Reconstituting the 'Good Woman'

Gendered Visibility and Visual Political Performance in West Bengal, India

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Rituparna Banerjee

School of Communications
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Dublin City University

Supervisor: Dr Saumava Mitra

Page intentionally left blank

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 acknowledge within the text of my work.

Rituparna Banerjee

20214514

June 2025

Page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

I began my PhD at the height of a pandemic, in November 2020, under Dublin's grey, rain-soaked skies. Just over four years later, it seems surreal that I'm writing this note prefacing my complete thesis. Perhaps there is truth in what they say about PhDs: you find companionship in the most unexpected places, and light breaks through in ways you never anticipate. I see this thesis as a reminder that everything we achieve is possible because we get by with a little help from friends.

I am, firstly, deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr Saumava Mitra at the School of Communications, Dublin City University (DCU), for his unstinting support and generosity in sharing ideas and intellectual insights. Saumava's astute mind, perceptive humour, and sharp critiques have shaped and strengthened my research and me as a researcher. I am thankful for his ability to always keep in sight the bigger picture while concurrently driving me to extract more depth out of my study, and ensuring I don't get lost in the inevitable uncertainties of a PhD. This thesis is so much stronger because of him.

My research has explored the politics of visibility and how female politicians navigate their everyday visual political performance on social media. I wish to thank all the women I reached out to—who, even amidst the charged atmosphere of the All-India elections in 2024, made the time to speak with me, a stranger, pursuing a somewhat inscrutable inquiry (for them). My study's participants not only offered their time but also shared their experiences candidly. Their aspirations fuel them despite the daily struggles they face—struggles you will learn much more about in the following pages. To reach them, I also reconnected with friends old and new. I thank Sujishnuda and Avishek for responding each time I called for help, leading me to my participants. Serendipity indeed—there are friends at every corner helping.

I am deeply grateful to the School of Communications, DCU, for its financial and research support. In addition, the School provided a nurturing academic environment and an invaluable opportunity to develop my pedagogical skills through tutoring undergraduate students. I especially thank Dr Jim Rogers, whose willingness to help—no matter how many times I showed up with questions or concerns—made an enormous difference to my overall academic experience. A special thanks to Dr Pádraig Murphy for entrusting me with the incredible opportunity to co-teach alongside him, which shaped my growth as an educator. I am deeply thankful to Dr. Paola Rivetti for the opportunity to collaborate with her on the Generative AI project, an experience that has profoundly influenced my thinking and continues to shape the direction of my future research ideas. In writing about my academic home for this extended period, I cannot but remember Eileen Myers. Over these years, Eileen's kindness and efficiency kept students like me afloat and sane. Jonny Hobson in the Graduate Studies Office was always generous with all forms of support possible during the innumerable times I approached him for help.

My experience as a DCU researcher was enriched by my colleagues in the Ireland India Institute, particularly Dr. Jivanta Schottli, who continuously created opportunities for research students to connect with scholars from around the world. Her kindness, support, and generosity—whether in academic settings or over wine-fuelled conversations in Dublin's parks—meant so much. A PhD at DCU is made more fulfilling by the sense of community it fosters. Whether advocating for better working conditions for researchers or standing in solidarity with Palestine, the spirit of resistance remains alive on university campuses. I am deeply grateful to all my colleagues and peers who have fought relentlessly to give voice to

the unheard. Even if progress is incremental, it is still through students that change begins.

But then, Dublin's housing crisis? Finding a place to live here is harder than tracking down a spice bag at 3 am—both vanish instantly, leaving you questioning life choices. So, with a full heart, I thank those who opened their doors to me. From Melody John to Mary and Patrick, your kindness made all the difference. You embodied the Auld Pair—the only people who could judge you, bless you, and feed you, all in the same breath. Whilst my time living in your homes was brief, I will always remember it fondly.

A city becomes home because of the people who make it feel like your own. And so, here's to 4, Sycamore Park—not just an address, but a home made special by those I shared it with. To the best two *tipsies* one could ask for—Kusumika and Tim—I thank you for everything. For making a city feel like ours, for the conversations, and for turning the everyday into something extraordinary. No matter where the night took us, we always had a home to return to, where my friends became yours, yours became mine, and somehow, Dublin became ours. Here's to a lifetime of stories still to come— thank you for making this chapter so special.

Arpita, thank you for opening your heart and your home—whenever and wherever. Your generosity, kindness, and masterful cooking nourished not just the body but the spirit, turning even the hardest days into something lighter. From festival feasts to submission-day survival meals, you somehow always knew what was needed. And what is a PhD without friends who share both the struggles and the pints? Thank you to Hari, Anja, Marina, Cris, little Noorie, Saurav, Rashmi, Indee, Aish, Nithya, Yvonne, Daniel, Fabrizio, Marcel, Simon, Waqar, Vidushi, Cathal, Kathi, Adam, and Anna—the list goes on—for the much-needed distractions and for making this journey infinitely richer. And, of course, a special mention to Bigu and Milo—because no story is complete without them! To Samantha, our very own Sam, for taking the best care of us in CA126. To desk #47, my silent witness through all the ups and downs.

This marathon had cheerleaders at every turn. Through meltdowns and doubt, they never lost faith. To Nikita, Jyotsna, Pranjali, Koel, Jhinuk, Sweta, Dhrubo, Harsh, and so many others—thank you for being yourselves, for bringing encouragement, hope and the occasional weekend diversion when the road seemed endless. To Ritwik and Rajarshi, thank you for being you. My thesis stands on the foundation of indispensable support from my own and adopted parents—Tridibesh and Santana Banerjee, and Ashis and Smita Sanyal. Much of my research was steeped in Bengali, a language rich with layers of meaning. When I found myself lost in colloquialisms or struggling to grasp deeper references, my father patiently helped me see what lay between the lines. But beyond academic guidance, my parents gave me something just as important—the quiet reassurance that, no matter how far away I was, I was never alone. Parents have their own way of looking out for you, making sure you're okay even from a distance. And sometimes, just knowing that home, in all its forms, remains steady is enough.

From the very start of this PhD to its final moments, Saptarshi Sanyal has been the one true constant. 'Constant' may sound mundane, but it is also the quiet force that keeps you going. Through every ordeal, high and low, he was there—unfailingly steady. I began this PhD in the middle of a pandemic, with Saptarshi and me in different countries—between London, Dublin, and New Delhi. And yet, through the distance and chaos, what never wavered was him. Even from 8,000 km away, he remained my anchor. Through all the noise, simply thanking him feels inadequate. Instead, I raise a toast—to the everyday, to the steadfast, to the kind of love that doesn't need grand gestures because it is already everything.

Table of Contents

(Chapter 5, continued)

Page intentionally left blank

Page intentionally left blank

List of Tables

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Page intentionally left blank

List of Figures

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Page intentionally left blank

Abstract

Reconstituting the 'Good Woman': Gendered Visibility and Visual Political Performance in West Bengal, India

Rituparna Banerjee

This thesis examines gendered visual political communication on social media within the context of electoral politics in the state of West Bengal (WB) in India. Digital visual politics is an expanding field in communications research. Yet, in non-Western contexts, its practice remains underexplored from critical socio-cultural perspectives. By focusing on a specific cultural and societal setting in South Asia, my research explores how women political candidates construct and negotiate their digital identities and visibilities as a form of non-verbal political performance. My study adopts a critical realist approach to frame visual political performance through a 'two bodies' formulation, thereby considering exchanges of meaning between the physical and social body.

Through two complementary investigations, I firstly examine the 2021 election campaign for the state legislature in West Bengal on social media platforms. Here, I combine qualitative and quantitative visual content analysis to examine visual artefacts posted on Facebook and X by the four major parties contesting this election and their two most followed female candidates. My second investigation examines perspectives of those producing these visual artefacts through semi-structured interviews, with twenty-four female politicians in the state and a reflexive thematic analysis of these testimonies. These two investigations reveal how female political candidates navigate a complex relational field between constituents, party leadership, and public expectations. They bring to light contemporary, embodied reconstitutions of the *bhadramahila*, a social construct of the good woman drawing from Bengal's complex colonial and post-colonial experience. Finally, I show how female politicians balance societal expectations, party interests, and personal aspirations, while navigating intense forms of public scrutiny that simultaneously makes them hyper-visible and invisible.

By thus centring a culture-specific approach in the study of visual politics on digital media, my research shows that the political visibility of women remains deeply embedded within societal power relations. It reveals the persistence of colonial and postcolonial societal norms in non-verbal political communication mediated by digital technology, and the plural constructions of acceptable femininity (the good woman) in a non-Western electoral context. The conceptual apparatus my study employs and its findings, I argue, have wider implications on expanding study of visual political communication through novel, de-westernised modes of inquiry, whose relevance extends far beyond the South Asian context.

Page intentionally left blank

1 Introduction

On 23 August 2023, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) celebrated a global scientific achievement, the success in landing a module on the moon's south pole under the 'Chandrayaan-3' mission. Almost immediately after the event, a Twitter (now 'X') handle released a photograph of six women, all ISRO scientists, with the intriguing caption, 'Dear girls, this is what feminism looks like' (Sakshi, 2023). Hours later, a post from another user (Bhardwaj, 2023) included the same image with two others, adding:

> #Chandrayaan3 proving that cultural values & success can go hand in hand & these ain't symbols of oppression but strength!!!

This latter post began with a list of check boxes (denoted by a tick '✓'), a set of visual cues. These cues asserted how the women upheld 'cultural values' through certain 'symbols' of 'strength', rather than 'oppression':

> 'Sari (✓) Bindi (✓) Gajra (✓) Sindoor (✓) Mangalsutra (✓)'

These posts reveal how objects on the bodies of the female scientists—clothing, marital anointments, flowers or jewellery—are considered a display of 'cultural values' conforming to traditional femininity. Such objects and their presence on female bodies seem integral to defining the 'good woman'—an expression that this thesis will delve into in varied conceptual and grounded ways. In the case of the female ISRO scientists, even if incidental, visuals on a social media platform proclaimed that 'good' women need not abandon 'cultural […] symbols' to partake in modern, national, scientific achievements. The example assumes significance because of the symbolic, religious and social meanings it ascribes to women's bodies and the objects on them.

As women across the world today inhabit the digital spaces of social media, the performative aspects of femininity appear to be intensifying. Visible signs of being a 'good woman' are placed under far greater scrutiny than before. In this thesis, I explore the *visible* presence and performance of (being) women in one such area, namely, electoral politics. More specifically, my research investigates the phenomenon of visual political communication of female politicians on social media, focussing on the state of West Bengal in India. By concentrating on a specific context, I examine the ways in which its societal and cultural norms and expectations are intertwined with how female

politicians aspiring for public office are *made* visible on social media-based political messaging.

The centrality of visuals to political communication and their role in social messaging emerged in the pioneering works of Barthes and Lavers (1972), Boorstin (1962) and Guy Debord (1995). As Grabe and Bucy (2009) posit, visuals have conveyed sense and meaning for millennia, and continue to operate similarly in contemporary social and political life. They play a vital role in how politicians, activists and citizens convey messages and connect with audiences (Cartwright & Mandiberg, 2009; Lilleker et al., 2019). What becomes important then, is how a communication landscape is influenced by cultural specificity, an aspect that Pauwels (2019) believes demands close scrutiny. Meanwhile, in recent scholarship, critical investigations of how women are scrutinised publicly in visual terms, including on social media, have been undertaken extensively across various cultural contexts (Bauer and Carpinella, 2018; Bird, 1999; Cardo, 2021; Devitt, 2002; Jungblut and Haim, 2021; McGregor et al., 2017; Santia and Bauer, 2022). Following such a body of scholarship, this thesis is premised on gender and political visibility being a contested terrain on digital, social media. More specifically, my inquiry draws its basis from understanding how 'visibility' must be positioned within wider debates on power relations, and the gaze of the *other* through which women are scrutinised in both public and private spaces.

Some key reasons bring forth the need for such a study. Where digital media is concerned, it was generally hoped that its affordances would transcend racial and gender identities to result in a more homogenised online presence of individuals and groups. To the contrary, today, users exhibit and perform their racial and gender identities quite emphatically in digital spaces. This departure from the expectation, additionally, disrupts how only a few privileged people could curate their public personas in exclusive ways. In fact, the widespread availability of affordable smartphones in the modern era has empowered millions to visually construct digital identities as an integral part of their everyday lives (Hobson, 2016). As a result, the visible aspects of personal and public lives on digital media can be viewed as a political and social phenomenon. The production of these digital visibilities can, further, be considered both strategic and culture-specific (Creech, 2020)—an aspect I will return to throughout this thesis. Moreover, to understand how visuals either reproduce or challenge power dynamics in electoral politics, individuals and groups must be viewed within particular regimes of social and political power.

Through a focus on the realm of electoral politics, my research concerns itself with the *gendered* nature of visual political communication. Visual politics itself is an emerging area of study (Bucy and Joo, 2021). An increasing number of studies are being conducted into how its strategies and outcomes are mediated in diverse ways. These have sought to apply and extend previous theoretical and conceptual understandings of the role of visuals in politics and politics as a performative phenomenon (Debord, 1995; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1957; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). Yet, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain within the field of studying intersections of political communication with gender, visual politics and performance. In this introduction to my thesis, I will therefore first clarify the scope and reach of research in visual political communication, which in turn helps to identify the gaps that justify the bases of my study. Then I will present the goals and research questions articulated for my study and, finally, the thesis's overall structure.

1.1 Visual Political Communication: Un(der)explored Areas

What I mean by Visual Political Communication (VPC) for the purpose and objects of this study follows Claes De Vreese's (2006) tripartite model of political communication. VPC, through this model, can be defined as existing in the non-verbal, visual, domain of interactions between three sets of actors: politicians, media institutions, and citizens. It encompasses three kinds of processes: construction, dissemination, and reception of political messages conveyed through visual means rather than strictly verbal or textual channels. This conceptualisation positions VPC as an integral rather than peripheral component of political communication processes.

Building on this definition, Bene (2020) posits that VPC focuses specifically on visuals connected to *institutional* politics and *electoral* political participation, thereby encompassing political institutions and institutional political actors. Albeit delineating such focused areas of examination, De Vreese (2006) acknowledges a wider scope of objects and phenomena that can fall within investigating visuals in political processes. Yet, Bene's (2020) conceptualisations of VPC usefully define a manageable research domain centred on visuals within *formal* political structures and practices. What follows is that identifying material components in VPC demands precision. Therefore the distinction between 'images' and 'visuals' that Müller (2007) makes becomes crucial. Whilst 'image' encompasses both material representations and immaterial meanings (including metaphors and mental representations), 'visuals' within VPC specifically refer to tangible visual artefacts.

Nevertheless, even if confined to formal political mechanisms, the scope of visuals thus defined can itself be wide-ranging; they could encompass, as Rose (2001, p.6) identifies, a diverse range of media including 'TV programmes, advertisements, snapshots, public sculpture, movies, surveillance video footage, newspaper pictures, paintings'. Emmison and Smith (2000) broaden these objects of investigation further to include all observable phenomena—architectural structures, sartorial choices, nonverbal communication, and even ocular interactions—as legitimate visual data within VPC research. This expansive definition addresses the historical marginalisation of visual elements in political communication scholarship (Schill, 2012), a research gap only recently receiving substantive attention (Bucy & Joo, 2021). Establishing such clear parameters while acknowledging the field's wider scope provides a foundation for my examination of the outcomes *and* strategies for crafting visual political communication in the empirical context of my study. It is in the very definition of this empirical field that I respond to the first kind of gap in researching visual political communication.

1.1.1 Under-represented Contexts

In mapping the landscape of visual political communications research scholars like Grabe and Bucy (2009), Lillekar et al. (2019), and Veneti and Rovisco (2023) highlight how most studies remain concerned with North American or European contexts. This gap is an extension of how non-western contexts—also referred to as the Global South—have remained, until recently, marginalised where the study of political communication as a whole is concerned. Contemporary scholarship reveals how Internet-enabled media simultaneously reinvigorates and transforms established patterns of political action (Udupa, Venkatraman, & Khan 2019). In response, important bodies of work also strive to de-westernise the approaches and methodological apparatus through which visual communication and its cultures are studied and render them plural through insider-perspectives (Herdin, Faust, & Chen, 2020).

This dialectical relationship between continuity and change is particularly evident in South Asia, where digital cultures demand fundamental re-conceptualisation of media transitions (Udupa, Venkatraman, & Khan, 2019). Drawing on Caldwell's (2000, p.3) insight that digital cultures are 'historical formations animated by continuities as much as invention,' scholars have begun mapping more complex patterns of technological and social transformation. Punathambekar and Mohan (2019) extend this argument by examining how digital media technologies reconfigure social, cultural, and political contours while remaining deeply embedded in regional specificities. Their analysis

reveals that national, regional, and border spaces generate distinct opportunities for understanding digitalisation's impact on cultural production, consumption, and circulation. Crucially, an important facet of global scholarship that they challenge is how, even when examining contexts outside the North Atlantic, it relegates digital developments in their political communication as derivative phenomena, casting these as delayed variants of Western trajectories. Appadurai and Breckenridge's (1995) conceptualisation of public culture as a 'zone of cultural debate' (p. 5) provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding these digital practices as integral components of broader cultural negotiations. Their perspective illuminates the deep integration of digital media with established media economies—including advertising, print, film, and television industries. By bringing a perspective from an under-researched geographical, cultural and linguistic context as particular as West Bengal, I aim to bring new conceptual and empirical insights to bear on this growing area of study, therefore striving to make a contribution to truly globalising and expanding the field of researching political communication *and* visual politics.

1.1.2 Epistemological and Methodological Dominance

The contextually-grounded perspective I am making a case for is important to address a second gap in the study of political communication. The rapid proliferation of digital political practices across the Global South exposes blind spots in global scholarship. The dominant theoretical frameworks in this field remain largely anchored in Western epistemological traditions (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). This issue is particularly acute in studying political communication, a field whose evolution has been closely intertwined with Western democratic processes (Karpf et al., 2015). It becomes manifest in three ways: the institutionalisation of research around Western democratic norms, the presumed universality of Western communication theories, and the inadvertent reinforcement of intellectual paradigms even in attempts to 'de-westernise' the field (Curran & Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009). In this sense, the so-called 'parachute' scholarship on non-western contexts from the West remains captive to narrowly defined methodological approaches. I will soon return to and expand more on this issue.

Veneti and Rovisco (2023) offer a compelling critique (supported with statistical evidence) that shows, despite heightened scholarly interest, published research in important journals such as *Visual Communication Quarterly* or *Visual Communication* continue to focus on empirical cases from North America and Europe, systematically overlooking the diverse forms of visual political expression emerging from the Global South . This argument reinforces longstanding critiques of Eurocentrism in communications research

(Dissanayake, 2003; Miike, 2006) and reflects broader patterns of epistemic injustice within the academy and academic structures, including in studying visual practices such as photojournalism (Mitra & Witherspoon, 2024). Equally, the dominance of English as the *lingua franca* in academic discourse becomes a structural barrier, marginalising significant bodies of communication studies research from Latin America for example, by rendering them largely invisible to Global North scholars (Suzina, 2020). Such perspectives resonate with what Veneti and Rovisco (2023) argue about linguistic hegemony reflecting and perpetuating 'capitalist, extractive, and colonial dynamics' that might facilitate one-way knowledge flows from North to South (p.13).

Following Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2020), Veneti and Rovisco's (2023) observe that Southern intellectual contributions are frequently appropriated and repackaged within North American academic centres without meaningful engagement with their originating contexts. Indeed, Cusicanqui (2020) notes: 'the North American Academy does not follow the pace of our discussions; it does not interact with the Andean social sciences in any meaningful way (except by providing scholarships and invitations to seminars and symposia)' (p. 59). This critique exposes a fundamental contradiction in contemporary academic practice: while Southern knowledge is extracted and commodified, genuine intellectual dialogue remains absent. Consequently, the field of communications research, and studying visual political communication in general, faces an urgent imperative to establish true intellectual exchange that actively dismantle rather than reinforce existing colonial power structures in knowledge production.

To return to the question of methodology, quantitative studies easily dominate the larger field of research on political communication as well as visual political communication. As Neyazi (2023) rightfully highlights, the marginalisation of qualitative methods has resulted in 'an unnecessary and counterproductive narrowing of our ability to understand central aspects of political communication and how they are changing' (p.1890). These central aspects of political communication are multifaceted and extend beyond understanding *measurable* attributes like voter behaviour, partisan affiliations, and the ebb and flow of public opinion (most popular for media polls). The United States and Western Europe often dominate discussions on political communication due to their influential media landscapes and academic dominance. Yet, across the globe, in countries and cultures with diverse political systems, societal norms, epistemological and linguistic diversity, colloquialisms, political communication is grounded in intricate ways, not the least due to its audience being those most comfortable in the vernacular, both in verbal and non-verbal signs. From grassroots movements in Asia and Africa to political advertisements in

Latin America, and from the role played by social media in uprisings in the Arab world to indigenous communication strategies in the Pacific, the spectrum of political communication is vast and varied, and not always understood in measurable terms. To address this key gap in studying visual political communication, my study adopts a culture-centric approach and, as I explain in my research methodology, eminently uses qualitative tools of analysis and interpretation even in cases where it examines quantifiable trends.

1.1.3 Centring Visual *Political Communication on Social Media*

Whilst the first two kinds of gaps in the field of political communications research are rather interconnected, the third gap concerns the core object of my study, which is the focus on visual modes of political messaging, on social media platforms. Borrowing approaches from studying visual cultures and even semiotics and sometimes art history, the independent study and focus on *visual* political communication can be considered an emerging field (Parry, 2015). Bringing new perspectives into this field from a non-western context is also important as visual components fundamentally influence the construction, mediation, and contestations that constitute political reality.

Particularly in contemporary societal settings, where digital platforms have generated unprecedented visibility regimes by rapidly circulating visual content, Darren Lilleker (2019) highlights the significant role that social media plays in enhancing visual political communication. Lillekar argues that these platforms transform political communication in three key ways. First, social media shift the focus from political parties to individual political actors, thereby personalising politics through visual means (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Second, they amplify the role of emotions in political discourse by harnessing the affective power of visuals (Coleman & Wu, 2015). Third, they necessitate new visual communication strategies that are tailored to platform-specific affordances and algorithmic logics (Russmann et al., 2019). Therefore, effective engagement with these platforms demands that political actors project authenticity and integrity in ways that are visually legible. Given that social media particularly encourage audiences to engage with visual content, these practices underscore how political actors appear, but also the representational forms they employ through visual artefacts and the contents of these artefacts.

My thesis is premised on how political visibility is a performed act—an aspect I will further elaborate on in Chapter 2. Moreover, I take this performance of political visibility as being culture-specific. This has been made evident in works of scholars like Udupa et

al. (2018) who frame digital practices through lenses of cultural identity formations, ritualisation and sociality, to explore their the material implications across myriad societies. Additionally, Jari Kupiainen (2016) argues that digital visualities must consider pre-digital forms of constructing identity and representation. Stocchetti (2017) in fact argues how the concept of social representation must take into account how groups and individuals 'visually construct meaning in the digital age' (p. 38). Many other examples serve to reinforce the culture-specific nature of digital visual practices (Uimonen, 2013), for example, in how social norms observed in family scenes shape people's consumption and understanding of political reality through visual means (Lilleker et al., 2019). In effect, the idea of visuals in political communications, when seen from diverse cultural and societal perspectives, emerges as an unresolved and far from universal problem. By locating my study within this gap, I will explore how visuals are a distinct form of political communication, and function both as a symbolic resource and political tool in contemporary social life. In this sense, my study's focus on VPC recognises that it transcends mere images and involves more complex processes—both strategies and outcomes—to produce individual personas, group identities, represent ideologies of political parties, all within the dynamics and contestations that reflect and reconfigure the cultural and societal contexts in which visuals circulate.

1.1.4 Visual Political Communication as a Lens to Frame Gender in South Asia

Existing scholarship on visual political communication in non-Western contexts demonstrates a pronounced focus on *iconic* political figures, particularly presidents and prime ministers or masculine party leadership. In the Indian context, for example, the widespread focus on contemporary figures like Narendra Modi (or Indira Gandhi from earlier) exemplifies this trend. Rai (2019) examines the 'celebritisation' of Indian politics through Modi, while Baishya (2015) analyses how Modi's selfies functioned as political tools during the 2014 Indian elections. Similarly, Srivastava (2015) interrogates 'Modi-Masculinity' as a performance of traditional manhood within consumer culture. When examining broader visual political practices, Sahoo (2022) investigates political posters on WhatsApp during India's 2019 elections, while Chua's edited volume approaches political elections as popular culture. Gbadegesin and Onanuga (2019) analyse ideology and self-presentation in Nigerian campaign videos, yet again primarily through male political figures.

Even in the rare instance that female figures feature in the analytical focus of studies in visual politics, as in the case of a study by Shome, Neyazi and Ng (2024), that examines an area congruent with my own. In this study, while examining the interplay of identity,

ideology, and gender in West Bengal's 2021 election campaign, the focus remains on established political figures who feature in advertisements rather than the lived experiences of everyday women with crafting visual political communication. On the whole, such a study leave room to examine everyday negotiations in women politicians' visual politics.

Meanwhile, specifically related to the South Asian context, a significant volume of even recent research (since just over a decade) on understanding gender and/or the gendered body through feminist approaches, seem unconcerned about the currency of its intersections with visual political communication. This is evident for example, in the comprehensive historical examination of the lives and subjectivities of revolutionary politics by women in India, even those that call into question mainstream strands of Indian nationalism, liberal-feminism or European left-wing models of womanhood in the work of Anila Loomba (2019). In Loomba's exploration of the political subject, despite its focus on culture-based representation and self-presentation, visuals as political instruments to this end remain unexplored.

In an examination of the contemporary aspects surrounding gendered femininity and sexuality (Roy, 2022), despite a tracing of intersections of India's neoliberal politics with 'feminist governmentality' and the 'depoliticisation of struggles for women's rights', the visual dimensions of these political and social dynamics do not find a space. Entire edited volumes on attempting to understand, for example, gendered bodies as a function of transitions in South Asia's socio-economic and cultural landscape have also been produced (Malhotra, Menon & Johri, 2024). This volume draws theoretical perspectives from psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, law and post-colonial studies; but concepts from visual politics or visual political communication remains conspicuously absent in it. These studies—I have by no means presented an exhaustive list—are far from being insignificant. Indeed, they bring into focus how gender identity operates as a social construct, where, following Simone de Beauvoir ('one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one') Judith Butler (1990) highlights the 'compulsion of becoming' a woman (p. 10-12). Yet, as the vignette I began this chapter with shows, thinking about gender through visuals prompts deeper understanding of the body as a figurative, formal, social, political and cultural symbol.

Whilst discussing in detail the wider intellectual context where my research is situated (in Chapter 2), and in analysing visual political communication through a gendered lens, I will keep returning to the idea of the body as a symbol and carrier of symbols, which Mary

Douglas (1970) in her influential work on symbolism, conceptualised through a 'two bodies' formulation (p. 72). Douglas explains the duality through which the physical body expresses situations and positions in ways appropriate to social categories. Douglas therefore showed how the figure of the woman and the female body operates as a signifier mythicised through its social and cultural symbolism, something deeply relevant to grounding my investigations in its cultural context and societal setting. Therefore, in the realm of visual political communication, gender might be seen as a form of knowledge (Boulding, 1973) realised through explicit cues in imagery and display. To understand digital identities in culture- and context-specific ways, my study pays close attention to the societal and structural codes determining how the figure of a woman, including a female politician, is *made visible*. Inflected in combination through this context and culture that determine visual codes surrounding the female body, and the technological medium through which it is expressed, my study will also seek to understand how the body is produced, reproduced, reified, reconstituted or even challenged via the modes and contents of visual political communication (Kupiainen, 2016).

Indeed, digital visual practices are a key way for politicians to produce and perform their identities within 'technospaces', a concept Radhika and Venkataramana Gajjala (2008) use to describe social environments mediated by technology (pp. 1-2). Such practices are not independent material actions; they arise from principles and discourses of their societal contexts. Gajjala's (2019) formulation of 'gendered Indian digital publics' thus keeps the production of culture and subjectivity in technospaces central to it, a concept helpful to examine, as this research does, how women politicians in West Bengal present themselves on social media. Additionally, rather than only iconic politicians (Banerjee, 2012; Khan, 2019; Navarro et al., 2023) looking at less-known figures helps to understand how digital personas are gendered, and how gender is actively, intentionally, produced, remembered and routed through renewed identifications.

Of the various identities that visuals on social media serve to amplify, suppress, or deploy for political communication, gender cuts across all units and scales of analysis. This is evident in how traditional media portray women politicians (Devitt, 2002; Kahn, 1994; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Ross et al., 2013), which also impacts how first-time female political officeholders appear through their symbolic representation within the political landscape (Verge & Pastor, 2017). These show the importance of studying the visual nature of self-representation by women political candidates (Mattan and Small, 2021). Understanding the unequal ways in which women operate in a particular societal

context and how that society's—here West Bengal's—cultural codes impinge upon social media-based visual political communication (Udupa et al., 2018) then becomes paramount.

Therefore, in the context of studying gender and femininity critically in the South Asian context, framing gender through VPC is a fourth major research gap that my study seeks to address. My overall research, in this manner, works between absences even *within* the specific, non-western empirical context (South Asia) that I investigate. While it does not lay claim to being widely representative of all social groups of female politicians (I explain how this has been the case in Chapter 8), it does aim to bring into sharper focus visual political communication on social media, of figures who are not exclusively a group of celebrities, political or otherwise. Most importantly, an integral goal of my study, which I explain below in section 1.3, is to uncover the strategies and intents of enacting particular kinds of visual political communication through the lived experiences of female politicians in West Bengal.

1.2 Contextualising the Research

As stated in the beginning of this introduction, my study focuses on the context of West Bengal in India. This context is central to the goals my research sets forth with, the questions I articulate, and the methodological and analytical strategies I adopt to answer them. Whilst I have dedicated a full chapter of this thesis (Chapter 3) to tracing this context and setting of my study, understanding the goals and questions of my study demands a brief summary of it. The discourse of gender in Bengal (I have dropped the 'West' here to indicate a cultural qualifier rather than a political state and electoral unit) has been decorated and customised in literature and media from as far back as the incursion of print cultures in the Indian subcontinent—interestingly, modern printing arrived for the first time in the Indian subcontinent in Bengal itself. Alongside, a group called the Bengali *bhadralok* (educated, genteel middle and upper-middle class) has historically played a pivotal role in shaping its cultural and political discourses, including those surrounding gender. As cultural arbiters and (often self-claimed) intellectuals, the *bhadralok* historically and arguably in the contemporary times influenced how gender is represented, negotiated, and contested across various media landscapes in this cultural and linguistic region.

During Bengal's colonial period, elite women's behaviour and representation of femininity were quite significant for the nascent national movement, as 'concepts of femininity in

the context of colonial India became inseparable from a politics of cultural authenticity, preservation, and Indian identity itself' (Handa 2004, p. 67). Women, in the Indian nationalist movement of the 1900s, were the representatives of the spiritual core of the nation. They had to represent its spiritual purity while also demonstrating adherence to a particular conception of Indian identity. Women behaving in ways considered modest, respectable, and appropriate by their observers legitimated the 'imagined' communities they came from, one of which, vide Benedict Anderson (1983) is the national community. Such behaviour demonstrated to members and potential members the values the community upheld.

The British, like Indians, thought that a woman's status and behaviour directly reflected the moral character of the nation. They judged Indian culture by the status of women in India, decried numerous practices, most famously the barbaric ritual of 'sati'—where a woman was burned alive on her deceased husband's funeral pyre—as oppressive for women. Widespread British allegations that Indian women were downtrodden contributed to the imperialist civilisational mission of how women in India and by extension, Indian society needed to be reformed (Chatterjee, 1995)—with barely any regard for voices of the women themselves.[1] Conversely, for the Indian nationalist movement also precipitated by historical events in Bengal (I will elaborate these in Chapter 3), by performing a respectable and modest Indian identity, women were compelled to act as testament to India's *civilised* nature and the redundancy of its culture and society's need for 'liberal' colonial governance, reform and/or policy. Elite women therefore had to be not only authentically Indian, but appropriately modest and traditional in the public space. An instance of this in the colonial period was the *purdah* (literally meaning veil or partition). The *purdah* referred not only to the segregation of women in their homes or certain spaces, but required that women practice appropriate upper-class modesty in public, including in her behaviour (Papanek 1973). Through such compulsions, women in Bengal were tasked with preserving 'Indian' values (Chatterjee 1993). Partha Chatterjee (1990) observes that elite Bengali women could go outside their home as long as they behaved in certain ways: 'spirituality [of women] did not […] impede chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home […] out into the world; on the contrary, it facilitated it […] under conditions that would not threaten her femininity' (p. 249).

[1] In her 1988 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously constructed the opposing sentences 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' and 'The women wanted to die', in reference to the marginalisation of women's voices in the discourse, policies and actions surrounding their bodies (Spivak, 2006).

Through a far more in-depth discussion of these gendered dynamics within Bengal's social and political trajectory, in Chapter 3 I will present how the societal context's own history offers a lens to frame its present-day dynamics, the instances of continuity, as well as those of departure or even rupture with this past. Yet, in varied ways, my study will also establish how the societally constructed discourses about femininity in West Bengal continue to persist, how in particular these discourses play an important causal role in determining visual codes for women, and how these codes impact the lives and visual politics of active female politicians in their original or modified forms. What I am suggesting here, then, is that the historical context and the present setting of West Bengal provides an important conceptual apparatus through which its contemporary, gendered visual political communication on social media can be studied. Through such an apparatus, the layers of meaning in these forms of communications can be unravelled and understood. Finally, a key motivation for situating my study within this context stems from my position as a researcher familiar with West Bengal through my education, and also with Bengal's cultural politics. Most importantly, my knowledge of the Bengali language also affords me the opportunity to decipher gendered political representation through a *cultural* lens. By adopting this context for my study, my thesis aims to contribute to nuanced insights into the wider global discourse on political communication.

1.3 Research Goals and Questions

The goals of this thesis emerge from the four gaps I have critically identified in the overall fields of political communication studies, its epistemological and methodological orientations, the need to centre visuals in this field and the gaps in empirical orientations in feminist and gender studies in the South Asian context. Following these gaps, my research aims to,

Firstly: ***recentre culture in visual political communication studies.*** To achieve this goal, I will explore how societal mores and cultural norms shape visual politics from a non-western perspective, where I focus on West Bengal, India as a case to examine electoral politics.

Secondly: ***examine gender and political visibility as performative phenomena*****.** In my research, I will approach this goal from two analytical perspectives: one, the visual artefacts circulated on social media during an election campaign in West Bengal; and, two: by investigating the strategic considerations and intents of the

female politicians whose lived experiences impact how they produce these visual artefacts.

I have used these two distinct goals to articulate three primary research questions. Drawing from the conceptual triad of how (visual) political communication is defined, these questions address the aspects of production and dissemination, privileging, in turn, the perspectives of its producers and, the outcomes of their processes of production. To address the levels at which the act of visual political communication operates in the specific context I investigate, I have resolved each of these questions into sub-questions as noted below.

RQ1: In what ways is the political visibility of women candidates manifested on social media (Facebook and X) by their parties and themselves during the 2021 West Bengal election campaign?

- RQ1A: To what extent are women candidates made visible in their parties' campaign posts?
- RQ1B: How frequently do women present their personal or individual persona in visual posts during the campaign?
- RQ1C: What formal characteristics define candidates' visual self-representation in relation to constituents, and how do they establish visual salience?

RQ2: How do the visual politics of women candidates on social media during the 2021 West Bengal election campaign align with or deviate from their parties' portrayals?

- RQ2A: How do parties and candidates compare in their visual representation of traditional and non-traditional femininity, including gender neutrality?
- RQ2B: Quantitatively, how do candidates' portrayals of gender in traditional and non-traditional ways compare with their parties' visual politics?
- RQ2C: How do visual politics of candidates across different parties compare in their portrayal of gender through sartorial choices and modesty signalling?
- RQ2D: How are gendered sartorial choices, modesty signals, and religious/political markers distributed in candidates' visual politics across parties?
- RQ2E: What is the comparative frequency of religious and political markers in candidates' visual politics across parties?
- RQ2F: How do embodied actions and religious/political symbols in female candidates' visual self-representation compare with party portrayals?

RQ3: What considerations do female politicians in West Bengal report regarding their strategic intent and motivations in performing visual politics on social media?

- RQ3A: How do female politicians adapt their visual self-presentation to the affordances of different social media platforms?
- RQ3B: What levels of critical awareness do female politicians demonstrate regarding pressures to perform particular kinds of visual politics online?
- RQ3C: How do female politicians balance authentic self-representation with societal expectations in their visual political performances?
- RQ3D: How do female politicians navigate tensions between self-representation and their affiliated parties' interests and expectations?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured to guide the reader through a logical progression of ideas, beginning with the present introductory overview that establishes the rationale for the research, its goals and the questions the research sets forth with. Following the introduction, the first half of the thesis focuses on the intellectual and research context. This part provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature that explains its theoretical and empirical foundations, complemented by a detailed explanation of the methodology employed in the study, outlining the analytical approaches that each investigation within the overall study adopts. The second half of the thesis presents the findings that emerge by analysing the data, followed by a discussion chapter that synthesises these findings. Finally, the conclusion offers a summary of the key insights and reflects on the implications of the research, proposing directions for future study.

Following this introduction, **Chapter 2, Intellectual Context**, provides the theoretical as well as conceptual foundation for examining gender in visual political communication on social media in West Bengal. This chapter situates the research at the intersection of political performance theory, gender studies, media studies, and visual politics. Drawing on Mary Douglas's 'two bodies' framework, the chapter explains how women politicians negotiate both their physical and social self-presentation. This chapter argues that political performance is inherently gendered, with visibility mediated by power structures that determine what is seen and what remains hidden. It further traces how visual political communication operates through cues that invoke social identity and cultural context, particularly affecting women politicians who face heightened scrutiny regarding appearance and conduct. By reviewing both Western and South Asian scholarship, the chapter identifies critical areas that the visual political communication on social media in a non-western context is in dialogue with. In identifying these areas, I bring forth the agenda for adding nuance to existing theories of political performance, and also make the case for expanding Eurocentric frameworks that have long dominated the field. This

discussion naturally leads to the need for culturally grounded approaches to studying the everyday visual strategies employed by women politicians to assert their political authority.

Building on this foundation, **Chapter 3, Research Context and Setting**, examines three interrelated themes essential for understanding gendered visual politics in West Bengal: political history, women's participation, and cultural constructs of respectability. This chapter begins by tracing Bengal's political evolution—from colonial rule through independence, the period of Left Front governance (1977–2011), to the rise of the state's current Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee. It then analyses the shifting nature of women's political engagement across these eras, revealing a trajectory that moves from educational reformers to militant revolutionaries and ultimately to contemporary electoral candidates, thereby exposing the persistent underrepresentation of women despite expanded participation. Additionally, the chapter explores the cultural frameworks of the *bhadralok* (respectable elite) and *bhadramahila* (respectable woman), which shape societal expectations of female propriety. Through an examination of visual representations ranging from nationalist iconography to modern political imagery, I demonstrate how these cultural paradigms both constrain and sometimes contest the political visibility of women. This contextual understanding lays the groundwork for the subsequent empirical analysis by projecting four distinctive modes of visual self-presentation available to contemporary female politicians in West Bengal.

Following this explanation of the research context and its currents setting, **Chapter 4, Methodology**, outlines the philosophical underpinnings and methodological approach of my research into gendered visual political communication in West Bengal. Drawing on critical realist philosophy, I recognise that social phenomena are shaped by both observable material conditions and deeper structural forces. In this chapter, I describe two complementary methods employed in the study: a visual content analysis of social media during the 2021 West Bengal election and in-depth interviews with female politicians. For the visual analysis, I examined 1,033 posts from women candidates alongside 205 posts from party accounts, developing a culturally specific framework to identify gendered visual cues across dimensions such as actions, clothing, signals of modesty, and religious symbols. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 women politicians representing major parties, and reflexive thematic analysis was used to illuminate how they negotiate structural constraints while crafting their public personas. I also reflect on my unique positionality—as a Bengali woman with cultural insight and a researcher based in Ireland—which enriched my analytical perspective. This

dual methodological approach effectively bridges observable visual patterns with the underlying socio-cultural structures that influence women's political visibility in West Bengal's electoral landscape.

Moving into the second part of the thesis, **Chapter 5: Artefacts and Bodies**, employs visual content analysis to examine how gender is performed in political communication on social media during the 2021 West Bengal election. In this chapter, I analyse Facebook and X posts from female candidates and political party accounts to reveal significant discrepancies between how parties represent women candidates and how the candidates present themselves. Drawing on Douglas's 'two bodies' concept and Rai's political performance framework, I identify five distinct self-representation typologies and categorise visual cues as either gendered or gender-neutral, and as traditional or non-traditional. My findings demonstrate that female politicians strategically navigate conflicting expectations by balancing traditional femininity—evident in their sartorial choices and modesty signals—with displays of political competence through more neutral actions. Notably, candidates displayed traditionally gendered cues more frequently in their own posts than their parties did, suggesting a conscious effort to self-fashion as the culturally appropriate 'good woman'. This visual competition among female candidates to embody the ideal of womanhood while asserting political authority reveals how deeply cultural notions of respectability permeate digital political communication in West Bengal, thereby constraining women's political visibility even as social media offers new avenues for self-presentation.

Transitioning to **Chapter 6**, the focus shifts to what female politicians in West Bengal report about constructing and managing their visual personas on social media platforms. Drawing on in-depth interviews with candidates from across the political spectrum, this chapter explores how women negotiate the complex demands of digital visibility. The analysis identifies four interconnected themes: platform-specific adaptations, tensions between individual agency and structural constraints, navigation of societal expectations, and alignment with party interests. Female politicians are shown to engage in continuous balancing acts, often experiencing what is termed 'hypervisible invisibility'—a paradox wherein intense public scrutiny effectively erases their individual identities. Despite the democratising potential of social media, most candidates ultimately reproduce traditional gender norms through their visual performances, embodying culturally specific ideals of feminine 'goodness' and propriety. Moreover, the findings demonstrate how women's bodies serve as instruments for communicating broader cultural values, with their sartorial choices and demeanour becoming significant political statements. This chapter,

therefore, further illuminates the precarious nature of women's political visibility, where success often depends on conforming to the colonial-era '*bhadramahila'* archetype, and sets the stage for a broader synthesis of the research.

Building on these insights, **Chapter 7** synthesises findings from both the visual artefact analysis and the politicians' interviews to offer a comprehensive understanding of gendered visual politics in West Bengal. This chapter reveals how female politicians navigate a complex landscape in which their bodies become sites of cultural contestation. It examines how the limited representation of women in campaign visuals reflects broader systemic exclusion, and identifies a relational field in which female politicians must balance visibility with societal expectations—often appearing as nurturers and moral leaders rather than as autonomous authorities. I conceptualise these negotiations as the 'body's bargain': the continual trade-off between self-expression and conformity to cultural norms. The findings further reveal that competitive femininity drives candidates to outdo each other in embodying the shifting ideal of the 'good woman', thereby reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal structures. In moving beyond simple male/female binaries, this discussion also illuminates the culturally specific ways in which women politicians blend tradition with modernity and conservatism with progressiveness. Overall, this synthetic approach demonstrates that visual political performance is neither entirely liberating nor wholly constraining, but rather a nuanced negotiation embedded within West Bengal's distinctive sociocultural context.

Finally, **Chapter 8:** the **Conclusion** to my thesis, brings together its key contributions to understanding gendered visual politics in non-Western contexts. Integrating insights from both the visual artefact analysis and the interviews, it reveals how female politicians in West Bengal navigate complex representational fields that extend beyond mere numerical presence. By reconstituting traditional 'good woman' ideals through digital platforms while negotiating competing demands from both party structures and societal expectations, the research critically reflects on the multifaceted nature of political visibility. The conclusion also addresses the study's limitations—including its temporal scope and exclusive focus on women—and advocates for future approaches that centre cultural specificity in visual political analysis. In doing so, this research positions itself within broader efforts to de-westernise communication studies, demonstrating how culturally grounded methodologies can yield nuanced insights into the intersections of gender, visibility, and power in contemporary political performance.

2 Intellectual Context

In this chapter, I trace the theoretical perspectives, disciplinary knowledge, and empirical concerns that have informed my study. These discourses, at the intersection of which my research is located, serve to clarify its overall intellectual context. My research, on the whole, investigates the production and reconstitution of gender within digital social media-based visual political communication in a particular societal and cultural setting. Accordingly, in this chapter, I set forth the theoretical underpinnings, existing state of knowledge, and research precedents that are relevant to my research, as well as its key points of departure from them.

2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

My study's concern with electoral politics on social media platforms and its relationship with cultural specificities is premised on how, with rare exceptions, electoral politics is an activity that primarily occurs in public view. Therefore, it is essential to critically engage with theories that explain the performative dimensions of electoral politics and its underlying structures of power. This includes understanding how social identities—especially gender—are perceived, embedded, produced, and reconstituted within the political sphere. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how visibility and power influence the ways these identities are shaped and made to appear. The discussions that follow critically consider each of these aspects.

2.1.1 Political Performance

The notion of politics as a performance has emerged from ritual and ceremony. 'Ceremony' refers to what is enacted on special occasions and 'ritual' the order of performing acts based on certain prescribed norms. In the case of parliaments, by shifting the perspective from its 'deliberative, legislative, legitimising, and symbolic' functions, Rai (2010, p. 286) argues that performance, rather than merely forming a backdrop, becomes constitutive to 'inventing' traditions that both help and, conversely, resist the reproduction and stabilisation of political power. Significantly, in this performative understanding of politics, dominant social relations and identities are both represented and subverted. What is pertinent to my investigation is how, from the conceptualisation of politics and performance being co-constitutive, electoral politics can be understood as the means to connect the interests and ideologies of individuals and groups in society to the functioning of political institutions like the legislature or parliament in that society.

Focusing on ceremony and ritual in electoral politics, however, risks overlooking the more quotidian and commonplace aspects of political performance. As my study examines not just an event (an election campaign) but also the lived experiences of women politicians, what emerges as common to these two levels of political performance is a gendering of its spaces and modes. In the *Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance,* Gluhovic et al. (2021) define 'politics' or 'the political' as a field of human relations where power, values, and ritual are *enacted* and *expressed*. Building from the concept of performance I will turn to particular aspects of gender and power which underlie political communication, that are also central to my study, in the discussions that follow. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the enactment and expression of identities, power and values through political acts, whether in institutional or everyday settings, means that by its very nature, politics is inherently unstable, contested, and inflected by the manner and site of its performance.

For the purpose of my study, it also becomes necessary to view politics through the conceptual lens of performance in a wider sense. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1957) defines 'performance' as the 'activity of a given participant […] which serves to influence other participants', who in turn, comprise 'audiences, observers or co-participants' (p.8). Following Goffman, the theatre critic and scholar Richard Schechner (2002) notes, 'any action that is framed, presented, highlighted or displayed is a performance' (p. 2). Indeed, the concept of performance emerges from studies of theatre and drama. It can therefore be conceptualised as being transactional, marked by exchanges of affects between the performer and spectator or recipient of the act. This kind of exchange must, first, be recognised as rehearsed and *intentional* behaviour: an act of doing, and *showing* what is being done. This showing of the doing (and being) can occupy a spectrum ranging from theatrical acts to everyday life. A second feature of performance lies in how it necessarily requires an audience (McKenzie, 2001). Turner (1967) posits that in this relational field between the performer and audience, the possibility of both dialogue and confrontation emerges. Performance in politics becomes relevant for this study to recognise how it relies on the reciprocity of relations between the performer and their audience, and the ability of one to control what is shown, or conversely, experienced by the other. The third feature of performance which emerges as critical for my investigation involves mediation in order to move from the performer to the audience (Gluhovic et al., 2021). This means that the medium through which a performance is transmitted, whether it is, for example, a theatrical stage, cinema or digital means, affects both the modes of its fashioning and reception.

Drawing these ideas together, the concept of political performance becomes significant when examining how the showing of an act or even showing a manner of being occurs in electoral politics. In the context of my research, then, the interdisciplinary gender and politics scholar Shirin M. Rai's (2014) 'political performance framework' (PPF) proves helpful. In the PPF, Rai delineates four constitutive elements—body, representation, auditory power, and labour—in her conceptualisation of political performance. Rai also argues for the need to map such performance from its production to its reception. The framework builds upon Michael Saward's (2006) concept of 'representative claim', where authenticity of a political claim is produced by the performer, but also subject to scrutiny and judgement by the recipient(s) of the performance. The embodied aspects of political performance then emerge as being an important consideration in my study from a gendered perspective, which I explain further in the forthcoming discussion.

In my study, there is one important point of departure from Rai's PPF model, however. Given my focus on the *visual* dimension of political performance, I do not engage with the aspects of auditory power, as these can only be analysed by examining acts of speech. Rather, I concentrate on the still image as a site of visual political communication. Nonetheless, recognising the performative dimension of politics helps to build the approach and method my study employs. It serves to investigate both the visual artefacts that bear evidence to a political performance and the ideas or intentions reported about staging such a performance by its producers (which I reveal in chapters 5 and 6, respectively). As Alexander, Giesen, & Mast (2006) posit, which Rai builds from, reading a political performance involves understanding its constituent parts as well as the entire performance and the effect(s) it potentially produces. These effects, as I understand, are twofold. They can be seen as having a material manifestation. They can also be seen to possess certain qualities when displaying the performance. Such features of political performance prompt an examination of how power relations and, more importantly, gender identities are performed and communicated, which is a core concern of this study. Therefore, to better understand political performance and its visibility (the *showing* of being and doing), it becomes imperative to delve deeper into how gender is performed visually through the body as a political act, and the power relations embedded in such forms of performance.

2.1.2 Performing Gender: Two Bodies

In the main, my research focuses on how gendered identities are visually constructed in electoral politics. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how the portrayal of gender, as with any performance, is mediated by the site of its appearance, particularly the digital social

media platforms where political contestations occur. Before that, however, it becomes necessary to understand how this kind of performance necessarily employs the body of the female politician. Here, the anthropologist Mary Douglas's (1970) 'two bodies' formulation proves significant. Douglas underscores a duality of the body, which is physical in one sense, but also in another sense social. The physical and social body, in combination, operate to symbolically represent and respond to societal structures. Albeit considered to be rooted in structuralist traditions, Douglas's framework prompts us to examine how cultural norms and social categories are embodied and contested where gender identities are enacted.

This two bodies conceptualisation of gender enables a dynamic interpretation of how the visual political performance by women politicians in mediated spaces signify and negotiate power within a social order. The approach is particularly relevant for understanding the gendered nature of political performance, leading to particular forms of visibility. The female body, in such cases, could be seen to operate as a distinctly marked symbol. Moreover, being marked with its gender, the body appears laden with figurative, formal, social, political, and cultural meaning. Unlike the unmarked 'universal' body, it can be seen to communicate societal roles and expectations and, by extension, becomes a site of as well as a subject when enacting political performance. By adopting Mary Douglas's framework to understand political performance, my study moves away from the post-structuralist view of gender being fluid and subjective, as prominently posited in the works of the feminist philosopher and scholar Judith Butler (1990). Butler argues that gender cannot be seen as a stable form of identity but is constructed through repeated acts and norms, shaped by the 'compulsion to become' (pp. 10–12). In this respect, Butler challenges the fixity of symbolic associations.

Making a distinction between structuralist and post-structuralist feminist thought becomes important for two reasons. First, my study queries visual political communication on social media by centring the material and social realities of culture and politics, rather than solely focus on individual subjectivity. These realities, as explained in chapter 4 which discusses my methodological approach, cannot be reduced either to observable things or the non-observable structures that cause them, but must necessarily be read as a combination of both. Second, Douglas's theoretical perspective helps to forge connections between individual experiences and societal codes. By adopting such a framework, I aim to bring forth the material translation of these codes within visual artefacts that represent the material outcomes of a political performance, on the one hand. On the other hand, the two bodies framework allows for uncovering the

lived experiences of fashioning individual personas by uncovering the intents and contents of such performances.

To explain this point further, using Douglas's conceptualisation to read the female body, a strong connection existing between individual beliefs and societal structures must be recognised. She argues that ideas of gender and the feminine are deeply embedded in social contexts rather than operating as isolated constructs. Beliefs, for Douglas, serve a dual function: they reflect societal norms and actively shape collective behaviour. To understand these beliefs, she emphasises examining their practical applications and manifestations in everyday life. Douglas draws parallels between beliefs and social institutions, highlighting their mutual dependency. While acknowledging individual agency, she contends that social structures significantly enable and constrain belief systems, limiting the scope of personal choice. Using the 'two bodies' approach, therefore, allows an analysis of the female body as a site where social meaning is both inscribed and contested. It enables a nuanced reading of how gendered political performances are shaped by the interplay of cultural symbolism and structural realities. Adopting this approach therefore helps to combine the interdependence of belief, society, and visual representation, offering a way to critically consider gender, media, and politics in combination.

This approach is not without critique. Scholars have questioned Douglas's structuralist leanings, arguing that such perspectives risk being overly rigid and may overlook individual agency. Post-structuralist feminists, such as Butler (1993), reject fixed or essential definitions of 'woman,' instead viewing gender as a socially constructed and historically contingent category. Butler also warns that both feminist and patriarchal attempts to define 'woman' can inadvertently reproduce the very structures of control they seek to dismantle. However, in emphasising plurality and fluidity, post-structuralism can at times sideline gender as a central organising force.

For a non-Western context such as the one I investigate, it is crucial not to sever the link between symbolic systems and material realities but to centre it. While Douglas is not explicitly a feminist scholar, her anthropological framework intersects productively with feminist concerns about embodiment. Her 'two bodies' concept highlights how societal codes shape, and are shaped by, bodily practice—an idea that resonates across structuralist and post-structuralist feminist debates. In adapting Douglas to a feminist analysis of visual political communication, I emphasise the need to account for both entrenched social structures—such as patriarchal norms and class hierarchies—and the

performative ways in which female politicians actively reshape their public personas. This approach balances an understanding of enduring power structures with the agency that political actors exercise in navigating them.

Making a conceptual connection between gender and society becomes necessary to integrate an understanding of the former in the visual, performative dimensions of electoral politics. Therefore, within the broader theoretical context of feminist studies, my study finds a way to manoeuvre structuralist thought that has been charged with essentialising gender identity, and the formulation of gender as an ambiguous construct in post-structuralist feminist thought. As Teresa de Lauretis (1987) posits, gendered subjectivity is hardly an immanent characteristic in women, but is a dynamic and ongoing construction of meaning shaped by social experience. This process of identity construction is shaped through interactions with the world (the society in which the body is located). It is mediated by practices, discourses, and institutions that imbue events and experiences with meaning. Lauretis's emphasis on practices, rather than language alone, situates gendered subjectivity within material and historical realities, thereby providing a grounded yet flexible analytical lens for my study.

Particularly significant, then, is how the mediated construction of gender bears resonance not just with the notions of a physical and social body (per Douglas) but also with Donna Haraway's (1988) conceptualisation of 'positionality' in the experience of the world and the construction of its knowledge. Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges' is widely recognised as inherently spatial, as it emphasises the role of location in shaping the knowing subject. However, some recent critiques argue that it relies too heavily on the idea of 'epistemic gaps'—the notion that knowledge is always limited by one's position and can never be fully complete (Simandan, 2019). This is the sense in which knowing is partial, dynamic, and *situated*. Therefore, despite this criticism, making the positionality of the women candidates explicit and relying on their and my own situated knowledge remains relevant to both the site of political performance in this study and the societal context of the West Bengal election campaign.

Moreover, situated knowledges helps to frame the lived experiences of women politicians who report how they navigate cultural expectations, digital platforms, and political frameworks in their visual representations. Recognising these connections, then, prompts a closer look at how visibilities are fashioned within a relational field of social and political power, which is what I turn to now. While Mary Douglas roots her analyses in preindustrial or so-called 'tribal' contexts, Donna Haraway foregrounds late-twentieth-

century, postmodern Western societies, where advanced technologies reshape what it means to inhabit a body coded with new meanings (Haraway, 2016). Adopting Douglas uncritically could risk anachronism by universalising her findings; nonetheless, her central insight—namely, that moral and social codes materialise on and through the body—remains germane to a contemporary postcolonial context that also contends with digital technologies. I, therefore, adapt rather than simply adopt her framework, recognising stark contrasts in historical and technological milieus. This approach enables me to interrogate how patriarchal norms endure within digital media landscapes while remaining alert to cultural and temporal specificities. By placing Douglas's structural insights into dialogue with Haraway's more fluid, discursive orientation, I illustrate how the 'two bodies' concept still illuminates the contested space in which women's visual political performances take shape, even in an era marked by multiple, often competing, conceptions of embodiment.

2.1.3 Power, Politics and Visibility

By showing that electoral politics can be viewed as a performance, and specifically, how gender is delineated concurrently through physical and social bodies, I have highlighted how being seen and shown and showing and seeing, involves the transmission and reception of a *visible* message loaded with meaning. It is therefore imperative to delve deeper into how visibilities are mediated in and through acts that both employ and consolidate, even subvert political power. My research studies these forms of visibility and invisibility where gender roles and identities are concerned, predicated on unequal power relationships. Political power, as scholars of visual cultures underscore, reveals and conceals identities, actions and messages, thereby shaping what is seen and what remains obscured. Women in politics particularly face heightened scrutiny around appearance, behaviour, and conduct, pressures that their male counterparts experience to a far lesser extent (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020; Coffe et al., 2023). In fact, social and cultural variables that shape identity formation on digital platforms—which offer new modes of public engagement—also reinforce patriarchal stereotypes, thereby indicating that visibility is mediated by power. This is evident in a public gaze that imposes expectations even beyond the political sphere in the electoral sense.

In the South Asian context, an important case of the intersection of gender with political visibility and power emerges in the far right Hindu party Shiv Sena's[2] patterns of

[2] The Shiv Sena, founded in the mid-1960s, is a Hindu-nationalist party that emerged in western India (specifically Mumbai, the capital city of the state of Maharashtra and later became widespread across the state). Frequently extremist, the party gained a popular stronghold in Mumbai by pushing for a pro-Marathi nativity, where the city's 'original' Marathi inhabitants would be given preferential treatment (in economic

exclusion exercised towards its own women's front (*Mahila Aghadi*) members. As Tarini Bedi's (2007) compelling anthropological investigation of Shiv Sena's *Aghadi* members reveals, rather than being merely symbolic, their exclusion reflects a material practice of power. It maintains gender hierarchies while simultaneously ensuring the party benefits from the women's electoral labour. Bedi shows how the women recognise such forms of exclusion—'we do all the work and they get all the recognition' (p. 1538), they observe—yet report remaining powerless to demand a presence in the visual practices of the party. They report a systematic absence in the party's official visual presence, for instance, from hoardings, posters and billboards in the city of Mumbai's urban spaces. Instead, Bedi reveals that the *Aghadi* women exercise a more embodied performance of being visible by inserting themselves into these spaces to connect directly with their constituents.

Besides physical spaces, visibility's intersection with gender in the digital age has also blurred lines between political performance and personal identity. Evaluations of politicians increasingly extend beyond policy or professionalism, focusing on how they project personas that resonate with dispersed audiences (Thompson, 2000). Although the spectacle of politics—I will explain this aspect further later in this chapter—has long been a facet of the modern experience (Debord, 1995), emphasis on its performative and visual dimensions intensifies the vulnerabilities for women in politics. They must navigate these expectations in an online sphere where visibility can either empower them or expose them to public evaluation. The consequences of social expectations and evaluations can lead to crises of credibility or authenticity for political figures, with varied cultural implications across different regions. When these normative breaches occur, particularly in highly value-laden aspects of everyday life, their impacts are amplified through the medium of transmission. In social media particularly, the speed of information sharing can be staggering. Here, content may be appropriated, distorted, or challenged by a diverse array of actors—journalists, commentators, and everyday users—thereby distorting the original message and destabilising control over one's visibility.

Dayan (2013) suggests that visibility was once a privilege limited to a select few, with anonymity often stigmatised. His 'paradigm of visibility' (p. 139) highlights how media directs collective attention, framing visibility as a resource that can be actively sought, sometimes through provocative or disruptive acts. As Rose (2001) argues, modes of

status, jobs etc) because of a perceived threat of economic opportunity being claimed by 'immigrants' from other (usually northern) parts of India.

visibility also offer avenues for resistance, serving as platforms to challenge dominant narratives. However, Dayan argues that visibility is not inherently empowering and that certain forms may backfire. Digital media platforms like Facebook and YouTube enable individuals to assert visibility on their own terms or define others' visibility, fostering a landscape where 'visibility entrepreneurs' (p. 143) can challenge mainstream narratives. This dichotomy makes it imperative to recognise the possibilities for counter-narratives in political communication, where individuals and groups compete for attention, recognition and influence.

Tyler's (2013) work on the 2011 UK riots offers key insights into visibility as a contested terrain, highlighting how media portrayals can stigmatise marginalised groups. Additionally, he also warns that such portrayals can sometimes reinforce negative stereotypes, complicating the pursuit of social justice. Importantly, however, Tyler shows that visibility can be a site of negotiation, where power is exercised through the production and contestation of images, messages, and identities. Similarly, Casper and Moore (2009) contend that visuals can either reinforce or subvert power over human bodies, illustrated by the use of smartphones to document and witness social injustices. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement showed how visibility on digital media can amplify demands for justice and accountability (Peters, 2001; Richardson, 2016). These examples bear testimony to how visibility can operate in relation to power. It can be deployed as a tool for empowerment and a space of resistance within political movements. Building on this, Creech (2020) emphasises that the very way events are made visible—their mediatisation and framing—shapes their consequentiality. He argues that the visibility of an event is not simply a neutral reflection of reality but a constructed phenomenon that influences how the event is understood and what actions are deemed appropriate in response.

To further understand how visibility catalyses social and political mobilisation, it is important to recognise that calls to action are often constrained by unequal political and legal access (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Blaagaard et al., 2017). This means that even powerful acts of witnessing are deeply contingent upon existing power dynamics, where certain groups' visibility may be amplified or marginalised depending on their alignment with dominant socio-political structures. Furthermore, the impact of digital witnessing hinges on its capacity to evoke affective responses while navigating the uneven terrain of public empathy and institutional validation. For example, Kraidy's (2016) analysis of the Tahrir Square protests reveals how activists leveraged visual and digital media to bypass state-controlled narratives, situating their resistance within a global framework and

highlighting the potential of mediated visibility to challenge authoritarian regimes. However, as the Occupy Wall Street movement demonstrates, the use of digital imagery to expose systemic inequities does not always lead to direct policy change or sustained political action (Creech, 2014). This highlights the complex relationship between visibility, digital activism, and tangible outcomes, suggesting that while digital platforms can amplify marginalised voices, they are not a guaranteed pathway to social justice. My overall research builds upon this understanding by examining how female politicians in West Bengal navigate and negotiate visibility within such complex digital landscapes.

Situating questions of culture, subjectivity, and everyday life within a global context, and against the backdrop of the pervasive spread of communication technologies across borders, underscores the need to examine how mediated visibility both shapes and challenges longstanding cultural practices. Media forms increasingly permeate social life, intersecting with local socio-political structures and reconfiguring categories such as private/public, tradition/modernity, and global/local. In the realm of gendered political visibility, research from the United States (Ashworth et al., 2024), Turkey (Ehrhart, 2023), Kenya (Kenyatta, 2023), and China (Jiang, 2022) highlights the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics and the culturally specific ways in which their visibility is shaped.

While digital platforms create new opportunities for visual political engagement, their effects on women's political participation are uneven across contexts. In Ghana and Nigeria, for instance, digital media has been shown to strengthen activist outreach (Chiluwa, 2022), and to increase engagement among young Chilean Instagram users (Scherman & Rivera, 2021). Indonesian female politicians similarly employ such tools to build public trust and enhance their profiles (Amin & Ritonga, 2022). Yet, visual political communication remains a contested sphere, with gender stereotyping prevalent in both legacy and digital media (Rohrbach et al., 2023). Female leaders are frequently subjected to online hostility (Håkansson, 2023), an issue compounded in authoritarian contexts such as Morocco (Moreno-Almeida & Gerbaudo, 2021) and China (Wagner et al., 2021), where feminist voices are heavily suppressed. This suppression is also documented in India (Kadiwal, 2023), Iran (Siamdoust, 2023), and Ethiopia (Woldearegay & Hailu, 2023), highlighting the complex interplay of technology, power, and political agency.

These shifts—rooted in specific historical and political trajectories—materialise most visibly in popular culture and consumer spaces, where discourses of desire, gender, and commodification intersect. Given my focus on the digital visibility of women politicians in

everyday contexts, I identify a critical gap in feminist research on how women politicians use visual media for political communication, particularly in regions typically regarded as 'peripheral'—especially postcolonial, non-settler contexts outside Europe and North America. Most existing scholarship focuses on Western democracies, overlooking how women in other global regions harness digital platforms to navigate political visibility.

Additionally, it is important to assess whether women politicians—across both resource-rich and resource-poor nations—encounter similar challenges in performing visual politics. The historical and political shifts that intersect with popular and consumer culture, in turn, allow me draw on Angela McRobbie's (2015) notion of 'the perfect,' which explains how feminist energies can be channelled into self-actualisation and aesthetic perfection. In this view, members of a single gendered group may internally and externally strive to better one another in what McRobbie terms 'competitive femininity'. Such a pressure to appear perfect invokes certain notions of popular feminism that may promote individualised ideals, thereby excluding women who do not meet middle-class, Western-centric standards (Skeggs, 2004). Examining these dynamics from a South Asian vantage point—particularly West Bengal in my case—allows an investigation of how such discourses shape female politicians' pursuit of authority and if they successfully reclaim visibility outside these exclusionary norms. Finally, acknowledging the entanglements of visibility, power, and communication requires a critically engaged perspective on visual political communication. Categories such as nation, tradition, modernity, culture, and gender should be viewed not as stable binaries but as fluid, overlapping constructs. Moving beyond essentialist dichotomies, universalising assumptions, and unquestioned Eurocentrism is therefore crucial for developing more inclusive, context-attuned analyses of women's political lives.

2.2 Visuals in Political Discourse: State of the Field

My research is located in the domain of studying non-verbal forms of political discourse and messaging. Within this larger field, my study moves from understanding the importance of visuals as a whole in political communication studies, to the contents of what make up visuals, and finally their deployment by and about women political candidates on digital social media. In identifying how my study draws from each of these discursive areas of knowledge production, I will begin with the conceptualisation of political communication as myths and messages.

2.2.1 (Non-verbal) Myths and Messages in Political Communication

Extending the concept of visibility and the role of visuals in forging and representing power dynamics within societies, because a significant part of my research focuses on electoral campaigns, it centres how visuals operate as political instruments. The role of visuals in political communication strategies is hardly new, as they have been at the core of electoral politics and messaging in all modern societies. The idea of visuals as messages was brought to light in the pioneering work of Barthes (1957/1972). Using a semiotic lens, Barthes drew attention to non-verbal modes of messaging that operate as a kind of speech, acts of myth-making that both produce and transmit meaning through the image. In this sense, what Barthes posits as an act of 'myth- making' employs specific kinds of content made suitable to communicate meaning. To extend this concept into the questions my study seeks to answer, it becomes imperative to see visuals as being loaded with meaning and signification—which necessitates a deep understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the visuals are produced, received and understood.

Compatible with Barthes' formulation about the mechanisms of myth-making, from a sociological perspective, Guy Debord's (1995) concept of 'spectacle' becomes relevant here. Spectacles are potent instruments, per Debord, to bring to audiences the manifestation of an idea in tangible terms, which is particularly relevant to understand their production and circulation in political campaigning across all societal contexts generally. Debord in fact argues that the spectacle, in its concrete-ness, transcends the idea (or ideology) and becomes more enduring historically and politically in the minds of the audience. These concepts, then, can be read in how political discourse has always employed non-verbal means of communication, ranging from campaign posters and pamphlets to contemporary digital media show a reciprocal relationship with technological advancements and changes in media consumption habits. With modern audio-visual technologies and broadcast media, politicians have long mastered the art of delivering succinct, impactful statements through sound bites. Recently, using image bites—brief visual clips that convey complex information through symbolic cues—has become indispensable to electoral processes (Bucy & Grabe, 2007; Grabe & Bucy, 2009). What is particularly relevant here is how visuals necessarily function as an instrument of mobilising support. They employ powerful imagery and symbolism that appeals to voters' emotions and values. In this sense, visuals operate as non-verbal symbols crafted to convey a range of messages from, for instance, patriotism to creating positive associations with an individual electoral candidate.

For messaging in the digital age, social media platforms are a key site that visuals inhabit, providing new opportunities for politicians to disseminate their ideas and values. Social media allow real-time engagement with voters, enabling politicians to respond to questions, address concerns, and build relationships. This marks a key shift in how politicians, their consultants and campaigns approach the electorate. This shift is evidenced in political messaging adopting a visual mindset, for which events that will produce powerful images are staged in order to resonate with the public's as well as mainstream media's expectations (Irby, 2004). Such an approach to creating narratives appears in the North American context, for example, in how George W. Bush's team framed him against Mount Rushmore during a speech (Bumiller, 2003), or, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton's joint New Hampshire rally was marked by coordinated outfits, speeches, and a strategic staging of the word "U-N-I-T-Y" in the background (Strachan & Kendall, 2004). These examples powerfully reinforce what Boorstin (1962) terms 'pseudo-events': artificially created 'happenings' that are orchestrated for desirable images and impressions. These happenings are directed primarily for consumption and broadcasting by news media to attract public attention. Such pseudo-events, Boorstin posits, contribute to a visual culture that seeks to blur the line between reality and illusion.

In this respect, Lilleker (2019) explains how humans navigate their world through a forest of signs, seeking cues to aid their understanding of the environment, which becomes deeply relevant. The examples above demonstrate how powerful visual imagery can allow individuals and groups to create mental shortcuts that aid decision-making. This is particularly important for my study's context, in order to understand the kind of images that possess greater affective resonance than others. Images of a candidate with supporters at a rally might stimulate emotions of her being with the people, while expressions of power may instil confidence, ascribing to the candidate leadership qualities. Equally, emotional displays can be interpreted as signs of empathy or, conversely, weakness. When positioned in a particular context, it becomes important for my investigation to recognise how inferences are drawn from the *performative* dimensions of visual politics. This becomes pertinent in how visuals are constructions, can be manipulated and circulated with great speed on social media. Visuals in political communication, therefore seek to become 'viral' through their very content, and eminently rely on the way a viewer reacts to, and interacts with an image. The veracity of the claim made, the meaning of the image, then, could potentially be displaced by the momentary and enduring shock value created by a strong emotional reaction. The material qualities of these visuals are embedded as *cues*, both implicit and explicit, to

generate emotions based on the capture of a moment of being and appearing that signify the political candidate's value propositions.

Talking of non-verbal communication, a substantial body of literature has addressed how the visual domain shapes socio-political identity in South Asia's postcolonial settings (Mitter, 2003; Freitag, 2014). Scholars have frequently foregrounded spectacle—exemplified by large rallies or ubiquitous political posters—as a catalyst for mobilising public sentiment. The existing studies are important because South Asia represents a region where visual literacy likely surpasses textual fluency. There is a pressing need to move beyond spectacle and examine, therefore, how women politicians construct and enact their public selves in digital spheres. While visual culture studies have thrived in dedicated departments in the West, South Asian scholarship remains dispersed across art history, media studies, and visual anthropology. As Smith (2008) observes, any 'object of visual studies' is shaped by the apparatus that renders it visible. In stratified, postcolonial contexts—where religion, class, caste, and colonial legacies intersect—the apparatus behind visual political communication on social media extends beyond just technology (such as digital platforms) and incorporates entire socio-historical power structures.

Works such as Sumathi Ramaswamy's *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India* (2003) and Sandria Freitag's *The Visual Turn: Approaching South Asia Across the Disciplines* (2014) elucidate the 'dense and complicated picture-worlds' that interweave religion, community, and visual expression in everyday life. Yet existing research often centres on grand political dramas, overlooking the more mundane, day-to-day modes of visual political communication. I aim to address this gap by investigating how women leaders in places like West Bengal utilise digital media to project competence, moral authenticity, and empathy, even under intensified scrutiny and potential backlash. Significantly, South Asian visual studies have broadened to encompass cinema (Dass, 2016), art (Weerasinghe, in Pathak & Perera, 2019), caricature and cartooning (Khanduri, 2014; Devadawson, 2014), and novel re-conceptions of the region (Pathak, 2017).[3] These works underscore the diversity of South Asian visual culture and the complexity of its public arenas (Freitag, 2014), where communities form around iconic imagery, popular media, and civic discourse. They also illustrate how Western theories of public spheres risk oversimplification when confronted with localised

[3] In this edited volume, Dev Nath Pathak thinks through the very idea of South Asia by crossing disciplinary boundaries that 'impede novel processes of comprehending a region'. The volume brings together scholarship on visual cultures with art history, international relations and cultural and performance studies, among other disciplines (pp. 2–19).

gender hierarchies and violent repercussions targeting 'immodest' female visibility, as for example, evidenced by Pakistani social media influencer Qandeel Baloch's murder in 2016. Baloch's own brother confessed (and was later acquitted, in 2022) to killing her, as her transgressive visual practices on social media had outraged conservative sections of the Pakistani population, which was in turn seen as a dishonour to the family reputation (Ahmed, 2019; BBC, 2022).

Such debates reinforce the necessity for contextually, culturally-grounded and interdisciplinary research into the everyday visual strategies women and women politicians employ to establish or maintain political authority. My study positions itself within this emerging scholarship, focusing on how online visual practices of women politicians—ranging from campaign posters to social media images—mediate community identity, embodiment, and moral narratives in West Bengal's digitally connected publics. By centring daily, 'ordinary' images rather than singular spectacles, I address a gap in the literature regarding how female politicians balance autonomy and constraint.

2.2.2 Visual Cues, their Effects and Affects

For my examination, it becomes necessary to recognise how visual cues employed by politicians to shape their constructed identity are linked to social psychologists Tajfel and Turner's (1986) formulation of the 'social identity' approach. As individuals use shared identity for self-categorisation into groups—Tajfel and Turner use the terms 'ingroup' and 'outgroup'—the notion of social identity becomes vital to explain people's tendency to view some more favourably, as companions, than others, the adversaries, thereby encouraging a form of othering. Building on the notion of social identity, therefore, the 'moral anchor' guiding distinctions between right and wrong is closely tied to the idea of the ingroup (Ellemers, 2017). In this sense, visual cues can reinforce individuals' mental schemas linking specific policies to specific social identity groups. For instance, a politician who sports religious symbols like a crucifix is using a visual cue that appeals to conservative Christians, or conversely, someone opposing abortion rights (Valenzuela & Reny, 2021). These cues shape the electorate's perception and, in turn, voting decisions. Moreover, as flags symbolise patriotism or crucifixes represent religion, which Dan and Arendt (2021) term 'subtle backdrop cues', these can be strategically positioned to reinforce a politician's identity in ways that appeal to specific segments of the population.

My study therefore pays close attention to visual cues in order to unravel their embedded meanings, which cannot be understood without studying the cultural and societal

context in which they are employed (which is the subject of the next chapter). The need for my examination also arises from the debates related to the effectiveness of visual cues, which are, in turn, shaped by their role in reinforcing or perverting democratic processes. While some argue that visual cues can be beneficial, others raise concerns about their potential drawbacks. Critics argue that visual cues can be manipulative and hinder democratic accountability. Veiled appeals can prevent citizens from fully understanding politicians' stances, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability (Åkerlund, 2021; Santana, 2021). Additionally, citizens may become overly vigilant, perceiving visual cues where none exist and reject honest denials of manipulation (Drainville & Saul, 2024; Santana, 2021). This can lead to increased cynicism and affective polarisation, as, for example, opposing camps in a political contest may stop reflecting on the social issues, and become preoccupied with viewing politicians through a prejudiced lens (Iyengar et al., 2012; Santana, 2021). The role of visual cues in political discourse is a powerful semiotic underpinning of both the mediation of visibility and power differentials that characterise such mediations. As elements, I understand these visual cues to function both as evidence and as transformative expressions of political identity and solidarity (Pauwels, 2005). The aspect of public memory becomes important here.

Bringing these strands together, what emerges is how visuals predominate text in shaping public perceptions because of the human ability to process them faster and more efficiently (Barry, 1997; Messaris, 1997; Graber, 1996). Building upon the earlier discussion on feminist readings of gender through its underlying social structures, it then becomes imperative to understand in detail the various facets of how women figure in visual politics, and the way they portray themselves or are portrayed visually, how they use visual cues in these portrayals, and the responses these portrayals generate, particularly in digital spaces.

Visual cues do not simply function as neutral indices of objective reality. Rather, claims to objectivity—or at least empirical veracity—have historically bolstered political agendas that rely on the authority of supposedly unimpeachable facts. As seeing is commonly equated with experiencing, and experiencing is presumed to require accounting for what has been seen, the techniques and technologies that render previously invisible issues, phenomena, and events visible also transform them into coherent objects that institutions of power must address. When it comes to women, these processes are often calibrated to weigh clothing first, then to gauge which body parts are covered and on what occasions. This elaborate typology simultaneously positions women on a

continuum of progress, highlighting that the politics of feminine visibility extend well beyond simple questions of transparency and concealment. Although debates concerning the veil or hijab have gained particular attention, these garments merely join a repertoire of images capable of signifying either backwardness or self-empowerment, depending on who interprets them. Even a fully covered body can operate as a potent emblem in this system, while any refusal to appear visually in particular ways disrupts the established exchange of meaning (Ossman, 2011). Therefore, for my research, breaking down these visual cues is crucial. Understanding how meaning arises through images—images that both reflect and shape social positions and personal opinions—illuminates the mechanisms by which women's appearances are politicised. By critically interrogating what is visible, what is obscured, and what is never shown at all, I aim to shed light on how women politicians, particularly in West Bengal in India, navigate and negotiate their public image, power, and agency in the face of complex cultural and institutional demands.

2.2.3 Visual Politics and Women Politicians on Digital Media

Following what the previous sub-section identifies about the relevance of understanding visual political communication through visual cues, the public gaze on women as the *other* becomes central to positioning political visibility—both offline and online—within wider debates on power relations within different social groups. In this discussion and the next, alongside the state of knowledge, I bring forth a number of examples to substantiate my argument. As visibility is partial (Thompson, 2005), mirroring debates on technological affordances of the internet to champion democratic values, the discourse on gender also moves between the internet's ability to subvert traditional gender roles and constraints, offering new venues for feminist activism (Plant, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Duncan, 1996). Conversely, dystopian critiques of such positions that highlight male-dominated cyberspaces underscore the exclusion of women, online sexism and bullying (Harcourt, 1999; Herring, 1996; Sutton 1996). Positioned within these debates, my study explores whether the realities of political messaging practices online reproduce existing social hierarchies and reinforce barriers to gender equality, through new ways of entrenching hegemonic gender norms.

First, it proves necessary to foreground the unequal manner of representation of women politicians under a societal gaze. Expectations about both how they look and conduct themselves and the ensuing evaluation of their moral character typically does not extend to their male counterparts. As a result, political visibility on digital platforms can potentially also reinforce gendered stereotypes through patriarchal norms (Sobieraj,

2018). In the context of (West) Bengal, which I discuss in the next chapter, the visual scrutiny and censure faced by women politicians in digital spaces is connected to a long history of women in social life and electoral politics. The figure of the woman, in this sense, is not unmarked historically, but qualified by gender, where it becomes possible to speculate about labels like ‘women politicians’, ‘women authors’; or ‘women artists’, for example, rather than just politicians, authors or artists.

This gender-based marking is hardly limited to the context of Bengal, South Asia or even the global South. Across varied societies globally, and historically, several examples bear testimony to such a gaze in the scrutiny of women. Jeannette Rankin’s election as the first Congresswoman in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1916 caused considerable stir. Rankin’s achievement was overshadowed by media commentary on her appearance, such as the Washington Post’s article titled, ‘Congresswoman Rankin Real Girl; Likes Nice Gowns and Tidy Hair’ (History House, 2017). Decades later, when former French Minister Cecile Duflot was wolf-whistled in the National Assembly of France for wearing a floral dress, a male politician defensively stated, ‘We were merely admiring Duflot; she chose the dress she was wearing so we wouldn’t listen to what she was saying’ (Sim, 2017).

In November 2005, Angela Merkel became Germany’s first female chancellor, marking a significant moment in the nation's history. Yet, prior to her election, her leadership qualities were intensely scrutinised, with attention given to her political style, image, and policies—questions typically asked of any modern leader. However, as Merkel herself noted in a Der Spiegel interview shortly before her victory, one factor stood out as particularly important: her gender. The media's reaction to her rise reflected this focus. Germany’s widely-read tabloid Bild (meaning ‘image’ or ‘an optical characteristic of something in the German language) featured the headline ‘Miss Germany!’ while the more left-leaning Die Tageszeitung proclaimed ‘It’s a Girl’ (‘Es ist ein Mädchen’) (Council of Europe, 2006). These headlines framed Merkel’s ascent in a way that underscored how rare it still was to see women in political leadership, particularly on the global stage. Despite being a major political figure in Europe, the coverage of Merkel highlighted how the presence or prominence of women in politics continues to carry intrigue, often prompting media narratives that focus on their gender over their qualifications. This reflects a broader societal tendency to view female politicians through a gendered lens, which then becomes entangled with their public image and impacts their leadership trajectory.

Patriarchal systems of visually scrutinising and circumscribing the political agency of women politicians continue to live on in the algorithms and neural networks of the most cutting-edge technology that shapes digital visibilities today. In recent times, visuals in politics about women appear and the politics of such visuals entangled with new technology appear in more examples. The recent controversy regarding Australian MP Georgie Purcell's photograph being altered—by automated visual augmentation software powered by artificial intelligence—to expose her midriff and increase the size of her breasts to make it ready for broadcast by Nine News Australia, is a case in point (Wilson, 2024). All these historical and recent examples from purportedly liberal democratic societies gesture towards a broader global phenomenon where women in politics are often evaluated based on their adherence to prescribed gender norms—in visual ways. The labelling and marking, moreover, brings a long list of expectations, especially in politics, which typically breaks down into three basic categories: body (Is she pretty enough, or maybe too pretty? Does she dress badly or too well?); temperament (Is she nice or overbearing? Is she too emotional? Too ambitious?); and family (Is she a childless cat lady? A mother? Is her husband really running the show?). The sexualisation of Purcell's image confirms—in her own words 'Can't imagine this happening to a male MP'—that visual politics is indeed gendered to the detriment of women.[4]

2.2.4 Gender and Political Visibility Across Societal Contexts

Through the discussions and examples so far, gender emerges as a cross-cutting category in the visual dimension of political communication: across societies, time and stages of democratic development. In the Indian context, societal prejudices about gender appear in how Guha (2018) sheds light on female politicians in India being represented in both the mainstream and social media in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes; they are often addressed by name, with their titular political office overlooked. For example, Bengali actresses-turned-politicians Mimi Chakrabarty and Nusrat Jahan, first-time Members of Parliament from West Bengal at the Federal level of the Indian Union, posted photographs in 'Western' outfits within the premises of the Indian Parliament on social media. They were trolled online for being 'untraditional' and 'disrespectful' (BBC, 2019). This public censure marked them as outsiders within their own society, vide Tajfel and Turner (1986), despite being elected leaders. While sartorial

[4] Georgie-Purcell, S. [@georgievpurcell]. (2024, January 29). I endured a lot yesterday. But having my body and outfit photoshopped by a media outlet was not on my bingo card [Tweet]. *X*. https://x.com/georgievpurcell/status/1752088649527853107

choices have historically been used to dismiss women and associate them with frivolity, it can also be a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and furthering political agendas.

Sartorial choices become a particularly significant element in visual political communication when employed in political spectacles and pseudo-events, e.g. widely publicised occasions such as campaign speeches, inaugurations, debates, and political rallies. Clothing acting as visual cues play a major role in shaping public perception and judgment of political figures. For instance, in the United States, Hillary Clinton and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have been frequently critiqued for their fashion choices, with Clinton's preference for pantsuits (Clemente, 2016) and Ocasio-Cortez's wardrobe selections (Hoffman, 2018) becoming focal points for media scrutiny. This fixation on sartorial choices reveals the longstanding gendered lens through which women politicians are often viewed. However, Clinton's adoption of the pantsuit as her signature look also demonstrates fashion's power to reshape public perception; by embracing the critique and transforming it into a unifying symbol, Clinton disarmed its negative connotations, creating a relatable and resilient image for her supporters.

In examining gender and digital visibility, it is crucial to recognise that inequalities in visibility are shaped by intersecting factors, including gender, race, class, and age. Three dimensions of visibility are especially relevant here: the visibility of actors and groups, the visibility of gender norms, and the visibility of power relations. Moreover, societal perceptions of gender roles influence representation and communication styles in digital spaces. This is particularly important when stereotypes emerging from traditional gendered divisions of labour shape these perceptions, which are then reinforced through media representation (Wood & Eagly, 2009). Moreover, Rudman & Glick (2002) explain how deviations from gender norms, particularly for women, often lead to social penalties, especially when they challenge prescriptive stereotypes (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Together, these perspectives indicate that digital media platforms, through the visual politics enacted on them, reproduce and potentially intensify gendered expectations. In a highly mediated and visible political environment, women's appearance, behaviour, and self-presentation become sites of public negotiation, shaping both their visibility and the potential for their messages to resonate in a way that is distinctively gendered.

What follows, then, is that gendered political communication is linked to societal expectations dictating appropriate appearance and behaviour for men and women in public roles. These expectations include typified norms of how men and women (should) behave. While men are associated with agentic traits—assertiveness, ambition,

confidence, and forcefulness—qualities frequently linked to perceptions of effective political leadership, women are compelled to conform to communal traits such as empathy, nurturing, and warmth, which align with traditional caregiving roles less compatible with political authority (Thomas and Bittner, 2017). The trait of motherhood in particular, despite its thick connection with political symbolism as I discuss in the next chapter, paradoxically is also viewed as being in conflict with the professional demands of a political career.

For women politicians, such norms tend to become binding and pose significant challenges. When women do not display agentic traits, they tend to be viewed as lacking qualities of leadership. However, if they portray evidence of asserting agency, they risk violating societal expectations of femininity, leading to perceptions of them as overly aggressive or unlikable, akin to a 'double bind' (Jamieson, 1995). From, for example, Wagner & Everitt's (2019) volume that considers gender as a mediating factor in the Canadian political context, within gendered political communication research, three strands can be considered relevant for my study. First, the authors in this volume compare media coverage of female and male politicians, analysing how journalists reinforce or challenge gendered stereotypes. Second, they focuses on public perceptions, investigating how voters evaluate politicians through the lens of gendered expectations. Third, which aligns most closely with my examination, centres how the self-presentation by the politicians operate to strategically construct public personas as a function of gendered norms. The visuality of digital lives therefore emerges as a political and social phenomenon whose production is strategic, and also culture-specific (Creech, 2020).

In my study, I contextualise the broader social dynamics of gendered visibility to highlight the persistent cultural expectations that influence how women politicians are visually represented and perceived. My focus lies in examining how visual representations on digital media platforms function as sites of power, where gendered meanings are constructed, contested, and negotiated. By concentrating on the role of digital visibility in shaping public understandings of women's political participation, I aim to explore how social media imagery and visual practices impact the authority, credibility, and agency afforded to women politicians. Through my study, I seek to uncover the cultural logic that governs visual representations of women in politics. This approach allows for a more flexible, interpretative examination of visual politics, one that is sensitive to the specific social, cultural, and regional nuances of West Bengal. My aim is to uncover how visual media reinforces particular narratives about women's roles in the political sphere. This

approach helps to uncover the fluidity and adaptability of gendered visual representation, within a region where gender expectations are informed by its complex cultural, political, and historical factors.

The examples of gendered visibility I have discussed above become particularly relevant to my research in demonstrating vividly the pervasive impact of entrenched societal norms on both the representation and self-presentation of women in the political arena. The recurring themes of media coverage, public perceptions, and strategic self-presentation in scholarly concerns highlight the complex and constant negotiations that women politicians must undertake within practices of visibility that remain fundamentally gendered. Women in politics are continuously navigating an intricate web of expectations: they are often required to perform strength and competence through traditionally masculine attributes while simultaneously conforming to prescriptive norms that demand warmth and approachability, a dichotomy that underscores their public personas and credibility.

2.3 Empirical Orientations

So far, I have discussed the theoretical underpinnings of my research and the state of knowledge on visuals in political discourse. These serve to bring out the more precise, empirical context of my examination. Positioned within the discipline of communication studies, my research lies at the intersection of four key areas of empirical inquiry within this discipline: gender, social media, visuals, and political communication on digital platforms. In the present discussion, I will trace my discipline specific engagement with these areas of inquiry and how my study is positioned in relation to recent scholarship on visual political communication in the Global South.

2.3.1 Social Media Platforms and Visual Political Communication

Where digital technologies intersecting with societal power structures is concerned, Morozov (2013) and Fuchs (2016; 2021) have challenged the ‘digital solutionist’ perspective about social media’s inevitability in democratising electoral politics. Others highlight the internet’s role in sustaining existing and emerging forms of inequality and authoritarian control (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2024). These critiques demand a canny recognition of the broader socio-political contexts that visual politics is contingent on. What follows then, is how visual politics invokes a kind of *visuality* that extends beyond, often even subverts, a reflection of reality. To take into account Callahan’s (2020) distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘doing’, engaging with what is visible or *made*

visible—a central concern of my study—necessitates a critical engagement with the meaning behind visual representations, particularly how visual artefacts actively alter reality in unexpected ways.

Graber (1996) underscores the significance of visuals in political communication, calling for deeper scholarly engagement with images rather than treating them as mere adjuncts to text. Messaris and Abraham (2001) emphasise that visuals often permit multiple interpretations, which politicians may exploit to manage contentious messages. Goodin and Saward (2005) highlight politicians' longstanding reliance on symbolic displays, while Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue that candidates' varying intensity of visual cues can substantially influence voter perceptions. Schill (2012) in his milestone review of visual communication research in the field of political communication posits that 'political communication today is built on a visual foundation' (p.119), he also calls for more theoretical and applied research. Albertson (2015) contends that the flexible interpretation of images allows politicians to mitigate backlash in polarised environments, further illustrating how visuals can be strategically powerful.

Meanwhile, scholarly work on visual political communication highlights studies such as Henderson and McCready (2019), who examine how politicians tailor visual cues to reinforce particular identities. Messaris (2019) notes the increasing visibility that politicians face due to the proliferation of mobile cameras. Similarly, Russmann, Svensson, and Larsson (2019) observe that social media platforms provide politicians with a strategic toolkit for influencing voter attitudes—an observation reinforced by Stout (2019), who reports that Facebook and Instagram collectively receive hundreds of millions of daily photo uploads. Veneti, Jackson, and Lilleker (2019) confirm the centrality of images in politicians' interactions with their audiences, but they also remark that research into visual political communication, despite its recent growth, remains underexplored—particularly as much of it is situated in Western contexts and tends to be quantitative in nature. Bhat and Klein (2020) propose a continuum in which politicians vary in their reliance on visual cues. Farkas and Bene (2020) argue that these cues enable politicians to project affinities with diverse constituencies, echoing Kreiss et al. (2020), who maintain that visual strategies can significantly shape public perceptions. Lalancette and Raynauld (2020) similarly suggest that images function as salient markers of ideological orientation, while Santana (2021) highlights their capacity to facilitate ambiguous messaging that tempers direct criticism. Farkas et al. (2022) extend this line of inquiry by identifying further nuances in how frequently and strategically politicians deploy visuals. Finally, Dan and Arendt (2024) illustrate the potential for controversy

surrounding specific visible symbols—such as the six-pointed star—and note that politicians may deny problematic connotations even after they emerge.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the increasing diversity and intensity of scholarly interest exploring different empirical concerns and questions within visual political communication. However, much of this work remains anchored in Western settings, prioritises quantitative methodologies, or focuses on particularly high-profile politicians, leaving underexamined the everyday visual strategies of women politicians in non-Western contexts. By addressing these gaps, my investigation seeks to advance empirical understanding of how cultural norms, gendered hierarchies, and visual tactics intertwine in political communication, offering insights that extend beyond Western-centric paradigms.

My research therefore also strives to advance what media scholar W.J.T. Mitchell (2002) proposes about the reciprocity between the visual and the social. Mitchell argues that 'social construction of the visual' coexists with the 'visual construction of the social' (p.170). By considering this two-way relationship when examining visual artefacts, my study seeks to uncover how they mirror social, political, and economic power structures and, equally, recognise their capacity to generate new social and political formations. Operating within the realm of political communication on social media, I will therefore query how visuals not only service the dissemination of political messages but also how they activate the construction, negotiation and contestation of identities. By doing so, this study intends to uncover the reliance of visual artefacts posted to social media on human practices, material conditions and technological affordances. In this manner, my research maps both the capacity and limits of visuals when operating as instruments of power that shapes social relations rather than merely reflecting them (Branter & Stehle, 2021).

In examining how identities are actively mediated through visuals, scholarly research over the past two decades has progressively examined the pivotal role of social media in shaping collective identity within social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts, 2012; Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2012). While social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok offer unique opportunities for identity construction and the visibility of movements, their affordances still remain a subject of ongoing debate and research. At the core of this debate is how studying visuals brings to light social media's affordances for political discourse—by enabling users to share personal stories, grievances, and experiences, contributing to a

collective narrative framing process. Sharing such narratives facilitates a sense of belonging among their audiences, fostering a cohesive identity rooted in common goals and values. In this sense, performing politics, visually, via social media entails real-time negotiation of meaning. This process facilitates dynamic, ongoing dialogues that adapt to evolving socio-political contexts. Social media, then, can also be seen as affording performance, exemplified in the public sharing of both textual and visual content. By broadcasting personal images and narratives aligned with a cause, individuals engage in and solicit acts of protest and solidarity. In social media-based political communication, visuals emerge as essential for asserting the collective's identity, and conversely, they allow exposure to scrutiny, contestation, and potential co-optation. I view social media, therefore, not only as a platform for identity formation but also as a contested space that can both empower and constrain individuals and groups. In my research, I aim to further explore how visuals within digital spaces serve as both a site of agency and a site of tension for political actors.

My study considers the mediation of visuals on social media platforms as a phenomenon that increasingly shapes political engagement. Such platforms operate as a potent form of power, open to both manipulation and control. In this sense the platform mediates visuals, and in effect political visibility. The visual dimension of political performance hardly remains passive. It comes into being through intricate media logics and institutional practices that determine which, and how, actors and narratives gain representation. Along with the affordances drawn from social media by political actors, unanticipated risks that compel them to negotiate and (re)constitute their public image under intense scrutiny also arise (Thompson, 2000). This is where, new research on social media ushers in a productive departure from early claims that celebrated its potential to disrupt traditional hierarchies and amplify marginalised voices. This body of research reveals a more complicated reality of visual political communication being deeply embedded in processes of selection and differentiation that reinforce existing power structures. Consequently, visibility emerges as being partial and contested, characterised by the privileging of certain perspectives and narratives over others (Thompson, 2005).

Understanding 'visibility' in political communication continues to remain a complex endeavour in the discipline of communication studies. It involves nuanced distinctions to be made in relation to concepts such as 'transparency' (Stohl et al., 2016) and 'legitimacy' (Koopmans, 2004). While Koopmans argues that visibility is foundational to legitimacy in social movements, others, such as Brighenti (2007) and Dahlberg (2018),

propose that legitimacy and recognition are in fact outcomes of specific forms of visibility. These discourses make it imperative to reveal the various layered, context dependent mediation of visibility that holds diverse implications even in the digital domain of political communication.

My study views 'digital visibility' as the *likelihood* of being 'seen': noticed, heard, or recognised. Here, three distinct levels of visibility have been explored in communication and media studies (Brantner & Stehle, 2021, p. 93). The first level, described by Leonardi and Treem (2020) as the 'sociomaterial performance' of observable behaviours, reflects 'visibility as presence'. It aligns with traditional media concepts of visibility as representation, where individuals or groups are simply noticed or heard (Bantimaroudis, Zyglidopoulos, & Symeou, 2010). At this level, research often examines how media presence translates into awareness, salience, and prominence (Kiousis, 2004). The second level moves beyond mere presence to explore 'being heard', which is ushered in through heightened media presence and interaction. Studies at this level analyse media attention and prominence, considering how visibility can amplify only certain voices within the public sphere. The third level, 'being recognized' or 'respected', involves focusing on issues of diversity and equality, which fosters recognition and participatory equality within the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2018). This level often addresses structural inequalities and highlights the stakes of digital visibility for marginalised groups, which may result in either their empowerment or exposure to being controlled (Brighenti, 2007). These three levels of digital visibility—presence, being heard, and recognition—are interrelated, and often overlap in complex ways. However, visibility at one level does not guarantee progression to the next; visibility as 'presence' or 'being heard' may not necessarily ensure full recognition or legitimacy (Brantner, Lobinger, & Stehling, 2020).

In thus understanding visibility being *mediated* by digital platforms, and as a context-dependent phenomenon, my research will explore political communication on social media in a non-Western setting. It seeks to challenge the dominance of 'Western' perspectives in understanding visual political communication. Such a focus is imperative as the majority of critical studies of visibility—including those I have referred to so far—have privileged visuals and imagery (independently and collectively) related to the West. In empirical terms, this focus has pushed knowledge in the field of political communication studies to be dominated by Eurocentric or North-American frameworks. Through this research, I seek to advance this understanding of political communication, and also challenge theoretical and methodological impositions of the West-centric frameworks of analysis through an empirical context in the non-West. Addressing this

Eurocentrism requires not simply reversing the East/West dynamic by substituting one regional theory with another, but rather integrating a broader assemblage of insights and practices from a hitherto unexplored and under-researched societal and intellectual tradition. In this sense, my approach pursues a nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding that both recentres and critiques existing frameworks without dismissing the critical foundations of visual political communication discourse. Such a context specific approach, as my study will reveal, requires a reconfiguration of gendered understanding through a cultural lens, for one. Moreover, it will need a new methodological approach, a careful combination of qualitative and, to a lesser extent, quantitative readings.

2.3.2 Gendered, Culture-specific Approaches to Study Digital Visual Politics

In recent years, studies focused on contexts in the Global South have produced insightful, albeit very limited, work on the socio-political dynamics of visual political communication. Yet the bulk of these studies pertain to investigation of pre-digital modes of communication. For example, Fox (2022) analyses the evolution of Indonesian election posters from the 1950s to the present, based on a historical and content-based study of 4,000 posters. The findings of this study show a transition from singular social symbols aimed at mobilising demographic groups to visually complex, candidate-centred designs shaped by social forces, technological advancements, and institutional reforms. This underscores the growing importance of visuals in electoral strategy and identity construction. Similarly, Lee (2016) compares the cultural framing of political leadership in official photographs of US and South Korean presidents, Barack Obama and Myung-bak Lee. This study reveals contrasting visual approaches influenced by individualistic and collectivistic cultures: Obama's imagery emphasised relatability through personal connections and citizen support, while Lee's focused on statesmanship and global leadership. These differences demonstrate how cultural narratives shape visual political communication strategies. Khan's (2022) examination of the politics of photography in India reveals the biases of composition, and editing, where photographs construct strategic narratives that influence public perception. In this case, as a photographer himself, Khan brings forth how political actors orchestrate what he terms 'politics of the camera' in shaping public opinion.

In a wider sense, empirically grounded scholarship on visual politics in electoral processes in the non-West, also make evident the need for a culturally grounded rather than (relatively) remote quantitative approaches. Indeed, in parallel to the early stages of the present research, the publication of a discipline-focused (in media and

communication studies) volume that centres visual politics in the Global South bears testimony to the adoption of such approaches (Veneti & Rovisco, 2023). While focusing on electoral politics in contexts as varied as Lebanon (Riskedahl, 2023), China (Xiang, 2023), Mexico (Juárez-Gámiz & Pérez, 2023; del Val, 2023), Chile (Matus & Echeverría, 2023) and Ghana (Mensah, Tayman & Musah, 2023), the studies that feature in this volume, including preliminary findings of this investigation (Banerjee, 2023), display clear methodological strategies that are culturally grounded and specific to societal norms. South Asian political and visual cultures have also been collectively examined in a comparative perspective (with the Spanish context) through how political leaders use Instagram-based image-making techniques (Navarro, Ganapathy and Raynauld, 2023). In the context of the 2021 election campaign in West Bengal itself, gendered personalisation has been critically examined through Facebook-based advertisements of competing parties (Shome, Neyazi and Ng, 2024). As this study's context is identical to that of my own research, I will return to how the latter's concerns are distinct more fully in the next chapter.

Lastly, recalling the concept of performance, I underscore its capacity to transcend both private and public boundaries, as well as formal and informal institutions. This paradoxical quality emerges when performance is viewed as an integral part of communication—an inherently cultural and mediated act that can uphold existing structures or serve as a tool of dissent. Indeed, historical records abound with efforts to suppress theatre and other performative expressions, precisely because of their perceived subversive potential. As Perera and Pathak (2022) argue, 'performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting and boundary-violating figures' who often prioritise the carnivalesque over the monumental. In South Asia, this paradox becomes entangled with the legacies of colonial modernity, indigenous religious frameworks, and diverse social hierarchies. Visual media—ranging from political posters to televised spectacles—can reinforce accepted norms or radically challenge them. Expanding on Freitag's (2014) notion of 'public arenas,' I suggest that these performative acts and their accompanying visuals serve as shared modes of meaning-making, revealing both aspirational and interpretive narratives that shape the region's communal identity. Consequently, recalling performance is crucial for understanding how political, cultural, and social forces converge within diverse South Asian contexts to produce both compliance and subversion. As I will show in the next chapter, nationalist symbols, such as the figurative representation of *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, highlights how the interrelated site of performance and visibility is a space where gender, religion, and power intersect.

3 Research Context and Setting

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the need for exploring gender and digital visual politics through cultural lenses. A rigorous understanding of the context and setting my research is located in, namely (West) Bengal, proves necessary to achieve this goal. What follows is a need to connect the registers of gender, political participation and performance, and its visibilities, to Bengal's modern historical and political trajectories. This chapter undertakes such a task. I focus in particular on mapping Bengal's political and cultural context onto the visibilities female politicians encounter, navigate and perform in its societal setting—an approach that drives this research as a whole.

A duality characterising this context must be clarified at the outset; I have intentionally qualified Bengal with a 'West' parenthetically above for this reason. The duality pertains to what the descriptors West Bengal and Bengal/Bengali, respectively, mean. Since India's independence in 1947, the *state* of West Bengal describes an administrative and electoral entity in the federal Union of India. But in a more fluid sense, Bengal describes a *cultural-linguistic region* located in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. This distinction becomes historically important as Bengal's territorial definition underwent a series of transformations through the 1900s. These began with the British government in India partitioning of one of its largest administrative units, the Bengal Presidency, along religious lines in 1905 (Sarkar, 1973). Further transformations, to take some key dates, followed in 1912 (reunification under the British), 1947 (Indian and Pakistani independence, and second partition), and, finally, 1971—when modern-day Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation (Chatterji, 1994). Significant political and socio-cultural upheavals accompanied these events. The *state* of West Bengal in India is thus *one* part of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency (c. 1690s–1912), which also included present Bangladesh, much of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura—all now distinct states of the current Indian union. In this dissertation, I describe the current electoral setting my research engages with as West Bengal, and employ Bengal or the possessive form Bengali to convey its cultural and social antecedents.

The chapter therefore begins by summarising major features of Bengal's political and social history from its nineteenth-century colonial context through to recent developments. Having identified the important phases of Bengal's political trajectory, I trace the key shifts in modes of women's political participation across them. I then turn to how social reform efforts in the nineteenth century for the purported emancipation of women shaped ideas of the decorous, refined, modern yet genteel, woman, and how

these ideas emerged in and became enshrined through Bengal's literary and visual cultures. Finally, I discuss how the nature of women's visibilities emerging from Bengal's historical and political trajectory informs my approach to studying the visual politics of West Bengal's female politicians.

3.1 Bengal's Politics: Pre- and Post-independence

Bengal was one of the earliest regions in the Indian subcontinent to have experienced British colonial rule, beginning with the East India Company (EIC) and then the British Raj (after 1858, when administration of Indian territories was formally transferred to the Crown). The capital city of the Empire in India, Calcutta (now Kolkata), was located in Bengal for well over a century (1772–1911), and developed as an industrial, administrative, economic, educational, and cultural centre of imperial rule. The region's early and continuous encounters with colonial power in its shifting forms caused contradictory structures to be superimposed on Bengal's culture and society (Addy & Azad, 1973). These contradictions, for example, ranged from extractive agrarian labour practices and revenue models running in parallel to legal, social and educational reforms, or the struggles between subverting existing social hierarchies and re-entrenching them.

The expansion of colonial control over the hinterland beyond the urban and maritime centre of Calcutta was marked by the 1793 Permanent Settlement Act, an agreement between the EIC and indigenous landowners intended to create a system of private property rights. Arguably, this development defined a new kind of political economy in Bengal with its own historical trajectory, famously mapped by Ranajit Guha (1963/2016). During this period, rural impoverishment, including famine, intensified in Bengal, alongside a series of agrarian and religious uprisings against the EIC from the 1770s to the 1830s, such as the Sannyasi Rebellion, Rangpur Peasant Rebellion, or the Chuar Revolt (Dhar, 1987; Sen, 1983; Washbrook, 2012). The Permanent Settlement created a class of predominantly Hindu landlords in Bengal, the *zamindars*, a landowning elite intended to succeed, or rather centralise, the power-devolved pre-colonial, Mughal, land and revenue system. The zamindar-landlords were, in this sense, meant to act as revenue intermediaries between cultivators and the EIC administration (and later, the Crown government in British India).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Bengal witnessed industrial progress being juxtaposed with pre-colonial feudal systems that privileged the landed elite over the labouring classes. This period led to progressive and 'liberal' reforms in education, law

and administration being advocated, paradoxically, by a socially conservative regime that sought to crystallise demarcations between colonising and colonised groups instead of ensuring equal social liberties. These developments made Bengal particularly primed for anti-colonial resistance. Yet, internally, various classes and groups within even Bengal's indigenous population remained divided on the actual forms such resistance would take (Peers, 2012). Nonetheless, despite internal divisions, Bengal's prolonged colonial experience over nearly two centuries fostered a shared Bengali identity and the emergence of political consciousness in the modern sense (Dhar, 1987; Chatterji, 2013).

As a dominant and prosperous group, the nineteenth-century *zamindars* in Bengal were neither traders nor industrialists. Nor were they workers on the ground. Their prosperity came from control over land (Sarkar, 1985). The social dominance of this group comprising mainly upper caste Hindus—Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas (Addy & Azad, 1973)—marked them as those upholding high cultural values and education, as being urbane and genteel. With access to English education, by the 1830s–50s, they represented a social class that could participate in affairs of government. This genteel, cultured, often English-educated class were identified as the *bhadralok*—sometimes 'Babu'—socially distinguished by being above the labouring masses. As Joya Chatterji (1994) explains:

> …neither 'bhadralok' nor 'babu' describe straightforward communal or caste categories. These terms reflected, instead, the social realities of colonial Bengal, the peculiar configuration that excluded, for a variety of historical reasons, the vast majority of Bengali Muslims and low-caste Hindus from the benefits of land ownership and the particular privileges it provided (p. 6).

The term *bhadralok* therefore is a composite that literally conveys the idea of being gentlemanly, refined, respectable (*bhadra*) and man (*lok*). As a collective noun or a group identity the word refers to both genders; if used for women in particular, the *lok* is replaced by *mahila* (meaning woman) to derive the word *bhadramahila* (Ghosh, 2018).

I will return later in this chapter to explain further the importance of the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* in Bengal's politics, culture and society—and most importantly, in how these ideas progressively shaped the characterisation of Bengali women. For tracing Bengal's political and social trajectory, the *bhadralok* must be recognised for driving what is termed the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement that arguably emerged in the late-1820s and 30s. The many contradictions that

underscored this so-called Renaissance have received substantial scholarly attention. The contributions of its key nineteenth-century *bhadralok* proponents, figures like Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar or Dwarakanath Tagore, have also been the subject of historical debates. Nonetheless, a consensus remains about the Bengal Renaissance's goals in challenging religious orthodoxy, promoting women's and vernacular education, albeit by invoking Western enlightenment thinking, colonial legal instruments and the overall advocacy of British tutelage (Sarkar, 1985; Dhar, 1987; Acharya, 1995; Bayly, 1988). What emerges from these nineteenth-century developments in Bengal, then, is how its intellectual and social elite widely co-opted colonial mechanisms of control for social change. They relied on the ideals of progress theorised by colonial policy in advocating social emancipation. While the exact period until when the Bengal Renaissance lasted—some suggest it extended well into the early decades of the twentieth century (Ghose, 2018)—continues to be debated, it was not until the early twentieth century that the social class driving it posed a real challenge to the colonial administration.

The moment of a widespread resistance to British rule originated with the government announcing its decision to partition Bengal in 1903 (implemented in 1905). As noted by Chatterji (1994) and Sarkar (1973), the *bhadralok* were responsible for introducing new forms of political mobilisation that carried a widespread impact on Indian nationalism in the decades that followed. The act of this 1905 partition, in Bengal's case, came to be perceived as a deliberate attempt to fragment its cultural and linguistic unity. The resistance's proponents countered partition with *Swadeshi* (literally meaning 'of our country'), the call to a three-fold path: cultural, of pride in self-identity and unity; economic, of boycotting foreign-made goods for indigenous ones; and social, of a 'national' education (Sarkar, 1973). Across the wide array of ways in which political resistance from Bengal challenged the British rule in the decades that followed, Durba Ghosh (2017) examines the paradox of 'gentlemanly terrorism' unleashed by the very group the British education system and administration had created in India as its native allies.

Despite the purported focus on unity and brotherhood in the uprising against Bengal's 1905 partition, it came with major limitations. For one, the movement alienated vast sections of the Muslim community or lower-caste Hindus who possessed no *bhadralok* privilege. For them, indigenous goods were unaffordable, and national education out of reach (Bagchi, 2010). Owing to its protagonists' religious and social backgrounds, the movement also heavily relied on Hindu symbolism to construct Bengal's cultural identity.

Two examples are of note here, especially from the gendered perspective that my research explores. The first relates to the Swadeshi Movement's slogan 'Bande Mataram', meaning 'praise to/I bow to thee, my mother', invoked from the 1882 novel 'Anandamath' by the acclaimed author Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Set in the context of the 1770 Sannyasi rebellion in rural Bengal, in this literary work, the idea of the nation (as one's own land) appears powerfully in a maternal, goddess-like form (Sarkar, 1973; Sil, 2002). Yet, paradoxically, a predominantly Hindu imagery to describe the motherland reinforced cultural hierarchies and thus limited its appeal for championing pluralism and inter-religious unity (Sarkar, 2001b). Additionally, the Swadeshi movement also invoked divine feminine power in the figure of the Hindu goddess 'Shakti'. Representing resistance and regeneration, Shakti symbolism dominated both nationalist and post-colonial political discourse—and continues to do so. Yet, beyond purely religious devotion, an invocation of Shakti also served as a metaphor for gendered authority and autonomy (Ray, 1995; Sen, 1999). This correlation of a gendered motherland in Bengal's 1905 political context, as I explain further in this chapter, went beyond literary symbolism and appeared visibly—which holds particular relevance for my study.

Through the next decades leading to Indian independence in 1947, the dominance of Hindu Indian nationalism endured, widening the social cleavage with Muslim communities. It led to the violent partition of British Indian territories into the nations of India and Pakistan, the latter nation including the Muslim-majority but Bengali speaking 'East Pakistan', a territory marked distinctly from West Bengal in India (Bose, 2003). At various moments in the 1920s and 1930s, the social dominance and religious orthodoxy of the *bhadralok* was challenged during the pan-Indian nationalist movement by appealing to the masses, albeit in divergent ways; the Non-cooperation movement (1919-22) launched by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is one such notable example.

From Bengal's perspective, opposition to Gandhi, extolled by the Bengali poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore as Mahatma (great soul), came from another charismatic Bengali leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), Subhas Chandra Bose. The anti-colonial politics of Bose, who continues to be known popularly as Netaji, signalled a break from the Gandhian paradigm of non-violent resistance. It nonetheless mobilised inter-class and inter-religious groups, as well as sought international alliances—best known being the Bose-led Indian National Army (INA) which was allied with the Japanese armed forces operating in South and South East Asia during the Second World War until Bose's disappearance in 1945. These decades also witnessed the rise of the Communist Party of

India in Bengal, which aimed to mobilise the working class and peasants. However, the impact of Communists in Bengal remained limited due to its commitment to a Stalinist orthodoxy at the time (Abby & Azad, 1973).

After independence from British rule in 1947, in the early decades of independent India, the pan-Indian dominance of the INC party was mirrored in what now became *West* Bengal's politics. Drawing upon their closeness to the first Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Bengali leaders such as Atulya Ghosh and Bidhan Chandra Roy focussed on dismantling the *zamindari* system in the 1950s, leading in 1955 to the Land Reforms Act of West Bengal. Nonetheless, the India-Pakistan partition had induced mass displacement. West Bengal's successive governments under the chief ministership of Roy, aimed to address the influx of refugees and widespread homelessness with ambitious rehabilitation programmes and infrastructure projects. Along with the strain these placed on state resources of a newly born nation, their scant success, the Land Reforms Act's uneven implementation leaving many landless, fuelled rural discontent that would persist in West Bengal in the decades to follow (Dasgupta, 1984).

The INC's dominance began to wane in West Bengal by the 1960s, largely due to growing dissatisfaction with its policies and a food crisis. Alongside, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and its more radical offshoot the CPI (Marxists) or CPI(M), began to command support from the electorate. The INC's right-wing opposition led by important figures like Shyama Prasad Mukherjee provided a limited challenge in the 1950s in his lifetime. Rather, the CPI and CPI(M), at this time, proposed to redress the wide economic and social disparities that the INC had failed to do, and grew in the power vacuum the INC and right-wing had created. In 1967, a radical peasant uprising in Naxalbari, an area in the north of West Bengal, precipitated what became the Naxalite movement. Under the ideological influence of Mao Zedong and the leadership of Charu Mazumdar, this led to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) or CPI(ML) in 1969. The extremist and militant strategies of the movement, however, led to its equally violent suppression by the then INC government in West Bengal (Kennedy & Purushotham, 2012).

In this brief period, two governments in West Bengal were dissolved, including a minority government led by the INC's Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, and the state was put under

President's Rule (Ghosh, 2017).[5] Meanwhile, in 1971, the Bangladesh liberation war compounded the ongoing social and political challenges, with the arrival of millions of refugees when 'East Pakistan' seceded from Pakistan. Since the 1967 Naxalbari uprising, President's rule had been imposed thrice in the state in five years. When Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a well-known leader of the INC, took over as the Chief Minister in March 1972, his government needed to grapple with the refugee problem on the one hand, and also control the CPI(ML) and other allied parties, on the other—which it did through infamous extrajudicial killings of college and university students supporting the Maoist cause. These events added to the INC's unpopularity in West Bengal, coupled with the rise of the Left Front, a coalition of left parties led by the CPI(M) under leadership of the Marxist activist Jyoti Basu, who in 1977, took over as the Chief Minister of the state for the next twenty-three years until his retirement in 2000 (Ray, 2020; Kennedy & Purushottam, 2012).

In Basu's initial years of administration, the Left Front introduced transformative land reforms—most notably Operation Barga—which sought to secure tenancy rights for sharecroppers. Operation Barga garnered widespread acclaim for its empowerment of rural constituencies. However, the Left Front's preoccupation with rural development frequently came at the expense of industrial progress, causing economic stagnation in urban centres (Dasgupta, 1984). While its organisational capacity and grassroots mobilisation underpinned its enduring electoral success, these achievements also sowed the seeds of future discontent. As Basu & Majumdar (2013) note, the CPI(M)'s parliamentary approach eschewed the cult of personality and deliberately refrained from exploiting language, ethnicity, religious or caste identities to the extent observed elsewhere in India. Governed by the CPI(M)-led Left Front—a coalition of nine parties representing a diverse constituency of over 90 million people—the state witnessed uninterrupted left rule from 1977 until 2011. Over the course of these decades, the Left Front secured electoral victories in seven consecutive elections, consistent at collecting at least 40 per cent of the vote share. Even when the coalition was ultimately displaced in 2011, the CPI(M) retained 41 per cent backing among the electorate (Chakrabarty, 2011).

The 1990s, however, had introduced new challenges as India embarked on a course of economic liberalisation. The ideological rigidity of the Left Front rendered it largely incapable of adapting to the neoliberal policies that accompanied this transformation.

[5] This is invoked under the Indian Constitution under special circumstances that include but are not limited to a state government in India being unable to fulfil its constitutional duties autonomously, or not being able to form a government after elections for failing to achieve a majority, whether fully or through a coalition.

Concurrently, the state's industrial decline and the fragmentation of agricultural land undermined the Left Front's support. Within this context, a breakaway faction from the INC emerged: the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) founded by Mamata Banerjee. By the time she formed the AITC, Banerjee had already had a two-decade long political career, preceded by an active involvement in politics since the age of fifteen. In addition to serving as one of the earliest female ministers across multiple portfolios at the parliamentary level (the Federal government) since the 1990s, her ascendancy was marked by vociferous attacks on the ruling INC in West Bengal and, later, on the CPI(M). Banerjee's populist oratory, combined with dramatic public protests and personal resilience in the face of state repression—exemplified by her assault by state police—consolidated her and the AITC's image as the CPI(M) regime's most formidable political adversary in West Bengal. Today, as the chief minister of West Bengal for a third term, Banerjee represents one of India's most prominent woman politicians. Scholars such as Mace (2019) and Ray Chaudhury (2021a, 2021b) have underscored Banerjee's strategic rebranding of the AITC as a party that foregrounds women's issues, a repositioning that, they believe, proved decisive in the recent 2021 state elections. Notably, in 2020, at the national level, over 40 per cent of the TMC's 22 parliamentarians were women—a stark contrast at the time to the 13 per cent representation of women in the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party's 301 Members of Lok Sabha (Indian Parliament), and the 11.5 per cent in the INC's delegation to the Parliament, while the CPI(M) had no female parliamentarians (Party-Wise List, All Members, 2020).

From social and symbolic perspectives too, the establishment and growth of the AITC paralleled the erosion of the Left Front in its last years. Banerjee founded the party on 1 January 1998. This date, firstly, coincided with the Kalpataru festival,[6] which commemorated Ramakrishna Paramhansa, a nineteenth-century syncretic spiritual leader. Ramakrishna was an unorthodox priest from a humble and illiterate background, who since the 1870s and decades that followed—and until the present—became vastly popular and revered, equally among the *bhadralok* and working-class populations in Bengal (Chatterjee, 1993). The AITC party's founding date, meanwhile, also coincided with the commencement of the month of Ramadan in 1998. This symbolism marked the party's appeal to both the cultural and religious sensibilities of diverse social classes and

[6] The Kalpataru represents a mythic wish-fulfilling tree central to Hindu cosmology. As researchers contend, beyond ritualistic and religious significance, it signifies a site of political and social negotiation. In being associated with Ramakrishna, whose followers believe he revealed himself as God incarnate on earth on 1 January 1886, the festival inhabits political discourse as a potent symbol of renewal, abundance, and the continuity of cultural identity. In this sense, it draws legitimacy from Ramakrishna representing an alternate imagination of spiritual awakening during the otherwise rationalism-based ethic of the Bengal Renaissance (Sarkar, 1992).

religious groups (Bhattacharya, 2004), much in contrast to the atheistic ideology of the Left. In the years that followed, the Left Front's controversial acquisition of land for industrial development in the rural areas of Singur and Nandigram ignited widespread protests that were violently suppressed by the state, which further disillusioned its rural support base. Under Banerjee, meanwhile, the AITC positioned itself as a champion of farmers and marginalised communities. It vocally opposed forced land acquisitions, steadily consolidating its influence and support. Despite the Left Front retaining power in the 2006 state elections in West Bengal and the 2008 elections at the local governance level (Panchayat), the 2011 state elections ultimately ended the Left Front's thirty-four-year regime to usher in a new political era dominated by the AITC under Banerjee's leadership (Ray Chaudhury, 2021a).

Since then, the AITC itself has been charged with cronyism, corruption and the suppression of dissent, much like its predecessor, both within and outside West Bengal. Facing anti-incumbency in the 2021 elections, an event I examine in this research, its chief contender was the right-wing BJP which by then had consolidated its power at the all-India parliamentary level and many other Indian states. Despite the BJP's high-profile campaign against Banerjee in particular, spearheaded by the Indian prime minister (Narendra Modi) and home minister (Amit Shah), AITC emerged victorious. Yet the BJP made significant electoral gains in rural constituencies as a party that was historically marginal in the state of West Bengal.

In summarising this political trajectory of (West) Bengal historically, I have attempted to provide a broad overview of its thick intersections with shifting forces in culture and society. Each phase in this trajectory also makes evident the many internal differences and continuing fissures between social classes and communities within the state. Across these groups of West Bengal's population, albeit in varying ways, the female politician or the women active in its politics cuts across all categories and scales in the field of my study. Recognising this fact, in the forthcoming discussion, I turn more directly to women's attainment of political consciousness, agency, and their participation in (West) Bengal's politics through the key phases of this historical trajectory.

3.2 Women's Political Agency and Participation in Bengal: A Long View

In nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, the push for women's education by the Hindu educated elite, in tandem with colonial social policy, became an unintended catalyst for the burgeoning political consciousness among women and the political agency they

acquired. In considering a long-term perspective on women's political agency and participation, Tanika Sarkar (2001a) provides a helpful point of entry. Sarkar highlights how Indian women acquired rights as valid 'citizens' through a protracted process ranging from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, as 'a consequence of movements that did not directly aspire to secure citizenship for women' (p. 546). Focusing on nineteenth-century Bengal, she highlights how '…struggles for certain immunities and entitlements for the Hindu woman unfolded alongside simultaneous struggles for Indian nationhood—at times overlapping, at others conflicting' (p. 548). These arguments help to recall the correlation that the *bhadralok* Bengali nationalist thinkers, intellectuals, writers and artists made between the maternal body of the woman, its protection, and the attainment or defence of nationhood. Indeed, Bengal's shifting politics has consistently attracted attention regarding how urban elites shaped gender ideologies, championed female education, and influenced women's status in both the pre- and post-independence periods. Throughout these periods, the interplay between elite-led educational reforms, political engagement, and social activism both reproduced existing and reconstituted new models of femininity and Bengali nationhood. These models were also impacted by shifting boundaries of acceptable female roles in the public sphere (Borthwick, 1984; Karlekar, 1991; Chowdhury, 1998).

If, however, the nineteenth-century reformist (later nationalist) perspective of elite Bengali men was to be inverted, the very purity and sanctity they seemed to be preserving did not align with the views of even the earliest generations of educated women. Their political agency and consciousness become apparent in a new form of literary expression, the autobiography. Important examples include women like Rassundari Devi and Saradasundari Devi authoring works like *Amar Jiban*, or 'My Life' (1876), and *Atmakatha*, literally 'autobiography' (1913), respectively. This kind of literature, written by what Ananya Chatterjee (2021) terms 'new widows', candidly exposed the gulf between the domestic purity upheld by reformist rhetoric and the patriarchal constraints women actually faced. Generally, a growing cohort of educated women—often exposed to English-language curricula and literature—challenged existing social norms by documenting their lived experiences and questioning prevailing assumptions about female domesticity. The autobiography itself, in this sense, can be considered an early form of self-fashioning using the literary medium.

Recognising that education was a powerful tool to acquire political agency and enter the public domain, elite educated women embarked on grounded social work at the turn of the twentieth century, signalling a new form of political agency and participation. An

important instance of a non-Hindu woman being involved in such work is the prominent education activist of the early twentieth century, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), who founded schools in the 1910s for Muslim girls in Bhagalpur and Calcutta, both within the erstwhile Bengal Presidency (Begum, 2021). Begum Rokeya, who never held political office formally, nonetheless critiqued patriarchal norms explicitly, opening up new avenues for female public engagement. These efforts mirrored those of elite Hindu women like Abala Bose (1864-1951), who contributed to the education of widows in the early years of the twentieth century. Bose even supported the initiatives of émigré nationalist educators like the Irish-born Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), who actively espoused Indian spirituality in education as an instrument of anti-colonial resistance (Ray, 1991).

By the 1920s and 30s, women occupied the forefront of several political movements in the public sphere through activism. They sought better living conditions, drinking water, liquor prohibition and voiced protest against rising prices (Rajan, 1999). Many such women came from working-class and peasant groups. For example, the Calcutta and Howrah municipal scavengers' (sanitation workers) strike of 1928 and the jute mill workers' strikes in 1928 and 1929 evidence women's activism from these groups (Sarkar, 1984). After 1929, women again led a strike in 1949 within Bengal's jute mills (Chakravarty, 1981). Sarkar (1984) contends that even among the most conservative sections of society in Bengal, women from Marwari and Gujarati families (communities with cultural and linguistic roots in Western India) and upper-class conservative Muslim families courted arrest. They occupied official buildings, organised demonstrations, and took charge of picketing, flag hoisting, and processions.

In the 1930s, leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose in fact activated *Nari Satyagraha Samitis* (associations of anti-colonial resistance led by women) in Burrabazar, the commercial heart of Calcutta, and established special wings for female students within the Bengal Provincial Students' Association. During the non-cooperation protests of 1921 against British rule, Basanti Debi, Urmila Debi, and Suniti Debi (female members of the Bengali Anti-British militant nationalist Chitta Ranjan Das's family) joined picketing lines, courted arrest, contributing to broadening the female demographic of the movement to include elite families (Sen, 2000). Such active modes of political participation by women paved the way, from the 1930s onwards, for legislative reforms like the Government of India Act of 1935, which extended limited electoral opportunities for women (Sarkar, 1984).

In still more active ways of participating in the nationalist movement, as Durba Ghosh (2013) notes, a handful of the respectable *bhadramahila* women took up arms against the British from the 1930s onwards. Adopting militant action, they:

> …shot at British officials, secured and transported materials to make bombs, carried messages in an underground network of secret cells of revolutionaries and pretended to be wives, sisters and relatives of men who were hiding from the authorities (p. 360).

Notable among such women were Bina Das, Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Chowdhury, Pritilata Waddedar, who came from families of the landholding elite, and were college educated. Additionally, Sucheta Kriplani, although born outside Bengal, symbolised the widening prospects for women in post-independence politics by becoming independent India's first female Chief Minister, in Uttar Pradesh. These women flouted many prevailing social and cultural norms. In doing so, such women changed the predictable expectations from their projected lives as good homemakers, wives and mothers; instead, they were questioned and imprisoned; some—like Pritilata Waddedar, who swallowed a cyanide pill—even committed suicide to prevent being questioned (Ghosh, 2013).

Kaberi Chakrabarti, in a recent work (2023), gives a comprehensive overview of women's political participation in Bengal in the years preceding India's independence in 1947 and the decades that followed. Notable developments include the formation of the Mahila Atmarokkha Samiti (Women's Self-defence Association) in 1942, led by Communist Party members. This organisation engaged women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds in relief work, protests against price rises, and campaigns to release political prisoners through the 1940s. The 1947 partition and the ensuing refugee crises saw women's active role in relief and rehabilitation, thereby embedding their activism in grassroots mobilisation. After independence, prominent revolutionaries such as Suhasini Ganguly, Ujjala Rakshit, Manikuntala Sen, and Kalpana Dutta joined the Communist Party. Manikuntala Sen won elections to the West Bengal state assembly twice in the 1950s as the sole female candidate from the Communist Party of India (CPI). Meanwhile, former militant revolutionaries like Shanti Das, Bina Das, and Kamala Dasgupta shifted allegiance to the INC and formed the Congress Mahila Sangha (Women's Association of the Congress).

Although the post-independence roles of women in politics were quite wide-ranging, the ideological rifts from the 1940s among women aligned with different parties, such as the Communists and the INC, the extremists and moderates, the non-violent agitators and

advocates of militancy, also began to deepen. What remained constant, however, was the small proportion of Bengali women who were actually represented in high level electoral and executive processes. Among these few, Renuka Ray, a Gandhian social activist, served in the Constituent Assembly and the Provisional Parliament of the Union of India, later becoming Minister of Rehabilitation and Relief in the West Bengal Assembly (1952–57). Phulrenu Guha held a social welfare portfolio in the Union Cabinet (of India's parliament) in the 1960s, contributing significantly to legal reforms. Guha chaired the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which produced the landmark *Towards Equality* report in 1974. Yet, the division of the Communist Party in Bengal into CPI and CPI(M) in 1964 resulted in separate women's wings, leading to a splintered approach to women's struggles. For example, the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mohila Samiti (PBGMS; West Bengal Democratic Women's Association), split from the near-identically named Paschim Banga Mohila Samiti (PGMS; West Bengal Women's Association) in 1971. The former aligned with the CPI(M) to become a dominant force in women's organisation at the state level. However, independent women's organisations found themselves increasingly at odds with party-led movements that prioritised electoral gains over social reforms (Chakrabarti, 2023).

In the decades from the 1970s onwards, under successive Left Front governments (1977- 2011), women did gain certain advantages through radical decentralisation policies. For instance, land reform legislation, including joint titles in favour of women, was one notable step. The introduction of 50 percent reservations for women in Panchayats (the local government executive in rural areas) enabled a kind of grassroots leadership, at least in theory. The formation of an all-women Gram (village) Panchayat in the village of Kultikari in 1993 demonstrated the potential for transformative governance at the local level. The establishment of West Bengal's first Women's Commission in 1992, with Bela Dutta Gupta as its chairperson, further signalled institutional recognition of women's issues.

Yet, despite the rhetoric of equality, internal party documents expose persistent gender bias. For instance, the CPI(M)'s Eighth Congress in 1968 reported that there were no more than 750 women members nationwide, representing a mere 1 per cent of the total party membership. Even by the party's Twentieth Congress in 2012, women's membership had increased only to 15 per cent, indicating that cultural and institutional barriers within leftist organisations continued to marginalise women (Karat, 2014).

According to Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and West Bengal Election Watch (2021), women constituted only 10 per cent of total contestants in parliamentary or state assembly elections. The highest proportion of women MLAs in the West Bengal Assembly since independence was 13.6 percent in 2006, with 40 women elected to a 294-seat House. From the 1970s to the early 2000s, women's representation averaged at seven to eight percent, although this figure began to inch upwards from 2001 onwards. In the 2016 elections in West Bengal, 40 women MLAs (about 13.6 percent of the assembly) won, out of 199 women candidates. By 2021, although the proportion of enrolled women voters stood at 49.01 percent, only 40 women were elected—14 percent of the Assembly. The AITC nominated the highest number of women candidates (49, or 16.83 percent of its total), who managed to secure 33 seats. In contrast, the BJP fielded 32 women (10.92 per cent), of whom seven won assembly seats in the state. The Left Front and the INC combined failed to secure any seats occupied by women (Chakrabarti, 2023).

These historical trends about co-opting women's labour into electoral politics, yet systematically excluding them from effectively gaining visibility as political actors, including in West Bengal's left-wing politics, mirror particular experiences of women across India's more traditional and conservative Hindu groups. They recall the experiences of exclusion reported by members of the Shiv Sena's *Mahila Aghadi* in the context of Mumbai discussed in the previous chapter (Bedi, 2007). In a wider sense, the simultaneous co-option of female labour in political activity and women's exclusion from political *visibility* draws legitimacy from the socio-cultural construct of *seva*, (literally meaning 'service') for the group over the individual, which continues to have a presence in modern social life (Dyahadroy, 2009). Whilst not limited to the roles of women alone, *seva* does help to sustain a kind of patriarchy through figures of wives and daughters at the level of the family, and extending to the community and society (including social units like political parties). In the pan-Indian context, even within such patriarchal constraints, *seva* or service appears to have enabled women to play active (albeit not always visible) roles in Hindu nationalist movements (Sarkar, 2001b; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995; Banerjee, 2003). This form of participation, in effect, suggests a kind of gendered political participation that emerges from ideological leanings rather than individual interests, yet erases feminine agency in visual terms.

To return to the context of Bengal's (later West Bengal's) political trajectory, the discussions above evidence manifestations of women's political agency and participation in wide-ranging ways: self-fashioning through the autobiography, work in education,

political activism, militant resistance, relief work, potential for electoral and executive presence. Yet, on the whole, despite the promise and potential this historical evidence held, women's organisations found themselves increasingly co-opted into electoral preoccupations, rather than championing women's equality or liberation in autonomous terms. This paradox underlines the limits of how heightened electoral mobilisation of women does not necessarily translate into formal representation in higher levels of decision-making. In the forthcoming discussion, I will trace the persistence of such a glass ceiling through an understanding of Bengal's political culture in terms of its social history, which this chapter began with.

3.3 The *Bhadralok* and *Bhadramahila*: A Relational Field

To better understand the barriers for inclusion of women in higher levels of electoral politics in Bengal, a gendered understanding of propriety in political participation and performance proves necessary. I will derive this understanding from Bengal's broader social and political trajectory over time, and the agency and participation of women in this trajectory. These historical antecedents provide a context to the present-day expectations from and manifestations of social and political propriety expected from women. To make these connections, it is necessary to begin with notions of respectability embodied by the figure of the *bhadralok*.

3.3.1 Making Respectable, A Durable Identity

The historical trajectory of Bengal's society, intellectual explorations, culture and politics bears testimony to the enduring centrality of its elite *bhadralok* population (here I include both genders, with a majority of men, nonetheless). To build upon what I have traced about its historical origins in the nineteenth century, the dominance of *bhadralok* culture laid claim, albeit with important limits and variations, to India's nationalist imagination and, more importantly, to Bengali identity and culture through its colonial and post-colonial decades.

Before moving any further, it is important to note that while *bhadralok* hegemony played an important role in shaping political conduct in Bengal, its identity as a group over time was not fixed. As more groups gained access to English education and affairs of government, 'middle-class' respectability in Bengali culture came to be associated with people of varied social and economic classes. In this sense, *bhadralok* or middle-class identity became non-exclusive to the upper castes, nor was it inaccessible to other groups. A rare quantitative study by John McGuire (1983) establishes this fact by

showing that in the city of Calcutta, the *bhadralok* demographics show members from at least eighteen caste groups. In the early twentieth century, growing levels of education and literacy continued to expand the circle: newly literate groups from several castes sought to join *bhadralok* ranks (Guha, 2022).

Yet, as Bourdieu (1984) observes, social identity is inevitably defined and asserted through difference. Although becoming progressively diverse, the *bhadralok* population in Bengal was, and continues to be, quite small in proportion. The assertion of their difference occurred through occupation. As Broomfield (1968) explains: 'The basic and most rigidly maintained distinction between *bhadra* (respectable) and *abhadra* (not respectable), between high and low, was the *bhadralok*'s abstention from manual labour and their belief in the inferiority of manual occupations' (p. 6). So deep was the *bhadralok* disdain for manual labour that, although many owned land, they did not work it themselves. Their preferred occupations involved a white-collar position in the British (and later, Indian or West Bengal state government's) administration; if that was not available, they earned from their land by delegating agricultural tasks to lower-caste Hindu or Muslim farmhands and restricting themselves to a supervisory role (Chatterji, 1994).

Another key aspect of *bhadralok* difference, and respectability, was culture and language. India's independence in 1947, accompanied by the (second) partition of Bengal, heightened misgivings of the *bhadralok* about cultural alienation through national politics of the INC, dominated by north Indians. Such a condition drove many members of the *bhadralok* intelligentsia towards the left, partly due to a perception that pan-Indian parties did not adequately protect Bengali language and cultural identity. In 1956, for instance, proposals from the Indian Union to merge Bihar and West Bengal provoked widespread resistance in the latter. The event united progressive intellectuals and left-wing organisations in opposition to perceived threats to *Bengali* culture (my emphasis; Chowdhury, 2009)[7].

Over time, left ideology and Bengali high culture became identified interchangeably. When the Left Front officially formed the state government in 1977, it prioritised Bengal's

[7] In Bangladesh, the 1947-56 *Bhasha Andolan* (Language Revolution) in the erstwhile East Pakistan signifies a movement that resisted the imposition of Urdu (the widely spoken language in West Pakistan) as a state language, which mirrored the anxiety of Bengalis about being culturally and linguistically overrun by the 'non-Bengalis' in the Indian Union. A significant moment in this movement was the 21 February 1952 agitation (popularly known as '*Ekushe*' or 'the twenty-first') that saw the eventual inclusion of Bengali as a state language when the Pakistani constitution was drafted in 1956 (Ghosh, 1993).

culture and language matters to an exceptional degree, both by encouraging or imposing moral codes in public life, including education. Particularly significant here is how *bhadralok* status now became bound to a moral code of conduct. This important shift severed associations of the *bhadralok* with caste alone. Despite the group being populated mainly by upper caste Hindus, its identity was recast through those who were respectable in conduct, speech and manner (Sarkar, 2009). Through such a code, the *bhadralok* laid claim to representing authentic Bengali culture, effectively reducing other cultural traditions to a secondary or tertiary status—including those native to Bengal. The Left Front further legitimised these processes by merging socialist ideologies with Bengali nationalism, leading Moinak Biswas (2010) to describe the result as 'an exceptional bricolage of political techniques' (p. 202). Control over culture and education, in an extreme case, led to the 1981 proposal (implemented in 1983) of banning English as a language course in primary public schools. The decision led to sharp debates and sparked international controversy, as evident from contemporary sources (Datta, 1981; Acharya, 1982, Reuters, 1981). It occurred even as the Left promoted the idea that 'consumption of knowledge'—whether of traditional arts or English-language education—defined refinement, respectability, and provided the urban middle classes with a route to social mobility (Biswas, 2010), a mobility ironically made inaccessible to the new generation of school going children in the 1980s.

Positioning *bhadralok* respectability against political opponents proved effective for the Left. By presenting itself as the guardian of culture and progressive ideals, it cast rivals as culturally inferior. This hegemonic discourse legitimised the Left's political authority. The CPI(M) exemplified how inherited *bhadralok* cultural capital intersected with emerging socialist norms (Biswas, 2010). On the one hand, the Left Front benefited from the perception that the *bhadralok* circles had preserved Bengal's heritage. On the other, it sought to reformulate cultural mores to align with socialist ideals. Biswas (2010) contends that the Left's prolonged rule relied on stabilising cultural norms and positioning the CPI(M) as the legitimate representative of Bengali identity. This juxtaposition—pitting the proper and respectable against the non- or uncultured alien—continues to shape political debate in West Bengal.

The discourse that separates the respectable *bhadralok* from its 'others' is not without its own history, which helps explain the endurance of this paradigm. To recall the lasting impact of this internally variegated community as the guardian of respectable culture and nationalist thought, Partha Chatterjee (1993) reminds us that the *bhadralok* made clear distinctions between the 'inner' and 'outer' domains of colonial social life as early as the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The outer or material domain encompassed matters such as statecraft, economy, science and technology, education, and public intellectual pursuits. It was a sphere where interactions with—and even the acceptance of—'Western' modernity and the colonial state were legitimised and encouraged. The inner domain, however, was considered a more 'sovereign territory,' bearing the defining marks of national culture and identity. This domain sought to exclude the colonial state's institutional, legislative, and cultural apparatus (p. 6).

Among the many defining features of the inner domain, language played a particularly important role. Transformations in the Bengali language from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards were especially significant. By adopting modern communication technologies, it gained new currency in political discourse. As Chatterjee (1993) notes:

> An entire institutional network of printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and literary societies […] *outside* the purview of the state and the European missionaries, through which the new language, modern and standardised, [was] given shape (author's emphasis, p.7).

Another feature of this inner domain of national cultural identity was the family, domestic space and—of key importance to my research—the status of women. Here, precisely, shifts in the political agency of women emerges as an important site of contestation over time. To return to Chatterjee (1993):

> …the domain of the family and the position of women underwent considerable change in the world of the nationalist middle class. It was undoubtedly a new patriarchy that was brought into existence, different from the 'traditional' order but also explicitly claiming to be different from the 'Western' family. The 'new woman' was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the 'Western' woman (p. 9).

In a historical sense, it is hard to miss in these vignettes how the inner/outer polarity of identity and culture in Bengal's and post-independence West Bengal's politics endured from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth. The paradigm of respectability that the nationalist elite used to differentiate themselves against the British a nearly century prior was invoked in othering those who did not belong to *respectable* Bengali culture. By the 1980s and '90s phase of Bengal's politics, the inner domain had subsumed the outer. In the process, the Bengali *bhadralok* of this period unwittingly or consciously alienated

large sections of Bengal's population itself: its cultivators, working class immigrants, and even people of other linguistic, cultural and religious groups.

Equally important here are the ambiguities surrounding definitions of what the 'new woman' in Bengal and her code of propriety would be. In the colonial discourse on nationalism and national culture, feminine respectability was prescribed and limited to women occupying domestic spaces. The previous discussion on the political consciousness, agency and multiple modes through which women—many of them from *bhadralok* groups—participated in (West) Bengal's politics bears testimony to how features of a proper, respectable woman hardly remained constant. This dynamic and mutable identity of the respectable woman, the *bhadramahila* (as mentioned in section 3.1), her occupation of the public and outer domain in reality, complicated the theory and discourse about propriety among the *bhadralok* (here, I refer to the men only). In the forthcoming sub-section, I therefore provide an explanation of the various measures to fix the markers of respectability where Bengali women, as *bhadramahila*, were concerned.

3.3.2 Making Myths: Respectable Femininity and its Visualisations

To fully appreciate the relational field women in Bengal inhabited in the *bhadralok* world, I will begin with how women's bodies have long been mythicised to inscribe them with cultural, religious, and political meaning. Such meaning, in turn, shapes societal expectations and norms. Figural iconographies of maternal qualities—such as those represented by the Virgin Mary, Mother Teresa, and, as I will reveal in this discussion, Bharat Mata (India as Mother or Mother India)—serve as evidence of these inscriptions. Similarly, the personification of Ireland as a woman, often depicted as Mother Ireland, has historically functioned as a nationalist symbol, embodying both the nation's struggles and its moral and cultural purity. A growing body of research has illuminated how Marian devotion in European contexts elevates Mother Mary as a mega symbol of purity, maternal nurture, and spiritual mediation, linking figurative or textual representations to local and national identities, and even minority rights (Napolitano, 2009; Stadler, 2020). Beyond religious paradigms, the representations operate as cultural codes that carry socio-political weight, and female bodies serve as complex sites of cultural and national symbolism. Indeed, anthropological work has shown that Marian devotion often serves as a mode of resistance for marginalised communities to assert agency, combining religious iconography with resistance to social hierarchies and carving out new emotional landscapes (Dubisch,1995).

The utilitarian English philosopher John Stuart Mill's influential (1869) call for social and legal equality of women, articulated in his essay 'The Subjection of Women', reverberated far beyond Europe's shores. Mill asserted that women's subordination constitutes an anachronistic 'relic of an old world of thought'. This view intersected with the British civilising mission in colonial India. Convinced of India's social and cultural 'backwardness', colonial authorities sought to justify legal and social interventions aimed at 'reforming' indigenous customs. In Bengal, this confrontation between colonial modernity and nationalist aspirations led to the 'woman question', forcing a re-examination of feminine ideals that neither fully rejected nor entirely embraced Western precepts (Forbes, 1999).

Such developments in nineteenth-century Bengal formed the backdrop for inventing the *bhadramahila* within the 'inner' domain of national culture (Chatterjee, 1993). The term encapsulated a new ideal of womanhood: educated but morally anchored in traditional values, respectable yet confined to domestic norms (Borthwick, 1984; Chakravarti, 1990). This construct took shape through two parallel pressures. Colonial administrators and Christian missionaries framed 'Hindu' practices—especially those affecting women—as evidence of Indian society's unfitness for self-governance. Bengali reformers meanwhile proposed a modern yet 'proper' Hindu woman, placing her at the heart of national culture. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (1994) underlines that both imperialists and nationalists thus fixed their gaze on the 'Hindu woman' as an emblem of India's future to achieve starkly different ends. For the British, an image of the 'suffering Hindu woman' seemingly legitimised their own paternalist intervention as a colonial state. For Indian nationalists, by contrast, reform became an avenue to uphold an indigenous moral order. In both views, patriarchal authority remained unchallenged (Chatterjee, 2015). From this framework, the *bhadramahila* emerged as an enlightened and domesticated figure who symbolised India's capacity to modernise, even while remaining securely anchored to tradition—including normative gender roles. Tanika Sarkar (1984) argues that the *bhadramahila* was mythicised to ensure that patriarchal hegemony faced no threat from female education, which reform movements in nineteenth-century Bengal were advocating. Rather, it incorporated what Radhakrishnan (2009) refers to as 'respectable femininity'.

In the context of the popular uprising against Bengal's 1905 partition, as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's maternal goddess' invocation (*Vande Mataram*) in *Anandamath* showed, literary cultures in Bengal sought to fix particular meanings to the abstract

Figure 1. Bharat Mata (originally Banga Mata), by Abanindranath Tagore, 1905.

notion of ideal womanhood. Beyond literary works, one of the most impactful visualisations of the nation through the female body emerged in the modernist artist Abanindranath Tagore's 1905 painting Bharat Mata or Mother India; originally entitled Banga Mata (Mother Bengal), Abanindranath later dedicated the work to the pan-Indian cause of the independence movement in the 1930s (Guha-Thakurta, 1992). Art historians later have read this work as an explicit and powerful act of myth-making (Mitter, 1997). Saffron-clad, with a halo around her head, in her four metaphorical hands, 'Mother Bengal' held a rosary of beads embodying spiritual life and knowledge, was draped in white fabric symbolising protection, peace and sacrifice, paddy signifying nourishment and nurturing, and manuscripts representing knowledge—all elements of self-sufficiency posited by the Swadeshi ideal **(Fig 1)**. Contemporary accounts of the artwork, such as by

Sister Nivedita, saw the painting as a 'supreme example of [how] the abstract ideal of nationalism could be […] cast into an image that was both human and divine'. Nivedita felt it was a: 'dual impression of intimate familiarity and divine transcendence - the role of daughter, mother and goddess all merged into one…' (Nivedita, 1907; p. 221).

This figure, particularly in Bengal's context, gave the idea of an Indian nation, then not yet formed, a tangible and symbolic value by representing a female figure that was unmistakably Hindu and *bhadramahila* like. Beyond the artist's socially privileged class and audience, sacralised inscriptions of the motherland gained currency even in less elite circles, among the 'subaltern' populations as Christopher Pinney (2004) suggests. Indian nationhood, Pinney argues, reveals evidence of being 'driven by an intensely affective vision of the mother and her land [...] variously, in the forms of gender, visual symbol, visual style…' even through 'popular imagery' such as calendar or devotional 'art' (pp. 103-104). These kinds of popular myth-making acts align with India's deeply intertwined visual and religious practices, where *seeing* converges with acts of devotion such as *darshan*. *Darshan*, a kind of divine/spiritual witnessing reserved for religious settings and figures, also pertains to acts of seeing the ruler in feudal or medieval contexts as a symbol of the nation (or Empire) in a divine form (Eck, 1998).

In addition, the visual coding of a female body as the nation became crucial to the process of territorialising national culture. As scholars have argued, the personification of the nation is fundamental to embedding it in both historical and mythical time (Thongchai, 1994). Yet, absent from Abanindranath's representation were the varied realities of many Bengali women—Muslims, Christians, lower-caste, or tribal—who did not share the cultural markers of the elite, urban majority (Sangari & Vaid, 1990; Majumdar, 2021). The Bengali ideal of womanhood, as the *bhadralok* framework did, also excluded residents of Bengal who had settled with their families from various parts of the Indian subcontinent such as Rajasthan or Gujarat, not to mention the small yet historically resident populations of women of European, Jewish, Parsee and Armenian heritages who lived in the urban centres of Bengal. Despite not being native Bengali speakers, such women also fell in the larger group that can be described as the women of Bengal.

Unlike the actual diversity of women in Bengal, women from the non-*bhadramahila* groups did not appear as protagonists in celebrated works of Bengali art or literature. One such literary work, the novel by Rabindranath Tagore *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World), also set in the context of the 1905 partition, was intended as a critique of the

dogmatic nature of the nationalistic uprising, and its exclusionary tendencies. As Supriya Chaudhuri (2012) observes, the novel as a medium itself, became a potent site of communicating and inscribing the figure of the woman as the *bhadramahila*, portrayed in this case by *Ghare Baire*'s protagonist Bimala. The wife of a *zamindar*, Nikhil, a progressive and reform-oriented *bhadralok*, Bimala is encouraged to cross the boundary separating the inner and outer quarters of their mansion—which the remaining female members of the household never attempted. As Mrinalini Sinha (2008) posits, the author of her character, Tagore, quite a pragmatist in his own life, felt that 'modernising certain indigenous patriarchal modes of regulating women' would liberate Bengali women (p. 456). Therefore, Nikhil considers his wife an equal, is interested in her opinions, and introduces her to the 'outer' world of politics. However, Bimala is not portrayed in the same manner. Rather, she appears somewhat juvenile with little scope for independent action (Mukherjee, 2017).

Meredith Borthwick (1984) draws attention to how the *bhadramahila*'s commitment to embracing reform was usually a far riskier undertaking than that of her male partner. Unlike Nikhil, Bimala had no means of escape if 'reform' did not succeed in the outside world. *Ghare Baire*'s less-than-optimistic climax also confirms such an outcome; Bimala's character returns to the *andarmahal* (inner quarters), after an unsuccessful attempt to inhabit the outer world. Her own transgression, in this sense, even causes harm to her relationship with her husband. *Ghare Baire* therefore makes evident how the progressive attempts at liberating women had uneven, even unpredictable outcomes.

Beyond the genre of the novel, where representations of the *bhadramahila* was symbolic and imaginative, tangible visual representations of women in Bengal have been critically investigated far more rarely. To this relatively underpopulated field of inquiry, Malavika Karlekar (2005) brings exceptional insights through a close reading of an archive of photographs made between the 1870s to the 1910s. The technology of photography being nascent in Bengal at the time, it gained currency rapidly as a ritual to showcase upward mobility. The medium became a part of elite, modern and even Anglicised 'domestic' culture. In all of Karlekar's readings, it becomes clear that the visual portrayal of Bengali, even if only upper class, women or the *bhadramahila*, was sharply gendered—based on what they wore, how they were positioned in relation to men, even the body language of the photographed men and women in relation to one another (Karlekar, 2005; pp. 98-102). Like the novel *Ghare Baire* in particular, these photographs make apparent the position that 'respectable' women occupied in a relational field in their *bhadralok* domesticity.

The kind of woman represented in *Ghare Baire*, or the visualisation of Mother Bengal and even those appearing in photographs of the upwardly mobile Bengalis, reinforced in tangible terms notions of respectability for women within *bhadralok* society (Murshid, 1983; Chatterji, 1989; Forbes, 1996; Sarkar, 2001). Recent scholars argue how *bhadralok* critics of patriarchy espousing liberal, emancipatory values for the Hindu, upper caste *bhadramahila*—Tagore included—held rather conservative positions in their own lives (Majumdar, 2021). Like Abanindranath's painting or Rabindranath's novel, liberal reforms actually excluded a majority of the Hindu female population such as agrarian workers or those engaged in trade and production. These groups continued to be governed by local or community customs unlike those found in normative scriptural texts associated with the Hindu religion such as the Manusmriti (Menon, 1999). In the *bhadramahila* framework, meanwhile, women embodied the moral underpinnings of the future nation through qualities of self-sacrifice, virtue, and restraint (Bagchi, 2017). The *bhadramahila* ideal as well as its more tangible representations in Bengal's visual and literary cultures seemed to have dovetailed neatly with national discourse led by the *bhadralok* men. While this ideal suggests confining respectable women to supporting cast in the patriarchal order through codes of propriety, I now delve into how women in Bengal, *bhadramahila* or not, also challenged these codes. To do this, I turn to how such women negotiated and contested the fixity of their so-called respectable or *bhadra* selves.

3.3.3 Negotiations and Contestations

As the autobiographies of widows like Rassundari and Saradasundari's studied by Chatterjee (2021), or the militant confrontation with the colonial state that figures like Bina Das and others (Ghosh, 2013) evidence, the *bhadramahila* women in Bengal did not always meekly accept the domestic conjugal or maternal roles prescribed for them. These instances might signify how the *bhadramahila* framework was, on occasion, negotiated and contested by the very women expected to conform to it. By the late nineteenth century, an expanding circle of Bengali women from urban, upper caste backgrounds began to seek education, engage in philanthropic work, and publish in emerging women's journals such as *Bharati*, *Bangalakshmi*, and *Jayasree* (Borthwick, 1984; Ray, 1991). These publications revealed women's increasing desire for visibility in public life. They signal developments that unsettled both colonial sensibilities and male-led nationalist discourses (Sarkar, 2001). Nonetheless, by and large, the prevailing norms of propriety restricted women's self-expression to accepted 'feminine' modes, such as social welfare or spiritual leadership in the home.

What follows is that, in practice, idealised notions of the respectable or genteel woman did not reconcile with women's direct participation in political activism. Women revolutionaries who joined armed struggles in the 1930s and 1940s stood at odds with the normative model of patient, nurturing femininity (Dey, 1992; Bose, 2003). Their bold interventions highlighted a striking paradox: while mainstream nationalism lauded female symbols of the motherland, it remained ambivalent—even resistant—towards actual women wielding guns, fashioning explosives, or engaging in other acts of 'masculine' defiance (Forbes, 1997). These dissident figures momentarily disrupted the *bhadramahila* construct by exposing the structural constraints that even nationalism imposed on female political agency. Yet, as historians of gender and nationalism observe, such interruptions were short-lived (Mandal, 1991; Mukherjee, 1999). Pan-Indian leaders, particularly Gandhi, brought women back into public life primarily through non-violent protests and, household-based campaigns or political acts, roles deemed congruent with the maternal or wifely ethos. Even after Independence, 'the honour of a new social responsibility' for women, as Chatterjee (1990, p. 248) argues, frequently reinforced a hierarchical gender binary that restricted women to carefully circumscribed spaces of political involvement.

As a result, well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *bhadramahila* ideal shaped West Bengal's political and social milieu, ensuring that women's public roles remained tethered to their responsibility for upholding moral propriety defined by men (Rai et al., 2006). Even if female politicians gained visibility, voters and party structures often expected them to project nurturing, self-effacing qualities consistent with pre-independence nationalist tropes (Bagchi, 2017). Such enduring norms underscore why Bengal's women—despite significant contributions to various nationalist and post-independence social movements—continue to encounter barriers to robust leadership roles or autonomous decision-making in politics and governance (Sarkar, 1984).

Yet, Mamata Banerjee's ascendancy in West Bengal's politics in the 1990s represents a sharp aberration that has invoked much scholarly interest. For this reason, it deserves close attention in summarising the negotiations around and contestations posed to idealised respectability for women. Subverting claims of authentic Bengali culture from the *bhadralok* quarters, Banerjee's political activity also challenged what a *bhadramahila* should embody in her manner, speech and conduct. Her popularity (and later, enduring political success) underscores an alternative vision of Bengali identity, one not contingent on so-called *bhadralok* high culture. Banerjee cultivated a persona of being 'Didi' (elder

sister), invoking a familial relationship with her supporters, while explicitly engaging women as a social and electoral constituency. This approach moved outside the inaccessible *bhadralok* leadership style, the guardian of high culture, to galvanise mass support. Biswas (2010) notes that among those seeking political change, many asked how the AITC could replace the Left when its 'leadership [lay] in the hands of the *bhadralok*; the Trinamool is a party of unruly trouble-mongers'. Yet, Banerjee's populist style exposed the diminishing credibility of a *bhadralok* framework for the electorate. The 'Bengali people,' often equated with the urban middle class, were no longer a static bloc easily swayed by appeals to *bhadralok* respectability (p. 203).

The ideal of a genteel, respectable *bhadramahila* saw a breach, a disruption of its purported cultural authority with Banerjee's style of political engagement. Her populist approach and everyday vernacular eschewed the assumption that only polished, high-cultural leaders (according to *bhadralok* standards) were fit to govern. Despite earlier denunciations of her language as drawn from the 'gutter' (Mitra, 2001)—Banerjee's subsequent electoral success illustrated the limits of *bhadralok* cultural supremacy. By exposing the *bhadralok* ideal's ties to an urban, high-cultural legacy of colonial and socialist lineages, Banerjee articulated an alternative Bengali identity with broader appeal. Her attempts to reach female voters by tailoring policies for women's health, education, and social security deepened this transformation. This reorientation not only mobilised grassroots support but also forced a reconsideration of the cultural capital that traditionally legitimised *bhadralok* governance.

If seen from the perspective of her visual portrayals on mass media during her contest to the Left Front, Banerjee exposed that the *bhadralok* were not as genteel as they claimed after all. Defying the predictable historical image of a *bhadramahila*, rather than in the confines of the home, the female body appeared on the street—rallying against the male-dominated *bhadralok* Left Front regime in West Bengal (Sarkar, 1984). The visuals of Banerjee were quite unlike the literary and visual genres of representing the *bhadramahila* in the early twentieth century. The widely proliferated, now iconic, press images of Mamata Banerjee in her mid-30s, under physical assault—images that also found their way into political posters and murals—signalled a radical visual shift in West Bengal's activist political culture.

This phenomenon recalls what Kalpana Kannabiran (2010) discusses in the context of the struggle in feminist politics as how: 'practices of violence are written on bodies, because the physical body bears the burden of the violence, as much as the mind retains a

memory of it…' (p. 121). The stark visuals of Banerjee's bloodied, bandaged head and body conveyed precisely such imprints of violence, it subverted the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* ideals of authentic Bengali propriety. Instead, these visuals recalled the memory of women in left-wing political activism and militant trade unionism, labour strikes by women in jute mills or student protests during the early 1900s (Sarkar, 1984) and the Naxalite uprising in West Bengal (Mace, 2019), all events that contested a fixed idea of the *bhadralok* / *bhadramahila* paradigm as one of an authentic Bengali culture.

The trajectory that began with the emergence of the *bhadralok* and arguably culminated in a waning of its cultural and political dominance paves the way for a deeper engagement with gender in West Bengal's socio-political context. If the *bhadralok* established a long-standing benchmark of 'respectable' masculinity and, in turn, created the implicit 'rulebook' for respectable femininity, how (successfully, or not) the *bhadramahila* contest and reconfigure these norms lie at the core of my inquiry. As Guha-Thakurta (2004) observes, 'pasts become meaningful and usable only when they are activated by the contemporary desires of individuals and communities, and, most powerfully, by the will of nations' (p. ii). The manner of 'appropriating the past for the present' (Guha-Thakurta, 2004, p. ii) affirms a necessity to examine how historical legacies gain meaning when activated by current societal and political aspirations. This imperative validates why investigating gender through the sanctioning and preservation of a particular cultural order—as the normative 'decorum'—remains so critical in West Bengal even today.

3.4 Conclusion: Projecting Visibilities

Having traced Bengal's political trajectory through its colonial and post-colonial phases, its connection to shifting cultural mores, and the ideals of propriety—including feminine propriety—in the political sphere, I must step back and consider what this understanding provides for an examination of the current electoral setting in West Bengal. As I investigate how gender and visual politics intersect in West Bengal, two poles of a spectrum of a gendered visual politics emerge. At one end lies the 'Bharat Mata' painting and at the other, the photorealistic visual reportage of violence against Mamata Banerjee. What lies between these two poles of the spectrum remain to be explored in my study. Still, reflecting on the context of (West) Bengal I have visited in this chapter allows me to project at least four ways in which female political actors might construct their visibility in its current setting.

The first among such kinds of political visibility, I anticipate, would emerge from a conservative and traditional mould of the *bhadramahila*. It invokes images of modest demeanour, and essentialises a female politician attired in traditional clothing to uphold gendered conventions of Hindu nationalism. This kind of visual invokes and mythicises the past. It is likely to assign a central position to colonial and post-colonial national imagination, invoking the inner domain that houses the nation, and would be predicated on a paradigm of difference from colonial and western values (Wilton, 2012) like the 'Bharat Mata'. Through her visual politics, such a candidate would propose working for the nation's good by indexing their body to notions of Hindu middle-class women to nationhood, and maternal nurture. In sartorial terms, this manner of being visible might reveal a deliberate signalling of culturally appropriate femininity. It is likely to appear in balanced combination of different visible attributes signalling appropriateness, whilst being seen performing public work, speeches, and forging interpersonal connections outside the home. Such a choice of attributes combining actions, clothing, modesty, religious and political symbols will seek to show the female political candidates as ones who remain conservative, traditional women while occupying the 'outer' or public realm. It would cement them as reliable and relatable bastions of what people cherish in their cultural values through a mode of what Hansen (1994) describes as controlled emancipation.

A second kind of visibility of the female politician in Bengal today will likely draw from the history of women's activism in the public sphere. In modern day imagination, such a candidate's visual politics will strive to memorialise women protesting against discrimination. This figure will visually project itself in its fight for enfranchising of the poor, the farmers, industry labourers and dispossessed castes and religious minorities. Such a candidate's visual politics will be rooted in the twentieth-century Leftist politics of West Bengal, for instance, the strikes by women in jute mills or student protests in the early 1900s (Sarkar, 1984). It will seek to narrativise what the Left campus activists call declassed practices (Martelli, 2020), by embodying an identification with subaltern and subordinated populations. In its modern form, this political candidate's visibility could employ being pictured with marginalised groups, and display the rejection of her own socio-economic privilege through non-conformist dress and behaviour. She could appear in hybrid (Indo-Western) outfits and when, in traditional saris or kurta-kameez, sport drab colours and accessories like simple footwear in solidarity with constituents from the working class. The political visibility of this kind of candidate will strive to invoke images of social revolution.

A third kind of visual politics might emerge from female candidates who represent a legacy in political participation, either as former leaders, or even people of renown or popularity in their respective communities, neighbourhoods or constituencies, including popular celebrities. These, if seen as elite, candidates are likely to embody a visibility that straddles tradition and modernity. They would likely employ visible symbols or attire that are not tied down to singular social, political, or religious identities. Rather, the construction of their visibility is likely to be cosmopolitan and secular. These candidates, whilst representing the core principles of their respective parties, are likely to position themselves as camera friendly constituents, usually a second-in-command. For example, the growing inclusion of women film actors in recent times within most political parties active in West Bengal serves as a testament to the presence, even success of this kind of a female political candidate (Biswas, 2023). Moreover, historically, successful women in politics such as India's former and only female prime minister Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto (in Pakistan), Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka) and Sheikh Hasina (in Bangladesh) have been legitimised politically through male familial ties or patronage. As a result, such leaders are cast as 'exceptional' women, objectified through the process of veneration. The accompanying visualities—as evident in these examples—would portray a lack of excess signifying a kind upper-middle-class conservatism. Meanwhile, as Marshall (1997) asserts, such elite-exceptionalism, would help these candidates enjoy 'a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population. They would be 'allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us [the electorate] watch' (Marshall, 1997: ix).

In a fourth kind of political visibility, candidates might draw from the media-based hagiography, or conversely, critical discourse around a figure like Mamata Banerjee. Visually speaking, this visibility encompasses multiple facets attributed to or invoked for Banerjee: the fire-lady (in Bengali: *Agnikanya*), the elder sister (*Didi*) and the daughter of Bengal (*Bangla'r Meye*)—the last being used in the 2021 election campaign. In this sense, the hybridised and multifaceted visuality leans powerfully towards the end of the spectrum where the female body is a target of violence, and at the same time, reclamation of her agency in ways that challenge the genteel *bhadramahila* paradigm. The meanings embedded in this kind of political visibility are powerfully suggestive of the grounded approach taken to political engagement with the people, equally drawing from and subverting historical legacies and associations. It brings forth the aspirational combination of what it means to be a woman, a politically conscious leader, secular yet religious, traditional yet modern, and a seeker of justice for the subordinated, all in one through the kind of visibility that undergirds it. Such a visibility, nevertheless, would

convey pride in belonging to Bengal's culture, it's history, language and traditions, but also move away from fixed associations or settled narratives of propriety or authenticity on each of these aspects.

As presented in RQs 1 and 2 whilst introducing this thesis, in part, my research focuses on the 2021 election campaign in West Bengal. This campaign arguably represents one of the most polarised political contests in recent Indian history, conducted during a deadly wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia (Beaumont, 2021). To challenge the only sitting woman chief minister in India (Banerjee), gendered slurs were also cast—such as Narendra Modi's infamous catcall 'Didi, O Didi' (Banerjee is popularly known by the epithet 'Didi'), and earlier (in December 2020), the BJP's WB coordinator tweeting a remark pre-empting the AITC's defeat with a picture of her cooking (usually considered a feminine, domestic chore): 'Didi has already begun doing what she will need to do five months' (Kazim, 2021; Vijayvargiya 2020). Therefore, expectedly, the WB electoral campaign, apart from my own research, also prompted a key study on personalisation in electoral politics (Shome et al., 2024). This study examines Facebook adverts centred on Modi and Banerjee and is primarily quantitative in its methods. It draws out themes of party ideology and gendered identity by analysing a randomised sample of adverts, arguing how the campaign was 'personalised' through visuals about these iconic leaders (Banerjee and Modi). My study differs in both its ambition and methodology in relation to this one. As I will explain in detail in the next chapter, my research examines the electoral campaign through its *every-day visual artefacts* posted on Facebook and X from official accounts of the four major contesting parties (AITC, BJP, INC and CPI[M]), and their most followed (not always iconic) female candidates on these platforms from a qualitative, culture-centric perspective.

4 Methodology

I will set forth in this chapter the philosophical grounding of my research approach, which informed my research design and analytical framework, and, equally, the choice of methods adopted for data collection, processing and analysis. The chapter also explains the ethical framework and measures I adopted in my study, following which, I present the nature of the data I collected for the two distinct investigations I conducted, and the methods and tools employed to analyse and interpret their findings.

4.1 Philosophical Basis: A Critical Realist Approach

The methodological approach of my research is premised on the philosophy of critical realism developed in the 1970s by Roy Bhaskar ([1975] 2008), which recognises that the social world and its experience are shaped at two levels, its 'material conditions' and 'structures'. Of these levels, material conditions comprise phenomena that are observable. Yet, at another level, such conditions are also *caused* and *materialised* by structures that are not always observable. Roy therefore argues that social phenomena are reducible to neither what we can observe, nor the knowledge constructed from what we observe.

Critical realism therefore foregrounds that the social world is shaped by structures that have tangible effects, and not just by how people interpret the observable, material conditions. This interpretation of phenomena informs the modes of generating knowledge, which concerns the domain of epistemology. Critical realism, however, moves beyond what is observable and 'knowable' from observation to also encompass the existence of 'real' conditions—thereby adopting a position of ontology—that *cause* what we can observe. In this, it is distinguished from the notion of positivism, which is chiefly concerned with what is empirically observable, and also from constructionism, which is occupied with and emphasises *ways* of knowing like language and discourse. Thus, critical realism offers a balanced approach. It recognises the role of meaning in social life but insists that the meaning making processes are themselves impacted by material *reality*. This duality makes critical realism particularly suitable for my research on the visibility of women politicians, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of both structural forces and mediated representations that shape political identities.

What follows is that the social world is composed of interconnected relationships between individuals and groups. These relationships are not isolated or static in nature; they form a complex web of interactions that shape social structures, norms, and

conditions. For example, the visibility of women politicians is influenced by their relationships with constituents, political parties, media organizations, and broader societal groups. These interconnected relationships generate specific conditions—such as gender norms, institutional rules, and power dynamics—that both enable and constrain human actions. At the same time, individuals and groups possess agency, allowing them to navigate, resist, and transform these conditions. These relations generate conditions that shape human actions, particularly relevant to understand social norms and rules. Although these structures are not tangible objects, they can be considered 'real' because they have causal effects, influencing observable phenomena (Matthews, 2009). Significantly, such social structures do not exert a uniform influence on individuals; rather, their effects depend on specific historical and geographical contexts (Sayer, 2000).

Bhaskar ([1975], 2008) recognises that social structures and their causal powers are *real*, yet are shaped by culture and language. Consequently, a critical realist approach helps highlight how power relations, social structures, and cultural norms influence the construction of gender. By focusing on the reality that underlies social phenomena, it enables my study of women's gendered political performance in West Bengal to uncover the deeper mechanisms shaping their political identities and visibility.

Critical realism applies to both the conceptual and empirical dimensions of my research. It asserts that social phenomena—whether actions, texts, or institutions—exist independently of how people perceive or interpret them. In other words, the social world rests on a material foundation and is also shaped by meaning and language (Sayer, 1992). Building on this, and following Fryer and Navarrete (2024), my methods of data gathering, processing and analysis (elaborated in section 4.3) help distinguish between experiences, events, and causal mechanisms. This approach helps understand social phenomena while also shedding light on the deeper social structures that shape them. For my study of women's gendered visual political performance in West Bengal, it means I can link reported experiences and tangible artefacts to the structural realities of the region, revealing how observable phenomena are situated within broader societal contexts.

To elaborate further, the thematic analysis of visual cues and interview data (as detailed in this chapter later where I describe my first investigation) necessitated a deep engagement with the causal mechanisms underlying the phenomena under investigation. This approach was essential for both the study of visual artefacts representing women

candidates' political performances on social media and their reflective accounts of individual experiences. Such performances and experiences are inherently tied to individual subjectivities, which, in certain instances, are shaped by specific contextual events—in this case, the 2021 West Bengal Assembly Election. As a researcher, connecting observed phenomena to their causal mechanisms is pivotal for explicating the underlying structures that generate these events. For example, societal norms and power dynamics that shape gendered performances can be uncovered through this analytical lens. Critical realism, as a philosophical framework, equips my research with the tools to investigate such underlying causes—such as gendered power relations and cultural norms—that give rise to observable events and experiences in the social world (Bhaskar, 1975[2008]; Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). This is the first way such an approach is appropriate to my study.

A second contribution of critical realism to this research is its view of causality as tendencies rather than strict, deterministic laws. This perspective is especially useful in social science research, where causal factors emerge from the complex interplay of cultural, historical, and geographic contexts, along with the actions of social groups and individuals. Such an approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how gendered structures intersect with other social forces to shape women's political identities and actions. By recognising the contingent and multi-layered nature of causality, critical realism avoids oversimplified explanations and supports a more sophisticated analysis of the dynamic relationship between structure and agency in producing observable outcomes.

A third affordance of critical realism stems from its philosophical insights into the relationship between structure and agency, particularly as articulated by Margaret Archer (1995). Archer posits that structure (encompassing social norms, rules, and systems) and agency (referring to individual action and decision-making) are ontologically distinct yet interact dynamically. This conceptualisation allows for an examination of how women politicians navigate, and at times, resist or reconfigure structural constraints in their visual politics and the performance of gendered identities. By framing structure and agency as operating at different but interrelated levels, critical realism guards against simplistic, unidirectional causal explanations. It therefore maintains a check on reducing social phenomena to a simple one-way cause and effect, but rather helps to bring out a reciprocal relationship and impact of how individual agency is both shaped and in turn (re)shapes social structures. Recognising this reciprocity keeps intact a complex reading of digital visibility and political performance of women in West Bengal, especially taking

into account the agency of individual women navigating societal structures underscored by gendered power relations, cultural norms, and structural forces. In this, critical realism offers a foundation to see social reality as layered, which in turn helped me make informed choices about my tools and modes of analysing data.

A final affordance of deriving research methods from a critical realist approach lies in how my study's analytical framework engages with both the material and discursive dimensions of gender within its specific social and cultural context. This dual focus enables the study to uncover not only the constructed nature of gender but also its lived experience within the given context. By adopting a critical realist lens, I pursue 'intensive' research that prioritises causal explanation over mere description within the cases studied (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 1992). This approach aligns with critical realism's commitment to exploring the underlying mechanisms and structures that generate observable phenomena, rather than simply describing surface-level patterns. Moreover, the focus on context specificity further allows for the integration of particular feminist perspectives into the analysis, as I elaborate in the following section. These perspectives are fully committed to depth, detail, and nuance in examining the causal structures of phenomena. Such a stance enriches the interpretation of data by infusing qualitative depth into the analysis, even when engaging with quantitative or representative sample-based studies, such as visual content analysis. On the one hand, this approach ensures that quantitative methods are not reduced to superficial descriptions but are instead used to uncover deeper causal mechanisms. On the other hand, it facilitates the interpretation of interview data to understand broader societal processes at work within the specific context of study.

As will become evident in chapters 5 and 6, the methods I employed as part of my critical realist approach have helped to discover intersections between gendered social structures, self-presentation, and public perceptions, which shape both visual political performance and discursive identities, particularly that of a 'good' woman. These analytical methods have revealed how women politicians in West Bengal do not simply perform gender in the media; their everyday identities are profoundly shaped by their positions within patriarchal structures. By focusing on the causes that shape the visual and discursive construction of women in politics, my research moves beyond being descriptive. It maintains a balance between findings that are particular and of wider relevance, while not claiming 'universal' generalisations. Yet, it strives to contribute a deeper understanding of how gendered power relations are constructed and sustained, and, at times, even transformed, through the spheres of digital media and politics.

4.2 Cultural Specificity and Positionality

As my research focuses on a very particular societal context, it became necessary to centre the cultural and, at times, related linguistic nuances that materially influence the lives and visibilities of women politicians. These specificities render the state of West Bengal a *particular* kind of electoral setting, shaped by its historical and socio-cultural trajectory—as evident through the previous chapter. Here, it is important to remember that Pauwels (2005) highlights that visuals often transcend their role as mere images when their context is taken into account. This concept is particularly relevant to the objects of my research—visual artefacts on Facebook and X. These artefacts straddle both a referent: what they depict, and a style: how they depict and represent it, here, visual political content. This understanding informed the way I collected my data, which I present in detail in the next section. Moreover, the present research does not claim to be a total, exhaustive, analysis; it is *a way* of approaching the case, but not *the only one*. It bears in mind the 'problematic positivism' that Bleiker (2015, p.880) cautions against in making a case for plurality of methods to study visual politics globally.

In the context of West Bengal then, my study recognises that political performances and gender roles are deeply entangled with local norms and practices, which are themselves products of specific historical developments. This made it imperative to adopt a cautious and sensitive approach to account for how these norms impact the lived experiences and performances of women politicians. By recognising these particularities in West Bengal's electoral setting, I have sought to highlight the importance of context-specific analysis without making broader claims of exceptionalism. The focus on cultural and linguistic nuances allows for a deeper understanding of how gendered political identities are constructed and performed within this specific milieu. At the same time, it acknowledges that similar processes may operate in other contexts, albeit in different ways. This approach ensures that the research remains grounded in the particularities of West Bengal while remaining open to comparative insights from a broader Indian and South Asian context, and even beyond it.

Here, I must highlight how, drawing from Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, the researcher's (my own) positionality played a pivotal role in the studies conducted. Haraway's notion of situated knowledge emphasises that all knowledge is produced from a specific social, cultural, and historical location, rejecting the idea of a detached, objective observer. In line with this, my position as a cis-gendered Bengali

woman with lived experience in the region, rather than as a detached outsider, profoundly shaped my approach to data analysis. My intimate familiarity with the cultural-linguistic milieu of Bengal allowed me to engage deeply with the data, while my role as a researcher based in Ireland provided the necessary critical distance to maintain analytical rigour. This dual positionality—being both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'—offered a unique vantage point for interpreting the data, particularly the reading of visual cues as a non-verbal mode of communication. As a cis-gendered Bengali woman of upper-caste background, I brought an insider's understanding of the socio-cultural and historical context, including the nuances of language, symbolism, and gendered norms that are often invisible to outsiders. For instance, my familiarity with regional idioms, historical references, and the subtleties of gendered performances enabled me to decode culturally specific elements in the visual artefacts and interview narratives that might otherwise have been overlooked or misinterpreted.

At the same time, my physical and philosophical distance as a PhD student based in Ireland allowed me to approach the data with a reflective and critical lens. This outsider perspective helped me to question assumptions, identify patterns, and situate my findings within broader theoretical frameworks, such as critical realism and feminist theory. The dual positions I adopted between my familiarity as an insider and criticality as an outsider was particularly valuable in navigating the complexities of the data; it ensured that my analysis was both deeply contextualised and theoretically informed. This stance proved indispensable for extracting a deeper understanding of how gendered norms, social media practices, and political communication intersect in the context of West Bengal. For example, when analysing campaign posters, interview excerpts, or social media posts, my positionality enabled me to uncover the intricate ways in which women politicians navigate, subvert, or reinforce structural constraints through their visual and verbal performances. This insider-outsider dynamic enriched my interpretation of the data, allowing me to reveal the layered interplay of gender, power, and culture in the political landscape of Bengal.

Yet, I remained critically reflexive about how my insider status shaped my interpretations, acknowledging both the advantages and limitations of this positionality in my analyses. This reflexivity was essential to prevent any assumptions about the universality or objectivity of my understanding. I was particularly mindful of my proximity to the cultural norms that informed my analyses, while also recognising the privileges that accompany my position as an upper-caste Hindu woman within the increasingly religious majoritarian society of the Indian Union. This privilege extends to being able to study these

phenomena from a distance, based in Ireland, where I had the advantage of relative detachment and access to broader academic resources. Accordingly, while my positionality became a critical tool for qualitative research, it also required vigilance to avoid reinforcing dominant perspectives. By accounting for these dynamics, I was able to engage with the visual and thematic data from a sufficiently detached yet informed perspective, ensuring a more nuanced and balanced approach.

A key reason to recognise and declare my positionality is that my culture-specific approach diverges from the dominant Western frameworks typically used to understand gendered visual representation and performance in political and social media contexts. This approach supports the broader imperative to decolonise the discourse on visual politics, a call that has been highlighted by scholars like Veneti and Rovisco (2023). For instance, the idea of a 'good woman,' which is central to my findings, is continually reshaped through public perceptions, political discourse around nationalism and religion, and mechanisms of control applied to women's bodies. Capturing these dynamics necessitates a cultural-linguistic lens that takes into account how femininity is uniquely constructed and contested in specific locales, even in social media's hyper-visible landscape. This research, therefore, does not claim to offer universal generalisations but instead advocates for methodological and conceptual tools that centre cultural specificities often overlooked in mainstream scholarship. By focusing on the socio-political context of West Bengal, this study addresses the critical gap in how visual political communication, especially in the Global South, is framed and interpreted—revealing the complexities that are frequently under-represented in current discourses.

4.2.1 Two Studies: The Rationale

The concerns I have described above are hardly unprecedented. As scholars like Udupa et al. (2018) and Kupiainen (2016) suggest, digital visual practices cannot be analysed without close attention to cultural identity formation and pre-digital modes of representation. These scholars particularly highlight how such practices are shaped by micro-level, local, socio-cultural conditions.

My research therefore adopts two distinct yet complementary vantages to address these concerns by posing its three questions. The first question is concerned with the proportion and manner of female candidates' visual representation and formal characteristics of the visual artefacts shared by candidates and their affiliate parties. The second moves deeper into the contents of these two sources of social media posts based on their various attributes and gendered characteristics. The third queries what

female politicians themselves report about their strategies to navigate social mores and cultural norms to fashion their self and construct public personas.

The investigations that constitute the study underpinning this thesis and their methods follow as an extension of these three questions. The first investigation answers the first two research questions of my study, using data collected from the 2021 election campaign phase in West Bengal. It focuses on visual artefacts present in social media posts and employs a mixed, quantitative and qualitative, method of content analysis to interpret them. The interpretation of this kind of data relied on my close scrutiny of the material aspects—formal characteristics, actions, associations, sartorial choices, modesty, and religious or political symbols—characterising the visual political performance of the female candidates contesting the election. The analysis draws from an understanding of cultural and societal norms in West Bengal, as well as the ideologies of parties these candidates were affiliated to. This investigation uncovers discernible patterns through which the notion of a good woman emerges through the visual political performance signified by the contents of social media posts.

My second investigation addresses my study's third research question. It moves beyond the visible contents of the artefacts and focuses on what their producers report about the reasons for fashioning such forms of visibility. This study foregrounds the voices, perceptions, and lived experiences of active female politicians regarding the ways they construct their visibilities. By interviewing these women directly and critically engaging with their accounts, I align with the principles of situated knowledge as articulated by Haraway—not only in acknowledging my own positionality but also centring the positionality of the individuals being studied as a foundational basis for knowledge formation. This approach recognises that knowledge is shaped by the specific positions and experiences of everyone involved. It involves not only being aware of and transparent about my own biases and perspective (my positionality), but also prioritising and centring the perspectives and experiences of the women I study. In doing so, the research acknowledges that both the researcher's and the participants' situated-ness are crucial in forming a true and grounded understanding of the subject matter.

This approach further ensures that the insights generated are deeply rooted in the realities of those whose visibilities I analyse. The method of semi-structured interviews allowed me to collect data and extract codes, categories, and themes from the transcripts, while also accounting for points of emphasis, hesitation, exclamations, and other non-verbal gestures. Analysing this data not only brought forth the lived

experiences of these individuals, particularly in relation to crafting their performative self, but also revealed the intricate dynamics between their self-construction and the socio-political frameworks they navigate. These analyses, in effect, helped to concurrently uncover the politics underlying their performance and their performance of politics.

Adopting this two pronged approach helped bring to light both the observable phenomena that characterise the gendered visual politics in West Bengal, and equally, the underlying structural realities that impact these phenomena, through a culture-specific and situated approach.

4.2.2 Ethical Framework

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study, given its focus on public figures and their visual representation on social media. The primary data sources, the public Facebook and Twitter (X) profiles of political parties and women politicians, were readily accessible. While the individuals observed were identifiable due to the public nature of the data, this research did not collect any private or sensitive information beyond what was intentionally shared online. This minimised risk to the individuals whose social media posts were studied and interview participants by ensuring their privacy. Given the public nature of the data, I followed a process of pseudonymisation that does not make any individuals identifiable. Given their public roles, identifying the women politicians was essential for analysing their communication strategies. Still, the participants' identities were kept confidential for the audience and readership of this thesis.

Despite the public nature of the information used, the illustrative material used in my study does not show the actual images of the personalities in ways that are identifiable. The research ethics framework under which the study has been carried out does not permit the identification of individuals (provided in Appendix A: letters of institutional ethics clearance; DCUREC/2021/037 & DCU-FHSS-2023-018). For this reason, the visual types showing the formal characteristics of social media posts presented in Chapter 5 employ what Annette Markham (2011) terms an 'ethical' way of creative 'fabrication'. Using such a tool allows the representation of the visual typologies without identifying the subjects of the study.

Overall, my ethical strategy prioritised transparency. In my study of the interviews, although the participants were public figures, their identities were pseudonymised to respect privacy concerns, particularly regarding potentially sensitive responses. This

decision balanced the public nature of their roles with the ethical obligation to protect their personal reflections. The research participants were recruited to ensure participant alignment with the research goals, specifically those holding public office and belonging to major political parties contesting the 2021 state elections.

By focusing on publicly available social media content, the study respected privacy boundaries while ensuring data validity. No deception was used, and all interviews were conducted with explicit consent after sharing with the participants as plain language statement (PLS) that explained the goals and purpose of my study, the way their involvement aligns with it, that the involvement is voluntary and they might wish to withdraw from participating at any time, as well as how the data will be used, archived and for what period (Appendix B). The minimal risk to participants stemmed from the alignment of data collection methods with their public figure roles. This ethical framework ensured the research was both methodologically rigorous and ethically sound, allowing for the study of how women politicians manage public visibility while protecting their individual privacy during the interview process. I will now describe the nature of data collected for each of these studies and the strategies and methods I employed to analyse this data.

4.3 Choice of Methods Employed

4.3.1 Visual Research

In the study of visuals, scholars employ several established methods, each proffering valuable potential, and also possessing limitations. One of these methods is compositional interpretation, or the ‘good eye’ technique. It systematically analyses the formal properties of images—such as colour, hue, spatial arrangement, and perspective (Rose, 2001). While effective in scrutinising aesthetic and stylistic features, this approach lacks explicit methodological procedures and theoretical grounding, often overlooking the social, political, and cultural dimensions that shape image production and interpretation.

To study visuals, discourse analysis is employed to thoroughly examine intertextual and ideological structures that construct meaning (van Dijk, 1993). As Rose (2001) notes, 'discourses are articulated through all sorts of visual and verbal images and texts, specialised or not, and also through the practices that those languages permit' (p. 136). This method emphasises intertextuality—the relationship between an image and surrounding images—and discursive formations: how meanings connect within a

discourse (Rose, 2001, p. 137). Within discourse analysis, two distinct approaches exist, each with limitations. The first focuses on the image itself, its social context and production effects, but often neglects wider cultural and social practices. The second examines the institutional context of image production, such as platform or government influence on visual practices and technologies, but frequently at the expense of detailed image analysis. Despite its potential, discourse analysis predominantly centres on textual and rhetorical elements. It addresses images regarding their social production and effects, but generally does not prioritise questions of reflexivity (Rose, 2001).

A third method for studying visuals is semiotics. Semiotics provides a systematic framework to examine how visuals relate to broader cultural and ideological meaning systems. Rose (2001) describes semiology as a comprehensive toolkit that dissects images to reveal their function within specific representational structures. This method follows Barthes' (1972) sign-reading triad—comprising the signifier (visual element), signified (conveyed meaning) and signification (understood meaning). It assumes no fixed relationship between these elements, allowing exploration of how meanings emerge through contextual interactions. Many scholars argue that semiotic analysis neglects audience reception and social context (van Leeuwen, 2004; Hodge, 2014). In response, social semiotics extends this framework by integrating cultural and social dimensions, examining narrative frames, metaphors, discourses, genre, style, modality and composition within broader socio-political landscapes. While semiotic analysis enhances understanding of how visual representations reflect and reinforce power structures, it lacks a systematic, large-scale comparative framework for quantifying patterns across expansive datasets. Given its linguistic foundation, debates continue about Saussurean semiotics' relevance for analysing visual media like photography and film, as Messaris (1994) argues that intuitive ‘reading’ of visual media often transcends formal cultural codes.

A fourth method is visual framing analysis, which examines patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion in news photographs to uncover cultural and ideological assumptions in media production (Gitlin, 1980). This approach has been applied to topics including war, political coverage and health communication, exploring how political candidates and social actors are represented (Parry, 2010; Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2012). While traditionally focused on print media and news archives, its scope has expanded to include cartoons, documentaries, television news and social media imagery. For example, during the 2014 Gaza conflict, Twitter images reinforced Israeli framing strategies and fostered shared user identities (Manor & Crilley, 2018). However,

this analytical method lacks a unified methodological framework, resulting in inconsistencies in image selection, coding and interpretation, and often relies on small sample sizes that limit generalisability.

In the past decade, methods for studying political communication visuals have combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis (O'Connell, 2018; Farris & Silber Mohamed, 2018; Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Meeks, 2019; Famulari, 2021). While researchers traditionally used manual coding (Kharroub & Bas, 2015), computational advances have enabled computer-based analysis (Joo & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Jungblut & Haim, 2021).
Technologies like machine learning (Garimella & Eckles, 2020), facial expression analysis (Horiuchi et al., 2012; Joo et al., 2019), and data mining (O'Halloran et al., 2016) offer efficiency but perpetuate social biases, particularly regarding race and gender, sometimes with serious ethical consequences (Peng & Lu, 2023; Bucy, 2023). Researchers combine interpretive approaches—discourse analysis (Dumitrescu, 2017), semiotic analysis (Rovisco, 2017), multimodal analysis (Doerr, 2017), and visual framing analysis (Bleiker et al., 2013)—to explore ideological and cultural dimensions of political imagery.

For my first study, I employed content analysis—one of the most widely applied empirical methods in communication research (Müller, 2007). Its strength lies in its rigorous rules, reliability and objectivity—or, as Rose (2001) describes it, its explicit methodology. Defined as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context’ (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 21), content analysis enables systematic examination of large datasets. In visual studies, this method involves ‘counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analysing those frequencies’ (Rose, 2001, p. 56). However, my study was not a straightforward application of this method. The analytical framework had to be tailored to the social, cultural, and historical nuances of the research context. Social media content is inherently sporadic, episodic, and non-curated, making it unsuitable for a longitudinal analysis of deeper discourses. Consequently, I prioritised a depth-oriented content analysis over broad representational sampling, selecting prominent and salient visual elements that offered culture-specific and gender-based understanding of political communication in West Bengal.

Given the lack of previous systematic visual content analyses capturing culture-specific and gender-based nuances of political communication in West Bengal, I developed

categories through open coding of a sample of image posts. I then devised a structured coding scheme applied deductively across the dataset. In visual political communication, gender functions as a form of knowledge, manifesting through explicit imagery and display cues. To interpret digital identities in culturally and contextually specific ways, examining the structural and societal codes shaping women politicians' visual construction is essential. I approached the analysis recognising that women politicians' visual portrayal isn't merely a reflection of entrenched gender norms but also a powerful means of negotiating and contesting them. To maintain coding reliability, I conducted multiple coding iterations, ensuring consistent results when applying the same categories at different times (Rose, 2001, p. 62).

At the first level, posts were coded for the presence or absence of two types of political messaging. The first type examined the extent to which female candidates were represented on party pages in their social media campaign visuals, the extent to which women's (non-candidate) issues were represented, and how female candidates portrayed themselves according to a five-type typology. By analysing these broad patterns, I established the context for understanding trends in women's representation in political communication and examined how female candidates constructed their political visibility through social media imagery. This process laid the foundation for developing culture-specific, gendered visual cues at the second level, which I systematically coded into categories such as gendered versus gender-neutral, traditional versus non-traditional, and traditionally feminine versus non-traditionally feminine. I used frequency counts (represented as percentages) to measure and compare specific visual cues' prevalence. However, the validity of these quantitative comparisons depended on a robust qualitative approach to defining and interpreting visual elements. The coding framework emerged through an iterative process drawing on conceptual lenses rooted in Bengal's cultural and political history. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, my situated knowledge and lived experiences informed my analysis of how female politicians performed their political identity on social media.

Overall, this study took a grounded and iterative approach to identifying gendered visual cues within a culture-specific political landscape. By adapting content analysis to capture the intersection of gender, culture, and political communication, this study offers a nuanced methodological approach to analysing visual political messaging. The integration of quantitative precision and qualitative depth ensures that while the study measures the prevalence of visual cues, it also captures the performative dimensions of gendered political visibility.

In summary, this research method's efficacy stems from its integration of systematic quantitative analysis with contextually informed qualitative interpretation. The layered analytical framework examines both broad political messaging and specific culture-specific visual cues, capturing overall patterns and finer communication nuances. This approach reveals both overt imagery patterns and subtle cultural signifiers that shape women politicians' political presence in West Bengal. The method's strength lies in its contextual sensitivity—the coding framework developed iteratively through established conceptual lenses and the researcher's situated knowledge. By combining quantitative measurements (frequency counts) with qualitative cultural interpretation, the method provides both replicable data and rich contextual understanding of how visual elements contribute to the performance and negotiation of political identity in this specific regional context.

4.3.2 Interviews and Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Major methodological approaches to visual analysis usually focus on images, i.e., the site itself, as the primary object of study. However, these approaches are not mutually exclusive; depending on the research questions, they often require additional methods to gain insight into how images are produced. Rose (2001) contends that employing multiple methods is essential for thoroughly exploring the diverse meanings embedded in images across their sites of production, content, and reception. This methodological pluralism yields a richly detailed understanding of an image's significance and reveals the potentially contradictory interpretations offered by producers, or their audiences. Addressing these discrepancies is critical because they expose the complex dynamics of visual communication. In this way, integrating multiple methods not only enhances the depth and nuance of the analysis but also ensures that a multi-faceted method provides reliable, relevant, and satisfactory answers to the research questions at hand. Additionally, although the boundaries between methods in visual research are often porous, the central concern remains the same: identifying where the explanatory and symbolic power of visual representations lies and how this power is constructed through visual conventions and selective portrayals (Aiello & Parry, 2019).

Given the overarching research goal of examining two distinct perspectives—visual artefacts circulated on social media and the experiences of their production—I selected semi-structured interviews as my second method. This approach shifts the analytical focus from merely examining visual artefacts to exploring how female politicians describe the process of creating these artefacts. Their reported use of visual elements

and cues reveals their strategic intentions and motivations in constructing a socially constructed public persona. This choice draws on Silverman's (2016) emphasis on qualitative research strategies that allow researchers to explore participants' subjective experiences and interpretations in depth.

In adopting a qualitative method, I considered focus groups and ethnographic approaches as potential options. Whilst offering distinct advantages, these were ruled out due to practical and methodological concerns. Focus group discussions (Bryman, 2012) could elicit dynamic conversations revealing shared experiences of visual representation, political performance and communication, but might compromise confidentiality and inhibit candid responses among high-profile female politicians. Ethnographic approaches—including participant observation—promise rich contextual understanding of politicians' everyday practices and environments. However, these methods require extensive resources and participant time commitments. Most importantly, they risk intrusiveness (Silverman, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2015), particularly as my interview schedule coincided with the run-up to the 2024 Indian national general elections when candidates needed mobility for campaigning across the country. Under such conditions, gathering candidates together or securing permission for prolonged ethnographic observation would have proved extremely challenging. Consequently, semi-structured interviews were selected as most appropriate, enabling collection of detailed, nuanced individual narratives whilst accommodating both ethical considerations and participants' practical constraints.

Semi-structured interviews (Dörnyei, 2007) enhanced my research in several complementary ways. They provided a consistent framework for data collection while accommodating varied participant responses. Throughout the process, I remained reflexive about how my presence as an interviewer influenced participants' behavior and responses. The integration of interview data with social media posts enabled cross-validation of findings while uncovering deeper insights about participants' visual practices in comfortable settings and time periods. These interviews created valuable opportunities for reflection on the social media data, helping identify emerging patterns and adjust research focus when necessary. Careful preplanning ensured each interview session systematically addressed relevant topics while maintaining focus on research objectives and allowing for natural, in-depth discussions.

The data comprise a sample of 24 women politicians representing a diverse range of political parties, age groups, educational backgrounds, and social classes. This diversity

supports a comprehensive exploration of how various socio-demographic factors influence the performative aspects of gender and political visibility on social media. However, a notable limitation is the restricted religious diversity within the sample, with only two participants from a minority religious group. Although this distribution reflects the broader demographic reality among women politicians in the region, it may limit the generalisability of findings related to the intersection of religion, gender, and political representation.

Moving on to the analysis of my semi-structured interview data, I employed a flexible and organic process of coding and theme development, which evolved throughout the analytical process (Braun et al., 2019). As I progressed with the analysis, I became increasingly familiar with the data, enabling me to interpret emerging layers of meaning. In contrast to methods that rely on codebooks and predefined themes before coding, I adopted a reflexive approach. In this approach, I did not predefine themes to simply 'find' codes; instead, I evolved themes by organising codes around a core commonality, or 'central organising concept,' that I interpreted directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consequently, this iterative process allowed me to capture the dynamic nature of the interview responses, ensuring that the themes reflected the participants' subjectivities.

I organised my research into two separate investigations based on my research questions. I used a combination of methods (described in sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2) for these investigations. In the following sections, I will explain each investigation in detail.

4.4 Investigation 1: Social Media Posts

In the first investigation, to answer RQs 1 and 2, I examined data from social media posts on two platforms, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). This dataset comprised a selection of visual artefacts posted on these platforms. The data came from two distinct sources: the individual accounts of female candidates contesting the 2021 WB assembly election across its four major political parties, and the official social media accounts of the parties these candidates represented, respectively. The posts were collected in the period of campaign activity from 26 January to 27 April 2021 leading to the election, and the visual artefacts, in turn, analysed according to the study's conceptual framework, both of which I explain below. On the whole, the conceptual framework that guided my analyses of visual artefacts drew from my reading of the wider intellectual concerns in visual political

communication and discourses on gender to the local, culture-specific historical context of West Bengal's electoral politics.

4.4.1 Data Collection and Screening of Sample

A critical understanding of images, both in political communication and beyond, involves three key sites where meaning is constructed: production, the image itself, and audience reception (Rose, 2001). In my first investigation, I focus on visual artefacts at their origin to examine the presence (or absence) of women candidates in online political campaigns, how they are portrayed by political parties, and how they represent themselves or others. For this reason, the study parses a larger field of visual social media posts, on the one hand, while also paying close attention to discernible patterns and characteristics across individual posts, on the other.

To systematically generate a database of visual artefacts, I manually retrieved every social media post shared during the 2021 West Bengal assembly election campaign.[8] Election campaigns are among the most significant events in a large democracy like India. Social media has become an indispensable instrument of the campaign process, with media systems and political communication strategies differing widely across the political spectrum of the country (Bennett, 2012). I therefore collected posts from the official Facebook and X accounts of the four major political parties contesting the election: the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the (CPIM), and the Indian National Congress (INC). In addition I retrieved posts from the two female candidates of each party whose accounts were the most followed on the two social media platforms.

To manually retrieve social media posts, I took screenshots of every post shared by the four parties and the two politicians from each party. I systematically collected posts using specific criteria—namely, every post shared between 26 January and 27 April 2021, which marks the start and finish of the campaign period—to determine valid entries and ensure a consistent, replicable process. My data selection was based on representativeness, influence, and strategic visibility. I analysed official political party accounts to understand institutional messaging, campaign strategies, and the visual framing of women candidates, revealing how gendered political communication is

[8] India is a federated Union of States with a 3-Tier executive: elections are held at the federal, state and local (urban/rural) levels, to form central, state and local governments respectively. Union level elections to parliament are commonly termed 'general elections' and at the state level, elections to the legislative assembly are termed 'assembly elections'.

structured. I also examined the two most-followed female candidates, as their significant digital reach shapes public perceptions and online discourse. Their self-representation highlights how they navigated gendered visibility and engage with voters. This selection allowed me to compare party-led narratives with individual portrayals, uncovering divergences in visual positioning and providing a valuable case study on women's political participation in digital spaces.

Table 1: Initial dataset, overview of posts retrieved from party and candidate accounts

	Facebook	Twitter (X)	Facebook	Twitter (X)
	Party pages		Two most-followed women candidates of each party	
BJP	984	578	182	232
AITC	94	45	221	152
INC	1819	651	259	0 (no presence)
CPI(M)	322	649	278	89
TOTAL	3219	1923	940	473

Table 1 shows total number of posts initially collected. From the party pages, I retrieved a total of 3,219 Facebook posts and 1,923 X posts. Additionally, from the candidates' own social media accounts, I collected 940 Facebook posts and 473 X posts. Notably, the two most-followed female INC candidates did not have X profiles, limiting their inclusion to Facebook posts only. Using the official accounts of parties and candidates ensured that the data was authentic and reliable, ensuring the efficacy of my research data for this investigation.

Although most parties also used videos in the campaign—the majority of AITC's social media posts contained videos—my study remained focussed on still images. While the contents of videos and static visuals overlap to an extent, analysing their logic and experiences are not co-terminus. Firstly, since videos are both temporal and aural, they lie beyond the investigative scope of this study as they need a different form of analytical treatment. Second, scholars who have recently engaged with visuals to conceptualise their role in political communication, especially through gendered frames, invariably refer to still images or photographs (McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017, Bauer & Carpinella, 2018, Jungblut & Haim, 2021). These studies define the state of the field my research responds to.

Given the importance of visuals in shaping social identity, I saved the posts containing visuals with their accompanying captions and embedded textual elements in some. This was done recognising that all these elements as a whole contributed to understanding

the messages being disseminated on social media, which is especially relevant for RQ 1, which asks about the extent and manner of representation of both female candidates and women's issues.

Figure 2 Screening database for 2nd level content analysis, left: candidates' posts; right: parties' posts

SELECTION BASIS (ARTEFACT TYPE)	Yes (tally)	No (tally)	Sample size
Legible	///N///N///N/ /N///N///N///	///N///N//	1033
Single	///N///N///N/		1033
Composite	///N///N///N/	///N///N/	1033
Photorealistic	///N///N///N/	///N///N/	1033
Women candidate present	///N///N///N/ /N///N///N///	///N///N/ /N///N///	1033
	Only when all criteria are met		

SELECTION BASIS (ARTEFACT TYPE)	Yes (tally)	No (tally)	Sample size
Legible	///N///N///N	///N///N/	205
Single	///N///N///N		205
Composite	///N///N///N	///N///N	205
Photorealistic	///N///N///N	///N///N	205
Women candidate present	///N///N///N //N///N///N/	///N///N //N///N/	205
	Only when all criteria are met		

On the larger dataset of retrieved posts, I implemented a selection process based on five criteria to ensure the visual artefacts were suitable for in-depth content analysis of visual cues: legibility (to remove blurry or shaken images), singularity (eliminating posts containing multiple, similar images), photorealism (excluding posts with text or graphic overlays), exclusion of collage-type compositions, and the most important criterion—whether female candidates were visibly present in the post. For this screening process, each artefact was scrutinised and a system of tally marks used **(Fig 2)**—to record whether a post met the selection criteria or not. The tally marks were also applied to a corresponding 'No' column (not meeting all the criteria) to exclude these posts from the shortlisted database of visual artefacts. Moreover, several posts across the platforms were identical, along with their captions. As a result, I also eliminated the redundancies from the shortlisted artefacts coded for culturally embedded meanings. After applying these criteria, and eliminating redundancies, the dataset comprised 1,033 posts from the eight female candidates' social media accounts and 205 posts from the official posts of the four parties. The screening process, guided by systematic criteria and the removal of redundancies, ensured that the final dataset maintained consistency in content. All visual artefacts shared common, identifiable characteristics, making them valid objects of analysis. This dataset, comprising selected visual artefacts from the 2021 West Bengal Assembly election, was used to address RQ 2 and its sub-questions, focusing on the comparison between women's self-presentation and their representation by political parties across various dimensions.

4.4.2 Analytical Strategy: Visual Content Analysis

To answer RQ 1, it was essential to review all retrieved posts containing visual content before screening them for in-depth visual content analysis. This step was necessary for several reasons. A significant portion of visual messaging during the campaign—by nearly all contesting parties and individuals—integrated Bengali text directly into visuals. These artefacts often resembled posters within the platform's allocated frame, potentially subverting its standardised styles and layouts. By combining visuals and text, these images evoked meanings and metaphors deeply embedded in Bengal's socio-cultural context. Ignoring this textual component would risk overlooking critical nuances specifically designed for digital, social media-based political messaging.

For instance, many posts prominently featured Bengali slogans directly embedded into visuals rather than in post captions. One example included a campaign poster of a female candidate standing with a raised fist, where the embedded Bengali text read: *"Nari Shakti, Banglar Shakti"* (Women's power is Bengal's power). While the image alone conveyed confidence and leadership, the textual component strategically linked the candidate to a broader gendered political narrative. Without considering both visual and textual aspects, the full impact of such campaign messaging would be lost.

Similarly, in self-representational posts, female candidates often combined images of grassroots campaigning with personalised captions in Bengali. One candidate posted a photo of herself interacting with voters in a local market, accompanied by the caption: *"Amra Janogoner Pashe, Shudhu Vote-r Somoy Noy"* (We stand with the people, not just during elections). While the image depicted community engagement, the textual component emphasised a long-term commitment beyond electoral cycles, shaping audience perception of political sincerity. Thus, my interpretation of both the broader sample and individual artefacts considered West Bengal's socio-political landscape, the role of women as political candidates, and the extent to which candidates were visually represented in their party's communication strategies. Following Gillian Rose (2001) and Luc Pauwels (2005), I adopted a multi-modal analytical framework rather than a purely visual content analysis, which, due to its predominantly quantitative nature (as explained in Chapter 2), could limit the exploration of culture-specific nuances.

This first stage of analysis, therefore, examined how these nuances were embedded in both non-verbal and textual elements. The textual dimension, often written in Bengali (sometimes transliterated in Roman script), appeared in captions accompanying photographs. These captions played a crucial role in fixing meanings where visual

elements alone might have been ambiguous, reinforcing specific interpretations within the political messaging framework.

This process revealed the major trends and patterns within the database about the nature and contents of gendered political messaging in the election campaign. Coding through the broader sample that formed my database *before* the shortlisting process, I conducted the analysis in the following two steps. In the first step, I examined to what extent parties foregrounded female candidates within their posts; to what extent female candidates represented their own selves within in their posts; and, how often women (who were not candidates) and their issues appeared in posts by both candidates and parties. In the second step, I then parsed through the eight most followed candidates' posts on both platforms to analyse their formal compositional characteristics.

For presenting my findings on the formal compositions, as I explain above, I used ethical means without showing any candidates identifiably. This analytical approach therefore operated at two scales. It helped to gain familiarity with the entire database. Moreover, it facilitated selection of a refined sample to which further analytical categories drawn from the understanding of Bengal's cultural nuances could be applied to an in-depth visual content analysis.

4.4.3 Analytical Strategy: Coding and Categorising the Shortlisted Sample

The second stage of my analysis focussed on a shortlist of visual artefacts suitable for in-depth content analysis, arrived at by screening the broader sample of posts I retrieved. Continuing to develop Gillian Rose (2001) and Luc Pauwel's (2005) multimodal framework, I generated codes that followed from key categories that described a gendered visual politics to answer RQ 2. I responded to RQ 2 by answering its constituent sub-questions comparing the parties' visual politics to those of their most followed candidates on social media. In this manner, the methods employed in this investigation of social media posts respond to a pressing challenge articulated by Bucy and Joo (2021), where they emphasise the need for an ongoing dialogue between qualitative, interpretive, quantitative, and predictive approaches within the realm of visual analysis of digital media. My analytical strategy attained validity and efficacy by aligning with such principles in combining qualitative methods, inherently non-top-down, and integrating the qualitative layer with quantitative models in critically grounded ways (Bucy, 2016).

I therefore adapted the multimodal framework for analysing digital media through a contextualised approach to analysing the visual artefacts. I refined this framework iteratively to arrive at context-specific categories to understand visual cues through a gendered lens. This analytical strategy became the key to making comparisons between the visual politics of parties and candidates, which also ensured the efficacy of my methods. I combined my interpretative lens derived from how women figured in West Bengal's cultural and political history with my own situated knowledge and lived experiences. Through this strategy, I formulated categories that derived from coding the visual cues present in the artefacts I analysed—all of which relied on my positionality as a researcher from the very context I was analysing.

Table 2: Actions conveyed in visual artefacts

Visual Cues: Actions	Category	Description
Cooking	Gendered	The act of cooking conveys a gender-normative division of labour in the private sphere of the home
Housework	Gendered	Performing household chores is seen as feminine work
Pranaam (obeisance or genuflection) /Worship	Gendered	Conveys piety or spirituality: engaged in praying or worshipping in private or in a public place
Delivering Speech	Gender-neutral	Delivering speeches is considered a political act
In Procession/On Stage	Gender-neutral	Partaking in processions – public gatherings, marches, rallies, and other forms of street-level canvassing
Meet and Greet	Gender-neutral	Performing padayatra, literally meaning 'a journey on foot', a form of campaigning where candidates walk in their constituencies, meeting with voters to build relationships and gain support
Press Conference	Gender-neutral	Speaking to journalists in an organised setting

Table 3: Associations shown

Visual Cues: Associations with others Present	Category	Description
Majority Female	Gendered	Seen meeting only women constituents
Majority Male	Gender-neutral	Seen meeting only male constituents
Mixed	Gender-neutral	Seen with both male and female constituents
None	Gender-neutral	Seen without any other people

First, I analysed the actions of the politicians that the visuals portrayed (Table 2) and then, the associations with other people that the visual cues served to explain about whether or not a particular action was a gendered or gender-neutral representation of the candidate (Table 3). Whereas gendered actions were the ones that were indexed in

the gender hierarchies and norms of West Bengal, gender-neutral actions were those which both male and female candidates normally engaged in, and did not particularly draw from those hierarchies or norms. Following this, I conceptualised associations through the individuals and groups women candidates were pictured, or pictured themselves, in close proximity to.

Table 4: Clothing and Sartorial Choices

Visual Cues: Sartorial	Category	Description
Sari	Traditional	The sari, an unstitched piece of cloth about four to nine meters in length, is worn as a garment by women in South Asia. It is seen as a symbol of Indian culture and is worn and draped in a variety of ways, depending on the region, religion, and social status of the wearer.
Salwar Kameez	Traditional	A salwar kameez, also a traditional Indian attire, comprises a loose, usually below waist length tunic (kameez) and a pair of trousers usually fastened by a string (salwar).
Western	Non-traditional	Clothes or fashion styles associated with Western culture, such as trousers, jeans, t-shirts, shirts and dresses
Hybrid	Non-traditional	Clothing that combines elements of both Western and Indian garments, such as a *kurti* (a shorter waist-length tunic) *or a kurta or kameez* (longer usually below waist length tunics) as a top with jeans.

The most important aspect of body politics I analysed through a gendered lens emerged through sartorial aspects of how women appeared in—and therefore performed—their visual politics. Such body politics emerge within the choices of attire they were pictured in (Table 4). The traditional choices include the *sari* or *salwar kameez*—a draped unstitched length of cloth, and a loose two-piece leg and long torso covering (a light tunic), respectively—representing traditional societal norms. Western and hybrid clothing subvert the traditional choices of attire through trousers, jeans or dresses, and in these being combined with traditional attire elements such as the *kurta* (a long tunic) or a *dupatta* (a cloth to cover the bosom/torso).

A further category provided a deeper analytical lens into how female bodies conveyed modesty, through the draping or manner of their attire. In this category, female candidates performed a visual politics of covering their bodies in ways that indexed them to traditionally feminine or non-traditionally feminine personas. This category, through my analysis of the visual artefacts, also range from normative notions of femininity and the absence of such (modesty) signals (Table 5).

Table 5: Modesty signals shown in manner of attire

Visual cues: Modesty signals	Category	Description
Ghomta	Traditionally feminine	A *ghomta* (in Bengali) signifies the covering of a (usually married) woman's head with a part of her sari or dupatta (a loose scarf worn with salwar kameez), fully or partially, as a sign of respect in the presence of men, in public or a sacred space. The ghomta, or ghunghat in Hindi, has variants across Hindu, Jain, and Sikh women in the Indian subcontinent.
Shoulder Cover	Traditionally feminine	Covering of the shoulder, using a part of a sari or a dupatta to cover the shoulder and the back for modesty.
Dupatta	Traditionally feminine	A long scarf, typically made of lightweight fabric, worn by women in South Asia. The dupatta can be worn in a variety of ways, but is most commonly draped across the chest as a sign of modesty.
Shoulder Uncovered	Non-traditionally feminine	The sari, salwar kameez, western or hybrid outfits, is worn in a way that exposes the back and shoulders.
Sari wrapped around waist	Non-traditionally feminine	Tucking the loose end of a sari around the waist baring the midriff is associated with working class women, working on the ground. It also signifies getting down to business (the Western male equivalent of this would be rolled up shirt-sleeves).

In my analysis, I also identified accessories on the bodies of female candidates that invoke ideas of the *bhadramahila*, as explained in chapter 2, with regard to traditional ideas of Hindu femininity—such as the vermillion anointed on their scalp (*sindur*), particular kinds of bangles on their wrists (*sankha-pola*)—symbolising their religious identity as married women. Conversely, through my understanding of the cultural context, I also formulated (Hindu) religious identity symbols to view the visual politics of female candidates that were gender neutral, such as a mark on the forehead (*Tilak)*, a shawl worn by upper-caste male and female individuals (*Uttariyo*), or rings on their fingers (Table 6).

Table 6: Religious symbols sported on body

Visual cues: Religious symbols	Category	Description
Sindur	Gendered	A vermillion powder applied to the parting of the hair and/or forehead by married Hindu women.
Shankha-pola	Gendered	Traditional Bengali wedding bangles, consisting of a white conch shell bangle (shankha) and a red coral bangle (pola), a sign of being married
Tip (Bindi)	Gendered	A small dot or mark applied to the forehead, typically by Hindu women, a sign of auspiciousness (when red in colour) or marital status; also signifies the 'third-eye' of Hindu goddesses
Tikaa/tilak	Gender-neutral	A linear mark worn on the forehead showing Hindu religious affiliation; both genders can wear a tilak.
Chain/garland	Gender-neutral	A wreath of flowers, leaves, or other decorative items that are often used in political campaigns and rallies, and they can also be used to welcome or congratulate politicians on special occasions.

Uttoriyo (Angavastra)/Shawl	Gender-neutral	A shoulder cloth or stole typically worn by men in India. It is a single, rectangular piece of fabric with decorated borders and may be offered as a mark of respect.
Rings	Gender-neutral	Jewellery signifying belief in astrology with connection to the Hindu religion. In some cases; could also be used ornamentally or as wedding symbol

I finally developed categories to understand female candidates' visual political performance through their sporting political symbols that used colours, headgear, badges and other accessories that represented party colours or caste-associations (Table 7). This

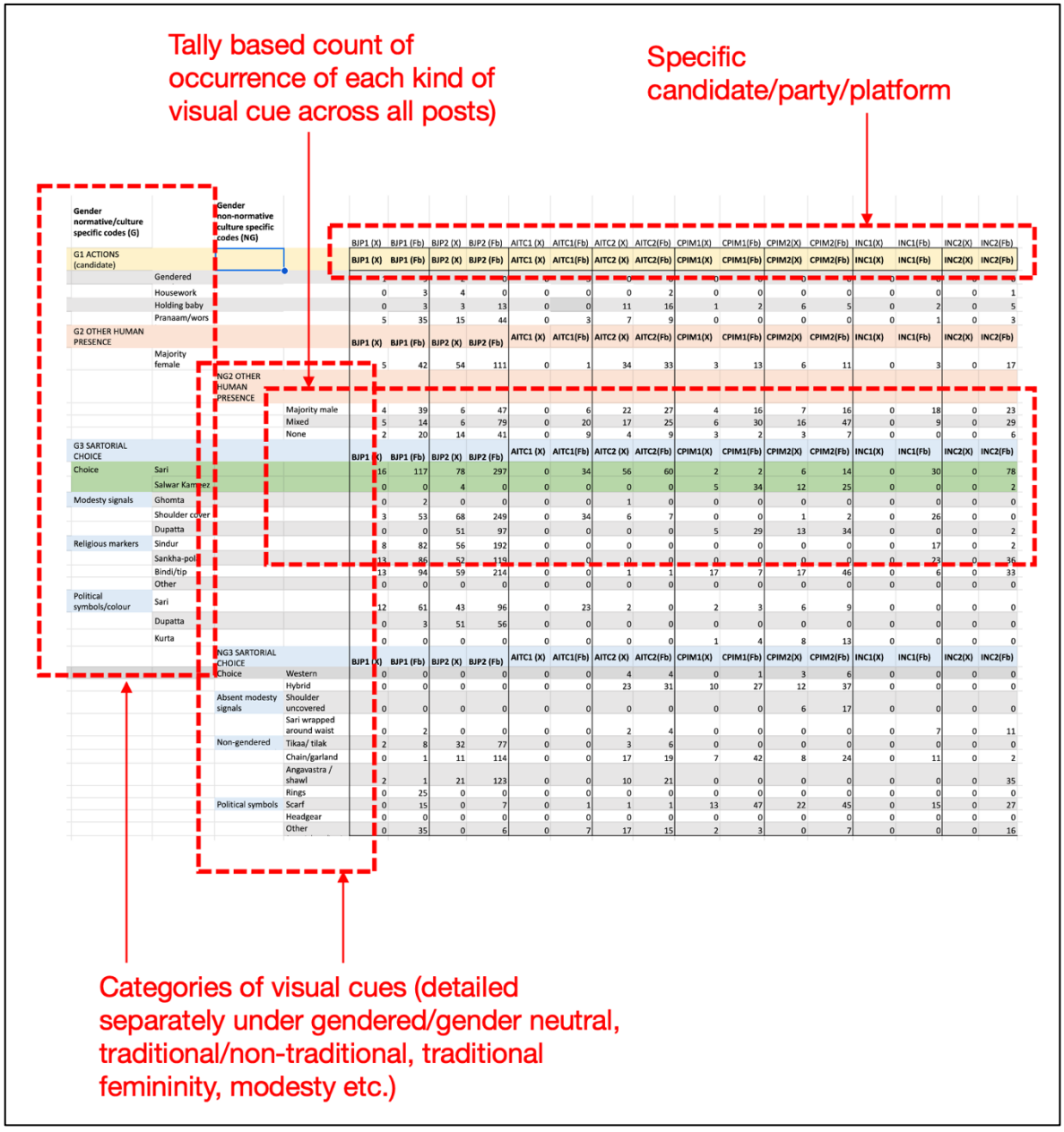
Table 7: Political symbols sported in sartorial ensemble

Visual cues: Political symbols	Category	Description
Sari	Gendered	Political party affiliation is often expressed through saris in a number of ways, such as wearing the colours of the political party, or the sari has party symbols/logo on it (in this case the party symbolism becomes an integral part of the clothing)
Dupatta	Gendered	Similar to above, dupattas in party colours or carrying party symbols a form of body canvassing.
Kurta	Gendered	Similar body canvassing expressed through upper-body apparel, such as kameez or kurta (tunic) in party's colour or party's symbols
Scarf	Gender-neutral	Politicians may wear scarves with their party's logo, colours, slogans, or symbols.
Headgear	Gender-neutral	Headgears or turbans, which conveys higher status (understood at the intersection of caste, class and political power in Indian Hindu contexts) made out of cloth in party colours.
Other (Mask/badge/cap)	Gender-neutral	Badges with the party symbol used as a visible campaign tool; additionally, face masks in party colours were used by politicians as the campaign period coincided with the pandemic.

analytical lens helped to examine how candidates portrayed their political affiliations and their social outlook towards tradition in both gendered and gender-neutral ways. The relevance of integrating such an inductive and interpretive method lies in generating novel concepts and ideas, offering fresh perspectives within the field of visual politics. Although qualitative techniques may seem 'impressionistic, intuitive, and subjective' (Rosengren, 1989, p. 27), I argue that they contribute to this study's rigour and reliability. It allows me to position this study of a corpus of visual political communication within the specificities of the visual codes of gender-related cultural norms of West Bengal. In this way, I was able to also harness my own lived experience and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) as an interpreter of the knowledge embedded in the visual artefacts.

It becomes pertinent to illustrate what I mean here with an example. If, for instance, the *sari* emerged as the predominant attire of choice among all candidates (category of visual cues from Table 4), to further differentiate between saris qualitatively, it became

Figure 3 Sample screenshot, master codebook of analysing posts of candidates.



necessary to investigate modes of draping the cloth over the body. Such nuances conveyed the presence or absence of modesty-related symbols. For instance, the 'ghomta' (head cover by extending the sari), could convey a traditional sign of modesty and deference (category of visual cues from Table 5). Following that, I moved on to even examine the bodily accessories sported by the candidates through which different meanings were conveyed. Within the umbrella of the physical and social bodies, the accessories accompanying clothing could also symbolise religious or political affiliation in gendered or gender-neutral ways (as evident in the category of visual cues from Tables 6 and 7). This example shows how the analysis of visual artefacts maintained an

internal consistency and efficacy. On the whole, through this analytical approach of the categories through which gendered visual politics appear in visual artefacts, I have coded the visual cues related to actions the candidates were pictured in, the gender of the people accompanying them, what the candidates wore (their sartorial choices), how they wore or carried it (traditionally feminine modesty signals conveyed, or their absence), as well as the traditionally gendered or gender-neutral religious and political symbols accompanying their bodies and/or attire. By comparing these categories across posts by the candidates and parties, my analysis helps to answer the sub-questions within RQ 2. These pertain to the enactment of political visibility by women politicians, used in a manner that constructs value-propositions for the voter through their performances, strictly however, as visible in the visual cues of the artefacts. **Figure 3** above shows a sample snapshot of my master codebook of the visual cues analysed from posts of the candidates' accounts. To interpret the cues, I paid close attention to varied layers of visual content, both their formal attributes and conveyed meanings. This examination laid the groundwork for the qualitative and grounded development of the culture-specific gendered visual cues and helped to code and organise the visual cues into categories, ranging from gendered/gender-neutral, traditional/non-traditional and traditionally feminine/non-traditionally feminine. Based on what I found through this first investigation, and most importantly, following my research question (RQ3), I designed the research method for my second investigation.

4.5 Investigation 2: Semi-structured Interviews with Female Candidates

To answer RQ 3, about the experiences both, online and offline, of female candidates in enacting their visual politics, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-four female politicians representing WB's four parties. This research question—unlike the observable and classifiable visual artefacts and social media activity—deals with the realm of the *unseen*, yet *real*, structures that cause the observable phenomenon of visual politics on social media. The methods of answering it thereby directly draw from my research's philosophical bases in critical realism. My objective was to understand how these women perceive and manage their public representations, and what strategies they employ to gain media visibility, particularly in the digital sphere. This focus on their lived experiences provided an 'insider' view into both the media portrayal of women politicians and the gendered challenges they face in the political landscape. It was therefore necessary to engage with the candidates because as Knott et al. (2022) argue, engaging deeply with individuals, allowing them to express their views and feelings, even opinions, in their own words, provides a key to qualitatively explaining

phenomena that will otherwise be only partially understood through quantifiable means. I conducted the interviews for this investigation in 2022-23 over a period of three months. During and after this period, I prepared the interview transcripts that became the dataset for my thematic analyses, conducted in a reflexive manner—as I explain below. In the following subsections, I provide detailed descriptions of the data sampling and collection process and methods of analysing this data.

4.5.1 Data Sampling and Collection

A critical first step in the investigation of WB's female candidates' lived experiences with visual politics involved recruiting participants for the study. To achieve this, I conducted an overall purposive sampling strategy to ensure participants reflected all the parties active in West Bengal, and they possessed enough experience with social media based visuals. Within this purposive sampling strategy, I contacted particular party sources on the ground, such as leaders, parliamentarians and workers, thereby adopting a snowball sampling strategy. Through a small number of female politicians who expressed willingness to participate in my study, I implemented this snowball sampling to contact

Table 8: Profiles/backgrounds of the study's participants and their party affiliations

ID	Party	Position/Role	Years in Politics	Age range	Education Level	Marital Status	Constituency
P1	CPIM	Former student leader/Contested for MP	8	30-40	PhD	Unmarried	Suburban
P2	AITC	Party member	12+	50-60	Postgraduate	Married	Urban
P3	BJP	Councillor/women's wing chief	15+	50-60	Graduate	Married	Suburban
P4	BJP	Councillor/party member	20+	50-60	Graduate	Widowed	Urban
P5	CPI(M)	Student leader/Party worker	5	20-25	Postgraduate	Unmarried	Urban
P6	CPI(M)	Student leader/Party worker	20+	20-25	Postgraduate	Unmarried	Urban
P7	BJP	MLA	16	30-40	Graduate	Married	Suburban
P8	BJP	Women's wing chief	20+	40-50	Graduate	Married	Suburban
P9	BJP	MP	18	60-70	Graduate	Married	Rural
P10	AITC	MLA	14	40-50	Graduate	Married	Rural
P11	AITC	Councillor	8	25-35	Graduate	Single	Rural
P12	BJP	MLA	22	50-60	Graduate	Married	Urban
P13	TMC	Councillor	8+	25-35	Graduate	Single	Suburban
P14	INC	Party member	20+	40-50	Graduate	Single	Urban
P15	CPI(M)	Former minister/Party member	30+	50-60	Graduate	Single	Rural
P16	CPI(M)	Party member	12+	50-60	Graduate	Married	Urban
P17	CPI(M)	Party member	15+	30-40	Graduate	Single	Suburban
P18	INC	Party member	20+	30-40	Postgraduate	Married	Suburban
P19	BJP	MLA	18+	50-60	Graduate	Married	Rural
P20	CPI(M)	Student leader/Party worker	15+	30-40	Graduate	Single	Rural
P21	AITC	MP	12	50-60	Postgraduate	Single	Urban
P22	BJP	MLA	19	50-60	Graduate	Married	Suburban
P23	CPI(M)	Party member	10+	30-40	Graduate	Married	Urban
P24	AITC	MP	20+	60-70	Postgraduate	Married	Rural

and recruit more participants. Through this combined purposive and snowball sampling, I was able to reach a total of thirty female politicians who expressed willingness to participate. Six of these candidates were later unable to make time for a full interview leading to the final number of twenty-four participants for my study who I could

interview in-depth. These participants represented all parties and varied age groups, experience in politics, education levels, marital status and constituencies they were active in (Table 8).[9]

All participants were pseudonymised using the abbreviation P followed by numbers from 1 to 24. The unavailability of the six initially contacted candidates arose because all parties, and their workers and leaders were busy in preparation for the 2024 general (federal, or parliamentary, as is known in the country) elections in India. In many cases, I attended political rallies and waited until after the events to secure time for the interviews. Convincing candidates that my questions would focus on their personal experiences in negotiating political visibility, rather than party affiliation or controversial political matters or current affairs, helped to establish trust. Once this rapport was built, my network of participants expanded through a snowball sampling technique, where politicians I had already spoken to introduced me to and helped me secure consent to be interviewed from other women colleagues across the state. Each participant signed a consent form before our interview and received the plain language statement about the research prior to consenting.

Drawing from Walliman (2006), to design the interview questions in a manner that would allow for leading or follow up questions as well as individual subjectivity, I developed six areas evolved from, firstly, my focused research question regarding the candidates' experiences with visual politics, and, second, my findings emerging from the analysis of visual cues conducted in the first investigation as I have described above.

These areas of questioning offered flexibility, allowing participants to diverge based on their own experiences and interests. To keep their responses focussed within the areas of my inquiry, I also asked follow up questions based on the initial responses of participants. I began with a general overview and gradually moved into questions that became progressively personal. The themes that shaped my interview questions were: (1) the role of visuals in everyday political communication; (2) influences and factors shaping their visual representation on social media; (3) the role of female politicians in shaping their own visual representations; (4) gendered concerns around 'good politics' and the 'good woman' in society; (5) their political party's visual political communication strategies; and (6) their views on how and why they visually construct themselves in certain ways to stay relevant in the everyday electoral politics of the state. An interview

[9] In this table, I have not provided the exact age of the participants, rather an age range, to make them less identifiable.

questionnaire that guided the conversation (Appendix C) and two sample transcripts, one in English and one bilingual (Appendices D and E). Prior to each interview, I investigated each participant's social media outputs to familiarise myself to their specific content style, genre, and level of professional experience. This preparation ensured that the interview conversations remained relevant and allowed for a deeper exploration of their individual media strategies. What made these interviews particularly valuable was my goal to view West Bengal's political milieu and social experience from the participants' points of view, rather than adhering to a rigid set of predetermined questions. This aligned with my broader methodological approach, which combined data collected in the form of these interviews with online and offline observation to generate a holistic understanding of their political communication practices (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The interviews were designed to be informal, collaborative, and conversational, following my ethic of equality between the researcher and participant. I allowed participants to choose the time and setting they felt most comfortable with, ensuring a conversational tone that respected their time, and matched their energy, and level of enthusiasm. As a result, the interviews varied in length, ranging from one to two and a half hours, depending on the participant's availability and interest in discussing their experience.

4.5.2 Method of Analysis

My ability to converse with the participants bilingually, in Bengali and English, proved significant for my analysis. In analysing the interviews based on their transcripts, I used

Figure 4 Sample screenshot, bilingual interview transcript in Bengali and English translation

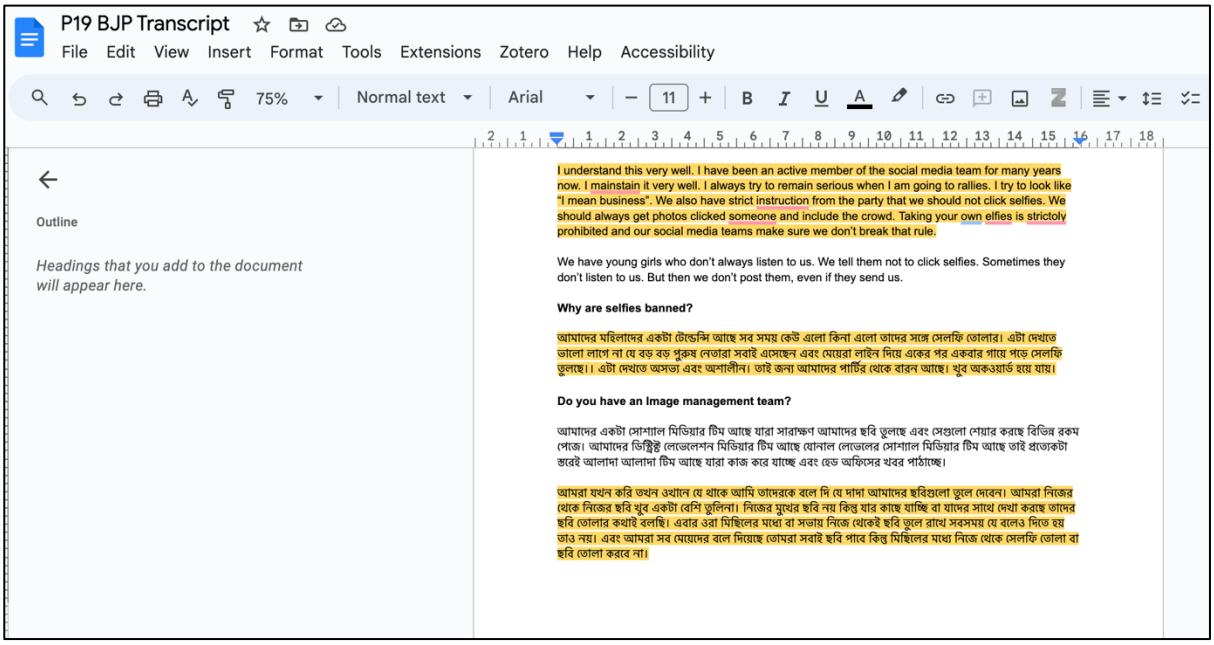


Figure 5 Sample screenshot, generation of codes derived from interview transcripts.

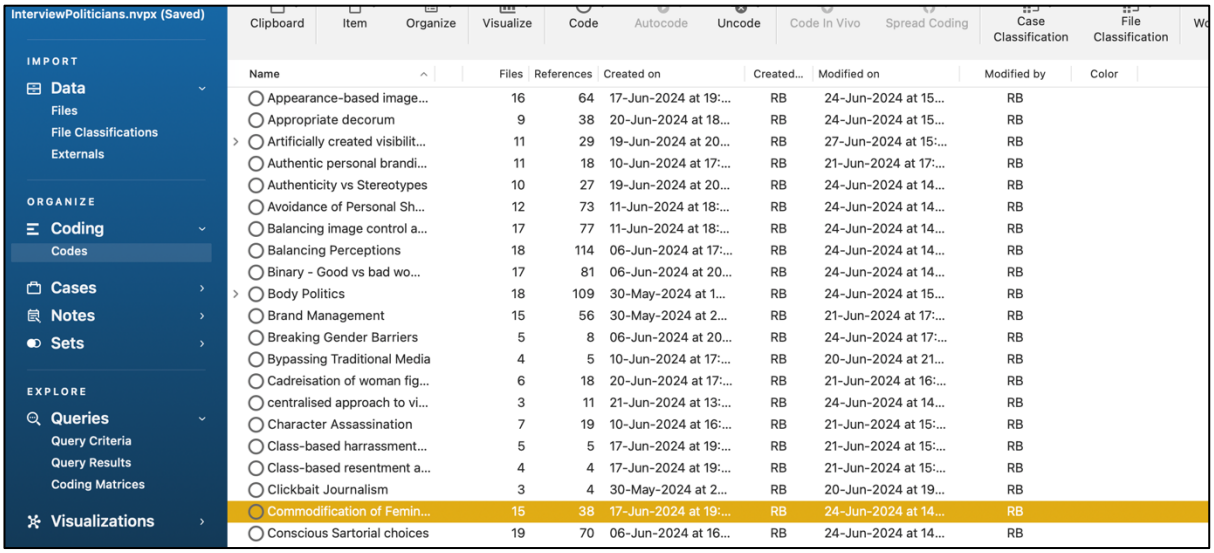


Figure 6 Sample screenshot, defining and naming initial categories.

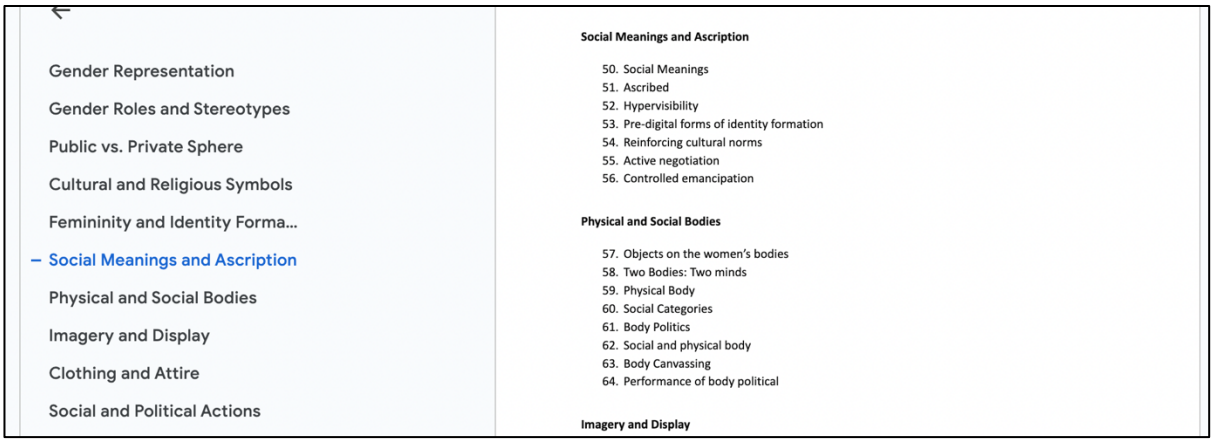
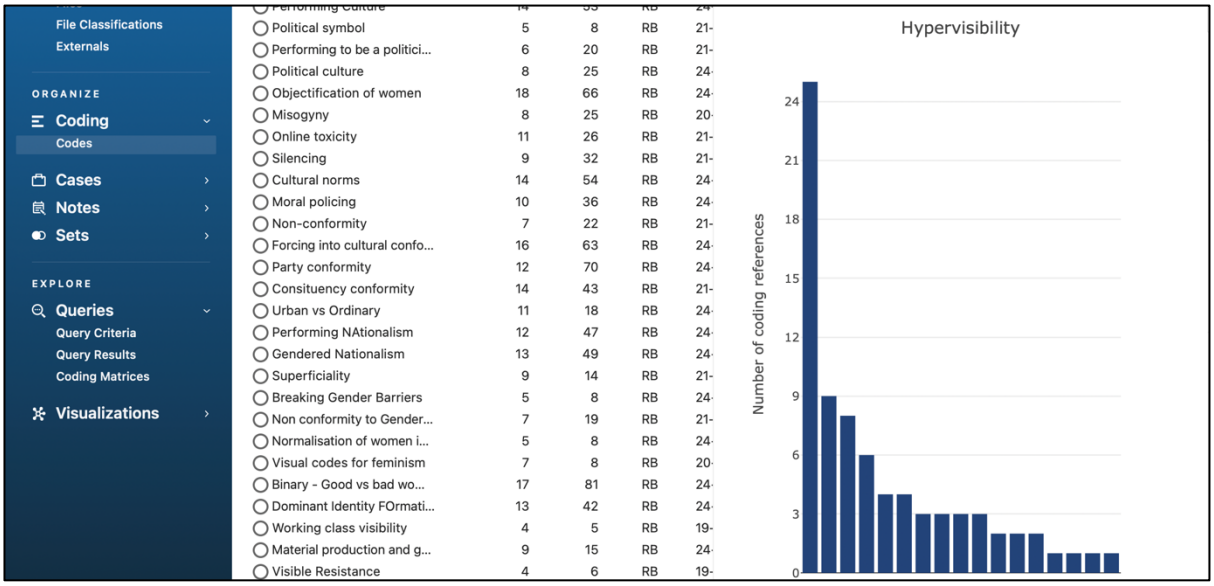


Figure 7 Sample screenshot, visualising codes from candidates' narrated accounts.



the original Bengali and also used translations, as shown in **Figure 4**. The data for analysing interviews was textual, derived from the interview transcript. These transcripts were prepared from audio recordings and uploaded into NVivo for a comprehensive thematic analysis. My analysis of interview transcripts drew from Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step framework. The first two steps entailed familiarisation with the data and generating initial codes **(Fig 5)**; these were 149 in number. The subsequent four steps involved searching for initial themes **(Fig 6)**, reviewing them, defining them and the frequency of codes and themes in the candidates' accounts of their experiences **(Fig 7)**.

The thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke's (2019) critique articulates, followed a reflexive approach. Through this approach, the themes were iteratively, and intentionally, constructed and generated by combining my own theoretical awareness of the questions posed, based on my empirical understanding drawn from the reading of visual artefacts. In this sense, the themes were derived through an active interpretation of the responses and codes based on my own sensibility and awareness of the societal and cultural context. Additionally, This process involved identifying a central idea or meaning—the common thread that unites the observations within a theme—and then constructing an interpretative narrative around it (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, in undertaking my analysis of the interviews, I drew on my interpretation of the social construction of gender, political performance, and the 'two bodies' concept. This interpretation entailed recognising participants' perspectives in a nuanced way, through my understanding of West Bengal's historical trajectory where women's visual politics was concerned, as well as my situated position as a reader of the testimonies narrated to me.

Additionally, the process of thematic analysis itself was iterative and non-linear. While Braun and Clarke's six steps provided a useful guide, the actual process of qualitative analysis required constant movement between these steps. As themes began to emerge, I revisited earlier stages of the process, re-reading transcripts and reconsidering codes to ensure that the themes identified were well-grounded in the data. This iterative process aligns with Tobin and Begley's (2004) concept of qualitative research, where reflexivity and interactivity are integral to the inquiry process. The stages of data collection and analysis were not distinct but also overlapped, with ongoing thematic refinement occurring throughout the analysis period.

The analytic approach I adopted also combined deductive and inductive thematic analysis methods. While I used *a priori* codes based on my research questions and the

existing literature, as outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999), I also remained open to the emergence of new themes directly from the data, following Boyatzis' (1998) inductive approach. This hybrid methodology was particularly suitable for my research. It allowed me to balance the analysis necessary to address my specific research questions with the flexibility needed to capture any unique and unexpected insights that emerged in the interviews. Boyatzis (1998) describes a 'good code' as one that encapsulates the qualitative richness of the data, and I adhered to this principle in my coding process. A theme, in this context, is a recurring pattern that describes and organises observations while also offering deeper interpretive insights into the phenomenon under study.

I began by conducting a systematic reading of the interview transcripts, guided by ideas of political performance, visibility, and cultural identity. Among the initial 149 codes I developed, several, for instance, highlighted nuanced practices of political presentation—such as 'political image of capability', 'balancing perceptions,' and 'modes of draping'—as well as more intimate or socially embedded acts, including 'domestic rituals' and 'motherhood'. Following these codes, I grouped conceptually related ones into categories that offered a more precise grasp of recurring patterns. For instance, references to private and public roles—such as 'direct interactions,' 'domestic chores', 'body politics,' and 'modesty signals'—were refined under categories like expectations and tensions, visibility and negotiation, modesty and symbolism, and body politics.

Throughout this process, I remained attentive to the ways power relations, cultural norms, and embodied practices shaped women politicians' experiences and representations. Iterative reviews of the data confirmed the coherence of these categories and provided a foundation for identifying six overarching themes: image construction and management, authenticity, stereotypes, and gendered representation, gender dynamics, electoral politics, and body politics, cultural identity, values, and norms, media influence, surveillance, and representation, and visual strategies and political communication.

In constructing the codes into themes, I found that some (such as those describing social media strategy or branding) were strongly linked to the ways politicians curate their public image. Others (such as those capturing objectification or stereotypes) underscored the tension between self-presentation and gendered expectations. A further set of codes revealed the prominence of culturally inflected identities or the corporeal dimensions of political engagement.

Although the themes contained varying codes, the spread was relatively balanced. For instance, image construction and management encompassed ten codes, while cultural identity, values, and norms incorporated fourteen. Within each theme, I then delineated categories reflecting key dimensions of participants' lived realities—such as appearance and style, branding and identity, and perception management under image construction and management, or harassment and vulnerability within gender dynamics, electoral politics, and body politics.

This step by step process—from generating codes and assembling categories to consolidating higher-level themes—created a clear analytical framework that ensured that the study was effective and consistent. By employing this approach, I ensured a way to understand how women politicians constantly negotiate their mediated visibility through a blend of conscious sartorial decisions, strategic self-positioning, and discursive engagement with gendered norms. At the same time, my approach also revealed how these female politicians actively navigate institutionalised power relations and forms of media surveillance. Overall, by tracing the movement from individual codes to broad themes, I was able to understand women's political communication in West Bengal through a critical and reflexive, thematic lens.

4.5.3 Arriving at Findings through Interviews

My coding led to four major themes: (a) the visual practices employed by women politicians in their campaigns, (b) the role of social media in shaping their public image, (c) the factors influencing their representation, and (d) the role of these women in actively constructing their public personas. Coding large volumes of data into these thematic categories enabled me to distil rich qualitative insights into more manageable clusters. These themes were further refined to reveal important sub-themes related to political communication, identity formation, and the intersection of gender, political performance and societal norms and mores.

As I have pointed out, self-reflexivity played a pivotal role throughout the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), being aware of how my background and experiences influenced the process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Following Gajjala's (2002) guidance on reflexivity, I regularly questioned my own assumptions and biases, considering how they might affect my interpretations of the interviews. This stance helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives rather than being overly

influenced by my own preconceived notions, while also maintaining critical distance in my own position as a researcher.

I conducted this reflexive thematic analysis to shed light on the construction of gendered political identities to answer RQ 3, which explores how visual political communication influences gendered identity formation within this socio-cultural context. By employing both deductive and inductive coding, I ensured that my analysis was comprehensive, capturing both expected and emergent themes related to political performance, representation, and gender. This iterative, reflexive, and multi-layered approach allowed me to explore the visual and discursive strategies women politicians employ to navigate and construct their identities in the public sphere. In the forthcoming two chapters, I present the findings that emerge from the data I analysed, in relation the three key research questions my study poses.

5 Artefacts and Bodies: Political Visibilities in an Election Campaign

This chapter presents the key findings of my research that emerge from investigating visual artefacts posted on social media during the 2021 West Bengal (WB) election campaign. These findings serve to answer the first and second research questions (including their sub-questions) that my study set forth with, as these pertain to the election campaign on digital social media platforms. The chapter first presents the major patterns emerging from campaign-related posts containing visuals from both parties and candidates. Critically examining these visuals provides a preliminary yet critical understanding of the extent to which female candidates are represented by their parties and how they represent themselves. Drawing from an investigation of the overall database of visual artefacts retrieved, this chapter firstly answers RQ 1, which independently queries how women candidates appear in their parties' and their own social media activity.

Taking into account the broad trends emerging from addressing RQ1, the chapter then elucidates the specific mechanisms through which political visibility is enacted in the visual artefacts produced. It consequently addresses my second research question (RQ2), which compares how gender is portrayed by political parties and candidates on social media platforms. As outlined in my data processing approach, a focused sample drawn from the overall posts was subjected to in-depth content analysis. Building on Douglas's concept of the reciprocal relationship between the two bodies—physical and social (1970)—and Rai's (2014) framework of political performance, I conducted a detailed coding of visual cues across three dimensions: whether they are gendered or gender-neutral, whether they are traditional or non-traditional, and whether they are traditionally feminine or non-traditionally feminine. This analytical lens helps to reveal the underlying body politics that shape the meanings of the 'good woman' in visual terms within the socio-cultural context of the election campaign. It demonstrates how the emphasis and messaging differ between the candidates and their respective political parties in reconstituting the figure of the female politician.

5.1 Unravelling the Field: Political Visibility of Female Candidates

As explained in my research methodology, I critically examined all posts retrieved from Facebook and X during the 2021 West Bengal (WB) election campaign, in which 2,132 candidates from various parties competed for 292 seats. Of these candidates, 240 were women (including independents). Within this total, 48 of the All India Trinamool

Congress's (AITC) 290 candidates were women, 38 of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 293 candidates were women, 23 of the Left Front's (CPI[M] and CPI[ML/L]) 164 candidates were women, and 7 of the Indian National Congress's (INC) 93 candidates were women (National Election Watch, 2021). In considering the visual politics of the WB election, I moved beyond viewing 'visual culture' solely through the lens of platform technology. Instead, following Pauwels's (2005) conception of 'culture' as an instrument that actively constructs identities in online spaces, I examined how text and imagery together shaped political messaging. For example, many of the visuals incorporated Bengali text directly into images, creating a poster-like effect that either adapted to or challenged the standard layouts offered by social media platforms. This culturally grounded perspective was vital for understanding how political communication was formulated and presented during the election campaign.

5.1.1 Extent to which Parties Represent Female Candidates

Responding to RQ 1, I retrieved posts on Facebook and X containing visual material from the official pages of the four major contesting parties and each party's two most followed female candidates. To answer RQ 1A, I coded these posts by counting instances where each party represents their female candidates on the two social media platforms (Table 9).

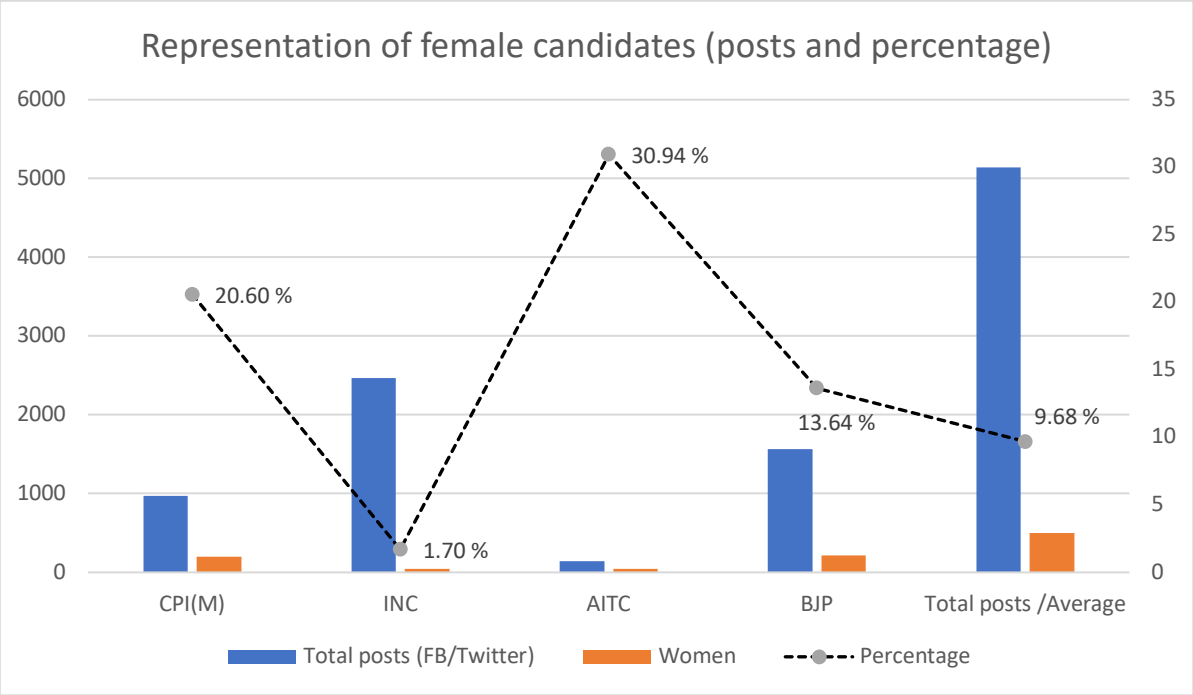
Table 9: Party-wise representation of female candidates.

BJP	FB (of 984)	X (of 578)
Party's representation of female candidates	95	118
AITC	FB (of 94)	X (of 45)
Party's representation of female candidates	22	21
INC	FB (of 1819)	X (of 651)
Party's representation of female candidates	16	26
CPI(M)	FB (of 322)	X (of 649)
Party's representation of female candidates	82	118

This first-step coding of the posts with visuals from the parties' official social media accounts revealed the extent to which their visual campaign foregrounded female candidates. By thus identifying how often female candidates figured in the parties' campaign messaging in the 2021 WB election, preliminary insights emerged about the relative status and importance of female candidates to their parties' online campaign activity.

When seen in terms of percentage representation, the overall trend showed that female candidates were vastly under-represented in their parties' social media campaign activity. Across parties, on an average, their female candidates were visible in only 9.68% of all posts containing any visual material on both Facebook and X. However, significant variation was observed between parties when considered individually. Taking the total of both platforms, the INC had the lowest representation, with only 1.7% of its posts (42 of 2470) featuring women

Figure 8 Proportion of female candidates represented by parties in visual posts on social media



candidates. In contrast, although the BJP generated the second-highest number of posts with visual material among all the parties contesting (1562), they represented women in just 13.63% (213) of them. The CPI(M) performed slightly better, with women candidates featuring in 20.6% (200 of 971) of its official posts **(Fig 8)**. In contrast to these three parties, the AITC posted the fewest still images, with 139 visual posts across both platforms. Yet, nearly a fourth (23.4%) of its 94 Facebook posts and almost half (46.7%) of its 45 Twitter posts featured female candidates. The combined level of representation of AITC's women candidates across both platforms amounted to 30.94%. This was more than three times the average across all parties (9.68%) and eighteen times higher than the INC's proportion, nearly 2.5 times the BJP's, and 1.5 times the CPI(M)'s. This divergence underscores the AITC's comparatively greater emphasis on visual representation of women candidates on social media pages.

5.1.2 Representation of Self by Female Candidates

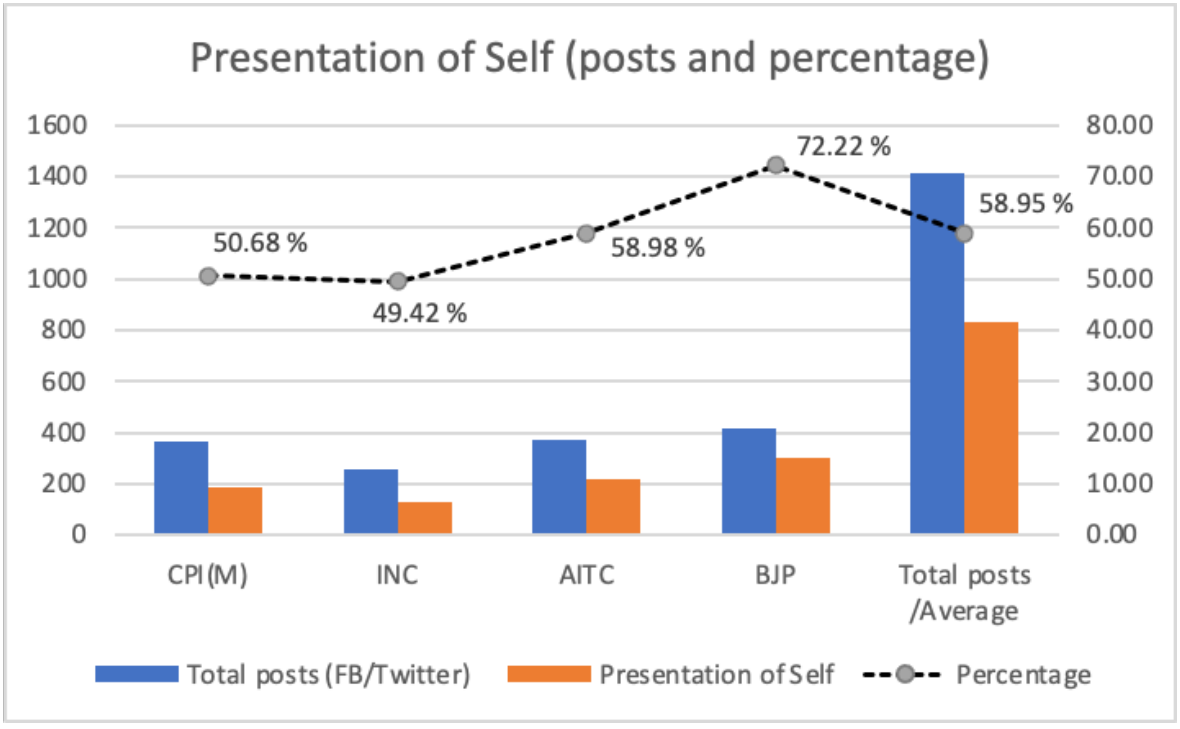
Whilst parsing through posts by candidates, I paid attention to instances where the candidate foregrounded her own self in posts containing visuals on both platforms. Here, I considered two most followed candidates of each party as a single dataset and separated the two platforms, to count posts evidencing self-presentation, as a proportion of total posts on these platforms (Table 10).

Table 10: Occurrence of self-presentation in posts by the two most followed candidates of each party.

BJP	FB (of 182)	X (of 232)
Self-presentation by candidates	138	161
AITC	FB (of 221)	X (of 152)
Self-presentation by candidates	130	90
INC	FB (of 182)	X (0)
Self-presentation by candidates	128	No account
AITC	FB (of 278)	X (of 89)
Self-presentation by candidates	150	36

In contrast to an overall low representation in visual campaign posts of their parties, candidates appeared to foreground their self far more than their parties did **(Fig 9)**. Across all posts on both platforms, about 58.95% of their posts presented their selfhood and agency

Figure 9 Presentation of self by candidates (party-wise) in posts on social media

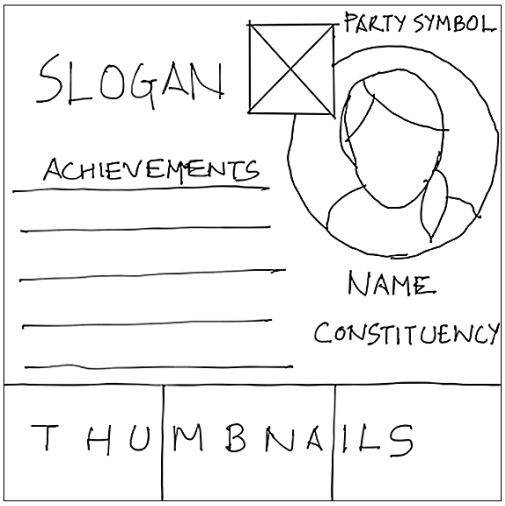


visually in one way or the other. Moreover, these proportions varied much less among candidates across party lines. Candidates from the BJP foregrounded their self the most frequently, in 72.22% of their posts, while INC candidates did so the least—yet in nearly half of all their posts (49.42%). On the whole, this finding, about the candidates' presentation of self, strongly validates a need for closer attention to the manner in which they present themselves visually across all their posts.

5.1.3 Candidates' Posts: Types of Visuals

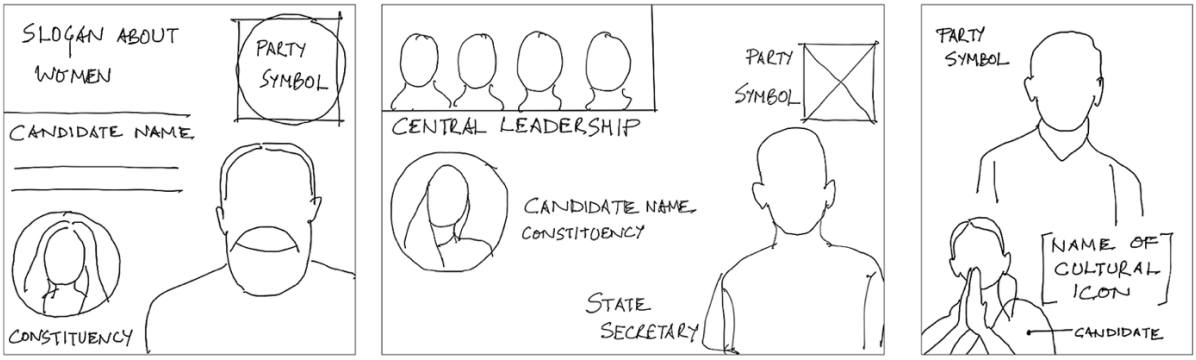
Given that the occurrence of self-presentation was quite pronounced in female candidates' practice of their visual politics, answering RQ 1C, about the formal characteristics of these visuals, proves necessary. Identifying such characteristics brings my investigation a step closer to understanding how female candidates sought to appear to their constituents on Facebook and X during the 2021 election campaign. As explained in the methodology employed in this investigation, to follow its research ethics framework, the illustrations used to portray these types do not show the actual images of individuals in identifiable ways. The visual types identified through my examination are therefore presented through a form of 'ethical fabrication' (Markham, 2012).The first visual type is the most straightforward. It appears to be purely informational **(Fig 10)**. The female candidate presents herself through a formal, frontal, passport-picture-like facial photograph. The photograph is juxtaposed with textual information laid out as a list. The text contains the candidate's name, their constituency, and also her family, educational, and occupational backgrounds. The primary purpose of this type of posts seems to have been to make available basic biographical information about the candidate to a potential voter.

Figure 10 Type 1: candidate information



The second type of portrayal of self in the female candidate's visual posts presents two or more facial shots of the same style as the first. But in these instances, the visual artefact in the post moves beyond pure information. It seeks to invoke relevance and the legitimate the candidate's stature by using two faces instead of one. This type conveys a message of mentorship towards the candidate and approval of their candidature by a particular party's top leaders. This is the most common in the BJP candidates' posts on both Facebook and X, where frontal, bust-level pictures of the Indian prime minister or other senior ministers of the union government were located (in an enlarged manner) alongside the relatively less-known face of the local contesting candidate **(Fig 11)**. Even the INC candidates' posts visually indexed themselves to pan-India level party leadership in this manner.

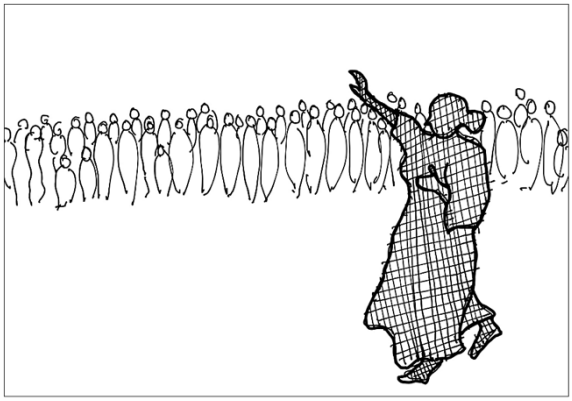
Figure 11 Type 2: Candidate shown in mentor-protégé relationship or juxtaposed with cultural icons



This kind of arrangement, one of two faces, was used in yet another way by replacing the face of a living political mentor with recognisable cultural icons from Bengal's history. In the latter variation, the candidate used this arrangement in the canvas to index herself to the rich history of Bengal's movements in literature or the arts, and even India's freedom struggle. Many of these visuals, strip down the text into a single message conveying the goal of real change (in Bengali, '*ashol paribartan'*) with the name of the candidate and their constituency. The slogan of transformation or '*paribartan*' bears political currency in the recent context of WB elections in a way that moves beyond mere change in elected representatives or government.[10]

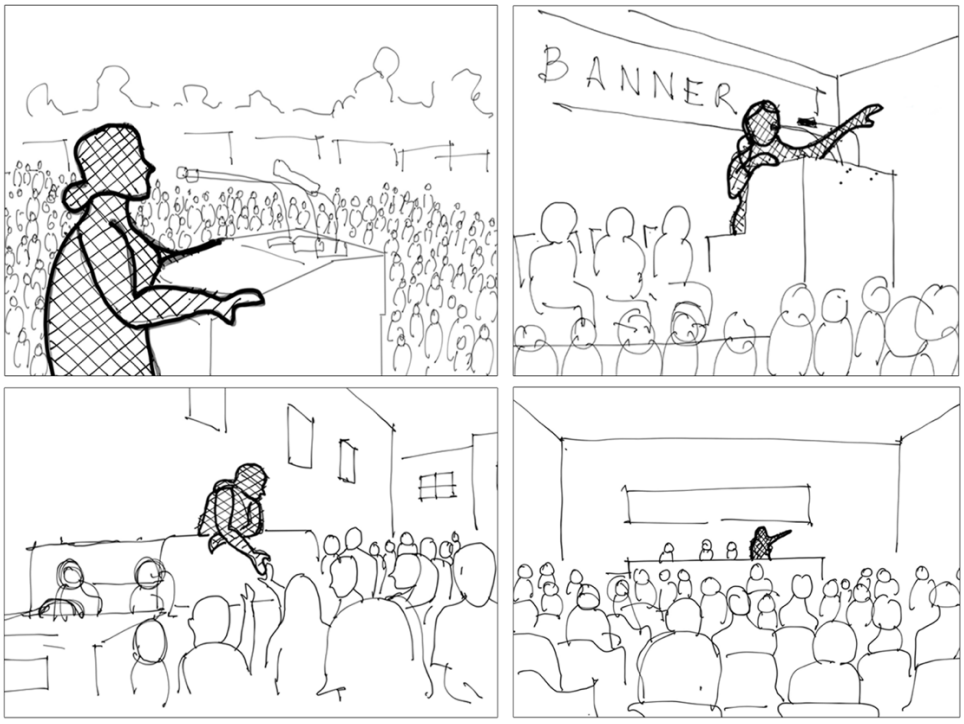
[10] Mamata Banerjee, newly elected Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2011, launched an ambitious project of *paribartan* or 'transformation', to 'turn Kolkata into London'. (The Telegraph [Kolkata], 2011). After continuous Left Front rule (1977–2011), Banerjee used the theme of *paribartan* to signal a political shift. Soon, the riverbanks of Kolkata's Hooghly river were cleaned, sanitised, and paved; new lamp-posts installed and throughout the state, official buildings, gateposts, and railings were repainted in the AITC colours of blue and white, eliminating remnants of red symbolic of WB's Left-front. Banerjee sought thus to challenge the popular image of Kolkata as a decaying, disease-prone erstwhile colonial city, an imaginary which was linked to the humanitarian imagery which linked the figure of Mother Teresa with poverty in Kolkata

Figure 12 Type 3: a leader among the people



It can be traced to Mamata Banerjee's own historic ascent to leadership as its chief minister in 2011, by unseating the then CPI(M) government that had ruled the state for nearly thirty-five years as mentioned in chapter 3. The third type of visual post possesses mostly photographic content. In most of the AITC's party pages, the subject of these images is Mamata Banerjee herself. In some instances, she appears as a silhouette speaking at the centre of the frame, juxtaposed with text about her government's track record and future agenda. In others, Banerjee is positioned at one edge of the composition, with a crowd occupying the remaining image space **(Fig 12)**. The images are shot either at a low angle or at eye level, depending on the composition.

Figure 13 Type 4: The stateswoman

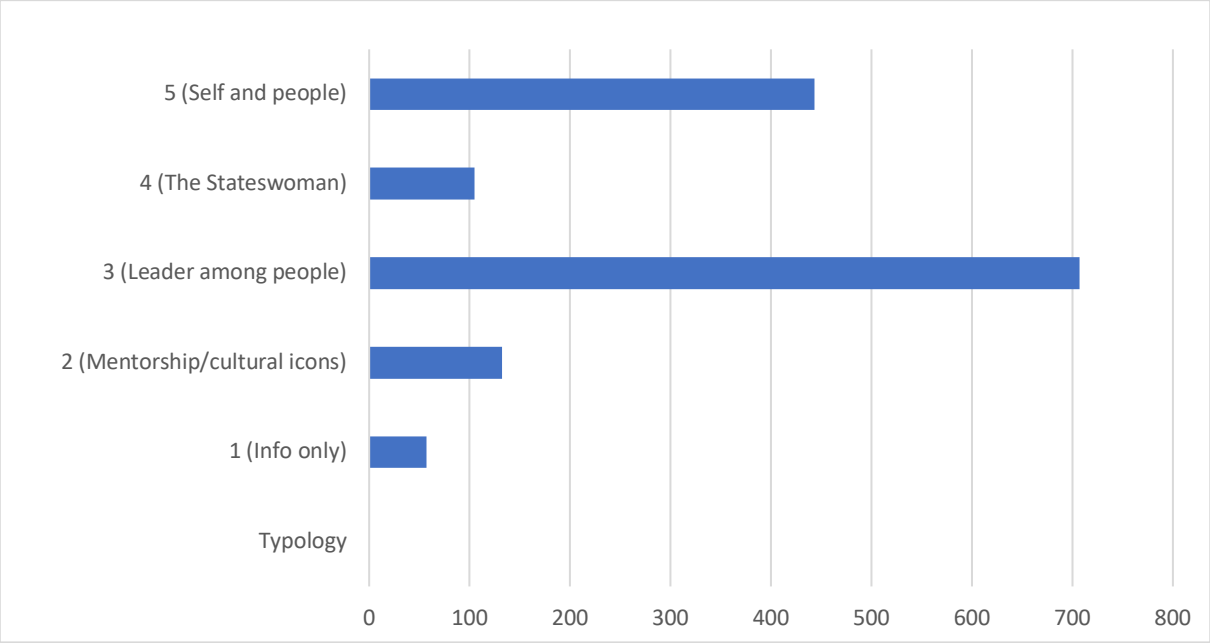


A fourth type of visual artefact posted by candidates is also photorealistic. In these instances, the candidate is pictured either from the top or bottom of a dais **(Fig 13)**. In the former case, the back of the candidate dominates the foreground of the image, while a large crowd fills the rest of the image's composition (see top left of figure). In the latter case, the candidate is seen in a standing position, addressing the crowd from the front, with a backdrop showing the location or agenda of the event, usually through a banner or with other party members seated on the dais (top right). Two variations of this spatial composition include the candidate campaigning from within or outside a moving vehicle (bottom left), or the dais photographed from a distance, with the crowd dominating the foreground (bottom right).

Figure 14 Type 5: The 'self' among people

In the fifth type of visual artefact, the candidate enacts her self-presentation by placing her body among the people who comprise her potential voters. The scenes are mostly framed at the ground level **(Fig 14)**. The CPI(M) and AITC's most followed candidates show themselves walking among crowds in outdoor settings. These portrayals are also primarily photorealistic; in some cases meanings of the visuals are fixed with a poster-like composition where written text is used. This type of visual post typically showed the candidates in photographs that are front-facing or in group settings, such as on a dais or marching with supporters. These photographs, when showing the candidate from the front, frequently highlight her gender by juxtaposing her with men in the background, in the dais setting, or placing her in the centre of a group of male party workers when walking. In addition, a significant number of posts by candidates also show her interacting with—speaking, shaking hands or even hugging—smaller groups of people such as a family, or a female individual or children.

Figure 15 Number of posts showing each of the five types of self-portrayal



Considering the posts by individual candidates across parties cumulatively, the distribution of each visual type across the total number of posts is revealing. These frequencies indicate that in their self-presentation, candidates most often sought to depict themselves as leaders, followed by appearing relatable—evident in images showing them among constituents. Taken together, the frequency of candidates' self-presentation, the visual types they used, and the most commonly observed patterns highlight the embeddedness of cultural and societal contexts in the visual politics female politicians enacted during the WB election campaign **(Fig 15)**. Particularly revealing is how candidates distinguished their own political and social agency from that of the women in their electorate—for instance, through assertive postures, strategic wardrobe choices, or direct engagement with local communities, thus underscoring their political role. To continue addressing RQ 1C, which focuses on the formal characteristics of these visuals, this aspect of the 2021 WB election campaign warrants closer examination.

5.1.4 Candidates' Self-portrayal: in Relation to Constituents

To develop a more comprehensive description of formal characteristics evident in the female candidates' posts, I viewed their visual politics in a relational field in being present with constituents. This finding adds an important layer in the answer to RQ 1C, particularly emerging in the fourth and fifth type of self-portrayals discussed above. In these types of visual posts, *how* the female candidates running for office showed themselves being present among people, especially women who were not political

candidates, becomes important. This relational field appeared in four ways within the candidates' posts.

First, when candidates were photographed interacting with constituents, they were usually positioned at the entrances of people's homes during door-to-door campaigns—shown engaged in conversation, shaking hands, being garlanded, or receiving other forms of felicitation. In these images, the figure of candidate as a public figure was displayed in contrast with non-candidate women as domestic householders. In such respect, the candidates' visual politics of seemed to be striving to appear relatable, but nonetheless maintaining a visual salience for their online audiences.

A second kind of contrast between female constituents and candidates emerged in posture and body language. Female candidates were frequently depicted standing, walking, or engaged in dynamic activities that conveyed empowerment and agency. In contrast, non-candidate women in their posts were portrayed in more passive roles, either as individuals or in groups, sometimes as an audience, and frequently seated. Notably, the camera angle often positioned the viewer *above* the eye level of the seated women, reflecting the vantage of the standing candidate rather than of the seated constituents.

In their self-portrayal, a third kind of relationality emerged in contrasting sartorial ensembles of the female candidates and other women in the photographic compositions. The candidates in traditional attire showed themselves in starched and ironed saris, which appear visibly cleaner and sharper in manner of dress compared to the more ordinary, well-worn saris of the non-candidate women. In some cases, the candidates were also photographed in urban, western or hybrid outfits that contrasted with those of the non-candidate women. These differences implicitly signalled class disparities in visual ways—occupational, educational or socio-economic background, thereby subtly conveying that the female candidates possessed relatively greater agency than those they were seen with.

A fourth kind of visual contrast, that of age, appeared in the candidates' self-portrayals. This difference was most pronounced in photographs of candidates interacting with older women. The visuals positioned the candidate as both resilient in relation to and respectful towards their constituents, using generational difference to emphasise leadership qualities while acknowledging the experiences of their elders. This visual strategy reinforces distinctions between the female candidate as an empowered public

figure and other women as passive or domestic subjects, subtly conveying hierarchies of power, class, and agency.

In considering these four ways of relational self-portrayal together, particularly examining their captions, a common thread emerges through the textual accompaniments to the visuals. Ordinary women, who were not candidates, are portrayed as either nurturing figures or victims, rather than as those with agency to take actively charge or effect change. Many posts featured female candidates (and male candidates as well) being blessed, congratulated, or garlanded by women, thereby underscoring the passivity of the women who were constituents.

Slogan-like textual accompaniments in the posts that asserted how Bengal's women faced unprecedented atrocities. One particularly stark BJP post showed the battered face of an elderly woman who was attacked during the campaigning with the caption 'Is she not Bengal's mother?' (in English), while another depicted a young woman with facial injuries, asking Is she not Bengal's daughter, in Bengali *(Ini ki Banglar meye non?).*

The mother and daughter references arose in opposition to visual posts the AITC's official pages (and most of its widely-followed candidates) circulated, accompanied by the slogan *Bangla nijer meye'kei chaaye* (Bengal wants her own daughter), referring specifically to Mamata Banerjee as the native daughter of Bengal; accompanying posts contrasted her identity with the 'Hindi-speaking outsiders'—mainly candidates who figured as their opponents, the BJP. This invocation of the daughter as a symbol of service and nurturing also—in Banerjee's case—suggested a grounded leadership. These varied representations of 'the daughter' assumes important meaning that extends well beyond electoral messaging. It draws upon a wider, and very real, societal structure of how women are seen and see themselves in South Asian political discourse. These findings into the larger dataset of visual posts provide important initial insights into the gendered nature of visual politics.

5.1.5 Candidates' Self-portrayal: Appearing Visually Salient

Given that the female candidates most followed on social media (Facebook and X) evidently distinguished themselves from their constituents, following RQ 1C, I also uncovered their other means of appearing salient in visual ways. To uncover this aspect of salience, I relied on the visual and formal composition of photorealistic images as proportions of the total sample of 1033 shortlisted visual artefacts. The understanding of salience emerged as closely being tied to female candidates expressing their agency in

visual ways through the posts they shared on their individual pages during the campaign period.

Table 11: Candidate's salience as expressed through visual artefacts' formal characteristics.

Candidate's salience, established via	Count	Proportion of total sample (1033)
Background	329	31.85%
Foreground	782	75.70%
Contrasts	217	21.01%
Light	34	3.29%
Colour	251	24.30%
Balance	123	11.91%
Focus	347	33.59%

By coding how often candidates appeared salient and expressed their agency in visual ways, it becomes evident that they strategically sought opportunities or constructed scenarios that induced their being photographed in particular ways, such as occupying the foreground of the composition, being in focus, or even being attired in contrasting colours. By paying close attention to the final selection of visual artefacts from posts by candidates, the proportions of their salience and agency in relation to the total number of visuals becomes apparent (Tables 11 and 12).

Table 12: Instances of the candidate's visual agency portrayed through visual composition

Candidate's agency shown through	Count	Proportion of total sample (1033)
Eye contact (demand)	221	21.39%
Close up (intimate/personal)	49	4.74%
Frontal (involved)	41	3.97%
Eye-level (equality)	580	56.15%
Low Angle (subjecthood/power)	302	29.24%
High Angle (vulnerability)	60	5.81%
Over the shoulder	97	9.39%

These proportions reveal a deliberate strategy of carefully balancing authority with accessibility. That candidates occupied the foreground in 75.7% of visual artefacts they posted underscores their centrality in campaign narratives, and establishing their political presence. This prominence was tempered by the frequent use of eye-level pictures (56.15%), fostering connection and equality with viewers. Such strategies align with

Goffman's (1956) concept of 'impression management', where politicians aim to craft relatable personas.

The use of low-angle shots (29.24%) adds complexity, projecting power and authority while navigating gendered expectations. Their less frequent use compared to eye-level shots reflects the careful balancing act women politicians undertake. Assertiveness, here, appears in balance with approachability—a visual tightrope between projecting leadership and maintaining a relatable image. Such findings suggest that political candidates, particularly women, must create an impression of both competence and accessibility. Conversely, the sparing use of high-angle photographs reflect efforts to avoid being seen as weak. Other techniques like focus and contrasts to emphasise candidates' presence resonate with Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of constructing a visual grammar of the female politician as both a leader and one of the people—by standing apart as well as blending in. This focused sample of visual artefacts has helped to answer the aspect of my sub-question RQ 1C related to visual salience. To build upon these readings, I will now turn to findings that have emerged from a rigorous content analysis of the photorealistic portrayal of women candidates in the sample as evidence of the non-verbal means of enacting a gendered visual politics, which is the core concern of RQ 2.

5.2 (Re-)presenting Gendered Bodies

The visual artefact, as I have explained in Chapter 2, is more than merely an object in existence online, but operates as a site of political performance. It contains visual *cues*, whose intended effect and invocations of symbolism are manifest in material ways. Visual cues therefore formed an important unit of coding for my dataset to reveal how a visual artefact or a group of visual artefacts reinforce gendered ideas of femininity in traditional and non-traditional ways, or conversely, even gender neutrality. Through such an exploration, I drew out how political visibility is not a static entity but a performed act. Examining such acts followed from my research question: (RQ2), about how the visual politics of women candidates on Facebook and X align or deviate from that of their parties in the 2021 WB election campaign. Answers to this question and its constituent sub-questions emerges from a content analysis of the posts by the political parties and their two most followed candidates on social media. This analysis reveals how the candidates' gender appears in visual cues across the posts, taking into account that a single post could also contain multiple visual cues. As explained earlier in Chapter 4, the entire set of retrieved posts were subjected to a screening process to generate a shortlist

for a detailed, visual content analysis. This analysis helped to generate codes and, thereafter, key categories from visual cues related to actions the candidates were pictured in, the gender of the people accompanying them, what the candidates wore (their sartorial choices), how they wore or carried it (traditionally feminine modesty signals conveyed, or their absence), as well as the traditionally gendered or gender-neutral religious and political symbols accompanying their bodies and/or attire. I use these categories to organise my findings in relation to the sub-questions that pertain to the enactment of political visibility by women politicians and their parties.

5.2.1 Candidates and Parties: Traditional and Non-traditional Portrayal of Gender

To answer my research's sub-question RQ 2A, I first considered the visual cues derived from posts by candidates and a parties as a whole, separated into those that convey femininity in traditional ways and, conversely, non-normative ideas of femininity or a gender-neutral visual politics. Thus analysing visual cues across all categories, as theorised by Douglas (1970), an overall sense of body politics employed in the campaign through the data sample emerges. In this manner, to answer sub-question RQ 2A, I fixed the categories of femininity and gender appearing in traditional ways or otherwise, respectively, and used these lenses to compare visual cues in candidates' and parties' posts together. This initial classification into broad categories revealed a broad picture of where candidates' visual politics aligned their parties', and where they diverged.

Figure 16 Comparison of visual cues conveying gender and femininity in traditional ways

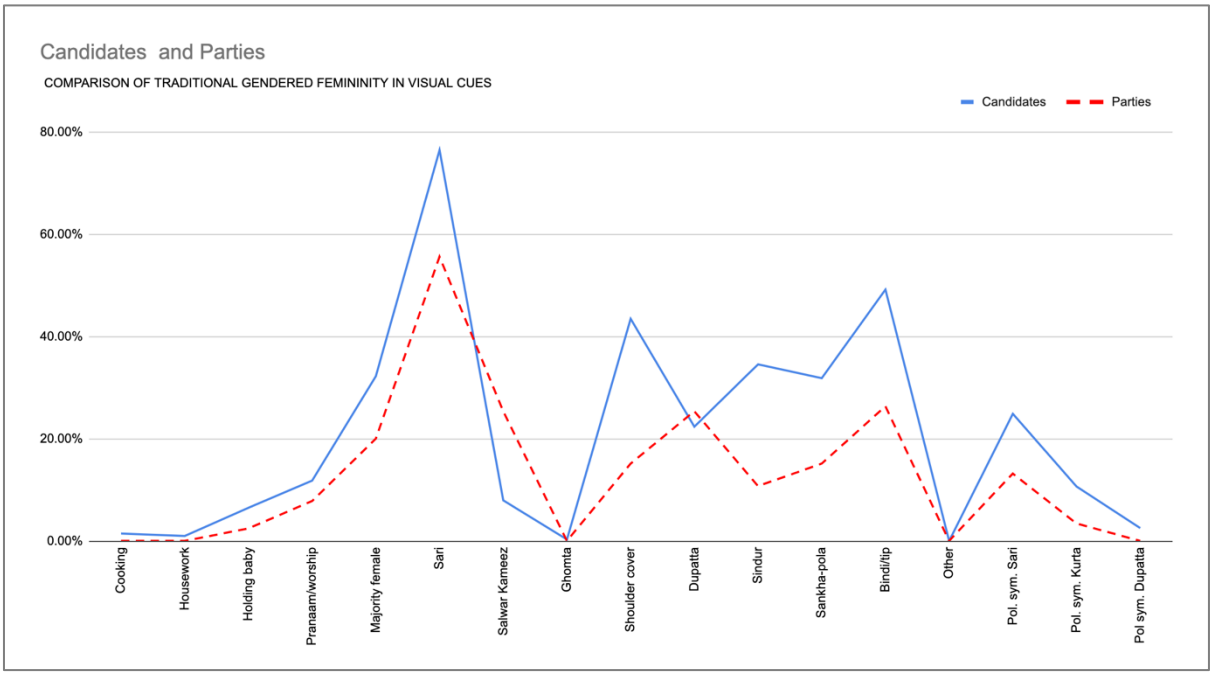
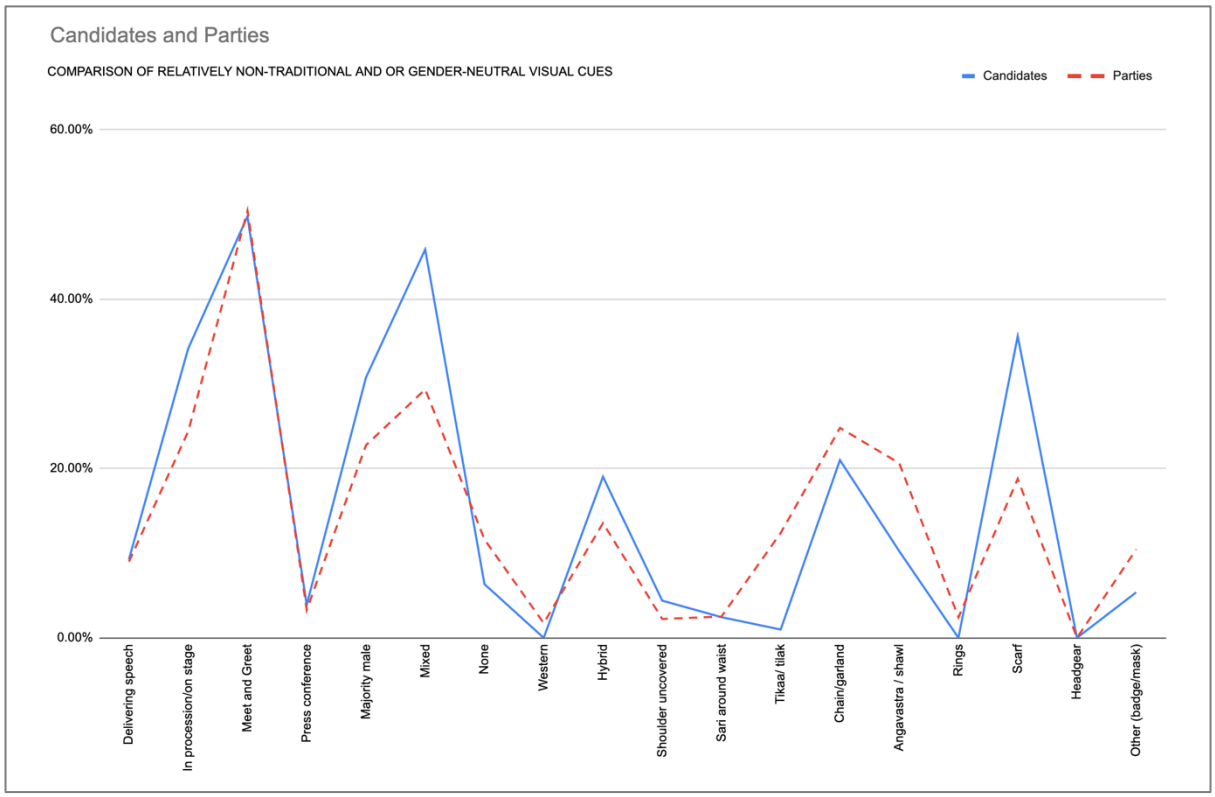


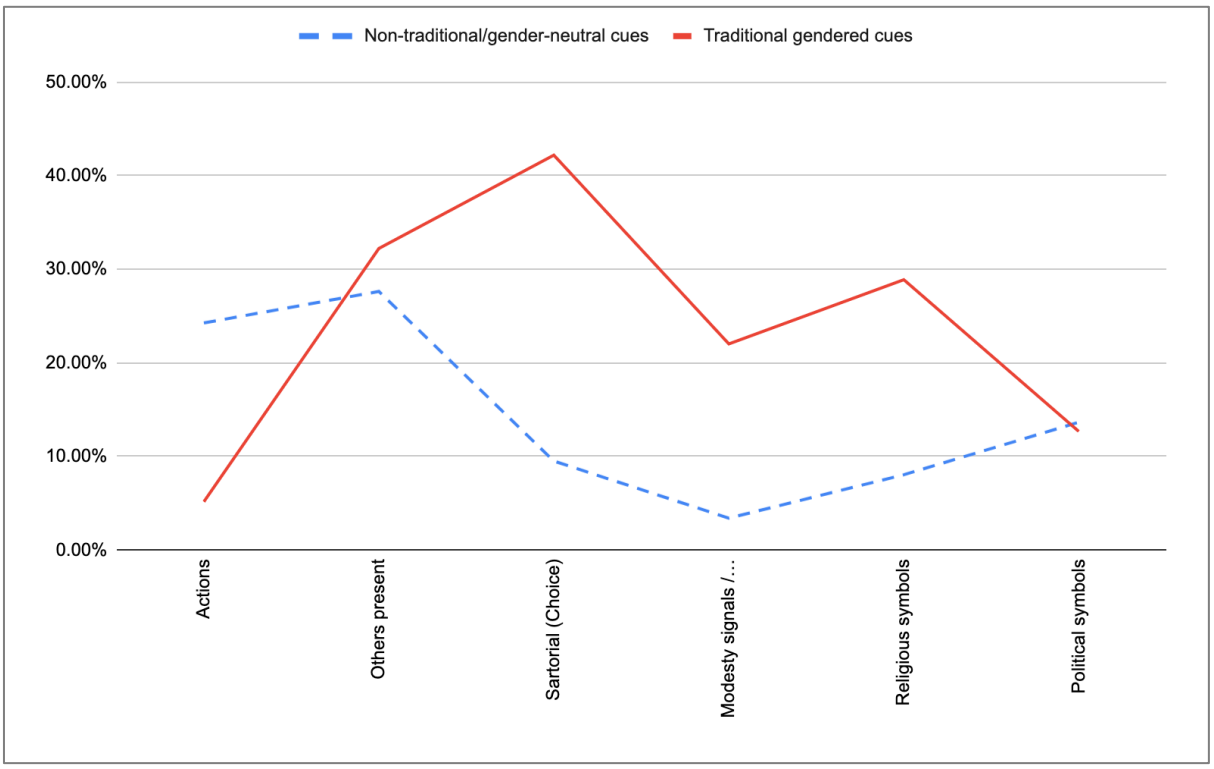
Figure 17 Comparison of visual cues conveying femininity in non-traditional or gender-neutral ways



Through this reading, it was evident that whilst the occurrence of gender-neutral or non-traditional cues varied only slightly, significant differences emerged in the frequency of traditionally gendered visual cues. **(Figs 16-17)**. Across all sub-categories, the most pronounced variations in body politics appeared in visual cues related to attire or sartorial choices, modesty, and marital symbols, which were quite prevalent among traditionally gendered portrayals. Conversely, gender-neutral aspects showed less variation across posts by candidates and their political parties' posts.

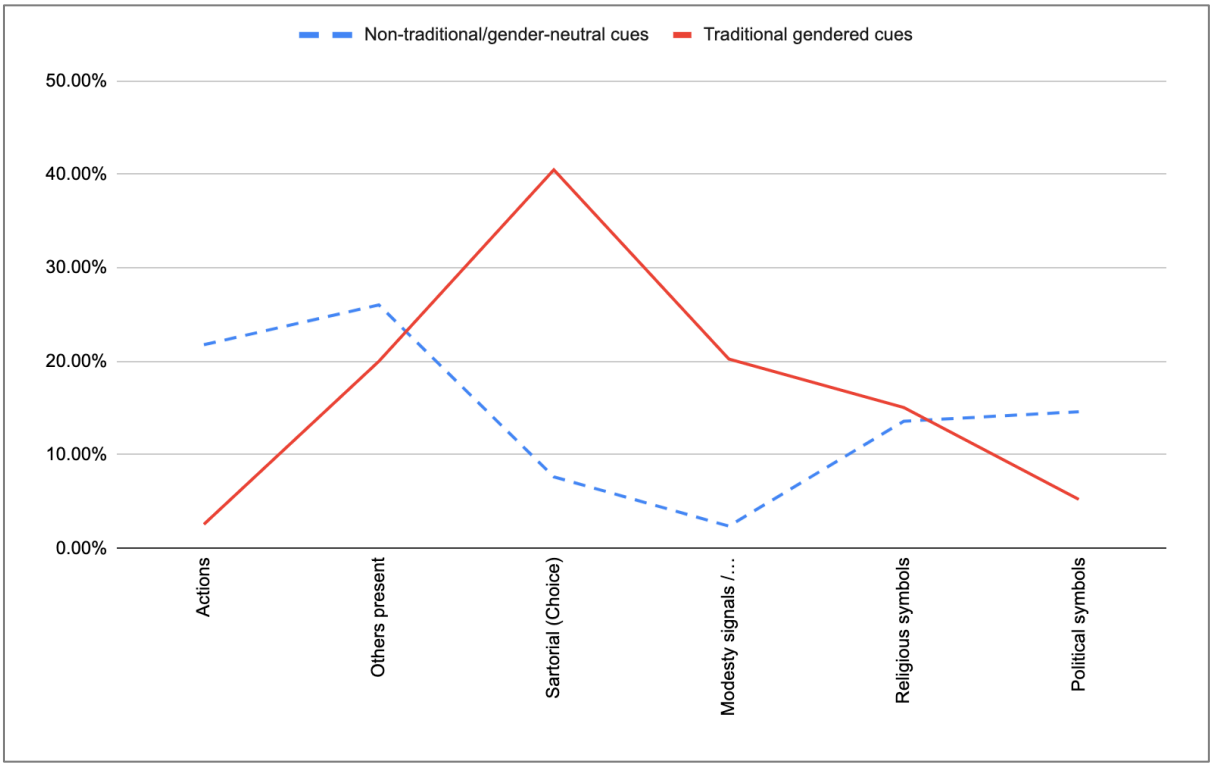
Following the sub-question RQ 2B, I considered the candidates' and parties' visual politics separately to compare them. The lenses of comparison remained the same as previously applied. However, in this case, the source of the posts analysed was separated to compare in which groups of visual cues all the candidates in the sample, on an average, seemed to draw upon traditional ideas of femininity and where they employed gender neutral or non-traditional ideas of femininity. The same criteria was then applied to visual cues emerging from the party's posts to gain insights into how they compared to that of the candidates' visual cues.

Figure 18 Average of traditional and non-traditional gendered visual cues: candidates' posts



The comparison revealed that irrespective of party affiliation, on an average, candidates displayed traditionally feminine visual cues far more than gender-neutral or non-traditional portrayal of femininity **(Fig 18)**. In posts by candidates**,** the sartorial choices

Figure 19 Average of traditional and non-traditional gendered visual cues: parties' posts



and modesty signals in traditionally feminine, gendered ways appeared in about 42.2% and 22% of the visual cues, as compared to only 9.5% and 3.4% of cues that were gender neutral or non-traditional in nature. When it came to the category of actions, however, cues that were gender neutral amounted to about 24%, nearly five times as frequently as those that were gendered in nature (just over 5%). Cumulatively, categories such as sartorial choices, modesty signals, religious markers, and political symbols far outweighed the presence of gender-neutral or non-traditional cues. Specifically, candidates' sartorial choices leaned towards the traditional in 42.2% of visual cues, and modesty signals appeared in 22% of the cues. By contrast, only 9.5% of sartorial cues and 3.4% of modesty signals were gender-neutral or non-traditional. However, in the category of actions, gender-neutral cues (24%) were nearly five times more frequent than traditionally gendered cues (just over 5%), indicating that candidates sometimes adopted more neutral forms of self-representation in their actions.

To continue responding to RQ 2B, on an average, posts by parties **(Fig 19)** displayed visual cues showing actions, associations and political symbols that were gender-neutral or non-traditional more frequently. A difference was the most pronounced in actions of the candidates: about 21.8% of the total number of cues in the parties' visual artefacts were non-traditional or gender neutral, while only about 2.6% of them represented gender in traditional ways. Yet, even in the posts by the political parties, in the categories of sartorial choice and modesty signals, traditionally gendered visual cues occurred far more frequently. These stood at 40.5% and 20.25% respectively, of all visual cues, when compared to non-traditional attire (7.7%) and non-traditionally gendered or absence of modesty signals (only 2.4%).

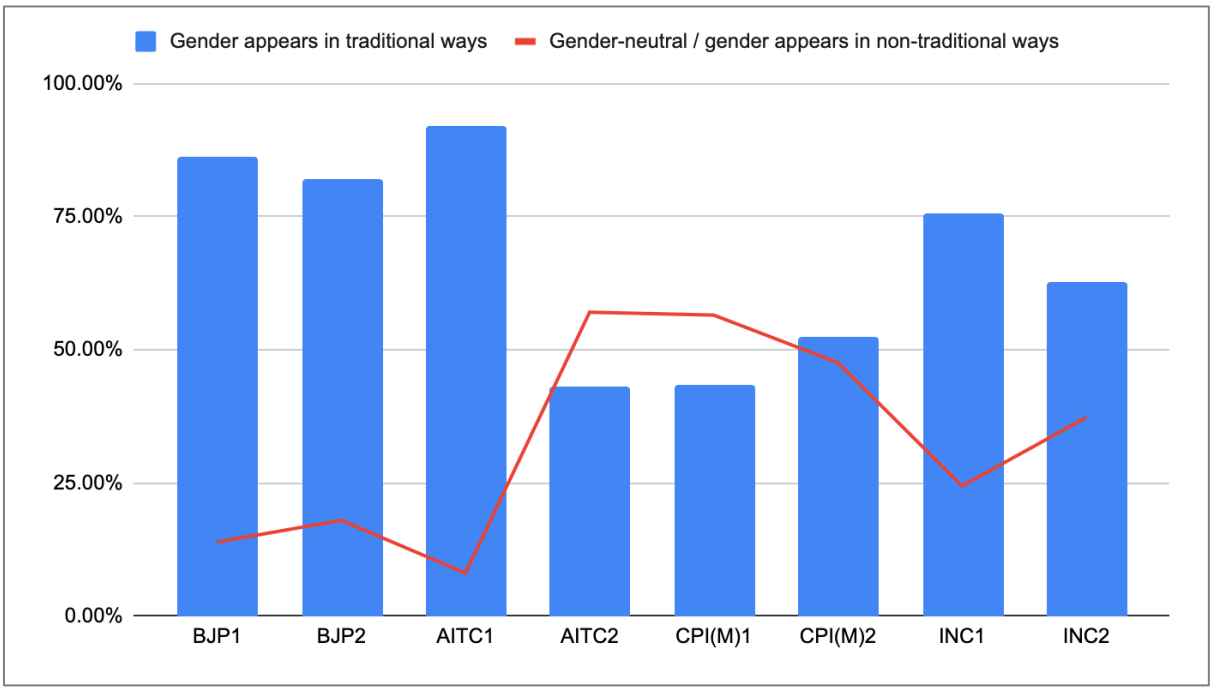
In posts by political parties, gender-neutral or non-traditional visual cues appeared more frequently across categories such as actions, associations, and political symbols. For example, non-traditional or gender-neutral cues comprised 21.8% of the total number of actions, compared to only 2.6% representing traditional gendered portrayals. However, traditional portrayals dominated in categories such as sartorial choices (40.5%) and modesty signals (20.25%), compared to non-traditional sartorial cues (7.7%) and absence of modesty signals (2.4%). These findings indicate that while political parties occasionally employed gender-neutral or non-traditional portrayals in specific contexts, traditional representations remained dominant in their visual politics. Among visual cues in every category, the sari appeared in 22% of what was posted from the AITC party's pages. The BJP followed at 14.75%, suggesting that these parties deliberately projected their female candidates in alignment with traditional cultural and gendered values. In

contrast, candidates in the INC and CPI(M) appeared in saris in only 6.3% and 5.4% of all visual cues, respectively.

5.2.2 Performing Gender: Self-presentation by Candidates

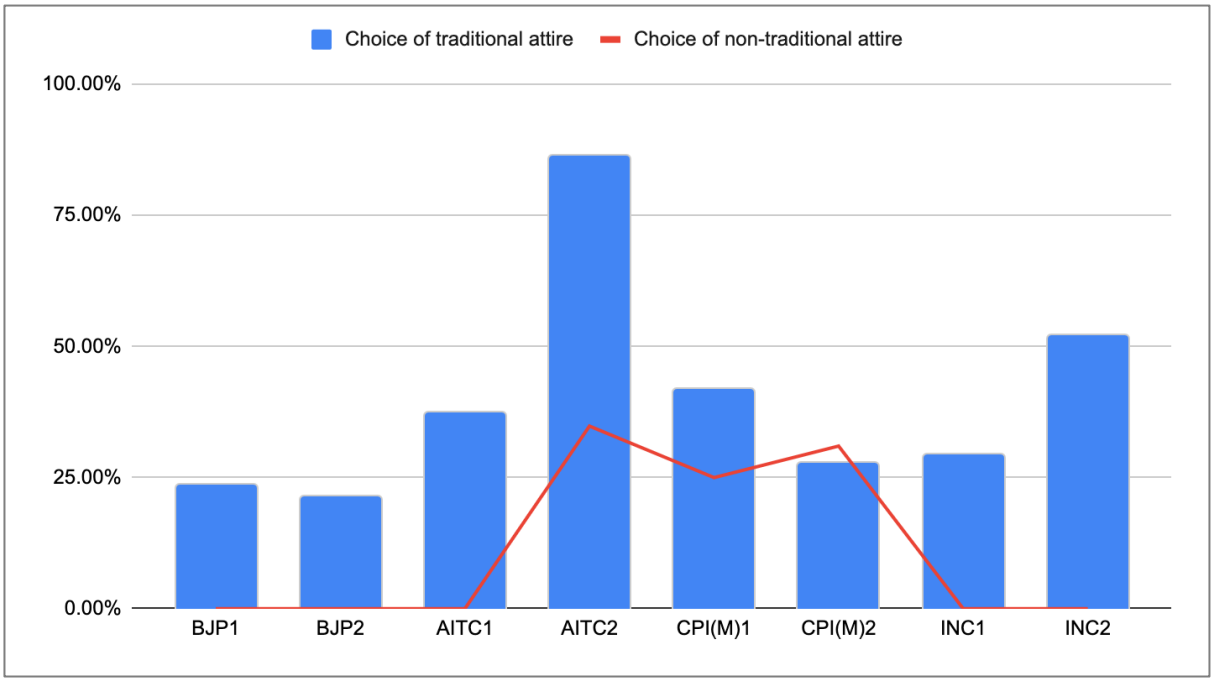
The comparisons of candidates' and parties' visual politics by answering RQ 2A and 2B have indicated that use of traditionally gendered visual cues varied significantly among them. Nonetheless, in particular groups of visual cues, on an average, both candidates and parties employed gender in traditional ways more often than in non-traditional ways or displayed gender-neutral visual politics. This necessitated a closer look at these groups of visual cues, particularly a comparison of how candidates from specific parties used them.

Figure 20 Candidates' overall use of traditional / non-traditional (including gender neutral) visual cues



Following RQ 2C, I first compared the candidates' visual politics, party wise, through three lenses: their overall use of gender in traditional and non-traditional ways, the ways gender appeared in their sartorial choices, and finally, how often they signalled modesty or did not do so. Considering these groups of visual cues separately proved necessary to gain a more granular and deeper insight into where the candidates' visual politics showed trends consistent within the whole group and where the candidates' visual politics showed significant divergences. Examining posts by candidates, their self

Figure 21 Candidates' instances of displaying traditional or non-traditional attire across all visual cues

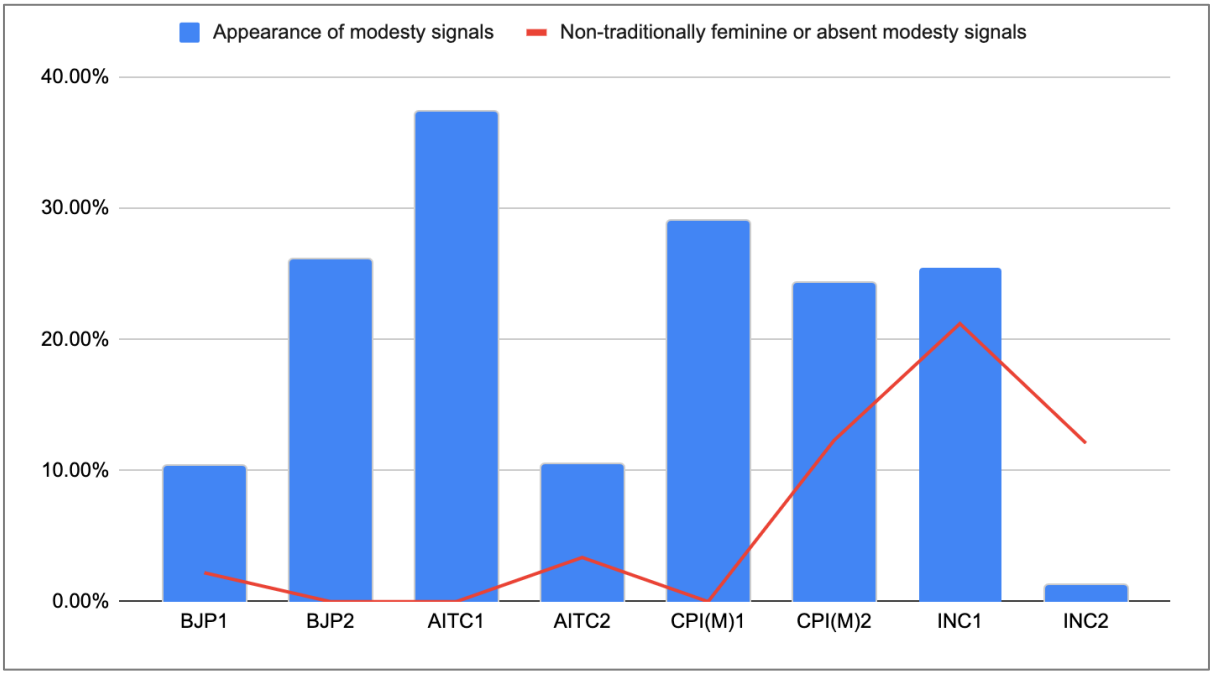


-presentation displayed a strong predominance of traditionally gendered visual cues overall **(Fig 20)**. In sartorial choices of all the candidates, visual cues showing traditional attire were significantly higher than non-traditional attire in number **(Fig 21)**. The highest instance of traditional attire including but not limited to the sari appeared in 86% of all visual cues among one AITC candidate's posts. Even in the lowest instance, traditional attire appeared in about 21% of all visual cues (for a BJP candidate). Yet these frequencies show significant variation in sartorial choices between candidates' posts. Specifically among forms of traditional attire, for BJP candidates, the sari appeared in 14.23% and 12.88% of visual cues. Meanwhile, CPI(M) candidates appeared in a sari in 3.16% and 0.95%, respectively, of all the visual cues they displayed. Interestingly, the two INC candidates showed a higher prevalence of sari usage, at 15.23% and 19.4%, respectively, of all their visual cues, demonstrating a more traditional portrayal compared to their coalition partners in the CPI(M). Still, across all parties, the sari cut across age groups, with candidates ranging from 28 to 66 years old (as of 2021) adopting this kind of traditional attire. However, younger candidates, reflecting contemporary socio-cultural trends in West Bengal, appeared more often in non-traditional or gender-neutral clothing, indicating a correlation between sartorial choices and age. For example, Western attire appeared in 1.14% of the visual cues for a younger AITC candidate, compared to 1.42% for a CPI(M) candidate. This frequency, whilst minor, reflected a limited but notable presence of non-traditional attire among younger candidates seemingly attempting to

balance contemporary fashion sensibilities with the traditional expectations of their political roles. In comparison, notably, none of the parties featured their candidates in Western attire on their official pages (a case of zero instance), despite its growing acceptance among Indian women, particularly in urban workplaces.

When it came to sartorial choice, my analysis of visual cues also identified the use of a hybrid attire also known as Indo-western, blending traditional and Western styles, as a notable trend among some candidates. CPI(M) candidates prominently featured such Indo-western clothing in 8.77% and 7.43% of their visual cues. Similarly, a younger AITC candidate, a celebrity and film actor, displayed a preference for Indo-western attire, wearing it in 7.7% of her visual cues. These findings demonstrate how sartorial choices varied not only by party affiliation but also by individual candidates' age and professional background, adding a nuance to gendered visual representation. If the sari emerged as the predominant attire of choice among the eight women politicians whose posts I analysed, to further differentiate between them qualitatively, I investigated modes of draping cloth over the body, and how bodily accessories with such attire convey different meanings (as outlined in Chapter 4, sub-section 4.4.3)**.**

Figure 22 Comparison of modesty signals or their absence in visual cues used by candidates

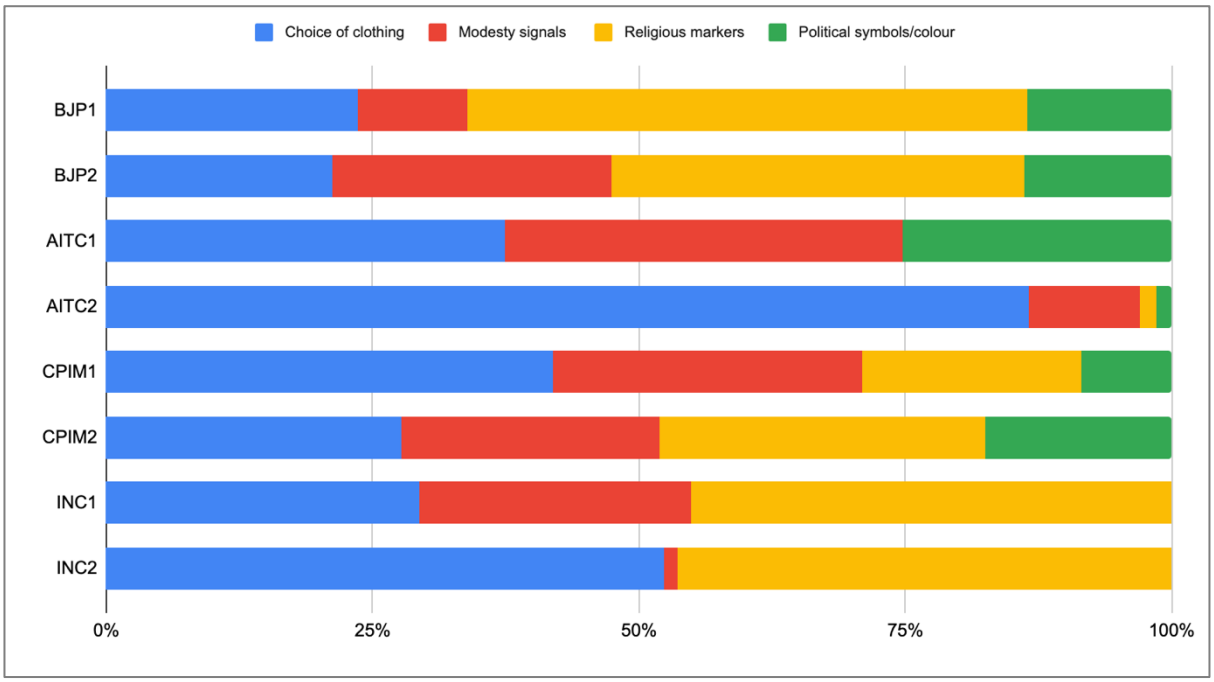


The presence or absence of modesty-related visual cues reveals the how candidates from different parties presented themselves **(Fig 22).** For instance, the 'ghomta' (head cover, a traditional sign of modesty and deference) was absent across all party posts, appearing nominally (0.21% of all visual cues) for just one candidate of the BJP. Interestingly, while the visual cues that signalled modesty appeared in posts of the older

AITC's candidate was 37.4% and the younger candidate's posts was 10.5%, the average of the two roughly mirrored the trend of visuals posted by their party (19.3%). Conversely, the BJP candidates, one a former fashion designer and another a celebrity actor, were seen to cover their shoulders in 5.99% and 10.89% of the total visual cues. CPI(M) candidates, given fewer instances of them appearing in saris, expressed modesty by draping around their torsos *dupattas*, a loose scarf of light material worn with *salwar kameez* or with Indo-Western hybrid attire. *Dupattas* were seen in 8.06% and 7.43% of the visual cues in their own posts.

A key accessory visible on the bodies of BJP, CPI(M) and INC candidates was the '*tip*', a forehead dot considered exclusively feminine in most Indian and Hindu Bengali, society (recall Table 7 in Chapter 4). The *tip*, called a '*bindi*' in Hindi, is either drawn, mounted with light adhesive or both, on a woman's forehead. On an average, the *tip* appeared in about 8.33% of the visual cues displayed by women in the posts analysed. Both BJP candidates (11.44% and 9.33% of all visual cues) and one CPI(M) candidate (9.95%) exceeded this mean and one of the INC candidates (3.05% of all visual cues) fell far below it. In this case, the AITC stood apart, however, where both the party and its candidates barely posted any visuals showing them wearing a *tip* (0% and 0.285% of the visual cues in their posts, respectively).

Figure 23 Distribution of various groups of visual cues in the candidates' posts



To complement these findings, following sub-question RQ 2D: I juxtaposed the candidates' *distribution* of all types of gendered visual cues apparent in their posts **(Fig 23)**. This analysis revealed how specific candidates employed gender in traditional ways,

through what they chose to wear, how they draped it, particular accessories signalling traditional, religious images of femininity as well as the employment of body canvassing through the sporting of symbols or accessories conveying their party identities. This examination showed that some candidates utilised all four of these kinds of cues more frequently than others. The balanced use of gendered cues reflects a visually cohesive strategy in political messaging. Such an aspect, of cohesiveness, appeared the most pronounced in the visual politics of both BJP candidates across all four categories. Contrary to this pattern, in the case of INC and AITC candidates, the distribution of visual cues was uneven, with one form of presenting gender in traditional ways dominating the others. The cohesive approach indicated a more conscious gendered political visibility strategy by emphasising traditional or religious identity, and political symbolism equally, through markers such as attire, political symbols, and modesty signals.

5.2.3 Gender-neutrality: Aligning with Parties' Visual Politics

By considering, in turn, overall and groups of visual cues used by candidates' in their self-presentation as well as the manner in which parties represented them, a significant duality can be interpreted from the findings. The first part of this duality pertains to candidates' being *visible* carriers of their parties' identity. The second is how they themselves present to construct identities as representatives and agents of what the people (their electorate) values in

Figure 24 Gendered/gender-neutral religious markers in party-wise candidates' posts

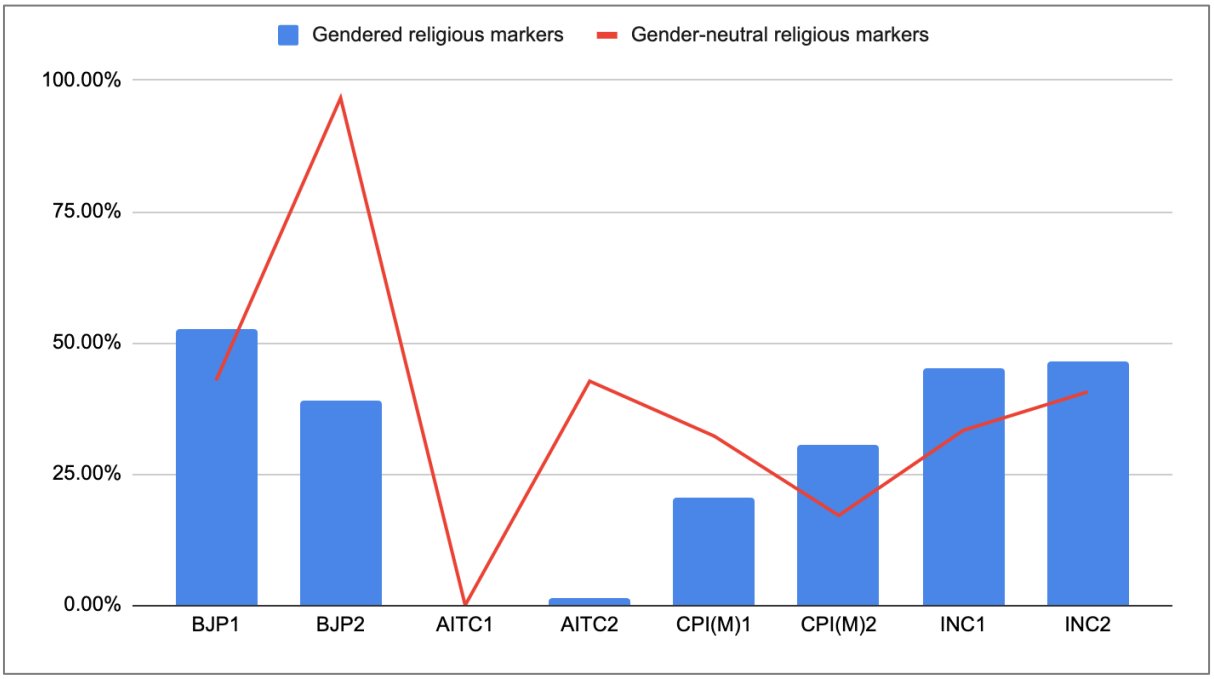
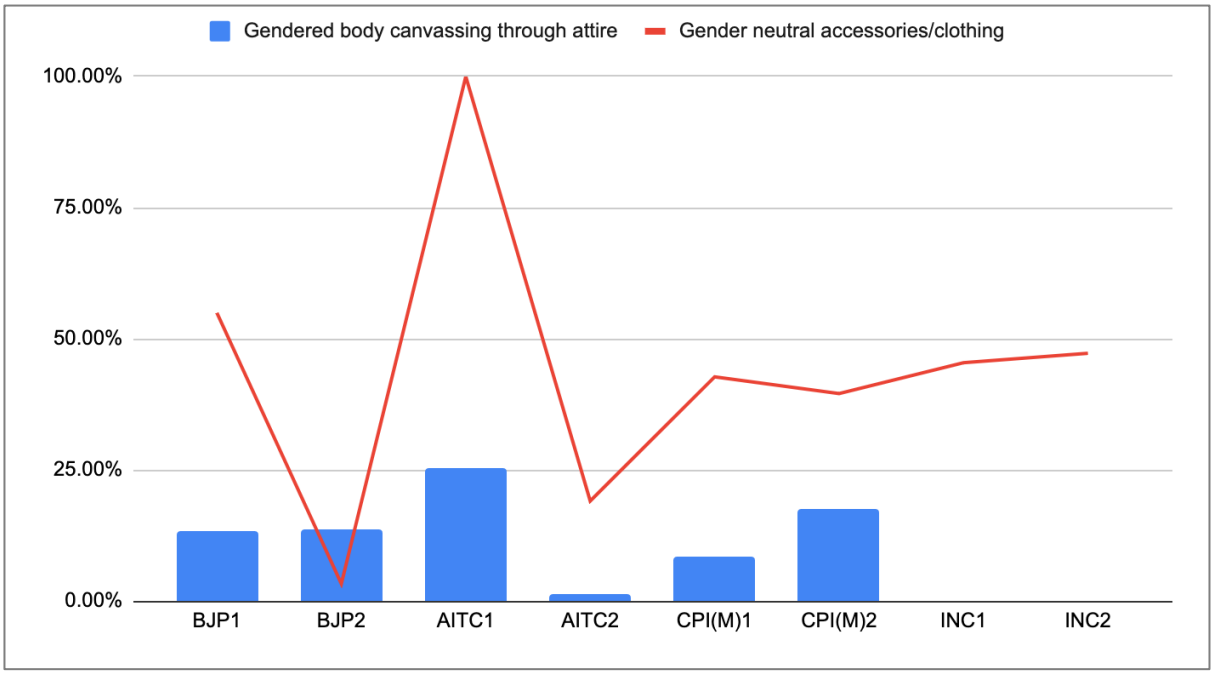


Figure 25 Gendered/gender-neutral appearance of political symbols (party-wise candidates' posts)



them *as women*. I will discuss each of the interpretations of this duality in the present and next sub-section of presenting specific findings emerging from my study of the visual artefacts. Following RQ 2E helps to understand to what extent candidates of each party exhibited either religious or political symbols or markers in gendered or gender-neutral ways **(Figs 24-25)**.

On the whole, the proportions of visual cues suggest that visual cues those that are gender-neutral relating to actions were consistently utilised to convey the female candidate's political image of capability, regardless of the party or the candidate. Press conferences were an exception to this trend. Posts from the candidates' of the AITC, the ruling party of West Bengal led by a woman, showed the highest occurrence of its current chief in press conference settings, in 5.56 % of all visual cues. Conversely, the AITC's key challenger the BJP's candidates showed appeared performing such an action in as little as 0.536% of cues. There were no visual cues in this action within the CPI(M)'s candidates' posts, and occurred only in 0.286% of cues within the INC's posts. This suggests the AITC was possibly projecting an image of a party led by a strong, competent woman.

Recalling posts by parties showing actions by candidates, and comparing these with candidates' posts, gender-neutral acts of, firstly, delivering speeches appeared in about 9% of the total number of visual cues, and, second, meeting and greeting constituents,

appeared in about 50% of all visual cues. With respect to walking in processions or being seen on the stage, the proportion varied somewhat with 24.39% of cues in the parties' posts and 34.15% of cues in the candidates' posts showing them in this manner.

The CPI(M), AITC, and INC placed emphasis on their relatively younger candidates being seen with voters, thereby building personal connections with the electorate. This suggests a strong alignment in the visual politics of candidates and parties when it came to gender-neutral aspects. Candidates of these parties showed themselves this way in 16.6% of the total visual cues of the CPI(M]) candidates' posts, an action that appeared in about 12.5% of the AITC's and 11.1% of the INC candidates' visual cues in their posts. This barely deviated from how their respective parties showed them.

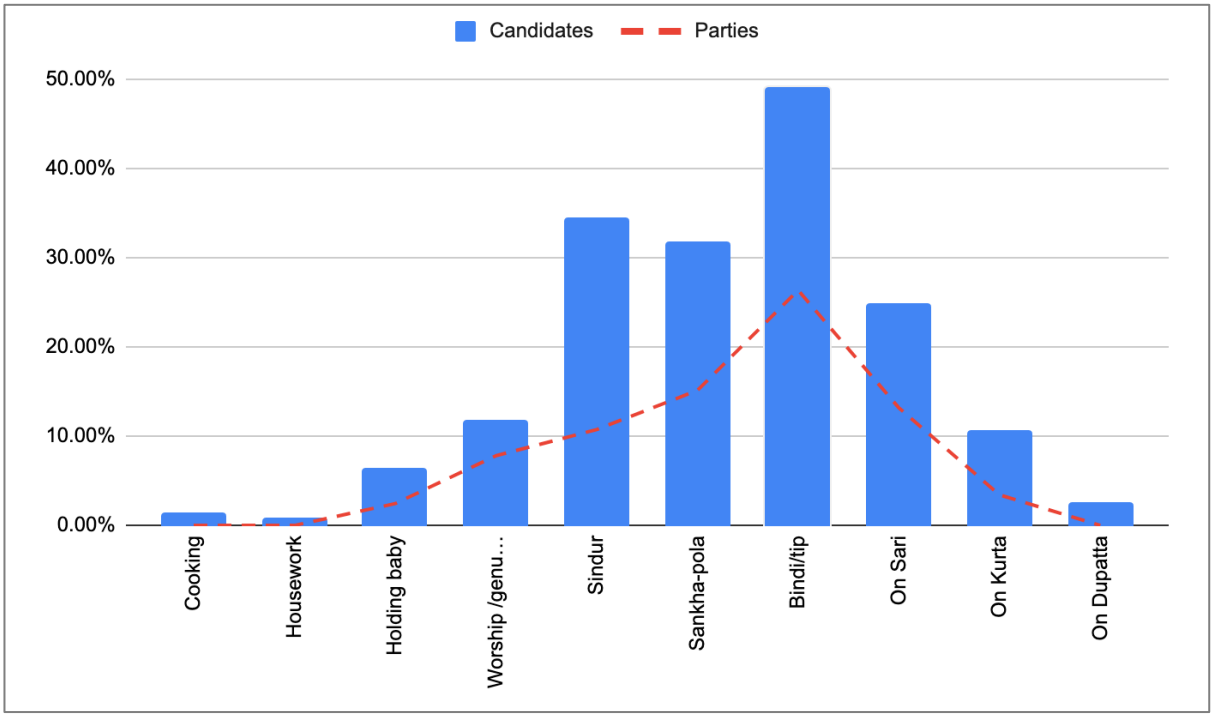
5.2.4 Gendered Divergences: Being Seen by the People as A Woman

As evident from the trajectory of Bengal's political and social context discussed in Chapter 3, women were preoccupied with balancing perceptions about her physical and social body. Moreover, as the post-independence period in West Bengal shows, to the people, a female political candidate must appear as a 'good woman' without failing to display her as a competence and professionalism as a potential parliamentarian. This delicate balancing act confirms how, recalling Radhakrishnan (2009), respectable femininity can be made eminently visible through the Bengali (Hindu) social construct of the *bhadramahila*—which is why I examined how it extends into the digital realm of social media platforms.

The good woman construct can be seen in how the Bengali political candidates stand apart from western values while also distinguishing themselves from Bengal's older, conservative order. In this examination, the visual strategies the candidates used to invoke historical or traditional images of womanhood, even as they strove to establish themselves as modern, seemed less aligned with party-based political ideologies than might be assumed, led me to formulate the sub-question RQ 2F, which queries how the actions, religious and political symbols appearing on the bodies of female political candidates in the 2021 WB election compared to how their parties presented their candidates through these dimensions of the context's visual politics. By contextualising gender and the expectations tied to its representation, my analysis uncovered the competing notions of femininity in the visual politics of female politicians in West Bengal's socio-political landscape. These competing notions are particularly significant as they highlight how women politicians from different parties vie to embody and project the ideal of a 'perfect woman'. This ideal, represented by the construct of the

bhadramahila, extends to, for example, a possible characterisation of 'Bengal's daughter' becoming a site of symbolic competition.

Figure 26 Candidates' and parties' visual politics compared through gendered actions / accessories



Answering RQ 2F shows that female politicians strive to stand out as the most culturally aligned, virtuous, and electorally appealing figure, using their visibility as a platform to perform and assert their version of ideal womanhood far more than their parties showed them in such ways **(Fig 26)**. This becomes evident evident in occurrences of traditionally gendered or feminine cues that ranged from praying or worshipping, or engaging in housework, to incorporating political and religious symbols within clothing and bodies. The frequency of how often such acts appeared in the percentages of all visual cues in artefacts posted by candidates and parties were quite divergent. This trend was unlike the notable convergence between instances of candidates and parties showing actions in gender-neutral categories. Rituals such as cooking, albeit not appearing very frequently (on an average 1.45% of all cues) in the candidates' pages were notably absent in posts from the parties. Similar visual cues such as holding a baby, representing motherhood and nurture, appeared nearly thrice as frequently (6.65% of all cues) within the posts of candidates compared to those by their parties (2.44% of all cues). 'Pranaam' (obeisance or genuflection to elders or divinity) and worship featured in about 12.55% of all visual cues in the candidates' posts, two and half times as frequently as the posts by their parties, around 5% of all cues.

These trends help to interpret that the candidates' visual political performance competed internally among them, primarily in gendered areas. They provide evidence of how women politicians negotiate societal expectations and cultural ideals to construct their public personas. These constructs are not uniform; rather, they represent a spectrum of ideals deeply embedded in Bengal's cultural and political ethos. The 'good woman' ideal, for example, underscores traditional values of modesty, family orientation, and cultural authenticity. Women who embody this ideal often employ sartorial choices and visual cues—such as the sari, *ghomta* (head covering), or religious markers like the *tip* (forehead dot)—to symbolise their alignment with these values drawing legitimacy from the embodied idea of the *bhadramahila* as the ideal, or good, woman evoking notions of humility and grace. These visualities are not necessarily aligned with 'Bengal's daughter', which serves as a regionalised cultural construct, presenting the politician as a relatable figure who upholds Bengal's traditions and regional pride. Yet, in high competition through visual means, the concept of the 'perfect woman' functions as both an aspiration and a benchmark. The ideal, as my findings show, invokes registers that attempt to balance traditional expectations with public leadership, often through heightened self-regulation and a calculated visual performance.

Female politicians therefore competed to demonstrate traits deemed culturally valuable, such as moral integrity, devotion to family, and a capacity for dignified leadership. This competition, however, was not confined to traditional markers of femininity; it also extended to non-traditional expressions. For instance, candidates differentiated themselves by incorporating hybrid attire or engaging directly with voters, blending traditional cultural markers with signs of modernity and accessibility. The contest for the 'perfect woman' therefore emerges as both a symbolic and a practical strategy. On one hand, these visual politics evidence self-presentation that reinforces societal hierarchies of femininity, distinguishing between those who align with cultural ideals and those who deviate. On the other hand, it serves as a mechanism for social mobility, allowing female politicians to elevate their status by performing an aspirational version of womanhood that resonates with their electorate.

Interestingly, despite the Hindu religion being central to their political ideology, the BJP's posts showed the two women candidates in acts of worship in only 2.94% of all their visual cues, while the religiously agnostic AITC (rhetorically speaking) displayed candidates in the same act in nearly 20% of all visual cues. Yet, in their personal posts on an average, BJP candidates appeared more frequently in these acts than those of the AITC's. Compared to all the parties' posts, the older AITC candidate was displayed

engaging in religious rituals the most frequently. Expectedly, not a single post by CPI(M) as a party or its candidates showed them worshipping or visiting temples.

5.3 Reflections on a Culturally Grounded Body Politics

Answering RQ 2 and its constituent sub-questions has enabled a critical examination of traditional, non-traditional, gendered, and gender-neutral visual cues in the social media posts of political parties and their candidates during the 2021 West Bengal election campaign. These findings offer important insights into the body politics performed by female candidates and their affiliated parties, thereby drawing out how visual strategies on social media respond to Bengali cultural and social norms. Importantly, my content analysis shows how candidates' visual politics navigate cultural expectations, aligning with that of their parties in showing gender-neutrality or gender in non-traditional ways, and diverging from strategies of their parties when it came to displaying a traditionally gendered visual politics. These alignments and divergences underscore how cultural, political, and gendered significations intersect with and also remain rooted in West Bengal's historical and societal context. This context shapes and re-constitutes specific narratives, ideologies, and expectations of a 'good woman' that influences how female politicians construct their visibility on social media. For example, sartorial choices emerge as a crucial element in the visual strategies of these body politics, reinforcing Douglas's (1970) assertion that the physical body both inscribes and is inscribed by the social body. For female politicians, attire, hairstyles, floral accessories, and head coverings serve as powerful markers of identity. They signify individuality, celebrate cultural heritage, and affirm national identity. Simultaneously, these choices reflect an acute awareness of societal scrutiny, where visual appearance becomes a site of judgment. For women in politics, such markers can signify whether they are perceived as 'good' or 'bad', responsible or irresponsible, professional or domestic, traditionally feminine or subversively masculine.

Such visual politics, as noted in Chapter 2 in particular, is hardly limited exclusively to West Bengal's context. It is manifest even in ostensibly progressive cultures—evident in global examples such as Hillary Clinton's pantsuits, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's tailored coats, or Cecile Duflot's floral dress in the European Parliament (Clemente, 2016; Hoffman, 2018; Ellen, 2012; Sim, 2017). While such scrutiny is widespread, I argue that it remains deeply shaped by cultural and contextual factors. In some settings, a woman politician's attire may symbolise defiance of traditional norms, while in others, adherence to cultural expectations may be essential to establish credibility. These dynamics

underline the dual pressures women face: they must balance the need to assert authority and competence while responding to societal expectations about femininity and modesty. As the analysis of visual artefacts from the West Bengal election campaign demonstrates, these pressures are highly context-specific, rooted in historical, cultural, and ideological narratives that shape how female politicians negotiate their public image. In West Bengal's case, for example, forehead adornments such as the *tip* are traditionally associated with the third eye, signifying a personality's inner or deeper vision, often in case of divine female figures (but sometimes also true of male Hindu divinity). Additionally, forehead adornments are also a marking of (usually upper) caste for both men and women in other South Asian Hindu cultures. Yet, within South Asian Hindu traditions itself, the *tip*'s symbolism is variable. A bright red *tip* is deemed auspicious, even religious, often a marital symbol; in such cases, the *tip* could be both drawn with *sindur* (vermillion powder) or mounted. Conversely, if the *tip* appears in other colours (including red tones like maroon or pink) and is mounted on the forehead to complement clothing, it is considered fashionably feminine, conveying a sense of modern womanhood rather than religiosity. This distinction appears in the kind of *tip* BJP candidates sport, exclusively seen in all visuals with a large red one signifying religious attributes, as opposed to tips sported by CPI(M) candidates, smaller and dot-like in form, in black or other colours, thus not signifying traditional Hindu femininity.

Notably, distinctions such as those of the *tip* (forehead dot) evidences how visual codes express 'good' femininity in variable and dissimilar ways. As the varying meanings of the *tip* affirm, these visual performances cannot be seen independently of the ideological forces they draw from or are set within. The quantitative trends presented in this chapter reveal distinct approaches to visual messaging. For BJP candidates, the *tip*, particularly in its large, bright red form, symbolises religiosity, traditional Hindu femininity, and cultural rootedness, aligning with the party's broader ideological narrative. The CPI(M) candidates' smaller, dot-like *tips* in black or muted colours, eschew religious connotations and instead position the adornment as a modern, understated marker of femininity. The INC candidates' limited use of the *tip* reflects an inconsistent strategy, perhaps indicating an ambivalence toward emphasising overt gendered identity markers.

Finally, the AITC candidates' near absence of the *tip* suggests a deliberate choice to avoid traditional markers of Hindu femininity, possibly aligning with Mamata Banerjee's efforts to project a secular, inclusive political image. This is precisely why, as the findings of my research presented in this chapter collectively also reveal, more complex relationships of the campaign's politics of visibility merit further examination. Such an

examination is necessary to uncover how and the extent to which the female candidates intentionally align their public appearance in relation to their parties' ideological positions and societal expectations, a finding I present in the forthcoming chapter.

5.4 Conclusion

On the whole, answering the first two sets of research questions (RQ 1 and RQ 2) has revealed that female political candidates in West Bengal employ a range of embodied strategies in their visual politics. In the answers to RQ 1 in particular, contradictory trends have emerged in the underrepresentation of women candidates by all parties and the high instance of self-presentation that women candidates enacted in their own posts. Equally significant among the five types of self-presentation by the candidates are the visual strategies through which they set themselves apart from their female constituents through subtle markers of their agency—evident in the formal characteristics of visual artefacts where they were seen among people.

The answers to these particular set of research questions and the meanings behind these findings, in combination, suggest that the female body is both a material reality and a canvas where social and cultural expression is enacted in visual terms. This tension between the physical body and its social construction thus becomes central in considering the visibilities of female politicians on social media, through how they fashion themselves in relation to the ways their parties fashion them. Even within a single linguistic-cultural context, this investigation reveals how these women, as public figures, navigate the societal ways in which people evaluate their modes of carrying, covering, and on the whole portraying, their bodies. These processes bear testimony to a continuous (re-)negotiation between the physical and social body of the public figure of a female politician as a potential parliamentarian. They confirm how the body is under constant scrutiny from societal perception.

In this chapter, by presenting my content analysis of visual artefacts circulated on social media during the 2021 West Bengal election campaign, I have attempted to illuminate how political visibility is a performative act. Accordingly, my analyses of embedded visual cues across posts by the candidates and their affiliate parties has helped to uncover and compare how various facets of the enactment of political visibility as a good woman occurred in this campaign. Despite how social media potentially fosters the inclusion of women in political action and discourse, the findings of this chapter reveal the ways in which this inclusion is also circumscribed. Female politicians in West Bengal largely

continue to portray traditional norms of femininity and ideal womanhood; in their sartorial choices, actions, body politics, candidates align with the idealised, even sacralised, image of the 'good woman', originating in India's colonial-era nationalist politics.

Against this backdrop, political parties and candidates, on the whole, displayed a notable convergence in their use of gender-neutral visual cues associated with political actions. These included delivering speeches, attending processions, meeting and greeting constituents, and holding press conferences. This finding suggests that political parties recognise a strategic value in projecting professional competence and suitability, a depiction that benefits both the candidates and the parties irrespective of gender. However, the alignment of such visual politics also places women candidates under a unique form of scrutiny. Their portrayal in political actions often positions them as supportive figures, assessed against an implicit masculine standard. This observation aligns with Campbell's (1998) assertion that female politicians face the dual challenge of having to 'please like a woman and impress like a man'.

In contrast to Western contexts however, where female politicians are often compared to male counterparts, the West Bengal context is indicative of a different dynamic: a competition among female candidates themselves. Here, women seem to vie with one another to embody the 'good woman', to determine who best aligns with cultural and societal ideals of femininity and respectability, This contestation among female candidates has particular implications on approaches to study gendered visual politics, which I will explain further while discussing these findings in chapter 7.

By answering this first two sets of research questions my study set out within this chapter, I have attempted to bring to the fore the rich and varied, and often unexpected ways in which cultural and societal ideas of the female body inhabit the realm of visual political communication. Rather than treating the visual artefacts on these platforms as mute entities to be seen only in quantitative terms or even independently of the individuals' offline personas, the analyses presented here have revealed how they are eminently coded with cultural meaning. In addition, rather than exclusively concentrate on the gender binary, my study has illuminated how these meanings can be quite subtly communicated and vary even between candidates of the same sex. I have also demonstrated how their distinctions and overlaps can be made quite legible by reading an individual's political performance in the digital realm. Finally, I have also attempted to highlight the aspects of this political performance where gender and the body predominates, how it is foregrounded, and those aspects where the body and its

femininity are subtly underplayed to portray an image that upholds the promise of professional competence.

These findings shed light on the social and cultural meanings embedded in visual artefacts and the performance of political visibility in digital social media. It has framed social media as a site of visible performance through the gender of a political actor. However, these findings rely on an analysis of the *outcomes* of an individual's (as a candidate) or collective's (as a party) choices. They have revealed how, in effect, such choices or decisions were expressed in material way. Yet, the more immaterial and intangible *intentions or design* behind such political performances remain to be unravelled further—which constitutes another core area of my overall inquiry. Accordingly, making sense of such (immaterial) aspects necessitates pursuing answers to this study's third major research question (RQ3): uncovering what factors individual candidates take into consideration to enact their political visibility in digital, social spaces. What, for instance, might we learn from and about the female political candidates themselves through what they express about their and strategies to construct the kind of artefacts this study has examined? In what ways do the candidates' lived experiences offline shape decisions about the intended effects of a non-verbal, visual politics online? These are the issues I turn to in the forthcoming chapter.

6 Visual Politics and Negotiated Visibilities: The Seen and The Unseen

6.1 Introduction

'My work is not unconnected to my image,' concluded a female politician at the end of her interview with me. She had highlighted how, in constructing her persona, she was responding to 'certain expectations from society.' This individual reflected on how such expectations translated into her always wearing 'a sari and sporting a big vermillion *tip* [forehead dot],' adding that 'these things played a big role in my [her] overall career progression.' Two other participants in my study, across party lines, displayed an awareness of photographic composition and the sartorial dimensions of the body. Moreover, such forms of awareness revealed personal and societal concerns—as in the example above—as well as those of their respective parties, as illustrated in the examples below:

> Of the many photos taken, I select [for social media] those with meaning, the essence of an event must be clear […] to show a political meeting, I post a picture of the crowd with me and others from my party on the dais […] this makes people see how many people the event has drawn […] if I am shaking hands with someone and no one else occupies the frame—say, a close up—I avoid posting such a picture…

> In the Youth Congress, I hardly wore a sari, even to political programmes. I wore tee-shirts and trousers, even skirts—it was accepted and considered normal. I continued to dress that way when I joined the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), but learned that people were not accepting that look. Gradually I changed myself. As soon as I started being seen in a sari at every event, I found approval among people; now, they were seeing me differently...

These statements from female politicians in West Bengal highlight the ways in which they construct a gendered identity online. In effect, the interviewees appear to disclose two aspects of how they fashion their bodies—physical and social—reflecting the logic of what the visual artefacts analysed in the previous chapter convey (Douglas, 1970). Accordingly, this chapter shifts its analytical focus from examining visual artefacts to exploring how female politicians themselves describe the process of creating such artefacts. To investigate this, I follow my third research question (RQ 3), which asks: What considerations do female politicians in WB report about their strategic intent and motivations in performing their visual politics on social media? When I analysed visual

artefacts representing female candidates' political performance (in the previous investigation), I could consider and analyse visual cues both individually and in an aggregated manner. However, analysing testimonies of the female politicians demands close attention to what individuals report about their motivations behind producing these visual artefacts.

This focus on the female politicians' processes of enacting visual politics moves beyond the heightened visibility and fierce competition of election campaigns, instead shedding light on their more quotidian experiences of self-fashioning, both within and beyond digital spaces. By centring their voices, the analysis reveals the nuances of how female politicians navigate the interplay between personal agency and external expectations in crafting their public personas. Moreover, exploring their testimonies offers insights into how they conceptualise, rationalise, and enact the processes involved in constructing and managing the personas they aspire to present to their target audiences. As explained in my research methodology, I coded, thematised, and categorised the statements made by interviewees from multiple parties during semi-structured interviews. In this chapter, I describe four overarching themes that emerged from those interviews. Where relevant, and in line with my research questions, I explore subthemes within each theme when presenting these findings.

The first theme concerns what my study participants reported about adapting their online performance to platform affordances on various social media. The second theme addresses what I found about pressures and demands that social media–based visual political communication exerts on these politicians. Here, I focus in particular on the level of critical awareness their testimonies reveal about the compulsions placed on them to perform their visual politics in particular ways. Third, I turn to substantive findings about female politicians reporting how practices of their visual politics responded to societal expectations. Fourth, and equally meaningful, I will present the findings emerging from what they reported about their visual politics balancing their self-interests as politicians with political interests of their respective parties.

6.2 Visual Politics Adapted to Platform Affordances

To answer RQ 3, specifically the sub-question RQ 3A, what my study's participants reported about understanding distinctions between different digital social media platforms becomes crucial to gaining insights into how they performed their gendered identities. While this aspect came up in the interviews relatively rarely, the testimonies cannot be ignored altogether. They reveal how female politicians strategically adapt their

visual performances to the unique affordances of each platform. Many interviewees affirmed they were confronted with this platform problem whilst negotiating their visibilities online. They explicitly mentioned how this tension became exacerbated by the very nature of social media platforms. For instance, several interviewees felt that Facebook was akin to a public square. One of them observed that it could act as a double-edged sword for women in politics, equally to valorise or demonise them.

The performance of femininity, rather than being unidirectional, encounters hostility at its very site of performance—as one of my study's participants highlighted. Talking of hostility, another Left politician eloquently articulated: 'Previously, harassment used to happen face-to-face. But now, with social media, it lingers in your mind all day, staying with you relentlessly. They [the audience] do it to provoke you, to unsettle you, to make you uncomfortable. You don't even need to be physically touched to feel harassed, do you?' She drew attention to how on social media, women such as herself who are public figures, become increasingly transformed into gendered data. Their bodies are subjected to digital scrutiny, and the information they share is used to constrain their identity, performance, and their view of their own bodies. Several participants confided in their ongoing legal battles against nameless, faceless perpetrators of such violence. One of them added, 'Strangely, when I step outside or online, in our society—and I'm not just talking about West Bengal but everywhere—so often I feel I am seen as a commodity rather than a person'. In extreme cases, the simmering hostility could turn altogether malignant, as evident from a former CPI(M) student leader's account about her Facebook post:

> As a researcher, I went to Paris for a conference. It was an incredible experience, and I posted a photo from that trip in 2018, where I was wearing a sari at a metro station in the city. I wished to invoke an image of Suchitra Sen [an extremely popular Bengali actress adored across classes and groups] and felt really happy. The memory is dear to me, so I reshared the photo [using Facebook's memory function] in 2021. But my audience had changed after my electoral debut. The comments I received on Facebook were nothing short of disturbing. People accused me of going to Paris to earn as a prostitute, adding that I was waiting there [at the streetside near a metro station] for customers. Some even asked whose money I used to fund my trip. Then, they began stalking my friends to unearth more private photos of me.

Such an incident reveals in the sharpest manner how acts of objectifying the female body can be profoundly violent (which I will return to and expand upon later in this chapter).

The social media platform encourages it in ways that are hardly in control of the politicians themselves. Rather, my interviewees reported being compelled to face and negotiate this kind of hostility, where an online space encourages unexpected degrees of a culture of surveillance. As evident from this testimony, the platform, in combination with the societal context, determines an ideal of how the woman politician should be, look, behave, and even what spaces—certainly not streetside Paris—she is allowed to inhabit. Another celebrity-turned-politician emphasised this view, but in the same breath segued into the necessity of social media for public figures:

> You cannot be a public personality without being active on social media. Because of my celebrity status, my constituents and voters want to feel close to me. Of course, I can't be physically present everywhere, but through social media, they can see my daily life, my activities, and my whereabouts in real-time. This makes them feel like they know me well, doesn't it?

The online presence of women political actors, in some instances, can be embedded in strong mechanisms of control by their affiliate parties and the ideologies these parties strive to project as visual narratives. Among the manifold imperatives that individuals reported responding to in their visual politics—which I discuss in this chapter's forthcoming sections—the pride some of my interviewees took in their party's ideological stance emerged as paramount. One young BJP politician, for instance, felt that her autonomy needed to operate within limits when producing content online. She reported that 'I am bound by certain norms that I can't flout under any circumstances. In our party this relates to image management [her public persona] of how I appear online, and where my photograph goes'. She explained how her party's male colleagues were at a greater liberty to post their photographs, suggesting a gendered hierarchy within the party. Women in the BJP, however, were instructed beforehand about using two proprietary applications commanded from New Delhi (where the party headquarters are). She explained, 'Apart from the *Saral* app—the party's internal digital platform for party members to upload political activities and images—we upload our political images on the *NaMo* App, the official app of Prime Minister Modi where BJP workers submit content for approval before public distribution, whether it's a meeting or movement, even pictures of our daily activities.' These apps represent the party's internal control mechanisms, which I understood from the interviewee. She pointed out that 'the Prime Minister's Office controls this activity, and by retrieving the uploaded images, the party's social media unit decides what goes where [on which social media platform where the public could see the visuals]'.

To the contrary, at the other end of the spectrum, accepting very much the undeniable necessity of social media in political communication, an interviewee from the Left I spoke to criticised it, remarking: 'With the rise of digital media alongside traditional media, political communication has turned into a beauty pageant—where a bit of makeup and self-promotion is enough to project a "perfect" image'. This, for the interviewee, represented a troubling shift. For leftist politics, it was far from ideal as this interviewee felt that: 'politicians and parties are prioritising image over substance now, and even grassroots workers, whether they fully grasp it or not, are learning to amplify visibility and inflate political ideals beyond their true scope.' She continued: 'It's as if the individual has become the medium itself. This is not how politics should function, especially in parties like ours'.

Meanwhile, some participants of my study who spoke about X (formerly Twitter) felt that the platform operated as the place for news and information sharing, and was therefore dominated by institutional voices. 'On X, official party communication is likely to be shared more frequently', noted a BJP politician. This suggests that X was perceived as functional in a top-down manner, privileging institutions over individual voices. Her colleague agreed, adding that X is primarily for 'educated elites', implying that it presented a limited opportunity for politicians targeting a broader electorate. The affordances of X in India's heavily party-centric political communication, my interviewees testified, hardly provided them with as much reach as Facebook does. A young CPI(M) politician noted, for example:

> I've used my profile on X primarily to showcase my involvement in national activities. While the content includes some work from West Bengal, it's mostly focused on a broader audience. On the other hand, my Facebook page is specifically targeted to my state's audience, with content centred around local politics and door to door campaigns.

In contrast to X, all female politicians felt that Facebook provided opportunities for personal connections and visual storytelling, and represented a more level playing field. A BJP politician from a rural constituency captured this distinction, stating: 'If you want sophistication, go on X, but if you want votes, share your photos on Facebook. That's where the masses are'. She highlighted how no one in her constituency used X, and the platform was therefore useless for her. She would rather post 200 photos from a rally on Facebook and was assured that more people would look at it.

Through such testimonies, it becomes evident that where visual politics and communication to forge narratives by politicians is concerned, the platforms become as important as the actual visual content produced. The strategic use of multiple platforms, and recognising their non-neutrality also becomes apparent when seen through societal and cultural lenses, particularly what my interview participants expressed about their perceptions of the audience on each social media platform. On the whole, their testimonies make evident that individual expression has very little space in how visual politics is mediated via social media platforms. Rather, the testimonies reveal that the context in which these women enact their visual politics can hardly transcend societal specificities when they construct and project public personas. That might well have a different site and destination. Most politicians—not all my study's participants used it—highlighted that Instagram was a more intimate platform and offered opportunities for personal expression, given that its privacy controls were governed by the individual, with little electoral implications. An interviewee from the CPI[M] echoed this sentiment, stating:

> Oh, yes! Instagram is where I can actually speak from my heart. I have a private account. Whenever I have to think twice before posting something on Facebook, I know it deserves a spot on my Instagram.

In her essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' Donna Haraway (2016) famously noted that the intersection of communication technologies with biological beings, humans included, involves the 'translation of the world into a problem of coding' (p. 34). Within the larger question of what my interviewees reported about their strategic intent and motivations in performing their visual politics on social media lies the more particular question about how they adapt their visual politics to various platforms. This adaptation reflects what Haraway proposes about the power to control societal codes—which extends to content in the digital age—yet resists the collapse of gender binaries. Rather, such visual politics is dictated by the cultural narratives female politicians draw upon and also construct in their visual politics online. Power, in this sense, is discursively constructed and enacted through producing and understanding the very forms of communication—in the case of my study, its nonverbal forms.

6.3 Demands of Enacting Political Visibility: Agency and Constraint

To answer RQ 3, a distinct theme emerged from my interviews with female politicians, reporting the extent to which they could exercise individual agency and where they needed to conform or were constrained by particular demands of performing visually

online. Drawing out such a theme helps to answer the sub-question nestled within RQ 3 (3B): What levels of critical awareness do the interviewees' testimonies reveal about compulsions to perform particular kinds of visual politics online? Indeed, my participants' responses reflect a critical awareness of their need to construct a public persona and the individual's negotiation of agency and constraint involved in this process. Recognising such forms of negotiated mediation, then, becomes another significant point of entry into what female politicians reported about their everyday experiences of producing their visual performance online.

Understanding these intentions expressed by the female politicians themselves helps to shed light on the causal structures of their lived realities and, in turn, the structures that underlie their visual political performances more fully. My study's participants, as a whole, comprised a mixed group of politicians: some held senior positions within their respective parties, while others occupied lower ranks. Across the board, most displayed an awareness of the need to conform to particular practices in their visual politics; they either imbibed these through experience or were informed of them by peers.

6.3.1 Exerting Agency: Being Seen with Constituents

Many interviewees stressed the importance of visuals depicting on-ground meetings with constituents marked by cordiality and intimacy, rather than grandiose, formal displays. A BJP interviewee insisted that: 'A selfie is not just a selfie. It's about the people we meet, the crowds that gather around us and the situations we find ourselves in'. She pointed out how such photos constitute—in effect, this is what I mean by *construct*—their main attraction (in Bengali: '*pradhan aakarshan*') to the people, and added: 'whether we're talking to women, shaking hands, or walking with leaders, in these appeals, our own faces are not so important'. One actor-turned-politician from WB's ruling party, the AITC, stated, 'The road to my people's hearts is by sharing our own photos'. She added: 'People earlier relied on newspapers to learn about politicians. Now, with smartphones, they can instantly see what a politician is like, which we can show on our own terms'.

A CPI(M) interviewee noted that her interaction with constituents entailed: 'pictures that show me [her] interacting with people, visiting their homes, talking to women, or working with them'. She aimed to highlight her popularity, being pictured with 'women coming up and hugging me, or children holding my hand'. A BJP interviewee, who met me at a door-to-door campaign trail mirrored these thoughts: 'We emphasise images of me visiting homes and meeting with women. The idea is to show that we are actively engaged and connected'. My interviewees therefore felt that a key part of content

making through visuals was showing what they do with and among the people. Another BJP politician who attended the same political rally (as interviewee who spoke about selfies) highlighted to me: 'Look, we go to someone's house, we take pictures, we hold babies, we take pictures with women'. All seven female politicians from the left-wing party asserted that for the visual narratives they construct, issues matter more than their gender identity. By foregrounding their interactions with communities, they construct a form of political legitimacy that hinges on proximity, empathy, and everyday engagement rather than distant authority. This emphasis on visual storytelling ultimately shapes public perception, influencing how voters relate to and evaluate women in political leadership.

6.3.2 The Compulsion: Establishing Continuous Visual Presence

The female politicians spoke about the kind of visual compulsions they were responding to. Alluding to the responsibility thrust on them, a BJP interviewee reported: 'We are forced to show such images. We are asked to use different social media platforms to keep up a continuous stream of visuals of ourselves among the people.' This pressure to constantly establish a visual presence in particular ways through sheer volume—always being present online as a party representative—was not limited to the BJP's female politicians alone. An interviewee from even their diametric political opponents, the left-wing CPI(M), recognised how:

> …visuals create an impression in our minds very quickly. Wall writings or posters, as was done earlier, all represent classic [sic] ways of campaigning. Be it an advert or a political campaign, the real goal is to sell, isn't it? Now, in this neoliberal climate, with the advent of social media, we are basically selling ourselves 24/7. Whether it's for politics, movies, or even making vlogs…

One of my youngest interviewees, a master's student, who admitted to being a digitally conversant political campaigner. She switched from Bengali to English in our conversation to highlight how her visual communication strategy needed her to put her 'labour on display'. Yet, even this stance echoed the idea of being seen in certain ways among the people. Responsible for campaigning as an official position-holder in the student wing of her party, alongside preparation for the general national level elections in India when we spoke, she added: 'Visuals are how information is presented to us. Like big brands constantly flashing images to influence shopping habits, parties also work consciously to influence the electorate's political judgments visually'.

When I probed these interviewees about whether they share photos of themselves or not, they echoed what a few from their political opponents, the BJP, reported about being

visible all the time. They were quick to add that this kind of political visibility was not only a demand of their politics but of the medium they were communicating through, echoing what the interviews have revealed about being present through social media platforms. Such a process led to fatigue for many actively campaigning candidates, which I will explain further in this chapter whilst discussing the aspect of hypervisible invisibility (later in sub-section 6.4.1).

One CPI(M) interviewee, a Marxist researcher emphasised that being in the constant view of the electorate was a 'call of the time'. This interviewee confessed: 'It's true that political parties have to share photos mindlessly. Even if someone doesn't want to, they'll have to. So do I'. Another member of her party—who spoke about her labour being on display—maintained that local problems always took precedence in her party's politics, and that these concerns, voicing the problems of the poor needed to be showed explicitly, and continuously. In the photos she shares, she reported that she made it a point to include, '…those who are suffering. I don't look for a perfect angle. I am a politician. My job is to highlight people's issues, and I do it emphatically'.

6.3.3 Critical Awareness of Compulsions

Despite the seemingly conformist outlook on the pressures imposed by the visual medium, not all interviewees reported accepting these demands uncritically. Many expressed a critically reflexive stance toward the visual practices they were compelled to adopt due to their profession as politicians. Even as they faced pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, some female politicians actively questioned these expectations. For instance, a BJP leader asserted: 'Men won't tell us how to maintain our decency, morality, and sexual purity; we have to decide that for ourselves.'

This statement highlights the complex interplay between agency and constraint experienced by women in politics, more so related to the demands of politics through visual means. In general, particularly in West Bengal's urban areas, women increasingly felt comfortable asserting their autonomy. However, female politicians still navigated a societal landscape shaped by patriarchal norms, where expectations around visibility and self-presentation remained deeply entrenched. An AITC leader pointed out how the party leadership had ordered them to 'dress up nicely when appearing on TV or in front of people. Our party supremo is happy if we go to the public looking well-groomed and with some makeup'. At the same time, to balance these competing pressures, some female politicians employed techniques to manage their bodily performance, including its sartorial aspects. This became evident in how, almost all the celebrity-turned-politicians I

interviewed, or those referred to by others I interviewed, consciously downplayed their physical attractiveness or 'glamour' to connect with a wider audience.

What the interviews revealed about both individual strategies or external compulsions (both from their parties or societal expectations) is that women politicians were held in a double bind. On the one hand, they reported being tied to underlying patriarchal structures that sustain the idea of women as objects of desire rather than political agents in an 'unmarked' or universal sense (Butler 1990). On the other, they were also under instruction from their party leadership, whether male or female (as in the case of the AITC), to enact their visual politics in preordained ways through their public appearances. In general, my interviewees felt that the considerable effort and time it took them to navigate such a double bind affected their success, and the success of women in general in electoral politics. They articulated this aspect with varying degrees of refinement or explicitness (many participants from the BJP were guarded but their subtexts were clear).

Most interviewees reported that how gender-related issues projected onto women's bodies had turned their appearance into a battleground for societal expectations. Each woman politician displayed critical awareness that they inhabited a patriarchal society—evident in what they reported about male politician's visibilities, especially their attire, being placed under far less scrutiny. For instance, in West Bengal, shirts-trousers, kurta-pyjama, or *dhuti* (an unstitched cloth for the lower body) are commonly accepted as standard male attire. Conversely, the kind of attire that determines the appearance of women is varied. It is frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny, often through the lens of male gaze. This differential treatment, nearly every interviewee felt, is particularly evident in the political arena. Regardless of their critical awareness about such patriarchal norms, the pursuit of a mythical ideal of womanhood persisted in their reported actions and perceptions to varying degrees. This ideal was something that certain female politicians sought to embody, representing what they perceived as the best values of their society. In addition, what emerged from my interviewees' testimonies is also how they often looked down upon those (women) who did not conform to such an ideal.

6.3.4 Conforming to Expectations

However, as a collective representing diverse expectations shaped by their party ideologies and societal expectations, the challenges of embodying such an ideal appeared nearly insurmountable. The wide range of societal and political expectations

they had to navigate made it difficult to reconcile these competing demands. One interviewee reflected on how these norms denied them something as basic as bodily comfort:

> We campaign on foot in awful weather sometimes. Even though I really want to wear a thin saree in the heat, I'm worried about revealing too much or being perceived as someone who reveals too much. We have to cover ourselves as much as possible […] we have to give up these things. If we don't, what will happen? The people who work with us, our colleagues who look up to us for inspiration, might get the wrong idea. We have to remember that young girls look up to us. We need to set a good example for them.

One of them described the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles to gain acceptance and respect. As she explained:

> Boys grow up in a certain way. They want to see a woman as their mother. Male politicians don't face this pressure. But for us women, to gain respect from men, we have to present ourselves and conduct ourselves in a particular way.

Another interviewee recounted an incident where she was criticised by a male colleague of her party for not adhering to traditional attire, and having attracted undesirable attention. The colleague had commented, in her words: 'He said, "Didi [literally, elder sister, also used to address a woman above one's own status], people were staring at you as you didn't have that 'ma/ma' [motherly] vibe"', thereby underscoring the expectation that women should conform to maternal stereotypes in the sphere of politics in West Bengal.

Through these testimonies, what becomes apparent is the distinct ways in which female politicians conceptualised the construction of visual narratives and the meanings these narratives hold, they thought, for their audiences. A key difference lies in how my participants reported adopting the demands of visibility—either critically or uncritically. For instance, some reflected on the implications of being on display, such as the role of visuals in selling ideas or influencing political judgements—for example, by depicting deprivation. Their testimonies reveal varying levels of criticality in adopting the demands of visual performance as female politicians.

Among these demands, the most pervasive is the delicate balancing act female politicians are compelled to enact between their own self-interests as women and

professional politicians, and societal expectations and their party's interests. To fully understand these dynamics and even delicate balancing acts, I will turn to two very substantive themes which arose from my interviews.

6.4 Balancing Acts: The Self and Society

An important and recurrent theme that emerged in the testimonies from my interviwees pertained to how, in practicing their visual politics, they negotiated the identities they produced online in relation to particular social values and expectations. This finding directly responds to RQ 3C, which asks how female politicians' visual political performances balance their self-interests with societal expectations. In reading the interviews and thematising the testimonies, I have taken into account how gender is performatively produced, expressed and made visible in embodied ways (Butler, 1990). In extracting what can be read as performative in the interviews, I have also remained attentive to the interconnectedness of politics and performance (Rai, 2014), and gender not being a given but an act of becoming (de Beauvoir, 1952). As performative acts, both (gender and politics) remain governed by rules, conventions, and expectations circumscribing their production. I have therefore paid close attention to how the producers of these performances recognise and perceive their intended audiences in specific ways, and societal expectations, more generally. In presenting these findings below, that answer RQ 3C, I continuously highlight the various contradictions and challenges female politicians I interviewed encountered, and negotiated whilst enacting their visual politics through the following sub-sections about their hyper-visibility and invisibility (6.4.1), how they balance being relatable *and* appearing salient (6.4.2), conform to the idea of 'goodness' (6.4.3), and how their embodied visual politics is objectified and invites forms of 'semiotic violence (6.4.4).

6.4.1 Hyper-visibility and Invisibility

The dilemma of balancing the self-interest of maintaining privacy with the societal expectation of constantly being seen in public as a political candidate is powerfully encapsulated in a popular actor-turned-politician's lament:

> I need to be seen, but don't want to be seen!

In a rare instance, a BJP leader candidly admitted in a similar vein:

> Now, after so long, I don't even feel like doing all this anymore. I don't enjoy it. For example, we have a rule that we shouldn't wear very bright lipstick. Over time, this has created an image that, yes, perhaps this is how a woman politician should be. If we dress up too brightly or wear too much makeup, laugh and joke all the time, or speak too loudly, it creates a different kind of image altogether. Such actions are frowned upon.

This interviewee was not specific about the origin of the 'rule' about not wearing bright lipstick or who would 'frown upon' the effervescence of her actions—she became reticent when I probed further. Yet, the latent dimensions revealed by the testimony about her performance demanded by social pressures, from which her party as a collective may or may not derive its own norms, relate to objectification of the female body and its actions. They raise the question of whether such sentiments unsettle the 'good woman' ideal that emerged from the analysis of artefacts in the previous chapter. Furthermore, they prompt a consideration of whether these forms of fatigue are confined to members of one political party or extend across party lines. An outline of an answer begins to emerge when examining the testimony of a member of the leftist CPI(M), a party often regarded as more progressive in its stance on dress codes and behavioural expectations for its female candidates. This interviewee expressed clear exasperation about the comments her social media photographs attracted. It was clear from her words that these comments were my no means emerging from party quarters exclusively, when she exclaimed:

> On the one hand, we hear, 'She's involved in leftist politics, so why is she wearing shorts or sleeveless clothes?' On the other, we're also told, 'Since she's in politics, it must mean she is of poor character, could do nothing better with her life, so how can she dress modestly?', as if this kind of an appearance is expected from us!!

These pronouncements bring to the fore a problem of simultaneously being invisible and hyper-visible as female members of the society they inhabit. These testimonies powerfully convey the notion of societal surveillance in a rather particular way, the consequences of being made invisible through 'hypervisibility'. The dual effect of being invisible and hyper-visible simultaneously, was originally coined by Frantz Fanon (1967). From Fanon's perspective, the anxiety of being the object of a racialised white gaze on a black body, a body without a self, defines the notion of hyper-visible 'invisibility'. Fanon's concept was later developed by Sarah Ahmed (2004) and others, like Ryland (2013), who posit that hypervisibility can be understood as a state of heightened visibility that, for

particular groups, carries negative connotations that are malleable to societal conditions. When coupled with negative stereotypes, hypervisibility can lead to perceptions of deviance and increased surveillance. This heightened scrutiny can reinforce stereotypes by amplifying mistakes and discounting achievements. Moreover, by flattening individual identities, hyper-visible people are made invisible by being reduced to a group membership. In empirical terms, one interviewee from the CPI(M) used this exact term to describe the dilemma of bodily performance as a female individual, arguing:

> By merely displaying a woman as a spectacle, their parties legitimise the merging of glamour and politics. This normalises a hyper-visible objectification of women.

Going on to explain to me how the individual self is rendered invisible through this mode of performance, the interviewee was rather articulate in stating how such a person became reduced to a member of her (gendered) group of glamour, politics, or both.

In this sense, the constant exposure—ubiquitous social media seemingly enables this exposure as a site of visual performance—raises questions about whether it makes the woman political actors more visible. One interviewee offered a contrary perspective: 'I don't think it's unidirectional. Whatever you're putting out determines what audience will consume what you show you're doing; it's not always in your control'. This reflection suggests that the relationship between visual content about performance and its audience is complex and unpredictable, and highlights the limited control individuals have over their online persona. Another interviewee emphasised the heightened scrutiny faced by women in a hyper-visible social media landscape that was also gendered, stating: 'as women, we are even more careful when we curate our images'. When asked if they needed to work by what the political climate of the day demands, a fairly senior AITC politician emphatically agreed, with a jab at her political opponents: 'A saffronised nationalist image sells today because Modi is in power. If he loses to Mamata, you'll see that an image that conveys a rejection of patriarchy will sell'. Adding empirical substance to what Fanon termed hyper-visible invisibility, the strategic use of visuals as a form of brand management also emerged. As a BJP interviewee observed, '…our image [implying her persona] shapes perception, that is its politics. We employ professionals who know what the audience will like the most'.

In this manner, whether conveying the idea of what an interviewee termed 'saffron politics'—a news media shorthand for religious, right-wing Hindu-supremacy based

ideology—or otherwise, visual narratives are mediated to represent ideas and ideologies that are inextricably tied to the socio-cultural context. These ideals are what make women's bodies hyper-visible and, in effect, render them invisible as individuals. Whenever they indicated being placed under scrutiny by the 'people', the 'audience' and their perceptions, the women I interviewed were conveying how the body, and the codes that determine its appearance, its actions or perceptions become mental shortcuts as symbols and metaphors. These codes assumed concrete meaning through their sartorial choices, manner of draping, colours worn and other accessories that signify particular societal values first, before being indexed to a party's more specific rhetoric of ideology. The visual political performances female politicians enacted, in this sense, transcended mere documentation of their political lives. They operated as strategic tools in response to and reinforcement of expectations arising from the societal gaze.

6.4.2 Visual Salience, and *Appearing Relatable*

From my interviews, a second sub-theme emerges within what participantss reported about balancing their self-identity to respond to societal expectations, particularly in how they intended their personas to appear. As expressed by the study's participants, this aspect pertains to the conundrum of standing apart from the masses as leaders or merging with them, which the study of visual artefacts—particularly their formal compositions—have also revealed. In visual terms, such forms of negotiation manifested in appearing salient or, conversely, relatable. This finding adds greater depth to my earlier discussion about how female candidates on campaign wished to be photographed among the people. This dimension of the visual politics of female politicians also highlights the centrality of gender within the specific societal context of Bengal.

Most participants felt that, as women, their personas needed to align more closely with the image of someone who serves rather than someone who stands apart and leads. They mentioned how if they visually *denoted* certain attributes of womanhood—whether through bodily presentation, sartorial choices, or both—they invoked *connotations* of being agreeable nurturers, upholding values cherished by the people. However, what is also evident here is visual salience conveying individual agency does not preclude the visual performance of blending in. In many cases, what emerges from the reports of my study's participants suggests a combination of the two. A popular actress-turned-politician, for example, candidly discussed the balance involved:

> The idea of how exactly to create my persona was a very fine line. I had to de-glamorise myself for them to rely on and depend on me. But I also couldn't *entirely* de-glamorise myself, because that's what was getting me votes. I wanted to appear reachable to them but also not break the prism of my celebrityhood (emphasis in original transcript; voice inflection by interviewee).

Similarly, a CPI(M) politician reflected on how female actors entering politics often undergo a transformation in their appearance and grooming to emphasise their gender identity as a primary asset. She explained: 'When an actress suddenly enters politics, her appearance is meticulously constructed—she starts wearing saris, high-neck blouses, and sporting a large *bind (tip)* on her forehead. Her social media profiles then exclusively feature these images.' She further highlighted the rationale behind this: 'Such an image gains her acceptance, especially if she represents a party that lacks a distinct ideological stance.'

On the subject of negotiating visual salience with appearing to blend in, a theatre activist turned politician observed how politicians often 'mould into the image of their party. For example, you will see Left politicians mould themselves to project the idea that only the CPI(M) works for the downtrodden.' Collectively, these observations reveal a deeper symbolism or connotation tied to gendered bodies in politics at a societal level in West Bengal's context. Rather than standing out, these politicians use appearance to align with societal perceptions—whether through colours that convey religious philosophy, attire that signifies modesty, accessories that traditionally denote femininity, or a careful balance between glamour and societal acceptability.

This balancing act between visual salience and relatability consistently leaned towards the latter in what my interviewees reported. Where salience of the interviewees in relation to the people was constructed by their visual performance, there were several degrees and conditions of such salience. For example, a CPI(M) interviewee (the social science researcher mentioned before) noted how, 'in the constituency that I'm contesting from, I can just be myself. I don't really have to think of a perceived image or its "semiotics" too much'. Most left-wing party members agreed that merging with their constituents and appearing as one of them was more important than standing out. One of them added, 'People these days are very observant. If you stand out too much, they won't see you as being one of them. Appearing fashionable doesn't gain me acceptance'.

An INC politician echoed a similar view. She preferred that her photos not show her as prominently standing apart, and rather focus on the content of what her and her party's efforts are, the issues they highlight, and the causes they represent. These testimonies also help to recall what interviewees reported about a visual politics of appearing in unity with their constituents, sometimes using saturated colours, and high contrast visuals of them meeting people on the ground. Through such acts, my interviewees' testimonies once again affirmed that their self-interests lay in a positive reinforcement of societal expectations. The clear preference for appearing relatable while not entirely erasing their salient appearance also helps to add a deeper layer to the finding about the female politicians' visual politics negotiating their own agency and operating within societal constraints.

A notable departure from the idea of blending in to appear relatable emerged in the case of being exceptional, recalling historical figures who have emerged as successful women leaders, like the rare, female heads of state in many South Asian nations. In such cases, commenting on the understated yet distinctive personas and visual politics of some of her elite peers, one of my study's participants succinctly reflected: '[here], if you want to get into a position of power in politics, you either have to be a political widow or a political orphan... it's very rare for a woman to ascend entirely on her own merit'.

The idea of appearing relatable however prevailed more than appearing exceptional among celebrities, with one exception. All four parties contesting the 2021 election fielded female candidates who were celebrities, a recent phenomenon in the state when seen relative to the rest of the country's politics (Mukherjee, 2004; Sukumar, 2024). These candidates' self-presentation on social media emphasised the individual rather than the party. As celebrities, they exuded confidence, reinforcing their public presence by being pictured with voters. How such women chose to be seen however, did not vary too much despite their party affiliations. Celebrities in all parties appeared visually salient, but nonetheless conformed to societal expectations of 'goodness', which I will discuss in detail in the forthcoming section. Yet, in a particular instance, one party's celebrity candidate, an actor, wore saris in a manner more revealing of her body than the conservative-traditionalists emphasising goodness in line with public perception. Such an example bears testimony to performances of 'everyday activism', to borrow an expression from Vivienne & Burgess (2012). It reflects an ongoing construction of the self, positioning the otherwise inaccessible figure of the celebrity in public (offline and online) spaces, while appearing salient.

6.4.3 Conforming to Gender(ed) roles: the Idea of 'Goodness'

The act of balancing salience and relatability in how female politicians' visual politics manoeuvre societal expectations and their own interests lends empirical substance to Shirin Rai's (2014) framework for understanding political performance. To build upon being relatable, the female politicians' staging of gender(ed) roles in line with societal expectations in their visual politics as a key sub-theme. Given its complex cultural and societal history, a singular aspect that conveys a feminine role in Bengal's political context is difficult to pin down. This is mirrored in the interviews, which in fact provides evidence of gendered 'goodness' containing multitudes in the roles it becomes visible as. The study's participants reported a continuous negotiation of expectations *as women* alongside, even circumscribed by, their identity as political actors in West Bengal's societal context. With few exceptions, despite a they also testified about the inescapable pressure to conform to traditional gender roles in order to convey an image of a 'good' woman. An AITC interviewee's words, despite her party's purported liberal stance on women's roles, expressed this powerfully:

> A woman's duty is primarily to manage the household and take care of her husband. A woman decorates the house, while a man manages the outside. We must understand what is right and what is wrong. There is no need to always defy feminine behaviour.

In addition, the interviewee reported voluntarily projecting both literal and symbolic visuals that affirm her identity and role in upholding traditional femininity. She frequently and explicitly mentioned her husband's strength of character, which she implicitly contrasted with her own vulnerability and need for protection. Emphasising that a woman must be reserved, home-oriented, and polite, this interviewee added how, even after entering a political role, or working outside the home, playing all those roles must remain confined to certain limits. When asked what these limits are (which I planned to follow up by asking who sets them), she seemed puzzled: 'How come you don't know? Everyone in our society does'.

Following from what I have presented about visual salience and relatability, testimonies of women across party lines emerged about keeping themselves out of the limelight—and how this was more appropriate. The interviewees however rationalised such acts through dissimilar reasons. Their testimonies, for one, bear evidence to an active avoidance of self-promotion. As revealed in the previous chapter, a woman's image—both within and beyond the political arena—must align with this notion of 'goodness.'

Societal expectations from the good woman extends to multiple audiences: herself, her female peers, society at large, her specific cultural and social context, the electorate, her party's peers, its leadership, and even the nation. This is a long, and by no means exhaustive, list of stakeholders. Yet, when I asked my study's participants about the descriptor of feminine 'goodness,' one Bengali word emerged prominently in their responses: *shaleenota*. This complex term serves as a crucial descriptor for the concept of goodness in visual political performance. It encompasses ideas of decency, decorum, politeness, refinement, and, most importantly, modesty. Another recurring Bengali word, *shrinkhola* (literally meaning 'in chains'), introduces the metaphor of discipline within social conformity. Both terms, which can be modified as adjectives or adverbs from their roots *shaleen* and *shrinkhol*, respectively—describe the performative and visual ideals associated with sexual and social purity (confirming what I found about expression of modesty in the visual cues).

One of my interviewees from the BJP elaborated on the concept of the *shaleen* woman, emphasising that she must avoid behaviours associated with 'punk' (stated in English). The term 'punk' has entered colloquial Bengali to describe unconventional attire, hairstyles, and demeanour. This emphasis on modesty was closely tied to the imperative of deflecting male attention. A participant from the ruling AITC party articulated this perspective clearly:

> If by covering my body, I am able to keep away from men's gaze, I have not only protected myself, but also maintained social order by not exciting the (implicitly, male) public.

An older BJP participant in my study framed women's roles within the party by combining gender identity with morality reveals how the ideal of the *shaleen* woman serves as a mechanism for controlling female behaviour in a way that upholds patriarchal norms. Equally, the concept of *shaleenota* represents a construct deeply rooted in the historical *bhadralok*/*bhadramahila* cultural framework. Dictating expectations of behaviour, attire and language, *shaleenota* serves as a mechanism to circumscribe the actions women perform and appear as in front of the public and in this manner limit their agency.

As one participant expressed, 'As long as the women didn't act in ways that represent "*shaleenotar ulannghan*"', they could 'go anywhere' and 'do anything'. Referring to the

very ISRO scientists whose example figures in my thesis' introduction, another noted: 'Just recently we saw that the scientists who were sitting in the control room during our lunar mission [Chandrayaan 3] were all wearing saris'. Situated within the codes of the colonial-era societal framework of *bhadralok*-inspired standards of personal conduct, the expression *shaleenotar ulannghan* powerfully conveys transgression of codes of propriety and modesty. As recent events in 2024 have shown, deviation from such norms could invite sharp judgement from prominent social figures, for example, a popular Bengali actress and dancer's comments on unacceptable modes of draping a sari.[11] This view was echoed by those I interviewed from both the left, right and centre of the political spectrum. It indicated something higher at play beyond the message of a specific party to its electorate. One interviewee took personal responsibility—thus, by extension, placed on women the responsibility to—navigate societal dynamics. She stated: 'I can't blame anyone else if my own behaviour, lifestyle, or conduct leads to difficulties for me. That's why I try to maintain decorum, and uphold discipline'. Another participant expressed that if she stayed 'within limits, she [I] can do anything', adding that the negative propaganda against women was widespread in society. Adding that such propaganda could be easily invoked online and offline, she concluded: 'While performing what I do, and being visible as such to my audience, I keep in mind not to cross the boundaries of appropriate decorum'.

6.4.4 Objectifying Femininity, Semiotic Violence

In the visual politics of balancing individual positions with societal expectations, the body and its being marked as feminine emerges as a key sub-theme from my interviews. Suggestions of this finding have already emerged where I discussed the condition of hypervisible invisibility experienced by female politicians. It has also emerged in the critical awareness some female politicians reported about the kind of visual practices they are compelled to conform to. In specific anecdotal evidence, such as the politician who was trolled because of sharing her photograph in Paris, scrutiny translates into abuse. Two related but distinct strands emerge here: first, how femininity is objectified through the female politician's body, and second, the kind of semiotic violence (Krook, 2022) visuals of the body are subjected to.

[11] Recently, veteran actress and dancer Mamata Shankar attracted social media controversy after commenting, in a video interview, on the appropriate ways of how 'bhadramahila' women should drape saris. Shankar emphatically repeated how non-traditional ways that exposed a woman's bosom was identical to what sex workers use to attract business. Such comments drew sharp criticism from many women, who accused her of reinforcing regressive, upper-class and upper-caste gender stereotypes (Das, 2024).

So far as establishing their identity as political actors, my interviewees reported a range of societal norms and expectations from their practice of visual politics. They also highlighted consequences and repercussions of what occurred when they strayed from these practices. Much of this appearance was attributed to an embodied sartorial choice that determined their appearance (which complements a significant finding that emerged from my study of visual artefacts, presented in the previous chapter). Those I interviewed provide intimate insights into how they felt about enacting their gender and political performance through sartorial choices, among other considerations. For example, one interviewee lamented:

> Whatever you see, *that* definitely matters a lot. I am not very fond of wearing saris. But *I still wear them* everywhere I go. Because it does matter at the end of the day. I feel convinced that people are always noticing such things; they are observing our bodies and what's on them closely (emphasis in original transcript; voice intonations).

This matter of sartorial choice, however, is hardly as simple as being a direct response to what people want to see. Such a response itself draws other kinds of scrutiny from fellow female colleagues in the same arena, even their own party, not always in sympathetic ways. One of my interview participants felt strongly that 'there is a section of candidates who, in order to establish their political space, want to objectify themselves so that it's clear they are *women*' [emphasis in original transcript]. Such forms of objectification, another interviewee felt, meant to blur the lines separating the world of glamour and that of electoral politics. She went on: 'You will notice that those who are comfortable being shown on TV, in newspapers, when they move to digital platforms, highlight their gender identity to such an extent that it becomes their primary identity…'. A perception among the female politicians themselves, whether left- or right-leaning, or moderate, was that some women strategically objectified themselves to gain political visibility.

The female politician who was not motherly enough per her male colleague (as presented in sub-section 6.3.4 of this chapter), reported: 'I have changed myself over the years. Even if someone asked me now, I wouldn't be able to return to my old self'. Yet, even the motherly body is not above sexualisation and objectification. As Sanghvi (2014) observes in contemporary culture in the United States, the bodily objectification bears an uncanny resemblance to West Bengal's societal context, as I found in this study. Sanghvi's identification of how advertising reduces women to specific body parts for male consumption, applies equally to political 'marketing' that scrutinises and commodifies

the bodies of female politicians through physical attributes like ‘hem lengths’, ‘hairdos’ and ‘cleavage’, that occupy media attention and public discourse. If we think of these aspects through the sari, the blouse, the bosom, the ‘ghomta’ (head cover with a sari or any other cloth) societal expectations of femininity and motherhood in Bengal appear on similar contours of objectification. In this respect, my study moves further beyond that of analysing advertisements that personalise iconic political figures in the 2021 West Bengal election campaign (Shome et al., 2024). Fearful of sexualisation and objectification, one interviewee shared:

> We have to keep up with society’s expectations, so even if I feel like wearing tight clothes, I don’t. I keep myself covered by wearing salwar kameez [the relatively modest north Indian attire comprising a long, knee-length tunic worn over loose trousers] or saris to appear dignified.

A young, left-leaning politician observed: ‘They [the audience] want to control what I post. They want to control how I present myself’. When I probed how this could be possible, she emphasised that the audience’s response to her performative acts online was hardly benign. To the contrary, it could often be violent. Indeed, Mona Lena Krook’s (2017) essay on violence against women in politics empirically demonstrates what the above interviewee went on to explain about how social location, gender, caste and class, were all modes through which online violence could be enacted against a female candidate’s visual performance. Another CPI(M) interviewee confided in me how during her election campaign, a meme with her image went viral. She explained this episode in the following manner:

> During the last elections, there were photos of four actor-turned politicians from the TMC [AITC] and the BJP, underneath which, photos of a colleague from my party and my own photo were placed. Below our photos, a slogan said ‘*kaajer mashi’* [meaning housemaid of a lower social class and/or caste]. So, this idea of being glamorous, within the very established upper-caste and upper-class Hindu idea of who is visually enticing, etc., is quite prevalent. We face it every day.”

This incident underscores a deep-seated emphasis on glamour and physical attractiveness within the electoral landscape, where caste, class, and gender, connected to appearances, heavily influence voter perceptions in ways that transcend party affiliations. This woman was dark-skinned, and she confirmed that it was an easy prompt for the meme.

In such respect, for women I interviewed, physical appearance, particularly skin colour, becomes a critical factor that helps audiences of their visual politics easily draw on societal biases related to class and caste. The colour hierarchy, not unlike what Fanon described in the 1950s, continues to play a crucial role even in the third decade of the twenty-first century on digital social platforms. Black, as the darkest colour, my interviewee confirmed, is associated with negative connotations, symbolising the absence of virtue or 'class'. In contrast, fairness is perceived, even in West Bengal, as with the Indian Union and South Asia more generally, as a symbol of purity, innocence, lack of pollution and, most importantly, the legitimate kind of power. Fairness also eminently invokes the idea of the upper caste Brahminical purity in relation to such power. These notions, as it becomes evident through this incident, impacts the social evaluation of women. The Bengali societal context, with complex hierarchical structures enmeshed in it, in popular terms, reduces a woman's identity and credibility to her skin colour. This is where women politicians bear upon themselves the task of navigating their visibility through a landscape fraught with semiotic violence, activated by popular perceptions of how darkness of skin is a sign of negative or inferior status.

6.5 Balancing Acts: Self and the Party

In addition to the practice of constructing a visual political persona that negotiated their self in relation to societal expectations, interviewees also reported responding to imperatives of the parties they were affiliated to. In turn, a female politician—my interviews showed—projected herself to the electorate in particular ways as a member of her party. The theme that emerged from the interviews in this aspect responds to RQ 3D, which queries how female politicians balanced their self-interests with their parties' interests and expectations. In this respect too, several sub-themes emerged.

6.5.1 Collective over the Self

By reflexively examining my interview transcripts, I found that particular tensions—not always stated explicitly—emerged between the individual and collective. For example, whilst visuals of female candidates interacting with their constituents might be common to all parties, their intentions are not identical. A BJP politician, who was on a campaign trail in the days we spoke, articulated that her narrative practice was curated to show that the party comes first and the self comes last, in these words:

> Our deeper message is that India [the interviewee used the term 'Bharat Mata' or Mother India here] comes first. We're unfailingly informed about this when we join the party. We must work in the interest of the nation, followed by our party, and our great leader Narendra Modi. I come last and am hardly the centre of attraction. Therefore, I should look how they want me to look.

Her party fellow, attending the same rally, added: 'Every single photo we circulate is to promote the culture of our country; above us comes the party, above which is the nation'.

However, the receding self in visual performance online was meant to curate a different narrative when it came to an AITC politician, who formerly had a thriving acting career. 'I don't want my voters to see me just as an actress. I want them to think of me as someone like their own daughter'. In this case, interestingly through her party interests, the selfhood of the woman politician emerged as the priority in her practice of visual politics. She added here how: '…that's why I [she] consciously de-glamourise[d] myself [herself] so that they can accept me [her] as one of their own, relate to me [her] at their level'.

The loss of selfhood became apparent in what interviewees reported about being associated with influential figures in their party. In the context of the 2021 elections in West Bengal at least, it became evident that both the BJP and AITC were governed by the larger-than-life personality cults of Narendra Modi and Mamata Banerjee, respectively (Samrat, 2021). In one BJP politician's testimony, this became evident in her highlighting: 'Nowadays, it has come down to face value. Who are you sharing the stage with? How many meetings are you attending? People want to see how famous you are'. Another BJP politician confessed: 'I stick to the idea of saffronisation. Wherever I go and am pictured, I'll include orange in my body. The colour symbolises *Sanatan Dharma*, in how I present myself'.[12] She went on: 'We love BJP and our mentor, Modiji [the Indian PM Narendra Modi]. I keep that in mind when dressing up', and commended me: 'This is a good question you asked about my self-representation [sic]. I never thought of it like that or even thought I'd been doing it!' In this case, a simple denotation through colour

[12] In ancient Brahmanical treatises and codes, the idea of *Sanatan(a) Dharma*, literally meaning eternal (timeless) or ancient law—in the right-wing politicised version of it—implies a kind of nativity or originary form of Hinduism. Several colonial origin Hindu right wing organisations, often referred to today collectively as the 'Sangh Parivar', a kinship of organisations, claim a form of purity of *Sanatan(a) Dharma*; and the people who follow and express it to possess a legitimate membership of the Indian Union.

and manner of attire, the interviewee seemed to feel, indexed her to universal values of her party and the people she intended to reach as a representative of that party.

As a party ideologically opposed to the BJP, a senior CPI(M) politician drew pride in her self-identity as a Bengali woman. Yet, drawing from her party's ideology of championing collectivism over individualism, this person expressed her scepticism about the ways in which her party peers flaunted their self in visible ways. With undisguised disdain, she observed that the new female workers and leaders the party has recently been promoting, were becoming somewhat 'trendy' and 'feminine' on social media. She alluded to how in effect, this recalled the AITC's mode of presenting their female candidates, which she felt was more about over-sexualising their femininity to grab attention. Calling this problematic, the interviewee felt such workers and candidates must remain focussed on their political ideology rather than their individual image. Conversely, one of the interviewees who represented the group her senior party member was criticising felt differently. This interviewee expressed that although 'ideology is fine', until recently, in her party, women were only visible holding banners at rallies, and thus contributing to the making of political spectacles. She felt that the new organisation had broken this mould by bringing them into more prominent roles. 'So, I post photos with make-up sometimes. I love my red lipstick! Who are you to judge?', she laughed.

Such statements underscore the performative nature of political image-making, where the self is rendered invisible by appearing hyper-visible. Yet, the female politician's self-identity also aspires to connect with the party's interests, displacing the individual's identification of the self in the practice of her visual politics. The aspect of gender being a factor in the aspect of hyper-visible invisibility—mediated by interests and alignment with her party—becomes hard to ignore in these findings. In effect, gender emerges as being an embedded position in the party hierarchy, which is both conformed to, and in rare, cases, resisted.

6.5.2 Party Injunctions: Constraining Agency

In the case of many female politicians, the downplaying of visual salience (discussed in sub-section 6.3.2) was accompanied with pride about upholding an ideal as the party that truly represents interests of the electorate whose confidence they sought to gain. Some BJP politicians reasoned their downplaying acts through the nation-party-leader complex. Equally telling insights emerged from how they positioned their roles in relation to other, often younger women, of their own party, including those newly inducted into it, and how they did not hesitate to portray such relationships visually:

> We say that the BJP is like a family to us. So, just as you know what values are taught within a family, you can understand how we nurture our members. Just like a girl is raised in a middle-class Bengali household, we shape and prepare the women who join our party. We guide them on how they must appear in front of others, we tell them what their roles are and the way they must operate within certain boundaries.

Such a statement confirms the delicate balance between asserting individuality and adhering to party norms through a reasonably well-defined practice of visual politics. It underscores another way in which agency is constrained in the lives of women in politics, in this case, through the interests of their party. If, for example, younger women in a party gained recognition on their own terms through their activities, and more importantly, if they showed themselves prominently in their visual practices, they were placed under close scrutiny and their acts were met with swift retribution. Across the four parties, the younger female politicians I interviewed expressed being subjected to uncannily similar statements from within their parties, such as: 'How can she be so confident, supremely confident, and defiant of any kind of patriarchy, does she think she doesn't need the party to carry out her activities...?' Another young interviewee echoed such an experience, observing, 'The more I get involved in active electoral politics, the more recognition I receive as an individual and as the face of the people, that's when these problems arise', referring to her party's senior, usually male, leadership. These experiences reveal various forms of power dynamics and the layered identities that role playing, as acts of visual political performance, entails.

In visual terms, the behaviour of female political actors is scrutinised by what they do, who they are seen with, and their public gestures, in a way that party interests extend to governing their bodily performance and sartorial choices. What my interviewees from the BJP reported is of note. One interviewee emphasised and even showed me how she was wearing the traditional Bengali white saree with a red border and sporting a large matching *tip.* She pointed to her wrist to draw attention to the *Shakha-Pola*[13] (signifying her married status) she wore. Even the BJP's opponents, in one case a CPI(M) politician, underlined this exaggerated display of traditional Hindu Bengali femininity:

[13] *Shakha-Pola* (the composite word) describes an accessory worn on the wrist by married Hindu women. These are bangles, where the *Shakha* is made from conch shell, and *Pola*, made from red coral, are traditionally worn on both wrists as significant symbols to display marital status, but also to convey prosperity, and/or as a talisman for protection for the husband. Meanings and associations surrounding the *Shakha-Pola* vary across different regions in Bengal, but generally hold significant cultural and religious importance, about the sanctity of marriage and the wearer's connection to her familial and communal heritage.

> There is [by BJP candidates] an in-your-face assertion of Hinduness. They strive to display it all in a "See, how much of a devout Hindu I am!" mode. You'll see these women wearing rosary beads, broad *sindoor* (vermillion on the forehead), and a large red *tip*. It's all a performance.

Indeed, BJP politicians I interviewed were candid about claiming a rather pronounced, Hindu persona within their party. They were sure that as women, their visual practices could achieve a persona—closely tied to the metanarratives generated by performing the ideals of Hindu culture (including that of Bengal) and Indian nationalism—far more convincingly than their male counterparts.

However, in rare instances, counter-performances of traditional femininity also emerge as visible acts in response to parties' patriarchal order that attempts to control and circumscribe the agency of female politicians. A veteran AITC member with multiple terms in the legislative assembly described how the party in opposition to her own, the CPI(M), attempted to cast her as a voiceless, ornamental figure. 'They try and stereotype me as someone who just sits pretty and is easily manipulated', she reported, adding that she, 'circumvents this strategy' by making visible how she remains focused on making a difference and not just being a 'pretty face'. When it came to how she carried herself, the interviewee added:

> I wear my comfortable trousers and white shirts and my voters love it—especially the rural women among my constituents. I also sometimes go watch neighbourhood football matches and often go in the ground to kick the ball. My constituents cheer and clap for me.

In this sense, countering traditional or fixed ideas of femininity became an active visual strategy. Speaking about her practice of visual performance and its content, a young CPI(M) politician explicitly rejected image-centric politics. She suggested that political leadership was all about the work. Yet, in the context of electoral and party politics, this interviewee also admitted that a visual strategy is important. She felt it can be consciously chosen to build a narrative:

> …me and my party cannot compete with our well-funded opponents. However, unlike them, I also don't believe in a politics where my gender, or my pretty face, can be more important than showing our work.

The left-leaning interviewees of the CPI(M), in this sense, reported how they did not care for particular kinds of garments to feel powerful. Yet, coming to how carrying 'respectable' attire visibly with comfort, they acknowledged that playing their roles by wearing particular kinds of clothing did help them embody authority and credibility. In their expression of feminism and Communism, they rejected a dominant idea or uniform image of what a party's female candidate should look like to represent its value propositions. Instead, they highlighted that, through their acts of work, they sought to make visible the invisibility of marginalised groups in society. Such explicit reflections on the performative dimension of political labour showed a stark contrast to what their right-wing counterparts stated about traditional gender roles and being comfortable with them. One interviewee from the leftist party, a schoolteacher and political activist, asserted that:

> We are all trying to reflect our ideology and performing our principles daily in our work. Unlike them [the BJP], we don't need to wear saffron saris and visit poor people's homes to get votes. We embody a completely different performative strategy to reach out to the people. Whether people are accepting us or not is a different matter. But we don't need to wear full sleeve blouses covering our backs to reach out to the working-class people.

Another interviewee, also from the same party, echoed a concern with substance when enacting their visibility by performing their work:

> I believe countering the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh],[14] their ideology of Hindutva, or countering fascism is not going to happen superficially in the realm of appearance or culture. It is rooted in class struggle. It is rooted in production and labour processes. We need to make sure that the people who are involved in production, the working class, the marginalised sections of society, are becoming more visible.

Yet, the practice of these visual strategies cannot be simplistically tied down to some form of independent agency of the female politicians. The left-leaning parties, per reports of their opponents, appear to engage in the same acts they purportedly reject. The political counter-narrative claim becomes diffuse, in this case, by playing for credibility at the cost of others. A politician from the AITC shared with me a telling anecdote:

[14] The RSS or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, is a far-right paramilitary Hindu nationalist organisation that emerged in the 1920s, and arguably is the world's largest political organisation by membership. It supplies the ideological premise for the formation and actions of the Bhartiya Janata Party in contemporary Indian politics and exerts substantial influence over its policies and outlook on nationalism (Jafferlot, 2011).

> Let me tell you something amusing. When I was contesting the [2021, WB state] election, the candidate from the CPI(M) who was running against me went door to door campaigning against me, saying, "<name omitted> just dresses up nicely. What can she do in politics? There's no benefit in making her your councillor".

Such an example illustrates the tension between appearance and substance in performing a gendered politics in visual terms, yet another evidence of balancing party interests with that of the self. It also brings to the fore how prominently the body and its appearance are both objects of scrutiny and possess agency in political performance. Most importantly, on the whole, a significant finding emerging from the interviews confirm that individual agency in visual political performance of female politicians is indeed constrained in explicit ways by their parties.

6.5.3 Performing 'Goodness': Catering to the Party's Image

My examination of the female politicians' testimonies has revealed a seemingly irreconcilable web of interests and audiences tied to a her 'goodness' through societal expectations. The accounts provided by my study's participants about falling short of this elusive attribute also invoked interests of their parties being at stake. In the broader context of my interviews, several participants who failed to meet societal standards of 'goodness' confided that they faced relentless, violent, and gendered slander from the party's self-appointed monitors of propriety, both online and offline. While some resisted these pressures, others conformed. For instance, a senior BJP politician explicitly stated:

> See, young girls who are new members of the BJP need to understand that if they want to grow within our Hindu nationalist party, they will have to make sacrifices [in terms of what they wear and how they appear]. Many are adamant and say, "Why should I change?" To them, I say, "Fine, then there is no place for you in this party."

Nested in such expectations was many interviewees' recognition that their party enables, encourages, even orders the objectification of 'good' women for electoral gain—thereby determining the visual politics they are compelled to enact. A testimony from a former female INC member who joined the BJP provides a vivid image of this experience. This interviewee admitted to a 'dramatic transformation' upon joining her new political home. She expressed feeling an immense pressure to conform to party expectations, particularly regarding appearance, including marking her body with specific ways to

drape a sari, with broad pleats, sport a tip, and enhance the application of *sindoor* (vermillion on the brow as a sign of a married woman). To cultivate an image that upheld her party's purported values, she consciously adopted a gentle and maternal demeanour, aligning with traditional roles. This emphasis on traditional femininity reveals a strategic approach to political persona-building, where conforming to cultural expectations is mediated by the party to connect with the electorate. At the core of this traditional femininity, as a BJP interviewee observed, lay the kind of expectations from new inductees into the party:

> After understanding what is expected, they completely transform themselves. They recognize that the party is above them, above the party is Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and above all is the country. As Indian women, we must remember we are here to serve. We are expected to perform seva. Nothing is personal here. Everything is for the country.

The ideal of *'seva',* in this manner, emerges in the framework of subsuming individual interests as only being validated when it serves the party, its leader and a singularity of national identity. Another BJP interviewee went into further detail through the iconography of the Lotus (the party's symbol), explaining how *service* to the party and nation were integral to its principles.

Additionally, views interviewees expressed about appropriateness also invoked the notion of the mother as a symbol of morality and cultural identity. A BJP politician equated India as the goddess-like Motherland (Bharat Mata) to the critical importance of preserving cultural values for the benefit of the nation—a view she believes her right-wing nationalistic party upholds. This individual felt that women are revered in India in a way not found in other countries or cultures:

> We were born in such a place that there is no need to teach us anything about our behaviour or attire. Our culture, deeply embedded in our upbringing, guides us on how to conduct ourselves and what clothes to wear. Girls are regarded as goddesses, and thus, we do not need instruction on what to wear or not to wear.

She further remarked that as women's bodies are subject to societal scrutiny, 'deviations from societal norms are missteps for which the woman herself has to bear responsibility'. Such perspectives recalling the purported and emphatic politics of representation in Bengali culture through the bodies of women. The head of the BJP's women's wing in the state asserted: 'Mother India comes first. We are a nationalist party. Bharat Mata is in

everyone's heart, and we acknowledge that Bharat Mata precedes everything and must be revered above all.' This prominent female politician believed that nationalism would permeate Bengal's regional politics. However, another BJP interviewee articulated the 'mother' sentiment of goodness from a grassroots perspective, framing it as a public appeal that merits being quoted in full:

> I would like to call upon all political women workers, whether at the grassroots level or in higher positions to recognise that the culture of Bengal centres around the worship of Goddess Durga and Kali. They must embody the maternal qualities of Goddess Durga, while also possessing the strength and resilience of Kali.

This call for political performativity, rooted in the dual imagery of Durga and Kali—two mother goddesses representing contrasting visions of femininity (Pinney, 2004)—combines nationalism, cultural authenticity, traditional femininity, and a monolithic religious perspective. This narrative appears to align with upper-caste, upper-class Hindu ideals that co-opt Hindu goddesses to legitimise higher status of the urbane, modern yet traditional *bhadramahila*. Yet, invoking the inclusion of Kali complicates this position of status (Rajan, 1998). Kali is a multifaceted deity, often associated with non-Brahmanical forms of worship, including marginalised caste-oppressed and tribal communities, and even bandits, outcastes and outlaws-–whose values and worldviews stand in opposition to the urbane, mainstream, upper-caste, in Bengal's context, *bhadralok* culture.[15]

Yet, in the visual political communication during the 2021 West Bengal elections, as evidenced by its various visual artefacts, the BJP's representation of the 'ideal' Hindu woman remained uniform. The politician making the appeal above was explicit about how her party's women visually embodied traditional Indian culture: 'The BJP's ideology is nationalistic. How are women reflecting the country's mindset? With a small bun, red *sindoor* if married, and a red *bindi* [forehead dot]—that is the extent of it,' she concluded.

On the correlation of goodness with national values, I shared an awkward moment with one of my study's participants. This BJP politician called into question my own position whilst responding to me. She began with how 'Our education and upbringing instil in us a

[15] In July 2022, Mahua Maitra, a woman Member of Parliament from the AITC, courted widespread controversy and pushback from upper caste/class groups for her comments on X about Kali being a 'meat-eating […] alcohol-accepting' goddess, irreducible to middle-class norms of polite society (including Bengal's). See: Chattopadhyay, 2022) for a critique of this majoritarian view of Hindu religion in the context of the Maitra controversy.

deep-rooted sense of Bengali culture. We must represent this heritage and project this image to the world'. When I expressed curiosity about what that image is, I received the taunt: 'You've been away from your homeland for too long, haven't you?' When I nodded in agreement, she explained: 'India has always been a culturally diverse nation with a distinct identity, and Bengal has been no exception'. Drawing into her argument the long left-wing era (1977–2011) in West Bengal's politics, she went on: 'left ideologies gave prominence to secularism, leading to a period where university students, particularly those at Jadavpur [a major public university in Kolkata], embraced foreign lifestyles and cultural norms', and added referring to the victorious 2019 performance of her national party in WB: 'We're glad the people of Bengal, deeply connected to their cultural roots, rejected this foreign influence'. In her view, the people of Bengal's preference for 'the traditional Hindu culture, as promoted by [Narenda] Modiji, brought us back and defeated the communists'. Visual allusions to the 'good woman' and the embedding of party interests within them also draw from representations in popular media. While I do not independently examine such media here, it is noteworthy that many disenfranchised groups remain marginalised and excluded from mainstream depictions in popular Bengali TV soap operas, which perpetuate these visuals. For example, one participant opposed to the BJP politically observed:

> Only one kind of visuals of what is a good woman dominate, as popular cinema and serials [TV soap operas] play a significant role in shaping them. When people repeatedly watch what is shown on TV every evening from six to ten, they start believing in those codes. Viewers, for example, will never be able to think beyond the persona of a married woman adorned with bangles and *sindoor*, if that is the image shown every day. They will start believing that this is the only valid image'.

In fact, critiquing the pan-India Hindutva politics of the BJP, women from the other political parties expressed their discomfort with how their own parties, to varying degrees, asked them to visually construct ideas of goodness. Television serials, particularly Bengali ones, have a significant influence in portraying the ideal woman as one who suffers in silence, accepts everything without protest, and suppresses her own desires to serve her in-laws and family, at least four interviewees who were not from the BJP reported. The voice of a former actor, now with the AITC is important here, as it draws upon her personal experience. 'The TV shows depict ideal women as subdued and compliant, and the negative characters are shown as defiant. As the viewers are also voters, they come to expect this image from their female politicians across party lines', she candidly added. Conversely, if a female individual's status advanced within the party,

the censure became enhanced, sometimes even from sources within the party itself. Many of my interviewees acknowledged this phenomenon and its role in controlling their advancement within the party as women. As one of them recounted:

> If I rise in party ranks, I am immediately attacked. Some will say (not always to your face): is she sleeping with the senior leaders or offering them sexual favours to rise so swiftly? Such comments are quite common.

This example sums up rather appropriately the aspirations to goodness a party seeks through the visual politics of its female politicians. Along with previously presented testimonies, it affirms that female politicians are continuously exhorted by their parties to enact the portrayal of goodness even in practicing their individual visual politics. In the light of such findings about the intersections of the physical and social female body (Douglas, 1970), determined not only by interests of a female politician's party but also societal norms, Angela McRobbie's (2015) concept of 'the perfect', used in relation to what she terms 'competitive femininity' proves helpful. Indeed, the visual politics this study has examined calls to mind popular feminist discourses of self-confidence and success, where the construction of a personal brand, whether related to or independent of an affiliate party, becomes a micro-perfection project.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the testimonies of women politicians in West Bengal to reveal how they conceptualise, rationalise, and enact the construction and management of their visual personas for their intended audiences. The distinct yet interrelated themes emerging from the interviews provide answers to my key research question (RQ 3) and its sub-questions, regarding the role of social media platforms in shaping their visual narratives, their levels of critical awareness, and the imperatives of balancing the visual politics of self in relation to both societal expectations and their parties' interests. What emerges is a complex picture of female politicians navigating a contested terrain of expectations, where their visual political communication is deeply mediated by the cultural context of Bengal in manifold ways.

These findings highlight a paradox: while social media platforms like Facebook and X offer unprecedented opportunities for disseminating political messages, they are not neutral spaces. Female politicians, it has become evident, are required to respond to the affordances and constraints of these platforms, whose audiences seek and often reinforce traditional societal values. As a result, these structures, technological and

societal, compel female politicians to construct visual personas that *essentialise* femininity, promoting ideals of cultural propriety and goodness. This places women political actors in a relational field of morality, party loyalty, and platform dynamics, where they can seemingly assert agency but to a greater degree, such agency is constrained. Female politicians, it becomes evident, become instrumentalised as the medium of upholding cultural values, goodness and propriety despite digital media's claims to their equal citizenship. Their personas are constructed to reduce the promotion of traditional societal values to mental shortcuts drawn from preordained codes of society and the party. If, in rare cases, they transgress or subvert these codes, both publics and their own parties circumscribe their visual political performances in multiple ways.

Some participants in my study normalised women's vulnerability and emphasised maternal roles, while others critiqued the patriarchal construction of women as passive and compliant figures. Many interviewees felt that patriarchal cultural hegemony sought to dictate their identities and behaviours through dominant visual narratives. Despite the potential of social media to foster greater inclusion of women in political discourse, the findings reveal that this inclusion remains limited by deeply entrenched societal and cultural norms. Female politicians in West Bengal largely continue to align with traditional norms of femininity and ideal womanhood, as reflected in their sartorial choices, body politics, and actions. These norms, rooted in India's colonial-era nationalist politics, perpetuate the idealised image of the 'good woman'. While the interviewees claimed agency in curating their self-representation, they also acknowledged operating within the confines of societal, cultural, and political expectations. As a result, their self-presentations often reinforce rather than challenge these norms. Across party lines, these women engaged in a delicate balancing act, navigating authenticity and stereotypes while reducing themselves to indexes of their parties and societal expectations. This active negotiation manifests in performances of nationalism, feminism, and cultural conservatism, which often subsume their roles as professional political actors. Such dynamics underscore the challenges faced by women in politics, where their visibility is mediated by both digital platforms and cultural expectations.

In addition, West Bengal's female politicians' visual politics and personas being variegated in nature, these findings have shown that the aspiration of appearing as the 'good woman' is a contested terrain. Despite portraying ostensibly gender-neutral acts—such as delivering speeches, attending public rallies, or meeting constituents—my study's participants reported being subject to intense scrutiny. As might be expected,

campaign activities become sites of comparison and evaluation. These comparisons and evaluations however, my study has found, occur in distinct ways. Rather than solely indicating how women measure up to their male counterparts, the findings of this investigation make evident that many female politicians competed with each other for legitimacy as the 'best' or 'most respectable' woman in politics. This kind of competition reveals that their political visibility marked by a certain precarity. The precarity, my study shows, derives from the shifting boundary conditions of cultural propriety, where adherence to the *bhadramahila* archetype operates as an unspoken benchmark of political success.

In the next chapter, by synthesising the findings from the preceding two chapters and the various strands that emerge in them, I will present discussions that delve deeper into the relational field between women's political visibilities and performance and contemporary electoral politics in West Bengal's empirical context. I will move into many key questions henceforth: How do these findings challenge or reinforce existing theories and research precedents? What do they reveal about the limitations and possibilities for feminist agency in visual political performance? And, how does the digital sphere mediate such dynamics, and what are its implications for future studies that lie at the intersections of gender and visual politics?

7 Discussion

This chapter synthesises the findings of my two investigations and situates them within the broader discourse on visual politics in communication studies. It addresses their empirical, conceptual, and methodological implications for the field. My research set out by exploring how gendered societal norms intersect with electoral politics in digital social media platforms. It aimed to understand visual political communication as a performative phenomenon entangled with gender, viewed through the dual lenses of the physical and social body. By focusing on a non-Western setting—the state of West Bengal in India—I have investigated how cultural norms, social customs, and societal expectations shape the outcomes of visual politics on social media and the reported strategies about producing these outcomes. At its core, my study has adopted two distinct vantages of examination. It has firstly examined visual artefacts on social media to gather evidence related to gendered political visibilities during a key election campaign (2021) in West Bengal. Second, by analysing testimonies from the producers of such artefacts, the study has brought to light the experiences, motivations and pressures that shape their visual political performance. By thus examining both the visual artefacts themselves and probing the intents behind their production, I have sought to illuminate both the nature of and experiences underlying the construction of gendered political visibilities in a digital environment.

On the whole, by examining the posts through a content analysis of visual cues—informed by an understanding of Bengal's cultural and social context—it became evident that most candidates engaged in a visual politics drawing from traditional gender norms. These ranged from the portrayal of attire and displays of modesty in particular ways by incorporating Hindu religious values through the explicit use of religious or religion-inflected political symbols on their bodies. I have argued that these visual strategies for constructing personas contribute to a political performance that reconstitutes the notion of a 'good' woman. Indeed, my findings from the investigation of visual artefacts show that the pursuit of this ideal among female political candidates aligns with societal gender norms far more frequently than it transgresses them. By considering these findings through the testimonies of the candidates, their reasons for reinforcing such societal norms in their visual politics have also become apparent. My study's participants expressed views that ranged from uncritical acceptance to reflexive critique of their party's and societal gender imperatives their visual politics were expected to follow. A tension between being hyper-visible and invisible, for example, represents one way in which the candidates' political performances sought to balance their personal interests

with those of their parties' and the public's expectations. Moreover, my study's participants reported making sartorial choices and sporting accessories that bore signs of appearing maternal, nurturing, modest, or religious, and often combining these aspects. Conversely, some revealed that transgressing these markers of the 'good woman' invited sharp online violence and misogyny. The censure came, as reported, from two sources: their parties and the audience representing the societal norms through which their visual politics underwent scrutiny.

In this chapter, I will therefore consider the findings of my two modes of examination both separately and together. The discussions that follow will contextualise how these findings bring new insights to the field of visual communication studies. Moreover, I will discuss what my research brings to deepen the empirical and conceptual understanding of visual politics through the examination of the particular cultural and societal context of West Bengal through a gendered lens.

7.1 Compulsions to Perform

To begin with what my study of visual artefacts from the 2021 campaign phase in West Bengal revealed, an underlying question—what it meant to be a female candidate contesting elections in a federal unit (the state of WB) governed by a woman chief minister—cannot be ignored. This question necessarily needed to be viewed through a cultural lens, taking into account (as chapter 3 does) the shifts in cultural traditions and history of women's participation in electoral politics. With digital environments being the sites of political contestation, the need to contextualise the findings about the performative dimensions of visual politics assumes significance. For this is where female politicians transform the ordinary act of being seen into strategic displays of agency, which in turn offers valuable insights into the intersections of gender, authority, and representation. The digital sites of visual political performance therefore become the stage where every day acts ascend into exceptional spectacles.

7.1.1 Representation: A Relational Field of Relatability and Salience

My findings on the representation of women in social media artefacts during the West Bengal (WB) elections confirm that, despite extensive debates on gender parity, the political stage worldwide remains deeply imbalanced. The 2021 West Bengal (WB) Assembly elections, which my study focuses on in its investigation of visual artefacts, starkly illustrates this disparity. Fewer than a tenth (9.68%) of all visual artefacts posted by the four major contesting political parties even showed female candidates. This

proportion, in fact, was lower than the representation of women in the political campaign overall (240 among 2132, or 11.26%), and even the four parties I examined (116 female candidates of their total of 841, 13.8%). In a state led by a woman chief minister, women's representation in visual political narratives thus remained quite low, reflecting the systemic exclusion that shapes politics globally.

This pattern resonates across countries, as over 60 nations—including India and the United Kingdom—prepared for elections in 2024 with severely limited access for women to top leadership roles. Against this backdrop, UN Women projects that achieving gender parity will take another 130 years (UN Women, 2024). Structural barriers continue to impede women's political advancement. When viewed in a global context, the findings about the underrepresentation of women in the WB elections highlight the unique challenges faced by women who attempt—or manage—to break through the glass ceiling. In addition to the examples I have previously mentioned from Western democracies, Hillary Clinton, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Cecile Duflot, figures like Jacinda Ardern, celebrated internationally for her leadership during crises, faced sexist commentary that often overshadowed her political decisions (Suliman, 2023). Similarly, Finland's Sanna Marin endured intense public scrutiny over a leaked video of her dancing at a private party—criticism unlikely to be directed at a male leader under similar circumstances (Al Jazeera, 2022). These cases underscore the pervasive double standards that undermine women's authority and reinforce restrictive societal expectations, ultimately limiting their scope for genuine political empowerment.

The challenges that women politicians face resonate within the specificities of the electoral political context in South Asia. They highlight how, in this region, women's pathways to power are often shaped by dynastic legacies and personal tragedies. In this regard, one of my study's participants remarked that success in politics, for women, often follows from being a political widow or orphan. In such cases, gender functions as a form of symbolic capital, intertwined with class and familial ideals. These forms of reverence reinforce societal norms rather than disrupting them, confirming how cultural and visual traditions intersect to impede women's pursuit of autonomous political authority. In India, despite near-equal voter turnout between men and women, only 9% of candidates in the 2019 Lok Sabha (federal parliamentary) elections were women, with a marginal 10% success rate (Verniers & Ammassari, 2019). As I write, the 2024 general elections have witnessed a modest increase, yet representation remains inadequate. This numerical invisibility, I found, translates into visual invisibility. Moreover, my research has also revealed that female candidates' invisibility is accompanied by hyper-visibility,

causing female leadership as a whole to be cast into doubt through the lenses of exclusion, difference, and societal expectations. For women politicians, the ability to navigate between states of invisibility and hyper-visibility, as my findings suggest, reflects an ongoing negotiation with entrenched gendered expectations.

The five types of visual artefacts my study has identified—informational visuals, mentorship/cultural visuals, leader-among-people, imagery of the stateswoman, and placing the self among people—highlight the layered dynamics of female politicians' visual representation. These categories reveal how aspirant women leaders frequently framed their performance in a relational manner, reinforcing gendered expectations of the nurturer, proximity to people, and moral leadership. Mentorship/cultural visuals, for instance, often depict women alongside male leaders or cultural icons, where their authority is legitimised through association while their individuality is diminished. This relational framing reflects Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical perspective, which conceives the 'front stage' of performance as a meticulously orchestrated space where preordained norms govern appearances.

The contrast with male politicians, for example a pan-Indian national leader like Narendra Modi, underscores these gendered dynamics. Modi's visuals rely on low-angle shots and singular framing to convey a distinct sense of individualised power (Khan, 2019). This approach contrasts sharply with the visual composition accorded to women, including Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal's chief minister and leader of her party. While Banerjee's imagery conveys leadership, it is more often portrayed at eye level, emphasising accessibility. Occasional cooking rituals, or photographs of her in the kitchen, though infrequent, reinforce these relational qualities. Not all female candidates however, were afforded this personalised form of visual politics; most relied on their public personas alone as evident from their visual posts. Yet, Banerjee's dual approach highlights the delicate balance women leaders must maintain: they gain visibility yet must also project relational and collective attributes to align with cultural expectations.

The compositional choices and formal characteristics of the visual artefacts reveal a further paradox. Women politicians gain public prominence yet remain constrained. Their authority is packaged within traditional gender norms. Examining the visual strategies through both visual artefacts and the testimonies that rationalise their production has revealed how representations of women in politics replicate—and very rarely are able to challenge—the perceptions of being the lesser gender, and the forces of power, and visibility. Here, it becomes essential to recall how visibility, gender, and the mechanisms

through which power operates coalesce in visual political communication practices. Indeed, scholars of visual politics note that power both reveals and conceals, exhibits certain identities, actions, and messages and obscures others (Brantner and Stehle, 2021). Employing Rai's (2014) political performance lens has helped to clarify how visuals in electoral contexts are simultaneously constitutive of, and contested within, sites of power.

In West Bengal, women politicians' increased visibility on social media remains constrained by patriarchal visual vocabularies that limit their agency and leadership. 'Mentorship or cultural' visuals, along with self-and-people frames, illustrate this phenomenon by consistently situating women leaders within collective or relational paradigms. One interviewee noted, "We emphasise images of me visiting homes and meeting with women," a strategy that fosters approachability but simultaneously diminishes individual authority by positioning the female politician primarily as a caregiver or community figure. In this context, Mitchell's (2005) critique of commodification under modern capitalism is especially instructive: political visuals become consumable objects, reducing representational diversity into reproducible and memorable tropes. Despite the ostensibly democratising potential of digital media, these platforms frequently replicate—rather than disrupt—conventional visual structures, thereby limiting genuinely transformative portrayals of women's political leadership.

The visual representation of female politicians in the WB campaign also depicts them in relation to the larger population of women. This reflects culture-inflected gender roles in ways that both restrict and seemingly enable women's political agency. For example, the 'leader-among-people' type of visuals temporarily places women politicians at the centre, suggesting the potential for empowerment. However, these moments are fleeting and often overshadowed by narratives that emphasise collective identities over individual authority. This dynamic demonstrates that, despite the potential for digital media to transform representations, platforms often continue to reinforce traditional hierarchies. In this sense, my findings align with scholarly arguments that 'men's universal status and their occupancy of the normative standard state' render women invisible as subjects of critique or academic inquiry (Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

Building on Mitchell's (2005) argument that visuals construct rather than simply mirror reality, and read with the co-constitutive functions of the social and physical body (Douglas, 1970), I argue that my findings related to underrepresentation help to understand why the visual politics of female candidates follow gender stereotypes and

sustain dominant hegemonic discourses. In a society dominated by visual culture—television, film, the internet, advertising—women's portrayals have long been constrained within culturally acceptable norms. Through a visual politics characterised by overall underrepresentation, these norms and visual dimensions of gendered difference are (re-)produced, legitimised, and naturalised. By examining the candidates' testimonies, my study has brought forth what stays unseen, and how authorship and autonomy is framed or concealed. These testimonies evidence how modes of creatively expressing political agenda is limited for women at the individual level, remaining heavily circumscribed by power relations that shape and perpetuate their inequitable political representation.

To contextualise the compositional aspects of the final set of visual artefacts, I found that the nature of posts by female candidates during the campaign was explained rather consistently in their interviews across the political spectrum. This finding relates to strategies used to portray relatability and popularity while also appearing visually salient. This duality—being both relatable and exceptional—also emerged in what interviewees reported to me. Such a negotiation in visual politics reveals the challenge of modulating one's persona to meet societal expectations while appearing unique. Ultimately, these findings underscore the many compulsions involved in a visual political performance, in addition to the relational field that the visual politics of female candidates inhabit. While the strategy affords female politicians some visibility, the findings also reveal the constraints within which they operate—a dynamic in which their authority is tempered by the expectation of accessibility and relationality. Mediated through entrenched cultural scripts, the gendered visual politics I have uncovered aligns with deeply rooted societal norms, particularly in the Indian context, where portrayals of women engaging with constituents—especially women and children—emphasise care and collective leadership. These visuals do not merely reflect existing norms; they actively reproduce them by reinstating traditional gender roles within the visual vocabulary of political communication. As a result, women's leadership is legitimised primarily by aligning with hegemonic ideals of femininity, which reinforce the traditional status quo of gender relations and patriarchal structures in society. Concurrently, this dynamic perpetuates inequalities by restricting women's capacity to attain leadership, as I discuss in the next sub-section.

7.1.2 A Supporting Cast: Performing as the Second in Command

Among my findings within the visual types I have described in Chapter 5, one has corroborated how the agency of women politicians is circumscribed. This category relates to their portrayal as subjects who support leadership, rather than own it. Except

Mamata Banerjee spearheading political campaigns, other female candidates' visual representations frequently positioned them behind the scenes—which my interviews with candidates corroborated. This relationship underscores how whilst women are central to political messaging, their visual portrayals limit perceptions of their agency. The strategic contrasts embedded in these narratives further confirm the relational paradigm shaping women's political representation, how it is positioned between public and domestic spheres, candidates and constituents, and strength and vulnerability.

The visual portrayals, in this sense, align with the populist and welfarist frameworks (Raychaudhury, 2024) prevalent in Indian electoral democracy. Here, even women candidates—though public figures—are represented as if they are passive beneficiaries of a larger political system, echoing welfare-driven narratives. Meanwhile, campaign visuals frequently juxtapose these candidate-women with non-candidate women in domestic settings, reinforcing binaries of control and vulnerability. In many images, candidates are shown engaging with constituents in unequal roles—knocking on doors, being garlanded, or consoling women in distress. Candidates' own testimonies confirm that they are cast as capable yet reliant actors, implicitly perpetuating the notion that women need external intervention for safety and support. These compositional tactics, rooted in an aesthetic of victimisation, acknowledge women's issues but also confine their agency—one that female candidates demonstrate they can address but within certain predefined boundaries. This finding underscores Bleiker's (2015) argument that representation is an act of power, delineating the limits of women's political and social agency.

My study has uncovered that by portraying women as victims in their visual politics, candidates who contested the WB election diminish their own capacity for autonomous political action. The visual types emerging from posts during the WB election's 2021 campaign have also shown how these visual performances by candidates and parties both align with hegemonic discourses that reinforce voicelessness. In a global context, these discourses make women appear de-individualised. They subsume individuals into a collective narrative of helplessness, further reinforcing passivity and limiting their potential to challenge entrenched hierarchies. On occasion, party slogans also become relevant to affirm the significance of these findings. For example, the AITC slogan *'Bangla nijer meye'kei chaaye'* (Bengal wants her own daughter) shows how cultural symbols and mores intersect with political ideologies to shape public imagination. In the AITC's visual artefacts, the slogan invokes the figure of the daughter as a symbol of service and nurturing, blending traditional gender roles with political capability.

The familial reference of the daughter as a servile figure also, in this sense, recalls the notions of *seva* or service where female labour is incorporated in electoral politics (Bedi, 2007; Sarkar & Butalia, 1995; Banerjee, 2003). Whilst in the case of Mamata Banerjee in particular, it may convey leadership and competence, for a wider group of less-known candidates, across party lines as some of my interview participants observed, service reinforces the female politician as the second-in-command to (in most cases, male) higher leadership, invoking the idea of service to the nation, party, her peers and to the electorate. These contrasting narratives highlight how traditional norms of women's identity (daughter) and relationality (propriety) within the family are mobilised differently but ultimately both constrain women's roles in politics. Such invocations of traditional norms bind their agency to traditional gender expectations and limiting their transformative representations as free agents, individuals and political leaders. The visual portrayal of service and care consistently situates women within collective frameworks, legitimising their leadership only in relation to either a superior social actor (a male politician) or an inferior social actor (the female member of the electorate who needs rescuing) rather than as individuals with authority.

While such portrayals offer a degree of political visibility, they reinforce traditional hierarchies and gendered norms, prioritising care and collective leadership over autonomous authority. These findings reveal how visibility, while crucial, parties as well as societal expectations compel candidates to reinforce paternalistic societal expectations rather than subverting them. Moments of women depicted as central, authoritative figures have emerged as rare and fleeting, highlighting the systemic resistance to transformative narratives. As a result, women politicians in West Bengal, much like their counterparts in many parts of India and the world, are placed under scrutiny within a relational field determined by society and the party, and in many cases—as I discuss in the next sub-section—by themselves.

7.1.3 Appearing 'Good': Competitive Femininity

The careful curation of a persona on social media, as reported by my study's participants and also seen in my examination of social media posts by women candidates, can also be seen to amplify patriarchal scrutiny. Another important facet of political performance therefore involves feeding a subtle but steady antagonism around doing (performing) better in order to look a certain way, recalling the notion of 'competitive femininity' (McRobbie, 2015). This kind of competition operates, as apparent from the candidates' testimonies, in two ways. The first involves a kind of inner-directed self-competition,

which involves self-berating, ultimately compelling female candidates to aspire for surpassing their female peers not only in the (masculine) norms of political leadership but also in *being good* or appearing as *perfect women*. Second, what candidates reported equally indicate an outer-directed rivalry. This rivalry manifests in public critiques or comparisons—who is dressed more appropriately, who appears more 'authentic,' or who projects the most relatable brand of womanhood.

Significantly, such phenomena of competing to visibly appear as the good woman extends beyond clothing. Certain participants mentioned how visual cues of moral righteousness—such as performing acts of justice for marginalised communities, wearing subdued colours to communicate humility, or showcasing direct engagement with vulnerable voters—can signal a female politician's sincerity. Yet, in a neoliberal popular culture saturated by TV soap operas and romanticised depictions of the dutiful wife or self-sacrificing mother, these acts risk being reduced to moral display. It is important to recall here how my study's participants reported their (or other) parties increasingly capitalising on soap-opera-inspired storylines; the 'perfect woman' fights for justice but never strays from prescribed familial or cultural norms. As a result, female politicians become compelled to navigate not only the scrutiny of male-dominated structures but also a landscape where other women—in the same party or opposing parties—jostle to present themselves as more virtuous, relatable, or successful at portraying goodness in comparison to their peers.

In effect, the aspiration to be a 'good woman' is sustained through constant competition. Each small sign of a flaw or deviation from cultural expectations can yield condemnation from online trolls, male party figures, and, crucially, competing women. The latter often capitalise on any perceived shortcoming to assert their own feminine legitimacy in relative terms. Situating these insights in a global context underscores how neoliberal popular feminism has often been 'glammed up' to suit consumerist frameworks (Banet-Weiser, 2018). What emerges from my interviews is that transgressions or deviations from norms of goodness are either self-censored or subject to censure, criticism, and ridicule—often from other women in their own or opposing parties. Such acts fail to dismantle the deeply rooted structural constraints placed on women's bodies (Menon, 1999) within West Bengal's societal context. Rather, as my study's participants revealed, their visual politics are compelled to reinforce a hegemonic script of what is acceptable within femininity rather than to challenge patriarchal codes. Within the visual performance of ideal womanhood, my interviews revealed variations: appearing in traditional gender roles such as domesticity, avoiding self-promotion, adhering to discipline, being

decorous, polite, refined, and modest. In effect, these elements invoke the circumscribed 'inner domain'—sovereign to Bengali nationalist men—inhabited by the *bhadramahila*.

My investigations of both the visual artefacts and testimonies about their production have affirmed that each of these behavioural attributes or forms of conduct responds to the colonial-era 'women's question' in national life (Chatterjee, 1993). Yet, they all converge on one imperative: demonstrating the loosely defined and shifting benchmark of 'perfect' womanhood—one that combines tradition, modesty, competence, and moral virtue. Consequently, in my interviews, as one candidate recalled, considerable time must be "devote[d] to my appearance, what clothes I wear, how transparent they are, how I drape them, how much I smile, who I am seen with—these concerns form my primary occupation as a candidate rather than thinking deeply about policy and goals." The energy and time female politicians dedicate to policing their bodies and sartorial choices, as well as negotiating peer rivalries, testifies to the competition for goodness. Trapped in such competition, what candidates reported evidences how it hinders them from fulfilling their professional roles as political candidates, let alone meaningfully challenging male privilege**.**

Ideas of the 'perfect' that competitive femininity strives to attain emerge vividly in the Bengali linguistic descriptors of *shaleenota* (modesty, propriety) and *shrinkhola* (chains), as expressed by candidates in Chapter 6. These terms define an acceptable code of conduct, appearance, and sexual purity for women in politics. It is in relation to such notions that candidates from various parties emphasised the necessity of 'covering up' their bodies to evade the male gaze—one that persists even when their bodies are covered and remains largely unchallenged. They felt this was a way of 'protecting themselves' while upholding social order. In presenting how an older BJP politician likened the party to a familial space, I have uncovered that upholding *shaleenota* is viewed as a moral responsibility, particularly for younger women under the party's tutelage. In effect, ideas of modesty and discipline—rooted in the historical *bhadralok*/*bhadramahila* framework—operate as a regulatory device both within the party and in the public sphere. Consequently, even modern expressions of individualism become absorbed into a broader patriarchal code that pits women against one another in a race toward 'good woman' status, while simultaneously enforcing normative propriety to curtail female autonomy.

These phenomena of self-imposed control from within the group also indicate that the 'good woman' paradigm is inherently unstable. My study's participants consistently

emphasised the shifting nature of public taste: an overtly traditional look might thrive in one election cycle but falter in the next if a more modern aesthetic gains temporary favour. The so-called *perfect woman*, then, is a dynamic cultural tool that enables patriarchal frameworks to adapt and endure. Instead of openly competing with men for power, female politicians find themselves embroiled—both subtly and openly—in an internal competition with one another. This intra-gender competition ultimately reinforces underlying gender hierarchies, ensuring that they face only a feeble challenge.

Ultimately, then, my findings add empirical substance to the interpretive lens of 'competitive femininity.' They provide insight into the multifaceted, often contradictory forms of female political agency. While women carve out spaces of visibility—sometimes even subverting cultural scripts—any claim to empowerment is undermined by internalised rivalry, relentless judgment, and the sheer durability of patriarchal structures in both West Bengal's parties and society. Understanding how female candidates actively shape their visual tactics while also being shaped by them reveals that their bodily performance in the political arena remains a site of continuous negotiation. It is precisely through these negotiations that the prospect of a transformative visual politics fails to be fully realised. As this study's findings—from both the analysis of visual artefacts and candidates' testimonies—demonstrate, dismantling the deeply embedded and evolving societal standards governing their bodies poses a significant challenge to transcending patriarchal norms.

7.2 Political Performance Circumscribed

In how women politicians are compelled to perform their visual politics in a relational field with their male counterparts and even compete among themselves, I argue that their opportunities for individual expression in their visual politics are strongly circumscribed. This occurs despite debates about social media proffering opportunities for women's individual expression in India and beyond (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2016; Lu, 2015; Kasana, 2014). My analyses of visual political performance through both the artefacts and testimonies of female candidates have revealed the cultural, political, religious, and gender signifiers that mediate such a performance, which remains connected to societal expectations and historical legacies. I have also argued that a major cause of the lack of challenges to patriarchal frameworks within gendered visual politics lies in the overall underrepresentation of female candidates. In the absence of enhanced representation—in real terms, space and time on social media and other platforms—female candidates struggle with internal rivalry and low-risk approaches to their visual politics. They remain

circumspect about objectification and semiotic violence, as Chapter 6 shows. In light of these findings, it becomes imperative to reflect more deeply on their body politics as a function of the limits placed on their gender in the political arena.

7.2.1 Gendering the Self

Of the various types of the visual artefacts where women represented themselves or were represented, it has become evident that two aspects—their fashioning of self in relation to the people, and that of projecting the promise of competent leadership—emerged as paramount. These aspects were firstly confirmed by the high proportion of visual posts that pictured the female candidates in these two types by candidates themselves. My in-depth analysis of the visual cues embedded in these artefacts revealed the societal and cultural context that drives the meanings encoded in the posts, both from the candidates and parties. This is why a comparison of posts from the two distinct sources, the parties and the female candidates (as RQ 2 does on the whole), was necessary. What emerged through this comparison is how the female candidates, rather than the parties, used a greater proportion of gendered visual cues—such as the presence of other women, sartorial choices or signalling modesty in how they carried themselves. In this manner, the candidates made their identity *as women* figure prominently in the visual cues (as opposed to cues that were gender neutral ones). Interestingly, the visual cues candidates seem to have employed were also marked predominantly by their highlighting of their traditional and Hindu identity as women. Such instances occurred in a far greater proportion than in posts from their affiliate parties, across most thematic categories of visual cues: gendered, traditional, or Hindu, as opposed to gender-neutral, gender-neutral, or non-traditional ones. Interestingly, in the posts where candidates projected gender-neutral or non-normative forms of femininity in visual cues to convey leadership or competence, the proportions of visual cues employed varied little between their own and their parties' posts.

A detailed analysis of the candidates' self-fashioning, including their attire and use of modesty signals, indicates that female candidates were considerably more self-conscious of their gendered identity than their parties were. Among the eight candidates studied, traditional visual cues appeared far more frequently than non-traditional ones in six cases. With only one exception, the candidates overwhelmingly chose traditional attire. In some instances, there was a complete absence of non-traditional attire; in others, traditional clothing appeared three times as often as non-traditional clothing, even for the candidate most inclined to wear the latter. This heightened self-consciousness was most evident in displays of modesty, where visual cues related to

traditionally feminine expressions greatly outnumbered any non-traditional or modesty-neutral signals.

In combination, through the overwhelming appearance of feminine, traditional, modesty-signalling visual cues, all female candidates most active on social media during the election campaign continually emphasised and reinscribed a paradigmatic notion of the 'good woman' running for political office. An additional dimension to the gendered nature of social values portrayed by candidates became evident when examined through the lens of overall cohesion in the integration of gender, religious, and political identities within their social media posts. Candidates from the ideologically right-wing BJP demonstrated the most strategically planted cohesion in this regard (recall **Fig 23**). Their posts effectively balanced traditionally feminine attire, modesty signals, and religious or political markers, creating a unified visual narrative that aligned seamlessly with their party's overarching ideological messaging. This coherence reinforced a clear and deliberate alignment of gender, cultural, and political identities, projecting a well-rounded representation that supported the party's values. In contrast, candidates from other parties exhibited less cohesion in their visual representations. For instance, AITC candidates rarely incorporated religious symbols, resulting in posts that lacked the multi-pronged approach seen in BJP candidates' visual politics. Similarly, candidates from other parties often emphasised one type of marker—whether feminine, religious, or political—over others. This variation suggests that while the BJP candidates' visual strategies reflected a deliberate effort to integrate multiple identity markers into a cohesive narrative, other parties' candidates were less consistent, leading to a more fragmented representation of gender, religious, and political identities in their social media posts.

In contradiction to these ostensibly constant patterns where the candidates foregrounded their gender and emphasised their femininity more than their parties did, studying the visual cues related to religious markers and political symbols (as a form of body canvassing through accessories or attire) revealed a different trend. In posts by the parties, only about half of the total of eight candidates were shown in a manner where gendered religious markers prevailed with greater frequency than gender-neutral ones. Interestingly, such deviations could not be directly correlated with party ideologies, as the candidates from the centrist/left-of-centre INC party were also shown this way, while one candidate from the far-right and Hindu-nationalist BJP was shown primarily through gender-neutral religious markers. With respect to visual cues related to body canvassing apparent in posts by the candidates, the proportions of cues that showed gender-neutral

accessories or clothing far outnumbered gendered forms of body canvassing for almost all candidates (with the exception of one BJP candidate).

From these findings, it is possible to surmise that the candidates' visual politics were far more gendered in nature than that of their parties. Furthermore, these forms of gendering within the visual political performance of candidates followed traditional and Hindu religious societal paradigms of propriety across party lines more broadly. These findings, therefore, are significant in substantiating the reasons for a body politics predicated on difference, where the visual political performance of individuals follows trends that diverge significantly from those performed by parties. At the core of this divergence, I argue, is the female body as a key instrument in performing visual politics, which I will now turn to.

7.2.2 The Body's Bargain

Having recognised the factors that limit and adverse consequences of free expression for female politicians on social media platforms, the critique of 'feminist techno-utopias' by Sveningsson Elm (2009) remains relevant. Indeed, my study has shown multiple ways through which individual expression fails to be realised on social media. Being dictated both by parties but also by prevailing societal expectations, the visual politics I have examined pertain to how women dress, gesture, and otherwise appear. For the purpose of describing these limits, I will call these negotiations the 'body's bargain'—of how to appear, what to conceal, what to enhance and accentuate—in the non-verbal, gendered political performance I have examined. Such a notion of bargaining foregrounds the ways in which female candidates unavoidably remain objectified as bodies far more than receiving recognition as knowing, unmarked subjects with political agency. The negotiating, in such cases, occurs between the degree of intentional censure of personal aspiration or views, with the force with which such forms of individual expression are inflected by cultural norms.

In conceptual terms, understanding these norms in depth have served to nuance and adapt the connection between female candidates' physical and social body (Douglas, 1970) to the societal context in which the visual political performance occurs. Even as the body might serve as a vehicle for collective mobilisation and expression of individual experience (Subašić et al., 2018), the testimonies of candidates has revealed forms of confinement within the body (Butler, 1990), where their *representations conform* to gain credibility, *negotiate* how much self-expression is admissible, and the consequences of

resisting invites invocations of societal norms of propriety. This allows the cycle of *re-constituting* gender to continue as a visual performance.

Such ideas of bargaining and negotiation, I argue, emerge strikingly in candidates co-opting the ubiquitous sari in their sartorial ensembles, irrespective of party or ideology. Although many candidates deployed subtle variations—saffron-hued saris imprinted with the lotus symbol by BJP candidates, floral motifs, or simpler, plainer hues by CPI(M) ones—their reliance on the attire as a whole aimed to, as confirmed by their testimonies, signal legitimacy through modest femininity. Yet, the near absence of the *ghomta* (head covering) across recorded visual cues suggests that younger or urban-focused candidates increasingly favoured moving away from more conservative markers. A younger BJP politician reported being advised by local elders of both genders to adopt the *ghomta* for broader appeal—a point that becomes particularly relevant here. Yet, the candidate reported avoiding it to project a more contemporary public image. Such a form of resistance remained, as my findings show, an exception. The sari, in its various colours, modes of draping, and accessorising, as a whole, confirms adherence to a cultural script in which the clothing choices of female politicians remain tightly bound to moral expectations.

Now, whilst such a strategy—or compulsion, as it were—might appear uniform on the surface, the deployment of religious visual cues manifested in my findings in unexpected ways. It is often presumed that the BJP highlights Hindu religious imagery more than others, but official posts by the BJP's party handles in my dataset rarely showed candidates engaged in acts of worship or situated in religious settings. Instead, BJP candidates, in their individual posts, demonstrated a display of religious acts and Hindu devotion. Here, their bodily enactment of religiosity emerged as a strategy to appeal to voter blocs by projecting authenticity. In contrast, posts by the AITC party—often dubbed 'secular'—showed acts of worship by their female candidates more frequently, including images of candidates visiting temples. This apparent paradox suggests that female politicians exercise a degree of agency when they perceive that seemingly oppressive customs, such as overt religious markers on their bodies or bodily actions, can confer an electoral advantage. Yet, as many interviewees reported, having to utilise their bodies to perform what is perceived as 'respectable femininity' (Radhakrishnan, 2009) or to appear 'authentic' (Rai, 2014) ultimately reinforces patriarchal codes.

The bargain in enacting bodily performance appeared in my study's interviews with politicians reporting how they curated or were compelled to curate their gestures and

accessories. Several younger candidates described receiving ‘strong suggestions’ from senior party leaders about how to drape their saris or wearing a bright red *tip* (forehead dot). One AITC politician deliberately emulated Mamata Banerjee’s signature white rubber flip-flops (colloquially called ‘chappal’), recognising the iconic status of the party leader’s persona among West Bengal voters. Another, who stood for election from the INC, recalled feeling ‘oddly modern’ when she wore jeans in her rather rural constituency, worrying that voters—especially women—would see her as inappropriately dressed. Conversely, an actor-turned-politician from the AITC recounted that she deliberately dressed in shirts and trousers in a rural area. This individual reported drawing large crowds who saw her attire as a novelty. Such multifaceted performances and their intentions strongly indicate that the boundary between tradition and modernity is neither fixed nor uniformly enforced. Factors such as age, personal background, the perceived ‘glamour factor’, and the local cultural milieu all shape how much a female politician can push her side of a bodily bargain through sartorial experimentation.

A key aspect of the body’s bargain emerged in my findings, echoing insights that Young (2005) drew on regarding the intersection of body politics with patriarchy. Indeed, my participants’ testimonies can be understood to a large extent through how they recognised that increased visibility came at the cost of sustaining hierarchies and, in addition, the fatigue brought about by being hyper-visible. Recognising this ‘double bind’, candidates reported that each decision about their visual political performance—clothing, gestures, or religious symbolism—needed to balance the desire to stand out against the need to fit in with societal standards, testifying to the idea of a continuous trade-off between how, and how much, their bodily performance was displayed. The findings emerging from my study, then, connect to broader theoretical discourses by bringing attention to the preordained cultural scripts that the body politics of female politicians are compelled to perform within the specific setting and culture of their enactment. Casting the female body as a symbol of moral virtue or national identity underscores Douglas’s (1970) argument that social rules regarding the body function as markers of communal order. The notion of bargaining also resonates with Goffman’s (1957) contention that public performance requires the continual negotiation of socially prescribed roles. The online environment, my study has found, intensifies these negotiations, simultaneously offering a space for self-fashioning and a forum for relentless commentary. Hence, while social media might allow female politicians to bypass traditional gatekeeping, it also exposes them to amplified digital surveillance, magnifying the significance of each accessory, gesture, or photograph.

7.2.3 Framing the Gaze: Visual Culture and the Dynamics of Looking

Acts of negotiation—more precisely, the body's bargain between self-expression and confinement within societal norms—necessitate further discussion of the various dimensions of female bodies being made both hyper-visible and invisible. Such a duality is underscored by how women are subject to heightened scrutiny while simultaneously experiencing the erasure of their presence and contributions. The socio-cultural expectations of modesty and moral virtue reappear here and are intensified for women seeking public office through electoral processes and online personas. Indeed, while recounting her experiences, one interviewee noted the unease she felt in self-expression whilst being subjected to an 'othered' gaze, stating: '…whatever I post, the audience's reaction is hardly in my control.' Another highlighted how she was 'extremely careful when [we] curate our images', even when being pictured in seemingly gender-neutral acts like delivering an impassioned speech or debating policy. The candidate drew attention to how a kind of professional behaviour that would be applauded before an unbiased audience could instead be regarded as transgressively 'unfeminine' by the more numerous conservative observers. In this manner, what seems entirely normalised for a male politician invites heightened scrutiny and judgement when enacted by a woman.

Crucially, throughout my study, factors that compound the pressures of the gaze have emerged as manifold, even intersectional in nature. Interviewees reported that parties seeking to broaden their appeal often field younger female candidates and emphasise personal voter engagement, especially with women. Such an approach is an inherent characteristic of non-Western political communication, which values direct interaction and sociality with local communities (Udupa et al., 2018). Consequently, candidates stated in their interviews that they were encouraged to visit women constituents in the afternoons, when most men in the household were away at work. This scheduling minimises discomfort for both the candidates and the women, who typically meet in domestic spaces such as kitchens or private quarters—areas where male political candidates do not usually venture. This arrangement also limits public scrutiny of the candidates and their constituents. Yet, by cultivating such face-to-face rapport, female politicians inadvertently become targets of hyper-(in)visibility, where every gesture or choice of clothing risks being interpreted through a patriarchal lens. One interviewee disclosed that she employed 'professionals who know what the audience will like the most', revealing the stage-managed nature of these offline encounters. Women thus find themselves in a delicate balancing act: they must convey authenticity to voters while pre-empting potential disapproval from party insiders and the broader public.

To better understand such intersectional dimensions of the gaze, Fanon's (1967) concept of overdetermination is particularly useful. In his original formulation, Fanon described overdetermination as the act of racialising an individual by reducing them to stereotypes that deny independent personhood. Building on this, I argue that, in the case of the female politicians whose visual politics I have studied, overdetermination helps explain how societal expectations prefigure their narrative and foster an 'othered' gaze on their appearance and behaviour. This kind of othering also echoes what hooks (1997) identifies in 'black hyper-visibility' and LGBTQI+ experiences—the amplified scrutiny that marginalised groups face. In this context, I propose that such scrutiny erases the nuances of identity and individual actions, reducing female politicians first to their gender identity and physical appearance, and only then to their party and its ideology, if any. My interviews demonstrate that female candidates experience both erasure and scrutiny: they become conspicuous when deviating from male political culture yet remain invisible when it comes to being recognised as individuals for their work.

Building on such forms of scrutiny, the gaze on the body of the female politician manifests in increasingly insidious ways, both symbolically (Bardall et al., 2020) and semiotically (Krook, 2017). My interview findings reveal that attempts to delegitimise women's presence in politics often take visual forms that draw upon textual and discursive practices. My study has uncovered the practical manifestations of this kind of violence, with candidates describing memes, doctored photographs, and repeated insinuations about their character and credibility. One candidate, for instance, was subjected to a casteist, colourist, and classist slur—*'kaajer mashi'*—which likened her to a maidservant by highlighting visual cues such as her dark skin, unkempt hair, and plain attire. She recounted a meme that compared her and a dark-skinned colleague from the same party to four actor-turned-politicians deemed 'glamorous'. Such instances illustrate how the gaze co-opts not only gender but also caste and class prejudices to undermine women's authority under the guise of humour or political critique. Social media platforms, as these testimonies reveal, amplify such forms of violence, often drawing on vernacular-language expressions or local idioms disguised as ordinary gossip or banter.

What emerges, then, about the online gaze is that increased visibility does not necessarily translate into genuine political empowerment or an expansion of women's agency. Instead, female politicians must constantly navigate a landscape where every action—whether a speech, a social media post, or a choice of attire—is subject to heightened scrutiny or outright ridicule. In this environment, intersectional identities—

including caste, class, religion, and sexuality—further amplify vulnerabilities. For example, a minority woman candidate may become hyper-visible for deviating from cultural majorities while simultaneously facing additional layers of patriarchal hostility.

While some of my interviewees reported seeking help from digital image management experts for 'damage control', these aids only allowed them to address imminent problems or pre-empt backlash, rather than dismantle the reasons for a misogynistic gaze. Conversely, carefully orchestrated presentations also inadvertently seem to have reinforced expectations of what women should prioritise, keeping intact the cycle of gaze, trivialisation, misogyny and dismissal. An AITC politician's remark about how images 'sell' depending on who is in power underscores the mercurial nature of the patriarchal gaze*.* Rather than challenging its foundations, politicians and parties often adapt to fluctuating public tastes. Feminine 'traditionalist' cues might be championed in one election cycle, only to be replaced by more 'modern' ones in the next; each shift preserves the idea of women curating their public selves in line with *current* patriarchal ideals. The result is a classic *double bind* in which hypervisibility labels a woman politician as 'exotic' or 'different,' while invisibility conceals her political achievements and contributions.

The experiences of female politicians in West Bengal, shaped by a gaze that undermines their identity, offer new insights into Fanon's notion of overdetermination and Krook's account of semiotic violence. Both theories highlight how dominant cultural frameworks constrain marginalised voices, forcing them to operate within limitations that uphold male privilege While some women adopt what can be considered everyday forms of activism—leveraging social media to craft more empowering narratives or engaging with communities to demonstrate genuine empathy—the success of these efforts depends on an audience that is highly unpredictable and often quick to reinforce sexist norms. By exposing such a gaze, my findings reveal that the visual political acts performed by female politicians are neither entirely liberating nor wholly restrictive. Here, I must emphasise the fluid and shifting forms of hyper(in)visibility and scrutiny through a cultural lens. I therefore argue that a culture-based approach has the potential to advance future research on the intersectional nature of scrutiny faced by marginalised groups in their visual political performance within specific contexts.

7.3 Beyond the Male Politician, Female Politician Binary

On the whole, my findings indicate that the expected distinction between male and female actors that dominates the study of visual politics can be resolved into a more fine-grained cultural reading, where the figure of the female politician itself is not unitary but variegated. Much of the research that lies at intersections of visual politics and gender studies predominantly tends to overlook such a subtlety. Many of these bodies of work also tend to concentrate on the narrative of pantsuits-based gender binaries and transgressions and their societal acceptance within Western democracies. The findings of my study challenge this restricted focus. They help to make a case for critically reassessing and expanding prevailing areas of research on visual politics, without potentially flattening the reading of societal and cultural nuances embedded in performing political visibility. This argument draws its substance based on evidence that the body politics and visual strategies of female politicians even within a relatively focussed historical, cultural and social context like West Bengal is richly multifaceted.

The gendered visual politics within this context has shown that its strategies and outcomes lie between two ends of a spectrum. On one end of this spectrum is portrayal of the female body based on the symbolisms derived from the 'Banga (Bharat) Mata' painting: an exclusionary, synthetic, sacral political construction of an imagined community *and* territory. This representation drives an imagination of a sanctified and genteel woman and personhood—the respectably feminine *bhadramahila*—ensuring that nationhood nurtures and belongs to its people. At the other end of the spectrum lies the photorealist visual image of the wounded Mamata Banerjee from the late 1990s (Ganguly, 2015), which draws on the legacy of activist politics by women in West Bengal (Sen, 2000; Nielsen, 2012). These two poles highlight contrasting yet interconnected strategies of what is visual and performative in Bengal's imagination of women generally, and as leaders.

Conspicuously absent from the visual politics of the period I have examined—through both artefacts and the testimonies of female candidates—is the image of the activist streetfighter, once central to West Bengal's political milieu. Each category of codes derived from my study of visual artefacts, as well as testimonies from female political candidates, signals a collective forgetting of the embodied militant politics that characterised women's participation in the colonial and early post-independence decades of West Bengal. The erasure of this visuality has emerged as a significant finding of my study, evident both in the visual artefacts themselves and in the testimonies

detailing the strategies behind their production. I argue that this absence may stem from an effort to homogenise the perceived image of a politician—one that is strongly shaped by socio-cultural and moral notions of the 'good woman'. Historically, such homogenisation was not pursued as rigorously, nor was militant politics as constrained. Today, however, militant politics has been supplanted by mainstream female politicians who may still take to the streets, but only within the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable in 'respectable' society. This shift was also corroborated by my interviews, where participants asserted that while there are no explicit barriers to their actions, they must always remain aware of their limits.

In effect, through my findings from both investigations, it becomes possible to posit that the visual politics enacted bears testimony to an ongoing construction and reconstruction of the Bengali woman's political and individual persona in a more moderate way. My study of visual artefacts reveals multiple ways in which female politicians portray traditionalism and progressiveness, activism and conservatism, left and right politics, and individual identity and party affiliation. These findings also evidence how such a politics of visibility, to a significant extent, delicately balances a contemporary version of conservatism with modernity. Through what the visual artefacts and the candidates' testimonies have shown, I argue that the potential for reproduction and re-inscription of a 'good woman' lends currency and meaning to the shape-shifting visual strategies female politicians employ within the cultural context of West Bengal. The testimonies in particular have revealed that as much as female candidates expressed comparing themselves to male counterparts, they also compared themselves to one another, both within and between parties.

Within the gendered visual politics uncovered in my study, the personas associated with conservative or traditionalist female politicians have emerged as the most enduring. Every candidate I interviewed, and all the visual cues I examined, expressed modesty and femininity and employed traditional attire to invoke late 19th-century Hindu nationalism. Indeed, the most followed—and thus most visible—candidates on social media, whose posts I examined, were Hindu. The nation's cultural identity is therefore constructed in alignment with the female politician's portrayal of a Hindu middle-class woman and/or mother. Through their clothing—whether mothers or not, married or otherwise—female politicians employ visual strategies that go beyond merely wearing traditional garments to curating a sartorial ensemble. This ensemble is designed to convey modesty and nationalistic femininity, portraying a dependable and relatable woman who upholds traditional values. This strategy, which some scholars term

‘controlled emancipation’ (Hansen, 1994), enables female politicians to navigate the intersection of traditionalism and modernity in intricate ways, while still maintaining legitimacy within their societal context.

However, the idea of national cultural identity, as embodied by female candidates, is interpreted differently across political parties. For instance, candidates from left-wing parties were often depicted—or chose to depict themselves—in Indo-Western clothing. Even when opting for more traditionally feminine attire such as saris or salwar-kameez, they favoured subdued colours, symbolising solidarity with their constituents. In some ways, this choice harks back to the activist roots of visual politics, albeit in a softened (perhaps even superficial) manner. Such visual cues signal a rejection of personal privilege and social class identity. Complementing this, the party itself reinforces this message, projecting its candidates as champions of the oppressed and upholding its promise to voters.

Across the range of Right and Left political ideologies, candidates reported employing diverse visual strategies to differentiate themselves, which has provided an explanation for the meanings embedded in the visual artefacts I analysed. Candidates from the Left projected an image that blended tradition and modernity, using social, political, or religious symbols to signify their beliefs or marital status. This use of symbolism was characterised by restraint, reflecting a measured approach to self-presentation. While most candidates whose social media posts I studied were married Hindus, their portrayal nonetheless leaned towards secularism, avoiding overt emphasis on their party’s fundamental ideological principles. Instead, they were often projected as playing a supporting role to prominent male leaders within their parties. These visual cues suggest a form of lower- to upper-middle-class conservatism, thereby reinforcing gendered cultural and social hierarchies within the political sphere. The BJP candidates I interviewed, and even those whose posts I analysed, represent an exception to this trend, in their portrayal and vocal testimonies of projecting an easy-to-grasp Hindu visual politics in a gendered way.

To further this discussion on how femininity is visually encoded in different ways, it is imperative to examine the appearance of elite personas. This form of sartorial representation constitutes a deliberate political act. Unlike female celebrities who may sexualise themselves to attract the male gaze, these candidates’ manner of attire, I argue, functions as a powerful form of self-expression. This became particularly evident in the visual politics of candidates who were formerly actors in television and film, as well

as among the four high-profile celebrity figures I interviewed. These interviewees were the most articulate in describing their purposive enactment of political personas, highlighting how they strategically used their bodies and appearance to forge a connection with constituents—much like the way they approached costume choices in their acting careers. Unlike candidates from the Left or Right, whose ideological commitments and party structures imposed clearer sartorial expectations, these elite celebrity politicians appeared to experience greater flexibility. Their engagement with political performance often resembled a form of role-playing, where visual presentation was less about adhering to a strict ideological framework and more about crafting a persona that resonated with voters.

Within the digital space of social media, their voluntary public appearances exert a stronger influence than those mediated by traditional or mainstream media. Unlike in television or film, where their image is shaped by producers or costume designers, social media provides them with greater agency to curate their political identity. In this context, digital visibility becomes integral to a visual politics that allows celebrity candidates to control the narrative around their personas while still drawing on the conventions of entertainment media. In this sense, they reappropriate elements of popular culture to construct a persona that holds electoral value—blurring the boundaries between performance and politics in ways that set them apart from their ideological counterparts.

To critically reflect on an important political figure's visual persona—particularly that of Mamata Banerjee—it is essential to consider how her long experience as a female politician informs the strategic use of visual cues for political purpose. What distinguishes Banerjee's persona is her ability to merge an activist legacy with the upholding of traditional social values. Through this seemingly ambivalent identity, she successfully positions herself as both a *daughter of the land* and a *fiery guardian*—a leader who not only embodies cultural familiarity but also takes to the streets to defend her people. This persona carries significant visual dimensions. Banerjee's self-presentation—marked by her signature blue-bordered white saris, covered shoulders, and simple footwear—conveys an ascetic aura (Raychaudhuri, 2021). This asceticism evokes the sacral imagery of *Banga Mata* while also aligning seamlessly with her reputation as an activist, her modest upbringing in a disadvantaged Kolkata family, and her turbulent yet ultimately victorious political journey against the once-dominant Left Front in West Bengal. Additionally, Banerjee's strategic use of gender-neutral cues—such as forgoing a *tip* (bindi), jewellery, and adhering to a minimalist aesthetic—reinforces her authority as the state's leader. This carefully curated image allows her to embody multiple identities at

once: a woman, a politically astute leader, secular in public outlook yet personally religious, traditional yet modern, and a champion of social justice. Through this interplay of visual and ideological elements, Banerjee constructs a persona that is both relatable and commanding, blending cultural symbolism with political pragmatism. Yet, Banerjee's case can be considered an exception in subverting the male/female binary in visual politics.

Overall, the findings from both my investigations suggest that studying gendered visual politics on social media requires a new approach—one that leverages methodological affordances rooted in a culture-specific understanding of both visual artefacts and the strategies used to produce them. These cultural and societal dimensions, I argue, cannot be overlooked; rather, they are central to both methodological and empirical approaches to studying gendered visual politics. The *politics of visibility* compels women active in electoral politics to engage in continuous negotiation, shaping a unique sense of personhood through visual performances that are deeply embedded in broader historical and cultural processes. Although negotiated, these performances enable women in otherwise patriarchal political parties to carve out somewhat autonomous discursive spaces. These spaces not only shape public-political personas but also, albeit in a circumscribed manner, expand the possibilities of political participation and engagement in an increasingly visual and consumer-driven public sphere.

8 Conclusion

My research set forth by identifying four key conceptual and empirical gaps that justify its bases. In concluding this thesis, these gaps are worth recalling to explain how answering my research questions contributes to addressing them, and before I summarise my study's limitations, and map the way forward. The first such gap lay within concerns about the underrepresentation of non-western perspectives in studies of political communication (Neyazi, 2023; Chakravartty and Roy, 2023). A second kind of gap pertains to an 'epistemological dominance' of quantitative methods in political communication research. Given the field's roots in '…qualitative and interpretative methodologies', such a 'puzzling […] marginalisation of qualitative [approaches]' tends to overlook the 'varied and intricate' ways in which political messages are crafted 'when one steps out of the predominantly researched terrains of US and Western Europe' (Neyazi, 2023 p. 2–3). Recognising both these gaps, my analysis of political communication in a non-western context, West Bengal in India, was underpinned by a close understanding of the cultural nuances of its society.

A focus on non-verbal, specifically visual, means of enacting political communication on digital, social media, represents a third, un(der)explored area my research engages with. Here, in my study, I have employed a qualitative framework to study gendered visual culture as a *performative* phenomenon in *electoral politics* (Rai, 2014), mapping these onto a rigorous content analysis. This is where my approach has directly drawn from a deep and critical understanding of West Bengal's social and cultural trajectory over time. Situated within the specific context of South Asia, my research, finally, addresses an empirical gap in the well-established field of feminist and gender studies in and on the region. By examining visual political communication as enacted by women politicians on social media platforms, it explores gender through the intersecting lenses of technology, culture, and society—an area of inquiry largely absent in recent studies on feminist agency, resistance, and politics in South Asian contexts, even in relation to the gendered body (Roy, 2012; Loomba, 2019; Roy, 2022; Malhotra, Menon, and Johri, 2024).

In tracing the shifting positions and participation of women in (West) Bengal's politics over time, I have critically adapted the 'two bodies' formulation (Douglas, 1970) and the concept of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) to my field of study. This cultural understanding of women's social and political lives in West Bengal has been crucial for examining contemporary visual politics as a function of social power and visibility (Dayan, 2013). Drawing on McRobbie's (2015) conceptualisation of the 'perfect', my research has also provided empirical insight into how the visual and social remain mutually constitutive

(Mitchell, 2005), particularly in the gendering of bodies and identities.I have therefore sought to recentre the importance of cultural and social mores in the study of visual political communication. This approach has been critically integrated into my research methodology, which draws its philosophical foundations from critical realism (Bhaskar, [1975] 2008). To this end, I have complemented my detailed visual content analysis of observable outcomes (visual artefacts produced during the 2021 West Bengal electoral campaign) with an equally rigorous reflexive thematic analysis of the unobservable societal structures and strategies (as reported in testimonies of female political candidates). Together, these analyses constitute, produce, and reify gendered visual political performance in varied ways (Matthew, 2009; Sayer, 2000).

To recall, then, how my specific research questions address these goals: the first (RQ1) examined the extent and manner of representation of female political candidates; the second (RQ2) compared the visual politics embedded in the visual artefacts produced by candidates and their political parties; the third (RQ3) queried the intent and motivations that lie behind producing this kind of visual politics. By answering each of these questions, the new, grounded insights my thesis as a whole brings to the study of visual political communication have been threefold. It sheds new light on how gender figures in visual political performance on digital media in terms of its representation, re-constitution and finally, as a form of negotiation.

8.1 Representation

My research shows that female representation in electoral politics should not be viewed solely in statistical terms. Rather, I have argued that framing representation through gender binaries risks overlooking the fact that the political visibility of female politicians is deeply relational and complex, particularly when numerical proportions are interpreted qualitatively. While quantifying women's political visibility in West Bengal's electoral campaign through the visual posts of political parties provides preliminary evidence of low female representation, my research has clearly demonstrated that paying close attention to the modes of representation can be far more revealing about the societal conditions under which a gendered visual politics is performed on social media platforms.

In their own political performance on social media, female candidates most often privileged a display of being seen with people and crowds. This preference serves as a testament to the endurance of making in-person connections on the ground through a political campaign. Such evidence, seen within the study of visual artefacts posted by them,

confirms how digital media have yet to completely displace pre-digital forms of identity construction and representation in non-western societies (Kupianen, 2016). Moreover, I have also argued how in such societies, as in the case of West Bengal, the gendering of visual political performance occurs in female candidates displaying expected societal roles aligned with caregiving, and in effect, erasing any overt display of political authority (Thomas and Bittner, 2017). In their interviews, a refrain about the display of care and service emerged from participants across the political spectrum in varied ways. For example, the BJP's right-leaning candidates emphasised how they needed to show allegiance to the people, the party, its leaders and the nation; the CPI(M)'s left-leading candidates felt they needed to demonstrate their relevance by foregrounding problems of the poor and marginalised in society. Either way, a concern about appearing among and as working for the people remained prevalent in the visual artefacts as well as the testimonies about their production. Female candidates enacting a visual politics of blending in with their constituents cannot be considered absolute however, as my study of the various types of visual artefacts has shown.

Despite facing greater scrutiny regarding their appearance and conduct compared to male politicians (Rohrback et al., 2023; Coffe et al., 2023), female candidates in the 2021 WB campaign employed strategies to express visual agency and enhance their visibility. As Rose (2001) and Dayan (2013) suggest, I argue that instances of female candidates appearing visually distinct have emerged in more subtle ways. The visuals candidates posted of themselves differentiated them from other women constituents through various elements—their attire, the postures they were photographed in, the manner and locations in which they were felicitated in public, the camera angles privileging their own eye level, and even age differences. Many of the female candidates I interviewed corroborated that they intentionally chose to post such visuals (in response to RQ 3). These candidates emphasised that being seen among people while simultaneously standing out was a key strategy for expressing both agency and popularity. However, some candidates also reported that their popularity and legitimacy could be visually reinforced by the presence of large crowds or by appearing alongside their party's senior leadership in photographs. In addressing RQ 2, my findings confirm that the visual artefacts posted by female candidates during the electoral campaign were deliberately crafted to convey leadership potential.

Through these various strategies *observed* in the visual artefacts, and *reported* by their producers, I argue that representation of female politicians is not relational to their male counterparts alone. Furthermore, my study has shown that framing visual political

performance through gender binaries can obscure these nuances. Rather, answering the question about the *manner* of representation (embedded in RQ1's sub-questions), shows that their visual political performance on social media platforms establishes a relational field between themselves, the people and their party's leadership. In addition, the question of representation has also been answered by what female candidates reported about their *compulsions* to perform and establish continuous visual presence. A double bind in their visual political performance emerged here, beyond balancing relatability with salience. It extended to the compulsion of female politicians to cater to interests of both their parties and the public, thereby sustaining existing and emerging forms of women's unequal status in society by being *made* visible in particular ways (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2024; Callahan, 2020).

The most compelling way in which this compulsion operated, I argue, emerges from the accounts of my study's interview participants across party lines, who consistently reported experiencing a form of societal scrutiny resulting from the visual politics they were required to display. This scrutiny, in turn, compelled them to conform to normative societal expectations. While I began my study with the conceptual framework of visibility in politics as a function of power, and understood visuals on digital media as a form of societally grounded political discourse, my analysis of interview data revealed an additional layer of insight—the phenomenon of gendered, hyper-visible invisibility, thereby introducing a new theoretical lens. As I demonstrate in Chapter 6, Fanon's (1967) ideas on the racialised gaze and the heightened scrutiny based on perceived difference (Ryland, 2013) serve as substantive concepts through which the reported experiences of my interviewees can be understood.

In this way, addressing my question on strategic intents and motivations (RQ 3) adds important empirical substance to the notion of a group being negatively marked by always being visible and scrutinised. In effect, the individual is reduced to her group identity, portrayed as lacking agency and power in the eyes of the observer. This evidence of hyper-visible invisibility in my research strongly substantiates Fanon's (1967) thesis on racial anxiety at both visceral and psychological levels. However, by foregrounding the lived experiences of a group of women politicians operating in West Bengal's societal context, my findings extend Fanon's concept into the realm of gender studies, offering new empirical evidence from an unexplored perspective. To return to what this thesis reveals about female representation, I argue that, beyond the compulsions shaping gendered visual

politics and limiting individual autonomy, these visual politics also serve to reconstitute how the female body is perceived, signified, and understood—an issue to which I now turn.

8.2 Re-constitution

In developing this thesis through two complementary investigations, I began with Mary Douglas's (1970) *two bodies* formulation, which led me, in the specific domain of my study—visual political communication—to W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) argument that the social constructs the visual, and, concurrently, the visual constructs the social. Douglas's framework has been crucial in analysing how women politicians in West Bengal navigate both their physical presence and the broader political structures that shape their visibility. The *physical body*—scrutinised for its appearance, gestures, and attire—is central to how female politicians are perceived, while the *social body*—embedded within political norms, cultural expectations, and media narratives—dictates the boundaries of their public legitimacy.

By evolving the framework of my study through a close examination of Bengal's (later West Bengal's) socio-cultural trajectory, particularly the status and political participation of women, I have illuminated the exchange of meanings between the physical and social body. In light of my findings, I argue that contemporary visual politics on digital and social media actively reconstitutes the embodied figure of the Bengali woman. In this sense, the visual artefacts on social media are imbued with profound cultural and social significance. They project historical values into the future in modified forms, demonstrating the reciprocity between the physical and social body and the role of the visual in shaping the social. This notion of reconstituting feminine ideals in West Bengal's gendered visual politics on social media platforms represents a significant contribution of this thesis—firstly, to the *two bodies* formulation, and secondly, to the global discourse and practice of studying visual politics, and more broadly, political communication.

In my research, I have traced how West Bengal's intellectual heritage has historically grappled with anxieties about women's public roles and sexuality. I have delved into how shifting imaginations of the *bhadramahila* (the 'respectable woman') from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1980s idealised the Bengali woman as a moral guardian of the family and nation. Yet, historically, vernacular literature circulated in colonial Bengal satirised a 'new woman' who transgressed established caste and gender norms (Chatterjee, 1993; Menon, 1999). As I have demonstrated through my empirical investigations, such historical anxieties persist and continue to shape contemporary

political and social discourse. On the one hand, today, female politicians reconcile with these enduring ideals of genteel respectability. Yet, on the other hand, Bengal's social and political history, my study of the visual artefacts in its contemporary politics on social media platforms, and the testimonies about producing them, reveal that ambiguities surrounding the *visual* embodiment(s) of a *bhadramahila* ideal of womanhood remain far from resolved.

Within such ambiguities, my study has uncovered diverse yet novel ways of projecting a persona of the 'good woman'. An overwhelming presence of associations with a traditionalist, modest, genteel, religious, domestic, servile construct of the Bengali woman does persist. My investigations have shown an adherence to traditionalist societal codes in sartorial choice, signalling modesty, religiosity, or political affiliation. Nonetheless, important departures from a *singular* kind of visibility have also appeared in the construction of self within the visual artefacts, as well as what female candidates reported about their varying interpretations of the 'good woman' ideal.

In the testimonies I analysed, the ideal of feminine goodness has emerged in *dialectical* and *plural* ways. For instance, whilst a candidate reported embodying gentility and modern sophistication by wearing western attire and participating in community activities like sports among her constituents, another reported sporting a large red *tip*, accessorising herself with all her marital anointments and religious symbols to display her Hindu femininity. Even in the right-wing BJP candidates' testimonies, the idea of a political party, a community formed in the public sphere, being regarded as a 'family' does not conform to any historical ideals of the 'good woman' inhabiting the domestic sphere. Nor does referencing Bengali television soap operas—a popular medium that grew in the mid-1990s, to configure what the ideal mother, wife, daughter (or daughter-in-law) should look like—signify forms of *bhadramahila* femininity in a political actor that invokes nineteenth century literature in Bengal in a new and modified form.

The embodiment of literature- and TV-inspired 'feminine' codes in a political persona, I argue, signifies a paradoxical, modern form of traditionalism. These portrayals of genteel, domestic femininity effectively erase from public imagination the historical memory of activism and militant politics undertaken by Bengal's and West Bengal's women—including even the so-called respectable middle-class women in pre-independence nationalist movements and post-independence Naxalite struggles. As a result, any representation of grounded, militant activism in the figure of the female politician is conspicuously absent from present-day visual politics across all parties, as well as from the visual personas

enacted by their candidates. Even in exceptional cases such as Mamata Banerjee, the ideal of a 'good woman' is reconstituted through a broad, openly-defined populism. Here, the social lives of poor and marginalised constituents are given prominence alongside the high culture of the *bhadralok*, where highbrow nationalist literature—targeted at a global or at least *bhadralok* audience—features alongside folk art and music. In terms of the visible reconstitution of feminine ideals, Banerjee's performance of Hindu rituals on social media exists alongside her commitment to a multi-religious, secular sociality in West Bengal.

To return to the imperatives of appearing 'good' as a female political actor to the people in their visual politics on social media, I have argued that my investigation of visual artefacts and testimonies about producing them evidence a kind of competitive femininity (McRobbie, 2015). Central to these competing ideas of 'goodness', I have shown, lie instances where candidates reported overstepping their circumscribed roles within a party, or in the view of society, generally. My study has revealed how, when women in political roles moved beyond being the second-in-command to higher levels occupied by, often male, party leadership, if they projected 'modernity' through intellectual expertise, digital fluency, or a cosmopolitan demeanour, they faced acute scrutiny for deviating from conventional norms or even suppression. In addition, candidates also reported evidence of semiotic violence (Krook, 2022) that directly targeted their appearance and bodies. Such kinds of violence, I have demonstrated, takes the form of 'digital' retribution for transgressing feminine codes from a general societal perspective, when not *appearing* in consonance with *bhadramahila* ideals. In such instances, my study reveals that while digital platforms undeniably broaden the scope of political participation, historically entrenched cultural expectations continue to define the contours of women's public visibility.

Yet, my study as a whole brings to light how competing to be an ideal woman possesses political currency because its visual translations are not fixed in nature. Indeed, my self-reflexive engagement with the research data reminded me of the dual role the female body plays: as tangible, physical reality and as a canvas that re-constitutes social and cultural meanings. This is how, even within one linguistic and cultural community, women politicians reported that the ways the public might judge their attire, demeanour, and overall persona, has shifting expectations.

In presenting themselves as credible political figures, female candidates engaged in ongoing negotiations of bodily norms—balancing culturally entrenched ideals of femininity with the demands of a modern, public persona. This is where, I argue, plurality thrives

within the visual politics of social media, even within a single cultural and societal context. My thesis contributes to the field of political communications research by demonstrating how a methodology grounded in the socio-cultural context of study can yield a rich and nuanced understanding of the variegated nature of visual political performance. At the same time, my research highlights how the 'good woman' ideal continues to persist, even within the new, digital space of political visibility in the third decade of the twenty-first century. This, in turn, brings me to a third key contribution of my thesis to the global discourse on political communication and visual politics: the central role of gendered negotiation.

8.3 Negotiation

In presenting my thesis's contribution to the discourse on representation of female political candidates, the aspect of appearing relatable to the public while also appearing salient, points to a form of gendered *negotiation*. Indeed, such forms of negotiation also emerge where female candidates portray (or are compelled to portray) themselves as a second in command to male party leadership, appearing servile to the people, their party and the nation. Many such negotiations I have foregrounded in developing this thesis remind us, for one, that the regulation of women's bodies and public roles was forged in Bengal's colonial society. Moreover, I have also argued that the persona of the respectable and 'good' female political candidate in West Bengal is re-constituted through varied visual political performances in the present day. In this sense, my thesis offers new insights on how social media operates as the site through which gendered hierarchies are both reproduced and to a lesser extent, challenged—at least in the particular context I have examined.

To qualify what these contributions to gendered negotiations on social media look like, what I have discussed about the 'body's bargain' in Chapter 7 is worth recalling. By answering both RQ 2 (comparing the visual politics of candidates and their parties on social media) and RQ 3 (the considerations female candidates report about performing their visual politics), the body politics *observed* in studying online visual artefacts show both alignment and divergence of the female candidates' visual politics and their parties' portrayal of female candidates. The alignment of candidates' visual politics on social media with that of their parties on gender-neutral sartorial choices or modes of body canvassing showed that candidates felt compelled to show themselves as potential leaders as frequently as their parties did. Conversely, a divergence of the candidates' visual politics from their parties when it came to gendered aspects—whether actions, traditional or religious political

symbols and accessories—revealed that they were much more inclined than their parties to portray themselves to the people as 'good', relatable women, as daughters, sisters or mothers. My studies of both the visual artefacts and of the female politicians' perceptions and practices concurred on this aspect, thereby affirming that appearing as women who their electorate could relate to mattered more to them than establishing political competence in independent terms. The aspect of professional competence can also be considered abstract and difficult to *display*, thereby not amenable to a purely *visual* politics; traditional gendered femininity of being good and relatable can be portrayed in more tangible and observable terms.

The female candidates I interviewed consistently displayed an awareness, albeit with varying levels of criticality, about aspects of their political performance that were amenable to display and being made visible, including a knowledge of the affordances across major social media platforms. This kind of awareness brings a new dimension to how Smith (2008) highlights that the objects and phenomena within the realm of visual studies are a function of the *apparatus* that renders them visible. Moreover, the various nuances of gendered negotiations that candidates reported to me bring a wealth of evidence from a particular societal and cultural context to what Lillekar (2019) argues about people (in this case, the electorate) looks for through cues and signs embedded in visuals. Lillekar highlights that visuals operate as mental shortcuts to aid decision making. The kind of gendered negotiations the candidates reported about enacting their visual politics, confirmed by cues embedded in visual artefacts posted by female candidates and parties, supply resounding evidence of the intents and outcomes behind fashioning mental shortcuts for the audience. In this sense, facilitating the visible signs and symbols of respectable femininity bears further evidence to gendered *negotiations* through the intents and acts that inhabit what is seen on social media platforms based on anticipating how its audience will perceive them.

The most frequently occurring form of gendered negotiation my thesis has revealed that pertains to female candidates balancing societal expectations and interests of the party with their own political aspirations. It is within such balancing acts, between the self and society in particular, that I have argued the candidates simultaneously become hyper-visible and invisible as well as strive to negotiate gendered relatability and salience for their electorate. Moreover, in balancing societal expectations with their own interests, women candidates negotiate the norms of maintaining decorum through their behaviour, their bodies, what they choose to cover their bodies with and *how* they do so. At one level, I

have argued, this form of self-censure strongly circumscribes their access to free personal expression. At another, my study has shown, in the very self-censure female candidates exercise in their visual political performance objectifies their bodies to public gaze in unexpected ways (for themselves), an outcome they seldom have control over. I have also argued how the fine line this form of gendered visual politics by female candidates negotiates extends to balancing their own interests with that of their parties. Across the political spectrum, I have uncovered how candidates need to display a commitment to the collective over the self, through both implicit as well as explicit guiding principles of party ideologies. Inevitably, my investigations have shown that negotiating such interests compel female candidates to put their labour on display for consumption by their individual political competitors, for their parties as well as to meet expectations of their online audiences.

By uncovering these various forms of gendered negotiations in the specific context of West Bengal's current electoral politics, my study advances the discourse on the double bind that female politicians manage about expectations from their femininity (Jameison, 1995). By focusing on these negotiations within a gendered visual political performance, my thesis sheds new light on the discourse on culture-specific ways of constructing public personas on digital, social media, and the intricate strategies that underlie these constructions globally (Creech, 2020).

8.4 Limitations of the Present Study

My research design, in part, focuses on a single electoral cycle in West Bengal, constrained by the period of its execution and also the five-year periodicity of elections at the state (assembly) level of the Indian federated political structure. Whilst this choice enabled me to conduct an intensive analysis of contemporary visual political practices, I recognise how it limited my ability to capture the evolving nature of political communication by taking a long-term view. Whilst conducting my research, I became acutely conscious of electoral cycles not being isolated moments but deeply embedded in historical continuities and ruptures. Analysing the socio-cultural context of (West) Bengal by taking a long view particularly convinced me for a need to perform further investigations before ruling out rival explanations about gendered, visual political performance strategies, that evolve and employ new technological affordances, styles and visual languages. This limitation also became apparent in my interviewees reporting their experiences from past campaigns, and highlighting how their current strategies were a function of previous campaign experiences.

Another key limitation of my study lies in its empirical focus exclusively on women politicians, without a comparative dimension involving male politicians. As such, this renders my findings partial, as reports of perceptions of female candidates could not be cross-examined by interviewing male candidates, or, for that matter, analysing the visual artefacts posted by them alongside those posted by their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the research findings still remain valid in centring women politicians' experiences within a relational field. This approach helps to understand more comprehensively how female bodies are ‘marked’ through and for their visual politics, identifying the privileges or exemptions actually available to male politicians. Against what strategies, then, could their visual politics be evaluated? Just as I have uncovered a gendering of visual political performance from a female vantage, could a similar gendering also be revealed by investigating the position of male politicians? Or would this gendering be completely absent, and could the visual political performances of male politicians be considered neutral or naturalised? These questions point to areas of future research that could employ a wider relational understanding of gender in political communication, one that could illuminate how masculinity and femininity are co-constructed. Further research using the methodologies I have employed could be extended to a wider empirical field that was beyond the time and resources available for the current study.

A third limitation of my study pertains to the demographic composition of my interview participants. In my first investigation, for instance, applying the criteria of the most followed female candidates on Facebook and X, resulted in all of them happening to be Hindus. A similar composition emerged in my interviews; the group is dominated by upper-caste, upper-class Hindu—only two of my study’s participants were Muslim—women politicians. The composition of this group too reflects the naturalised access to an ‘external’, international researcher afforded within existing socio-economic structures within West Bengal’s current context. In this sense, while my analytical methods were rigorous and systematic, the findings they yield also possess limited generalisability from an intersectional perspective, which can only be fulfilled if the participant group is extended to more and other religious minorities, lower caste and marginalised groups and more diverse educational and occupational backgrounds.

The scope of the actual inquiry I conducted—as opposed to the original ambition of my project—presents another limitation of the completed study. I had initially envisioned a comprehensive view of the complete circuit of political communication encompassing the artefacts, producers, and audiences as well as political communication constructed by and

on mainstream media (in terms of groups to investigate), and also examine the combination of visual politics with that of text in far more depth than solely analysing accompanying captions for visuals and/or embedded text within visual posts. Yet, covering such a wide scope would have necessarily entailed the employment of a far more diverse and complex methodological approach than what a single researcher can undertake. Yet, I am convinced that recognising such a limitation also promises avenues for further investigations that can be undertaken through more collaborative research with colleagues who can bring more varied methodological expertise, such as more complex modes of statistical analysis, or even, tools for deep anthropological enquiry.

Beyond these methodological considerations, the geographical specificity of my research presents another limitation. Initially, I had planned to include Bangladesh and conduct a transnational study. However, this ambition had to be set aside, in part, due to the timing of the country's general elections, which had already taken place in 2018, with the next elections not due until 2024. This timing precluded a study of any election campaign during the period of my PhD, given that Bangladesh's size and population mean that the country does not have 'state' level elections. Matters worsened further due to the simmering unrest that precipitated the country's 2024 'July revolution', which led to the resignation and departure of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the violent fall of the government. As of the date of writing, the restoration of complete social and political order in the country is still awaited.

In addition, my focus on West Bengal, whilst having enabled deep contextual analysis, intersects with broader questions about knowledge production in communication studies. As Chakravartty and Roy (2023) argue, regional studies risk being treated as mere 'case studies' in global communication theory, rather than productive sites of advancing new theoretical and methodological perspectives. Yet, this focus lent my study a situated understanding of linguistic and cultural nuances that would be difficult to access by someone not intimately familiar with Bengali language and society. For the same reason, my own biases might also be called into question. I have of course taken extreme care to eliminate these through the application of rigorous and iterative processing of data examined self-reflexively. Indeed, even in critically analysing my distinct forms of data, inflected through a cultural understanding, my study continually traversed the rich specificity of West Bengal's political communication landscape and the broader implications of what I was uncovering. This tension, in a sense, reflects what Flyvberg (2006) identifies in debates about scale and generalisability in qualitative case studies.

Nonetheless, as I explain below, by advancing global knowledge production in political communication closer to what Connell (2007) terms 'southern theory', I do not articulate the validity of my research through Indian *difference* or Bengali *exceptionalism*, but rather place it in a dialogical relationship with new knowledge and theory emerging from diverse academies, on new geographical and societal contexts.

8.5 De-westernising the Study of Visual Politics: An Expanded Field

A critical and carefully considered qualification warrants mention before I discuss the de-westernisation of inquiry into political, specifically, visual political communication. As Chakravartty and Roy (2023) do, I wish to stress that the call to de-westernising this field does not imply adoption of some kind of 'methodological nationalism' akin to a rise of extreme and often violent right-wing, exclusionary, politics now on the rise in many post-colonial democracies (pp. 3–4). This worrying trend, about an ethno-majoritarian call to de-colonise or de-westernise plagues both public and institutional lives in many countries, including India. Equally concerning is how this pattern is seldom criticised in the West. Rather, it is often met with commendation from Western and Northern democracies harbouring the guilt of imperialism and therefore practicing a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs of post-colonial contexts, despite frequent violation of civil liberties and human rights within their societies. I will return, then, to the more particular implications of this study on the move to de-westernise studies of visual politics in a more *inclusive* way.

My research's adoption of a gendered lens as an integral part of its conceptual framework demonstrates the currency of actively employing an understanding of cultural nuances in a post-colonial societal context outside the West. My findings have emerged by moving beyond the 'disembodied' Western gaze (Rajagopal, 2011) in the study of visual political performance, which often employs quantitative and statistical approaches. Rather, by centring cultural nuances even in defining the conceptual categories through which I have examined visual cues in quantitative terms, the research has revealed how markers of tradition, religion, femininity, and even modesty, can be employed to gain productive insights into body politics and its visual performance. My research therefore centres gendered power relations that structure contemporary society in West Bengal. In this sense, what I have uncovered through an examination of both visual artefacts and the reported strategies about their production helps to expand the scope of current communications research at the intersection of visual politics and gender.

In order to achieve this, my study has drawn from the wider discourse of female political participation in Bengal's colonial and post-colonial history, which provides its research context (Chatterji, 1994; Sarkar, 1984). Indeed, through my examination, I have drawn attention to how colonial and post-colonial trajectories of Bengal's history have a presence in its present-day politics in the digital realm, how these continue to shape the evaluation of its women political actors, and how these actors employ particular strategies of self-presentation within this present context. Celebrated for its intellectual heritage, Bengal, and subsequently West Bengal, has long wrestled with anxieties over women's public roles and sexual agency. The social reforms of the nineteenth century idealised the *bhadramahila* as a guardian of the family and a moral bedrock of the nation. Yet the personification of the Bengali women arising from such reforms was also subverted later.

My study demonstrates how these historical anxieties persist today, how they compel women politicians to erase their modern, activist selves with legacies of genteel respectability. The liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s complicated these debates still further, informing the divide between historical and 'new' constructions of ideal womanhood. As a result, female politicians' emerging public visibility adopted new dress codes, leading to media portrayals marked by ambivalence towards global consumer cultures. My findings underline how participants navigate these contradictory demands of the new 'Indian' woman, expected to project empowerment and autonomy while upholding Hindu upper-caste norms of moral propriety. This struggle exposes the uneasy coexistence of liberal impulses with deeply entrenched patriarchal frameworks. The persistent stigma surrounding women's bodies—seen as sexual, carnal objects unable to reach 'higher' intellectual or moral pursuits—means that any visual expression perceived as excessive or indecorous risks undermining a woman's political credibility. In several interviews, participants recounted how public controversies over attire or appearance instantly called into question a female politician's aptitude for leadership, suggesting that deviating from patriarchal norms disqualifies her from attaining political authority.

An emphasis on bodily display of decorum is not purely aesthetic. It remains, as my study shows, deeply connected to notions of authority and moral propriety. Borrowing from Rajagopal (2011) and earlier works on post-colonial South Asia, my study has uncovered how clothing, adornments, and gestures symbolise who is perceived as a credible source of power. India's only female prime minister Indira Gandhi famously wore regional handloom saris in each area she visited, signalling solidarity and reinforcing her position of authority through culturally specific attire (Basu, 2015). Contemporary female politicians in

West Bengal, as my study shows, emulate this practice by wearing local fabrics and styles to display authenticity and/or highlight their ideological affiliation. Far from trivial details, these sartorial choices have emerged as being politically loaded. For women appearing in offline or online spaces however, their sartorial choice and manner equates 'respectable femininity' with *covering* up, modest adornment, and *displaying* a deference to patriarchy. Many South Asian feminist scholars have argued that norms around gendered bodies emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as nationalist elites drew stricter lines between 'acceptable' and 'deviant' forms of bodily display (Lugones, 2010; Menon, 1999).

A 'double speak' regarding women's bodies—valuing them as symbols of cultural authenticity yet warning them not to appear too traditional or too Western—exposes the endurance of a postcolonial mindset and imagination. Rather than womanhood progressing from conservative to modern, participants in my research displayed overlaps between and complex responses to selective conformity and transgression through strategic appropriation of cultural codes. Yet, as I set forth in the introduction to this thesis, despite valuable bodies of research being done on South Asian feminism (Loomba, 2019; Roy, 2022), these have not centred on the visual specificities of *gendered bodies* in digital realms; they focus on policy-level debates or socio-legal reforms. Even scholarship like Diana Dimitrova's (2020) work on embodiment in South Asian traditions has often concentrated on religious contexts or looked at iconic figures.

Working within the gaps in this kind of scholarship, my study has focused on the everyday interactions between digital and offline spaces, and the performed body politics of female politicians on the latter. This approach has helped bring to light actions and appearances that map onto how post-colonial nationalisms interact with patriarchal traditions where women are concerned. Such issues centred around gendered control, visibility, visuality, performance, decorum, conduct, clothing or modesty are by no means limited to the Bengali, Indian or even South Asian context. Communications technologies—once perceived as neutral—become crucial brokers of how women in politics, including India's, reconfigure or re-inscribe normative binaries of tradition/modernity and local/global (Hegde, 2011). My study's findings confirm that while digital platforms facilitate more direct engagement with voters, yet they also intensify moral policing, as critics may brand any perceived deviation in female attire or behaviour as evidence of cultural betrayal.

There is no inherent either/or. One can wear sarees and still achieve feats such as sending a rocket to the moon. However, the critical issue lies in the gendered politics of the body—specifically, the ways in which societal constraints on women's choices, whether in attire or in more ambitious pursuits such as space exploration, become the focal point for understanding the intersection of gender, autonomy, and opportunity. Additionally, the longstanding presence of female deities in Hindu iconography and nationalist tropes—seen in works like 'Bharat Mata'—continues to shape audience perceptions of women in leadership roles (Pinney, 2004). On the one hand, this iconography compels the invocation of maternal imagery in present visual politics, which candidates perceived to potentially bolster their moral authority through a sense of care for citizens. On the other, it subtly imposes a standard of virtue demanding sexual purity and subservience, constraining their ability to portray more individualistic or radical personas. My analyses have in fact shown that candidates' appeals to the maternal or ascetic figure can garner widespread support but may also undermine a woman politician's agency by anchoring her identity to traditional patriarchy.

My study has shown that this body emerges as a contested site of authority, morality, and cultural identity. Recognising these nuances reveals the many complexities that usher in new ways to conduct the study of women's quest for visibility and power in contemporary politics globally. Addressing these issues, rather than imposing Western-derived binaries would enable a more expansive and context-sensitive understanding of how visual strategies function within postcolonial studies of gendered political performances.

On the whole, by revealing the material translation of these imaginaries about the female body and personhood, by centring the embodied, gendered experiences within the visual politics of West Bengal's female politicians, I hope to have brought forth how further research on de-westernising visual political communication studies requires a thorough and critical engagement with postcolonial feminist frameworks. Such an approach provides the opportunity to connect historical legacies of colonial rule and post-colonial experiences to contemporary political realities. It helps to find a way into understanding how societal hierarchies of gender and patriarchy find material translation in the visual politics surrounding the female politician's body.

To build further from the empirical learnings and conceptual foundation my study lays for researching visual political communication through a gendered lens, new research could take many productive directions. To examine postcolonial contexts as well as specific

diasporic or travelling groups within ‘northern’ societies, the complex interplays of offline and online political communication should be investigated through nuances of grounded cultural understandings. Through new forms of trans-national and trans-academy research collaborations, comparative studies such as the one with Bangladesh that I had set out to conduct but could not could yield important insights about societies with a shared history, their common and distinct cultural values, societal norms, and religious inflections on gendered visual politics and performance. This approach would yield a more graded and nuanced understanding of cultural and societal codes that inhabit the realm of digital media. Given what my study has found about semiotic violence towards and objectification of female bodies, future research must also centrally consider the evolving role of emerging technologies in shaping the visual representation of women in politics through its opportunities as well as its perversions. On the whole, these varied approaches could serve to make the study of visual political communication truly representative and global, exploring new fields geographically, culturally, and intellectually, to move beyond and/or even nuance existing conceptual frameworks and empirical concerns.

Page intentionally left blank

Bibliography

Acharya, P. (1982). Abolition of English at Primary Level in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *17*(4), 124–128.

Acharya, P. (1995). Bengali 'Bhadralok' and Educational Development in 19th Century Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *30*(13), 670–673.

Addy, P., & Azad, I. (1973). Politics and Culture in Bengal. *New Left Review*, *1*(79), 71–112.

ADR. (2021). *West Bengal Election Watch*. Association for Democratic Reforms. Retrieved from: https://adrindia.org/research-and-reports/state-assemblies/west-bengal

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2019). The Honor Killing of Qandeel Baloch: Visibility Through Social Media and Its Repercussions, in K. Zaleski, A. Enrile, E.L. Weiss, & X. Wang (Eds.), *Women's Journey to Empowerment in the 21st Century: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of Women's Lives in Modern Times* (135–146). Oxford: Oxford Academic (online) https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190927097.003.0008

Aiello, G. & Parry, K. (2019). *Visual Communication: Understanding Images in Media Culture.* London: Sage.

Åkerlund, M. (2021). Dog whistling far-right code words: the case of 'culture enricher' on the Swedish web. *Information, Communication & Society*, *25*(12), 1808–1825. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1889639

Al Jazeera. (2022, August 20). Finland asks: Does a prime minister have a right to party? Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/20/finland-asks-does-a-prime-minister-have-a-right-to-party

Albertson, B.L. (2015). Dog-Whistle Politics: Multivocal Communication and Religious Appeals. *Political Behavior, 37*, 3–26 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9265-x

Alexander, J. C., Giesen, B., & Mast, J. L. (Eds.). (2006). *Social Performance : Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Amin, M., & Ritonga, A. D. (2022). The Differential Effect of Women Politicians' Communication, Efficacy, and Ideology in Building Citizens' Political Satisfaction and Trust: A Case of a Developing Nation. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *9*(4), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1375

Andén-Papadopoulos, K. (2014). Citizen camera-witnessing: Embodied political dissent in the age of 'mediated mass self-communication'. *New Media & Society*, *16*(5), 753-769. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489863

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Appadurai, A., & Breckenridge, C. A. (1995). Public modernity in India. In C. A. Breckenridge (Ed.), *Consuming modernity: Public culture in a South Asian world* (pp. 1–20). Minneapolis [MN]: University of Minnesota Press.

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ashworth, S., Berry, C.R. and Bueno de Mesquita, E. (2024), Modeling Theories of Women's Underrepresentation in Elections. *American Journal of Political Science, 68*, 289-303. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12785

Bagchi, A. K. (2010). *Colonialism and Indian Economy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Baishya, A.K. (2015). #NaMo: The Political Work of the Selfie in the 2014 Indian General Elections. *International Journal of Communication 9*, 1686–1700.

Banerjee, S. (2003). Gender and nationalism: The masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *26*(2), 167–179. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00019-0

Banerjee, T.N. (2012). Political Iconography & the Female Political Leader: The Case of Indira Gandhi, Some Initial Questions. In: *Humanities Underground*. Retrieved from: http://humanitiesunderground.org/political-iconography-the-female-political-leader-the-case-of-indira-gandhi-some-initial-questions/

Banerjee, R. (2023). Elections and Social Media Cultures: Politics, Women and Visuals in West Bengal, India. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_3

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11316rx

Bantimaroudis, P., Zyglidopoulos, S. and Symeou, P.C. (2010). Greek Museum Media Visibility and Museum Visitation: An Exploration of Cultural Agenda Setting. *Journal of Communication, 60*, 743-757. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01512.x

Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts. *Political Studies, 68*(4), 916-935. doi:10.1177/0032321719881812

Barry, A. M. (1997). *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication*. Albany [NY]: SUNY Press.

Barthes R. (1972). *Mythologies*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang

Basu, S., & Majumder, A. (2013). Dilemmas of Parliamentary Communism. *Critical Asian Studies*, *45*(2), 167–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2013.792569

Basu, A. (2015). *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bauer, N.M. & Carpinella, C. (2018). Visual information and candidate evaluations: the influence of feminine and masculine images on support for female candidates. *Political Research Quarterly 71*(2), 395–407.

Bayly, C. A. (1988). *Indian society and the making of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BBC (2019, May 29). Indian Film Star MPs Hit Back at 'Outfit Trolls'. *BBC.* Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48442663

BBC (2022, February 15). Qandeel Baloch: Court acquits brother of Pakistan star's murder. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60388111

Beaumont, P. (2021, April 29). West Bengal elections go ahead despite India's soaring Covid death toll. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/29/west-bengal-elections-india-covid-death-soaring

Bedi, T. (2007). The Dashing Ladies of the Shiv Sena. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *42*(17), 1534–1541. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419520

Begum, F. (2021). *Ties that Bind: Women's Sociality in Bengal, 1920-1965*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

Bene, M. (2020). *Virális politika: politikai kommunikáció a Facebookon* [*Viral politics: Political communication on Facebook*]. Bidapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó & Könyvpont Kiadó.

Bennett, W. L. (2012). The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 644*(1), 20-39. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212451428

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bhardwaj, D. [@DeepikaBhardwaj] (2023, August 24). Saree Bindi Gajra Sindoor Mangalsutra *Women of #Chandrayaan3 proving that cultural values & success can*

go hand in hand & these ain't symbols of oppression but strength !!! X. [Tweet]. https://x.com/DeepikaBhardwaj/status/1694620613770698910

Bhaskar, R. ([1975], 2008). *A Realist Theory of Science*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bhattacharyya, D. (2004). Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *39*(14/15), 1529–1537.

Bird, S.E. (1999). Gendered construction of the American Indian in popular media. *Journal of Communication 49* (3), 61–83.

Blaagaard, B., Mortensen, M., & Neumayer, C. (2017). Digital images and globalized conflict. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*(8), 1111-1121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717725573

Bleiker, R., Campbell, D., Hutchison, E., & Nicholson, X. (2013). The visual dehumanisation of refugees. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *48*(4), 398–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.840769

Bleiker, R. (2015). Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *43*(3), 872–890. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829815583084

Boorstin, D.J. (1962) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Harper.

Boulding, K.E. (1973). *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*. Ann Arbor [MI]: University of Michigan Press.

Bose, S. (2003). Post-Colonial Histories of South Asia: Some Reflections. *Journal of Contemporary History*, *38*(1), 133–146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009403038001968

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. London: Sage.

Brantner, C., Lobinger, K., & Stehling, M. (2020). Memes against sexism? A multi-method analysis of the feminist protest hashtag #distractinglysexy and its resonance in the mainstream news media. *Convergence, 26*(3), 674-696. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519827804

Brantner, C., & Stehle, H. (2021). Visibility in the digital age: Introduction. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, *21*(1), 93–98. https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2021.01.006

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a *knowing* researcher. *International Journal of*

Transgender Health, *24*(1), 1–6. https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Brighenti, A. (2007). Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology, 55*(3), 323-342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392107076079

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2015). *Business Research Methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bucy, E. P. (2016). The Look of Losing, Then and Now: Nixon, Obama, and Nonverbal Indicators of Opportunity Lost. American Behavioral Scientist, 60(14), 1772-1798. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216678279

Bucy, E.P. and Joo, J. (2021) Editors' introduction: Visual politics, grand collaborative programs, and the opportunity to think big. *The International Journal of Press/Politics 26*(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220970361

Bumiller, E. (2003, May 16). Keepers of Bush image lift stagecraft to new heights. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/16/us/keepers-of-bush-image-lift-stagecraft-to-new-heights.html

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of* '*Sex*'*.* New York: Routledge.

Caldwell, J. (Ed.) (2000). *Electronic Media and Technoculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Callahan, W. A. (2020). Introduction: Visualizing International Relations. In W. A. Callahan (Ed.), *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (pp. 1–14). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190071738.003.0001

Cammaerts, B. (2012). Protest logics and the mediation opportunity structure. European Journal of Communication, 27(2), 117-134. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323112441007

Cardo, V. (2021) Gender politics online? Political women and social media at election time in the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand. *European Journal of Communication 36* (1), 38–52.

Cartwright, L., & Mandiberg, S. (2009). Obama and Shepard Fairey: The Copy and Political Iconography in the Age of the Demake. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *8*(2), 172–176. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412909008002030 3

Casper, M. J., & Moore, L. J. (2009). *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility*. New York: NYU Press

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Chakrabarti, K. (2023). Women in State Politics in West Bengal. In P. Rajput & U. Thakkar (Eds.), *Women in State Politics in India: Missing in the Corridors of Power* (pp. 273–288). London; New York: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, B. (2011). The 2011 State Assembly Election in West Bengal: The Left Front Washed-out! *Journal of South Asian Development*, *6*(2), 143–167. https://doi.org/10.1177/097317411100600201

Chakrabarty, D. (1981). Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s. *Past & Present*, *91*(1), 140–169. https://doi.org/10.1093/past/91.1.140

Chatterjee, A. (2021). An Experiential Study of 'Conditional Agency' of Bengali Widows with Reference to the Autobiographies of Saradasundari Devi and Rassundari Devi. *Ensemble*, *2*(2), 265–271. https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0202-a027

Chatterjee, P. (1990). The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question. In K. Sangari & S. Vaid (Eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (pp. 233–253). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press.

Chatterji, J. (1994). *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chatterji, J. (2013). Nationalisms in India, 1857–1947. In J. Breuilly (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.013.0012

Chattopadhyay, S.K. (2022, July 24). In defence of Kali: Uproar over comments by Mahua Moitra. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from: https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/in-defence-of-kali-uproar-over-comments-by-mahua-moitra/article65665308.ece

Chaudhuri, S. (2012). Space, Interiority, and Affect in Charulata and Ghare Baire. In M. Asaduddin & A. Ghosh (Eds.), *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand, and Ray* (pp. 98–115). New Delhi: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198075936.003.0007

Chiluwa, I. (2021). Women's online advocacy campaigns for political participation in Nigeria and Ghana. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *19*(5), 465–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1999287

Clemente, D. (2021, November 7). A president in a Pantsuit? The Conversation. Retrieved from: https://theconversation.com/a-president-in-a-pantsuit-68286 (Retrieved May 1, 2022)

Coffe, H., Fraile, M., Alexander, A., Fortin-Rittberger, J., & Banducci, S. (2023, August 24). Editorial: Mind the backlash: gender discrimination and sexism in contemporary societies. *Frontiers in Political Science 5*. http://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1260143

Collinson, D. L., & Hearn, J. (1994). Naming men as men: Implications for work, organization and management. *Gender, Work & Organization, 1*(1), 2-22. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.1994.tb00002.x

Connell, R. (2007). *Southern Theory: Social Science and The Global Dynamics of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity.

Coopmans, R. (2004). *The transformation of political mobilisation and communication in European public spheres*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/70957.

Council of Europe. (2006). *Portraying Politics: A Toolkit on Gender and Television*. Stratsbourg: Council of Europe/Democracy. Retrieved from: https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/mars/source/resources/references/others/53%20-%20Portraying%20Politics%20-%202006%20COMP.pdf

Corrigall-Brown, C., & Wilkes, R. (2012). Picturing Protest: The Visual Framing of Collective Action by First Nations in Canada. *American Behavioral Scientist, 56*(2), 223-243. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211419357

Crabtree, B. F., & Miller, W. L. (1999). *Doing Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks [CA]: Sage.

Creech, B. (2014). Digital representation and Occupy Wall Street's challenge to political subjectivity. *Convergence*, *20*(4), 461-477. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856514541354

Creech, B. (2020). Exploring the politics of visibility: Technology, digital representation, and the mediated workings of power. *Semiotica 236-237*, 123-139.

Curran, J., & Park, M. (Eds.). (2000). De-Westernizing Media Studies. London, New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203981764

Cusicanqui, S. R. (2020). *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: On Decolonising Practices and Discourses*. Cambridge: Polity.

Dahlberg, L. (2018). Visibility and the Public Sphere: A Normative Conceptualisation. *Javnost - The Public*, *25*(1–2), 35–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418818

Dan, V., & Arendt, F. (2024). Visuals as Identity Markers in Political Communication on Social Media: Evidence for Effects of Visual Cues in Liberals, but Not in Conservatives. *Mass Communication and Society*, 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2024.2333404

Danermark, B., Ekström, M., Jakobsen, L. & Karlsson, J. C. H. (2002). *Explaining Society: An Introduction to Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge

Das, T. (2024, March 26). Mamata Shankar stuck in Dark Ages. Gen Z showing India there's no one way to wear a saree. *The Print*. Retrieved from: https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/mamata-shankar-stuck-in-dark-ages-gen-z-showing-india-theres-no-one-way-to-wear-a-saree/2016081/

Dass, M. (2016). *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Datta, B. (1981). *Storm over English in West Bengal*. *16*(14), 619–622.

Dayan, D. (2013). Conquering Visibility, Conferring Visibility: Visibility Seekers and Media Performance. *International Journal of Communication*, *7*, 137–153.

de Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington [IN]: Indiana University Press.

De Vreese, C. H. (2006). *Ten Observations about the Past, Present and Future of Political Communication*. Amsterdam University Press.

Debord, G. (1995) *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone

Della Porta, D. (2011). Communications in Movements. Social Movement as Agents of Participatory democracy, *Information, Communication & Society*, *14*(6), 800–819. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/19856

Devadawson, C.R. (2014). Out of Line: Cartoons, Caricature, and Contemporary India. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan

Devitt, J. (2002). Framing gender on the campaign trail: Female gubernatorial candidates and the press. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 79* (2), 445–463.

del Val, N.J. (2023). Los Pinos, a Presidential Residence: *Farándula* Politics and Populism 2.0 in Mexican Visual Culture. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_6

Dhar, P. N. (1987). Bengal Renaissance: A Study in Social Contradictions. *Social Scientist*, *15*(1), 26. https://doi.org/10.2307/3517400

Dimitrova, D. (2020). *Rethinking the Body in South Asian Traditions*. New York: Routledge.

Dissanayake, W. (2003). Asian Approaches to Human Communication: Retrospect and Prospect. *Intercultural Communication Studies, 12*(4), 17–37.

Doerr, N. (2017). Bridging language barriers, bonding against immigrants: A visual case study of transnational network publics created by far-right activists in Europe. *Discourse & Society, 28*(1), 3-23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516676689

Douglas, M. (1970). *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Barrie & Rockliff.

Drainville, R., & Saul, J. (2024). Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles. In E. Lepore & L. Anderson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language* (pp. 546–570). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192844118.013.4

Dumitrescu, D. (2017). Up, close and personal: the new Front National visual strategy under Marine Le Pen. *French Politics, 15*, 1–26.. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-016-0012-7

Duncan, N. (Ed.) (1996). *BodySpace: Destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*. London: Routledge

Dyahadroy, S. (2009). Exploring Gender, Hindutva and Seva. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *44*(17), 65–73.

Ehrhart, A. (2023). Navigating underrepresentation and gendered barriers to women's political power: Narratives and experiences of women parliamentarians in Turkey. *Frontiers in Political Science, 4*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.1075462

Ellen, B. (2012, July 22). Cécile Duflot: A woman in a dress? Mon Dieu, whatever next? The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/22/barbara-ellen-cecile-duflots-dress

Emmison, M., & Smith, P. (2000). *Researching the Visual: Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry*. London: Sage.

Elm, M. S. (2009). Exploring and negotiating femininity: Young women's creation of style in a Swedish Internet community. *Young, 17*(3), 241-264. https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880901700302

Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics: Twitter and Facebook as arenas for political communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, *16*(5), 757–774. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.782330

Famulari, U. (2021). The Strategic Use of Visuals on Facebook: A Multimodal Analysis of Images and Audience Reactions During the Campaign for the 2019 UK General Election. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, *28*(4), 199–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2021.1986828

Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press

Farkas, X., & Bene, M. (2021). Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media.

The International Journal of Press/Politics, *26*(1), 119-142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220959553

Farkas, X., Jackson, D., Baranowski, P., Bene, M., Russmann, U., & Veneti, A. (2022). Strikingly similar: Comparing visual political communication of populist and non-populist parties across 28 countries. *European Journal of Communication, 37*(5), 545-562. https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221082238

Farris, E. M., & Silber Mohamed, H. (2018). Picturing immigration: how the media criminalizes immigrants. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *6*(4), 814–824. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1484375

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219-245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Forbes, G. (1999). *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, C.A. (2022). Visualizing Politics in Indonesia: The Design and Distribution of Election Posters. *International Journal of Communication, 16*, 4187–4209.

Freitag, S. B. (2014). The Visual Turn: Approaching South Asia across the Disciplines. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 37* (3), 398-409. DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2014.930012

Fryer,T. & Navarrete, C. (2024). *Revisiting Realist Theory of Science: A Practical Guide*. [OA: CC License] Retrieved from: https://tfryer.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/revisitingrts_241219-1.pdf

Fuchs, C. (2016). Digital Labor and Imperialism. *Monthly Review, 67*(8). Retrieved from: https://monthlyreview.org/2016/01/01/digital-labor-and-imperialism/

Fuchs, C. (2021). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage

Gajjala, R. (2002). An Interrupted Postcolonial/Feminist Cyberethnography: Complicity and Resistance in the "Cyberfield." *Feminist Media Studies*, *2*(2), 177–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770220150854

Gajjala, R. and Gajjala V. (Eds.) (2008) *South Asian Technospaces*. Berlin: Peter Lang

Gajjala, R. (2019). *Digital Diasporas: Labor and Affect in Gendered Indian Digital Publics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ganguly A (2015) Tale of Two Assaults and Two Reactions. *Telegraph India*. Retrieved from https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/tale-of-two-assaults-and-two-reactions/cid/1580461

Garimella, K., & Eckles, D. (2020). Images and misinformation in political groups: Evidence from WhatsApp in India*. Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review.* https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-030

Gbadegesin, V. O., & Onanuga, P. A. (2019). The enactment of ideology and self-presentation in political campaign videos of the 2015 general election in Nigeria. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *28*, 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.11.002

Ghosh, A. (2017). Left Front Government in Bengal (1971-82). *Policies and Practices*, *93*, 1–28.

Ghosh, D. (2013). Revolutionary Women and Nationalist Heroes in Bengal, 1930 to the 1980s. *Gender & History*, *25*(2), 355–375. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12017

Ghosh, D. (2017). *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316890806

Ghosh, G. (2018). Nobility or Utility? Zamindars, businessmen, and bhadralok as curators of the Indian nation in Satyajit Ray's Jalsaghar (The Music Room). *Modern Asian Studies*, *52*(2), 683–715. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000482

Ghosh, P.S. (1993), 'Bangladesh at the Crossroads: Religion and Politics', Asian Survey 33 (7), 697-710. DOI: 10.1525/as.1993.33.7.00p0298d

Gitlin, T. (1980). *The Whole World Is Watching*. Berkeley [CA]: University of California Press.

Gluhovic, M., Jestrovic, S., Rai, S. M., and Saward, M. (2021). Introduction: Politics and.as Performance, Performance and/as Politics. In S. M. Rai, M. Gluhovic, S. Jestrovic, and M. Saward (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–21.

Goffman, E. (1957). *The Presentation Of Self In Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor.

Goodon, R.E. & Saward, M. (2005). Dog Whistles and Democratic Mandates. *The Political Quarterly, 76,* 471-476. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2005.00708.x

Grabe, M.E. & Bucy, E.P. (2009) *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Graber, D. A. (1996). Say it with Pictures. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 546*(1), 85-96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716296546001008

Guha-Thakurta, T. (1992). *The Making of a new 'Indian' Art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal c. 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guha, A. (2022). *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics*. Leiden: Brill.

Guha, P. (2018). Gender Gap in Indian politics through the lens of Facebook: Visual Portrayal of Women Candidates by Indian Media in Facebook. *China Media Research, 14*(2), 48–61.

Guha, R. (2016). *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Håkansson, S. (2024). Explaining Citizen Hostility against Women Political Leaders: A Survey Experiment in the United States and Sweden. *Politics & Gender*, *20*(1), 1–28. doi:10.1017/S1743923X23000144

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Tavistock.

Handa, A. (2004). Modest and Modern: Women as Markers of the Indian nation state. In A. Prince & S. Silva-Wayne (Eds.), *Feminisms and Womanisms: A women's studies reader* (pp. 171–178). Toronto: Women's Press.

Hansen, T. B. (1994). Controlled Emancipation: Women and Hindu Nationalism. *The European Journal of Development Research*, *6*(2), 82–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/09578819408426614

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, *14*(3), 575–599. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham [NC] Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Harcourt, W. (Ed.) (1999). *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*. New York: Zed Books

Hariman, R. and Lucaites, J.L. (2007). *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, And Liberal Democracy*. Chicago [IL]: University of Chicago Press.

Herdin, T., Faust, M., M. A., & Chen, G.-M. (Eds.) (2020). *De-Westernizing Visual Communication and Cultures: Perspectives from the Global South*. *3*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748906933

Herring, S. 1996. Posting in a different voice: Gender and ethics in computer-mediated communication. In C. Ess (Ed.) *Philosophical perspectives on computer-mediated Communication* (pp: 115–145). Albany[NY]: SUNY Press.

History House (2017, April 17). Whereas: Stories from the People's House: A Womanly Woman with Womanly Ambitions. *History House*. Retrieved from: https://history.house.gov/Blog/2017/April/4-17-Womanly-Rankin/

Hobson, J. (2016). Black Beauty and Digital Spaces: The New Visibility Politics. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology 10*, 1–20. doi:10.7264/N39C6VQK

Hodge, B. (2014). Social Semiotics. In T. Miller (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture* (pp. 36–44). New York: Routledge.

Hoffman, A. (2018, November 16). Alexandria Ocasio Cortez Comment becomes a Viral Meme. *Time*. Retrieved from https://time.com/5456871/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-memes/

hooks, b. (1997). Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination. In R. Frankenberg (Ed.) *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (pp. 165–79). Durham [NC]: Duke University Press.

Horiuchi, Y., Komatsu, T., & Nakaya, F. (2012). Should Candidates Smile to Win Elections? An Application of Automated Face Recognition *Technology. Political Psychology, 33*(6), 925–933. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00917.x

Howard, P.N. & Hussain, M.M. (2013). *Democracy's Fourth Wave: Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Irby, K. (2004, March 26) Beyond Taste: Editing Truth. *Poynter*. Retrieved from: https://www.poynter.org/archive/2004/beyond-taste-editing-truth/

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 76*(3), 405–431. https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038

Jamieson, K. H. (1995). *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jaffrelot, C. (2011). *Religion, Caste and Politics in India*. London: Hurst.

Jari Kupiainen (2016). Digital Visuality in Cultural Identity Construction: Notes from the Festival of Pacific Arts. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes 142-143*, 131-142. https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.7605

Jiang, X. (2022). Gendered Pathways to the County-level People's Congress in China. *The China Quarterly*, *249*, 68–90. doi:10.1017/S0305741021001156

Joo, J., Bucy, E., & Seidel, C. (2019). Computational Communication Science| Automated Coding of Televised Leader Displays: Detecting Nonverbal Political Behavior With Computer Vision and Deep Learning. *International Journal Of Communication, 13*, 23. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10725

Joo, J., & Steinert-Threlkeld, Z.C. (2018). Image as Data: Automated Visual Content Analysis for Political Science. *ArXiv*. https://arxiv.org/abs/1810.01544

Juárez-Gámiz, J., Pérez, C.C. (2023). The Visual Construction of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Populist Communication on Facebook. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_5

Jungblut, M. & Haim, M. (2021) Visual Gender Stereotyping in Campaign Communication: Evidence on Female and Male Candidate Imagery in 28 Countries. *Communication Research 50* (5), 1–23.

Kahn, K. F. (1994). The Distorted Mirror: Press Coverage of Women Candidates for Statewide Office. *The Journal of Politics*, *56*(1), 154–173. https://doi.org/10.2307/2132350

Kahn, K. F., & Goldenberg, E. N. (1991). Women Candidates in the News: An Examination of Gender Differences in U.S. Senate Campaign Coverage. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *55*(2), 180–199. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749288

Kannibaran, K. (2010). Feminist deliberative politics in India. In A. Basu (Ed.), *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms* (pp. 119–156). Boulder, CO: Westview.

Karat, B. (2014, November 9). Aspects of the" Women's Question" in Fifty Years of the Formation of the CPI(M). *People's Democracy*. Retrieved from https://www.peoplesdemocracy.in/2014/1109_pd/aspects-the"-women's-question"-fifty-years-formation-cpim

Karlekar, M. (2005). *Re-visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875-1915*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Karpf, D., Kreiss, D., Nielsen, R. K., & Powers, M. (2015). Introduction – The Role of Qualitative Methods in Political Communication Research: Past, Present, and Future. *International Journal of Communication 9*. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4153/1408

Karpf, D., Kreiss, D., Nielsen, R. K., & Powers, M. (2015). Introduction ~ The Role of Qualitative Methods in Political Communication Research: Past, Present, and Future. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4153/1408

Kasana, M. (2014). Feminisms and the Social Media Sphere. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 42*(3), 236-249. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2014.0065.

Kazim, R. (2021, May 5). How the Women of Bengal Carried Mamata Banerjee to Victory. *The Wire*. Retrieved from https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengal-women-voters-mamata-banerjee

Kennedy, J., & Purushotham, S. (2012). Beyond Naxalbari: A Comparative Analysis of Maoist Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Independent India. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *54*(4), 832–862. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417512000436

Kenyatta, G. N. (2023). The Political Participation of Women in Kenya. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *25* (2). https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss2/5

Khan, F.B. (2019) *The Game of Votes: Visual Media Politics and Elections in the Digital Era*. New Delhi: Sage.

Khan, F.B. (2022). Visual Matters: Unpacking Political Communication and Politics of the Camera. In D.N. Pathak, B. Das, & R.K. Roy (Eds.) *Seeing South Asia: Visuals Beyond Borders*. New Delhi: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276753

Khanduri, R. G. (2014). *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kharroub, T., & Bas, O. (2016). Social media and protests: An examination of Twitter images of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. *New Media & Society, 18*(9), 1973-1992. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815571914

Kiousis, S. (2004), Explicating Media Salience: A Factor Analysis of *New York Times* Issue Coverage During the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election. *Journal of Communication, 54*, 71–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02614.x

Knott, E., Rao, A.H., Summers, K. & Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Review Methods Primers, 2*(73). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6

Kopf, D. (1979). *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Klein, O. & Bhat, P. (2020). Covert hate speech: white nationalists and dog whistle communication on Twitter. In G. Bouvier & J. Rosenbaum (Eds.) *Twitter, the public sphere, and the chaos of online deliberation* (pp. 151–172). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kraidy M.M. (2016). *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press.

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2020). Political Identity Ownership: Symbolic Contests to Represent Members of the Public. *Social Media + Society, 6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120926495

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content Analysis*: *An Introduction to Its Methodology*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781

Krook, M.L. (2017). Violence Against Women in Politics. *Journal of Democracy 28*(1), 74-88. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0007.

Krook, M. L. (2022). Semiotic Violence against Women: Theorizing Harms against Female Politicians. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *47*(2), 371–397. https://doi.org/10.1086/716642

Kupiainen, J. (2016) . Digital Visuality in Cultural Identity Construction: Notes from the Festival of Pacific Arts. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes, 142-143*(1), 131-142. https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.7605.

Laila Kadiwal. (2023). Critical feminist resistance to the politics of hate in India. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *21*(5), 734–753. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2222074

Lalancette, M., & Raynauld, V. (2019). The Power of Political Image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and Celebrity Politics. *American Behavioral Scientist, 63*(7), 888-924. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217744838

Lee, J. (2016). Presidents' visual presentations in their official photos: A cross-cultural analysis of the US and South Korea. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1201967

Leonardi, P. M., & Treem, J. W. (2020). Behavioral Visibility: A new paradigm for organization studies in the age of digitization, digitalization, and datafication. Organization Studies, 41(12), 1601-1625. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840620970728

Lilleker, D.G. (2019). The Power of Visual Political Communication: Pictorial Politics Through the Lens of Communication Psychology. In: Veneti, A., Jackson, D., Lilleker, D.G. (Eds.) *Visual Political Communication*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3_3

Lilleker, D.G., Veneti, A. and Jackson, D. (2019) Introduction. In D.G. Lilleker, A. Veneti & D. Jackson (Eds.) *Visual Political Communication* (pp. 1–13). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Loomba, A. (2019). *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India*. London: Routledge.

Lu, Y. (2015, December 4). Social media technology and female emancipation in China: Case study in Sina-Weibo. *Synergy: The Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies*. Retrieved from http://utsynergyjournal.org/2015/12/04/social-media-technology-and-female-emancipation-in-china-case-study-in-sina-weibo/

Lugones, M. (2010), Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia, 25*, 742-759. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x

Magaldi, D., Berler, M. (2020). Semi-structured Interviews. In V. Zeigler-Hill & T.K. Shackelford (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_857

Malhotra, M., Menon, K., & Johri, R. (2024). *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle*. New York; London: Routledge.

Manor, I., & Crilley, R. (2018). Visually framing the Gaza War of 2014: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter. Media, *War & Conflict, 11*(4), 369-391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635218780564

Mariani, M., Marshall, B. W., & Mathews-Schultz, A. L. (2015). See Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Sarah Palin Run? Party, Ideology, and the Influence of Female Role Models on Young Women. *Political Research Quarterly*, *68*(4), 716–731. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915605904

Markham, A. (2012). Fabrication as Ethical Practice: Qualitative inquiry in ambiguous Internet contexts. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(3), 334–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993

Martelli, J.-T. (2021). The Politics of Our Selves: Left self-fashioning and the production of representative claims in everyday Indian campus politics. *Modern Asian Studies*, *55*(6), 1972–2045. Cambridge Core. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2000013X

Matthews, R. (2009). Beyond 'so what?' criminology: Rediscovering realism. *Theoretical Criminology*, *13*(3), 341-362. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480609336497

Mattan, A.J. & Small, T.A. (2021). Worth a Thousand Words: The Study of Visual Gendered Self-Presentation on Twitter. C*anadian Journal of Political Science, 54*(2), 477–490.

Matus, P., Echeverría, C. (2023). Representing Change and Continuity: A Visual Analysis of Political Television Advertising for the Constitutional Plebiscite of 2020 in Chile. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_7

McCready, E. (2019). *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Honorification: Register and Social Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGregor S.C., Lawrence, R.G. and Cardona, A. (2017) Personalization, gender, and social media: Gubernatorial candidates' social media strategies. *Information, Communication & Society 20* (2), 264–283.

McGuire, J. (1983). *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857-1885*. Canberra: ANU.

McKenzie, J. (2001). *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420058

McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *30*(83), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485

Meeks, L. (2019). Owning your message: Congressional candidates' interactivity and issue ownership in mixed-gender campaigns. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *16*(2), 187–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2019.1620149

Menon, N. (1999). *Gender and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Menon, P. (2001, June 1). Behind a Famous Victory. *Frontline*. Retrieved from https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30250844.ece

Mensah, K., Tayman, A.J., Musah, Z.T. (2023). Mapping the Formats and Significance of Signs and Meaning in Political Campaigns in Ghanaian Elections. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_8

Messaris, P. (1994). *Visual 'Literacy': Image, Mind, and Reality*. Boulder: Westview.

Messaris, P. (1997). *Pictures and Reality. Visual Persuasion. The role of images in advertising*. London: Sage.

Messaris, P., & Abraham, L. K. (2001). The Role of Images in Framing News Stories. In S.D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, A. E. Grant (Eds.) *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* (pp. 215–226). New York: Routledge

Messaris, P. (2019). The Digital Transformation of Visual Politics. In A. Veneti, D. Jackson, & D. G. Lilleker (Eds.), *Visual Political Communication* (pp. 17–36). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3_2

Miike, Y. (2006). Non-Western Theory in Western Research? An Asiacentric Agenda for Asian Communication Studies. *Review of Communication*, *6*(1–2), 4–31. https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/15358590600763243

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005). *What Do Pictures Want?* Chicago [IL]: Chicago University Press.

Mitra, S. & Witherspoon, B. (2024). De-Westernizing Photojournalism: From Photojournalism of the Global South to Photojournalism in the Global South. In B. Mutsvairo, S. Bebawi, & E. Borges-Rey (Eds.). (2023). *The Routledge Companion to Journalism in the Global South*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298144

Mitter, P. (1997). *Art and nationalism in colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mitter, P. (2003). Mechanical Reproduction and the World of the Colonial Artist. In Sumathi Ramaswamy (Ed.), *Beyond Appearances, Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India* (1–32). New Delhi: Sage Publications

Moreno-Almeida, C., & Gerbaudo, P. (2021). Memes and the Moroccan Far-Right. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(4), 882-906. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161221995083

Morozov, E. (2011). *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Perseus.

Mukherjee, J. (2004) Celebrity, Media and Politics: An Indian Perspective, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *57*(1), 80–92, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsh007

Müller, M. G. (2007). What is visual communication? Past and Future of an Emerging field of Communication Research. *Studies in Communication Sciences 7* (2), 7–34.

Murshid, G. (1983). *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905*. Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University.

Nachtwey, O., & Seidl, T. (2024). The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *41*(2), 91-112. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231196829

National Election Watch (2021). West Bengal 2021: Total women candidates. Retrieved from:https://myneta.info/WestBengal2021/index.php?action=summary&subAction=women_candidate&sort=party&page=2

Navarro, C., Ganapathy, D. & Raynauld, V. (2023). Visual Culture, Personalization, and Politics: A Comparative Analysis of Political Leaders' Instagram-Based Image-Making and Communication in Spain and India. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, doi:10.1080/1553118X.2023.2209572

Neyazi, T.A. (2023). Moving Beyond Western Dominance: Rethinking Political Communication Scholarship. *Political Communication Report 28*. 1–10. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41235

Nielsen, K. B. (2012). 'An activist can't become a politician': Social activism, leadership and the (un)making of a political career in an Indian state. *Contemporary South Asia, 20*(4), 435-453. doi:10.1080/09584935.2012.737307

Nivedita. (1907). The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality; Notes on 'Bharat-mata'. *Modern Review*, 221.

O'Connell, D. (2018). #Selfie: Instagram and the United States Congress. *Social Media + Society, 4*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118813373

O'Halloran, K. L., Tan, S., Wignell, P., Bateman, J. A., Pham, D. S., Grossman, M., & Moere, A. V. (2016). Interpreting Text and Image Relations in Violent Extremist Discourse: A Mixed Methods Approach for Big Data Analytics. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *31*(3), 454–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1233871

Osman, T. (2013). *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to the Muslim Brotherhood*. New Haven [CT]: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vm1bv

Papanek, H. (1973). Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 15*(3), 289–325. http://www.jstor.org/stable/178258

Pathak, D.N. (Ed.) (2017). *Another South Asia!*. London: Primus

Parry, K. (2010). A visual framing analysis of British press photography during the 2006 Israel- Lebanon conflict. *Media, War & Conflict, 3*(1), 67-85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635210353679

Parry, K. (2015). Visibility and visualities: 'ways of seeing' politics in the digital media environment. In S. Coleman & D. Freelon (Eds.), *Handbook of Digital Politics* (pp. 417–432). https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782548768.00036

Pauwels, L. (2005). Websites as Visual and Multimodal Cultural Expressions: Opportunities and Issues of Online Hybrid Media Research. *Media, Culture & Society 27*(4), 604–613.

Pauwels, L. (2019). A multimodal model for exploring the material culture of digital networked platforms and their practices. In: Veneti A, Jackson D, Lilleker DG (Eds.) *Visual Political Communication.* (pp. 75–96). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peers, D. M. (2012). State, Power, and Colonialism. In D. M. Peers & N. Gooptu (Eds.), *India and the British Empire* (pp. 16–43). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perera, A. (2019). Collectivism in the Contemporary Sri Lankan Art: The History of an Unusual Case of Artists. In S. Perera, , D.N. Pathak, D.N. (Eds.) *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05852-4_11

Perera, S. & Pathak, D. N. (Eds.) (2022). *Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia: Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times.* London: Routledge.

Peters, J. D. (2001). Witnessing. *Media, Culture & Society*, *23*(6), 707-723. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023006002

Pinney, C. (2004) *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion.

Plant, S. (2000). On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations. In D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds.). *The Cybercultures Reader* (pp. 325–336). New York: Routledge.

Punathambekar, A., & Mohan, S. (2019). Introduction: Mapping Global Digital Cultures. In A. Punathambekar & A. Mohan (Eds.), *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia* (pp. 1–34). University of Michigan Press

Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). Professional Women, Good Families: Respectable Femininity and the Cultural Politics of a "New" India. *Qualitative Sociology*, *32*(2), 195–212. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-009-9125-5

Rajagopal, A. (2011). Notes on Postcolonial Visual Culture. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies, 2*(1), 11-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/097492761000200103

Rai, S. (2019). "May the Force Be With You": Narendra Modi and the Celebritization of Indian Politics. *Communication, Culture and Critique, 12*(3), 323–339. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz013

Rai, S. M. (2010). Analysing Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *16*(3), 284–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2010.498098

Rai, S.M. (2014). Political performance: a framework for analysing democratic politics. *Political Studies*, *63*(5), 1179–1197.

Rajan, R. S. (1998). Is the Hindu Gooddess a Feminist? *Economic and Political Weekly*, *33*(44), WS34–WS38.

Rajan, R. S. (2001). *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-independence India*. Chicago, IL: Rutgers University Press.

Ramaswamy, S. (Ed.) (2003), *Beyond Appearances, Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications

Ray Chaudhury, P. (2021). The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India. *Politics & Gender*, 1–36. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000209

Ray, A. (2020). *The Left Extremist Politics in West Bengal: From Birth to Resurrection and Beyond* (R. Chatterji & P. P. Basu, Eds.). London: Routledge.

Ray, B. (1991). Women of Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947. *Social Scientist*, *19*(5/6), 3–23.

Ray, B. (1995). *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ray Chaudhury, P. (2022). The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India. *Politics & Gender*, *18*(4), 942–977. doi:10.1017/S1743923X21000209

Raychaudhury, P. (2024). Gendering loyalty in Indian electoral democracy: The Trinamool Congress and its construction of a female constituency in West Bengal. *Economic & Political Weekly, 59*(48), 87-95.

Reuters. (1981, April 5). West Bengal Halting Teaching of English for Primary Students. *The New York Times*. NYT Online Archive. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/05/world/west-bengal-halting-teaching-of-english-for-primary-students.html

Richardson, A. V. (2016). Bearing Witness While Black: Theorizing African American mobile journalism after Ferguson. *Digital Journalism*, *5*(6), 673–698. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1193818

Riskedahl, D. (2023). Playing with Accents in the Khede Kasra Campaign in Lebanon: Multimodality in Visual Politics. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_2

Rohrbach, T., Aaldering, L., & Van der Pas, D. J. (2023). Gender differences and similarities in news media effects on political candidate evaluations: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, *73*(2), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqac042

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Objects*. London: Sage.

Rosengren, K.E. (1989) Paradigms Lost and Regained. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B.J. O'Keefe & W. Ellen (Eds.) *Rethinking Communication* (pp. 21–39). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Ross, K., Evans, E., Harrison, L., Shears, M., & Wadia, K. (2013). The Gender of News and News of Gender: A Study of Sex, Politics, and Press Coverage of the 2010 British General Election. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *18*(1), 3-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212457814

Rovisco, M. (2017). The indignados social movement and the image of the occupied square: the making of a global icon. Visual Communication, 16(3), 337-359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357217702088

Roy, S. (Ed.) (2012). *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*. London: Zed.

Roy, S. (2022). *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press.

Russmann, U. & Svensson, J. (2017). Interaction on Instagram?: Glimpses from the 2014 Swedish Elections. *International Journal of E-Politics (IJEP), 8*(1), 50-66. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJEP.2017010104

Russmann, U., Svensson, J., & Larsson, A. O. (2019). Political Parties and Their Pictures: Visual Communication on Instagram in Swedish and Norwegian Election Campaigns. In A. Veneti, D. Jackson, & D. G. Lilleker (Eds.), *Visual Political Communication* (pp. 119–144). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3

Ryland, M. (2013). Hypervisibility: How scrutiny and surveillance makes you watched, but not seen. *The Body Is Not An Apology*. Retrieved from https://www.tumblr.com/thebodyisnotanapology/57763238146/hypervisibility-how-scrutiny-and-surveillance

Sahoo, S. (2022). Political Posters Reveal a Tension in WhatsApp Platform Design: An Analysis of Digital Images From India's 2019 Elections. *Television & New Media*, *23*(8), 874–899. https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764211052997

Sakshi [@333maheshwariii]. (2023, August 23). *Dear girls, this is what feminism looks like.* X [Tweet]. https://x.com/333maheshwariii/status/1694347075809599519/photo/1

Samrat. (2021, May 3). BJP's David vs TMC's Goliath: Why the TMC was the lesser evil. *Newslaundry*. Retrieved from: https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/05/03/bjps-david-vs-tmcs-goliath-why-the-tmc-was-the-lesser-evil

Sangari, K., & Vaid, S. (Eds.). (1990). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sanghvi, M. (2019). *Gender and Political Marketing in the United States and the 2016 Presidential Election*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Santana C. (2022). What's Wrong with Dogwhistles. *Journal of Social Philosophy,* 53, 387–403. https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12409

Santia, M. and Bauer, N. M. (2022) The intersection of candidate gender and ethnicity: How voters respond to campaign messages from Latinas. *The International Journal of Press/Politics 28* (4), 975-994.

Sarkar, S. (1973). *The Swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1903-1908.* New Delhi: People's Publishing House.

Sarkar, S. (1985). *A Critique of Colonial India*. Calcutta: Papyrus.

Sarkar, S. (1992). 'Kaliyuga', 'Chakri' and 'Bhakti', Ramakrishna and His Times. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *27*(29), 1543–1566.

Sarkar, T. (1984). Politics and women in Bengal- the conditions and meaning of participation. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *21*(1), 91–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946468402100104

Sarkar, T., & Butalia, U. (1995). *Women and the Hindu Right*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Sarkar, T. (2001a). Enfranchised Selves: Women, Culture and Rights in Nineteenth-Century Bengal. *Gender & History*, *13*(3), 546–565. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00243

Sarkar, T. (2001b). *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Bloomington [IN]: Indiana University Press.

Saward, M. (2006). The Representative Claim. *Contemporary Political Theory*, *5*(3), 297–318. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234

Sayer, A. (1992) *Method in Social Sciences: A Realist Approach*. London: Routledge.

Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.

Scherman, A., & Rivera, S. (2021). Social Media Use and Pathways to Protest Participation: Evidence From the 2019 Chilean Social Outburst. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211059704

Schill, D. (2012). The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. *Review of Communication 12* (2): 118–42.

Sen, A. (1983). *Poverty and Famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, N. D. (1999). Sisters in Sorrow: Contemporary Indian Women's Re-telling of the Rama Tale. In B. Ray & A. Basu (Eds.), *Independence Towards Freedom* (pp. 201–239). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, S. (2000, April). Toward a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective. *Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 9, World Bank*. Retrieved from https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/205981468752698664/pdf/multi-page.pdf

Shome, D., Neyazi, T. A., & Ng, S. W. T. (2024). Personalization of politics through visuals: Interplay of identity, ideology, and gender in the 2021 West Bengal Assembly Election Campaign. *Media, Culture & Society*, *46*(4), 777–797. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231214189

Siamdoust, N. (2023). Women Reclaiming Their Voices for Life and Freedom: Music and the 2022 Uprising in Iran. *Iranian Studies*, *56*(3), 577–583. doi:10.1017/irn.2023.15

Sil, N. P. (2002). Bande Mataram: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's nationalist thought revisited. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *25*(1), 121–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400208723468

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (2024). *Interpreting Qualitative Data.* London: Sage.

Sim, B. (2017, June 12). #OpérationRobe: confronting everyday sexism in France. *Open Democracy*. Retrieved from: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/operation-robe-everyday-sexism-france/

Simandan, D. (2019). Revisiting positionality and the thesis of situated knowledge. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, *9*(2), 129-149. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619850013

Sinha, M. (2008). Nationalism: Nationalist Movement. In B. G. Smith (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History,* (Vol. 3, pp. 318–325). New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skeggs, B. 1997. *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage.

Sobieraj, S. (2017). Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women's visibility in digital publics. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(11), 1700–1714. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1348535

Smith, M. (Ed.) (2008). *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers*. London: Sage.

Spivak, G.C. (2006). Can the Subaltern Speak?. In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (Eds.) *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (pp. 28–37). London; New York: Routledge.

Srivastava, S. (2015). Modi-Masculinity: Media, Manhood, and "Traditions" in a Time of Consumerism. *Television & New Media*, *16*(4), 331–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415575498

Stocchetti, M. (2017). Digital Visuality and Social Representation. Research Notes on the Visual Construction of Meaning. *KOME*, *5*(2), 38–56. https://komejournal.com/files/KOME_MS.pdf

Stout, D. (2019, 8 July). Social Media Statistics: Top Social Networks by Popularity. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from https://dustinstout.com/social-media-statistics/

Strachan, J. C., & Kendall, K. E. (2004). Political candidates' convention films: Finding the perfect image—An overview of political image making. In C.A. Hill & M. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (135-154). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Stohl, C., Stohl, M., & Leonardi, P. (2016). Digital Age | Managing Opacity: Information Visibility and the Paradox of Transparency in the Digital Age. *International Journal Of Communication, 10*, 123–137. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4466

Subašić, E., Hardacre, S., Elton, B., Branscombe, N. R., Ryan, M. K., & Reynolds, K. J. (2018). "We for She": Mobilising men and women to act in solidarity for gender equality. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 21*(5), 707-724. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218763272

Suliman, A. (2023, January 19). Sexism dogged Jacinda Ardern's tenure. Battling it is part of her legacy. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/19/jacinda-ardern-resign-sexism-battles/

Sukumar, L. (2024). Celebrification through Media Spectacles: Emerging Forms of Performativity in Indian Politics. *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.53007/SJGC.2024.V9.I1.216

Sutton, L.A. (1996). Cocktails and thumbtacks in the old West: What would Emily Post say? In L. Cherny and E.R. Weise (Eds.) *Wired women: Gender and new realities in cyberspace* (pp. 169–187). Seattle [WA]: Seal.

Suzina, A. C. (2021). English as lingua franca. Or the sterilisation of scientific work. *Media, Culture & Society, 43*(1), 171-179. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720957906

Tahmasebi-Birgani, V. (2017). Social media as a site of transformative politics: Iranian women's online contestations. In P. Vahabzadeh (Ed.), *Iran's struggles for Social Justice* (pp. 181-198). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, M., & Bittner, A. (2017). The "Mommy Problem"? Gender, Parental Status, and Politics. In M. Thomas & A. Bittner (Eds.), *Mothers and Others: The Role of Parenthood in Politics* (pp. 3-17). Vancouver [BC]: University of British Columbia Press.

Thompson, J. B. (2000). *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Thompson, J. B. (2005). The New Visibility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *22*(6), 31-51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405059413

Thussu, D., (2017). Internationalizing Media Studies: A Reconsideration. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 12* (1), 21-22. https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.245

Tobin, G.A. and Begley, C.M. (2004), Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *48*, 388-396. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2004.03207.x

Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Turner, V. W. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca [NY]: Cornell University Press.

Tyler, I. (2013). The Riots of the Underclass?: Stigmatisation, Mediation and the Government of Poverty and Disadvantage in Neoliberal Britain. *Sociological Research Online, 18*(4), 25-35. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3157

Udupa, S., Costa, E., & Budka, P. (2018). *The Digital Turn: New Directions in Media anthropology*. (EASA Media Anthropology Network E-Seminars; No. 63). European Association of Social Anthropologists. https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars

Udupa, S., Venkatraman, S., and Khan, A. (2019). “Millennial India”: Global Digital Politics in Context. *Television & New Media 21*(4), 343-359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419870516

Uimonen, P. (2013). Visual identity in Facebook. *Visual Studies*, *28*(2), 122–135. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2013.801634

UN Women. (2024). In Focus: UN Commission on the Status of Women. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw65

Valenzuela, A. A., & Reny, T. (2021). The Evolution of Experiments on Racial Priming. In J. N. Druckman & D. P. Green (Eds.), *Advances in Experimental Political Science* (pp. 447–467). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. Discourse & Society, 4(2), 249-283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006

van Leeuwen, T. (2004). *Introducing Social Semiotics: An Introductory Textbook*. New York: Routledge.

Veneti, A., & Rovisco, M. (2023). Introduction to Visual Politics in the Global South. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.), *Visual Politics in the Global South* (pp. 1–26). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_1

Verge, T., & Pastor, R. (2017). Women's Political Firsts and Symbolic Representation. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, *39*(1), 26–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1268878

Verniers, G., & Ammassari, S. (2019). Lok Sabha election results 2019: At 14.6%, Lok Sabha to have most women ever. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/lok-sabha-election-results-2019-at-14-6-lok-sabha-to-have-most-women-ever/story-5BCCTbyER96BxdMV22PKPN.html

Vijayvargia, K. [@KailashOnline] (2020, December 31). Jo kaam Didi ko 5 mahine baad karna hai, wo abhi se shuru karr diya!: pic.twitter.com/8bj63tlxtj [Tweet]. https://twitter.com/KailashOnline/status/1344519707286638595

Vivienne, S., & Burgess, J. (2012). The Digital Storyteller's Stage: Queer Everyday Activists Negotiating Privacy and Publicness. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(3), 362–377. https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705194

Wagner, K. M., Gainous, J., & Abbott, J. P. (2021). Gender Differences in Critical Digital Political Engagement in China: The Consequences for Protest Attitudes. Social Science Computer Review, 39(2), 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319865907

Walliman, N. (2006). *Social Research Methods*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209939

Waisbord, S., & Mellado, C. (2014). De-westernizing Communication Studies: A Reassessment. *Communication Theory*, *24*(4), 361–372. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12044

Washbrook, D. (2012). The Indian Economy and the British Empire. In D. M. Peers & N. Gooptu (Eds.), *India and the British Empire* (pp. 44–74). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199259885.003.0003

Wilson, C. (2024, January 30). Nine's Georgie Purcell image shows the risks of AI in newsrooms. *Crikey*. Retrieved from: https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/01/30/nine-georgie-purcell-photoshopped-risks-artificial-intelligence/

Wilton, S. (2012). Bound from Head to Toe: The Sari as an Expression of Gendered National Identity. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *12*(1), 190–205. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2012.01153.x

Woldearegay, A. G., & Hailu, S. M. (2023). Alternative voices from London: Women and the Abyssinian War in Sylvia Pankhurst's internationalist weekly New Times and Ethiopia News. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2222453

Wood, W., & Eagly, A. H. (2009). Gender identity. In M. R. Leary, & R. H. Hoyle (Eds.), *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior* (pp. 109-125). New York: Guilford Press

Xiang, Y. (2023). Visualizing Hegemony and Resistance: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of 'Covid-19 Hero' on Chinese Social Media. In A. Veneti & M. Rovisco (Eds.) *Visual Politics in the Global South. Political Campaigning and Communication*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22782-0_4

APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Ethics Approval dt: 12 Mar 2021, Investigation 1

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Rituparna Banerjee
School of Communications

Dr. Saumava Mitra
School of Communications

12th March 2021

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2021/037**

Proposal Title: **Framing elections through social media cultures: politics, its women and visuals in West Bengal, India.**

Applicant(s): **Rituparna Banerjee & Dr. Saumava Mitra**

Dear Colleagues,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Scanlon

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

Research & Innovation Support
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000
F +353 1 700 8002
E research@dcu.ie
www.dcu.ie

Appendix A:

Ethics Approval dt: 15 Dec 2023, Investigation 2

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

15 December 2023

CONFIRMATION OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FOR A PROJECT

Application Reference:	**DCU-FHSS-2024-018**
Project Title:	**Framing elections through media cultures: politics, its women and visuals in West Bengal, India** (Working title)
Project contact(s):	**rituparna.banerjee3@mail.dcu.ie**

Let this letter certify that the proposed project identified above has been reviewed by the *Humanities & Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee* (F-REC) and has been approved as a low-risk project. The application was found to that comply with university requirements and best practices for research ethics, and with GDPR guidelines and requirements where personal data is processed in the project.

A copy of the application, including appended documents related to participant consent, is archived under the reference above. Queries about this project's approval may be directed to the F-REC Chair.

Sincerely,

Dr Dónal Mulligan
donal.mulligan@dcu.ie

Chair, Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
Dublin City University

Dámh na nDaonnachtaí agus na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement (PLS)

PLS:

The purpose of the Research
I am Rituparna Banerjee, and am contacting you for this study that aims to understand how female politicians in West Bengal, India, portray themselves in the media, both in newspapers and social media. The information gathered through this study will help me better understand how visual images are used to represent women in electoral politics in West Bengal. This research also aims to determine how insights gained from this particular context can be used to study visual objects and understand the nature of political communication. Finally, the study contributes to an understanding of how women's political performance is affected by gender and how both news and social media reinforce certain expectations about how women in politics should portray themselves visually.

The categories or types of personal data
I will not ask you any direct questions about your racial, ethnic origin. But you are welcome to disclose it during the interview, it will be processed accordingly. Your personal data will also be unidentified as the interviews will be pseudonymised, including the removal of direct identifiers, pseudonymisation, generalisation of data, and data aggregation.

Details of what participant involvement in the Research Study will require
You will be interviewed by a researcher who is a PhD student at the School of Communications, Dublin City University. The interview will take about 90 minutes and can take place either in person or online. It will be recorded. During the interview, the questions will focus on your background, the process of creating content, what motivates you to produce it, how you use visual political communication, how you engage with the media, and your relationship with your online audience as a woman politician in West Bengal, India.
If you cannot meet in person, the interview will be held on Zoom. Before the interview, you will receive an informed consent form by email. The interview will only take place after you sign and return the consent form.

Any benefits to participants from involvement in the Research Study
While your involvement in this research will not bring any direct benefits to you (including financial remuneration), you may find the findings and conclusions useful and interesting in terms of your professional capacity. These could include self-reflection, professional development, and contributing to a better understanding of how gendered political news production and communication works in West Bengal, India. Additionally, you will have access to a final copy of the study, and any published outputs will be sent to you by email so you can benefit from the findings.

Confidentiality of data
Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions. Additionally, a document listing the pseudonyms will also be securely stored.

Right to withdraw consent
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you have a right to withdraw consent at any point during research by emailing the researcher at *rituparna.banerjee3@mail.dcu.ie*. Their participation in the project will end, at the point they withdraw, and all their personal data will be securely deleted.

Data Retention/ Disposal
All research data will be encrypted and securely stored on DCU password-protected Google drive by using the secure eduroam wifi network. All research material - signed consent forms/transcripts etc- will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office on the DCU Campus, to which access will be restricted only to the principal investigators. Additionally, in the interests of security - recordings, transcripts and other project data will be safely uploaded to a secure location on a DCU Google Drive folder.

All research data will be retained only for the period necessary in relation to the PhD thesis described above, as well as in any related academic publications. Recordings will be deleted from the device within 15 days of interview. All data will be deleted after 5 years from the commencement of fieldwork, which is 30/11/2029.

You will have the right to access their personal data by contacting the researcher at *rituparna.banerjee3@mail.dcu.ie*. They will also be sent published version of the study by email, in line with DCU DPU guidelines.

Privacy Notice
This study will be conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and if you have any concerns regarding how your data in this study has been handled, you can contact: DCU Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward – (data.protection@dcu.ie Tel: 01-7005118/01- 7008257) who will handle any data protection concerns arising from this research. An individual also has the right to report a complaint concerning the use of personal data to the Irish Data Protection Commission: https://www.dataprotection.ie/

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please Contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent Form (For Women Politicians)

Framing elections through media cultures: politics, its women & visuals in West Bengal, India

School of Communications, Dublin City University
Principal investigators: Dr Saumava Mitra (Supervisor); Rituparna Banerjee (PhD Student)
Contact Details: saumava.mitra@dcu.ie; rituparna.banerjee3@mail.dcu.ie

The purpose of the research

This study aims to understand how women politicians in West Bengal, India, manage their mediated visibility in the press and on social media. It also explores how journalists navigate the production process of such representations of women involved in electoral politics. The data obtained from the study will contribute to the critical cultural understanding of an under-researched societal and cultural context to initiate a conversation and inquiry into women's presence in electoral politics through processes of visual image- and meaning-making in the digital sphere.

If I agree to participate, I will be interviewed by the researcher. The interview will be done in person, and it will be electronically recorded.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided	*Yes/No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes/No*
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes/No*
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	*Yes/No*

I understand that I may withdraw from the research study at any point.

I understand that my interview can be audio-recorded and transcribed, and my transcript will be pseudonymised and all identifiable information removed from the interview transcript.

I am aware that Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

I understand that all research data will be retained only for the period necessary to the purpose stated and deleted after 5 years from the commencement of the study.

If participants have concerns about their personal data and wish to contact DCU Data Protection Officer, please contact Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie) Ph.: 7005118 / 7008257.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C:

Guiding Questions, Semi-Structured Interviews

Visual themes

Let me begin with your own background. You have been a public personality and accustomed to exposure. Let's start there…

As a woman politician in WB, in what ways do visuals appear in your practice/campaign/everyday activities (especially where you show and want to be seen in certain ways)?

To what extent can you control these visuals yourself (or are they managed by others)?

As someone who is active on Facebook and Twitter, where you actively self-represent yourself, how do such visuals differ in different forms of media eg. social media platforms, and how you are, for instance, shown on mainstream media?

What are the steps involved in the making of these visuals? Please walk me through a typical process (from say, you taking the picture/being photographed – to the photograph being posted online on your own or your party's page)

What is your view on how important visuals are in shaping narratives about political personalities who are women? Please highlight your own experience with this.

Influences and Factors Shaping Representation

In your view, what are the primary influences that contribute to the visual representations of women politicians in mainstream media?

In comparison, how is it different on your own official social media profiles?

How does such representation compare with how political parties represent women politicians on their official party pages?

To what extent do societal expectations and historical narratives, such as the 'bhadramahila', 'bhalo meye' etc influence the contemporary visual representations of women in politics?

Are there external pressures or expectations that significantly impact how women politicians are visually represented, and how do these pressures differ between social media and mainstream media?

Good politics, Good woman

Can you provide examples of strategies employed by you to balance historical ideals with your political identity in your visual self-representations?
How do these historical narratives impact the perception of women politicians within and outside your political party?

Can you share examples of instances where you actively contributed to shaping your media representation?

In your opinion, who holds the agency to implement changes in the representation of female politicians in West Bengal?

To what extent do women politicians themselves play a role in influencing their own representations, and how does this factor into future developments?

Female Politicians' Role in Shaping Representation

How do you balance the expectations of your political party with your personal visual representation choices in each medium?

Can you share experiences where your party's visual representation was different from your personal preferences? How did you navigate these situations differently in social media and mainstream media?

According to you, what do you think your role is in challenging or reinforcing established norms regarding the "good woman" in politics through your visual self-representation.

Appendix D:

Sample Interview Transcript 1 (Bengali)

আপনি মূলধারার নির্বাচনী রাজনীতিতে যোগ দেওয়ার সিদ্ধান্ত কীভাবে নিয়েছিলেন? আপনার যাত্রা কীভাবে শুরু হয়েছিল?

ব্যাপারটা হচ্ছে আমার ফ্যামিলি চিরকালই রাজনীতির সঙ্গে জড়িত। আমি ছোট থেকে পলটিক্যাল ফ্যামলিতিে বড় হয়ছেি। আমার বাবা বলো, দাদু বলো সকলইে পলটিক্সরে সঙ্গে involved। আমার দাদু রাজ্যরে এম এল এ ছলিনে কন্তিু আমি ওনাকে ছোটবলো থকেে একদমই পাইনি উনি অনকে দনি হল মারা গয়িছে। আর বাকি রইল বাবা। বাবাকে দখেইে বড় হওয়া আমরা একদম প্রপার পলটিক্যাল ফ্যামলিি থকেে আসছি। ছোটবলো থকেে খুব একটা ইন্টারস্টে ছলি তমেনটা একদমই নয়। এটা ভীষণ সত্যি কথা। আমি ছোট থকেে একটি পলটিক্যাল ফ্যামলিতিে রয়ছেি আমি ছোট থকেে সবাইকে দখেছেি রাজনীতরি সঙ্গে জড়তি থাকতে কন্তিু তবুও আমার কোনদনি ইচ্ছে ছলি না সক্রয়িভাবে রাজনীতি করব। আমি এমন একটা জায়গায় ছলিাম যে আমি শুনছেি দখেছেি সব কছিুই হচ্ছে আমার চারপিাশে কন্তিু ঢুকনিি কোনদনি। আমার কলজে লাইফ অব্দি আমি ওরকমই রাজনীতি থকেে পাশ কাটয়িে কাটয়িে চলতাম। আমার পলটিক্সে ঢোকাটাই কাকতালীয় ঘটনার চক্রে কাউন্সলিররে ইলকেশন আমি দাঁড়য়িে ছলিাম। গত বছর থকেে আমাদরে শ্রীরামপুররে এই ওয়ার্ডটা উইমন্সে ওয়ার্ড হয়ে গয়িছেলি।

যখন women's reservation হয়ে গলে তখন আমি আমার বাবাকে বলছেলিাম যে যখন উইমন্সে ওয়ার্ড হয়ইে গছেে আমি ইলকেশনে দাঁড়াতে চাই, আমিও ইন্টারস্টেডে কোন সমস্যা নইে। বাবা প্রথমে মত দয়েনি একদমই বলে দয়িছেলি ময়েে হসিবেে আমার রাজনীততিে আসার কোন প্রয়োজন নইে। পলটিক্স এর থকেে বাবারা যা দখেছেে বা আমি না থকেওে যা দখেছেি সগেুলো একজন ময়েে হসিবেে আমার জন্য সুটবেল ছলি না তাই প্রথম থকেইে আমাকে বাড়রি লোকরো বলতো সক্রয়ি রাজনীততিে ঢোকার কোন প্রয়োজন নইে। বশে কছিুদনি পরে বাবা নজিে থকেইে এসে বলল আচ্ছা ঠকি আছে তোর যদি কোন সমস্যা না থাকে তাহলে দখে চষ্টো করে। তারপরে দদিরিা আশীর্বাদ নয়িে মাঠে নমেছেলিাম এবং এগয়িে গছেলিাম পরবর্তীকালে মানুষ ভালোবাসা দয়িে আমায় জতিয়িছেনে। আমি এখন কাউন্সলির হসিবেে তৃণমূলরে প্রতনিধিত্বি করে শ্রীরামপুর শহরে। এভাবইে জয়নে করা আমি একদম এখনো আমার রাজনতৈকি করেয়িাররে শুরুতইে রয়ছেি। সবমোত্তর দু'বছর হয়ছে।ে

আপনার দৈনন্দিন রাজনৈতিক প্রচার ও কার্যকলাপে ছবি/চিত্র/দৃশ্যগুলি কিভাবে প্রদর্শিত হয়? বিশেষত একজন নারী রাজনীতিবিদ হিসেবে, যিনি যুবতীও, আপনার দৈনন্দিন রাজনৈতিক যোগাযোগের কার্যকলাপে চিত্রটি কিভাবে নির্মিত হয়?

দখেো ভজিুয়াল্সরে কথা যদি বলতে হয় আমার মুখ এখন সবাই চনে।ে আর হ্যাঁ তুমি ঠকিই বলছে আমার পার্সোনাল লাইফ এখন একটা বশিাল ব্যাপার কারণ আমার পার্সোনাল লাইফে এখন সবার প্রচুর উৎসাহ।

আমাকে নানারকম ছোট খুঁজতে হয় কি করে হাইট করে রাখবো আমার ব্যক্তগিত জীবনরে খবর গুলো যাতে বাইরে না চলে যায়। এটা শুধু আমার নয় সমস্ত নতোর নত্রৌদরে বশে করে নত্রৌদরে জীবনে এটা হয় এবং যারা actress jara রাজনীতিতে নামছে তাদরে তো আরো অবস্থা খারাপ।একটা ফ্রশে হয়ে গলেে তখন তাদরে পার্সোনাল লাইফ টা নয়িে সবারই খুব ইন্টারস্টে থাকে এবং রাজনীতি করতে এলে তুমি তো একটা মুখই মানুষরে প্রতনিধিত্বি করছ সটো নয়িে কমপ্লনে করলওে মুশকলি কন্িতু কমপ্লনে না করওে আজকাল আর থাকা যাচ্ছে না। ব্যক্তগিত জীবনটা রক্ষা করাটা ভীষণ একটা টাফ ব্যাপার। আমি একটু চষ্টো করি আমার পার্সোনাল এবং সোশ্যাল লাইফটাকে মইেনটইেন করতে ।এটা হয়তো আমার সমস্যা আমি এমনতিইে সাধারণভাবে আমি এরকমই তাই আমি চষ্টো করি পার্সোনাল লন্সে সোশ্যাল লাইফটা একটু আলাদা থাকুক। আমি একটা স্কুলে পড়াই এবং আমি রাজনীতওি করছি তো আমার স্কুলই বল অথবা আমার অফসিে বল আমি চষ্টো করি আমার পার্সোনাল আর প্রফশেনাল লাইফটাকে separate রাখতে। অন্য কোন কছিুর জন্যই আমি আমার ব্যক্তগিত জীবন টাকে হাম করতে চাই না কখনো। এত অসুবধিা হয়ে গছে এই ধরো আমি রাস্তায় বরে হলাম আমি কোথাও গলোম সবার চোখ আমার দকিে। এটা তো হবইে আমি রাজনীতি করছি আমার মুখ সোশ্যাল মডিয়িায় যাচ্ছে ডজিটিাল মডিয়িায় যাচ্ছে। যত আমি যত আমি এই কাজে জড়াবো ততই আমি একটা মানুষরে ফসে হয়ে দাঁড়াবো এবং তখনই এই সমস্যাগুলো তরৈি হয় । এটা আমাকে সবসময় শুনতে হয় যে তুমি এখনো টোটো ইউজ করো বা তুমি এখনো নজিরে গাড়ি করে যাচ্ছ না বা তোমার সকিউিরটিি কোথায়?? এর তো কোন মানে নইে যে আমি আর রাজনীতি করছি মানে আমার সবসময় চারটে লোক নয়িে ঘুরতে হবে বা আমায় সব সময় বড় বড় গাড়তিে ঘুরতে হবে কন্িতু আমি মনে করি আমি এখনো অত বড় রাজনীতবিদি হয়ে যায়নি যে আমায় বরোতে হবে। কন্িতু আমাকে ক্রমাগত শুনতে হয় এই কথাগুলো। ইমজেরে কথা বলছ কন্িতু যহেতেু আমি একটা ফ্রশে হয়ে গছে আমার ব্যক্তগিত স্বাধীনতাটা কমে গছে।

আমি সব সময় বদল হই না কিন্তু তাও মাঝে মাঝে এগুলো খুব এফেক্ট করে। আমি কোথায় যাচ্ছি কে কোথায় দখেছে এগুলো সব সময় মাথায় রখেে দনি যাপন করতে খুব বরিক্তি হয় মাঝে মাঝে।অনকে সময় বাইরে গছে মানুষ এসে কথা বলতে চাইছে তখন হয়তো আমি নজিস্ব পার্সোনাল একটা কাজে বরেয়িছে তখন আমার কারো সঙ্গে কথা বলতে ইচ্ছে করছে না কন্িতু আমাকে করতইে হবে কারণ আমি একজন মানুষরে প্রতনিধিি।

তোমার কি মনে হয় তোমার কতটা কন্ট্রোল আছে অঙ্কিতা গোস্বামী যে তোমার কতটা কন্ট্রোল আছে তুমি তো মানুষের একজন প্রতিনিধি কিন্তু তুমি কি কন্ট্রোল করতে পারছো তোমায় কিভাবে দেখানো হচ্ছে সেটা যদি একটু বল? তোমার কি মনে হয় যে তোমার কতটা কন্ট্রোল আছে ইন হাউ ইওর ইমেজ ইজ কনস্ট্রাকটেড ইন দা আইস অফ দ্যা পিপল? Women's scrutiny compared to men: what you wear, how you talk, where you go, who you talk to? Creation of the bhadramahila.

দখেো তো সর্বত্রো হতে হয়, আমি একটা ছোট শহররে প্রতনিধিি আমাকে ছোট স্তররে জাত হতে হয় মানুষরে প্রতনিধিি তাকে বড় স্তরে জাজ হতে হয়। এটা তো একদমই সত্যি কথা। সামনে আমি নজিকেে কভিাবে প্রজেন্টে করছি এটা তো ভীষণ ইম্পরট্যান্ট। কভিাবে কথা বলছি আমি কি জামা পড়ছি এগুলো তো অবশ্যই আমায় ভবেচেন্িতে করতে হয় । আসলে পাবলকি আর আমি আমরা দুজনরে পরপূিরক ।আপনি পাবলকি কে সার্ভ

করবো পাবলকি আমাকে চুজ করবে। আমরা দুজনেই দুজনরে উপর নরি্ভরশীল তাই দুজনরেই উচতি আমাদরে নজিস্ব স্পসে টাকে মইেনটইেন করা।

মানুষ এটাকে পছন্দ করে সেটাই করার চেষ্টা করি সব সময় কারণ মানুষের আমাকে পছন্দ না হলে সে আমায় জাজ করতে পারে কিন্তু আমি উল্টে দু কথা মানুষকে শুনিয়ে দিতে পারব না কারণ আমি তাদের প্রতিনিধি। কন্ট্রোল মানে আমি কি জামা কাপড় পরছি সটোও আমাকে ভীষণভাবে কন্ট্রোল করতে হয় খুব সত্যি কথা।

তুমি বলছো তুমি ডসিাইড কর তুমি কভিাবে মানুষরে কাছে আসবে।সইে প্রসঙ্গইে বলছি তোমার নশ্চিয়ই facebook আছে টুইটার আছে ইনস্টাগ্রাম আছে যখোনে তুমি কনশডিলি নজিে ঠকি করছো তুমি নজিকে কভিাবে প্রজেন্ট করবে মানুষরে কাছে তুমি তো একটা নজিরে ইমজে তরৈি করছো। সইে ইমজে মকেংি টার পছেনে তুমি কি রকম চন্তিা ভাবনা করছো সটো নয়িে যদি কছিু বল।

একটা তো নির্ভর করে ছোট থেকে আমি কিভাবে বড় হয়েছি। দ্বতিীয়তঃ আমার একটা অন্য প্রফশেনও আছে আমি একটা স্কুলরে পড়াই প্রাইমারি স্কুলরে টচিার সুতরাং সইে প্রফশেনরে দায়ত্বিও আমাকে মাথায় রাখতে হয় jokhon আমি ei নজিরে ইমজেটা তরৈি করছি। চচিংি প্রফশেনটা এমনই যে আমি ওখানে খুব একটা বশেি লাউড হতে পারব না। মজার কথা যে রাজনীতবিদি হতে গলেওে আমি খুব বশেি লাউড হতে পারবো না। মনেটইেন করতইে হয় সটো সারা জীবন ধরইে চলে আসছে porer পর জনোরশেন সভোবইে choleche। এখন যদওি অনকেটা ব্রকে হয়ছে বভিন্নি জায়গায় গয়িে এখন সইে ইমজেটা আর আগরে মত নইে কন্তিু তাও তুমি যদি ভঙেে দখেো মূলত সটোই চলে আসছে নতুন মোরক। সবচয়েে পড়লে সটো হয়ে যায় শালীনতা এবং দৃষ্টকিটু। আমরা চষ্টো করি শালীনতা বজায় রাখার এবং নজিকেে যনে দৃষ্টকিটু না লাগে মানুষরে চোখ। আমি যখন যখোনে থাকবো আমাকে সইে রকম ভাবইে নজিকেে মনেটইেন করতে হব। পলটিক্সি আমি চষ্টো করি নজিরে গাম্ভীর্য টা মইেনটইেন করত। এখন এমন হয়ে গছে যে যে হাউজরে মধ্যে মহলিারা হয়তো হাসাহাসি করছে খুব লুস ভাবে কথা বলছে কন্তিু আমি চষ্টো করি আমার গাম্ভীর্যটা মইেনটইেন করে সরিয়িাস কাজ করে বাড়ি চলে আসত। কারণ ওই যে আমি বললাম আমি রাজনতৈকি পরবিারে বড় হয়ছেি সুতরাং আমি জানি পছেনে এর ফল কি হতে পার। আমি হয়তো মজা করে কছিু বললাম কন্তিু মানুষ একদম তার উল্টোটা বুঝে আমার রাজনতৈকি কারয়িার নমিষেরে মধ্যে শষে করে দতিে পার।

কারণ আমি তো একটা মেয়ে সর্বপ্রথম আমি একজন নারী। আমার নজিস্ব কছিু একটা কভার তো থাকা উচতি আমি সইে খাবারটাই মনেটনে করার চষ্টো করি। আমি দখেি যে আমার হাউসরে বাকি মহলিারা যা ইচ্ছে মজা করছে ফাজলামো করছে লুস ভাবে কথা বলছে আমি সটো এভোয়ডে করার চষ্টো করি। সামনরে মানুষরে কাছে যদি ইজি হয়ে যায় তারপর দুদনি বাদে সে যদি সে যদি উল্টে অফন্সেভি কছিু আমায় করে আমার ব্যাপারে অফ কছিু বলে তখন আমার হাত-পা বাঁধা কারণ তার কাছে প্রমাণ থাকবে যে আমিও তো ওরকমই হাসি, মজা, লুজ টপ করি। তখন আর আমার কোন ডফিন্সে থাকবে না। আমি তার হাতে আমার নজিরে বপিদ ডকেে আনার জন্য তার

হাতে ammunition যটোকে বলে সটো দয়িে দচ্ছি। সে বলবে যে ওমা তুমি তো করছে আমি তো বানয়িে কছিু বলছ। আমি আমি চারপাশে এটা এত ঘটতে দখেছে যি যে আমি এখন ভীষণ cautios হয়ে গছে।একটা ময়েে হসিবে আমার নজিকে প্রটক্টে করার দায়ত্বি। আমি অন্য কাউকে দোষ দতিে পারবো না যদি আমার নজিরে ব্যবহার বা নজিরে লাইফস্টাইল বা নজিরে বহিভেয়িার এর জন্য আমায় অসুবধিায় পড়তে হয়। তাই নজিকে প্রটক্টে করার চষ্টো আমি নজিইে করি। সাবধান হয়ে শালীনতা বজায় রখেে এবং শৃঙ্খলা মইেনটইেন কর।ে

ববিাহতি হোক বা অববিাহতি হোক একটা ময়েে হয়ে দৃষ্টকিটু পজশিনে পড়ার টাকইে এভোয়ডে করা উচতি। আমি তো আমার অনকে ববিাহতি মহলিাদরে দখেছে িযারা দৃষ্টকিটু একটা সচিুয়শেনে রয়ছেে আমি তাদরে কছিু বলি না কন্তিু আমায় যদি জজ্ঞিসে করো সটো কন্তিু উচতি নয়। নজিের বোঝা উচিত নজিের ভালোটা কসিে এবং কসিে নয়।নজিরে রয়িালটিটিা নজিকে ফসে করতইে হয় সটো ফ্রাস্ট্রশেন হোক ডপ্রিশেন হোক আমাকইে তো তার মধ্যে দয়িে যতেে হবে তাই যাতে আমি সইে পজশিনে না পৌঁছে সইে চষ্টোই আমি সবসময় কর।ি

পোশাকরে কথা যদি বল, অনকে সময় কি হয় একটা ময়েে আমার সাথইে হয়তো স্টজেে উঠে গছেে সে জন্সি আর টপ পড়ে আছে আমি হয়তো একনকিে আছি আমি সবসময় চষ্টো করি মানুষরে কাছে যাচ্ছি যখন নজিকে কাভার্ড রাখত,ে কন্তিু আমি তো এটা কন্ট্রোল করতে পারব না অন্যরা কে কি পড়ছ।ে আমি চষ্টো করি তখন তার থকেে একটু দূরে গয়িে দাঁড়াত।ে অ্যাক্টর অ্যাক্ট্রসে রা কি পরল তাদরে অতটা কছিু ম্যাটার করে না।। কন্তিু আমাদরেকে তো সমাজরে মানুষরে সাথে তাল মলিয়িে চলতে হবে তাই আমার টাইট জামা কাপড় পড়তে ইচ্ছে করলওে আমি পড়ি না আমি নজিকে কাভার রাখি সালোয়ার কামজি বা শাড়ি পরার চষ্টো করি যাতে নজিরে ডগিনটিিটা মন্টেনে করা যায়।

তাহলে তুমি কি বলবে যে এই কন্ঠসাস ডিভিশনটা রাজনীতিবিদ হিসেবে তোমার মেন্টেন করা খুব দরকার যে তুমি ধরো বন্ধুদের সাথে গেলে তুমি তখন তাদের সঙ্গে যেভাবে থাকো সেই ইমেজটা বা সেই ইম্প্রেশনটা তুমি মানুষের কাছে নিয়ে যেতে চাও না মানুষকে দেখাতে চাও না যে তুমি তোমার বন্ধুদের সঙ্গে কি রকম?

লোকজনের কাছে আমি যেহেতু একটা ফেস হয়ে গেছি তাই আমাকে এগুলো তো মাথায় রাখতেই হবে আমাকে এই ডিভিশনটা করতেই হয়। অবশ্যই সব সময় ইচ্ছে করে না কন্তিু তারপর মনে করি যে আমি তো মানুষরে প্রতনিধিি তাই আমাকে এই স্যাক্রফিাইসটা করতইে হব।ে ওয়স্টোর্ন ইথনকি ইন্ডয়িান জামা কাপড় এরকম কছিু নয় কন্তিু নজিকে কাভার্ড রাখা নজিরে ডগিনটিিটিামন্টেনে করার শালীনতাটা মনেটনে করা এটাই আমার মোটামুটি চষ্টো থাক।তার সঙ্গে আমি এটাও বলবো যে, অনকেদনি না পড়তে পড়ত,ে প্রায় দু বছর আমি আর এই মানুষরে প্রতনিধিত্বি করছি অনকেদনি না পড়তে পড়তে এখন সত্যি কথা বলবো আমার অভ্যাসটাই চলে গছে।ে বা বয়স বলো বা ছোট থকেে কভিাবে বড় হয়ছে িসটো, লাইফ স্টাইলটা আমার কি রকম হবে এইসবরে ওপরইে নর্িভর করা। Lifeস্টাইলরে সাথে এই প্রত্যকেটা জনিসিই এডাপ্ট করতে থাকি। আমি কোথায় achi স্কুলে না মঞ্চে না আমার ভোটারদরে কাছে তার ওপর তার ওপর ভত্তিি করে আমি ঠকি করি

আমি কিভাবে নিজেকে দেখাবো নিজেকে প্রজেন্ট করব। আমার ফ্রী নাস বা আমার বহিভেয়িার টা আলাদা হয় প্রত্যকেটা ক্ষত্রে। আমি চেষ্টা করি আমার সাথে যারা আছে বা আমার চারপিাশে যারা আছে বা আমি যাদরে সাথে আছি আমরা কউেই একে অপররে বহিভেয়িাররে জন্য আনইজি না ফলি করি।

সামাজিক মাধ্যম চিত্র ব্যবস্থাপনা?

আমি মনে করি আমি এখনো সইে বদিশে জায়গায় পৌঁছায়নি যে আমায় ম্যানজে করার জন্য বা আমার সোশ্যাল মডিয়িা ম্যানজে করার জন্য আলাদা করে কাউকে হায়ার করতে হবে। আমি এখনো নিজেই নিজরে সোশ্যাল মডিয়িা ম্যানজে করি। প্রথম কথা আমি টুইটার ইউজ করনিা। বাকি এই ফসেবুক ইনস্টাগ্রাম এই দুটোতইে আমি আছি। আমার ফসেবুক পজে আমি নিজেই হ্যান্ডলে করি। আমার ক্যাম্পনেংি এর টাইমে আমার পজে ওপনে করা বা রোজকার ছবি দওেয়া এগুলো আমায় হল্পে করার জন্য একজন ছলি কন্তিু মোটামুটি আমি নিজেই পুরোটা হন্ডলে করি এখন। আমার পার্সোনাল প্রোফাইল আছে এবং একটা পলটিকি্যাল পজে। আমার এটা নয়িে অনকে অসুবধিা হতো আগে যে আমার পার্সোনাল প্রোফাইলটা দীর্ঘদনিরে আমি অনকেদনি ধরে সময় নয়িে আমার ফসেবুক প্রোফাইল টা সাজয়িছেলিাম ।তারপর যখন ভোটে দাঁড়ালাম তখন আমাকে আমার মনে হলো যে একগাদা মানুষ আমায় ট্যাগ করছে বা আমার ভোটাররা সবারটা আমি বন্ধু হতে চাই না তারা আমার পার্সোনাল প্রোফাইল দখেছে তখন আমি আমার প্রফশেনাল পজেটা খুলি একটা টমিরে সাহায্য নয়িে ।আমার প্রফশেনাল পজেটা হচ্ছে আমার পার্টরি রপ্রিজেন্টেটভি হসিবেে আর পার্সোনাল প্রোফাইলটা আমার একান্তই নজিরে। তোমার প্রোফাইলটা আমার একান্তই nijer। কন্তিু ওই যে এখন পলটিকি্সে ঢুকে ১০০ বার ভাবতে হয় একটা পোস্ট শয়োর করার আগে যটো করলে আমি বপিদে পড়বো না তো এটা উচতি আমায় কমেন দখেতে লাগছে এই ছবটিা দখেে মানুষ আবার উল্টোপাল্টা কোন মন্তব্য করবে না তো?আমি ভাবি আমার টাইমলাইনে ওইটা থাকবে তাহলে লোকে কভিাবে নবে? এগুলো আমার ভীষণ ভাবতে হয়।

একটু ডিটেইলে যদি বলো তুমি কিরকম পোস্টের কথা বলছো? এটা শেয়ার করছো আর তোমার প্রোফাইলে যেটা শেয়ার করছে তার পার্থক্যটা কি? কিরকম পোস্ট শেয়ার করার আগে তোমার দুবার ভাবতে হয়?

আমার পজে আমি শুধু পলটিকি্যাল মটেরিয়িাল পোস্ট করি। তাছাড়া অন্য কছিু আমি পোস্ট করি না।পলটিকি্স ওরয়িন্টেডে আমার পোস্ট থাকে।কোথায় ক্যাম্পইেন করতে যাচ্ছি কোন গ্রামে মানুষরে সাথে দখো করতে যাচ্ছি কোথায় সভাতে যাচ্ছি বা কোথাও বক্তৃতা দতিে হচ্ছে এই সবই থাকে আমার পলটিকি্যাল পজেটাতে।মোটামুটি জনসংযোগরে কাজইে আমি আমার পলটিকি্যাল পজেটা লাগায় আমার নজিস্ব যে সত্তা সটো কোনোভাবইে সইে পজে বরেয়িে আসনো। আর আমার পার্সোনাল যে প্রোফাইলটা সখোনে কন্তিু আবার আমি আমার কোন পলটিকি্যাল ইভন্টেস বা পলটিকি্যাল নউিজ বা পলতিকি্যাল আপডটে একদম পোস্ট করনিা । ইনফ্যাক্ট আমাকে কউে tag o korte pare na. Ami akdom allow kori na. নাহলে লোকে ভরয়িে দয়ে tag করে করে। আমি একদমই সটো এলাও করি করনিা।

ওই পজেটা আমার পার্সোনাল যকেোনো কছিুর জন্য। কন্িতু আফটার তো দুটো জয়ন্েট টী। কতটাই বা এভয়ডে করা যায়। অনকে সময় হয়ছে যে memes আমার প্রোফাইলে শয়োর করে ট্যাগ করে দয়িছে। কন্িতু মইেন যওে তো ছবি থাক। ছবরি মাধ্যমে যে মজা করে অনকে সময় কছিু কথা বলার চষ্েটা করে মানুষ সগেুলো দখেতওে ভালো লাগে এবং শয়োর করতওে ইচ্ছা কর। কন্িতু আর দশ বার ভাবতে হয় ও বাবা মানুষ কভিাবে রত্িযাক্ট করবে আমি যদি এটা শয়োর কর। হার্ট ফল্েট বা স্যার যদি কছিু শয়োর করি তখন লোকে ভাববে নশ্িচয়ই আমার জীবনে কছিু হয়ছে। তখন পররে পর আমার প্রোফাইলে এসে কমন্েট করতে শুরু করবে ভীষণ বরিক্তকির লাগে এই ব্যাপার গুলো তাই আমি নজিকেে কন্ট্রোল করে কছিুই শয়োর করি না।

ব্যক্তিগত ও পেশাদার প্রোফাইলে বিষয়বস্তুতে পার্থক্য?

আমার ছবি তোলার খুব একটা নেশা নইে। সব জায়গায় গয়িইে যে আমাকে ছবি তুলতে হবে সরেকম খুব একটা আমার ক্রজে নইে। আমি চষ্েটা করি আমার পার্সোনাল পজে টাইপ পলটিকিাল কোন কনটন্েট থাকবে না আমি চষ্েটা করি ওটা একদম একান্তই আমার নজিস্ব একটা প্রোফাইল যখোনে সোশ্যাল মডিয়িার গার্বজে ঢুকবে না। ধরো একটা সবাই গলোম এখানে আমার চারটে পাঁচটা ছবি তুলে কেড়ে পোস্ট করছে। আমি আমার পয়সা নয়িে প্রোফাইলে সটো শয়োর করব না কন্িতু আমার প্রফশেনাল পজেে গয়িে আমি সটো শয়োর করে দবেো। আমার নজিস্ব প্রোফাইলে কোথাও বড়োতে গলোম বা বন্ধুদরে সাথে কোথাও গলোম সরেকম ছবি মাঝে মাঝে আমি পোস্ট করি কন্িতু সটোও খুব রয়োর। যখন করি তখন চষ্েটা করি খুব সাজয়িে খুব বুদ্ধি দয়িে সময় নয়িে পোস্ট করি যাতে কোন ফাঁক না থকেে যায়। আমার ওপর কড়ে যনে কোন আঙুল না তুলতে পারে আমার সইে ছবরি মধ্যে দয়ি। আমি চাইনা আমাকে নয়িে কড়ে gossip করুক আমার পার্সোনাল লাইফ স্টাইলরে উপর ভত্িতি করা। আফটারনাল আমি তো আমি। আমি চার জায়গায় যাচ্ছি তারা স্কুল ধরো পলটিক্যিাল হাউসে যাচ্ছি আমি বন্ধুদরে সঙ্গে বড়োতে যাচ্ছি , এই চারটে জায়গাতইে তো আমি আছি চার রকম ভাবে আছি। কন্িতু সইে চার রকম শর্তটাকে আমার খুব মাথায় রখেে কয়োরফুলি মন্েটনে করে চলতে হয়। ধরো আমি পূজায় কোথাও বড়োতে গলোম সখোন থকেে হয়তো একটা ছবি অনকে খুঁজে কছিু একটা পোস্ট করলাম কন্িতু এমন ভাবইে খুঁজে চুজ করবো তাতে সটো নয়িে আমায় যনে কোন গসপি না শুনতে হয়। পলটিক্িসে আফ্টারঅল কি? ময়েদেরে নয়িে কাঁটাছড়ো ময়েদেরে নয়িে বসে ময়েদেরে নয়িে কচ্িছা এগুলোই তো মানুষ করতে ভালোবাস।

জনিসিগুলোকে ভাগ করে রখেে দয়িছে। এই জনিসিটা এরকম পলটিক্িসটা পলটিক্িস এর জায়গায়। ভাব বলতে আমি বোঝানোর চষ্েটা করছি সকালে উঠইে চোখ খুলে আমাকে মানুষরে সঙ্গে ডলি করতে হয়। তারপর আমার স্কুলরে কাজ সখোনে যতেে হয়।। তারপর বাড়ি ফরিে একটু রস্েট নয়িে আবার বকিলেে মানুষরে সাথে বলি করা মানুষরে সাথে কথা বলা তাদরে সুবধিে অসুবধিে গুলো হ্যান্ডলে করতে হয়।তা আমি নজিকেে কম্পার্টমন্েটালাইস করে কাজগুলো করার চষ্েটা করি যাতে আমি কমপ্লটিলি এক্সজাস্টডে না হয়ে যায়। আমায় এটা বলতইে হবে যে আমার বাবা অনকেটাই আমার কাজে আমার সাহায্য করে তাই আমার অনকেটা সুখ দতিে হয় এই ভাগ গুলো করে আলাদা আলাদা করে বাঁচত।

আমি পলটিক্যাল প্রোগ্রাম ওপনে করছি, আবার আমার নজিস্ব কোথাও বরেোনোর হলে আমি সখোনওে বরেোতে পারছি। আমার কাছে পার্সোনাল লাইফ পা আমার বসেকি লাইফটাই আগে আমাকে সটো মনেটইেন করতইে হব। তারপরইে আসবে পলটিক্স। এইসব বষিয় ইনভল্ভ হয়ে গলেে আর বাকি কছিু থাকনো। একচুয়ালি পার্সোনাল লাইফ বলে আমার এখনো কছিুই নইে। সব প্রশ্নরে লাইফটা ভীষণ পছন্দ করি তাই একটা পলটিকিাল রালি বা পলটিক্যাল সভা থকেে যখন বরেয়িে আসছে আমি আমার ওই সত্তাটা ওখানইে ফলেে আসছ। আমার নজিস্ব যে মন বা নজিস্ব যে সত্তা সটোr মধ্যে আমি আমার পলটিক্যাল সত্তাke ঢোকানোr চষ্টো করি না বরং চষ্টো করি খুব কনশয়িসেলি যাতে দুটো আলাদা থাক। সমস্ত কছিু গটেরে বাইরে রখেে বাড়তিে ঢুকি। ওই যে বললাম এরকম আলাদা করতে করতে এখন হাবটি হয়ে গছে।

টিভি, প্রিন্ট, ডিজিটাল?

কি আর বলব আমাদের সমাজ এখনও সখোনইে আটকে আছে যখোনে ময়েদেরকে একটা স্টেজের পর উপরে উঠতে দখেতে পারিনা। আমি যখন প্রথম প্রথম জয়নে করছেলিাম আমাকে এটা অনকেবার শুনতে হয়ছে যে “ward একটা ময়েে সামলাচ্ছে আবার রাজ্য একটা ময়েরে সামলাচ্ছ।” এরকম taunt তো আমাকে মাঝে মাঝইে শুনতে হয় । মডিয়িা সরেকম পার্থক্য ছলে-ময়েে রাজনীতবিদিদরে খুব একটা আমার চোখে পড়নে। কন্তিু ওই আগে যটো বললাম যে গসফে বা কানা খুসো বা ক্যারক্টোর কে টার্গটে করা বা দাগয়িে দওেয়ার টন্ডেন্সি টা ময়েদেরে উপরে বশেি এবং মনেশন মডিয়িাও সটো খুব ভালোভাবইে করে থাক।

এখন মডিয়িা কাভারজে আমার সাথে সরেকম ডরিক্টেলি কছিু হয়নি কারণ আমি এখনো অত বড় জায়গায় পৌঁছতে পারনি। কন্তিু এই ধরা মহুয়া মত্রেরে কথা যদি বলি রসিন্টেলি ওনাকে ওনার ব্যাগরে ব্র্যান্ড ঘরিে অনকে কন্ট্রোমবাসী হয়ছেলি কন্তিু ব্যাপারটা হচ্ছে একজন মহলিা তনিি রাজনীতি করুন বা কর্পোরটেইে চাকরি koren তনিি যদি নজিে afford করতে পারনে, তাহলে মডিয়িা বা অন্য লোকরে সইে বষিয়ে টপিনি কাটার কে? আমিও পছন্দ করি ব্র্যান্ডডে জনিসি কনিতে বা ব্র্যান্ডরে জনিসি পড়তে জামা কাপড় ব্যাগ জুতো। আমার মাথায় রাখতে হয় আমি মানুষরে সঙ্গে মশিছি তারা হয়তো সইে ব্রান্ড আফোর্ট করতে পারনে না বা কারোর হয়ত চোখে লাগতইে পারে যে আমি এত দামী দামী জনিসি কি করে কনিছি তখন তোমার ভাবতে হয় সইে ব্রান্ডরে জনিসিগুলো ব্যবহার করার আগ। কারো কাছে কছিু আছে মানে সটো লুকয়িে রাখতে হব কনে? প্রত্যকেটা মানুষরে এটা মনে রাখা উচতি যে কউে যদি লুই ভটিনরে ব্যাগ নয়িে ঘুরছে সে সটো এফ৪ করতে পারছে কনি। এমনও অনকে সময় হয় যে সে মহলিা বলে বার রাজনীততিে মহলিা এসছেনে বলে সবাই ইঙ্গতি করার চষ্টো করে যে সে হয়তো কারোর হাত ধরে উঠছে উপরে বা তাকে কউে কনিে দয়িছে ওই একটা ছলেে একটা দামি গাড়ি কনিলে তো বলা হয় না যে সে কারো সঙ্গে সম্পর্কে গয়িে সে গাড়টিা ফ্রতিে নয়িছে? কন্তিু একটা ময়েে দামি জনিসি কনিলে তখন সমাজ ইঙ্গতি করে যে সে অন্য কারো সাহায্য নয়িে হয়তো সটো কনিছে ।

আমি তো আপলোড করতেই পারি আমি একটা চাকরি করি আমি afford করতেই পারি। ব্রান্ডের জিনিস কিনতে pari।কিন্তু অনকে সময় হাউজে গলেে আমার অন্যান্য colleaguera ইঙ্গতিে বুঝিয়ে দবেে যে বাবা কি করে কনিলে নশ্চিয়ই চুররি টাকায় বা কারো সঙ্গে সম্পর্ক আছে তাই জন্য কনিছে। Ami Iphone afford korte pari. Ami schooleo akta chakri kori.

মিডিয়া মসলা খোঁজে লিখতে হবে কিছু তাই জন্য যেটা চোখে পড়ছে সেটা নিয়েই একটা করে স্টোরি বানিয়ে দিচ্ছে। এটা বশেি হয় ডজিটিাল মডিয়িার। জনিসিটা এখন নংোংরা হয়ে গছে আমার মনে হয় না ভালো সাংবাদকিতা করার জন্য লোকরে ঘররে ba hnarir খবর দয়িে নউিজ বানানোর দরকার পর। কন্তিু আজকালকার দনিে ডজিটিাল মডিয়িা হওয়ার ফলে সটোই হচ্ছ।

ভিন্ন রাজনৈতিক দলগুলি এবং তাদের নির্দিষ্ট পোষাকের পছন্দ (সার্টোরিয়াল চয়েস)

অন্য পার্টির কি ডেকোরাম আছে আমি ঠিক জানিনা কিন্তু আমাদের পার্টিতে এরকম কোন রুল বুক বলে কিছু নেই। তবে দদিি আমাদরে বলনে যে আমরা যনে সুন্দর করে সজেগেুজে টভিরি সামনে বা মানুষরে সামনে jai। তনিি খুশি হন আমরা যদি একটু সুন্দর করে সje মকেআপ করে মানুষরে কাছে যাই তনিি বরং খুশি হন। আমাদরে পার্টতিে অনকে ইন্ডাস্ট্ররি লোকরো আছনে বা অ্যাক্ট্রসে রা আমাদরে পার্টরি নত্রেী এখন। তারা তো এমনহি মকোপরে জগতে থাকনে। আমাদরে পার্টতিে দখেবে যহেতেু অনকেইে ফলি্ম ইন্ডাস্ট্রি থকেে এসছেনে তারা সবসময় নজিদেরে গ্ল্যামারাস দখোনোর চষ্টো করনে। দখেইে বোঝা যায় একটা ছক কটেে তাদরে প্রজেন্টেশনটা হচ্ছে মানুষরে কাছ।

তাদের একটা ম্যানেজিং টিম থাকে তারা সব সময় খেয়াল করছে কি ছবি পোস্ট করা হলো কি জামা পরে কালকে যেতে হবে কস্টিং ডিজাইনার থাকে এটা একটা ইমেজ ম্যানেজমেন্ট টিম manage করে এদের। আর অনকেটা ডপিন্েড করে তুমি কোন constituency কে রপি্রজেন্টে করছো। কলকাতার নত্রেীদরে হয়তো সটো করতইে হয় কন্তিু আমার শ্রীরামপুরে অত সজেগেুজে গ্লামার আছে সবসময় ঘুরে সটো মানুষ ভালো চোখে দখেবনে না।

Jamon CPIm er netri ra extereme simplicityr modhye thaken. Otirikto Simple ebong chaposha r messy hoye thaake। তুমি এখন যখন বলছ আমি ভাবছি যে হ্যাঁ সত্যি বজিপেরি নত্রেীরা সবসময় একটা স্পসেফিকি ধরনরে সাজ সজেে হাউসে আস। ওরা আসলে যহেতেু ধর্ম নয়িে রাজনীতি করে ওদরে হয়তো ওই রকম ভাবে নজিদেরে তুলে ধরতে হয় আমাদরে পার্টতিে আমরা তো ধর্ম নয়িে রাজনীতি করি না, তাই আমাদরে ওরকম ভাবে সাজার দরকার nei।আমি চষ্টো করি অতরিক্তি সম্পিল একদম ছাপোসা ম্যারম্যোরে না থাকতে আবার বজিপেরি মতন ওরকম এক মাথা টপি এক মাথায় সঁদুর ওটাও আমার অতটা ভালো লাগনো। আমি বরং চষ্টো করি আমার constituencyr মানুষ আমাকে করিকম দখেতে চায় সইে রকম ভাবইে সে যে হাউসে যতে।

আপনি কি আপনার দৈনন্দিন রাজনৈতিক যোগাযোগ এবং ভাবমূর্তি উপলব্ধিতে ভদ্রমহিলা ধারণার ঐতিহাসিক প্রভাব সম্পর্কে একটু কথা বলতে পারেন?

দেখো ভগবান তো ছেলে মেয়েকে আলাদা বানিয়েছে, তার একটা কারণ আছে বলে। আমরা তো এই জনিসিগুলো ডনিাই করতে পারি না যে কনস্টটিটিউশনালি একটা তফাৎ আছে ছেলে এবং ময়েরে মধ্যে। দখেো পুরনো দনিরে আমাদরে মা ঠাকুমারা যারা ছলিনে ওনারা তো একটা জনিসি বুঝইে তাদরে জীবন যাপন টা করতনে ।ছলে মেয়েদেরে নজিস্ব কছিু রো·ল ডফেনিটেলি থাকে এটা আমরা অস্বীকার করতে পারি না ।এখন মডার্ন সমাজে আমাদরে কালচার বভিন্নি রকম ভাবে বদলানো·ার চষ্টো করা হচ্ছে। আমি এই সমাজইে থাকি একটা ময়েে রান্না করছে মানে কি সে backdated হয়ে যাচ্ছে? যহেতেু আমরা এখনো আমাদরে মাসি দদিা ওদরে মাঝখানইে রয়ছেি, তারা একটা ময়েকে ওই সুন্দর ময়েে হসিবেে দখেতইে পছন্দ করনে।আমি শাড়ি পরয়িা বা আমি একটা পড়ি এটা ওনারা আমাকে ওভাবইে দখেতে পছন্দ করনে। আমি ওইভাবে নজিকেে না দখোলে রাস্তার লো·ককে আমায় সত্যহি আমার দকিে আঙ্গুল তুলব।আর আমি ওই মা মাসদিরে মনরে মত করে সজেে যদি রাস্তা দয়িে হাঁটি তখন লো·কে বলবে ওই দখো একটা ভালো·া ময়েে যাচ্ছে। *“Pehle darshandhari-phir gunvichaari”*

আমি ধরে একটা শাড়ি পড়ছেি কন্তিু ভীষণ ডপি cut royeche। পুরো·া peethta কাটা। পার টপ মডলে ব্লাউজ এর সাথে শাড়টিাকে ম্যাচ করয়িছেি তখন ডফেনিটে দলি কি আমার দকিে আঙুল তুলব।ে ছলেরো শুধু নয় ময়েরোও তুলব,ে আমাদরে মফস্বলে তো·া আরো·া বশেি করে তুলব।ে

Transcript 1 (English Translation)

How did you decide to join mainstream electoral politics? How did your journey begin?

I come from a political family. My grandfather was an MLA, and my father has been involved in politics. Despite growing up in this environment, I wasn’t particularly interested in active politics until recently. My entry was coincidental when my ward became reserved for women. I told my father I wanted to contest the election. Initially, he discouraged me, saying politics wasn’t suitable for women given what we had seen. Eventually, he agreed, and I campaigned with blessings from senior party leaders. People elected me with their love, and now I represent TMC as a councillor in Srirampur city. I’m still at the beginning of my political career, having been in politics for just two years.

How are images/visuals displayed in your daily political campaigns and activities? Especially as a young female politician, how is your image constructed in your daily political communication activities?

Everyone recognises my face now. As you rightly pointed out, my personal life has become a significant matter because people are very interested in it. I have to be careful to keep details of my personal life private. This happens with all leaders, especially female leaders, and actresses who enter politics face even more scrutiny. When you become a public

figure, there's always interest in your personal life, and since you're representing people in politics, it's difficult to complain about it, though it's becoming increasingly necessary. Maintaining privacy is extremely challenging. I try to maintain separation between my personal and social life. I teach at a school while also being in politics, so I try to keep my personal and professional lives separate. I don't want to compromise my private life for anything.

When I go out, all eyes are on me. This is inevitable since I'm in politics and my face appears in social media and digital media. The more involved I get, the more I become a public face, which creates these issues. I'm constantly asked why I still use public transport or why I don't have security. It doesn't make sense that just because I'm in politics, I need to be surrounded by people or travel in fancy cars. I don't think I've become such a big politician yet that I need all that. But I constantly hear these comments. Since I've become a public figure, my personal freedom has decreased.

I don't always change myself, but these things affect me sometimes. It can be very annoying to constantly think about where I'm going and who's watching. Often when I'm out for personal work, people want to talk to me even when I don't feel like it, but I have to because I'm their representative.

How much control do you feel you have over how your image is constructed in the eyes of the people? Women's scrutiny compared to men: what you wear, how you talk, where you go, who you talk to? Creation of the "bhadramahila" (genteel woman).

I represent a small town, so I'm judged at a smaller scale, but representatives of larger constituencies are judged more widely. How I present myself is extremely important. How I speak and what I wear are things I must carefully consider. The public and I are complementary to each other - I serve the public, and they choose me. We depend on each other, so we both should maintain our respective spaces.

I try to do what people like because if people don't like me, they can judge me, but I can't talk back because I'm their representative. Regarding control, I definitely have to control what clothes I wear, that's very true.

You say you decide how to present yourself to people. In that context, you surely have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram where you consciously decide how to present yourself. What kind of thinking goes into that image-making?

It depends partly on how I was raised. Second, I also have another profession as a primary school teacher, so I need to keep that responsibility in mind when creating my image. The teaching profession is such that I can't be too loud. Interestingly, as a politician too, I can't be too loud. This has been maintained for generations. Although there have been some changes, essentially the same image continues in a new package. It comes down to decorum versus impropriety. We try to maintain decorum and not appear improper in people's eyes.

I need to maintain myself appropriately wherever I am. In politics, I try to maintain my dignity. Now, for instance, even if other women in the house are laughing and talking casually, I try to maintain my seriousness, do my work seriously, and return home. Because as I mentioned, I grew up in a political family, so I know the potential consequences. I might say something jokingly, but people might completely misunderstand it and end my political career in an instant.

Because I'm a woman first and foremost. I should have some personal boundaries, and I try to maintain that. I observe other women in the house joking around and talking casually, but I try to avoid that. If I become too casual with people, and then later they say something offensive about me, my hands will be tied because they'll have evidence that I also laugh, joke, and talk loosely. Then I won't have any defence. I would essentially be giving them ammunition to use against me. I've seen this happen so much around me that I've become very cautious. As a woman, it's my responsibility to protect myself. I can't blame others if my own behavior or lifestyle puts me in difficulty. So I try to protect myself by being cautious, maintaining decorum, and discipline.

Whether married or unmarried, as a woman, one should avoid being in an improper position. I've seen many married women in improper situations. I don't say anything to them, but if you ask me, it's not right. One should understand what's good for them and what's not. You have to face your own reality, whether it's frustration or depression. I have to go through it, so I always try not to reach that position.

Regarding clothing, sometimes a girl might join me on stage wearing jeans and a top while I'm in a traditional outfit. I always try to stay covered when meeting people, but I can't control what others wear. I try to stand a bit away from them. Actors and actresses can wear whatever they want without much scrutiny, but we have to align with society, so even if I want to wear tight clothes, I don't. I cover myself with salwar kameez or saree to maintain my dignity.

So would you say that this conscious division as a politician is very important for you to maintain? You don't want to show people the image or impression of how you are with your friends?

Since I've become a public face, I have to keep these things in mind. I must make this division. I don't always want to, but then I remind myself that I'm a representative of the people, so I have to make this sacrifice. It's not about Western versus ethnic Indian clothes, but about keeping myself covered, maintaining my dignity and decorum. After doing this for almost two years as a people's representative, I'll be honest, it's become a habit. It depends on how I was raised and my lifestyle. I adapt each aspect to my lifestyle. Based on where I am - school, stage, or with voters - I decide how to present myself. My freedom or behaviour changes in each context. I try to ensure that those around me and I don't make each other feel uncomfortable.

Social media image management?

I don't think I've reached a stage where I need to hire someone to manage my social media. I still manage it myself. First, I don't use Twitter. I'm only on Facebook and Instagram. I handle my Facebook page myself. During campaigning, someone helped me open my page and post daily photos, but I mostly handle everything myself now. I have a personal profile and a political page. I used to have difficulty with my personal profile, which I had curated over a long time. After contesting elections, many people started tagging me, and my voters all wanted to be friends. I didn't want them all to see my personal profile, so I created a professional page with a team's help. My professional page represents me as a party representative, while my personal profile is strictly personal. But now that I'm in politics, I think 100 times before sharing a post, wondering if it will get me in trouble, if this

photo will lead to inappropriate comments, or how people will perceive it on my timeline. These are things I have to consider deeply.

Could you explain in detail what kind of posts you're talking about? What's the difference between what you share on your page versus your profile? What kind of posts make you think twice?

On my page, I only post political material, nothing else. My posts are politics-oriented - where I'm campaigning, which village I'm visiting to meet people, which meeting I'm attending, or where I'm giving a speech. I use my political page mainly for public relations. My personal identity doesn't appear on that page at all. And on my personal profile, I don't post any political events, news, or updates. In fact, I don't allow people to tag me. Otherwise, people would fill it with tags. I don't allow that at all.

That page is for my personal stuff. But of course, the two are connected. How much can one avoid? Sometimes people have shared memes on my profile by tagging me. But the main issue is with photos. Through photos, people often try to say things jokingly, which look good and tempt me to share. But I have to think ten times about how people will react if I share it. If I share something heartfelt or serious, people will think something has happened in my life. Then they'll start commenting on my profile, which is very annoying, so I control myself and don't share much.

Differences in content between personal and professional profiles?

I don't have much passion for taking photos. I don't have the craze to take pictures everywhere I go. I try to keep my personal page free from political content. I try to make it exclusively my own profile, where social media garbage doesn't enter. For example, if we all went somewhere and someone posted four or five photos, I won't share that on my personal profile, but I'll share it on my professional page.

On my personal profile, I might occasionally post photos from trips or outings with friends, but it's rare. When I do, I try to post very carefully, thoughtfully, taking time to ensure there are no vulnerabilities. I don't want anyone to point fingers at me through those pictures. I don't want people to gossip about me based on my personal lifestyle. After all, I am who I am. I go to four places - say, school, political house, outings with friends - and I exist in four different ways in those places. But I have to maintain those four different personas very carefully. Say I went somewhere during the Puja festival and posted a photo from there, but I will carefully choose it such that it doesn't lead to any gossip about me. After all, what happens in politics? People love to nitpick about women, sit around and gossip about women - that's what people enjoy doing.

I've compartmentalised things. Politics stays in its place. What I mean is, as soon as I wake up in the morning, I have to deal with people. Then I have to go to school for my work. After returning home and resting a bit, I again meet people in the evening, talk to them, and handle their concerns. I try to compartmentalize myself to do these tasks so that I don't become completely exhausted. I must say that my father helps me a lot with my work, so I have some relief in managing these divisions and living separately.

I can open a political program, and if I need to go out for personal reasons, I can do that too. For me, my personal life or basic life comes first, and I must maintain that. Politics comes after that. When all these things get involved, nothing else remains. Actually, I don't really have a personal life yet. I really like my pre-political life, so when I leave a political rally

or meeting, I leave that identity there. I try not to let my political identity enter my personal mind or identity. Rather, I very consciously try to keep the two separate. I enter my home leaving everything outside the gate. As I said, doing this repeatedly has now become a habit.

TV, print, digital media?

What can I say, our society is still stuck at a point where they can't stand seeing women rise beyond a certain stage. When I first joined, I often heard taunts like, "A girl is handling a ward, and a woman is handling the state." I face such taunts quite often. I haven't noticed much difference in how media treats male and female politicians. But as I mentioned earlier, the tendency to gossip, whisper, or target character and stigmatize is more towards women, and mainstream media does this very well.

I haven't directly experienced media coverage issues because I haven't reached such a prominent position yet. But take the recent controversy about her bag brand. The thing is, whether a woman is in politics or a corporate job, if she can afford it herself, what right do the media or others have to comment on it? I too like buying branded things or wearing branded clothes, bags, shoes. I have to keep in mind that I'm mixing with people who may not be able to afford that brand, or someone might wonder how I can afford such expensive things. So you have to think before using branded items. Why should anyone hide what they have? Everyone should remember that if someone is carrying a Louis Vuitton bag, can they afford it? Often it happens that because she is a woman, because women have entered politics, everyone tries to imply that she has risen through someone's help or someone bought her those things. When a man buys an expensive car, no one says he got into a relationship to get the car for free. But when a woman buys expensive things, society implies that she probably got help from someone else.

I can upload that I have a job and can afford branded items. But often when I go to the house, my other colleagues will imply that how did I buy it, surely with stolen money or because I have a relationship with someone. I can afford an iPhone. I also have a job at a school.

Media looks for spice to write about, so they create a story out of whatever catches their eye. This happens more with digital media. The thing has become dirty now. I don't think good journalism requires making news out of people's personal or domestic information. But in today's digital media era, that's what's happening.

Different political parties and their specific clothing preferences (sartorial choices)

I don't exactly know what decorum other parties have, but in our party, there's no such rulebook. However, Didi (Mamata Banerjee) tells us to dress nicely when appearing on TV or before people. She's happy if we dress nicely and wear makeup when meeting people. There are many people from the film industry or actresses who are now leaders in our party. They are already in the world of makeup. Since many in our party come from the film industry, they always try to look glamorous. You can tell their presentation to people follows a pattern.

They have a managing team that always keeps track of what photos are posted, what clothes to wear tomorrow, and they have a costume designer. An image management team manages all this. And it depends a lot on which constituency you represent. Leaders from

Kolkata might need to do that, but in my Srirampur, people won't look kindly on me always being dressed up glamorously.

For example, CPI(M) female leaders maintain extreme simplicity. They're extremely simple, commonplace, and often messy. Now that you mention it, I'm thinking that yes, BJP's female leaders always come to the house in a specific type of attire. Since they do politics with religion, they perhaps need to present themselves that way. In our party, we don't do politics with religion, so we don't need to dress that way. I try not to be overly simple or shabby and messy, but I also don't like the BJP style with vermillion and all. I try to see how the people of my constituency want to see me and dress accordingly when going to the house.

Can you talk a bit about the historical influence of the "bhadramahila" (genteel woman) concept on your perception of daily political communication and image?

Look, God has created boys and girls differently for a reason. We can't deny that there's a constitutional difference between boys and girls. Our mothers and grandmothers from older times lived their lives understanding one thing. Boys and girls definitely have their own roles, we can't deny that. In modern society, attempts are being made to change our culture in various ways. I live in this society - does a girl cooking mean she's becoming backward? Since we're still among our aunts and grandmothers, they prefer to see a girl as a nice girl. They prefer to see me in a saree or traditional outfit. If I don't present myself that way, people on the street will truly point fingers at me. And if I dress according to what those mothers and aunts like and walk on the street, people will say, "Look, there goes a good girl." *"First appearance, then character assessment."*

Say I'm wearing a saree but it has a very deep cut, exposing the entire back, with a model-type blouse matching the saree. Definitely then people will point fingers at me. Not just boys, but girls too will point, especially in our small town.

Let me tell you something interesting. When I was contesting the election, the opponent candidate from CPI(M) went door to door campaigning against me saying, "Look how she dresses up. How can she do politics? You won't benefit from having her as your councillor."

It depends on the place, what people will accept and digest. If you dress modestly, people will accept it. Otherwise, the neighborhood aunties will say, "Oh, how ugly she looks." If I leave politics, I won't have to keep all this in mind. I think the "bhadramahila" image for women isn't wrong. As a woman, it's very beautiful. To me, that image is the perfect image. If I can maintain that image, I won't fall victim to any controversy or gossip in life.

Appendix E:

Sample Interview Transcript 1 (English)

Transcript 1

I'll start with a basic question. In your opinion, in what ways do visuals or images appear in the everyday practice of political candidates, because you deal with a lot of them, you're always in touch with them, and you observe their everyday political communication. So according to you, if you have anything to say about how visuals are?

See to talk about what you are working on. Before that, I think it's very important to talk about the backdrop of women in important political positions in [REDACTED]. Now, it is said that in [REDACTED], if you want to get into a position of power in politics, then you have to be either be a political widow or a political orphan. So if you look at [REDACTED], there is [REDACTED]. She was a political orphan. [REDACTED] is a political widow. [REDACTED] is a political orphan. If you look at [REDACTED], [REDACTED] is a political orphan. If you look at [REDACTED], [REDACTED] is a political orphan. And [REDACTED] is a political widow. Same goes in [REDACTED] or in [REDACTED], and so on. So it's very, very rare that a woman can get into a position of power in [REDACTED] entirely on her own merit. Even if you are not a political widow as such, but you need some kind of a male patronage. Back in the case of [REDACTED], there was [REDACTED]. So, it's very rare that a woman gets into power entirely on her own.

It is not a given thing, it's not encouraged, families don't encourage, they'll say that it will rock the boat, the family, who will look after the family, etc. And when this 33% reservation for women in panchayats, when the bill was being brought in, one of the MPs asked in parliament, then who will make the rotis? If women are going to panchayat, who will make the rotis? So this is the backdrop, this is the scenario, the social scenario, which in a big way influences other factors. So, therefore, when a woman gets into politics, even then, she is expected to be very polite. It'll be good if she wears the *pallu* on her head and if she's soft spoken, et cetera. So when you find that a woman like say, [REDACTED], who was one of the very few women in politics in [REDACTED], who got into power not because of any man in her life, but in spite of them.

So she is constantly mimicked and often, even in an office situation, even in politics, sometimes in order to assert yourself, you have to be extra loud. If you're a boss, you have to be extra loud.

Now that is forgiven in a male boss, but it is usually not forgiven in a female boss. So this perception that when a woman is smoking, she's often referred to, oh, she smokes like a chimney, but a lot of men smoke like a chimney, but you don't refer to a man smoking like a chimney. Okay, so therefore, when you find a woman like [REDACTED] in Parliament, who is extremely vocal, very emphatic, very clear in her mind, speaks between English, people are not able to swallow it. They can't digest it, but how can a woman be so sure of herself? How can she be so confident, supremely confident and defiant of any kind of patriarchy and so on? So therefore, she has to be put down. Her personal life must be brought in. Her, you know, she must, has to be charged with something or the other, as we are finding now that, you know, she has been constantly heckled and even then she's not going down to it, you know, she's defiant and that is something that they cannot digest further.

That is a problem for them. And the same with [REDACTED]. Whether you agree with her brand of politics or not, I'm talking about the woman in politics, the way she had to work her way up. And if you look at the way [REDACTED] came up, she comes from an extremely poor family, very, very poor family. She is a working class family. She grew up in the slums. And she continues to live there. So when she was given the ticket [REDACTED] in 1984, it was a given that she will lose. Because [REDACTED] means [REDACTED].
In [REDACTED], the person she had to fight against was [REDACTED]. He was a giant. So for a woman who was fighting for the first time, and who was fighting, who had to fight for, from [REDACTED], it was a given. The ticket was given to her, you know, we have given it to a girl, a woman, we can say, you know, we gave a ticket to a woman, but knowing fully then that she's going to lose.

But the fact that she turned it on its head, and she actually won the constituency, that is what, that was the beginning of her journey, okay. So, but she has this optics. She grew up wearing her mother's hand-me-down saris, which used to be white saris. And she didn't have the money to buy expensive slippers. So she used to always wear those flip-flops. And she made it her brand. She continues to wear white saris and wear flip-flops. Even when she's in [REDACTED], she'll wear those flip-flops and wear those cotton saris.
So that is a brand that she has created. And, but even then, you know, she's taunted for it, that, you know, it's a put-on, et cetera, et cetera. But for [REDACTED], [REDACTED] always wears saris. You know, she makes it a point to wear saris.

But say, for MPs like [REDACTED] or [REDACTED], they are, they are primarily, they are actors. They were stars. So when they got into Parliament, they were criticised for the kind of clothes that they were wearing. You know, as if that is what matters. Your work does not matter. Yeah. And that is what is important. So, so the optics are that, you know, you have to, some way or the other, you need to conform. Yeah. You have to conform to patriarchal norms. What is acceptable in patriarchy for a woman to wear, you know, the sari, the, and you have to be, you know, you have to be soft spoken. You have to be humble, gentle, all those things that a woman are taught. Yeah. So even as a politician, you're supposed to be that. And if you're not that, then people try to put you down in unconstitutional matters. Yeah. So just like taking a thread from that, you were referring to the past when [REDACTED] came into politics and there's been a sea change in how with social media coming into our mainstream politics.

So in the day, politicians would only be represented via traditional media organizations, like what the newspaper writes or what TV is. Yeah. But now with social media, the power is a lot on the women itself. So [REDACTED] is kind of high up there. I can't reach her. But like just to have, if you have something to say about the rest of the women who are trying to come into politics with so much hoo-ha being done about the reservation, Reservation for 50%. Yeah, but for them, like the general public or the general pool of women politicians, do you think they have more, to what extent can they control these visuals about themselves? The image making process that is...

It's not easy. It's never easy because, yes, as a woman, you can put out something on the social media. But the amount of trolling that follows, that trolling is beyond your control. And women politicians are trolled like nobody's business. For example, I think a few days back, [REDACTED] was nominated for the [REDACTED]. And the amount of trolling that she has faced, it's unbelievable. Any time that she puts up a post, the amount of trolling that she faces, calling her all kinds of names, it's absolutely as if everyone is trying their best to

put her down for having got that ticket, that she must have given money. And not only her, even her husband, [REDACTED] is being trolled, that how much money did you pay for your wife's ticket, 40 crores, 50 crores, that kind of a thing. So social media has given people, people, the freedom, men, women, everybody, transgenders, and everybody, the freedom to put out what they want to say.
Definitely, it's a very powerful medium, but the threat is a trolling that happens. And trolls are often paid trolls, as we know.

Yeah, yeah. And do you see, because of that trolling, do you see women kind of create a certain image about themselves, there's a huge, there's a stark division between the private and the public.

Not for everybody, not for everybody. Like, for example, for [REDACTED], she doesn't care what is said about her. And she is who she is, she's very transparent about herself, about her life, about her past, about her relationships. She is very strong. So. She can take them on. She's like a man. She is not awed by patriarchy or, you know, overrun by patriarchy. But I'm sure that there are, you know, politics by itself divides a person, men, women, everyone between the private and the public.

So, you know, the moment you get into, you know, you get into politics, you have to become diplomatic. You have to stop using that. You have to hide a little bit of your real feelings. And, you know, in politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, no allies and no enemies, permanently. So sometimes you might have to, you know, ally with somebody, form an alliance with somebody who you actually hate from the core of your heart or whose policies you completely disagree with. But in parliamentary politics, numbers are important. The seats, how many seats do you have? Important. How many votes? From where are you going to vote? That's important. So there are many areas where you have to tie up, even though you don't want to tie up.

Like, for example, in [REDACTED], [REDACTED] had to tie up with [REDACTED], completely differing ideologies, which is unthinkable. You know, it was always [REDACTED] versus [REDACTED] throughout history, but this time they had to tie up with [REDACTED] to fight the [REDACTED].

The [REDACTED] was considered to be a bigger threat. So I'm sure that, you know, many of them had to remain silent on many issues on both the sides to keep the alliance going as long as it went going. So I think, you know, the moment you enter politics, whether you are a man or a woman, you will have to hide a part of real you. division between private, what do you think privately, and what you say publicly, or what the image that you project publicly. And there's a lot of research going on.

Say for example, in the West, political communication in the West, a lot of studies show that more and more politicians, male or female, more so women, are trying to kind of merge their personal life and curating a glimpse of their personal into the public. Chilling with the dog, or [REDACTED] going on a walk with [REDACTED], or giving more and more of a glimpse of their personal life. So in another component of my study, before I reached the interview part was I was analysing the social media activities of women politicians across political parties, not just one in [REDACTED]. So I observed this personal life, glimpses of the personal is kind of absent. So do you think women in our kind of societies or in [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] more so, are more careful about to show who they are in their real life or is it, or do you think it's not, I mean, what do you think?

Yeah, I think a lot of this personal stuff that goes out in the West, it's a lot, a lot of it is put on, you know, they have to do it for their political career, for their political advancement. And, you know, in the [REDACTED] especially, this thing about family, the family is important. So because families are falling apart, so they try to project themselves as the perfect family, that they are always standing by each other and so on. It happened even with [REDACTED] and, yeah. So even when during [REDACTED]'s worst years, worst time, his wife, you know, stuck to him showing solidarity.

I'm sure they must have had huge fights in their bedroom, but they didn't bring it out into the open. So I think this, using their personal image for their political advancement, I would say they only use their personal image. It's not necessarily that necessary that they're so hunky-dory in their personal life.

Yeah. Okay, so they do it very, they do it very professionally. It's image management. Image making, yeah, absolutely.

Image management, okay. So they do it professionally. I'm sure they have professionals there to tell them that, you know, when you go out. like, like [REDACTED] does it here. Yeah. Okay, so every time he visits his mother, the joke is that the mother knows the son is going to visit her when the photographers arrive. So he makes sure that whenever he's doing yoga, there's a photographer there, when he goes to the [REDACTED] to meditate, there's a photographer, photography team there. So he has taken up that image management thing from the west to use it electrically. And it has worked for him in many ways, you know, a lot of people are really floored by the fact that every time he goes to visit his mother, he touches his mother's feet and, you know, and all these things that he does whenever he's doing yoga or feeding the peacock, you know, kind of feeding the cows. So he is always a photographer around and and it's always projected on social media and so on. But here it is not, apart from [REDACTED], I don't see anyone else doing this. Yet, you know, those professional image managers work for him.

He has picked it up very well. He meaning the [REDACTED] has picked it up to create this image of this complete man, 56 inch complete man, etc. But it hasn't arrived in [REDACTED] overall.

So yeah, so it hasn't reached here but do you think women are even more careful to curate their their image in a very careful manner? Especially, you know [REDACTED] faced a lot of trolling when she put up something on tick tock. You know wearing some kind of clothes and you know dancing or something that is perfect.

So she put it up on TIKTOK and she faced a lot of trolling because of that and I'm sure politically it affected her image to a great deal Because she's from a very conservative constituency [REDACTED] lots of people from minority community who expected. You know who are very conservative in their outlook when it comes to women. Or even [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] when they first went to Parliament They were in Western clothes and they took a photo shoot outside the Parliament, you know in Western clothes. There's a lot of trolling that are they on a fashion parade or something, you know So it does happen women have to be careful if they are not careful.

So, but like, for example, you will find in the parliament that women wearing saris or I'm told that even in our state, the ministers usually always wear saris whenever they're going out. So, you know, some ministers have told me in private that, you know, I envy you so much,

you know, you can wear whatever you want. But we can only wear sarees. It's a compulsion. In public, we can only wear sarees. So yeah, but that's a compulsion that they have. But that they have to wear sarees, or they can't wear sleeveless stuff. They have to be modestly addressed. But so yeah, that is a limitation. But image management, there is no professional image management that I am aware of. There's only one politician in [REDACTED] who is doing professional image management, and that is [REDACTED].

Do you see any difference in how the women self-represent themselves on Twitter and Facebook? Do you see any difference in the two? Because Instagram, I have been kind of trying to understand that a lot of these politicians are kind of missing on the Instagram even today. Whereas many places in the world where politicians are kind of taking on Instagram to give a personal glimpse of.

I think in [REDACTED], women mostly use the Twitter and also Facebook, when they have to represent something visually. A lot of visuals are there when they use Facebook. But when they have something to say, they do it on the Twitter.

[REDACTED] is a lot on Twitter. Yeah, yeah, true, true. So another question is that how are... So one part is them representing themselves on social media, where the power is kind of with them. They can decide. They can control to some extent, do you think, what they put up on social media versus? Yeah, sorry. Yeah, please say. Versus how they are represented in mainstream media. The control... They don't have too much power on how mainstream media represents them. So what kind of a difference do you think there is in how mainstream media in today's day and age?

Back in the day, [REDACTED], when she was kind of entering politics, we had seen the kind of misogynistic headlines and extremely problematic headlines in very popular daily newspapers in [REDACTED].

But in today's day and age, with television, with digital media and print newspaper, because even today, there's a huge readership of print even today, even though we are saying that print is dying. But still, the readership number in absolute terms is quite...So do you see the, what, what do you think are the primary influences that kind of contribute to the visual representation of women in mainstream media and how is different or is it even different according to you on social media?

See on social media you're doing it yourself. On print media someone else is deciding what is to be put up and what is being decided on print media has is greatly influenced by the advertisers or by the people who put in the money. So we all know that whether it is television or it is, it is print, the advertiser or the funder plays a very, very important role. They have to be happy, they have to be pleased. Things have really changed, you know, I mean everything is controlled by the market and politicians, politics. So if a political party is controlling a certain newspaper or a certain television channel then they will, they will prefer certain kind of images of certain kind of women in the, in the, in the print or in on television. So obviously the control is not with an individual whether it's a politician or even with an editor anymore. So yeah, so that is the main thing but on social media, if I am on social media, I'm a politician, I know what I will put up on the media, on social media.
I can't control the trolling but I can put up or what I will put up on the, what I will be there on, on, on social media whether it's Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or wherever. Yeah, that is the difference, I would say.

So in mainstream media, have you, any example that you have kind of seen, usually, you know, women politicians except [REDACTED] because she is the leader of the state. But other other women politicians usually headlines like if there's an image, there are headlines that are about their clothes or their marital status very like non political non like for male politicians, the headlines don't only revolve around that you know, but do you even it still exists in?

No, no, in not about clothes, but even about personal life. There is an unwritten code in [REDACTED] journalism, which has been running for a long time that whether it's a man or a woman or any politician, they don't they don't really talk about the personal life of a politician. So you really very, very, very rarely find a scandal about a politician being you know, put out there in the media, especially in the print media. Print media has its own self-censorship. They will not do it.

They consider them to be serious journalists, who's serious, they're broadsheets. So only when [REDACTED] was found with a huge amount of money in his girlfriend's, you know, when the thing was for the stash of money and gold was found in his girlfriend's apartment, only then there were some references. That was the only time. But [REDACTED] is a male politician, but that was like huge. So that was, it was more on television. That kind of thing happened more on television, those kinds of remarks, et cetera.

Not so much in print. The print, they were only talking about the cash, mainly about the cash that was found. So, and about the corruption. No, I don't see, yeah. Yeah. Okay. And do you observe any, so there are say four kind of mainstream political parties right now, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED].

So do you see the visual representation again? You will, there are these codes of the political parties like a leader looks a certain way versus a left leader looks a certain way. So what are the differences that you've seen how even the younger lot, younger women who are entering politics across parties, how do you see the difference in their visual representation that they are consciously trying to put up to a line or not either way it can be any.

So, for example, there's this, a young woman called [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. She is, they are gradually building her up against [REDACTED]. So she is made to dress like her. She's, you know, she's, they're trying to create her.

They're trying to build her up against [REDACTED]. It's a long way to go, but they're trying to do it. That is a great observation. Yeah, true. Yeah, so, because I hear a lot of people say, [REDACTED] is a part of the [REDACTED]. Now, [REDACTED] is a party which is extremely patriarchal. They never promote women. They very, very, very rarely allow a woman to come into their Politburo. Only [REDACTED]'s wife, [REDACTED], because she was [REDACTED]'s wife, she was led into the, she was given some kind of position. Otherwise, [REDACTED] for all its "liberal, Marxist" policies, they're very, very conservative in their outlook. They believe that women should make the rotis, they should remain in the kitchen. I met a lot of women, very illustrious women who got married into a [REDACTED] or a [REDACTED] household. And they have told me, including [REDACTED], that beyond that, you know, she got married to [REDACTED]. But she said that, you know, even [REDACTED] was very conservative when it came to the women in the house, that they have to be women first, they have to be cooks first, they have to be homemakers first before anything else.

So [REDACTED] never promotes women, never. So therefore, for them to consciously promote someone like [REDACTED], who's absolutely a new entrant, it speaks volumes about, you know, they're strategising, you know, they're strategising, they're thinking five years from now or 10 years from now, because [REDACTED] is also aging.
So they can then, you know, project her as the next person. But apart from that, what was your question again?

I mean, across parties, do you think women are consciously trying to make an image that kind of lines with their parties?

Yes, when consciously, like in the [REDACTED], you don't find any women in [REDACTED]. It's not a single woman. In [REDACTED], I told you, in [REDACTED], there is [REDACTED], and at the moment, [REDACTED] is the one who's projected the most. And from being a very suave, smart fashionista, you know, who was a fashion designer, suddenly she has transformed herself into what we call, wearing vermilion from here and wearing certain kind of saris and always in orange and speaking in shrill voices, trying to match up to [REDACTED], you know, the men in the thing. So they are, everybody tries to mold into the image of their party, of what would suit their party. So [REDACTED] is trying to mold herself into the image of the [REDACTED] who only works for the downtrodden K.T.

[REDACTED] didn't have to try. And she kept on, she held on to that image, her own image. And I see young politicians in her party, young women like [REDACTED] and even [REDACTED] and all, whenever they are in a party forum, I see them wearing white saris. And [REDACTED], I see her wearing those white flip flops, exact flip flops that [REDACTED] has. So, you know, they are kind of imitating her and trying to project themselves as one, you know, we are like this.

We were white saris, we were flip flops, we don't care what the world thinks. It's not a diktat talk from above. I once heard there was a [REDACTED], you know, where, you know, we are invited like the civilians, like, you know, people who are in civil society, they're invited. And there are, you know, there's this [REDACTED], there's [REDACTED] and a few other women. So they were all wearing white.

So [REDACTED] suddenly turned and said, "Why are you all wearing White? I am wearing white doesn't mean you will also wear white?" So it's not that she has told them to wear white. Probably they feel that she will feel happy. She will be pleased if they also wear white. But actually, it's not like that. They are trying to mould themselves into, you know, that kind of a framed image.

Yeah. Yeah. So like just drawing from that, like you were saying, [REDACTED] has kind of moulded herself into what her party would like. I've analysed hundreds of photos of [REDACTED] and all of them have sindur and large red bindi. Yeah. With sindur, sankha, pola. And yeah, so there's a kind of a big thing on how a woman should look. But I don't know her personally, so I don't know if she's very different in her private life or not. So is she probably is. But I am failing to reach to her. She's very busy. I have I've been trying to network through and reach her. But…

I'm sure that women have to very consciously create that division. Accepted in the public, especially for someone like [REDACTED], because [REDACTED] is a very aggressive party. Exactly. And with very regressive values. Now, as a woman, if today, for example, could never ever happen, but today, for example, if I join the [REDACTED], I'll have to start

looking different, very, very starkly different, I'll have to start behaving very differently, you know, I'll have to start talking very differently. So it will be a completely divided self, you know, like I will be completely different in my public life than I what I am in my private life. Yeah, but for [REDACTED], [REDACTED], etc, it's not completely different. It's only that the sari that they're changing, but otherwise they are doing what they're doing. Even for [REDACTED], she is actually a student leader. So she has been a fighter, etc. So it's only that the party is projecting her at the moment.

Yeah. But for, for [REDACTED], I've known her personally. for quite a few years before she joined [REDACTED]. I was quite surprised that she joined the [REDACTED] because she's a fashion designer, you know, and she belongs to a very well-to-do family. She's married into the [REDACTED] family. She has no dearth of money or fame or being a social entity. What propelled her to get into [REDACTED] and, you know, suddenly start putting up this regressive image of a woman, promoting this regressive image of what an ideal [REDACTED] should be. That is something that has always puzzled me, but [REDACTED] is an ideal example of how a politician, a woman politician, has to split her personal life and there's a split between her personal and private.

Yeah. I'm sure like [REDACTED], she also enjoys a drink in the evening, you know, I'm sure. I'm sure she enjoys eating a Beef Chatiaubriand, all that, but in front of the public, she has to, you know, yeah.

That was exactly the cue when I started my work back in 2020 in peak lockdown when I started. So that brings me to the next question that to what, according to you, to what extent do societal expectations and historical narratives, because [REDACTED] first, [REDACTED] today, but [REDACTED] back in the day, had the Bhadramahila, bhalo meye, like in Ghare Baire with the public and the private being very separate. So even we have the ideal woman or the good woman, so to say, who is the good woman? So the historical narratives in literature in that we have, do you think is having an influence in contemporary visual representations, like, you know…

Not literature, not literature, because literature has become far more progressive. What is having an influence are the television serials, the [REDACTED] television serials, where the ideal woman is the suffering woman, you know, who accepts everything and who's very nice and never protests, never raises her voice and always keeps her own desire subdued to serve the in-laws and to serve the family. So that is the image that has been projected, that is being projected ever since the time of [REDACTED]. It started with that and then it followed in [REDACTED] and in [REDACTED] almost every serial has the same story. So, in our similar kind of stories and where the women have to be very subdued, etc, etc. So that is what, you know, and these people, the viewers are the voters. So they expect their female candidates across party lines to have a certain image that they shouldn't be, like, it's not the image of [REDACTED]. You know, [REDACTED] is very different from that thing. She has other plus points, you know, people would vote for her for other reasons. But not this one, not, yeah, she doesn't have this kind of a image. So yes, I wouldn't say literature, because literature has progressed far beyond that. There is this feminist literature now, there are so many women writers, there are even male writers who are questioning. In [REDACTED] also, even earlier, like you had [REDACTED], where you had this Birangana, where women are questioning their husbands. You know, so I would say literature is not what is compelling women to create a different image.

It's the serials, it's the public expectation is built by what they watch on television. But let me just tell you one more thing. It's not just women, it's men also. Because I remember one

of my sister-in-laws, her husband was posted in [REDACTED], in the [REDACTED], and my brother-in-law was asked to host a dinner. And a lot of people were meeting him, so he had to host the dinner. And my sister-in-law is a very good cook, so she cooked half this stuff, the food, food, half the stuff, et cetera. And she cooked a lot of veg stuff for [REDACTED], because, you know, there should be shakaharis. So then [REDACTED]'s CA, confidential assistant, told her, took her aside, told her that, you know, in front of everyone, he eats veg, but, you know, sometimes he will be, you know, he moving to another room where he will be having non-veg.

So she had to constantly supply him with non-veg stuff in another room, behind curtains, and he would be drinking there as well. And then come back and have shakahari in front of everyone. So that's the kind of image that even a male politician has to put up with.

So that is probably a, I mean, of course, that is a [REDACTED] bound by its ideals and... image management, but like historical ideals by that, I mean, I meant the, you know, image of the bhadramahila, if I'm married, then how I should look and if I contest tomorrow, if I go like this, I might not would I get votes, I don't know, I will have to look a certain way to be accepted by the voters, like you said, depends on your constituency, depends entirely on your constituency. Okay, so can you like expand a bit because how do these historical ideals of, of, of the perfect or the ideal woman or the good woman?

See, on the one hand, you have the serials, which influence people, on the other hand, you have social media. And even in the remote villages, everyone has a phone, a smartphone and they go through social media stuff, they go through all kinds of stuff, they're exposed, now they're, they're exposed to everything. So it doesn't shock them anymore. If a candidate comes to a village, wearing a salwar kameez, it will not shock them anymore. Because it is something that they're exposed to. Okay, but yes, it will make a difference, it is likely to make a difference in the number of votes that they get. It might, depending again on the constituency, say in in a remote place in [REDACTED], where people usually wear salwar kameez only, if you go in jeans, then people might frown. But if you are doing so in a constituency like [REDACTED] or [REDACTED], it will not make any difference.

Okay. So when I, when I started the PhD, so like, like you were saying, the the balancing between the party's expectation versus a woman leader's own expectation. How do they balance this, like how is [REDACTED] wanting me to represent myself versus what I want?

How do you think any glimpses that you've got of how these leaders balance the two? Yeah, yeah. See, as I told you that no other party is as regressive as the [REDACTED]. I'm talking about [REDACTED]. So in [REDACTED], I see women wearing saris, you know, whenever I would see [REDACTED] women workers, they would be mostly wearing saris earlier and they would often wear those red, you know, white saris with red border, you know, the nationalist Swadeshi kind of a thing. But women often wear saris. They don't, it's not something, it's not an outlandish thing.