaul and initiatives as a result of its association with the I-PAC, even as the same association has led to an increase in women's representation in the party's candidate list. This section has also indicated the presence of a naturalised logic of deference to the party leadership among its grassroots members which will be explored in further detail in the chapter on interviews.

Conclusion:

Through its engagement with the formal organisational structure, policy orientation and personalist leadership of the All-India Trinamool Congress, this chapter has sought to reflect upon the key themes and logics that constitute the gendered institutional culture of the party. The influence of these themes and logics on the construction of political subjectivities of the party's women members will be explored in the chapter on interviews. The naturalised and hegemonic 'social logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of absolute deference and loyalty to the personalised authority of the party leader Mamata Banerjee is enshrined in the formal provisions of the party constitution and the organisational hierarchy. It is also illustrated in other party documents and in Banerjee's personal association with her government's CCT schemes.

Even as in the recent years, defections of significant political leaders of the AITC to the BJP on the eve of the 2021 state elections can be seen as illustrating a rupture in the ‘social logic’ of absolute deference and loyalty to the party supremo, emotive appeals to personal loyalty to Banerjee among the remaining party leaders continue to reinforce the logic of deference which was further consolidated with Banerjee’s landslide victory in the recent elections. An overwhelming number of AITC defectors being notable male leaders⁴⁵, such appeals to personal loyalty seem to have a particular grip over women party members and leaders. Alongside the social logic of deference to the leader that ensures the reproduction of systemic coherence and institutional continuity in the AITC’s party culture, antagonistic binaries between the party leader and her political rivals in the CPI(M) and the BJP constitute the contentious ‘political logic’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) in the party. Banerjee’s personalist leadership bears a deep imprint on the AITC’s institutional culture. Even as Banerjee’s leadership has contributed to the undermining of the role and contributions of the party’s women’s wing and other women leaders, its foundational influence on the self-makings of women party members cannot be denied. The recent organisational developments in the AITC in association with the I-PAC, on the eve of the 2021 state elections have to an extent contributed to an increase in the descriptive representation of women in the party’s candidate lists and have also expanded opportunities of political networking for women party workers. It remains to be seen, however, whether these developments and initiatives are limited to short-term electoral gains or would they translate into structural and institutional change in favour of a women-friendly party culture. Banerjee’s personal commitment to enhancing women’s

⁴⁵ Suwendu Adhikari, Mukul Roy, Saumitra Khan, Sabyasachi Dutta, Arjun Singh, Anupam Hazra, and Nishith Pramanik are among the important AITC leaders who have defected to the BJP in the recent years.

representation in her party underscores the decisive influence that personalised political leadership can have over the gendered institutional culture of political parties, particularly in parties with flexible ideological foundations.

With the centrality of emotions in populist politics, criticism of the contemporary surge in populist politics across the globe has often revolved around the overwhelming influence of emotions⁴⁶ in populist speech and action, with the assertion that emotions are detrimental to the ‘proper’ conduct of politics (Devenney, 2019; Eklundh, 2019), even as emotions have borne a foundational influence on several epochal political moments in history such as in anti-imperialist movements. In the context of Banerjee’s populist leadership, this discourse of political appropriateness is reflected particularly in the negative appraisals of her politics and writing reveal her disqualification from what is held as ‘proper’ conduct of politics that was idealised in the elite *Bhadralok* circles in West Bengal. At the same time, Banerjee’s use of nativist Bengali pride and high emotions in her self-making presents a continuity with the key historical moments such as the early-20th century nationalist Swadeshi (Indigenous) movement, the freedom struggle, the electoral victory of the communist Left Front in 1977, etc. in the trajectory of the region’s political development.

Even as her emotive political rhetoric is held against her by her critics, Banerjee’s deployment of nativist and religious iconography in her writings and speeches serve to reinforce her populist self-making as a benevolent, apolitical, ideology-defying, and

⁴⁶ For instance, reflecting on the anti-neoliberal Occupy Wall Street protests (2011) in the United States, Marxist sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued ‘If emotion is a good tool for destruction, it is a terrible tool for construction’ (quoted in Eklundh, 2019, 24).

maternal figure to her followers, and in the process, foreground the AITC in her image. To counter the precarity of her performance as a political ascetic, Banerjee's populist project draws from the Hindu religious iconography of the Divine Mother, culminating in the popular persona of her as an apolitical caring '*Didi*' to the Bengali 'people'- who is seen as a defender of the interests of the marginalised as well as an heir to the intellectual inheritance of the elite *Bhadraloks*. Banerjee's populist self-making has enabled the AITC to effect a decisive transformation of political culture in contemporary West Bengal in favour of reinstating the salience of religion in the region's political vocabulary when she facilitated and helmed a shift from the communist-era political rhetoric of class and 'party society' (Bhattacharyya, 2009b) to that of religion⁴⁷ and caste and the politics of recognition while appropriating the socialist discourse of welfarism and redistribution in her policy orientation. At the level of governance, the AITC has been seen as affecting a rupture in the hegemony of the 'party society' (Bhattacharyya, 2004b, 2009b) under the CPI(M)-led Left Front regime which was distinguished by the complete control of the CPI(M) over local institutions of governance and society in rural West Bengal and which enabled the party to function as the sole mediator between the citizens and the government. The personalised organizational structure of the AITC and Banerjee's efforts at resuscitating the state bureaucracy as a medium for the distribution of public goods among voter-citizens marked the shift from the 'party society' of the Left Front era, even as the immersive presence of parties as a marker of social identity in rural

⁴⁷ Political commentators have identified the particular moment which symbolised this shift in the political vocabulary in Banerjee's speech delivered at the heights of the anti-land acquisition movement in Singur (14/06/2020); when while expressing condolences at the deaths of two youths from Singur in a bike accident, she referred to them as her 'Muslim brothers' (Bhattacharya, 2020, 3). This moment has been regarded as effectively marking a new direction in the prevalent political rhetoric as no other secular mainstream popular leader from the state had sought to appeal to the religious identities of their constituents before this.

West Bengal and political violence among supporters of rival political parties continue to persist. The historical role of the AITC and Banerjee as a catalyst in the development of a shifting political culture in West Bengal can also be reflected in the play of contradictory gender norms in the policy framework of the AITC regime as well as in the political subjectivities of its women members, as the chapter on interviews will assist in unpacking. The following chapter presents an interpretivist engagement with the gendered institutional culture of the BJP with a contextual focus on the party in West Bengal.

6. Women and the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu State): The Gendered Institutional Culture of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Introduction:

Affiliated with a gamut of Hindu nationalist associations collectively designated as the '*Sangh Parivar*' (Sangh Family), the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) represents the Sangh's political face. Within the institutional expanse of the Sangh, the BJP shares space with religious associations such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), cultural associations such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* (for women), trade unions such as the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (BMS), and militant religious outfits such as the Bajrang Dal, and the Durga Vahini (for women), among others. This chapter engages with the historical trajectory, organisation and ideological content which constitute the institutional culture of the BJP through a gender lens and analyses the descriptive and symbolic representations of women in the party culture. Divided into two broad sections covering the historical development of the party and the organisational party practices on one hand, and the party's ideological foundations on the other, the chapter places specific focus on the party's location within the broader Sangh Parivar network. While the sections on the party's history and organisational structure highlights the BJP's deep affinities with the RSS, the section on the party's ideological foundations brings to the fore the doctrinal inheritance of the BJP from the RSS and other Hindu Nationalist associations and ideologues with a focus on the participation and representations of women in the party's ideology and organisation. A contextualised analysis of the BJP's participation in political developments in West Bengal marks both the sections. The first section (Party History and Organisational

Structure) is further divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section deals with the BJP's historical development- The second sub-section discusses the BJP's organisational structure with special attention to the party structure in West Bengal. The sub-section also engages with the formal constitutional provisions regarding the descriptive representation of women and other historically marginalised identities. The second broad section- The Ideological Foundations of the BJP, presents an interpretive analysis of the key philosophies and doctrines that shape the ideological and policy orientations of the party. The section includes discussions on some party documents, and the ideologies of Integral Humanism and *Hindutva*/Hindu Nationalism under two sub-sections, through a gender perspective under the poststructuralist 'logics approach' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Under this section, the chapter engages with the philosophy and works of leading Sangh Parivar ideologues and leaders such as Deen Dayal Upadhyay, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (Savarkar, 2003, 2012; Golwalkar and Islam, 2006; Upadhyaya, 2016; Golwalkar, 2017). These texts have been analysed in conversation with select party publications of the BJP. Such analysis offers a window onto the symbolic representations of gender identities and relations in ideologies such as Integral Humanism and *Hindutva* which go on to constitute the prevailing formal and informal institutional norms, and policy framework of the BJP. At the same time, the discussion of the party's ideological foundations also assists in unpacking the play of competition, negotiation and accommodation between such ideologies and other demands arising from the BJP's participation in democratic electoral politics.

The Historical Development of Party Culture in the BJP:

Founded on April 6, 1980, the BJP was a successor to the erstwhile *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (1951-80)- a political outfit established by the Hindu Nationalist political leader Shyama Prasad Mookerjee who was closely connected to the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. Prior to the BJP's foundation, its predecessor- the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (Jana Sangh in brief) was tasked with carrying out the political programs of the Sangh Parivar. The Jana Sangh was founded in 1951 by Shyama Prasad (S.P.) Mookerjee- a Hindu Nationalist political leader from Bengal, in consultation with M.S. Golwalkar- the then *Sarsanghchalak* (Chief) of the RSS, and other bodies such as the Hindu Mahasabha. The immediate historical circumstances surrounding the foundation of the Jana Sangh included the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, the assassination of Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi by the Hindu Nationalist extremist Nathuram Godse and the subsequent ban on the RSS in 1948, and certain policy decisions taken by the Jawaharlal Nehru led Congress government which were opposed by Hindu Nationalists (Graham, 1990; Jaffrelot, 1996; Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 2018).

Hindu Nationalist leaders such as S.P. Mookerjee had felt the need to constitute a consolidated political party in order to defend the Hindu Nationalist cause and to advance a right-wing perspective in several sectors of national life such as foreign policy, education, industries, etc. (Graham, 1990; Jaffrelot, 1996; Kanungo, 2002). Mookerjee discussed the possibilities of forming a Hindu right-wing political party with the RSS leader- M.S. Golwalkar, who offered several full-time workers (*Pracharaks*) from his organisation to help Mookerjee in setting up the new political party (Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 1988, 2018; Graham, 1990). The RSS's influential role in the formation

of the Jana Sangh marked a shift from its organisational preoccupation with the 'character-building' of its volunteer-members to a more activist political orientation (Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 1988, 2018). The Jana Sangh also presented an opportunity for the RSS to redeem itself in the public eye while shaking off the taint of the Gandhi assassination episode (Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 1988, 2018).

From its very inception, the organisational composition of the Jana Sangh demonstrated the predominance of North Indian leadership even as its president- S.P. Mookerjee hailed from Bengal. RSS volunteers such as Balraj Madhok held high-ranking positions in the party from its early days (Graham, 1990). For the first few decades, the Jana Sangh remained a marginal force in India's electoral politics- winning 3 seats in the first General Elections (1952), and Mookerjee's sudden death in 1953 in the midst of a movement in Kashmir further weakened the party. In Mookerjee's own home state- West Bengal, the Jana Sangh could not register a consolidated political presence. It was only in 1975-77 that both the Jana Sangh and the RSS received a substantial boost in their public reputations through their participation in the popular movement led by the Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan against the imposition of a state of Emergency across India by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Following the lifting of the Emergency in 1977, a coalition of several different political forces including socialists and the right-wing Jana Sangh- called the Janata Party, defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress party in the general elections and formed the government. Jana Sangh leaders Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani served as Cabinet Ministers in the Janata government. Ideological differences soon cropped up among the partners of the Janata Party and the Jana Sangh leaders headed by Vajpayee left the coalition when the Janata Party National Executive placed a ban on dual membership of the party and the RSS (Graham, 1990; Brass, 1994; Jaffrelot, 1996; DeSouza, Peter Ronald and Sridharan,

2006; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c). The Janata coalition broke down following the exit of the Jana Sangh leaders who went on to constitute a new political party in the year 1980- the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), adopting a saffron-hued blooming lotus as the election symbol of the BJP. While its maiden run in the 1984 General Elections reaped the BJP only 2 seats in the Lok Sabha, charges of corruption and anti-incumbency sentiments against the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government substantially improved the BJP's prospects in the next general elections (1989) where the party won 85 seats in the Lok Sabha. Throughout the 1980s, the Sangh Parivar's religious arm- the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), alongside other Hindu Nationalist associations, had been mobilising and consolidating an older campaign to construct a temple at the speculated birthplace of the Hindu mythological hero Ram at the district of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh. A medieval era mosque- the *Babri Masjid*- had at that point stood at the site of Ram's speculated birthplace- the *Ramjanmabhoomi*. Other political parties such as the INC/Congress had followed a policy of catering to Hindu Nationalist sentiments by allowing Hindus to offer prayers at the mosque site. The BJP, under the leadership of Lal Krishna Advani and active collaboration from Sangh Parivar affiliate associations such as the RSS, the VHP, etc., sought to deepen its public outreach by organising a pan-India *Ram Rath Yatra* (Ram's chariot rally) in support of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* Movement- motivating *Sangh Parivar* volunteers across the country to participate in the construction of the Ram Temple. The *Rath Yatra* (chariot journey) was also a political strategy to unify the Hindu electoral base against the rising ascendancy of Dalit (lower caste) and OBC (other backward classes) caste-based political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP). Riding on the wave of Hindu communal polarisation, the BJP won 120 Lok Sabha seats in the 1991 General Elections.

Beginning in September 1990 from the Somnath temple in Gujarat, the Rath Yatra sought to cover the entire territory of India and reach the city of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh in order to lay the foundation for a temple to the Hindu deity Ram in his speculated birthplace. In its wake, the rally induced riots in several places and Advani himself was arrested in the state of Bihar. The Movement also saw active participation by Hindu Nationalist women affiliated to associations such as the Rashtrasevika Samiti (Tanika Sarkar, 1991b). Culminating in the demolition of the Babri Mosque by an armed mob of Hindu right-wing volunteers on December 6, 1992, the *Rath Yatra* reaped electoral dividends for the BJP and consolidated Hindu majoritarianism in mainstream Indian politics. In the following decade, the BJP continued to spread its organisational base in several states of North India and formed governments at the Centre in 1996 and 1998, as dominant partner in the coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the Prime Ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Suffering electoral defeats to the INC/Congress-led coalition United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2004 and 2009, the BJP-led NDA returned to power by winning the 2014 and 2019 general elections under Narendra Modi.

The BJP fought the recently concluded 2021 state assembly elections in West Bengal- substantially improving upon their tally of 3 seats (2016) and sending 77 MLAs to the new Assembly- making it the sole legislative opposition to the AITC government. For the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, the BJP fielded 38 women candidates out of a total of 291. Of these 38, 7 women won. Among the 7 BJP women MLAs, the party's state president of the women's wing- Agnimitra Paul won in a closely fought contest from the Asansol South seat. Chandana Bauri, wife of an underprivileged, Scheduled Caste daily wage labourer, also scripted an impressive electoral victory from Saltora (Online Desk, 2021).

The historical context and circumstances behind the foundation and the subsequent ascension of the BJP have influenced the institutional culture of the party even as it undergoes organisational evolution in the recent decade. Critical historical moments in the BJP's development such as S.P. Mookerjee's stance vis a vis the partition of India in 1947, the Sangh Parivar's participation in the anti-Emergency movement (1975-77), the Ram Temple Agitation, the Rath Yatra and the Babri Mosque demolition (1990-92), and the recent personalisation of the party under Narendra Modi (2014-) continue to condition the political participation and self-makings of party members, including women. In the particular context of the party in West Bengal, the dominant official narrative in the party's institutional culture regarding the partition of India and the Ram Temple agitation were reflected on by women members of the BJP during their interviews with me as foundational to their motivation for joining politics as well as to their subsequent belonging in the party culture. Alongside the critical historical junctures, women members of the BJP also highlighted their long-term familial connections with the RSS to explain the depth of their involvement in the party as well as the larger Sangh Parivar universe, illustrating the prestige that associations with the RSS has historically been accorded in the BJP's institutional culture.

Even as women members of the BJP choose to underline their commitment to the party by referring to the key historical moments in the party's trajectory, the official narrative of the BJP is characterised by an erasure of the participation and contribution of women in its development. Relegated to the margins in the male-dominated lifeworld of the Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Right, women members and leaders scarcely find mention in the official historical annals. The key historical and cultural icons of the BJP have been overwhelmingly male, despite the active presence of women's associations inside the party as well as in the Sangh Parivar. The marginalisation of women from the

official narrative of the BJP's foundation and development resonates with the phenomenon of segregation of women within right wing movements and parties across the world (Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bedi, 2016). Within India, scholars of gender and Hindu Nationalism have pointed to the invisibilisation of women members in the official historical narrative of the Shiv Sena- a Hindu right wing Maharashtrian nativist political party (Banerjee, 1996; Sen, 2009; Bedi, 2016). While the academic scholarship on gender and Hindu Nationalism has engaged with women's associations of the Sangh Parivar such as the Rashtrasevika Samiti and the Durga Vahini (Tanika Sarkar, 1991b; Butalia and Sarkar, 1995; Sethi, 2002; Bacchetta, 2004; Menon, 2012; Ray Chaudhury, 2017), the existing literature (Graham, 1990; Jaffrelot, 1996, 2007; Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020; Sitapati, 2020)- both historical and contemporary, on the Jana Sangh and the BJP has mirrored the party's erasure of the participation and contributions of its women members. Studies on the historical development of the Hindu Nationalist ideological architecture (Graham, 1990; Bhatt, 2001; Sharma, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2007; Anand, 2011) have similarly focused largely on the theoretical contributions of male ideologues and leaders, with the effect of marginalising the voices of Hindu Nationalist women leaders such as the founder of the Rashtrasevika Samiti- Lakshmibai Kelkar (1905-1978), even as several of such studies have foregrounded gender and sexuality as critical conceptual lenses to interpret the Hindu Nationalist subjectivity.

In the following sub-section, the chapter discusses the BJP's organisational structure, focusing on the contextual specificities and recent organisational developments in the party in West Bengal as well as on the descriptive representation of women in the party- highlighting the state of political reservations for women and the women's wing in the BJP.

Organisational Practices and Gender in the BJP:

Being the only non-communist political party in India with a strong and widespread network of cadres, the BJP's organisation bears the influence of the structure of the RSS (Jha, 2016; Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2020c). Article VII of the party constitution offers an overview of the BJP's organisational hierarchy which has the National President at its apex and the local committee at its base (BJP, 2017). The primary decision-making bodies at the National level of the party organisation are the Plenary/Special session of the Party, the National Council and the National Executive (BJP, 2017). The National President is the highest authority in the party. According to Article XIX of the party constitution, the President is elected by the members of the National Council and the State Councils and can hold two consecutive terms of three years each (Article XXI) (BJP, 2017). In practice, however, instead of elections, the National President is chosen by informal consensus among the senior leaders in the party, the RSS and other *Sangh Parivar* associations (Graham, 1990; Malik and Singh, 1994; Jaffrelot, 1996; Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 2018; Sitapati, 2020). The current BJP National President, Jagat Prakash (JP) Nadda was elected unopposed in 2020 after the incumbent president Amit Shah was deputed as India's Home Minister (ET Staff, 2020; Hebbar, 2020). The party constitution bestows substantial powers on the National President, which range from presiding over the meetings of the National Council, the National Executive, and the Plenary and Special sessions to nominating members in the National Executive (Article XX) (BJP, 2017). The National Executive can have a maximum of 120 members and the President can nominate Vice-Presidents, General Secretaries, Secretaries and Treasurers as per Article XX of the party constitution (BJP, 2017).

Despite the constitutional powers accorded to the party President, in practice the latter is expected to work in close coordination with *Sangh Parivar* associations such as the RSS, and in the recent years, under the supervision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his second-in-command, Amit Shah. The personalised transformation of institutional culture in the BJP under Modi and Shah has been distinguished by the fostering of a more direct relationship between the Modi-Shah duo and the grassroots workers (Jaffrelot, 2015; Correspondent, 2019; Singh, 2019; Sircar, 2020). A corresponding marginalisation of the old guard in the party- exemplified in the creation of the non-constitutional, advisory post like the *Margdarshak Mandal* (Board of Advisors) for senior leaders such as Lal Krishna Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi after the BJP's electoral victory under Modi in 2014, also attests to the centralisation of authority in the party in the hands of Modi and Shah (FP Politics, 2014; Misra, 2019). The responsibilities of the BJP National President under the present circumstances involve sustaining a delicate balance between the dual power axes represented by Modi and Shah on one hand and the *Sangh Parivar* on the other.

Set against the prevalence of dynasticism in India's democratic politics (Chhibber, 2011; K. Chandra, 2016; Verniers and Ammassari, 2019; Verniers and Jaffrelot, 2020), the BJP has often centred its election campaigns on the platform of anti-dynasticism - claiming to focus instead on performance records and meritocracy in its selection of candidates (Verniers and Ammassari, 2019; Verniers and Jaffrelot, 2020). In a speech delivered at a rally before the Rajasthan state assembly elections in 2018, Narendra Modi exhorted the voters to choose between the party of '*naamdaars*' (dynasts) and that of '*kaamdaars*' (doers), promising that the BJP was committed to popular welfare as opposed to furthering the interests of 'grandsons and granddaughters' of the political class (India Today Television, 2018). Despite its anti-dynastic rhetoric, the

organisational practices within the BJP, however, do not constitute a clear departure from the ‘resilience of dynasticism’ (Verniers and Ammassari, 2019; Verniers and Jaffrelot, 2020) in its rival parties. In the 2019 General Elections, for example, 20% of BJP MPs have dynastic roots, and several noteworthy BJP MPs who have been included in the Union Council of Ministers hail from political families (Verniers and Ammassari, 2019; Verniers and Jaffrelot, 2020). Dynasticism continues to influence the selection criteria of parties particularly in the case of women candidates, highlighting the persistence of institutional bias against fielding women candidates- who are generally regarded as low on the prospect of winnability. During the 2019 elections, 51% of INC and 47.2% of BJP women candidates belonged to political families (Verniers and Ammassari, 2019; Verniers and Jaffrelot, 2020). Alongside the abiding influence of dynasticism on the selection of candidates- women in particular, in the BJP, a consideration of women’s descriptive representation in the party also reveals the gap between formal constitutional promises and organisational practices.

The BJP was one of the earliest among the political parties of India to pass a resolution in 1987 demanding 33% reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and state legislatures (Vajpayee, 2000). The party constitution mandates 33% reservation of seats for women and up to 10% reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every unit along the party hierarchy, including the state, district and local units (BJP, 2017). At the national level, 40 of the 120 National Executive members are required to be women and at least 12 members are to be chosen from the SC and ST communities. At the level of practice, however, the provision of constitutional regulations affirming the party’s formal commitment to gender quotas do not always translate into adequate descriptive representation for women. In the current National Executive, only 6 out of 82 members are women- constituting a measly 7.31%. Out of a total of 72 National office-

bearers, 14 are women (19.44%) (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020a). The only post in the party which approximates gender parity is that of the National Vice-President- where 5 out of 12 Vice-Presidents are women (41.66%).

Corresponding to the underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies within the party is a parallel practice of women's underrepresentation in the Council of Ministers of the incumbent BJP-dominated National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre. While the first NDA government under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi had 7 women ministers out of a total of 45 in the National Council of Ministers (Staff Reporter, 2014), the second term of the Modi-led NDA government has 5 woman ministers out of a total of 53 in the Council of Ministers (Government of India, 2020). The presence of such incongruities between formal quota legislations and informal practices can also be located in the subnational units of the party.

At the level of states, the State Council and the State Executive- composed of the State President and the vice-presidents and general secretaries nominated by the President, are the bodies to which the Regional Committees, the District Committees, the *Mandal* (Area) Committees, the *Gram/Shahari Kendra* (Rural/Urban Centres), and the Local Committees are accountable. The party constitution promises 33% reservation of seats for women at all subnational units of the BJP. In West Bengal, however, echoing the disjuncture between formal constitutional provisions and informal party practices at the central level of the BJP, the state leadership of the party presently have 7 women office-bearers out of a total of 31- amounting to 22.58%, falling short of the 33% quota (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020b). There are only 2 women out of the 12 Vice-Presidents in the state unit of the BJP. Dynasticism, however, seems to play a less influential role in candidate-selection and responsibility allocation in the West Bengal unit of the BJP vis a vis the factors of new entries and political turncoats from the AITC and CPI(M). In the

recent years, popular newcomers in the party such as Locket Chatterjee (actor), Rupa Ganguly (actor) and Agnimitra Paul (fashion designer) have been elevated to the position of State General Secretary and State President of the party's women's wing. Since 2017, high-profile AITC turncoat leaders such as Mukul Roy⁴⁸, Sabyasachi Datta, Arjun Singh, Anupam Hazra, Saumitra Khan and recently, Suwendu Adhikari, have been instated in prominent positions in the state and central party organisations of the BJP (Press Trust of India, 2020b; Singh, 2020). Among the women office-bearers in the BJP's West Bengal unit, two vice-presidents- Bharati Ghosh and Mafuja Khatun are new entry and CPI(M) turncoat respectively (ABP Staff Reporter, 2019), and the newcomer Locket Chatterjee is the sole woman General Secretary (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020b). The recent organisational practice of allocating elevated party positions to newcomers and rival party turncoats, coupled with an increasing concentration of authority in the central leadership of the party- based in New Delhi constitute a crucial electoral strategy devised by the party elite to expand the BJP's organisational network in states such as West Bengal. This practice, however, has generated open disaffections among the old-timer members and leaders in the West Bengal unit of the BJP (Bhattacharya, 2020c; Daniyal, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Ramaseshan, 2020; Sarkar, 2020; Singh, 2020) and has been blamed for the party's electoral defeat in the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections (Datta, 2021). Such discontent among party old-timers at the rapid elevation of newcomers was expressed by some women members of the BJP during their interviews with me. Apprehending a dilution of the party's ideological core, the interviewees also expressed concern with the what they perceived was a policy that denied old-timers their due dignity. The recent

⁴⁸ After the BJP's defeat in the 2021 Assembly elections in West Bengal, Mukul Roy who served as a National Vice President of the BJP, returned to the AITC (Datta, 2021).

organisational overhaul undertaken on the eve of the elections offered a test of loyalty for old-timer leaders and members of the party.

While the party constitution sets the Local Committee as the lowest tier in the BJP's organisational hierarchy, a few other tiers have been added by the central leadership in the recent decade for purposes of election management- Booth Committees, '*Panna Prabhari/Pramukh*' ('Page-in-charge') *Shakti Kendras* ('Power Centres') and *Vistaraks* ('Expansionists') (Jha, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Press Trust of India, 2020a). Under the Booth Committee, BJP election workers are directed to cultivate public relations at the micro level- involving locally influential individuals such as temple priests, religious heads, educators, panchayat office-bearers, etc. (Press Trust of India, 2020a). During the party's Lok Sabha election (2019) campaign, Prime Minister Modi himself mobilised the Booth *Karyakartas* (workers) under the slogan '*Mera Booth, Sabse Mazboot*' ('My Booth is the Strongest') and called the BJP a 'party of *Karyakartas*' (Correspondent, 2019; Singh, 2019). In the state of West Bengal, the central leadership of the party have devised strategies to ensure optimum performance by Booth Committee members. Such strategies include members having to provide evidence of their public outreach activities by sticking a party logo on the wall of every house they visit and note down the personal details of every new member they recruit (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020a).

In the face of the 2021 Assembly elections in West Bengal, the party leadership decided to ensure enhanced participation by women party workers in the election campaign by aiming to induct a minimum of 4 women at each Booth and Mandal Committees (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021h; Press Trust of India, 2021b). Such organisational initiative came in the wake of the increasing salience of 'silent' women voters who have been seen as instrumental in the BJP's victory in the recent parliamentary

and state assembly elections (Bansal, 2019; Kamra, 2019; Kumar, 2020; Ramesh, 2020; Press Trust of India, 2021b).

Under the Booth strategy is the tier of the *Panna Prabhari/Pramukh*- a category introduced by the BJP leader Amit Shah before the 2012 assembly elections in Gujarat. The '*Panna Pramukh*' (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021c) is required to maintain close contacts with voters in a particular page of the voter list in a booth, which usually numbers up to 60 voters (Bhattacharya, 2020, 8) and campaign by targeting families under the slogan '*Mera Parivaar, Bhajapa Parivaar*' ('My Family is a BJP Family') (Singh, 2019; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020b). Placed above the Booth Committee and below the Mandal Committee, *Shakti Kendras* are vested with the responsibility to oversee five to seven Booth Committees (Bhattacharya, 2020, 8).

The post of the *Vistarak* was introduced in 2017 under the *Deendayal Upadhyay Vistarak Yojana* by Amit Shah to facilitate a more centralised and coordinated supervision of election campaign management in states (Bhattacharya, 2020, 8). *Vistaraks* are full-time party workers who are deputed to a state other than their native state for a period of a year, six months or a minimum of fifteen days (Staff Reporter, 2017; Kumar, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020c), during which he/she is expected to conduct intensive, door-to-door campaigning and publicising of the party ideology as well as developing close personal networks with resident families in an assigned booth. The *Vistarak* strategy is a direct import from the eponymous post in the RSS which also entails spreading the ideology of Hindu Nationalism in far-flung regions. Prior to the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, around 2.7 lakh (0.27 million) party workers volunteered to work as *Vistaraks*, with the help of whom the BJP could cover around 80% of the total number of booths in India (Kumar, 2019). While considering the demographics of the *Vistarak* volunteers, however, the response from women and minorities were found to be

lukewarm and this was attributed by the leadership to the risks stemming from political violence (Tiwari and Mathew, 2017). These recent developments in the BJP's grassroots organisational structure, along with the party's coordination with the RSS and other affiliated *Sangh Parivar* associations are regarded to have deepened and consolidated the party's outreach at the grassroots level- particularly contributing to its electoral successes in states where its organisational network was hitherto stunted, such as West Bengal, Odisha, Assam and Tripura (Bose, 2019; Kumar, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Press Trust of India, 2020a).

Alongside the Central, State and Local units, the BJP's organisational edifice also includes Election Committees, Parliamentary Boards and *Morchas* (Wings) and Departments/Cells. Article XXXI of the party constitution provides for the creation of 6 *Morchas*- each titled *Mahila*⁴⁹ (women), Youth, *Kisan* (Farmer), Minorities, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). In 2015, the then party President Amit Shah announced the formation of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) *Morcha* as an election strategy to garner the support of OBC communities before state assembly elections in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Staff Reporter, 2015). Each *Morcha* has an organisational structure parallel to the main organisational units of the party and is headed by the All-India President at the central, the State President at the state level, the District President at the district level, and the *Mandal* President at the *Mandal* (area) level). The party constitution empowers the National President of the BJP to nominate the All-India Presidents of the *Morchas*, and the presidents of the subsequent tiers in the party to nominate the corresponding *Morcha* presidents (BJP, 2017). The Mahila, Youth, Kisan,

⁴⁹ The present All-India *Mahila Morcha* President of the BJP is Vanathi Sinivasan and the West Bengal State President of the *Mahila Morcha* is Agnimitra Paul.

Minorities and OBC Morchas are required by constitutional provisions to have at least 2 SC and ST members, and all the Morchas except the Mahila Morcha are required to have at least 1 woman member. The *Morcha* presidents at each level can constitute their working committees under the advice of the party presidents at their corresponding levels (BJP, 2017), underlining the overarching authority of the party presidents over the *Morchas*. Such authority also extends over the financial and executive autonomy of the *Morcha* units.

On the eve of the 2021 state elections in West Bengal, alongside appealing to women voters through the social welfare schemes of the Modi government, the BJP also put its women's wing- the *Mahila Morcha*, in the forefront of rallies and door-to-door election campaigning in West Bengal (Arnimesh, 2020b; ABP Staff Reporter, 2021h). Mahila Morcha leaders and workers regularly participated in *padayatras* (foot marches) and *prabhat pheris* (morning rallies) at the Booth level while also staging *dharnas* (sit-in protests) to mobilise women voters against the policies of the Mamata Banerjee-led AITC government in West Bengal (Arnimesh, 2020b; ABP Staff Reporter, 2021h). The increased public exposure accorded to the Mahila Morcha workers and leaders through their participation in such activities have enhanced their opportunities to cultivate their political networks among their constituencies, to receive training in political activism and prove their mettle to their senior colleagues in the party. Such organisational initiatives in the wake of the approaching elections have the potential to augment the autonomy of the Mahila Morcha as well as to rupture the tradition of segregating the women's wing from the mainstream party culture in a right wing political party (Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bedi, 2016) such as the BJP. It remains to be seen, however, whether the momentum generated by the election campaigns would be sustained in the post-election

period and whether it would facilitate the undertaking of structural change in the BJP's institutional culture in favour of a greater political inclusion of women.

The party constitution provides space for the creation of new departments (BJP, 2017), termed as cells, which would cater to a range of social sectors and interests. At present, the BJP has 18 cells- covering the areas of policy research, governance, election management, foreign affairs, and media, among others. The most recent cell is the Information and Technology Cell- popularly known as the IT Cell, which manages the digital and social media activities of the party and is widely regarded as an indispensable advantage to the BJP in election campaigns. Across India, the BJP has employed more than a hundred thousand of IT Cell staff- termed as '*cyber yoddhas*' (cyber warriors), in a coordinated mission to spread the party's ideology and defend the Modi government in digital and social media spaces- particularly Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Whatsapp (Mishra, 2018; Daniyal, 2019b; Arnimesh, 2020a). The deep penetration by the BJP's IT Cell of the digital and social media spaces and the widespread grassroots organisational network of the party can be regarded as mutually reinforcing and contributing to the party's success in the General and state assembly elections (Daniyal, 2019a; Arnimesh, 2020a; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Patel, 2020). The IT Cell has also, on several occasions, been accused of peddling misinformation and fake news, trolling, and harassment of the government's critics (Chaturvedi, 2016; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019; Sinha, Shaikh and Sidharth, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Chaudhuri, 2020; Staff, 2020; The Wire Staff, 2020). In particular, the IT Cell members- mostly composed of young men aged less than 25 years, have been on the forefront of perpetrating online bullying and cyber sexual harassment of women activists and critics of the central government (Chaturvedi, 2016; Kumar, 2016; Sudipta, 2017; Daniyal, 2018; Jha, 2018; Bhardwaj, 2019; Sengupta, 2021). In a similar vein as global right wing digital media activists (Schroeder, 2018;

Sundaram, 2020), the IT Cell members affiliated with the BJP have routinely engaged in issuing intimidation, rape and death threat to women activists, students, opposition political workers, actors, and media professionals, among others (Chaturvedi, 2016; Daniyal, 2018; Jha, 2018; Jaswal and Jalihal, 2021; Sengupta, 2021) on questions of the freedom of expression, faith and religion, Islamophobia, patriotism, dissent and critique of government policy. The inferences about the dominant gender regime of the BJP's institutional culture that may be drawn from a consideration of such practices by its party professionals will be discussed in the following section on the ideological foundations of the party.

Alongside reviewing the constitutional provisions that constitute the organisational structure of the BJP, this section also focuses on the gaps between formal regulations and informal party practices, particularly in the area of reservation of seats for women and other marginalised communities in the different tiers of the organisational hierarchy. This section has also traced the BJP's evolution into a personalised political party with strong organisational networks. The following section offers a gendered perspective onto the ideological foundations of the BJP, with particular emphasis upon the symbolic representation of gender identities and relations in the ideologies which constitute the party's philosophical base. This section will assist in a deeper appraisal of the aforementioned gap in the context of the representation of women between formal regulations and informal practices within the BJP.

The Gendered Ideological Foundations of the BJP:

The BJP describes itself as 'The Party with a Difference' (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020b), underlining the party's commitment to its philosophical and ideological

foundations in Integral Humanism (Upadhyaya, 2016; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020c) and Hindu Nationalism/Hindutva (Savarkar, 2003; Sharma, 2003; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019a). Rationalising the epithet of ‘the party with a difference’, the official literature of the BJP seeks to distinguish the party from other parties it shares space with in the Indian political landscape by casting the latter as ‘pseudo-secular’ (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019b, 2019c, 2020d, 2020c) who are seen to propagate a policy of ‘minority appeasement’ in the name of secularism. The BJP’s particular interpretation of secularism is termed in the official texts of the party as ‘*sarva dharma samabhav*’ (‘equal respect for all religions’) or ‘positive secularism’ (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019b, 2019c, 2020d). The party literature argues that the BJP’s political rivals- particularly the Indian National Congress, have ‘distorted beyond recognition’(Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020d) the core of Indian secularism through their pandering to what is termed as ‘shameless minority communalism’(Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c, 4) and ‘votebank politics’ with Muslims (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c, 21). Further contrasting the BJP from other political parties, the official literature underlines that unlike parties such as the INC and the AITC, the BJP does not promote dynasticism or political personalisation (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c). While acknowledging that the communist parties such as the CPI(M) are also free from the influence of dynasticism and personalist politics, the party texts of the BJP argue that whereas the communist parties in India derive their ideological resources from abroad and tend to harbour ‘anti-national philosophies’ on occasion (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c, 4), the foundations of the BJP are rooted in ‘*Bharatiya* (Indian) traditions’ (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c, 4).

Alongside the philosophical foundations of Integral Humanism and Hindu Nationalism, the BJP also recognises five guiding principles- ‘*Pancha Nishtha*’ as the party’s ideological inspiration. Through the Five Principles, the party highlights its

commitments to Nationalism and National Integration; Democracy; Gandhian Socialism; Positive Secularism; and Value-based politics. The Five Principles are enshrined in Article IV of the BJP's constitution (BJP, 2017). During the time of its incorporation into the party constitution, several notable delegates at the BJP's first plenary session; particularly Vijaya Raje Scindia, had raised objection to the principle of Gandhian Socialism under the grounds that the phrase represented a contradiction insofar as 'Socialism' accorded primacy to the state and 'Gandhian' thought advocated decentralisation of state powers. The party leadership under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani and others, however, retained the principle of Gandhian Socialism in the party constitution even in the face of stiff opposition, reflecting the influence of the Jayaprakash Narayan-led anti-Emergency movement and the subsequent Janata coalition (Jaffrelot, 1993, 319). From its foundation in 1980 till the 1984 General Elections, the leadership of the BJP had attempted to tone down the ideological content of Hindu cultural nationalism in the party's official discourse, choosing to promote a more secularist image (Jaffrelot, 1993). Following the poor electoral performance in the 1984 General Elections, however, the party undertook a revival of Hindu Nationalist ideology and politics- mobilising the Ram Temple agitation and accentuating the rhetoric of communal polarisation. The Five Principles in the party's constitution represent an attempt by the BJP's founding leadership to reframe the Sangh Parivar's discursive legacy through the frame of liberal constitutionalism.

In the following paragraphs, the chapter undertakes an interpretivist reading of the BJP's self-description, which would assist in comprehending the influence of Integral Humanism, Cultural Nationalism/Hindu Nationalism, the Five Principles and the discursive inheritance of the RSS/Sangh Parivar in constituting the ideological underpinnings of the party.

The BJP's self-description (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2021); published in the website of the party's West Bengal unit is a brief document of 320 words and is divided into four sections. The introductory paragraph establishes the party's origin in 1980; drawing historical continuity with the legacy of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and of its leadership- 'direct successor'. This could be read as an exercise in legitimisation as well as in highlighting a parallel discursive and historical legacy to that of its primary electoral rival- the Congress Party. The assertion of its status as a 'major political party in India' testifies to the pan-Indian ambitions of the BJP. The paragraph then discusses the foundation of the Jana Sangh by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee in 1951, and describes him as 'a nationalist leader, a Union Minister, and a freedom-fighter'- ostensibly to trace the party's roots in the anti-colonial freedom struggle as well as to present an alternative to the mainstream narrative (Mukherjee, A., Chandra, B., Panikkar, K.N., Mukherjee, M., Mahajan, 1988) of India's struggle for independence that is generally predominated by iconic figures belonging to the Congress- M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, among others. Professing commitment to 'welfare social policies, self-reliance, robust economic growth, foreign policy driven by a nationalist agenda, and strong national defence', the party attempts to underscore the critical significance it attaches to the discourse of nationalism. Also significant in this section is the inclusion of the phrase 'self-reliance'; whereby the party also appropriates the legacy of economic planning and development, which incidentally reached its peak under the INC-led regime (1966-77) of Indira Gandhi. Alongside this, 'strong national defence' is a frequently-recurring phrase in the document, underlining the BJP's adherence to a hypermasculine, muscular mode of nationalism.

The second paragraph, with its focus on the party's commitment to the creation of India as a 'strong and prosperous nation', is similar in tone with its preceding one. It

seeks to draw continuity with a detemporalised conception of ‘India’s ancient culture and values.’ The party’s aim of ‘establishing a democratic state’ in India seems to reflect dissatisfaction with the nature of the existing state in India and is in conformity to the Jana Sangh leader and ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyay’s criticism of the federal character of the Indian State established in the Constitution of post-independent India (Upadhyaya, 2016). The document also highlights the BJP’s commitment to the Constitution of India and the key principles that the Constitution espouses are listed. In the same section, the party also professes quite contradictory commitments to ‘socialism’ and ‘small government and free-market economic policies’, underlining the lingering discursive presence of Integral Humanism in the party’s official rhetoric alongside its stated preference for a right-of-centre economic orientation.

The concluding section of the document, termed ‘Philosophy’, affirms the BJP’s identification with and ideological commitment to the discourse of Hindutva. It also takes care to present Hindutva as a ‘nationalist, and not a religious or theocratic, concept’ and makes a direct reference to now-dissident BJP leader Arun Shourie’s article on the ‘Hindutva judgement’⁵⁰(Shourie, 1996), highlighting the party’s efforts at cultivating a mainstreamed discursive presence of Hindutva. It is interesting to note while the BJP’s self-description published by the party’s West Bengal unit unequivocally states that its conception of nationalism is shaped by the doctrine of Hindu Nationalism/Hindutva, its counterpart in the BJP’s national website make no mention of Hindutva while discussing the party’s philosophical foundations, even as Integral Humanism is discussed (Bharatiya

⁵⁰ The ‘Hindutva Judgement’ refers to the case- Dr Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo vs. Shri Prabhakar Kashinath Khunte and others (Supreme Court of India, 1996), wherein the Supreme Court offered an expansive definition of Hindutva as a ‘way of life’.

Janata Party, 2020d). Such omission of Hindutva from the BJP's official national website may be understood as a reflection of an underlying and persistent tension between the assimilationist pull of Integral Humanism and the exclusivist influence of Hindutva.

Through the repeated reference to 'nation' and 'nationalism', the text attempts to establish affinity between the secularist legacy of the anti-colonial struggle for India's independence and the party's own ethno-religious doctrine of Hindutva by recasting the discourse of nationalism in India in an exclusivist, masculinist, and militarist frame. Reading the BJP's self-description with reference to the macro-social and historical context it inhabits (Fairclough, 1995, 2003), it is also possible to interpret the term 'nation' as a site of contestation over meaning amidst the several different, and antagonistic, ideologies and discourses- such as liberalism and Hindu Nationalism, inhabiting the political landscape of contemporary India. In the following sections, the chapter unpacks the doctrines of Integral Humanism and Hindutva that comprise the ideological scaffolding of the BJP, engaging in particular with the constitutive influence of the said doctrines on the gendered institutional culture of the party.

Integral Humanism:

In its official literature, the BJP recognises the concepts of 'Integral Humanism' and 'Cultural Nationalism/Hindutva' as constitutive of its philosophical and ideological foundations (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c, 2020d, 2020b). In particular, Article III of the party constitution recognises Integral Humanism as the 'basic philosophy' of the BJP (BJP, 2017). Propagated by Jana Sangh leader and key ideologue- Deen Dayal Upadhyay in a lecture-series (1964-5)- Integral Humanism or '*Ekatma Manavatavaad*' sought to fuse elements from the 19th century Arya Samajist discourse of Hindu revivalism,

Gandhian political thought and RSS-style Hindu Nationalism (Jaffrelot, 1993, 2007). It advanced an organic conception of society, state and the individual while privileging the society over and above the state (Jaffrelot, 1993, 2007; Upadhyaya, 2016; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020d, 2020c). Upadhyay advocated decentralisation of powers while characterising the state as nothing more than a ‘limb’ of the social body. Himself an RSS ‘*pracharak*’ (full-time member), Upadhyay’s philosophy reflected the RSS’s stress upon the microsocial, ‘grassroots’, local spaces of activism. Even as he voiced his opposition to the federal concept of the Indian state established by the Indian Constitution and demanded the adoption of a Unitary constitution, Upadhyay maintained the necessity of decentralisation at the local level (Jaffrelot, 1993, 2007; Bhatt, 2001; Upadhyaya, 2016, 34). The emphasis on decentralisation and the sphere of local activism advocated under Integral Humanism can be held to have influenced the BJP’s organisational thrust towards the expansion of its local and grassroots network.

Rejecting the idea of individuals constituting social life under the Social Contract theory, Upadhyay argued that society preceded individuals and had a particular self- ‘its own life’, which was reflected in the ‘group self’ of communities (Upadhyaya, 2016, 23). Lamenting the lack of a ‘national identity’ in post-independent India, Upadhyay urged Indians to desist from seeking ideological inspiration from outside the territorial and cultural boundaries of India, stressing that ideological ‘isms’ of Western origin such as socialism and capitalism were inadequate in themselves and that only an indigenous philosophy could resuscitate India’s ‘national soul’ or ‘*chiti*’ (Jaffrelot, 1993; Bhatt, 2001; Upadhyaya, 2016). The philosophical foundations of India should lie in its ‘*Bharatiya*’ culture which could be distinguished by the prevalence of a holistic, symbiotic relationship between the individual, the society, the state and nature, Upadhyay argued, choosing the Sanskrit moniker for India (Upadhyaya, 2016, 12). Contrasting

‘Bharatiya culture’ with Western philosophical concepts such as Dialectical Materialism, Integral Humanism posits the theory that non-dualism and cooperation with nature and each other are the foundations of human existence. Under such a worldview, conflict and contestations of any kind are viewed as a ‘sign of cultural regression’ (Upadhyaya, 2016, 14). Echoing the Hindu theological interpretation that the four main castes in the Hindu social order- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, originated from the four parts of the divine body, Upadhyay advocated that the roots of the caste system lay in the mutual complementarity of the four castes/*varnas* instead of mutual antagonisms (Upadhyaya, 2016, 30). He attributed the issue of caste discrimination and inequality to the ‘deterioration’ of the various institutions serving as the ‘different limbs of society’ (Upadhyaya, 2016, 30). In supporting the orthodox mythical narrative associated with the origin of the caste system; and desisting from interrogating the constitutive inequality of status accorded to different caste-groups in the myth⁵¹, Upadhyay promoted a primarily status quoist perspective on the theme of caste, which may also be translated on the question of gender roles and relations in society. Alongside Upadhyay, other cultural icons venerated by the BJP such as Savarkar and Golwalkar had also subscribed to a similar status quoist position on the desired social roles for women in the Hindu Nation.

Derived from Integral Humanism, a preoccupation with the social marks the institutional discourse of the BJP. Official party texts characterise society in India as a manifestation of ‘an ancient and eternal nation’ while conceptualising ‘Indian culture’ as

⁵¹ According to the ancient Vedic (Rig Veda) myth associated with the origin of the four castes/*varnas*, each of the castes emerged from different parts of the *Virat Purusha/Brahman* (cosmic man). The *Brahmins* (priests) emerged from the head, and hence were to be considered superior to all other castes; the *Kshatriyas* (warriors) emerged from the arms; the *Vaishyas* (traders) from the thighs; and the *Shudras* (manual labourers) from the feet. The different limbs of the cosmic body associated with the different castes were understood to represent the differential status accorded to each caste in society, underlining the hierarchical order in the Vedic Hindu cosmology.

a naturalised, static entity that represents an imagined ‘glorious’ past (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020c). The party literature also promotes a collectivist philosophical orientation by registering opposition to individualism and what is viewed as a confrontational relationship between ‘man, nature and society’. Under such a worldview, movements for social change and transformation- such as anti-casteism, are presented as detrimental to the sustenance of social harmony: ‘Today man by considering himself an individual is waging war against social institutions, family, caste, kinship, panchayat; he is considering everyone his enemy’ (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2020c). By promoting the reproduction of the naturalised ‘social logic’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of caste hierarchy in the guise of preserving social integration, the official institutional discourse of the party contributes towards the invisibilisation of power relations and structural inequalities issuing from caste, economy and gender that constitute social existence in India. Such ‘fantasmatic’ imaginary (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of systemic cohesion and consistency at the societal sphere that Integral Humanism offers is adopted by the BJP for the facilitation of institutional continuity and consistency within its party culture through the containment of disaffections and dissident opinions. Echoing the preoccupation with the collectivism and status quoism, the narratives offered by the women members of the West Bengal BJP in my interviews with them reflected the emphasis that the party’s dominant institutional culture places upon symbolic appeals to religious and caste affiliations as well as on particular constructions of gendered subjectivities deemed ‘appropriate’. The resistance to political reservations for women that some of the respondents articulated during the interviews can also be interpreted with the aid of the party’s ideological preoccupation with the reproduction of the social status quo. The BJP’s recent election campaign slogans such as ‘*Mera Parivaar, Bhajpa (BJP) Parivaar*’ (My Family is a BJP Family) and the party elite’s frequent characterisation of the expanding and increasingly-salient

women voters in India as ‘silent voters’ (DNA Web Team, 2020; Ramesh, 2020) further illustrate the party’s endorsement and politicisation of the orthodox model of the heteronormative patriarchal South Asian family vis a vis the rights-based discourse of citizen activism.

Along with Integral Humanism, the official discourse of the BJP also harps on cultural nationalism/Hindutva as another prong in its discursive strategy to facilitate systemic continuity in the party culture- and by extension, in Indian social life, through the appeal to a pan-Hindu majoritarian identity and sentiment of belonging across caste, region and other markers of difference. The following section undertakes a gendered analysis of the doctrine of Hindutva/Hindu Nationalism, engaging in particular with the thought and works of V.D. Savarkar- the propagator of Hindutva and a historical icon of the Sangh Parivar, and M.S. Golwalkar- key ideologue and leader of the RSS, and tracing the ways through which their thought conditions the gendered institutional culture of the BJP.

Hindutva/Hindu Nationalism:

Akin to other cultural and ethnonationalist ideologies and doctrines, Hindu Nationalism sustains a worldview that is centred upon ‘the “cultural essentials” of religion, blood, and other practices related to the body- food, marriage, death’ (Hansen, 1999, 13). Adherents of Hindu Nationalism maintain that the essence of civilisation in India is located in Hinduism. Ideologues of Hindu Nationalism- primarily bearing upper caste affiliations, have been instrumental in promoting the imagination of a pure Hindu cultural identity that has remained uninfluenced by interactions and exchanges with other religions, worldviews and historical processes (Hansen, 1999; Bhatt, 2001; Banerjee and

Copeman, 2020; Dwivedi, Mohan and Reghu, 2021). Under such an ideological frame, non-Hindu religions- particularly Abrahamic faiths, and their followers are portrayed as alien to the ethos of Indian social life, and the post-independence secular Indian state is perceived as a ‘political fiction’ (Hansen, 1999, 13) imposed upon by westernised liberals. A peculiar conception of history that characterises the centuries of Turko-Afghan and Mughal rule in the Indian Subcontinent (600 years) as ‘Islamic colonialism’, forwarding the imagination of an ancient ‘golden era’ of ‘Hindu rule’ through the mirroring of the British colonial-era Orientalist historiography, is also intrinsic to the Hindu Nationalist worldview (Hansen, 1999; Sarkar, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2007; Datta, 2010; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019). Among the ‘cultural essentials’ of Hindu Nationalism, a gendered and sacralised territorial imagination of the undivided Indian Subcontinent- ‘*Akhand Bharat*’, as embodying *Bharat Mata* (‘Mother India’) informs Hindu Nationalist views on major historical events such as the Partition of India (1947)- which is characterised as an act of desecration of the divine body of Mother India (Sarkar, 2001). Such a cartographic imagination of India is derived from the late-19th century Bengali Hindu revivalist conception of the nation as an incarnation of the divine Mother Goddess (Sarkar, 1971, 2001; Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Datta, 1999, 2010). While the doctrine of Hindutva was cultivated and popularised by the Hindu Mahasabha leader V.D. Savarkar, it was originally coined in a book ‘*Hindutva: An Authentic History of the Hindus*’ (1892) by a conservative Bengali *Bhadralok* by the name of Chandranath Basu, who while inhabiting a social space dominated by the western-educated, reformist proponents of the Bengal Renaissance, claimed that Hinduism was a superior religion over all others and advocated for the upholding of Brahminical supremacy and orthodox gender and caste hierarchies by demanding limitations on women’s education, civil liberties and maintaining male authority (Sarkar,

1996; Bhatt, 2001). It was Savarkar, however, who transformed Hindutva into a political program.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) propagated, through his written works ‘Essentials of Hindutva’ (1923), ‘*Hindu Pad-Padshahi*’ (1925) and ‘*Hindurashtra Darshan*’ (1949), the doctrine of Hindutva. He identified Hinduism as only one facet of the broader theme of ‘Hindu-ness’: ‘a man can be as truly a Hindu as any without believing in the Vedas as an independent religious authority’(Savarkar, 2003, 81). Such an interpretation of Hindu-ness/Hindutva promoted the imagination of India as an essentially Hindu Nation- a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ and maintained that the Hindus were to be identified not only by their common religious practice but also from their territorial and racial origins (Bhatt, 2001; Chaturvedi, 2003; Banerjee and Copeman, 2020). Alongside establishing an ethnocultural definition of a Hindu, Savarkar’s characterisation of *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation/State) is predicated primarily upon his reliance on certain gendered discursive constructs in relation with the status of non-Hindu religious minorities in such a nation.

During the early phase of his career, Savarkar had been associated with *Abhinav Bharat* (‘Young India’)- a revolutionary extremist association committed to violent insurgence against British colonial rule in India. He spent long periods of imprisonment at the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands and at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. During his stay at the Cellular Jail- then infamous for the tortures inflicted upon anti-colonial nationalist political prisoners there, Savarkar wrote three successive mercy petitions to the British government, apologising to the government, describing himself as a ‘prodigal son’ yearning to return to the ‘parental doors of the government’ (Noorani, 2002, 2005). During his stay at the Ratnagiri prison (1921-1937), Savarkar authored his influential work ‘*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*’ which was published in 1923. It has been argued that

it was during his long experience of incarceration that Savarkar underwent a transformation from anti-colonial revolutionary to Hindu Nationalist (Bhatt, 2001; Noorani, 2002, 2005; Kumar, 2006). After his release from prison, Savarkar became the president of the Hindu Mahasabha, and continued to propagate the doctrine of Hindutva to his followers. A critic of the Gandhian discourse of non-violent civic resistance, he opposed the Quit India Movement (1942) launched by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi-led Indian National Congress, urging Indians to extend support to the British government in the war efforts during the Second World War (1939-45). Following the independence and partition of India (1947), Savarkar became involved as a suspect in the trials of the conspiracy behind the assassination of Gandhi (1948) by the Hindu Nationalist extremist Nathuram Godse. While his direct involvement in the assassination could not be established, he along with the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS faced widespread popular opprobrium and government ban. Savarkar continued to be venerated in the Hindu right-wing circles as a foundational ideologue, bequeathed with the honorific '*Veer*' (brave)-commemorating his early career as a revolutionary. In the recent years, the Narendra Modi-led NDA government has undertaken concerted efforts to rehabilitate the popular image of Savarkar by conferring the latter with a prestigious (posthumous) award, commemorating his legacy and attacking the critics of Savarkar's doctrine (HT Correspondent, 2020; Press Trust of India, 2020c). The constitutive influence of Savarkar's philosophy of Hindutva on the policy orientation of the BJP has been made apparent particularly in the Modi government's recent policy decisions and initiatives. Instances of such initiatives include the scrapping of Article 370- which accorded special constitutional protection to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019- which promises citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian citizens of neighbouring countries while excluding Muslims, and

the grand foundation stone-laying ceremony for the forthcoming Ram Temple at the hitherto disputed site of the Babri Mosque (Deodhar, 2019; Correspondent, 2020; Islamia, 2020; Roy, 2020; Sohail and Avram, 2020; Dwivedi, Mohan and Reghu, 2021).

In his work on Hindutva, Savarkar floated the idea of an organic and continuous Hindu Nation existing in India since ancient times. He defined Hindutva as ‘not a word but a history’(Savarkar, 2003, 3) and as reflecting the soul of a nation which is constituted by the ‘brotherhood’ of blood and racial ties (Savarkar, 2003, 3). In Essentials of Hindutva, Savarkar outlined his theory of nationality and Hindu identity with the help of four tenets: the first is the critical significance of territory in the constitution of nationality; the second being the sentiment of organic belonging and a ‘notion of the antiquity’ (Savarkar, 2003, 3) through the persistence of a common memory; the third is the need for a common linguistic bond between the inhabitants of the Hindu nation- a function, to his opinion, performed by Sanskrit in ancient times and by Hindi in the contemporary era; and finally; the notion of a common culture which was supposed to bind the members of the community in an organic whole, based on ties of blood and race (Hansen, 1999; Bhatt, 2001; Savarkar, 2003; Banerjee and Copeman, 2020).

Among the key ingredients that make up Savarkar’s concept of the Hindu Nation, blood occupies a central place. Invoking the existence of common blood ties among Hindus, Savarkar sought to supersede and invisibilise the social hierarchies and discrimination arising from the system of caste within Hinduism (Zavos, 1999; Bhatt, 2001; Banerjee and Copeman, 2020). Another ingredient is the importance he attached to the internalization of emotive attachment to the ‘*pitrubhoomi*’ (fatherland) as an essential criterion for belonging to the Hindu Nation. His characterisation of the Indian Subcontinent as a ‘fatherland’ illustrated the direct influence of the Nazi German discourse of racial superiority. His broad definition of Hindutva is inclusive of Hindus,

Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs as the 'holy land' of these communities are located in India but not of Muslims and Christians as their holy lands are located outside the territorial boundaries of India. Conflating faith with nationality, Savarkar's Hindu Nationalist political project of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011) adopted the boundaries of territory and blood to ascertain who belonged to the ethnonationalist Hindu Nation- Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, and who remained outside- Muslims and Christians. Such a conceptual manoeuvre sought to do away with caste, class and other categories which signify internal differentiation within established religious communities such as Hinduism. The doctrine of Hindutva bases itself upon the binary of the Self and the Other and seeks to resolve the ontological conundrum by advocating a frontal antagonism between the two (Savarkar, 2003, 19-20; Sharma, 2003; Kumar, 2006; Nandy, 2009; Datta, 2010). In Savarkar's Hindu Nation, the role of the Other is accorded to the Muslims, who were at the same time admired and stereotypically represented by Savarkar as aggressively masculinist and belonging to a unified community and also castigated as being essentially different from and antagonistic to the Hindus (Bhatt, 2001; Sharma, 2003, 2007). Throughout his work, Savarkar took pains to construct the Muslim as the severest threat, not only to Hindu integrity but also to the nation itself

Even as he has been identified as a rationalist historian (Datta, 2010) Savarkar's treatment of history in several of his works; be it *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, or *Hindu Pad-Padshahi*, has always been directed towards a specific telos. It has an express purpose, that of generating a mythical narrative of 'humiliations' and defeats faced by a monolithic Hindu community and of stirring an 'apocalyptic' (Datta, 2010, 114) desire for revenge and retribution in the hearts of his target audience. History, for him, therefore, does not acquire finality. It is, in fact, a continuing process which, in a rather Hegelian fashion, is supposed to reach its epic conclusion in the present, when the

historic reverses suffered by the Hindus would be avenged by them in retributive violence (Bhatt, 2001; Datta, 2010; Ajaz Ashraf, 2016). For Savarkar, violence is not ‘tactical’ or ‘instrumental’ as it was for anti-colonial revolutionaries, but a foundational element in the formation of the new militant Hindu subjectivity (Datta, 2010, 116). In Savarkar’s scheme, even in the constitution of the Hindu identity, the ingredient of blood plays a crucial role as it does in fostering national belonging. Imageries of violent retribution and bloodshed recur in Savarkar’s writings as warnings to Muslims in the case of their refusal to assimilate into the Hindu Nation (Sharma, 2003; Datta, 2010; Banerjee and Copeman, 2020). The reconfiguration of the past in the light of the present often happens by means of performance, which can quite often employ violence in speech and action. In her work on the women members of the Shiv Sena in the slums of Mumbai, Atreyee Sen highlighted the manner in which the said women enact certain mythico-historical episodes such as the Maratha hero Shivaji’s encounter with the Mughal general Afzal Khan with theatrical flourish and in the process, also reinterpret those events in the light of the communally-charged present. Such ‘mytho-histories’ (Sen, 2009, 42) also facilitate these women to highlight the contribution and influence of women in Shivaji’s life in order to carve out a broader space for themselves in the primarily male-dominated movement of the Hindu Right.

As one considers the constitutive role that violence was accorded in the fashioning of the ideal Hindu subject, a close reading of Savarkar’s writings unpacks the gendered nature of this violence. The gendered metaphors employed in his narration of history reflects the stereotypes propagated by the colonialist discourses (Kumar, 2006). Savarkar’s characterization of Hindu masculinity as ‘imponent’ and ‘weak’ vis a vis Muslim masculinity as rapacious and aggressive offers an instance (Sharma, 2003; Banerjee and Copeman, 2020).

In this narrative of conflict and antagonism, the position of women as the loci of the honour of the community assumes critical significance. In his representation of the Muslim elite in several of his works, Savarkar paints the stereotypical Muslim male as ‘sensuous, lascivious, immoral, unethical and impious’ (Sharma, 2003, 138). The rape, harassment and coerced religious conversion of Hindu women by Muslim men are recurrent themes in his plays and other works. As opposed to his depiction of the Hindu (upper caste) woman as the epitome of chastity, fidelity, modesty, grace and virtue (Keer, 1966), the Muslim woman is perceived as the embodiment of lust, arrogance and immodesty (Sharma, 2003). Through his stereotypical portrayals of Hindu and Muslim women; and by according them ‘contrasting sexualities’ (Kumar, 2006, 44), Savarkar sought to forge a common Hindu identity out of an ahistorical sense of victimhood; a possible redemption of which, he claimed, lay in inflicting violence upon the Muslim Other. Violence was to be unleashed particularly on Muslim women who were perceived by him as culpable in the atrocities committed by their male counterparts upon Hindu women.

‘Once they (i.e., the Muslim noblemen) are haunted with this dreadful apprehension that Muslim women, too, stand in the same predicament in case the Hindus win, the future Muslim conquerors will never dare think of such molestation of Hindu women... It was the suicidal Hindu idea of chivalry to women which saved the Muslim women (simply because they were women) from the heavy punishment of committing indescribable serious crimes against the Hindu women.’
(quoted in Agrawal, 2012, 29-57; Ajaz Ashraf, 2016)

In his work *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, Savarkar elaborates on his antagonism towards Muslim women: ‘The Muslim women never faced retribution or punishment at the hands of any Hindu for their heinous crime. They had a perverted idea of woman-chivalry’ (Savarkar, 2012, 178). He also criticised the heroes of the Maratha empire such as Shivaji and Chimaji Appa for sparing the lives and dignities of Muslim women after their victories against Islamic rulers (Agrawal, 2012; Savarkar, 2012; Ajaz Ashraf, 2016). As if to defend his case against expected moral outrage, Savarkar takes recourse (Kumar, 2006) to mythical events such as the abduction of Sita by the antagonist Ravan in the Hindu epic Ramayana and uses them as valid precepts which; for him, justified violence against the women of the ‘adversary’ community. Savarkar’s stress upon the need for developing a regenerated, militant Hindu masculinity has been of critical influence in the evolution of the Sangh Parivar’s ideological framework and organisational structure- particularly the RSS. Persisting as an undercurrent in the Hindu Nationalist psyche is Savarkar’s advocacy of retaliatory and pre-emptive violence against Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular, and is often revealed as an ideological inspiration in the event of epochal events such as communal clashes and anti-Muslim riots- an instance of which is the systematic and widespread rape and massacre of Muslim women by Hindutva extremists during the Gujarat Genocide (2002) (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012; Ahmed, 2018; Khetan, 2021). On the level of the everyday, the gendered logic of ‘righteous violence’ against Muslim women and opponents of Hindutva has been illustrated in the recent years, in the consistent participation of the BJP IT Cell members in campaigns of cyber sexual harassment of Muslim and non-Muslim women activists, students, media professionals and others who voice their criticisms of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government.

Savarkar's emphasis on violence against Muslim women also came from a sense of paranoia at a perceived decline in Hindu numbers which was seen as coinciding with an increase in Muslim population. The Hindu Nationalist demographic anxiety that was manifested in the works of Savarkar and other ideologues has been a consistent presence in the discourse of the contemporary Hindu Right, recently illustrated in speeches by RSS leaders and BJP lawmakers urging Hindus to breed more (Ali, 2015; Mishra, 2017; Sagar, 2020), and is also reflected in the BJP's aforementioned political mobilisation of families as vote banks for the party.

Such demographic anxiety has also manifested itself as one of the central themes in the BJP's political campaign in West Bengal, constituting the ideological foundation of the argument for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) (2019) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Involving a particular reimagination of the Partition of India and Pakistan (1947)⁵² and the associated crises of violent religious persecution, murder, rapes, mass displacement and refugee migration on either side of the border, (Sarkar, 1989; Chatterji, 1994; Datta, 1999; Bose and Jalal, 2004; Chandra, Heierstad and Bo Nielsen, 2015; Sen, 2017, 2018; Mukherjee, 2019) through the lens of Hindu victimhood, the BJP has promoted the idea of the state of West Bengal as a primarily Hindu haven while referring constantly to the bogey of rising Muslim population in the state (Ray,

⁵² The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 caused the deaths of around 2 million people in violent Hindu-Muslim riots and the displacement of around 14 million people along India's north-western frontier in Punjab and eastern frontier in Bengal, giving rise to one of the largest mass migrations of refugees in modern history. Among the several different historical causes behind the Partition, some prominent ones are the British colonial policy of 'Divide and Rule' (Sarkar, 1989; B. Chandra, 2016) and the 'Two-Nation' theory backed by the M.A. Jinnah-led Muslim League as well as the Hindu Mahasabha (Sarkar, 1989; Chatterji, 1994).

2017b; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c; Daniyal, 2019b, 2019e, 2019c, 2019a; Bhattacharya, 2020c). Such demographic anxiety and the reframing of partition history as a Hindu tragedy were reflected by some of my interviewees from the BJP. In party publications such as '*Udbastu Shomosya O Nagorikotto* (Refugee Problem and Citizenship)' (Ray, 2017b) and '*Amar Bangla Amar Maa, Pakistan Hote Debo Na* (My Bengal is my Mother, I shall not let it become Pakistan)' (Raha, 2017), the authors present a narrative of partition history and the refugee crisis as primarily a tale of oppression of Hindus by Muslims in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In keeping with the sacralised, Hindu Nationalist concept of '*Akhand Bharat*' (Undivided India), the event of partition of the Indian Subcontinent is imagined as an act of desecration of the holy motherland. Hindu women in West Bengal in particular are perceived to be in a state of constant danger from hypersexualised Muslim male 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh (Raha, 2017; Ray, 2017a; Press Trust of India, 2021a). In the recent times, the BJP *Mahila Morcha* (women's wing) members have protested against rape and other crimes against women under the AITC government in West Bengal, often communalising incidents of rape by harping on the religious identity of the rapists in the case they turn out to be Muslim (ANI, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Chattopadhyay, 2020; The Times of India, 2020).

Charging the successive CPI(M) and AITC state governments with facilitating 'illegal immigration' of Bangladeshi Muslims to consolidate their 'vote-banks' (Raha, 2017; Ray, 2017b; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019c; Daniyal, 2019a, 2019c; Bhattacharya, 2020c), the BJP vowed in its 2021 election campaign to cast out the 'immigrants' and 'intruders' from Bangladesh- identified as 'termites', while promising citizenship to Hindu 'asylum seekers' from Bangladesh through the implementation of the CAA and the NRC in West Bengal (BBC Staff Correspondent, 2019). Popular suspicion arising

from the experience of bureaucratic excesses and the exclusion of millions of Hindus from the NRC experiment conducted in Bengal's neighbouring state Assam (2019), opposition to the NRC-CAA scheme by the AITC, the CPI(M), the INC and civil society movements (Press Trust of India, 2019b), and electoral calculations compelled the BJP to temporarily shift focus from the NRC and the CAA (Daniyal, 2019d; Das, 2020; Jaede, 2020). The element of demographic anxiety about the perception of an escalating Muslim population in West Bengal and the consequent threats to the Hindu population continues to persist, however, in the BJP's political rhetoric. The gendered imagination of hypersexual Bangladeshi Muslim 'illegal immigrants' has been used, to a great degree of success in the recent years, as a 'fantasmatic logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) to conceal caste, class and other differentiations within the Bengali Hindus and constitute a consolidated 'Hindu' vote bank for the BJP in West Bengal. At the same time, the party's Islamophobic rhetoric also serves as a crucial 'political logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of generating antagonistic communal subjectivities. Instances of such Islamophobic rhetoric include charging the AITC leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee with the policy of 'Muslim appeasement' (Daniyal, 2019b, 2019a, 2019c; Bhattacharya, 2020c, 2021b) and branding her as the architect of 'Greater Bangladesh' while ascribing a Muslim name like 'Mumtaz Begum' to her (HT Correspondent, 2017; Press Trust of India, 2021a).

In the recent years, the BJP has also campaigned on issues aimed at polarising and consolidating the Hindu electoral base such as the state government's administrative decisions on Durga Puja and Moharram processions, the banning and restrictions on educational institutions run by the RSS, etc. (Raha, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2020c). The demographic anxiety is also reflected in the party's gendered conceptualisation of the '*Bangla Maa*' (Mother Bengal) figure as a symbolic representation of West Bengal as a

Hindu homeland under threat from ‘hypermasculine’ Bangladeshi Muslims- designated as ‘jihadi terrorists’ (Raha, 2017; Daniyal, 2019b; Bhattacharya, 2020c; Press Trust of India, 2021a), and bears a constitutive influence in the party’s position on issues such as incidents of sexual violence in West Bengal. The paranoia around the figure of the ‘hypersexual’ and ‘predatory’ Muslim male informs the BJP’s ideational and policy orientation. Such paranoia has found expression in grassroots Hindu Nationalist campaigns against religious conversion to Islam and Christianity (Chatterji, 2005; Das, 2015a; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019; Bell, 2020) as well as in the recent laws passed in BJP-governed states such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh aimed at curbing what is termed as ‘love jihad’- a Hindu Nationalist narrative on Muslim men ‘enticing’ Hindu women into romantic relationships and marriage as part of a systematic ‘jihadi’ strategy to curb Hindu population (Das, 2015a, 2015b; Seth, 2020; TNN, 2021). The party had promised similar anti-‘love jihad’ legislations if voted to power in West Bengal (Rohatgi, 2021). The BJP’s campaign strategy of communal polarisation in West Bengal reflected its ideological positioning within the Sangh Parivar universe in general and Savarkar’s Hindutva in particular.

Savarkar’s concept of the Hindu Nation was constructed on a peculiar notion of the female body and was accompanied by a distinction between which female bodies were to be revered and protected and which female bodies were deserving of violation. The education of Hindu women in the art of domestic management and in religious scriptures was deemed absolutely essential by Savarkar, as they were perceived as the crucible for the next generation who had to be trained in the religious and cultural heritage of Hindutva. The role of women in imparting Hindu religious instruction to their children, and the idea that the identity and selfhood of Hindu women is ‘relational’(Bacchetta, 2004, 8) rather than individualistic are themes that are harped on even in contemporary

times by Sangh Parivar organizations for women such as the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* (Ray Chaudhury, 2017). The BJP's belief in the discursive association of women with familial responsibilities was also illustrated during my interviews with BJP members who insisted that the party's women's wing was necessary to mobilise women voters as it would contribute towards transforming entire families into BJP vote banks. In the following paragraphs, the chapter engages further with the Sangh Parivar discourse on gender and the symbolic representation of women in the Hindu Nationalist lifeworld, through the works of M.S. Golwalkar.

Alongside Savarkar, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973) or 'Guruji' was one of the key ideologues and leaders of the Sangh Parivar. Born in Nagpur, Maharashtra in an upper caste Brahmin family, Golwalkar had been inclined towards spirituality and renunciation from early on. As leader of the RSS, Golwalkar steered the association away from all engagement with the Indian freedom movement and continued to build a strong organisational base by spreading its reach across the country. Golwalkar outlined his concept of nationality in his controversial work 'We or our Nationhood defined' (1939) which was banned for its open endorsement of the racial policies of Nazi Germany. While Savarkar offered a broad definition of Hindu-ness and for whom territory was a crucial determinant in the construction of nationality, Golwalkar privileges Race and blood ties as the cornerstone of a nation. Citing the works of German historians such as Bluntschli, he sought to establish the congruity of his thesis with the German idea of *jus sanguinis* (blood-based nationality). Golwalkar extended and connected Savarkar's Hindutva with the questions of the state, nation, citizenship, status of minorities and racism (Bhatt, 2001, 126). His concept of the nation was inspired by the Hegelian concept of the *Geist* or Spirit, and he expressed admiration for the Nazi theory of racial superiority (Golwalkar and Islam, 2006, 37).

According to Golwalkar, the process of constituting the Hindu subject was gradual, and was to be best achieved by a slow but rigorous disciplining of the body, mind and character- an instance of which are the physical and intellectual training exercises for RSS volunteers (Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 1988, 2018; Bhatt, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2007). The disciplinary regimen that Sangh Parivar affiliates such as the RSS, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and the Durga Vahini offer to their volunteers involves strict routines of martial training, character-building exercises and ideological indoctrination into Hindutva from an early, impressionable age (Andersen and Damle, Shridhar, 1988, 2018; Kanungo, 2002; Bacchetta, 2004; Menon, 2012; Meghwanshi, 2020). The ideological goal of creating a militant, masculinist Hindu subjectivity via a vis the perceived image of the ‘hypermasculine’ Muslim male informs the organisational thrust of the RSS and similar associations within the Sangh Parivar.

A significant feature of Golwalkar’s works and speeches is his overriding anxiety regarding the ‘corrupting’ influence of Western culture that he saw as being reflected in the leading media of mass entertainment of the day, such as cinema and music (Golwalkar, 2017, 51). The duty of imparting ‘proper’ ideological training to the youth, according to Golwalkar, rested on Hindu women, who as mothers, were supposed to safeguard their homes against encroachment by western influences. Thus Golwalkar, in a similar vein as Savarkar, perceives Hindu women primarily as the crucible of the honour of the community and as nurturing mothers- ‘*Matrushakti*’ (Maternal Power) (Bhide, 2006). Placing a great emphasis upon the need for women to serve society and the nation by inculcating religious discipline and moral values in their children, Golwalkar cautioned Hindu women against the evil of ‘modernism’ (Golwalkar, 2017). Under his leadership, the RSS adopted a strident opposition to the politicization of women and opposed the ascendance of Indira Gandhi to power during the 1970s. Golwalkar’s ideas

on the role of women as mothers has borne a foundational influence upon the organisational aim of the Rashtrasevika Samiti- the women's counterpart of the RSS and the largest Hindu Nationalist women's organisation in the world (Ray Chaudhury, 2017).

While Golwalkar's position on women continues to enjoy a privileged place in the Sangh Parivar discourse, within the policy framework of the BJP, it has to contend with the rhetoric of women's empowerment, and the electoral compulsion to cater to the increasingly vocal and salient women voter base in India- a constituency whose votes have proven decisive for the party's victory in the 2019 General Elections and subsequent state elections (Kapoor and Ravi, 2013; Kamra, 2019; DNA Web Team, 2020; Ramesh, 2020; Spary, 2020). The consequence of such an uneasy coexistence of different, and contradictory, discourses on femininity within the BJP is the prevalence of communally charged legislations such as the 'love jihad' laws ostensibly aimed at 'saving' Hindu women from coerced religious conversion alongside welfarist policies such as the '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save Daughter, Educate Daughter)' (BBBP) scheme of the Modi-led NDA government. A flagship scheme of the NDA government launched in 2015, the BBBP scheme aims curbing female foeticide and child mortality in the states of India while facilitating access to educational opportunities for girl students (MWCD (Ministry of Women and Child Development), 2018). Despite being launched amidst great fanfare, subsequent audits of the scheme revealed that a vast majority of its budgetary allocation of INR 100 crores remained unspent and an approximate 56% of the expenditure was on publicity drives (Dogra, 2017; Kapur, 2017; Press Trust of India, 2019a). Critics of the government have characterised the official symbolic representation of women as regressive by citing how the government uses orthodox gender stereotypes regarding women to propagate its schemes such as the *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana* scheme (2016)-which promised free cooking gas connections for one month to below-poverty

line (BPL) women in villages, as symbols of women's empowerment with slogans such as '*Mahilaon ko mila samman*' (Women got their dignity). Posters publicising the scheme often depict young girls sitting beside gas cylinders along with their mothers displaying satisfied expressions (Naqvi, 2019). It is argued that in supporting the traditionalist and stereotypical association of women with the kitchen and cooking, the government unveils its ideological affinities with the Hindu Right perspective on gender roles (Naqvi, 2019).

Through its interpretive engagement with the party's self-description, the Five Founding Principles, Integral Humanism, and Hindutva/Hindu Nationalism, this section offers a glimpse onto the dominant norms that govern and sustain the systemic continuity of the BJP's gendered institutional culture. In particular, the discussion on Hindutva illustrated the Sangh Parivar and the BJP's ethnonationalist perspectives on the position of women as the repositories of the honour of religious communities, the designation of their bodies as the zones of war among antagonistic religious communities, the sacralised conceptualisation of territory as a divine Mother, and the discursive association of women with stereotypical gender roles. While highlighting the influence of Hindutva on the policy framework of the BJP, this section also traces the contestations that Hindu Nationalist constructions on gender face in the party from the demands of electoral politics.

Conclusion:

Discursive and Feminist Institutional research have underscored the need for a critical focus on the formal and informal processes through which institutions uphold 'gendered logics of appropriateness' (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2020)- privileging certain forms of gendered behaviour by

actors over others. Among other themes, this chapter highlights the BJP's overarching endorsement of the orthodox discursive constructions of gender identities and relations that play an influential role in the reproduction of institutional continuity in the BJP. At the same time, it traces how the character of the BJP as a participant in electoral politics renders it distinct from its brethren in the RSS and other Hindu Nationalist associations who do not have to contend with the compulsions associated with electoral democracy.

From its inception, this unique positioning of the BJP within the Sangh Parivar, coupled with the impact of macro-social and historical circumstances, has turned its institutional space into an arena of contestation between its foundational ideologies and other, sometimes contradictory discourses. An instance of such discursive contestation is represented by the Five Founding Principles (*Pancha Nishtha*) of the BJP. Within these principles, the inclusion of a non-Hindu nationalist principle such as 'Gandhian Socialism' and its coexistence with 'Positive Secularism' - a principle that has deep roots in the Sangh Parivar discourse, can be regarded as the party's efforts to accommodate the interests and sentiments of its coalition partners during the Janata Party years. In the contemporary decades, even as the party has vastly improved its electoral clout and no longer depends on its coalition partners to govern, strategic electoral calculations continue to place demands on the policy framework of the BJP. The result of such jostling between the doctrinal purism of Hindu Nationalism and the pragmatism of electoral politics is illustrated in the coexistence of *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*- a scheme designed for enhancing women's well-being and educational opportunities with the anti- 'love jihad' laws- which have the effect of curtailing women's freedom of choice under the guise of curbing 'forced' religious conversion. Similarly, the BJP's recent intensive mobilisation of its women's wing (*Mahila Morcha*) to court women voters on the eve of the upcoming state assembly elections also presents another instance of the party's

response to the compulsions of electoral democracy. Having said so, the idea of women party workers mobilising ‘silent’ women voters and focusing on ‘women’s issues’ while remaining broadly segregated from the mainstream party organisation can also be held to exist in conformity with the Sangh Parivar’s vision of women’s ‘relational’ subjectivities and the general phenomenon of the marginalisation of women within right wing parties and movements (Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bedi, 2016).

The influence of pragmatic electoral calculations in the context of regional politics such as in West Bengal, has also been noted in the organisational space of the party- in the mass acceptance of turncoats from rival parties such as the AITC, the CPI(M)), and the INC, and their swift elevation along the party ranks. Political commentators have already begun to argue that the BJP can no longer lay claim to the tag, ‘The Party with a Difference’; given that a substantial number of its members and ministers are political turncoats (Tewari, 2019), and open conflicts between party old-timers and newcomers have become an everyday occurrence in states like West Bengal (Kundu, 2020; Mandal, 2020; Sarkar, 2020). While turncoat leaders have been rewarded with prized party positions, it remains to be seen whether their induction into the party structure would lead to a dilution of the BJP’s ideological commitments as well as of the prevailing gender regime of the party’s institutional space. The abiding influence of the orthodox heteronormative and patriarchal imagination of the family on party practices including political defection in the BJP will be discussed in the chapter on interviews. The possibilities of institutional change also lie in the expansion of networking opportunities for women members of the party as a consequence of the party’s mobilisation of women workers and voters during elections. Only time will tell whether these organisational initiatives will be sustained beyond the short-term period of election campaigning. The increasing personalisation and centralisation of the party command

under the leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah coupled with the hardening Hindu Nationalist ideational and policy orientation of the BJP, however, indicates that the ideological foundations of the BJP and its affinities with the RSS and other Sangh Parivar associations continue to bear a hegemonic influence upon the party's institutional culture even as it contends with the pull of electoral pragmatism. The following chapter presents an interpretivist engagement with the institutional belonging and political self-makings of women party members with its analysis of narratives offered by the interviewees from the three political parties.

7. 'Seva' (Service) and 'Sangharsh' (Struggle): The Institutional Belonging and Political Self-making of Women Party Members

Introduction:

Situating itself within the context of political parties in the state of West Bengal, India, this chapter offers an interpretive thematic analysis of the narratives presented by women interviewees from the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). The interpretive study of interviews is complemented with analysis of news reports on relevant events and seeks to delineate the influences of particular social and institutional positionalities upon women party members' articulations of belonging and self-making in relation with the institutional cultures and 'gender regimes' (Connell, 1987, 2002) of parties. The feminist institutionalist engagement with the narratives of women's belonging in party culture will be conducted through the method of Discourse Analysis and the Poststructuralist logics approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) in particular in order to flesh out, among other things, the negotiations that women party members from a variety of social positionings forge with the formal and informal institutional boundaries and 'requisites of belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 20) in the parties, and in the process, articulate their political subjectivities. The interpretivist research conducted under the method of Discourse Analysis will focus on everyday meaning-making by the women interviewees who inhabit the institutional cultures of the three parties. The names used to denote the interviewees have been changed from the original for the purpose of protecting their confidentiality. The chapter is divided into four broad sections. The first section engages with the different access routes that women party members take to join

active politics. The second section discusses women party members' perceptions of the formal and informal power dynamics in the institutional cultures of their respective political parties. The third section explores the constitutive influences of the different social positionalities of women party members on their articulations of belonging. With a particular focus on the narratives offered by selected women political leaders across parties. The final section on the self-making(s) of women party members traces the constitution of women's political subjectivities through the logic of defeminisation and the conceptual lenses of '*Seva*' (service) and '*Sangharsh*' (Struggle).

Women's Access Routes to Politics: Family and Community Activism:

Following the feminist institutionalist commitment to contextually-situated theorisation (Kenny, 2009; Hinojosa and Gurdíán, 2012; Bjarnegard and Kenny, 2016), and the interdiscursivity between institutions and the macro-social environment they inhabit (Fairclough, 1995; Glynos and Howarth, 2007), this section discusses the influence of extra-institutional factors such as family networks and non-party associational and community activism on the political socialisation and participation of women in the selected political parties of West Bengal in India. In the course of my interviews with women party workers and leaders of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a majority of the interviewees across party lines underlined the determinative and abiding influence of their respective families in the inception and development of their political careers. Whether close relatives being active political workers or with families politicised along ideological lines, most of the interviewees identified their families as the primary spaces of their political socialisation.

Family ties with politics often extended beyond the arena of electoral party politics and involved deeper connections with particular social and cultural associations affiliated with the political parties. While such cultural networks often serve as springboards for the recruitment of women and men into electoral politics, they also comprise affective investments that in turn contribute towards developing a strong sense of belonging among the members of the institutional cultures of the respective political parties. Emotional identifications with the cultural associations driven by family ties therefore often evolve into affective ties with the affiliated political party. Such attachments are complicated through the influence of the particular social and cultural positionalities and ethical values of the members (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2007, 2011). An instance of such affective investments can be located in the narrative of Debasmita Banerjee, a BJP MP who identified her family connections with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as being formative to her political socialisation. While recollecting her first experience with political activism, Banerjee narrated how while the then-dominant CPI(M)-affiliated student organisation was attempting to intimidate her into becoming a member on her first day of college, her long-term, familial attachments with the women's wing of the RSS (i.e. the Rashtrasevika Samiti) provided her with the affective charge to resist the communist student organisation and correspondingly establish a branch of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)- the student wing of the BJP, at her college in West Bengal:

‘They all wanted an articulate leader like me (*'boliye-koiye'*). I realised they were all trying to win me over. Now I come from a family that had its basics in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Father too was deeply connected with the Bharatiya Janata Party. So, these words just came out of my mouth, 'I do Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi

Parishad'. They started telling me there was no Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. I told them, 'know this, as long as I am standing here, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad exists'. It all began there and then; standing all alone in the college.'⁵³

Situated along the other end of the ideological spectrum and illustrating a similar constitutive influence of family-driven political socialisation was the narrative of CPI(M)-leader Ranjini Kar, a former minister in the Left Front government. Remembering the 'fiery times' of armed confrontation and street fights among the young members and supporters of the communist parties and those of the then-ruling Indian National Congress (INC/Congress) party in Bengal during the 1970s, Kar located her motivation to join parliamentary communist activism as originating in the 'almost-fascist terror' and everyday harassments that her own family contended with in that period:

'It was between 1970-77. At that time, there was the almost-fascist terror regime of the Congress in our state. In my area, Kalna, Bardhaman, 42 were killed at that time. Even my home was attacked; my brother used to do active politics then. In the context of these terrors and attacks, I began to be influenced by leftist politics. Eventually, I joined leftist student politics. Back then, the time wasn't good at all. We all had to operate while remaining underground- during the 70s. Therefore, I was secretly associated with the youth organisation. Those were fiery times! I remember going for my secondary exams where I saw big knives and daggers being stuck in the school benches and more '*mastans*' (goons)

⁵³ Interviewed on 10/11/2018.

than students. There was also mass cheating during exams. In that confusing situation, I gained direct experience of the harsh everyday reality. This inspired me even more to join direct politics. In 1973, I joined CPI(M) directly.’⁵⁴

Family attachments constitute a significant factor for women joining political parties in the context of West Bengal. In recent years, familial discord at the level of the party elite, has also caused turmoil within the institutional cultures of the AITC and the BJP as well as engineered inter-party defections. In another case, party defections by prominent party members have been the cause of marital discords. Instances of both kinds of defections include the protracted and emotionally charged political scandals that ensued from the respective cases of the extramarital romantic liaison between Shovan Chatterjee and Baishakhi Banerjee in the AITC, and the marital conflict between Saumitra Khan and Sujata Mondal Khan in the BJP. Both cases resulted in inter-party defections and continue to receive sustained and sensationalised reportage in Bengali news media (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020c, 2020e, 2021d, 2021a). The first situation involved the extramarital relationship between Shovan Chatterjee, a longstanding lieutenant of Mamata Banerjee in the AITC and former Mayor of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), and Baishakhi Banerjee, a college lecturer in Kolkata. Shovan Chatterjee had been married to Ratna Chatterjee who is the daughter of a locally-influential AITC leader in South Kolkata. During his tenure as Mayor, Shovan Chatterjee’s growing closeness to Baishakhi Banerjee had, alongside affecting his marital and family life, also been interpreted by the party leadership, including Mamata Banerjee

⁵⁴ Interviewed on 16/11/2018.

as jeopardising Chatterjee's professional reputation as well as the AITC's public image (Bhattacharya, 2018; Desk, 2021). Mamata Banerjee's personal opposition to the Shovan-Baishakhi relationship, coupled with the long-drawn series of allegations and counter-allegations among Shovan-Baishakhi, Ratna and key members of the AITC leadership and media sensationalism, culminated in Shovan Chatterjee resigning from the Mayorship in 2018, and eventually from the AITC. The political scandal also affected the career of Baishakhi Banerjee resigned from her college lectureship. On the eve of the 2021 state assembly elections in West Bengal, Shovan Chatterjee and Baishakhi Banerjee were approached by the BJP state unit leadership. The duo joined BJP in 2019 (Chattopadhyay, 2019) where they nonetheless continue to face censure within the BJP's institutional culture (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021e, 2021d, 2021a) while Ratna Chatterjee- the estranged wife of Shovan Chatterjee, was fielded as an AITC candidate for the 2021 state elections for Shovan Chatterjee's erstwhile constituency, Behala Purba in South Kolkata (India Today Web Desk, 2021a).

The second situation involved the AITC-turned-BJP Member of Parliament Saumitra Khan and his wife and erstwhile BJP worker Sujata Mondal Khan. Commonly perceived to have been instrumental in campaigning for and securing the electoral victory of her husband in 2019, Sujata Mondal Khan left BJP in late-2020 and joined AITC on the eve of the 2021 state elections (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020b). This defection resulted in Saumitra Khan serving a divorce notice to her through a dramatic press conference (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020c; Quint Staff Reporter, 2020) and Sujata Mondal Khan eventually being fielded as an AITC candidate from Arambagh in Hooghly district (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021g; India Today Web Desk, 2021b). Blaming the AITC for 'breaking his family', an emotional Saumitra Khan also conveyed his negative perception of his wife as a 'quarrelsome, suspicious woman' (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020d). In a similar

vein as the media coverage of the Shovan-Baishakhi affair, the political defection and subsequent separation between Saumitra Khan and Sujata Mondal Khan also received its share of media sensationalism and Sujata's 'homewrecking' political ambition was interpreted as the primary factor behind the couple's separation (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020e, 2020c).

Alongside functioning as launchpads and offering emotional incentives for women seeking access to a political career as well as being sites of discord with the potential to influence their political choices, familial connections were also noted for their critical and recurring role of being informal support-systems for women party workers (Rai, 2012; Rai and Spary, 2019). Women from across the three political parties affirmed that continuing support from their families were essential for them to conduct their political responsibilities. Such support ranged from active political participation by their relatives to assistance with childcare, cooking and other domestic responsibilities. While speaking of her stint as a municipal councillor, Shreya Das from the AITC heaped praises particularly on the female members of her joint family for encouraging her political participation by sharing household duties and attending her rallies and speeches⁵⁵. Active or tacit consent from older male family members was also regarded as essential for most women to be able to access politics in the first place, reflecting the conventional heteronormative model of the family in India. Attesting to the criticality of male consent for the launch of her activist career, Anju Das, a municipal representative from the

⁵⁵ Interviewed on 20/01/2019.

CPI(M), recalls how she was only able to actively join the West Bengal *Mahila Samiti*⁵⁶ after her marriage to a communist party-sympathiser husband:

‘Before marriage, me, my mother, we were not completely free to do *Mahila Samiti*. After marriage... my husband was committed to the ideals of this party. He loved the Communist party and Marxism. So, they accepted my doing politics.’⁵⁷

Even as most interviewees across party lines agreed on the importance of family consent and support for their access to political activism, a few others credited their motivation to join politics entirely to their personal aspirations while underlining the deep personal costs that they have had to/are having to bear as a consequence of their involvement in politics. Debi Sen, a senior AITC trade union leader and MP, regarded the ‘considerably difficult’ five years that she was compelled to spend in a slum, after her father cast her out of their affluent, middle-class family home due to her decision to give up higher studies and join trade union politics, as ‘life-changing and formative’⁵⁸. Ananta Pal, a grassroots BJP worker, on the other hand, highlighted the everyday hassles and trauma that she has to undergo as a consequence of living in a large joint family of AITC sympathisers while at the same time characterising the BJP as an embodiment of a private space enjoyed by her alone:

⁵⁶ The state-level women’s wing of the CPI(M), later merged with the CPI(M)- affiliated All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) in 1982.

⁵⁷ Interviewed on 22/11/2018.

⁵⁸ Interviewed on 13/06/2018.

‘There is a lot of *'ashanti'* (discord) at home. But I am determined to not leave this space. This is my own space. Everyone in my home does Trinamool (AITC). I have eleven members in my family. They all do Trinamool. I don't. I like this party.’⁵⁹

The aforementioned instances of Sen and Pal can be regarded therefore as being representative of dissident voices amidst the hegemonic presence of familial networks in women’s access to politics in the given context. Debi Sen’s experiential narrative, in particular, highlighted the significance of community activism as another space for women’s political socialisation preceding their recruitment in electoral politics. Activist spaces at localised levels, have been regarded by the existing scholarship on lower caste and lower class women’s political participation in India as crucial to the honing of women’s networking, leadership, oratorical and political skills (Roy, 2006a; Sen, 2007; Ciotti, 2009, 2017; Rai, 2012; Srila Roy, 2012; Madhok, 2013; Bedi, 2016; Rai and Spary, 2019). Women’s participation in community activism features a broad range, encompassing civic/militant social movements as well as welfarist social and cultural associations with or without ostensible links with political parties. Such spaces, of course, often intersect with familial connections as is illustrated by the BJP leader Debasmita Banerjee’s family links with the RSS, but also contribute towards the sedimentation of lasting relational solidarities among women activists. In the transition of women activists to electoral politics, such horizontal solidarities and sentiments of community are reflected particularly in the women’s wings of political parties, which often function as ‘safe spaces’ for women party members to bond with each other (Childs and Caul

⁵⁹ Interviewed on 15/01/2019.

Kittilson, 2016; Kimberly and Patrick, 2017), or, in other contexts, within parties and legislative bodies established and dominated by women (Evans and Kenny, 2020; Shin, 2020; Verge, 2020).

Throughout my interviews and interactions with women members across parties, several respondents with a background in community activism recalled with fondness the lasting friendships they had forged during their activist, ‘street days’, friendships that continued even after they joined mainstream politics. ‘My women colleagues at the AIDWA (The All-India Democratic Women’s Association) always have my backs and this is what distinguishes our party: the soul-bonding’⁶⁰, said Shyamali Ghoshal, a CPI(M) member. Women party workers with a record of community activism in areas of social welfare also characterised the political work done by them in present days as an extension of their welfare services (*‘seva’*- social service). For some others, however, a background in activism served to showcase and use their leadership and networking skills for advancing their political ambitions primarily by distinguishing themselves from their activist comrades. For instance, while remembering her struggle days at the Kanoria Jute Mills labour agitation (1993-98) in Howrah and her participation at the Singur anti-land acquisition movement (2006-11), the AITC leader Debi Sen highlighted her exceptional personal leadership qualities which, in her own interpretation, was ‘generally unlikely in women’ and had seemed to influence the AITC leadership to choose her over others as the president of the party’s trade union.

Highlighting the primary routes through which women in the context of West Bengal, India access and join party politics, this section has also explored the subjective

⁶⁰ Interviewed on 16/11/2018.

and affective dimension of motivation for the women to choose a political career, more of which shall be explored in the following sections. Across the three selected political parties, a majority of the women interviewees identified family networks with parties/affiliated social-cultural associations as the key channel for women's access to party and electoral politics. In recent years, family has also emerged as a site of political conflict among spouses, leading to inter-party defections. Alongside functioning as an access route, familial connections and resources also serve as informal support-systems for women party members, particularly in the context of the scarcity of women-friendly institutional arrangements at the parties. The criticality of continuing family support was illustrated in the discussion on how the presence of consent from older male relatives was a crucial factor conditioning women's participation in party politics. Alongside family, community activism is another space that functions as a training ground, safe-space, and launchpads for women activists with electoral aspirations. While often intersecting with familial networks, community activism also constitutes in itself an alternative space and access route for women aspirants who do not possess the political capital of family ties. The following section explores how the women party members and leaders perceive their respective political parties. Following the feminist institutionalist framework, and with the aid of the aforementioned logics approach, it will analyse the interviewees' subjective characterisation and interpretation of the structure, hierarchies, and institutional discourses of the parties.

The Whims of the ‘Upormohol’ (Higher Echelons): Women’s Perceptions of Party Cultures:

‘We are all low-level workers here (*‘nichutolar kormi’*).

We convey our demands and grievances to our leaders, they listen to us, accept whatever is right and reject whatever is wrong. Among the low-level workers, it is natural to have petty grievances, but we don’t convey them to the ones in the higher tier (*‘upormohol’*)- Sanjana Bhowmik (AITC)⁶¹.

Echoing the sentiments expressed by a majority of interviewees from the AITC, Bhowmik- a municipality representative and former office-holder in the suburban town of Dum Dum, indicated the top-down hierarchical command structure of her party. Characterising the AITC as ‘a large joint family’, Bhowmik identified her colleagues and herself as the ‘children’ of the family. Such a characterisation contributed to her interpretation of differences of opinion and dissent within the party as everyday quarrels among cousins in a joint family. While the representation of the party as a joint family can imply the existence of horizontal networks among party members, a different picture emerges when one examines the family metaphor through a contextualised lens. The image of the party as a family, a recurrent theme in the narratives of several party members in the AITC as well as in the CPI(M) and the BJP, takes as its source a specific historical construction of the South Asian joint family- characterised by the joint ownership of property among fathers, sons and male cousins, patrilineal descent conditioned by the caste system and the overarching authority of elderly male members

⁶¹ Interviewed on 16/01/2019.

over others in the family (Thapar, 1980, 2010). The prevalence of hierarchy and male authority within the joint family is reflected in the interpretations of vertical hierarchy within the parties. Nandana Mukherjee, a ground-level worker in the AITC articulated the familial naturalisation of male authority in the party hierarchy while stressing that most of her women party colleagues including herself function ‘under the umbrella and direction’⁶² of the local male party leader, characterised as a ‘*Dada*’⁶³ (elder brother), who ‘graciously listens’ to the opinions and demands of ground-workers but makes decisions ‘as he thinks best’. Similarly, Mala Pandey⁶⁴, a municipality representative from the AITC spoke at length about the ‘benevolence and wisdom’ of her area MP, a state-level male party leader, who appointed women as local party cell leaders. While familial sentiments of deference towards male party leaders were not overtly expressed by interviewees from the CPI(M), a majority of them argued that the present party leadership (overwhelmingly male) (Financial Express Staff, 2009; Imam and Salim, 2017) were occupying their positions by virtue of their ‘sound logic’ and superior commitment towards revolutionary ideals. In the BJP, identifying the party as a ‘President-based party’, Promita Sinha⁶⁵, a district-level leader of the BJP, underlined the sweeping and final authority of the President- who has, thus far, been always male, in terms of decision-making even as she and other interviewees from the BJP stressed that

⁶² Interviewed on 14/01/2019.

⁶³ In South Asian cultural vocabulary, it is common to apply familial kinship terms such as *Didi* (elder sister), *Dada* (elder/older brother) or *Kaka/Chacha* (uncle) to non-familial relationships.

⁶⁴ Interviewed on 02/06/2018.

⁶⁵ Interviewed on 22/11/2018.

the party adhered strictly to its constitutional rules. BJP workers under the women's wing such as Radha Samanta⁶⁶ expressed open deference to the male *Mandal Sabhapati* (Local Area President) in matters of decision-making even while asserting her autonomy as a women's wing local area leader.

Interviewees such as Sanjana Bhowmik and others in the AITC characterise the party elite as the residents of the '*upormohol*' (higher tier of a mansion), offering an image of the organisational edifice of the party as a feudal mansion that is traditionally a living space marked by the vertical segregation of its inhabitants in the higher and lower echelons. While the party elite are represented as the distant, privileged occupants of the '*upormohol*', Bhowmik identified herself and her colleagues as the '*nichutolar kormi*' (lower tier workers) who are faced with disconnection and exclusion from the 'secret garden' (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015) of the '*upormohol*': 'it is really not possible for us to be included in higher-level decision-making, we can't go there, can't even see what goes on'. Bhowmik's identification of herself as a lower tier worker disengaged from the party elite gains in significance while considering her sudden demotion from an influential post in the municipality after her reasonably good five-year performance. Instead of expressing open disaffection, she attributed her demotion by the party leadership to 'technical reasons' and the discretion enjoyed by the party elite, particularly the supremo, Mamata Banerjee. In a similar vein, while addressing the issue of her recent isolation from the privileged spaces of decision-making within her party, Manisha Ghosh⁶⁷, a state-level leader of the BJP, underscored her 'lifelong loyalty' to

⁶⁶ Interviewed on 30/12/2018.

⁶⁷ Interviewed on 24/11/2018.

the party leadership despite her exclusion. In the CPI(M), even while indicating the possibility of inclusion of demands from the lower levels of the party (the ‘mass line’) in the decisions undertaken by the ‘*uchutola*’ (higher level) of the party, Konika Mitra⁶⁸, a state-level member of the party emphasised upon the necessity of discipline and hierarchy in communist parties under the practice of ‘democratic centralism’.

The cases discussed in this section underline the sedimentation and naturalisation of the disciplinary ‘social logic’ (Laclau, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of vertical hierarchy which contributes to the overall coherence and reproduction of the prevalent institutional cultures of the three parties. Open expressions of deference and loyalty to the party leadership constitute a crucial informal ‘rule-in-use’ (Ostrom, 2007) and are seen as a primary means towards facilitating the advancement of one’s career within the parties in the broader context of political culture in West Bengal, primarily given the underrepresentation of women in the elite spaces of decision-making in most parties. Such expressions of deference were also reflected in the manner in which some interviewees shared their perspectives on the allocation of party and government posts as well as on the issue of political reservations for women. In the AITC, Chhanda Maity⁶⁹, a municipal representative in the northern suburb of Kolkata chose to describe her victory in the local municipality elections as a ‘blessing’ of her (male) political mentor:

‘I have been guided and supported by our MLA and my guardian- Sri Sujit Bose. I received the post of Councillor through his

⁶⁸ Interviewed on 13/11/2018.

⁶⁹ Interviewed on 21/06/2018.

blessings. It was he who gave me the post, maybe he thought me competent enough for it.’

Similar sentiments were voiced by Uma Chowdhury⁷⁰, a senior state-level leader of the BJP, while speaking of her career in the women’s wing of the party. Chowdhury stated that her selection for the post of the BJP women’s wing State President was primarily a consequence of her ‘good fortune’ instead of her leadership capabilities (*‘amar guney noy kopalguney’*).

On the theme of political reservations for women within the parties, interviewees from the three parties expressed their overall sense of satisfaction with the existing state of voluntary party quotas. As discussed in Chapter 2, the proposal to introduce quotas for women in the Indian Parliament and state legislatures in the form of the Women’s Reservation Bill continues to face resistance and backlash from diverse factions in the political class. Hence, even as gender quotas at the level of rural and urban local government in India have contributed substantially towards democratising local governance and enhancing the quality of women’s participation in political decision-making, and several major political parties have affirmed their formal support of the Women’s Reservation Bill, ambivalence, and lack of commitment towards implementing gender quotas continue to persist in the party cultures. As feminist institutionalist research on gender quotas in political parties has demonstrated (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016; Kenny and Verge, 2016), the mere adoption of party quotas does not necessarily translate into adequate expansion of women’s political inclusion as parties often take advantage of loopholes in quota laws at the level of informal practices. The following discussion on

⁷⁰ Interviewed on 17/12/2019.

the perceptions of women party members on gender quotas will illustrate the differences and congruities among women members of the three parties while also underlining how attitudes towards gender quotas reflect gendered institutional standards of acceptability and appropriateness in political behaviour of actors.

In the AITC, interviewees such as Mala Pandey and Shreya Das expressed their ‘heartfelt gratitude’ to the AITC leader, Mamata Banerjee for the implementation of 33% and later, 50% quotas for women in rural and urban local self-government bodies. ‘In our party, there is no discrimination against women- Mamata Banerjee has given us this space’, said Sonali Dey⁷¹, a district-level youth wing member of the AITC, representing the frequently-articulated perception among AITC members of Banerjee being a champion of women’s rights. CPI(M) members such as Konika Mitra and Ranjini Kar reiterated their party’s commitment and continuing struggle to ensure the legislation of the Women’s Reservation Bill (The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2008)- which promises 33% quotas for women in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the Parliament and in the Legislative Assemblies of states. Kar pointed out that contrary to claims by the present AITC government, it was the preceding Left Front government that had declared 50% quotas for women in rural and urban local government bodies. Reacting to Mamata Banerjee’s announcement of introducing 50% reservation for women in the AITC’s candidate-list for the 2019 General Elections (Uppal, 2019), Kar argued that Banerjee and the AITC merely emulated the Left Front’s progressive measures for women’s political progress. Interviewees from the BJP such as Manisha Ghosh and Debasmita Banerjee positively evaluated the state of quotas for women in the

⁷¹ Interviewed on 27/12/2019.

party. Ghosh argued that the present arrangement of 33% reservation for women in the state committee and other office-bearing positions ‘is not just decorative’ and that it facilitated space for the substantive participation of women in the decision-making processes. On certain occasions, however, interviewees such as Promita Sinha from the BJP articulated a negative stance towards the system of quotas for women. Despite acknowledging that ‘women's representation in Indian politics is relatively less’ and that the BJP is ‘male-dominated’, Sinha argued that reservations for women, both in legislatures as well as within the parties, should not be held up as a solution for the problem of women’s underrepresentation in Indian politics. Invisibilising the prevalence of gender discrimination in the institutional culture of her party and placing the onus of overcoming structural gender discrimination solely on women party members, Sinha portrayed political reservations as communist party strategies and states that quotas for women encourage tokenism and undercut the operation of meritocracy in the party:

‘Communists used women as a showpiece, with reservations and all. I don't think that should be the way. I should earn the opportunity through my work, my dedication and political ‘cally’ (calibre). I am against receiving a separate reservation, since forever. When travelling in buses, I am compelled to sit in the ladies' seat because if I sit in the general seats, I can end up blocking a seat where a man might want to sit, because he can't sit in a ladies' seat (smiles). This is why I am against women's reservation. I think reservation is a non-issue. We are more capable than men; this is my personal opinion. A woman who can run her household efficiently (*'shongshar korte pare'*) can do politics too very well, definitely.’

While Sinha's protest against political reservations for women may be read as an atypical instance, it illustrates the depth to which the logic of self-effacing deference towards the prevailing institutional arrangements, gender norms and relations permeate the construction of narratives by the interviewees. Norman Fairclough's characterisation of institutions as 'speech communit(ies)' (Fairclough, 1995, 38) distinguished by their own range of vocabularies and meanings, assists in capturing the discursive terrain and boundaries that constitute the institutional cultures of the political parties. Following the Foucauldian position that a discourse can be regarded as a 'regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements' (Foucault, 1972, 90), the narratives offered by interviewees such as Sanjana Bhowmik, Manisha Ghosh, Chhanda Maity and Uma Chowdhury indicate the constraints of permissible dialogue and vocabulary that mark institutional discourses.

The imagination of the political party as a civic-social reincarnation of the South Asian joint family adds to the naturalised social logic of vertical party command the element of male authority. The authority of male party leaders becomes particularly influential in the spaces of local politics primarily through relations of patronage in the Bengali context. The fantasy of the party as family also plays a critical role in undercutting and containing antagonisms and challenges to the hegemony and hierarchical authority of the party leadership through the fostering of emotional attachments, thereby constituting a 'fantasmatic logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) operating in the institutional discourses of the political parties. In the following section which engages with the experiences of belonging and self-making articulated by the women interviewees, such antagonisms, dissonances from and negotiations with the hegemonic institutional cultures would be unpacked and examined in greater detail.

Social Locations, Ideologies and Party Loyalty: Women and Institutional Belonging

Alongside expressions of deference to the hegemony of vertical party command, another point of convergence across ideological and party boundaries was the emotive assertion of identification with the party ideology on the part of interviewees. Such emotional proclamations- often derived from extra-institutional factors such as familial ties and associational/community politics and coupled with the social locations of the women party members, reflect their subjective experiences of belonging and self-making in relation to the dominant institutional cultures of the parties. A case in point can be the BJP MP Debasmita Banerjee's highlighting of her Brahmin (upper caste) Hindu identity while speaking of her relationship with the party's ideology. Distinguishing the BJP's espousal of Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva) from the ideologies of the Communist parties in India and that of the Indian National Congress, Banerjee subscribes to the official self-description of her party as 'a party with a difference' wherein her religiosity and caste identity do not constitute obstacles to her political participation but are in effect central to the construction of her belonging and conformity to the ideological framework of the BJP.

'Ignoring my *Puja* (Hindu ritual worship), assaulting my religious sentiments, this I couldn't take. I am a daughter of a typical Hindu family, a Hindu Brahmin family. Hindutva is in my flesh, blood and genes! Most importantly, my uncle and father had to come here as refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) only because they were Hindus. This suffering, this overnight transformation into a homeless refugee from being landlords, all of this has happened under Congress and

Communists. Congress and Communists together broke apart this country, which is why their hateful politics has never attracted me.’

In the process of articulating her Brahmin Hindu social location, Banerjee attempts to establish it as the archetypal, ‘typical’ Hindu identity, thus contributing to an invisibilisation of lower caste social locations. At the same time, by referring to her organic ties with Hindutva, she equates the political doctrine of Hindutva with the practise of the religion of Hinduism. Alongside her Brahmin Hindu positionality, Banerjee’s self-making also includes the element of inter-generational traumatic memory surrounding the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. While her familial legacy of the historical trauma of mass displacement stemming from the Partition was by no means unique: several interviewees from other parties recollected growing up in refugee colonies for instance. Banerjee’s experiential narrative can be distinguished by its peculiar interpretation of the history of Partition and the resultant refugee crisis. Taking care to highlight her feudal upper caste, upper class inheritance, Banerjee lays the onus of Partition squarely on the Communist party of India (then undivided) and the Indian National Congress, erasing the influential roles of the Hindu right-wing association, the Hindu Mahasabha (ideological predecessor of the BJP) and upper caste Bengali Hindus in the historical circumstances that led to the Partition (Sarkar, 1989; Chatterji, 1994; Datta, 1999; Bose and Jalal, 2004; Chandra, Heierstad and Bo Nielsen, 2015; Sen, 2017, 2018; Mukherjee, 2019). Banerjee’s reframing of Partition history gains in significance in the macro-social context of the communalisation of lower caste Hindu refugee identity especially set against Muslim refugees from Bangladesh who have been variously identified as ‘illegal immigrants’ and ‘termites’ by the BJP leadership in the recent years within the debates around the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship

(Amendment) Act (2019) (BBC Staff Correspondent, 2019; Daniyal, 2019d, 2019b; Press Trust of India, 2019c). Banerjee's positive evaluation of and emotional attachment to her upper caste Hindu identity situates her belonging within the institutional culture of the BJP in relation with her privileged positioning along the extra-institutional hierarchy of social locations (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Along with facilitating institutional belonging, caste and religious sentiments also often serve to contain expressions of dissatisfaction and alienation among some BJP interviewees. Manisha Ghosh of the BJP recalled meeting Lal Krishna Advani, a senior BJP leader and India's Deputy Prime Minister (2002-2004), during her early years as a party worker, and arguing about her discontent with the consequences that followed Advani's conduct of the *Rath Yatra* (chariot journey) in 1990. Highlighting that before her meeting with Advani her support for the BJP was primarily conditioned by her perception that the party stood for the 'national interest' above all, Ghosh remembered their long conversations wherein she expressed her discomfort regarding the surge in aggressive Hindu nationalist (*Hindutva*) politics. She then fondly recalled how Advani, 'a national icon from a national party', patiently responded to her 'arrogant bluster' and assuaged her unease with Hindutva politics by explaining to her that his actions were 'necessary' for generating Hindu pride. Drawing an ideological continuum between Advani and the late-19th century Hindu religious reformer from Bengal, Swami Vivekananda, Ghosh also sought to situate the ideology of Hindutva within the larger historical developments that constituted political culture in West Bengal:

'A national icon from a national party, whether you agree with him or not, whether you like him or not, he is a national figure, and he took the time out to sit and write down and explain why he did it: 'I did it because this is our ideology. It was necessary to do this because instilling

pride ('garv') in Hindus was extremely necessary.' That was one slogan that we were lacking- '*Garv sey bolo hum Hindu hain/Pyaar sey bolo hum Hindu hain*' ('Say it with pride that we are Hindus/Say it with love that we are Hindus'). This Advaniji started. Actually, it was started by Vivekananda, (a) long time back. Then somewhere, down the line, we had forgotten it. Advaniji started it. This is very important that Hindus get an identity...'

While references to caste and religious affiliations were articulated by some women members of the BJP as constitutive of their belonging to the party culture, most of the interviewees across parties displayed a common reticence particularly with regard to their caste identities. Pushpa Barui⁷², an old-timer BJP member bearing a Dalit surname stated that she had never faced any caste discrimination within her party. Among my interviewees from the CPI(M), derecognising their predominantly upper caste affiliations (and the accompanying privileges) alongside their religious, economic, and social locations was seen as an essential step in their existential journey to become ideal communists. Interviewees from the AITC too displayed uncomfortable and evasive reactions to my question regarding the role of their individual caste locations in the development of their political careers. Such reticence and discomfort around caste identities reflects the historical silencing and invisibilisation of caste privilege and discrimination (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Chandra, U., Heierstad, G. and Nielsen, 2017; Sen, 2018; Mondal, 2021) in the larger discursive spaces of Bengali social and political culture.

⁷² Interviewed on 29/12/2019.

Notwithstanding the distance between their philosophical positionings, the BJP and the CPI(M) are characterised by the foundational influence of ideology upon the sustenance and reproduction of their institutional continuity. A common explanation offered by women interviewees from the CPI(M) for the predominantly male composition of the party's leadership (Financial Express Staff, 2009; Imam and Salim, 2017) was rooted in a gender and caste-blind perception that the members comprising the party's top leadership were there because of their superior revolutionary credentials. As Arati Ray⁷³, a district-level leader of the CPI(M) expressed it, 'our leadership may be male, but he is there not because he is a man but solely because his leadership and revolutionary capabilities are very highly developed.' Konika Mitra of the CPI(M) acknowledged the existence of gender bias within the party and the need for the party leadership 'to become more vigilant' about the extra-institutional limitations for the political participation of women party-members. However, Mitra also underlined the 'need to transcend gender and all other identities' in the process of becoming a worker of a communist party. Arguing that it was necessary for women party workers to 'not think of themselves as women but also as leaders of the particular committee', Mitra echoed the privileging of class over gender and other categories of identity and oppression in communist discourse as well as the prevalent perception of tension between the struggles of redistribution and recognition in orthodox socialist politics (Fraser, 1998; Honneth and Fraser, 2003).

In the case of the AITC, its personalistic character and the lack of a strong ideological base enhance the influence of personal loyalty to the party leader, Mamata Banerjee, upon the containment of disaffections and discontent in the party. When

⁷³ Interviewed on 23/01/2019.

compared with the hold of ideology over the institutional cultures of the CPI(M) and the BJP, the grip of personal loyalty to the chief leader over the narratives articulated by the interviewees in the AITC was ostensibly stronger. The influence of personal loyalty was illustrated in the near-absence of open expressions of dissonance from the official discourse of and everyday decision-making in the AITC. Among interviewees, those who admitted to facing discrimination in the process of allocating election tickets or administrative posts chose to articulate their experiences of institutional exclusion through subtle linguistic manoeuvres, such as the metaphors of the party as a joint family and as a mansion- wherein discretionary powers regarding political recruitment and candidate selection are concentrated entirely in the party elite. Sanjana Bhowmik's aforementioned narrative about her abrupt demotion from the post of municipality chairperson constitutes an instance of such linguistic manoeuvres.

During the interviews, all the respondents from the AITC identified themselves as ideological followers of the party leader- Mamata Banerjee and claimed to be particularly inspired by her life and personal struggles. For her followers, Banerjee presents a moral leadership that constitutes a clear departure from the mainstream 'instrumentalist' political practices governing India's electoral democracy. Tales of Banerjee's early days as a political activist had exercised a formative influence upon several of the women members of the AITC whom I interviewed. As Mala Pandey of the AITC recollected:

'I came across a picture of Mamata Banerjee in one of the magazines. I was very young then, probably studying in IV or V standard. The magazine described her as someone who resists injustice and supports the common people. It intrigued me and made me think, "who was this girl?".

Within the personalised party culture (Rahat and Kenig, 2018) of the AITC, the belonging and the political self-making of women party members share an interdependent relationship (Sjoberg, 2013; Gauja, 2018; Maiguashca, 2019) with the self-fashioning and leadership of Mamata Banerjee. The abundant use of emotions through the demonstration of ‘street-style’ courage, sentimentality as well as vulnerability in Banerjee’s personal life-narrative and political practice act as ‘affective triggers’ (Mayer 2014, 7) for her followers, shaping their ideas about and expectations from political leadership. Banerjee’s self-fashioning also offers her followers motivational signposts for their own personal trajectories in politics. A majority of the women interviewees from the AITC claimed to have been directly influenced and inspired by Banerjee’s activism and her austere personal lifestyle. Amita Choudhury⁷⁴, a grassroots level worker of the AITC, recalled being motivated to join politics and being inspired to contribute to social welfare by Banerjee’s cultivated public image of being a ‘*janadaradi*’ (one who empathises with the people) leader.

Addressing her as *Didi* (elder sister), most of her supporters interpreted Mamata Banerjee’s leadership style and performance as an activist and as a policymaker in the light of her personal life-experience as an underprivileged woman and her nurturing, affective disposition. For instance, speaking of the welfarist Conditional Cash Transfer schemes for young girls launched by the AITC government in West Bengal, Amita Choudhury of the AITC linked these schemes entirely to Banerjee’s own experience of dire poverty in childhood- her origins in ‘a very lowly, grassroots level’, her lack of political inheritance and empathy for underprivileged girl-students. Similarly, reflecting

⁷⁴ Interviewed on 14/01/2019.

upon Banerjee's activist oeuvre, Debi Sen of the AITC traced Banerjee's leadership during the 'forest-fire days' of the Singur movement to the latter's personal experience of struggling during her 'exceptionally difficult childhood'. For Sen, Banerjee's austere lifestyle, above all, established her as 'a leader of unusual stature' in the contemporary Indian political landscape while at the same time, it had exercised a deep influence upon Sen's own political self-making:

'Didi has become the CM (Chief Minister) twice, but she does not own a car or a big house. Her bank balance is non-existent. She has never ever taken salaries from the State or the Central Government. She constantly opts for economy class air travel, saving the govt lakhs of money, I have followed in her footsteps. She even pays for her own tea and biscuits. You know that Didi lives in a rented house at a Calcutta slum; with asbestos roofing and without A.C. (air-conditioning). What to say, we are fortunate to be alive in her time!'

Within the discursive boundaries of the institutional cultures of the three political parties, women's experiences of belonging and the development of their political subjectivities are mediated through the factors of their respective social locations, such as their caste, class and religious identities, their associations with the dominant ideology of the parties and, in the case of personalistic parties such as the AITC, their loyalty to the party leader. Alongside conditioning the belongings and self-makings of women party members, identificatory appeals to the sentiments of caste, religion, party ideology and loyalty to the leader also facilitate the reproduction of hegemonic gender constructions and systemic continuity in the political parties through the containment and concealing of disaffections, antagonisms, and contestations. Even so, the construction of certain

discursive binaries and boundaries lie at the core of such processes of sedimentation of dominant gender norms and relations within the institutional cultures of the parties. Involving the pitting of discursive models of gendered subjectivities against each other, the creation of boundaries characterises the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011) in institutional spaces. For the sustained reproduction of such discursive binaries and frontiers, the elements of repetitive performance (Butler, 1993, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 2011) and the privileging of one model of gendered subjectivity over another assume critical significance. Within the context of political party culture in West Bengal, women's articulation of their experiences of belonging and their self-makings share a co-constitutive relationship with the politics of boundary-creation and the formal and informal institutional criteria for belonging. Analysing the narratives of the women interviewees across the three political parties through the lens of the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), the devices of political and fantasmatic logics in particular, the subsequent parts illustrate the negotiations that a selection of women interviewees forge with the institutional construction of binary models of gendered subjectivities. The following discussions also engage with the narrative process of self-making that the interviewees undertake in the course of their interactions with the hegemonic gender regimes of the institutions they inhabit.

'Not like other girls': Tracing the Political Self-making of Women Party Members

During my interview with her, while holding court at a crowded party office space on a busy winter evening, AITC parliamentarian, and trade union leader, Debi Sen was

responding to an eclectic range of requests from supplicants, including recommendation letters for jobs, legal assistance for divorce-alimony, and inaugurating a *sharee* (traditional Indian garment for women) boutique. Amused by the last request, Sen replied that it made little sense for her to inaugurate a boutique for *sharee*- since she never wore one herself. The themes of Sen's de-feminised appearance and personality as well as her lack of identification with her fellow women colleagues kept recurring throughout our long conversation. Asserting that she was 'not raised like a girl since childhood', Sen's narrative was intended to distinguish her upbringing and her self-making from conventional femininity, which for her implied weakness:

‘I did not play with dolls or kitchen items (*ranna-bati*). Even since I was a child, my father had instilled in me the idea that I have to be a good human being (*manush hotey hobe*) and self-dependent... Ever since childhood, my inclination was not to grow up as a girl, but as a self-dependent person, hence even as I hadn't paid heed to any of my father's instructions, I chose to obey one of his commands, that of staying far away from the cooking gas ovens (smiles). I have religiously adhered to it, even to this day. My get-up [a colloquial for appearance] was never really that of a girl. That was why, following this disposition of mine, I chose not to work in the women's front. So, from the first day onwards, I have made serious efforts to learn political activism in the trade union.’

To highlight her career in trade union politics as an extraordinary accomplishment, Sen chose to diminish the importance and prestige of women's wing politics vis a vis the more 'serious' space of trade union politics. Sen's narrative identified certain landmark moments when her unusual and often transgressive life-choices cast a formative influence

upon the development of her impressive career in activism and legislative politics. An instance of such moments was her abandoning a promising scholarship for pursuing a postgraduate degree in Mathematics in the United States, and subsequently taking up residence in a slum of jute mill labourers for five years after being cast out of her middle-class home by her father. Attributing such life-choices to her exceptional personal qualities, Sen took care to underline that the honour and privilege accorded to her in the institutional space of the AITC is a consequence of her de-feminisation as much as it is her close relationship with Mamata Banerjee, the party leader ('I was with *Didi* all along the Singur days... she has bestowed this responsibility upon me as she loves taking challenges'). Her assertion of full-time commitment to party and parliamentary responsibilities was connected with her conscious emulation of Banerjee's leadership style:

'My inspiration is always *Didi*. I never get exhausted, because she is my inspiration. Her ethics of commitment to the people is something I try to follow. All this keeps me busy. I don't even get the time to be sick. I love my vocation and have to deal with a large number of people on an everyday basis. I try to maintain my engagements at Delhi as well as Kolkata, flying in and out weekly.'

While it was not explicitly articulated, Sen's unmarried status also seemed to distinguish the nature of her commitment to politics, much like Mamata Banerjee's own status as a single woman in politics.

Juxtaposed against the dominance of dynastic politics in Indian electoral democracy, political leaders without direct familial descendants are perceived to be free from the pitfalls of nepotism and corruption that often accompany dynastic leadership.

The superior moral status granted to unmarried/widowed political leaders in Indian politics bears the influence of the ascetic mode of power (Morris Jones, 1963; Alter, 1996; Dasgupta, 2014; Ray Chaudhury, 2021c)- which is derived from the Hindu and Buddhist monastic traditions and which held up as its ideal the figure of a (predominantly male) celibate social critic who practised an austere lifestyle and advocated non-attachment to political power. In the course of my interviews, unmarried women party workers, across party lines, often invoked their marital status to highlight the extent of their commitment and spirit of service to their parties. The ways in which their status as single women constituted a career advantage for them need to be understood in the macro-social and historical context of the gendered division of spaces in India. Women being culturally associated with the private space and familial responsibilities, the participation of married women in party politics is conventionally perceived as limited and ‘seasonal’, as Arati Ray, an unmarried full-time worker from the CPI(M) expressed.

In the given context, unmarried women party workers are seen to possess a considerable advantage as they are regarded to have a fuller presence in and commitment to party politics, unhampered by care responsibilities. Some of the single women party workers expressed that they receive informal assistance from their party colleagues for the responsibilities they bear towards their natal families. Shyamali Ghosh, a member of the CPI(M)-affiliated All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) spoke about how she was assisted and given company by her women colleagues during her mother’s critical illness, stating that she identified the party as her family. While married women party workers and leaders acknowledged that the consent and support from their husbands and in-laws were essential to the smooth execution of their political responsibilities, unmarried women were perceived to be free from such obligations. The commitment of unmarried women workers to their parties was regarded to be on a morally superior plane,

characterised by a spirit of selfless dedication to social service ('*Seva*'). The career advantage accorded to them through their marital status is also reflected in the relatively swift ascension of unmarried women workers through the ranks of the party hierarchy, particularly in the BJP. The case of the BJP parliamentarian Debasmita Banerjee offers an instance. Recalling the influence of her religious instructor's (a Hindu ascetic guru) advice to her during her student days, Banerjee stated her wish to set herself up as an exemplar of total, selfless commitment to politics by deciding to stay unmarried and quitting other professional engagements:

‘My *Gurudev*, a very senior *Sanyasi* (ascetic) told me, educated kids will get jobs and go abroad, and here we in student politics talk about making our country the most prosperous. That touched me a lot. When it concerns us personally, why won't we enter politics? When I entered politics, I decided that I am going to do politics alone my entire life, I shall not marry. I also left the job I was doing then. I wanted to only concentrate on doing politics. I wanted to provide an instance that a modern young student can, unconditionally, without any personal interest, do politics in the interest of the nation.’

Alongside underscoring the personal sacrifices that contributed to the exceptionality of her involvement in politics, Debasmita Banerjee's narrative also illustrates the significance of de-feminisation in the articulation of her belonging within the contours of the prevalent institutional culture of the BJP. Stating that during her long association with the BJP, she had never faced isolation or exclusion from the party on the basis of her gender, Banerjee attempted to distinguish her personal experience as a possible exception stemming from her growing up in a joint family with several brothers and cousins. Her

positive perception of the party's institutional culture gained in significance as the interview was conducted in the presence of the state vice president of the BJP. Beginning as a youth activist, Banerjee's rapid ascension along the ranks of the BJP, her selection as a parliamentary candidate by the party leadership and her subsequent appointment as a Minister of State in the BJP-dominated Central government in New Delhi were attributed by her entirely to the benevolence of her 'respected mentors' ('*gurujon*') in the party. During the interview, in describing a particular incident involving the state president and other office-bearers of the BJP, Banerjee sought to highlight her close, exclusive association with the predominantly male party leadership:

'Our state president, general secretary, we all were going somewhere. Our state president was making fun of me about something, and I was saying, "how can you say this to your sister?" He said, "Huh, since when are you, our sister?" I was flustered and started thinking- "what just happened? Why is he saying this?" Everyone was looking. He said, "you are our brother!'

The aforementioned incident- chosen by her to portray her place of privilege in the party, also served to imply her de-feminised integration with the homosocial workplace environment within the party as well as her distance from her more 'feminine' women colleagues, a sentiment also echoed in her opening statement in the interview: 'since childhood, I was a little desperate⁷⁵, not like other girls'. A similar perspective on exclusive personal access to the top leadership was offered by Manisha Ghosh of the BJP.

⁷⁵ The English term 'desperate' in the Bengali common parlance carries the distinctive connotation of being untamed and adventurous. It is often used as a pejorative adjective for women who lead socially and culturally transgressive lives.

Unlike Banerjee, however, Ghosh expressed open dismay at the present state of affairs within the party where newcomers and defectors from the AITC and other parties were being given prestigious party offices at the expense of ‘committed old-timers’ such as herself. Arguing that the BJP is facing a resultant depletion in ideological content, Ghosh reflected the recent phenomenon of tensions and antagonistic lobbying between old-timer BJP leaders and AITC defectors in the West Bengal state unit of the BJP (Daniyal, 2020; Sarkar, 2020):

‘See, I believe in the ideology of the BJP. It is a very sad situation because we are at the helm of affairs in the country, we have become a bandwagon which everybody wants to jump on. I’m not going to take any names, I’m not going to insult anyone, but not everyone is joining us for ideology. They are coming to make an easy getaway, so to say. Also, as soon as they are coming, they are getting top-level positions, for whatever reason. Not that they are capable, not that they understand our ideology. They haven’t worked at the ground-level, they don’t know our people. This is happening at all levels, mind you, at the ground, middle and top levels. So, it’s getting diluted, the idea is getting diluted. So, people like me, who have joined politics for the ideology, we, or rather, I have a lot of mental anguish’.

Having expressed her disaffection with her party’s recent situation, however, Ghosh took care to underline her persistent loyalty to the party (‘Over the years I have proved my loyalty to the party, and they have realised that whatever you do to her, she will not leave’) as well as her special privileged access to the top leadership. Despite her recent exclusion from rewarding party positions and the allocation of responsibilities such

as fund-collection ('it is a bad work I have to do, fund-collection is horrible') to her, Ghosh chose to focus on her continued close association with the party elite:

'I was recently left out of a shuffle in office-bearers. Everybody rung me up and said, "Arre, you are so close to the top leaders, how come you were left out?" I sulked for 3 days. I felt very bad. Then I rung up the President and I fought with him. I gave him a piece of my mind, "did this happen because I don't listen to you?" I hung up and I cannot think of any other person in the party who can ring up and tell the president this and remain in the party. That is what I enjoy. I have that space and I'm very proud that I enjoy that space. The personal rapport is what I am gifted in.'

Emphasising her close personal access to the top layer of the party leadership, Ghosh- in a similar vein as her party colleague Debasmita Banerjee as well as Debi Sen from the AITC, demarcated her distinction from her fellow women colleagues, and in doing so, indicated her subscription to a model of political subjectivity that is privileged in the institutional culture of her party. While expressing dissatisfaction with the present state of the BJP, Ghosh consistently invoked her self-effacing display of loyalty to the ideological core of the party and asserted that she was not someone who would take her discontent outside the party:

'There are plenty of differences of opinion I have, plenty. but I don't go and write to social media. There are people who would go and do that, there are people who will write on Facebook, "they have done this to me!" I don't do that... Maybe the party people take me for granted.'

But that's alright, if they think that (fund-collection) is what I can be utilised for. At least I am involved in it.'

Underlining her distance from her fellow party-members who choose to negotiate differently with their experiences of exclusion and discrimination from the party, Ghosh also casts aspersions on the characters of some of her women colleagues who have been promoted to higher party positions while distinguishing herself from the 'compromising type':

'I want to make it very clear that there are some women who have utilised their charms, so to say, to get wherever they are, I'm not going to take names there, but in my case, it has never happened, mainly because I'm not the compromising type and I have always been treated with a lot of love and respect in the party.'

Located at a substantial distance away from Debasmita Banerjee, Manisha Ghosh as well as Debi Sen on the ideological spectrum, Arati Ray of the CPI(M) also underlined the 'sacred' nature of the full-time commitment that she, as an unmarried woman party worker, saw herself as being able to dedicate to her party. Personal obligations such as familial commitments were interpreted by her as 'weaknesses' which stood in the way of the communist 'revolutionary cause'. Ray's self-making as an aspiring revolutionary was also conducted in opposition to certain orthodox and stereotypical representations of women in the macro-social context. As a communist social activist with a long experience of assisting women survivors of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and socio-economic deprivation, Ray voiced her opposition to the Hindu right wing perspective on women and gender relations propagated by the RSS and the BJP:

‘Their ideas are like this: they blame women for everything. The other day, some BJP leader said about the *Nirbhaya* case⁷⁶- ‘the girl could save herself if she pleaded with the men and called them brothers’ (laughs). Their aim is to keep women subjugated... The idea that BJP has about chastity (*‘satitva’*) is wrong, a woman can also be raped, she wouldn’t be at fault in that case.’

Despite her critique of the Hindu Right views on women and sexual violence, Ray subsequently went on to endorse orthodox positions on women’s sexuality- constructing an image of deviant femininity she posed her own subjectivity against. Arguing that social conservatism in the matter of sex was ‘natural’, Ray voiced her stiff opposition to what she perceived as transgressive sexuality and desire among some of her women acquaintances, all the while insisting that her perspective on sexuality did not count as ‘conservatism’. It is also possible to note in her narrative the curious intermeshing of the communist disdain for acquisitiveness and an orthodox preoccupation with the control of female sexuality:

‘There are so many young ladies who come from affluent families but indulge in such practices, I feel ashamed to say this. They want the company of five men! They think that they are free! When they think of freedom, they think that free mixing with the other sex is freedom. This is not conservatism. In the matter of sex, people generally have conservative ideas, it has to be, naturally. Physical relations between

⁷⁶ The *Nirbhaya* case was the brutal gangrape and subsequent death of a young paramedical student Jyoti Singh- referred to as ‘*Nirbhaya*’ (fearless) in the mainstream news media, at New Delhi in December 2012 which saw mass protests against the rising incidents of sexual violence against women in India.

men and women are natural, but in most cases, women become the victims. These days, however, middle-class houses are showing a similar trend because they want that thing to happen in their houses too, because they want to decorate their houses with expensive stuff, I feel ashamed to even think! Of course, how can you even think of giving someone your company to get some materialistic thing! Be it an ornament, or something to decorate my house, does this give me dignity? The man who coming in my contact like this, his liking towards me is not decent, whether he uses me completely or not. He is not liking me for my qualities. I scolded this girl a lot for this the other day, “why did he even dare to approach you?”

Even as their narratives grapple with different trajectories, ideological standpoints and experiences, the articulations of belonging and political self-makings of Debi Sen, Debasmita Banerjee, Manisha Ghosh and Arati Ray share a common discursive strategy. Their sense of belonging and the connected practice of self-making are predicated upon the repetitive performance of distinguishing themselves from an identified other, a gendered subjectivity that is not privileged under the institutional ‘requisites of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 20) in their respective parties and the wider social context. Their responses to discrimination under the male-dominated homosocial institutional cultures of the parties involve developing de-feminised and de-sexualised subjectivities who are marked by their self-effacing loyalty to the party leadership. Viewed under the analytical lens of political logics, the sense of belonging that the aforementioned interviewees articulated illustrates the discursive binaries and antagonisms that undergird the dominant institutional cultures of the political parties. Facilitating the progress of their political careers, the crafting of their political selves is

designed to isolate and distinguish them from their fellow women colleagues whose femininity is variously perceived as a limitation (by Debi Sen and Debasmita Banerjee) or as a reflection of moral corruption (by Manisha Ghosh). Their political identities are framed in opposition to other women who are represented as lacking in political capital, moral scruples as well as in the sense of loyalty. It is possible to locate particular instances of women party members in the AITC and the BJP whose stereotypical representations within the institutional cultures of the respective parties and in mainstream news media have constructed them as subjects failing to pass the test of institutional belonging. The aforementioned cases of Baishakhi Banerjee and Sujata Mondal Khan offer instances of such subjectivities against whom the self-making of party members such as Manisha Ghosh, Debasmita Banerjee and Debi Sen are juxtaposed. Baishakhi Banerjee's association with Shovan Chatterjee and her subsequent representation as the 'other woman' and a 'homewrecker' in news media and popular culture contributed substantially to the dominant perception that she along with Shovan Chatterjee, can never perhaps be fully integrated into the institutional cultures of either the AITC or the BJP, and remain as 'bodies out of place' (Puwar, 2004). Within the AITC, Baishakhi Banerjee continues to be represented as the reason for Shovan's failure to perform his public role as a Mayor (Bhattacharya, 2018; Desk, 2021). The BJP, which inducted Shovan and Baishakhi into their fold as per the calculations of their electoral strategy in West Bengal, continues to sustain an uneasy public position with reference to the relationship between the duo- illustrated by the censure and disapprobation Baishakhi and Shovan face from the party's state leadership (ABP Staff Reporter, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f). Similarly, Sujata Mondal Khan's defection from the BJP to the AITC, her consequential separation from her husband- the BJP MP Saumitra Khan, and her selection as an AITC candidate for the 2021 state elections, have facilitated her representation within the BJP's

institutional spaces and in the mainstream news media as a ‘quarrelsome’ wife whose inordinate ‘ambition’ did not allow her to be content ‘with being the MP’s wife’ (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020d, 2020e; Bhattacharya, 2020b). It was also held that her political designs orchestrated the end of her marriage with Saumitra Khan (ABP Staff Reporter, 2020e, 2020d; Bhattacharya, 2020b). It is with reference to such ‘unruly’ and socially transgressive female party members within the larger context of party politics in West Bengal that other party members such as Manisha Ghosh, Debasmita Banerjee and Debi Sen construct their political selfhood.

The political subjectivities that Sen, Banerjee, Ghosh and Ray cultivate subscribe to the fantasmatic logic (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) that, it was possible for women party members to overcome gender-based discrimination if they affirmed their exceptionality and distinction from other women while at the same time, defeminising and desexualising themselves. By shielding the party leadership and the dominant institutional cultures of the parties from the pull of institutional change, the logic of defeminisation serves to place the obligation of addressing women’s underrepresentation in the higher echelons of the parties and other grievances on the women party members. The prevalence of such a logic contributes to the stability and continuity of the institutional gender regimes by absorbing and concealing the disaffections and antagonisms arising from the structural gender discrimination and lack of intra-party democracy in the political parties in West Bengal.

Alongside the logic of defeminisation and desexualisation, the development of the political subjectivities of women party-members is also conditioned by their perspectives on political participation and activism. While most interviewees from the three parties affirmed their love of doing politics, their interpretations bore the distinctive influences of their respective party and ideological affiliations as well as their positions

along the party hierarchy. Grassroots members of the parties chose to focus on their experiences of participating in booth-level campaigning during local, state-level and national elections, protest demonstrations and rallies, and local-level party meetings, among others. Nalini Pal⁷⁷, a local level worker of the BJP argued that the importance of women workers for the party primarily lay in their ability to deepen the reach of the party by politicising households and neighbourhoods, thus highlighting the prioritisation of supportive roles over leadership roles for women in the local level of the party. Also illustrating the risks of political violence that women political workers in the region face, Pal remarked that the party leadership tended to field grassroots women party workers in the frontline of political violence with the expectation that their opponents would not use their full force of attack on them:

‘The women are necessary for the party, to reach the insides of homes. Then again, if there are attacks on us, putting women forward can be a good strategy, because then the attacks will be less in intensity. Women are also important for bringing more people to the party.’

The prevalence of political violence on grassroots women party members was also highlighted by Ranjini Kar of the CPI(M), while she spoke about her party’s politics of opposition to the Mamata Banerjee-led AITC government in West Bengal:

‘Women are protesting more than ever. Their will to resist is also growing in different ways. At the same time, if they protest, they are being attacked in different ways- false cases are being registered against them, they are being jailed- like the incident of Sukriti Ash. The

⁷⁷ Interviewed on 30/12/2018.

girl didn't do anything, she just protested by burning an effigy of the CM. She was arrested and put in custody. A girl from Medinipur who voted against Trinamool (AITC) was kidnapped, garlanded with shoes and her hair cut. She was made to do squats while holding her ears with her hands. Have you ever heard anywhere of women candidates getting beaten up and harassed while on their way to file nominations?'

In the face of the everyday hazards associated with political violence- termed in common Bengali parlance as '*santrash*' (terror) that grassroots women party workers, particularly from the CPI(M) and the BJP, the two principal opposition parties in present-day West Bengal, contend with, their resilient affirmations of commitment to the party ideology and leadership assume significance. While the grassroots as well as higher-level women interviewees from the CPI(M) chose to characterise their political participation as an endless '*sangharsh/sangram*' (struggle) towards the end of revolutionary economic and political change, their counterparts in the BJP designated their politics as a form of '*seva*' (social service) that they undertook ostensibly for the betterment of society at large. The interpretation of participation in electoral politics as an endless '*sangharsh*' stems from the perception of CPI(M) leaders that their party represents a movement for the systemic transformation of the economic and social structures in India. The party's involvement in parliamentary politics is perceived as a strategic decision aimed at 'pressurising the parliament to pass laws in favour of women, labourers, the downtrodden', as Konika Mitra of the CPI(M) argued. While the idiom of '*sangharsh/sangram*' is used to characterise the political participation of CPI(M) members, it also conditions their self-makings. Just as the party is conceived of as an ongoing contentious social and political movement, the symbolic imagination of the ideal

communist revolutionary constructs the political self-makings of the CPI(M) members, wherein their subjectivities are positioned along a discursive evolutionary scale, the apex of which is occupied by the ideal revolutionary subjectivity. This ideal communist subjectivity is distinguished by the complete renunciation of individual interests, austerity of lifestyle and an absolute commitment to the revolutionary cause of the party. In the CPI(M), such idealised models of revolutionary subjectivities are primarily represented in an embodied sense by the ‘whole-timers’ (i.e., salaried full-time workers of the party). Locating themselves amidst this scale of revolutionary being, the women interviewees from the CPI(M) stated the persistence of a ‘contradiction’ between their social locations, gender identities and their ideological affiliations with communism. Surekha Goswami⁷⁸, a state-level leader of the CPI(M) elaborated on the contradiction between her middle-class position and her identification as a communist, stating that the internal ‘*sangram*’ for becoming a communist was ever-present. Characterising this contradiction as a reflection of the Marxist doctrine of Dialectical Materialism, Goswami added that along with her class position, her gender identity too constituted a limitation in the process of her assuming the ideal communist subjectivity:

‘See the contradiction is always there. Actually, one needs to continually work at becoming a communist. I cannot say that I have become a communist. Assimilating your identity with the struggles and demands of the working class, is a continuous process. I come from a middle-class family. The contradiction lies there itself. But I am still trying to outgrow it, to associate myself with their struggles and

⁷⁸ Interviewed on 20/01/2019.

movements. I need to think of myself not as a woman but as a communist.

This is a long process.'

In a similar vein as her colleague Arati Ray, Goswami said that her mentors in the CPI(M) and the present-day party leadership continue to inspire her by their austere lifestyle, self-sacrifice, and superior revolutionary subjectivities- using the Hindu religious renunciatory figure of the '*sanyasi*' (ascetic) to characterise her male mentors. While speaking of her experience of participation in State Committee meetings, Goswami pointed out the painstaking labour of research that she put into presenting her arguments in order to make them 'rational, above all'. Unlike her colleague Konika Mitra's acknowledgement of the existence of gender discrimination in the areas of promoting women to leadership posts and encouraging a women-friendly culture in the CPI(M), Goswami denied the existence of gendered institutional dynamics: 'in our party, only those who make informed, rational arguments are given leadership roles, it does not matter if you are a man or a woman'. Echoing an analogous view, Arati Ray of the CPI(M) offered an emotive perspective on the character of her participation in and her negotiations with institutional discrimination in the party. While acknowledging her sense of hurt during the situations when her arguments and opinions are side-lined, Ray traced her resentment to her underdeveloped communist self which was unable to dissolve her individual ego into the party's collective subjectivity. Stating that the path of communist self-making was a slippery one, Ray illustrated the incessant internal '*sangram*' that went on to constitute a 'true revolutionary soldier' in the service of the communist collective:

'I can say this from my 50 years' experience in politics, the ego in me, the individualism... if my opinions are not recognised, the ego in me is stirred.

I am very backward in terms of struggle. See, on the practical side, I have a lot of experience, I can give leadership to a movement, but as a revolutionary, I am far, far behind, because I couldn't get rid of my ego. There has been a lot of ideas about the concept of a communist- like, someone who sacrifices their all for the party. Many leaders of the freedom movement had done that- sacrificing their all. There is a concept of sacrifice in our society- the *sanyasi* who renounces everything. You may sacrifice your job, your comforts, your family, everything, but until the time you sacrifice your ego, you cannot become a true revolutionary soldier. If you cannot become that, you will have internal conflicts all the time, you'd think- "my opinion wasn't valued". That will actually make me regress right to the beginning- it's like a 'snake-and-ladder' game- and I slide down to the bottom of the ladder.'

The idealised institutional discourse of revolutionary subjectivity that most of the interviewees from the CPI(M) affirmed their subscription to therefore emphasises upon unquestioning deference and self-effacing loyalty to the party ideology and leadership, sharing a similar core to a certain degree with the institutional cultures of the AITC and the BJP. As the women interviewees from the CPI(M) interpreted their political participation and articulated their political self-makings through the metaphor of '*sangharsh/sangram*' (struggle), the end that such struggles are directed at is imagined as the casting aside of their individual identities in favour of a defeminised collective subjectivity. In their narratives, the interviewees from the CPI(M) such as Konika Mitra, Ranjini Kar and Arati Ray invoked the model of the selfless revolutionary while pitting it against the personalised political culture of the AITC- setting up the AITC leader

Mamata Banerjee as an exemplar of what they perceived to be a reactionary subjectivity. Ranjini Kar made a caustic remark that during her tenure as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, through the extensive official publicity of the AITC government's Conditional Cash transfer schemes as her personal creations, Banerjee seemed to embody the Upanishadic dictum of '*Ekam-advitiam*' (He is One only without a Second)⁷⁹. A male colleague of hers- Sunil Chatterji⁸⁰- a former minister in the Left Front government, agreed with her and stated that Banerjee displayed a high degree of narcissism- 'an I-ness'- something that was deemed undesirable in a political leader. Sheela Sengupta⁸¹, a senior CPI(M) leader attacked the Banerjee's cultivated image of austere living:

'Her aura as a poor person is completely fake. I am being very clear about this. Her head to foot, I won't go into other details. Everything about her, starting from her dressing sense to everything else, is a '*Chhadmabesh*' (disguise). We know everything about her.'

Alongside characterising Banerjee's self-representation as a *Chhadmabesh* (disguise), Sengupta also sought to dismantle the popularised narratives regarding physical attacks on her during her days of activism by claiming that Banerjee had 'completely faked' the attacks while hunger-strikes led by her were perceived to be 'stage-managed'.

Mamata Banerjee's self-representation and leadership style therefore presents a particular gendered subjectivity that constitutes a designated 'other', against which

⁷⁹ Chhandogya Upanishad (6:2:1).

⁸⁰ Interviewed on 16/11/2018.

⁸¹ Interviewed on 07/01/2019..

women from the CPI(M) cultivate and develop their own political subjectivities. Featuring the broader, interdiscursive environment in which the institutional cultures of the CPI(M) and the AITC interact with and respond to each other, the CPI(M) women's perceptions of Banerjee's leadership also illustrate the political logic of antagonistic gendered subjectivities and the institutional privileging of one subjectivity over another in the CPI(M). The thrust on selfless commitment to political work and deference to the party leadership that informs the metaphor of '*sangharsh/sangram*' used by the women interviewees of the CPI(M) to characterise their political participation and self-makings finds a parallel in the metaphor of '*seva*' that was often used by interviewees from the AITC and the BJP for similar purposes.

Originating in the Hindu religious and social discourse⁸², the concept of '*seva*' (social service) carries a connotation of selflessness and voluntarism that was politicised in the wake of the religious reform movements during the late-19th and the early-20th centuries (Heimsath, 1964; Srivatsan, 2006). During the anti-colonial struggle for independence, exhortations to selfless social service marked the nationalist discourse, particularly in the Gandhian movements. The Gandhian ethic of political leadership privileged non-attachment to political power and propagated '*seva*' as the ideal for the participants in the freedom struggle. In post-independent India, '*seva*' emerged as a frequently used metaphor by political leaders across party lines, to characterise their motivations for joining politics. The ethic of selfless service often stands at odds with the practice of instrumentalist 'power' politics by the political class in the everyday

⁸² While the theme of selfless social service can be located in other religious discourses such as '*zakat*' (almsgiving) in Islam or charity in Christianity, the politicisation of '*seva*' in pre and post independent India under a variety of ideologies and philosophies renders it particularly influential as a metaphor as well as a material practice.

functioning of India's electoral democracy. The adoption of '*seva*' by a diversity of political ideologies and factions in order to signify their practice of politics in contemporary India often implies a hollowing out of its content. As discussed in Chapter 2, authors such as J. Devika and Binitha Thampi and Manuela Ciotti in their respective works have highlighted the centrality of '*seva*' or social service as a metaphor in the self-fashioning of women political leaders and grassroots members of political parties (Devika and Thampi, 2012; Ciotti, 2017). In the context of the political parties in West Bengal, '*seva*' was used recurrently as a metaphor by the women interviewees of the AITC as well as the BJP to characterise their political participation and motivation to join politics. While interviewees from both parties deployed the metaphor of '*seva*', there was a substantial difference in the distinct connotations they attached to '*seva*'. Mala Pandey of the AITC stated her intention to offer '*seva*' to the society through her participation in the developmental and welfarist political program of the Mamata Banerjee-led AITC. Focusing on the several Conditional Cash Transfer schemes for the education and well-being of young girl students and marginalised sections of society that are sponsored by the government, Pandey spoke about her participation in the propagation of such schemes in her personal capacity as a municipality councillor. Shreya Das- a fellow municipal councillor, designated her career as a political representative as an exercise in the '*seva*' of her local community, stating that she perceived politics as a 'sacred duty' that she was obliged to fulfil, notwithstanding the personal costs it involved. Highlighting her overwhelming love for politics, Das used the metaphor of '*seva*' to portray her political participation and her role as a councillor as being unmotivated by power struggles or personal gains:

‘When my husband died, because my party liked my work,
and they loved me a lot, I did not shut myself off. Five days after his death,

post his fourth-day funeral ceremony, I attended party meetings and rallies. I absolutely love politics. Politics is not a mere career for me, but an intoxication (*'peshha noy neshha'*). I wish to work in close friendship with the people... My acceptability with the local people is quite a lot. I do not think that just because I am a Councillor, I am anywhere above them. This way you can receive the love of the people. I am forever devoted to the '*seva*' of my people. They can access me even at two in the morning, I receive each and everyone's phone calls, and keep my phone on at all hours.'

A similar perspective was offered by a fellow municipal colleague of Das's from the AITC, Chhanda Maity, who joined electoral politics from a background in social service and likened the relationship between herself and the municipal ward she represented to one that exists between a mother and her children. Claiming adherence to the discourse of selfless social service, Maity viewed her participation in electoral politics as a means to work for the betterment of the economically weak area she represented:

'I can tell you one thing- perhaps I devote more time and love towards the people of my ward than I do to my family. The people of my ward are my favourite, over and above my family. This is especially so because my area is an impoverished area. I have not given them birth, but the ward-people are my children.'

While the interviewees from the AITC connected '*seva*' with participation in developmental and welfarist activities, their counterparts in the BJP drew a linkage between '*seva*' and the Hindu right wing ideology. An instance of this Hindu Nationalist appropriation of '*seva*' may be found in the narrative of Debasmita Banerjee of the BJP.

Banerjee stated that her political participation was driven by the ultimate ambition to ‘make India secure for Hindus’, and that her ‘selfless commitment’ to the BJP was rooted in her organic connection with and the desire to offer ‘*seva*’ to the Hindus of *Bharatvarsha* (ancient Sanskrit name for the India Subcontinent):

‘I realised that there is only one state for Hindus: *Bharatvarsha*. There should be a secured land for Hindus. That is only possible under the ideology of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and Deendayal Upadhyay (leaders of the Jana Sangh, the precursor to the BJP). Today, as Pakistan opposes us, and similarly, within our country, there is open opposition to us, it is clear that we must make *Bharatvarsha* completely secure for Hindus to live in, or else we have to prepare ourselves for religious conversion. On that ground, for the sake of *Bharatvarsha*, and on the more universal ground of *Bharatvarsha's* basic essence, the bloodstream that flows in its veins- *Hindutva*, I have felt the need to safeguard and protect *Devbhoomi* (abode of the gods) *Bharatvarsha*. This would be my *seva*- defending Hinduism.’

Notwithstanding the substantial divergences in terms of ideological content, the use of the ‘*seva*’ metaphor by interviewees from the AITC and the BJP share a common emphasis upon the attribute of selfless commitment to political activism- an element that also characterises the political self-makings of CPI(M) interviewees. Even as the metaphors of ‘*sangharsh/sangram*’ (Struggle) is ostensibly used by grassroots and elite women members of the CPI(M) to communicate their contestation of prevailing socio-economic structures of inequality and political violence, within the spaces of institutional party culture, the metaphor primarily connotes their incessant psychological struggle to

approximate the ideal defeminised communist subjectivity. While the '*seva*' metaphor carries a sacralised connotation which at times can associate itself with over religiosity—such as in the case of the BJP, the idealised communist subjectivity that the '*sangharsh/sangram*' metaphor endorses also has affinities with an ascetic mode of self-making. The metaphors of '*seva*' and '*sangharsh/sangram*' both offer insights into the negotiations that women party members forge with the informal gendered power relations within the institutional spaces of their respective parties as well as with regard to the macro-social environment they inhabit and perform their politics in. Alongside the metaphors of '*seva*' and '*sangharsh/sangram*', this section has also explored the play of the logic of defeminisation in the political self-making of a selection of unmarried women party members in the three parties, focusing particularly on how their political subjectivities have been constructed in opposition to other women party members or acquaintances who are associated with excessive ambition, lack of loyalty to the party, lack of political skills, and/or socially transgressive sexuality. Despite ideological and inter-party variations in the self-makings of the women party members I had interviewed, a unanimous affirmation of the love of 'doing' politics characterised most of the narratives. Even as such positive commitment to their political careers were expressed through different metaphors depending on their respective ideological and social locations, such as the use of the '*seva*' metaphor by AITC interviewees to connote the nature of their political activism, the narratives also highlighted the personal enjoyment they derived from their political work. Such affirmations of love and enjoyment can be seen to provide women party members with everyday resilience to face the institutional structures of power and exclusion in their respective party cultures.

Conclusion:

This chapter presented a feminist institutionalist interpretive engagement with the narratives offered by women party members in the AITC, the BJP and the CPI(M) during their interviews with me. The interpretive and thematic analysis of these narratives was conducted with reference to the larger social, cultural, and historical gender discourses that structure and condition the institutional cultures of the three political parties. While the particular focus of the chapter was on the different factors that contribute to the self-makings of women party members, the analysis also attempted to trace the play of informal codes and processes of gendered exclusion that go on to constitute systemic coherence and continuity in the ‘secret gardens’ (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015) of political party cultures in West Bengal. Through its discussion of the role of familial networks and community activism, the chapter underlined the foundational influence of non-party and extra-institutional spaces in facilitating women’s access to and continuing participation in politics. The chapter noted the criticality of such networks in the face of scarcity of institutional support for women aspirants in Indian political parties. The section on women’s perceptions of their respective party cultures focused on how women party members, particularly at the grassroots level, grappled with, interpreted and responded to the prevalent logic of vertical party command and deference to the leadership within the parties. This section noted the strategy of linguistic ambivalence that disaffected women party members adopted to articulate their experiences of institutional exclusion. The third section on institutional belonging elaborated on the ways through which the respective social locations, ideological affiliations and personal loyalties to the party leadership shaped women’s articulations of their belonging in or exclusion from the institutional spaces of the parties. The final

section on the political self-makings of women party members engaged with the different discursive strategies through which women across the three parties frame their political subjectivities. Such strategies included constructing their political selves by othering women who are imagined as representing dissident subjectivities and using different metaphors to connote the 'selfless' character of their political activism.

Women's access routes to politics, their perceptions of their respective party cultures, their articulations of institutional belonging and the associated process of their political self-making illustrated the similarities as well as divergences among the three political parties. While familial networks and the ensued affective attachments served as crucial access routes and support-systems for women in all the three parties, longstanding family ties with the RSS and the Communist movements distinguished the political careers of women in the BJP and the CPI(M) respectively. With regard to community activism as an access route, it was predominantly the women members of the CPI(M) who claimed to have joined mainstream party politics through their background in community activism- an experience in collective solidarity they tried to keep alive within the CPI(M) as well.

While offering their perceptions about their respective party cultures, women members of the AITC and the BJP overwhelmingly subscribed to the prevailing imagination of the party as a family, choosing to articulate their individual experiences of institutional exclusion through linguistic subtleties and affirming their loyalties to the party leadership. Most of the respondents across the parties positively viewed the overarching authority of the (predominantly male) party elite and their display of overt deference to the party elite was seen as a crucial informal tactic to facilitate the advancement of their political careers. While members of the AITC showed open deference to their immediate senior male colleague in particular and to Mamata Banerjee

in general, some members of the CPI(M) critiqued gender discrimination and exclusion in the party while others rationalised the authority of the male-dominated party leadership through the lens of ‘sound logic’. As an illustration of their endorsement of the existing state of the affairs in their party, some women members of the BJP opposed the concept of political reservations for women while others denied the existence of gender discrimination in the party.

In their articulations of belonging, women party members of the AITC displayed the formative influence of the leadership style of the AITC chief Mamata Banerjee. Members of the BJP highlighted the criticality of their religious and caste affiliations in constituting their belonging as well as in the reproduction of institutional continuity through the containment of disaffections within the BJP. Women interviewees of the CPI(M) acknowledged the influence of the institutional thrust towards defeminisation in shaping their belonging. The privileged discourse of defeminisation and the associated ‘political logic’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of constructing antagonistic gendered subjectivities was found to be at play in the male-dominated workplace cultures of all the three parties, particularly conditioning the political self-makings of unmarried women party members. While women from the AITC and the BJP chose to characterise their political activism as ‘*seva*’, their counterparts in the CPI(M) used the metaphor of ‘*sangharsh/sangram*’ to do the same, even as an emphasis on selflessness constituted the core connotation of both the metaphors. In the face of the prevailing underrepresentation of women in Indian party politics and existing informal institutional discrimination against them- despite recent policy initiatives such as voluntary party quotas, the positive commitment to and love articulated by women party members for their careers in political activism stand out as a reassuring promise of institutional change.

8. Thesis Conclusion

This thesis offered a qualitative interpretivist engagement with the gendered institutional cultures of political parties in India to delineate the institutional belonging and political self-makings of women party members. With an in-depth focus on the shifting political culture of West Bengal, and endorsing radical systemic transformation and regendering of institutions in favour of women and other historically underrepresented social identities, this thesis undertook a feminist institutionalist study of gender regimes and women members of three ideologically variant political parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the Indian context, women’s representation, and leadership in formal political institutions such as political parties are an under-researched area, and this thesis contributes to the existing literature with its comparative enquiry of women’s representation and belonging in the three parties while also reflecting on the broader process of gendered institutional continuity and change in party cultures.

This thesis argues that the reproduction of gendered institutional continuity in political party cultures necessitates the sustained production of binary and antagonistic models of political femininity and the institutional privileging of one model over another. The institutional belonging and political self-makings of women members of the three political parties are mediated by their negotiations with such models of political femininity as well as their relationship with the party ideology, party leadership, their respective social locations, and social and institutional standards of appropriateness.

The thesis began with a review of the evolving academic discourse on the gendering of formal institutions, the production of idealised models of appropriateness

which condition the representation and participation of women in such institutions, and the critical interventions in the field of gender and political institutions under the Feminist Institutional approach. It also covered the feminist institutionalist theoretical transition from ‘critical mass’ (Dahlerup, 1988)- which posited that the numerical increase in women lawmakers would translate into more women-friendly legislation, to ‘critical actors’ (Childs and Krook, 2009)- which destabilises the perceived homogeneity of ‘women’ as a monolithic political group as well as that of ‘women’s issues’ with its emphasis on particular actors who initiate pro-women legislations. The positive gains in the direction of facilitating women’s political inclusion under the personalised leadership of Mamata Banerjee in the AITC can be seen as an instance of a ‘critical actor’.

The thesis discussed the focus of feminist political research on the everyday informal processes of gendered behaviour and interaction among actors inhabiting institutions. Underlining the androcentric and historically exclusivist foundations of modern democratic institutions of political representation, this thesis argues for a closer collaboration between the respective fields of gender and political institutions and theories of political representation to understand better the phenomenon of women’s underrepresentation and marginalisation in the spaces of political decision-making. In this thesis, the conceptual devices of belonging and self-making have facilitated the study of women’s participation in political party cultures as well as their experiences of and responses to institutional discrimination and marginalisation in such cultures. In particular, the analysis of the political self-making(s) of women members of the three political parties through the interpretivist lens of feminist institutionalism has illustrated how gendered institutional continuity is reaffirmed and also occasionally subjected to change through women’s cultivations of their political subjectivities in negotiation with the hegemonic gender regimes in the party cultures.

Set in the context of women's chronic underrepresentation in the higher institutions of political legislation in India such as the Parliament and the state legislatures, this thesis reviewed the debates, dialogues, and literature on the state of gender quotas, the resistance to the Women's Reservation Bill, the prevalent symbolic representations of women political leaders, and the access routes to women's political participation in India. Noting the criticality of political parties as gatekeepers to women's participation in India's electoral democracy, this thesis has engaged with the respective institutional cultures and gender regimes of the three political parties and has subsequently traced the overarching discursive logics such as the logic of cross-caste Hindu unity (in the BJP) or the logic of defeminised integration into the male-dominated party workplace that reproduce institutional continuity and condition women's belonging, symbolic representation, and participation in such institutional spaces.

Following the poststructuralist 'logics approach' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) under the interpretivist method of Discourse Analysis, the thesis has identified some discursive gendered logics which govern everyday institutional practices and interpersonal interactions in the political parties and which also reinforce institutional continuity by concealing contestation and change. Institutional practices adhering to such logics often directly influence the quality of women's representation in the parties. The disciplinary 'social logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of centralised party command reflected in the organisational principle of democratic centralism in the CPI(M), for instance, has regularly contributed to the marginalisation and exclusion of women and other historically underrepresented social identities from positions of power such as the higher units in the party. Similarly, the imagination of the political party as a family and as a feudal mansion articulated by the women interviewees from the AITC and the BJP

also serve as a social logic- lending legitimacy and naturalisation to the authority of male leaders within these parties.

Alongside shaping the gendered institutional cultures of the parties, such discursive logics also influence how women party members themselves interpret the evolution of their respective political careers. As the discussion on the three unmarried women members of the three parties illustrated, their self-making is characterised by a privileging of defeminisation and the complementary strategy of distinguishing themselves from other women in the parties or in the larger society who are perceived as failing to belong in and integrate with the male-dominated party cultures. The relatively swift political ascent of such women party members who aspire to and cultivate a defeminised and de-sexualised political subjectivity is often held in the cultural spaces of the parties- the BJP in particular, as an example of successful integration and institutional belonging. As discussed in Chapter 2, the cultivation of defeminised subjectivities by women members of formal institutional cultures has also been documented in other contexts (Rojo and Esteban, 2003, 2005). The normative status and sacrality accorded to a defeminised political subjectivity among women members of political parties in West Bengal, however, distinguish the manner in which the logic of defeminisation plays out as an informal ‘requisite of belonging’(Yuval - Davis, 2011, 20) in such party cultures.

For women in the CPI(M) and the BJP, the West Bengal Chief Minister and AITC leader Mamata Banerjee constituted a figure who was critically interpreted as being narcissistic on one hand and un-feminine on the other. In particular, for members of the CPI(M), Banerjee’s personalised leadership style presented the identified ‘other’ in negative reference to whom the former cultivated themselves as aspiring selfless communist revolutionaries. Women members of the BJP such as Manisha Ghosh and Debasmita Banerjee interpreted their institutional belonging and practised their political

self-makings against other women in the party whom they regarded as exemplifying selfishness, disloyalty, ambition, or opportunism. Similar sentiments were also reflected in the narrative offered by Debi Sen of the AITC, who framed the development of her political subjectivity in isolation from her fellow women activists and party members by highlighting her exceptional personal leadership qualities. The sustained production of such antagonistic gendered subjectivities and the ‘fantasmatic logic’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) that defeminisation would safeguard women party members from institutional exclusion is crucial for the maintenance of institutional continuity in the parties and for resisting the potential for change in favour of women and other marginalised social categories. Considered from the perspective of Naila Kabeer’s theorisations on the co-constitutiveness of agency and structure- as discussed in chapter one (Kabeer, 1999; Devika and Thampi, 2012), defeminisation can be understood as according a degree of agency to its practitioners. Kabeer’s idea that agency is inclusive not only of full autonomy but also a diverse range of deliberate action such as bargaining, subversion, manipulation, and reflection as well as her analytical distinction between agency as power to positively exercise life-choices and agency as the negative power over others (Kabeer, 1999, 4) can be useful to understand the influence of defeminisation in the self-makings of the selected women party members. While defeminisation assists Arati Roy, Manisha Ghosh, Debasmita Banerjee, and Debi Sen to create and expand spaces for themselves in their respective male-dominated party cultures, it also allows them to negatively distinguish and isolate themselves from other women colleagues in the party as well as from other women who are perceived as failing to meet the institutional and social standards of appropriateness.

In the chapters on the gendered institutional cultures of the three parties, the thesis has traced the evolution of the formal ‘rules-in-form’ and informal ‘rules-in-use’

(Ostrom, 2007; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Verge, 2015) which constitute standards of appropriateness and acceptability in gendered behaviour and relationships among actors in the party cultures. Such focus of the thesis on the role of informal gendered codes and conventions in the framing of hegemonic institutional cultures bears the influence of sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996) while the three chapters on the three respective political parties also offered a historical perspective onto the trajectory of institutional evolution, the development of gender regimes, and distribution of power and hierarchy in such party cultures, illustrating the influence of historical institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). The evolving discourse on patriarchy and feminism within the CPI(M)- as illustrated in the discussions of works by EMS Namboodiripad, Kanak Mukherjee, and Brinda Karat (Namboodiripad, 1975; Karat, 2005, 2014, 2017; Mukhopadhyay, 2005) in the chapter on the gendered institutional culture of the CPI(M) can be an instance of such historical perspective. The interpretivist focus of the thesis on the linguistic manoeuvres undertaken by women party members to articulate their experiences of discriminatory structures and processes has been informed by discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). The thesis therefore adopts the research insights offered under the different schools of New Institutionalism, the overarching influence being that of the feminist institutionalist research approach; particularly evident in the analytical focus of the thesis on the informal and unstated gendered behavioural codes and processes that decisively condition and also constrain women's participation and leadership in Indian party cultures.

Despite the presence of substantial dissimilarities, an overarching ethic of selflessness in political activism was found to characterise the expressed motivations of women members of all the three parties. While the ethic of selflessness was articulated differently and through metaphors with varying connotations such as '*seva*' and

'*sangharsh*' by women in the AITC, BJP, and the CPI(M), it reflected their response to and negotiation with the idealised standard of appropriate political behaviour expected from women in their respective party cultures. The thesis also noted the use of linguistic ambivalences by women party members to communicate their experiences of institutional discrimination and exclusion. Through their open expressions of deference to the male-dominated higher party leadership and their indirect and subtle critique of institutional practices, the women interviewees demonstrated the institutional boundaries for permissible and acceptable speech in their respective party cultures.

The chapter on the interviews of women party members illustrated their interpretations of their political careers, their self-making and institutional belonging- which in several cases was influenced by their respective extra-institutional social locations, such as religious and caste affiliations for women members of the BJP. It also facilitated a comparative understanding of the formal and informal gender norms which govern the institutional cultures of the three parties when considered in tandem with the preceding three chapters on the gendered organisational cultures of the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP. The discursive logics such as centralised party unity, fealty to the male-dominated party elite, or segregation of the women's wings that were found to constitute the gender regimes of all the three parties underlined the influence of the evolving interdiscursive space (Fairclough, 1995) of Indian and Bengali political culture which the three party cultures inhabit. The historical development and ideological foundations of each party, however, influenced the play of such discursive logics in distinct manners.

While the respective gendered institutional cultures of the CPI(M) and the BJP are primarily constituted and reinforced by a strong ideological foundation, the personalised (Rahat and Kenig, 2018) party culture of the AITC bears the decisive

influence of Mamata Banerjee's populist leadership (Ray Chaudhury, 2021c). Institutional continuity and consistency in the AITC are primarily reproduced through the logic of absolute deference and personal loyalty to Banerjee's leadership. The affective hold of such deference and loyalty seemed to be particularly strong for women members of the AITC even in the face of rampant defections from the AITC to the BJP on the eve of the recently concluded West Bengal Assembly elections (2021). Banerjee's populist self-fashioning as a modern political ascetic-activist (Ray Chaudhury, 2021c) was found to have decisively influenced the self-makings of women in the AITC. Banerjee's personal commitment to enhancing women's political inclusion was reflected in the relatively high number of women in election candidate lists and her mobilisation of women voters through welfarist schemes and special women's fronts for election campaigns, even as such fronts have the effect of undercutting the influence of the party's women's wing. The thesis argued that the party culture of the AITC demonstrates the relatively positive influence that personalised leadership can sometime exercise in the direction of greater political inclusion of women, particularly in parties with flexible ideological foundations.

Despite the distance in their ideological positionings, both the CPI(M) and the BJP are characterised by their respective *teloi* that extend far beyond the immediate institutional goal of winning elections in India's democratic politics and involve the extra-institutional theme of social revolution/restructuring. The institutional culture of the CPI(M) is informed by the revolutionary *telos* of economic, social, and cultural transformation in the form of establishing a proletarian communist state. Such ideological *telos* has a constitutive influence on the party organisation, endorsing the centralisation of power and authority in the higher units and is reflected particularly in the principle of democratic centralism. Contributing to the naturalisation of male authority concentrated

in the higher party leadership and the corresponding marginalisation of women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities in the party, the revolutionary ideational telos has a direct impact on women's representation in the CPI(M) despite women's economic and social emancipation being held as essential to the constitution of a communist social order. The CPI(M)'s status as a parliamentary communist party necessitates it to sustain a balance between its ideological commitment and the demands of electoral pragmatism. The chapter on the CPI(M) has discussed the limited autonomy of the party's women's front- the PBGMS/AIDWA, and the complicated relationship between the PBGMS/AIDWA and the women's movement in India as examples of the implications that sustaining such a balance holds for women's participation in the party.

Such jostling between ideological goals and strategic electoral calculations were also found to influence the BJP's gendered institutional culture and, in turn, women's symbolic representation and participation in the party. The telos of restructuring contemporary Indian society in the light of an imagined ancient monolithic 'Hindu' past informs the BJP's organisational practices while at the same time, its participation in electoral politics distinguishes the party from the other social, cultural, religious, and economic organisations that constitute the Hindu right wing Sangh Parivar. The party's ideological commitment to Hindu revival that is characterised by the vision of an organic, harmonious, status quoist social order governed by (hierarchical) caste and gender relations is reflected in the organisational thrust of the BJP towards institutional continuity and the concealment of dissatisfactions among members through emotive appeals to religion and caste.

Central to this telos of social harmony through the reproduction of existing hierarchies is the institutional privileging of a certain type of idealised political subjectivity for (Hindu) women that is pitted against 'dissident' subjectivities-

represented by minority women, liberals, communists, and all those who are seen to destabilise the cohesive institutional order in the party and in wider society. The demonisation of such dissident femininities in the Hindutva ecosystem is demonstrated frequently in the cyber sexual harassment of Muslim, anti-caste, and left-wing women activists and critics of the Narendra Modi government by the party's IT Cell members. The thesis traced this institutional production of competing models of femininity to the gendered foundations of the philosophy of Hindutva. The balance that the party attempts to sustain between the Hindu Nationalist construction of ideal femininity and the pragmatic necessity of attracting the electoral support of women is illustrated in the coexistence of welfarist schemes for women's education and empowerment such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' with 'anti-love jihad' legislations which have the effect of curbing women's freedom of choice in marriage and romantic relationships.

A comparative review of the women's wings/fronts in each of the three parties in West Bengal highlights the overall scarcity of influence that the women's wings/fronts continue to hold over the mainstream party organisations. Even as the women's wings/fronts have become indispensable for the parties during election campaigns in the light of the increasing salience of women as a distinct electoral constituency in India, the political participation and activism of the women's wing/front members continue to be strictly regulated by the mainstream party units. The women's wings/fronts perform the critical activity of mobilising women's votes in favour of the party and yet they remain broadly segregated and directed to be primarily concerned with what is perceived as 'women's issues'. The thesis noted the persistence of this segregation and marginalisation of the women's wing from the mainstream party organisation in the BJP- which was in conformity with the institutional practices of right-wing parties across the world

(Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bedi, 2016), as well as in the left-wing CPI(M) and the centrist-populist AITC.

On the issue of gender quotas, the three parties showed differentiation even as all three have formally affirmed their commitment to introducing reservations for women in the Parliament and state legislatures. The CPI(M) in West Bengal offers its pioneering contributions towards nominating women candidates in rural local government (Panchayats) even before the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were introduced, as evidence of the party's commitment to women's political inclusion and continues to endorse the movement to pass the Women's Reservation Bill in the Lok Sabha. Within its own organisational space, however, the thesis found that women continue to be chronically underrepresented and marginalised from leadership positions. To this day, the party has not introduced gender quotas in favour of women within its own organisational units which belies its professed commitment to the cause of women's political empowerment. The BJP presented a relatively different picture. Quotas for women (33%) are mandated by the party constitution for every organisational unit across the party hierarchy. While in the realm of institutional practices, the formal constitutional provisions are often defied and women's everyday participation in party politics is characterised by an overall lack of intra-party democracy, constitutionally mandated gender quotas do hold the potential for a comparatively greater scope of representation for women in the party units of the BJP. In the case of the AITC too, the party constitution lays down the provision of 33% reservation for women in the organisational units. However, the constitution also allows the leadership of each party unit to relax the minimum percentage of quotas. The AITC has consistently fielded a substantially higher number of women election candidates than its rivals such as the CPI(M) and the BJP. The party's decision to field the highest number of women candidates among all the

contending parties in the recently concluded West Bengal Assembly elections (2021) is an instance. The thesis noted that despite the AITC's consistently positive record in women's political recruitment and candidate selection, formal provisions such as flexible gender quotas have the effect of making the party's commitment to gender parity in politics entirely contingent on the personal discretion and preferences of the party leadership.

Notwithstanding the differences in ideology and organisational practices among the three political parties, the gendered institutional cultures of the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP were all found to have naturalised the scarcity of intra-party democracy which in turn, bore a constitutive influence on the quality of women's representation, participation, and belonging in the parties. Institutional status quo in the three parties is broadly characterised by the underrepresentation and exclusion of women and other historically marginalised identities from leadership positions in party organisation and government. The sustenance of the institutional status quo is achieved with the production of antagonistic models of political femininities, the privileging of one model, and a corresponding devaluation of another model in the party cultures. While the particular attributes associated with the institutionally privileged model of political femininity varied across the three parties in accordance with their respective ideological foundations, a common characterisation of behavioural attributes such as ambition, sexual promiscuity, and resistance to the party elite as undesirable and as markers of disloyalty was found to be hegemonic in the institutional cultures of all the three parties-conditioning in turn, the institutional belonging and political self-making of women party members.

Building on the existing global and Indian literature on gender and political institutions, this thesis can enrich the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism

in three ways. Firstly, its interpretivist engagement with the narratives of women party members underlined not only the centrality of gender in the constitution of hegemonic institutional cultures and women's belonging in political parties but also the complex intersections between gender and other categories of social identity and oppression such as caste, class, and religious identity in the framing of gendered political subjectivities in such party cultures. Secondly, the focus of the thesis on the affective and experiential concepts of institutional belonging and self-making can deepen feminist institutionalist research that has hitherto been primarily concerned with institutional processes such as political recruitment and candidate selection. It can also contribute to expanding the feasibility of a feminist institutionalist research design particularly in spatial contexts where data on institutional practices such as candidate selection in political parties or other formal institutions is not readily accessible due to lack of transparency in such institutions. Thirdly, the use of concepts such as self-making can illustrate the processual complexities that underlie the constitution of feminist institutionalist concepts such as 'critical actors' (Childs and Krook, 2009)- who emerge as being instrumental in undertaking pro-women legislations. As the engagement of the thesis with the AITC leader Mamata Banerjee's populist self-making demonstrated, the erratic and fluctuating commitment to gender parity on the part of 'critical actors' such as Banerjee needs to be appraised in the light of their responses to the demands of electoral pragmatism, thus necessitating a deeper probe into the complex processes that go on to constitute a 'critical actor'.

Scope for Further Research:

With its interpretivist feminist institutionalist study of the respective gendered institutional cultures of and women's institutional belonging and political self-makings in the CPI(M), the AITC, and the BJP in West Bengal, India, this thesis has generated in-depth insights on the formal rules and informal codes and practices in such party cultures that offer explanations for the persistence of women's political underrepresentation and marginalisation in India's electoral democracy. Hence, the thesis can be said to have contributed to the literature on gendered institutional continuity and change and women's representation, participation, and leadership in contemporary Indian party politics. The comparative analysis of gendered party cultures in the context of political developments in West Bengal constitutes the first such study in the Indian context. While there have been studies on women in party politics in Western democracies, this thesis offers comparative research on the said theme in a non-Western democratic setting. Contributing also to the field of feminist institutionalist research, the thesis generated theoretical insights on the institutional belonging and political self-makings of women in party politics. The research design followed in this thesis suffered from several limitations- both intrinsic and external, however, which also indicate the scope for further research into the play of gender in political institutions in the Indian as well as the global context.

Given the comparative research undertaken in this thesis, the depth of the enquiry was intrinsically limited. It was not possible to attempt immersive participant observation for the study of the everyday informal institutional practices which reproduce gendered hierarchies in the three political parties. Such immersive studies are only possible under single-party based ethnographic studies, as the existing literature on women in Indian

party politics demonstrates. The thesis has sought to address the limitations of its research enquiry with its adoption of the interpretivist method of Discourse Analysis that illustrates the play of power behind meaning-making and knowledge-production within the institutional spaces of the respective parties in the light of macro-social and historical gender constructions as well as negotiations that women party members undertake with such established meanings and gendered norms.

As discussed in the chapter on research method, the difficulty in gaining access to the inner world of party practices as well as to party literature constituted a substantial external limitation. The hegemonic logic of deference to the party elite in Indian political parties influenced the narratives of women party members particularly at the grassroots level. The responses provided by the women interviewees to my questions during fieldwork were also deeply conditioned by their perceptions of my social positionality as a young Brahmin woman researcher affiliated with a foreign university. With the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, I could not undertake the third and final phase of the fieldwork and hence could not speak to my interviewees about their experiences of participating in the recently held West Bengal Assembly elections (2021). The difficulty in receiving access to and getting women party members agree to in-depth interviews made it particularly challenging to maintain a representative sample across caste, class, religious, and other identities. While this thesis has underlined the importance of intersectionalities in understanding how the gendered institutional cultures in Indian political parties condition women's experiences of institutional belonging as well as the cultivation of their political subjectivities, further research in this area would need to focus particularly on the narratives of women party members who identify with Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, religious minority, rural and other historically marginalised social locations. It would be interesting, for instance, to engage with a Muslim woman's experience of

institutional belonging in the party culture of the BJP whose ideological foundations are foregrounded in Hindu supremacism.

Another area which needs further research attention is the generational divide between the political perspectives of senior women party members and younger women members. In the chapter on the gendered institutional culture of the CPI(M), this chapter has indicated the existence of such generational differentiation among women members of the party. While narratives from the relatively senior women party leaders largely focused on ideational concerns such as revisionism, the split that had occurred within the undivided CPI, and the model of revolutionary communist subjectivity, the younger women members preferred to speak about themes such as the nexus between neoliberalism and communalism as well as the intersectional implications of caste-class-gender-religious oppression of women in India. Further research on this theme can yield promising insights in the direction of destabilising the monolithic category of ‘women’ in Indian politics and also unpack the diversity of political preferences and policy concerns that constitute what are commonly referred to as ‘women’s issues’.

Grounded in the context of women’s underrepresentation in the spaces of political decision-making across the world and India in particular, this thesis intends to generate mid-range theorisations with wider implications on formal and informal institutional practices in political parties which perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of women and other oppressed social identities from the spaces of political leadership in modern democracies. Alongside the necessity of introducing political reservation for women in legislatures, the thesis points to the need for political parties to undertake attitudinal transformations of their institutional cultures in favour of enhancing the quality of women’s belonging and participation in electoral politics.

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Appendix A: (Sample Questionnaire)

1. How did you come to join active politics?
2. Are your families politically active?
3. What do you think defines the (AITC/CPI(M)/BJP) as a party, particularly in the area of gender equality and women's empowerment?
4. What in your opinion is the status of women in other parties?
5. How would you describe the decision-making process in your party organisation?
6. Can you elaborate on the relationship between the women's wing and the mainstream party organisational units?
7. What are the party responsibilities you have as a full-time party worker?
8. Do you feel free to express your views on different issues during party meetings?
9. How has your experience been working with the party?
10. How are you supported in your everyday party activities?

11. What do you like doing for leisure, outside your working hours?

Appendix B: (List of Interviews)

CPI(M):

- Ranjini Kar- 16/11/2018
- Anju Das- 22/11/2018
- Shyamali Ghoshal- 16/11/2018
- Konika Mitra- 13/11/2018
- Arati Ray- 23/01/2019
- Surekha Goswami- 20/01/2019
- Sunil Chatterji- 16/11/2018
- Sheela Sengupta- 07/01/2019
- Rakhi Bagchi- 20/11/2019
- Shikha Adhikary- 16/11/2018
- Swapna Ghosh- 16/11/2018
- Keka Biswas- 17/11/2018

AITC:

- Shreya Das- 20/01/2019
- Debi Sen- 13/06/2018
- Sanjana Bhowmik- 16/01/2019
- Nandana Mukherjee- 14/01/2019
- Mala Pandey- 02/06/2018
- Chhanda Maity- 21/06/2018
- Sonali Dey- 27/12/2019
- Amita Choudhury- 14/01/2019
- Chhaya Das- 01/06/2018
- Probal Pal- 01/06/2018
- Gagan Bose- 01/06/2018
- Chandana Bhattacharya- 24/11/2018
- Lata Das- 03/01/2019
- Geeta Halder- 22/06/2018

BJP:

- Debasmita Banerjee - 10/11/2018
- Ananta Pal- 15/01/2019
- Promita Sinha- 22/11/2018.
- Radha Samanta- 30/12/2018
- Manisha Ghosh- 24/11/2018
- Uma Chowdhury- 17/12/2019

- Pushpa Barui- 29/12/2019
- Nalini Pal- 30/12/2018
- Sita Kashyap- 23/11/2018
- Asha Banerjee- 08/06/2018
- Pramila Dutta- 10/07/2018
- Rani Maheshwari- 11/01/2019
- Titli Biswas- 12/07/2018
- Mithu Sarkar- 14/01/2019