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Gender Construction in the Media : A Study of Two Indian Women Politicians[1]

Sonia BATHLA

Keywords

India; women politicians; news media; gender stereotypes; women's portrayal; political conflict

Abstract

This study seeks to examine the responses of the newspaper media towards two Indian women politicians and the processes of gender construction in political communication. Under a system of universal adult suffrage and the constitutional assurance of social, political and economic equality, Indian women were given rights that were the envy of women in more advanced nation states. Political parties that should play a crucial role in training and encouraging women to enter the public arena are hostile, generally closing the gates of the upper echelons of party structures to aspiring or deserving women. How are such women viewed by society and how do the media present them? It is within this background that this paper examines the portrayal of two women politicians, that is, Jayalalitha Jayaram and Sushma Swaraj in the Indian English language press in the pre-election

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period of January and February 1998. Jayalalitha appeared as a calculating, opportunistic, extremely corrupt, and arrogant leader, while Sushma Swaraj was identified with a clean image and one who fulfilled traditional norms and expectations of feminine identity. The particular construction of this frame of 'ideal/good woman' and 'bad woman' needs to be explored within the discourses of India's colonial and nationalist past, wherein women were perceived as representatives of the 'private' and their feminine virtues were perceived to be the essence of the nation.

Introduction

The framers of the Constitution of India intended that India should be a secular democratic state with equality for all and discrimination towards none on the basis of gender, caste and creed. Special provisions ensured protection for the weaker sections of society. Under a system of universal adult suffrage and the constitutional assurance of social, political and economic equality, Indian women were given rights that were the envy of women in more advanced nation states. In the first general elections in 1952 women voted for the first time and some were encouraged to contest elections. Of these a few were successful in gaining entry to legislative bodies (including Parliament) and even held public office. Most of these women were leaders during the freedom struggle and activists in the social and political arenas prior to independence. While the number of women voters has continually increased, at a rate faster than men voters (thus narrowing the gender gap), by the mid 1970s it was clear that the political sphere had not really opened up for women in terms of political status and power and that the mass of women had been left out. Most women visible in public life were educated and from the upper and middle classes (CSWI, 1974).

Women's representation in legislative bodies has been less than 10 per cent at national and state levels (a figure not improved upon until today) and is a factor that denies them an effective share in decision and policy making. Their presence in the major branches of

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government was, to begin with, negligible but this has improved. Large-scale participation of women in local bodies was made possible in 1993 through a Constitutional Amendment, providing for 33 and one third per cent reservation of seats for women, a very big step that brought in a million women into governance and the political process. Since politics, overall, is dominated by men, provision for reservation became unavoidable in order to secure women's participation to some extent. However, old patterns persist, making such participation difficult for the elected women. Currently, there is a standoff between the women's movement and male politicians, who are in the majority in Parliament, over the Women's Reservation Bill that would extend reservation of seats for women in the state assemblies and Parliament as well.

Social, particularly male, resistance and bias are pervasive. Political parties that could play a crucial role in training and encouraging women to enter the public arena are hostile, generally closing the gates of the upper echelons of party structures to aspiring or deserving women. Lacking a presence where it matters, within political parties, women are unable to compel them to prioritize women's issues. Conversely, the few women who have been successful in politics, with access to office and power, usually enjoy the patronage and support of their party; otherwise they have kinship connections and affiliations that enable entry and effectiveness. Another example that reinforces the importance of parties is the role played by the Congress party in carrying through its measures on reservation of seats for women.

The difficulties encountered by women have been listed in numerous investigations and studies (for example, see Buch, 2000; Kumari and Kidwai, 1998), which occur not only on account of patriarchal structures and attitudes but also because of how democracy works in India, where tradition, caste and community are paramount. Even in this dismal scenario where the political status of women is more symbolic than substantive, individual women have been successful at the grassroots, within parties, in legislatures and leadership positions. How are such women viewed by society and

how does the media present them? It is within this background that this paper examines coverage of two women politicians, Jayalalitha Jayaram and Sushma Swaraj, in the Indian English language press and explores the processes of gender construction in political communication. It analyzes how these two women politicians were presented and perceived by the media, what kind of issues they were associated with during the 12th Lok Sabha elections held in India in the year 1998, and what kinds of conclusions might be drawn.

To place the purpose of conducting this study in its proper perspective, it should be mentioned that available research on gender and media has shown how vital the media has become for processes of gender construction. A whole range of categories, related to power, individuality, status, and representation, are deeply gendered by the media and western literature on the subject has also worked with the paradigm of 'public man and private woman' (see van Zoonen, 1995).

Methodology

To understand the approach of the Indian press towards women politicians in India, I clipped all the items that made reference to the two key figures mentioned above from three randomly selected newspapers of varying shades viz., *The Hindu*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Pioneer*. The months selected for analysis were January and February 1998 during which both campaigning was underway and elections held. The announcement of elections was made in December 1997. A total number of 34, 30 and 23 items were selected on Jayalalitha from *The Hindu*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Pioneer* respectively. The news stories on Sushma Swaraj added up to 22, 22 and 23 in *The Hindu*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Pioneer* respectively. The coverage was subjected to both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. While the quantitative part focused on variables relating to the type and placement of the story, status of the subjects, status as speaking subject, in the qualitative analysis, all the labels,

characteristics, features, expressions, adjectives etc. used in connection with the two politicians were subjected to a thorough analysis and interpretation. This paper focuses on the qualitative aspects of the coverage on the two leaders.

A Brief Profile of the Two Women Politicians

At the time of elections, Jayalalitha headed the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a regional party in Tamil Nadu (TN). The daughter of a film actress, she started her career in films at a very young age. During this time she was known as the 'mistress' of M. G. Ramachandran, a famous film star, popularly known as MGR. He subsequently founded his own political party and eventually became Chief Minister of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu and died some years ago. After his death, Jayalalitha managed to become MGR's political heir, in the face of strong opposition by other party members and his wife. Within Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha "has established herself as the reigning queen of AIADMK" (Kishwar, 1999). She is an extremely powerful female political leader, and in fact she *is* the AIADMK (Jacob, 1997). This is so in spite of her alleged involvement in various corruption cases. In contrast, Sushma Swaraj was the spokesperson of a national party, that is, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has often been considered a communal or a Hindu party within the Indian political system. She was a contestant from the South Delhi constituency. A lawyer by profession, Sushma Swaraj enjoys a clean image and in fact is a strong pillar of the BJP. She has been actively involved in politics for more than 20 years. She fought her first Lok Sabha election in 1996 from the South Delhi constituency and emerged a winner. Her father-in-law was a politician from Haryana and her husband a senior bureaucrat in the central government. By all accounts, Sushma has had a non-controversial married life. A significant observation made here was that while Jayalalitha got better coverage in quantitative terms, Sushma had better qualitative portrayal. She was presented in

a favourable manner to the audience by all the papers.

To begin with, both these leaders hardly received due space and place in the media, and the number of stories on them was limited. The highest coverage was on Jayalalitha in *The Hindu*, where a total number of 34 items were coded. This number gives Jayalalitha an average of less than one item in a day, despite the fact that she held a powerful position both at regional and national levels. These leaders did not find prominence or significance in the media in terms of the number of pictures, their status as primary actors, as speaking subjects, as interviewees, appearance on the front page, the editorial page, the OPED page, the election page and so on. As Carroll and Schreiber (1997) have argued these criteria indicate the seriousness with which the media consider women leaders. The frequency and place of coverage signals the significance or marginality of political players. In this sense, one could deduce that they were not given much importance by the media during the 12th Lok Sabha elections in India. The media/journalists kept the right 'to speak' mainly to themselves. However, to make such a case, it would be necessary to explore whether this was so in the case of other (particularly male) leaders also or whether such bias was due to the gender of the selected leaders alone.

Review of Literature

A considerable amount of research has gone into understanding the problems that women face in politics, the factors that obstruct their participation in political life and so on. But the need to explore the relationship between political women and the media is only emphasised within media studies. A brief review of this literature may be useful for understanding my data on media coverage of Jayalalitha and Sushma Swaraj. In her study examining the image(s) of women in the Israeli Parliament, Dalia Liran-Alper (1994) found that women got less representation; they were characterized as emotional and aggressive; the emphasis was on irrelevant issues like external

appearance and family status, feminine aspects rather than professional success, and social and welfare issues. She explains the nature of media coverage through the paradigm(s) of "symbolic annihilation," i.e., "absence of women," "trivialisation" or "condemnation" (ibid.: 4), and secondly through the dichotomy of "public man and private woman" that "defines man as a being who acts and earns his right to exist publicly whereas a woman is judged, and defines herself, in terms of her private roles" (ibid.: 6).

Gertrude J. Robinson and Armande Saint-Jean (n.d.) in their study on the media portrayal of Canadian women politicians show how different kinds of narrative patterns were used over a period of 30 years. The 'traditional' narrative (before the year 1970) focused on women's 'biological difference,' and referred to women politicians as 'first woman' and 'token' in the non-traditional domain of politics (ibid.: 8). It primarily highlighted their biological and family relationships (such as wife/widow or appendages of powerful husbands) and overlooked their training and professional qualifications. Through the 'first-woman' lens, women politicians are perceived as the 'other' or 'different' even when they have more in common with male politicians like level of education, professional background in law, political science and management. Their visible biological difference becomes the primary point of reference. Further, female politicians were questioned about a limited set of women-related issues like social welfare, education and health rather than economics and foreign affairs. According to these authors, this approach undervalues women politicians' professional backgrounds and wide-ranging capacities.

The transitional approach takes account of the socio-political shifts vis-à-vis women's social roles and frames them in a 'power' network. Three stereotypes that emerged were: the superwoman, champion, and gang member. A superwoman is young, intelligent, and ambitious and combines both her family and career. She is a hybrid who embodies both traditional characteristics and modern traits of a businesswoman. A champion is something of a superwoman but belongs to a 'certain age' and has led a more traditional

life. She has entered the domain of politics after proving herself in another sphere like business, sports or charitable organisations. Her family obligations are compatible with her public duties. A gang member is one who has been accepted into the ranks by the male political establishment. This type of woman adopts a 'masculine' stance in politics, which means either that she does not resort to what are called 'feminine wiles' to achieve her goals or that she accepts and operates by the conventional rules of the game (Robinson and Saint-Jean, n.d.: 16). These authors noticed that even during the 1990s, the narrative tended to ignore the substance of a woman's speech and concentrated more on her personal characteristics (looks, dress and hair). Further, a woman's prior political activities and stages in her political career, signifying her 'competence,' were not recognized and finally the media perceived women politicians to be responsible for woman as a class.

Some major conclusions which emerged from a study conducted by Carroll and Schreiber (1997) on media coverage of women in the U.S. Congress were, firstly, that newspapers clearly conveyed some messages about women in Congress. They were "portrayed as agents of change who are making a difference despite having to struggle against sexism and to juggle family lives and careers" (ibid.: 145). The reportage also indicated that the women members were most concerned with and active regarding issues of women's health, abortion, to some extent sexual harassment, and they acted as agents of change on these issues. These authors further discovered that some articles talked about women's appearance or attire, and that some articles about women in Congress were relegated to the style pages. However, the major problem with this coverage was said to be one of 'omission' rather than of 'commission.' In other words, the problem was not to do with what was reported but with what was not. The missing part in their portrayal was "any sense that women are important players on legislation other than women's health, abortion, and a handful of other concerns. There is barely a mention of women's involvement in foreign affairs, international trade, the appropriation process, or

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