

It is a truism that India is a land of mind boggling diversity. Yet stereotypes about India which reduce the Indian reality to a unidimensional monolith hold powerful sway.

One such powerful stereotype is that Indian women are brutally oppressed, denied a voice in their family and community, and marginalised in politics as in other power structures. Without doubt, there is much truth in this stereotype. But how do we then explain the current political scene? A few women are holding the entire political establishment of India to ransom. How else does one describe the machinations of Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati and Mamta Banerjee that have caused enormous upheavals in our polity and recently brought about the fall of the BJP government? Powerful politicians dance to the erratic tunes of these women, and are ignominiously subservient to them.

Many will try to explain Sonia's clout within the Congress party by ascribing all of it to her dynastic advantage. And certainly it explains a lot. Similarly, many will attribute Jayalalitha's rise to power to her relationship with MGR, and Mayawati's clout to her being patronised and groomed by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founder Kanshi Ram.

The Furious Mamta

But Mamta Banerjee did not have the same advantages. She comes from a very ordinary, lower middle class family and has built her political career on her own strength. She challenged powerful Congressmen in West Bengal and emerged as an independent power out of that battle. For years she had been sidelined and humiliated by fellow Congressmen who felt threatened by her mass appeal and aggressive populist

Indian Politics Encourages Durgas, Snubs Women

○ Madhu Kishwar

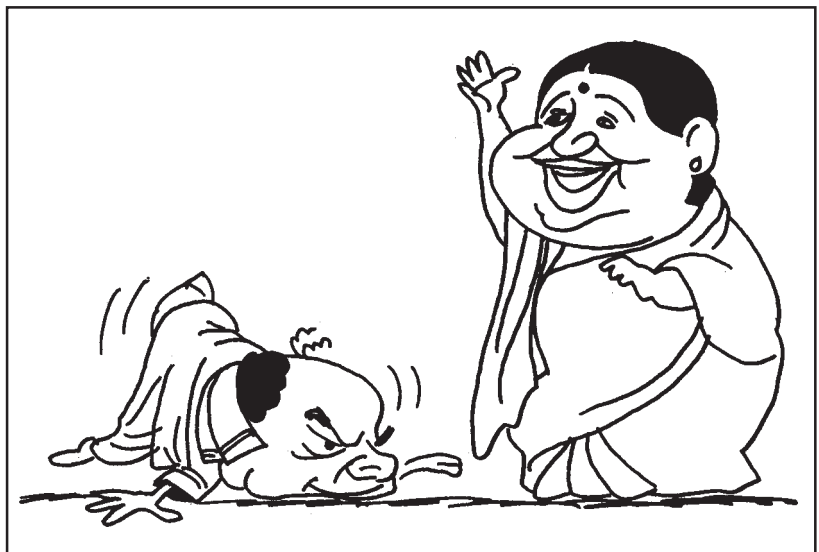
politics. At the same time, the CPM did their best to browbeat her because she emerged as their main opponent in their power base in West Bengal. They have met her persistent attempts to organize an anti-CPM front with brutal attacks. On numerous occasions she was beaten up by the police. A couple of times she even received near fatal injuries, but she refused to be frightened or retreat.

When her own party tried thwarting her efforts, she quit the Congress (I) and founded her own Trinamool Congress. She is the first woman to successfully found and lead her own party. It has emerged as the main opposition in West Bengal, shoving aside the Congress (I) stalwarts, many of whom now actively woo her to let them fight elections on

her party ticket. Even those who disapprove of her politics are in awe of her raw physical courage and organisational skills. In recent years, she has emerged as a major player on the national scene as well. Even before the fall of the BJP government, if Mamta sneezed, Vajpayee got a cold. This despite the fact that her gender, her class, her sensational political style and her hysterical temperament all went against her being taken seriously in the money, muscle power and male dominated world of Indian politics.

The Vindictive Amma

By conventional wisdom, Jayalalitha had even more disadvantages in acquiring a powerful position in the political



ANOOP KAMATH

world. She was the daughter of a character actress and comes from a fairly modest family, which was so hard up for money that she was withdrawn from school at an early age by her mother and pushed into acting in films. From a very young age she provided substantial financial support to her family. She eventually became the mistress of M.G. Ramachandran, a more prominent fellow film star who later founded a political party and subsequently became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. He found her a convenient prop but maltreated and exploited her for years. She was spied upon and even beaten up by him.

After his death, the male leaders of the party tried to sideline her because they resented the clout she had acquired on account of her intimacy with MGR. They even tried to use MGR's wife Janaki to obstruct Jayalalitha from taking over the AIADMK after MGR's death. Janaki was put up as a candidate against Jayalalitha. Her party backers expected MGR's wife to have an advantage over his mistress in inheriting his political empire.

Instead, Janaki suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Jayalalitha, who since then has established herself as the reigning queen of the AIADMK. She commands even more fear and exacts even more grovelling obedience from her party members than did Indira Gandhi from hers. There are many temples in the state where she is ensconced as the presiding deity. She is deified by her followers as Mother Mary, Shakti and even Bharat Mata.

It is customary for her party colleagues to

routinely touch her feet, and do *sashtang namaskar* as a mark of obeisance. At the same time her penchant for corruption is legendary and her vindictiveness frightening. Her greed for money and tendency for gross display of wealth would put Imelda Marcos to shame. The numerous court cases filed against her by the rival Karunanidhi government are merely the proverbial tip of the iceberg of corruption that characterised her tenure as CM. During her reign as chief minister, there were any number of physical, even murderous attacks on those who dared stand up to her. The victims included journalists, lawyers, and even bureaucrats like Chandralekha had acid thrown on her face at Amma's behest. Even when out of power, she has been involved in physical attacks on those she imagines have wronged her, including her own auditor who she beat up with her sandals assisted by her female companion Sasikala.

The remarkable fact is that she gets away with all such outrageous acts. Rather than be demonised for such vicious behaviour, she has added to her aura of being shakti incarnate.

The prime object of her fury is Karunanidhi, the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. She brought down the BJP government primarily because they did not oblige her by dismissing Karunanidhi's government at her bidding.

The Fearsome Mayawati

Mayawati comes from a poor Dalit (chamar) family and though she possesses a law degree, she seems to have none of the feminine qualities expected of "respectable women." With Kanshi Ram as her mentor, she helped him build the BSP. Within a relatively short period she emerged as the public voice of the party that claims to speak for the Dalit (scheduled caste) community in India. She is foul mouthed, abusive, unscrupulous and extremely ambitious. She is known to have treated all the state bureaucrats with utter disdain when she was the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. They virtually trembled before her and took all manner of humiliation. She filled all key posts with officers willing to assist her in looting the public and the exchequer and blindly follow her whimsical orders.

But her arrogance and disdain are not reserved for the upper castes and upper classes only. Her own party men and scheduled caste members get even worse treatment at her hands. For example, in BSP meetings, she and Kanshi Ram insist that everyone sit on the floor—including their party MLAs—while these two deities alone sit on chairs.



ANOOP KAMATH

The arrogance and disdain she displays toward fellow Dalits surpasses that of most upper caste people. Even in giving party tickets, Mayawati and her mentor Kanshi Ram have often shown a marked preference for selecting upper caste candidates to fight elections on their party tickets because upper caste candidates remain totally dependent on them for mopping up Dalit votes. They have systematically marginalised any of their own Dalit cadres who show the slightest sign of developing an independent political base or agenda. In addition, Mayawati outshines any man in her talent for robbery and extortion and has amassed enough wealth to last her for seven generations.

Mania for Sonia

Even Nehru as the prime minister of India and leader of the Congress party had any number of critics and opponents. But hardly anyone in the Congress of today, created by Sonia's mother-in-law, dare criticise or oppose Sonia openly. Without doubt, there are some disgruntled leaders like Sharad Pawar in the Congress. But their unhappiness is mainly due to her sidelining them from her *darbar* and choosing others to be part of her coterie. If she loses out to a mere man like Sharad Pawar, it will be the end of her political career. However, if she can outmanoeuvre him, she will be far more fearsome than even Indira Gandhi was for the Congress satraps. Even senior Congress leaders shake in fear before Sonia and lack the guts to challenge her claim to be the undisputed leader of the party and inherit the prime ministership. She has been able to manipulate the entire machinery of the historic Congress party into promoting her personal agenda even though until very recently she was a total novice in politics and has no political track record. In addition, she has the



handicap of being a “foreigner”, someone who despite living for 30 years in India, cannot effectively communicate in any Indian language. She lives in haughty seclusion and runs the affairs of her party as though from an imperial *darbar* where a select few are allowed *darshan* or called in for consultation as and when she pleases.

Their Special Clout

How do we account for the extraordinary clout these women, who came to power in such different ways, have acquired within their parties, the awe they inspire among fellow politicians, and the enormous hold they have over the popular imagination?

One common characteristic that Jayalalitha, Mamta, Mayawati, and to a much lesser extent Sonia Gandhi, share with each other is that they act as though no one could get away with trying to intimidate them. They have demonstrated extraordinary resilience and cunning in the face of heavy odds.

The mesmeric power these women exercise over our political life provides us with interesting insights into the Indian male psyche. While Indian men have made it fairly difficult for

ordinary women to feel comfortable as equal participants in the political domain, they tend to succumb easily to the demands of women who have the shrewdness and determination to grasp some dynastic or other leverage that provides them with the crucial opportunity to demonstrate that they are stronger and more resilient than the entire range of men in our politics, that they are courageous, fearless and hard to browbeat. In many other parts of the world, women who fortuitously find themselves in positions of power and who possess or demonstrate extraordinary strength tend nevertheless to be ridiculed and treated like aberrations. In India, the response is the opposite. Such women find greater acceptance than ordinary women who are looking for mere equality.

Devis and Matriarchs

This is a variation of our family scene wherein many men find it hard to deal with wives desiring equality. But the very same man has no difficulty in accepting his mother as an authority figure before whom he must show unconditional deference and respect, or even a wife who begins to assume matriarchal authority. Most women, trapped in

dependency, don't often get to be taken seriously. However when they manoeuvre themselves into a superior position, whether as mothers, elder sisters, grandmothers, aunts or even well established wives, they acquire numerous advantages that accumulate, including certain well defined rights to order and command. Such a family upbringing for most Indian men, combined with the tradition of goddess worship, provides a good training ground for men to be psychologically subservient to strong women who assume charge of the family and act like matriarchs.

As pointed out very elegantly by A.K. Ramanujan, in India we have two kinds of goddesses—the benign consort goddesses like Parvati and Lakshmi, whose shrines and status are subordinate to those of their spouses Shiva and Vishnu. People revere but do not fear them. By contrast, there are far more numerous non-consort goddesses who are far more powerful. Every village worships its own. “Their myths tell us of ordinary human women who are cheated into marrying untouchables or raped by a local villain or killed or buried by cruel brothers. Out of such desecrations they rise in fury, grow in stature to become figures that span heaven and earth, with powers of destruction that terrify the village into submission, sacrifice and worship. Theirs are not myths of descent or *avatara*, but of ascent from the human into divine forms.” These non-consort goddesses “represent the other side of the mother” who “punish, afflict people with plague and pox, and when propitiated heal the afflicted. They are deities of crisis; they preside over famine, plague, death and madness.” (see MANUSHI 69 page 10 of article: *Who Needs Folklore?*)

As with all the ferocious goddesses of Indian mythology

and village lore, Jayalalitha justifies her authoritarian ways and her vindictive politics as the legitimate response of a woman long wronged and exploited by men, till she rose in fury and decided to give tit for tat, and gave ten kicks for every one she received. Mamta has built her political career more in the tradition of an avenging deity than a politician. She presents herself as a victim of the CPM's dictatorship who will not rest till she has destroyed their power. Mayawati does not use any personal history of persecution but claims to be avenging the collective, historic insults heaped upon the entire Dalit community.

Acting at Own Behest

It is also not a coincidence that all these four women under discussion are single or widowed. As long as Sonia Gandhi acted the role of a mere wife, nobody in India paid much attention to her except as a colourful presence by her husband's side. She never became an important icon like Jackie Kennedy or a power centre like Hillary Clinton. But after her husband's death, as soon as she began to quietly and skilfully manipulate the Congress party bosses into kowtowing before her, the entire national media and political establishment became mesmerised by her. She should, properly speaking, have been resented and discouraged from becoming an extra-constitutional authority. Instead, the sight of powerful Congressmen falling at her feet, and stammering nervously while bending and bowing before her, enhanced her importance. The more imperiously she behaves, the more arbitrary her actions, the more awe she seems to inspire.

Similarly, as long as Jayalalitha was merely the consort of MGR she

was barely tolerated for his sake. She was neither respected nor feared. That is why, after his death, most of her party men were not willing to entertain her claim to be MGR's political inheritor. On the day of his cremation, she was forcibly removed from the carriage carrying his dead body to the cremation ground. However, it was only when she proved her mettle by emerging triumphant in the electoral battle against her opponents who had propped up MGR's wife against her, and successfully outmanoeuvred all those politicians who were desperate to ease her out by building an independent political base, that she acquired the aura of an invincible *amma*. She became a matriarch to be feared rather than a mere woman who could be put down. If her greed for money had not run amok and her lust for power not turned altogether destructive, she would have been even more potent a force. Even today she has millions of devotees and followers in Tamil Nadu despite the political mess she created. It is not surprising that, surrounded with so many awe inspired devotees, Jayalalitha grossly miscalculated her clout in the latest political crisis she created all so that she could compel the central government to dismiss the DMK government in Tamil Nadu, instal her in power and withdraw proceedings in the numerous cases going on against her.

Mamta has chosen to stay unmarried and in her single-minded pursuit of power has not allowed herself the luxury of a significant personal life or relationship. This in a way adds to her aura of invincibility because, she is not dependent on any man; she is neither wife nor mistress but a universal *didi* (elder sister) to her followers. But she has had to struggle much harder than any other woman politician because instead of

getting the backing of a powerful man, she has had to challenge male power, both within her party and outside.

Mayawati has also remained unmarried. Even though she is believed to have an intimate relationship with Kanshi Ram, within a short time she has projected herself as someone playing her own power games rather than acting as a mere rubber stamp or puppet in Kanshi Ram's hands.

Gender Advantage

To sum up: In India, women who prove themselves stronger and more commanding than men are able to use their gender to advantage rather than it becoming a liability for them. The mesmeric hold Indira Gandhi acquired over the Indian imagination is largely due to her ability to frighten and manipulate male politicians and make them act as her minions. Indian men don't seem to feel embarrassed or resentful falling at the feet of such women but they can be both clumsy and aggressive with most women who clamour for equality or appear vulnerable and dependent.

This applies in all fields, including power relations in the family, politics and public life, and in spiritual and religious sects. The popularity and power of sundry mother figures like Ma Anandmayi and Ma Nirmala Devi, who command huge followings among men, demonstrates the wide sway of this phenomenon. In politics, women who have the added advantage of a dynastic connection or patronage of a powerful male figure have a better chance to reach the citadels of power and can get there much faster than those who struggle it out on their own. But thereafter, only if they establish themselves as



independent and autonomous do they come to wield real power and get to evoke fear and reverence. Those like Rajmata Scindia who remain dependent on men or are seen as acting at men's behest and do not get to be taken very seriously. Even Indira Gandhi lost some of her sheen when people came to believe that her son Sanjay Gandhi had come to wield too much influence on her.

Lust for Power

However, for all the adulation, awe and reverence these four women have received, we cannot afford to overlook the fact that all of them have shown they are not serious about any agenda except lust for power. Two of them—Mayawati and Jayalalitha—have far outshone most men in corruption, nepotism and sheer, unashamed greed. These two queens of corruption cannot even be embarrassed in the way someone like Rajiv Gandhi was, who sometimes felt defensive about the Bofors bribes. They have been ruthless in putting down opponents, attacking journalists who fail to show them proper deference, and punishing officials who fail to assist them in their ruthless strivings for loot and power. They have systematically

practiced the politics of blackmail on any vulnerable opponent.

Sonia has undoubtedly behaved with relatively greater restraint and sophistication in her style of combat. But she too has indulged in a good deal of covert blackmail to protect herself from charges of corruption associated with her or her friends and relatives. Of these four, Mamta is the only one relatively free of major charges of personal corruption.

However, none of them are genuinely associated with any positive programme or vision for improving the awful state of affairs in the country. Even Mamta, for all her fiery self righteousness, has no programme, no principled agenda, except for a pathological hatred of the CPM and the desire to see Jyoti Basu out of office.

Similarly Mayawati, for all her pro-Dalit expressions of resentment and militancy in browbeating her upper caste opponents into yielding more concessions to her, has shown very little sensitivity to the real needs of the Dalits.

Equally important, none of these women have attempted to bring women's concerns into mainstream politics. Nor have they tried mobilising women into a political force, which can then pressure our political system to be more sensitive to women's agenda. Their career graphs are a good proof that when a polity turns as corrupt as ours, when anti-social criminal elements have come to dominate politics, the women who survive in politics are invariably those who can match or outdo men in cunning, corruption or crime. Therefore, they neither serve the cause of women as a disempowered group nor help society become more sensitive and responsive to ordinary women's needs and aspirations. □