The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India
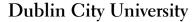
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Operating within the androcentric premises that support idealized models of populist leadership, self-representations cultivated by female populist leaders often involve precarious balancing acts, compelling them to appropriate contextualized traditionalist discourses and modes of power to qualify for conventional leadership models. This article engages with the stylistic performance of populist leadership by Mamata Banerjee of the All India Trinamool Congress in the state of West Bengal, India, focusing on her adoption of the discursive mode of political asceticism, nativist rhetoric, and religious iconography. Through an interpretive analysis of selected party documents, autobiography, and semistructured interviews with Banerjee's followers and critics, the article delineates Banerjee's populist self-fashioning as a political ascetic and explores perceptions of her leadership. The article argues that while the self-makings of female populist leaders remain fraught and contested, they contribute substantially toward redrawing the boundaries of both conventional leadership models and the broader political landscapes they inhabit.

Keywords: Political asceticism, South Asia, gender and political leadership, Mamata Banerjee, populism

As an explanation for the chronic underrepresentation of women in politics, feminist studies on political leadership have highlighted the gendered premises that support idealized models of leadership. In such models, the privileging of hegemonic masculine traits, such as aggression, assertiveness, rationality, and ambition (Eagly and Karau 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sjoberg 2013), and a corresponding devaluation of traits deemed feminine, such as kindness, nurturing, emotionality, and warmth (Eagly and Karau 2002; Sjoberg 2013), tend to relegate women as constitutively unfit for leadership roles.

Populism is conceptualized variously as a "logic of political articulation" (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) open to appropriation across ideological barriers as well as a "thin centered ideology" (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015) focused on the imagination of a "moral" struggle between the antagonistic binaries of a pure, homogenous construction of the "people" steered by strong, masculine leaders and an entrenched, "effeminate," corrupt establishment of "elites" (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 2015; Müller 2016). Such gendered stereotyping of these two antagonistic blocs, together with the deep association of populist politics with hypermasculine leadership, places particular limitations on women populist leaders. It requires them to incorporate elements of both hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and femininity (Geva 2018; Meret 2015) in their performance of leadership to qualify for the idealized figure of the populist leader. Reflecting the general predicament of women in leadership positions, however, balancing between hegemonic masculine and feminine traits is a tough act — with women populist leaders displaying assertiveness that is often viewed as wantonly aggressive and/or excessively emotional (Geva 2018; Meret 2015). This conundrum is further determined and complicated by the gendered institutional cultures of populist and other political parties, as well as the contextual specificities of the political cultures in which the leaders operate (Abi-Hassan 2017; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Caravantes 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015; Rousseau 2010; Verge 2015). As Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) point out, populism seldom functions in isolation, but always in conversation with other factors such as regional, cultural, and institutional particularities. Responses from women populist leaders to such cultural obstacles often involve adopting traditional discursive

constructs that constitute modes of power and self-making[1] for the performance of their leadership. Such constructs — drawn from the repository of traditional norms and concepts particular to the sociocultural contexts they function in — serve to frame and legitimize their leadership. At the same time, they constitute normative standards against which the performance of their leadership is appraised. This article explores the Indian populist leader Mamata Banerjee's self-making through her engagement with the discursive construct of political asceticism, alongside other contextually specific norms and concepts.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA

Conducting an interpretivist analysis of documents and semistructured interviews, this article explores the contours of female populist leadership in contemporary Indian politics through an in-depth and contextualized focus on the political culture of West Bengal, a state in eastern India. The article recognizes documents not only as bearers of information but also as reflections of particular ideological and discursive constructions (Prior 2004), primarily those that are hegemonic in the macro-social ecology that the documents inhabit, while drawing on other documents in a shared intertextual space (Freeman and Maybin 2011). In its analysis of Banerjee's populist self-representation, the article engages with her autobiography, *Struggle for Existence*, and two official documents from the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). Autobiographies composed by women are often marked by their emotional and personal character and style (Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2003). Alongside the rationalistic objectivity that characterizes mainstream theoretical and policy documents, the voices of

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1. Underlining the productive influence of disciplinary power on the constitution of social identities (Foucault 1980), Michel Foucault, in his later works, explored the linkages between the modern "technologies of the self" — micro-social practices that equip individuals to cultivate themselves (Foucault 1986; Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988) — and the larger historical developments in the state and society. The existing scholarship on self-making in South Asia reflects a transition in the postcolonial understanding of the self from locating it within the binaries of the inner and the outer domains (Chatterjee 1993) or of the civil society and the political society (Chatterjee 2004, 2011), to a more "processual" (Chandra and Majumder 2013, 6), ethnographic understanding of the self that attempts to transcend binaries. Highlighting the interconnectedness between the motivations and intentionalities of individuals and the external social, economic, cultural, political, and historical contexts they inhabit (Chandra and Majumder 2013), recent scholarship on self-making in South Asia has explored how the self-making of socially situated individuals reflects and, in turn, influences the broader structural processes they find themselves in (Chandra and Majumder 2013; Gooptu 2016; Kamra 2013; Majumder 2018; Majumder 2019; Nielsen and Waldrop 2014).

women, as well as other disadvantaged social groups, have historically been underrepresented in the former category. The distinctly embodied nature of the autobiography makes it conducive to interpretive studies on the motivations and intentionality of its author. Through a feminist engagement with autobiographies — as is attempted in this article with Banerjee's autobiography — it is possible to delineate the author's experiential narrative of the "evolution of the self" (Paul Ricouer, quoted in Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield- 2003, 65), an element that can rarely be found in policy documents and other formal political texts.

Alongside an interpretive reading of autobiographies and party documents, the article also analyzes news reports and semistructured interviews with members of the AITC, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal. The semistructured interviews were conducted in the urban and peri-urban vicinities of Kolkata and its suburbs, intermittently in three phases: between May 2018 and July 2018, November 2018 and January 2019, and December 2019 and March 2020. The interviews therefore encompass the temporal span of approximately two years, allowing the article to document and respond to political shifts on the ground. The interviews involved female and male members across different layers of the party hierarchies. Access to the interviewees was primarily devised through snowballing, with the initial contacts forged at the local level.

The article is organized in four sections. Following a short overview of Mamata Banerjee's life and politics in the first section, the second section conducts an analysis of the discursive construct of political asceticism, tracing its evolution from ancient monastic practices to its cultural association with political leadership in modern times and exploring its gendered character. The third section engages with Banerjee's gendered populist self-fashioning by facilitating a conversation between interpretive readings of her autobiography and selected texts from the AITC's official discourse and positive appraisals of Banerjee's leadership from her followers and supporters. The final section locates the contestations that Banerjee's cultivated self-fashioning jostles with in the broader political and cultural field in which she performs her populist leadership through a discussion of negative appraisals of her leadership from her critics in the CPI(M) and the BJP. Tracing such contestations not only illustrates the character of the negotiations between hegemonic masculinity and femininity that Banerjee undertakes in her self-fashioning, but also highlight the ways in which Banerjee's performance of populist leadership facilitates larger

transformations in the West Bengali political culture, offering, in turn, broader insights into gender and political leadership.

MAMATA BANERJEE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Mamata Banerjee was born to an underprivileged family in Kolkata in the state of West Bengal. The conventional narrative of Banerjee's stormy political life is usually tinged with high emotions. A popular student leader in her college days, Banerjee's organizational and oratorical skills aided her swift ascension through the ranks of the Indian National Congress (INC), her parent party. Banerjee's early crowning achievement, at the age of 29, was her victory over CPI(M) heavyweight Somnath Chatterjee in the 1984 parliamentary elections. Her parliamentary career, spanning several decades, involved the delivery of impassioned speeches on subjects close to her heart, often at the expense of critiquing the ruling INC,[2] and an abundance of dramatic moments,[3] both in the parliament and on the streets. Breaking away from the INC in 1998, Banerjee founded the All India Trinamool Congress and went on to defeat the CPI(M), which had ruled in West Bengal for 34 years, in 2011. At present, the AITC governs the state under a second term with Banerjee as the chief minister. The AITC fits the profile of a charismatic leader-driven political party with a personalized institutional culture (Rahat and Kenig 2018).

Distinguishing itself from its political rivals — the left-wing CPI(M) and the right-wing BJP — the AITC's official discourse frames Banerjee as an alternative, apolitical leader who represents the will of the Bengali "people" in opposition to the established political elite (AITC 2018a). Referred to universally as "Didi" (elder sister), Banerjee's political identity reflects the tradition in South Asia of addressing popular women political leaders in relational terms, such as Amma (mother), Didi (elder sister), or Behenji (respected sister). Performing her leadership in the

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

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

Indian context of critical underrepresentation of women in the higher echelons of politics,[4] Banerjee's populist self-making claims legitimacy by combining her performance of political asceticism with other cultural constructs, such as nativist political rhetoric and Hindu religious iconography. This article explores Banerjee's performance of populist leadership along with appraisals of her performance by her followers and critics while thinking through the implications that such appraisals hold for the self-fashionings of female populist leaders. The following section offers an overview of the historical roots and contemporary uses of political asceticism in Indian political culture while engaging with its gendered character.

POLITICAL ASCETICISM

Contextualized studies on the gendered underpinnings of populist leadership (Geva 2018; Meret 2015; Rousseau 2010) have examined the foundational influence of gender constructs and modalities peculiar to the discursive environment in which the stylistic performance of populist leadership is carried out. The normative status accorded to such discursive constructs generates standards for political leadership that are often used by followers and critics to interpret and evaluate the performance of populist leaders.

   In the Indian context, this article explores Mamata Banerjee's populist engagement with a particular mode of power, political asceticism, which continues to extend its influence over several different, and often contending, political ideologies and cultural practices in India. Conventionally associated with monastic practices, the discourse of asceticism in India advocated a renunciatory, nonmaterialistic ideational approach toward life and involved a set of practices aimed at a rigorous disciplining of the body, mind, and the self of the renunciate. Among these disciplinary practices, the significance of *brahmacharya*, loosely translated as "celibacy," is critical. In traditional Hindu sociocultural discourse, the ascetic — conceptualized as an upper-caste male — was accorded a special status outside the hierarchical socioeconomic caste system because of his renunciation of society, including the institutions

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4. Since the general elections of 2019, India holds the rank of 140 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking (IPU 2020) for the percentage of women in national parliaments in countries across the world. At present, the Lok Sabha (lower house) of the Indian Parliament has only 78 women members out of a total of 542, constituting 14.39% of parliamentarians (IPU 2020).

of marriage and property as well as social conventions around the observance of caste (Alter 1994a; Thapar 2010). Celibacy and the abjuring of *kamini* (women) and *kanchan* (gold/material wealth) (Sarkar 1992) being theologically endorsed as means for achieving physical and spiritual harmony (Alter 1994a, 1996), the *brahmachari* (observer of brahmacharya) ascetic was often placed in the position of a social critic by virtue of his austere living and his perceived superior spiritual status (Thapar 2010). The moral power ascribed to the ascetic has had a deeply influential and constitutive impact on the different political discourses inhabiting the macro-social culture in colonial and postcolonial India (Alter 1994a; Dasgupta 2014). In the anticolonial nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the observance of brahmacharya, along with other devices of rigorous self-discipline, including physical exercises, meditation, and martial training, was seen by early nationalists as a means to revitalize the bodies and selves of the colonized Hindu male while shaking off the emasculating experience of British colonial subjugation (Alter 1994b; Gordon 1974; Heehs 1997; Rosselli 1980; Sarkar 1971; Sinha 1995). Alongside the British colonial experience, such a project of reinvigorated and militant Hindu masculinity by religious revivalist associations such as the Arya Samaj in northern and western India was also developed in reference to the Hindu Nationalist fantasy of the hypermasculine and predatory Muslim male (Bhatt 2001; Gupta 1998; Jaffrelot 2007).

The body politics of political asceticism and its privileging of moral authority derived from austere living have been articulated in different ways and in combination with other contextually specific cultural constructs in a diverse range of political thought and practices in India. These include anticolonial revolutionary extremism (Ghosh 2013; Gordon 1974; Heehs 1993), in which asceticism is deployed to create the model of the celibate self-sacrificing martyr revolutionary; Hindu Nationalism (Jaffrelot 2007; Sharma 2003), which, through its use of the ascetic mode, seeks to propagate ideals of Hindu supremacy; and even communism (Dasgupta 2014; Morris-Jones 1963), in which the theological character of ascetic self-making is reframed as secular (Dasgupta 2014). The influence of the ascetic mode has been most apparent, however, in the Gandhian discourse of nonviolent civil resistance or *satyagraha* (Alter 1996). Illustrated by the life and politics of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the discourse of nonviolent resistance is presented as a close interrelationship between rigorous physical and spiritual self-discipline in the personal space and nonviolent resistance in

the national political space (Alter 1996), mediated through the ascetic mode of moral force. The *performative* elements of Gandhi's personal leadership style — his demonstratively austere and indigenous sartorial and dietary habits, influenced by the discourse of Hindu widowhood (Sarkar 2001); his adoption of hunger strikes as a mode of protest; and his strict observance of celibacy — established on a visceral level (Alter 1996) the paradigm of the modern political ascetic in India.

The discourse of political asceticism is gendered. The androcentric conceptualization of the figure of the ascetic, whether in a religious form or in a politicized avatar, is accompanied by an emphasis on the shunning of female company and material luxury. It is the strict adherence to celibacy and austerity that accords a superior moral authority to the modern political ascetic. Even so, Gandhi's performance of political asceticism helped affirm his image as a benevolent patriarch ("Bapu") to the nation. How does such a discourse perceive and represent women who aspire to political leadership? The orthodox symbolic representation of upper-caste Hindu women as primarily belonging to the private sphere of the home was the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist imagination of the *grihalakshmi* (domestic goddess) of the sacrosanct "inner domain" that was to be kept free from the colonizer's reach (Chatterjee 1993, 120) and "aestheticized" as well as sacralized as an embodiment of regional (Bengali) and national pride (Chakrabarty 2000, 159–72). These symbolic representations continued to extend their influence on postindependence Indian social and political culture, despite the mass participation of women in the freedom struggle. Such a discursive construct assisted in sustaining the conventional gendered division of spaces (Basu 2005; Jeffrey and Basu 1998; Phadke 2011), resulting in the imposition of restrictions on the visibility, mobility, and participatory potential of women. Instances of women's political activism were represented through the frame of the unnatural in such a context, and even nonmilitant citizen mobilizations and struggles undertaken by women were perceived to be transgressive (Menon 2004; Tharu and Niranjana 2012) and, at the same time, accorded a degree of moral legitimacy on the other, primarily by virtue of their perceived status outside the field of instrumentalist politics.[5]

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

Even as women's participation in political activism was thus rationalized in light of moral exigencies, it did not translate into advocacy for leadership roles for women in political movements. Similarly, the discourse of political asceticism privileges the moral leadership of the idealized figure of the outsider in politics, who is predominantly male in embodiment. The Gandhian ethic of political leadership, which advocated nonattachment to political power, generated a rhetoric of anti-politics in postindependence Indian political culture (Hansen 2008; Reddy 2018) and has often inspired popular movements against the perceived corruption and moral decadence of mainstream institutional politics. More often than not, such movements gather momentum around the idealized male figure of a citizen activist, who represents the incorruptible political outsider by virtue of his austere personal lifestyle[6] — an emulation of the Gandhian style of political asceticism. In this context, studying the performance of the ascetic mode of power through the rhetoric of anti-politics by female political leaders can offer interesting insights into their strategies of self-making as well as on their negotiations with conventional standards for and gendered expectations of political leadership.

Characterized by an ethical negation of instrumentalist "power" politics, the rhetoric of anti-politics, through the ascetic mode of power, endorses a leadership model that claims to give voice to the moral indignation of the people against political corruption by the established elites and social decay while, at the same time, propagating an imagination of the "people" as a pure and righteous entity (Hansen 2008), undivided by sectarian affiliations. Following decades of state-led industrial development under the Nehruvian discourse of scientific temper (Arnold 2013; Mahanti 2016; Nandy 1990) in postindependence India, the succeeding decades witnessed a proliferation of culturally and politically influential "gurus" (religious teachers) (Copeman and Ikegame 2014) whose emergence marked what has been identified as a wave of New Spirituality (Gooptu 2016), preoccupied with the concerns of spiritual self-development, indigenization, and collective social service. The rise of New Spirituality has been concomitant with the retreat of the state and the ascent of the

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6. An instance of such citizen movements can be located in the India Against Corruption (2011) agitation against the ruling United Progressive Alliance national government, in which large numbers of middle-class citizens actively participated (Reddy 2018). The movement centered around the austere figure of Anna Hazare, a veteran rural development activist and *satyagrahi* (observer of satyagraha) whose hunger strikes demanding anticorruption legislation sought to emulate the Gandhian style of resistance.

neoliberal mode of governance. The ascent of influential Hindu ascetic gurus such as Swami Ramdev (Bhatia 2011; Gooptu 2016; Longkumar 2018; Reddy 2018) as national icons in citizens' protests against corruption in the government and the rising appeal of Neo-Hindutva (Anderson and Longkumer 2018; Reddy 2018), a contemporary version of the Hindu Nationalist discourse that privileges an apolitical leadership model, in the past decade have been instrumental in reinstating the rhetoric of anti-politics in India.

In recent years, the rhetoric of anti-politics — particularly its anti-elite vocabulary and its symbolic appeals to a homogenized body of people — has been appropriated by populist political forces on the right, exemplified by the leadership style of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi of the BJP, as well as those in the center, represented by leaders such as Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party and Mamata Banerjee of the AITC. In particular, the ingredient of moralistic and anti-pluralist binary antagonism between the "righteous people" and the "decadent elite" that characterizes populism (Müller 2016; Riedel 2017) resonates with the rhetoric of anti-politics. Banerjee's use of the ascetic mode in her self-fashioning as a political leader in particular offers space for a critical engagement with the gendered character of political asceticism as well as that of the ideal leadership model it endorses. An interpretive reading of Banerjee's autobiography and some selected institutional texts from the AITC in conjunction with positive appraisals of her leadership in the following section will highlight Banerjee's cultivation of political asceticism, the rhetoric of anti-politics, and other cultural constructs for her self-fashioning as a populist leader in the broader discursive field of West Bengali and Indian electoral politics. Underlining the feminist approach to the study of political leadership (Sjoberg 2013), the parallel engagements with Banerjee's autobiography, the institutional discourse of the AITC, and the perceptions of her leadership from her supporters and critics will assist in illustrating the interdependent relationship between leaders and their followers.

THE GENDERED POPULIST SELF-MAKING OF DIDI AND THE MANUSH (PEOPLE)

By studying the ways in which gendered discursive constructs such as political asceticism, nativism, and religious iconography have been adopted by Banerjee, this section seeks to highlight the interrelated

processes of Banerjee's self-fashioning and her party's populist construction of the "people" of Bengal whose leadership is claimed by Banerjee. It explores how these contextually rooted discursive constructs such as political asceticism represent modes of power and self-making that leaders engage with in the process of constructing social identities under the populist project (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Pappas 2014). This section engages primarily with Banerjee's autobiography, *Struggle for Existence*, two institutional texts of the AITC — the party's official self-description (AITC 2018a) and its polemic tract titled "Maa, Mati, Manush"[7] (Mother, Soil, People) (AITC 2018b) — and positive appraisals of Banerjee's leadership from her followers and supporters.

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

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

What distinguishes Banerjee's narration is the close intermeshing of the personal and the political — something that is routinely reflected in her public speeches as well — and the complex interweaving of the past, the

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7. This slogan is derived from Banerjee's slogan for the anti–land acquisition movement at Singur village in Hooghly district of West Bengal (2006) that had propelled the AITC to power in 2011 (Majumder 2018).

present, and the future. Her style of weaving together seemingly disparate moments, incidences, and experiences helps convey a sense of continuity in the narrative, however tenuous it may appear. While her narrative may resemble disorganized musings, Banerjee's autobiography needs to be appraised for its "hortatory" character (Burke 1969, 41) and its mobilizational capital, which facilitates her self-fashioning as an apolitical, anti-elite leader of the people.

Banerjee's writings and speeches contain a strong religious flavor that often swerves toward being superstitious. Her unflinching admission of spirituality in the form of persistent invocations to divine figures and the use of Hindu religious rhetoric run contrary to the espoused atheism of the preceding Communist Party leadership in Bengal. In her autobiography, her reminiscences are peppered with extensive quotations from the speeches, songs, and other works of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and other iconic figures from Bengal — a feature that recurs in most of her public speeches as well. Her appropriation of the late nineteenth-century Hindu religious ascetic-reformer Vivekananda's discourse of selfless social service (seva) as a rationale for her frequent resignations from ministerial posts throughout her political career illustrates her performance of political asceticism:

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

In her writings and speeches, Banerjee's decision to break away from the INC and constitute the AITC is rationalized in light of her professed selflessness and a moral obligation to serve the "people" — a theme that also recurs in institutional texts sponsored by the AITC, such as the party's official self-description (AITC 2018a). In this document, Banerjee's political decision to break away from the INC and constitute the AITC in 1998 is shown in light of a righteous war against the CPI (M)-led Left Front government in West Bengal, which, in turn, is presented as a brutal, vicious regime — a "barbaric rule" (AITC 2018a). Even as it was Banerjee's maiden parliamentary election victory in 1984 by a CPI(M)-dominated constituency in Kolkata that catapulted her onto national political stage and effectively established her as a mass leader, for her followers in the AITC, the origins of Banerjee's populist persona lay in the earlier period of her activist career. Tales of Banerjee's early days as a social and political activist had exercised a formative influence

on several of the women members of the AITC whom I interviewed. As Mala Pandey, a municipal councilor affiliated with the AITC, recollected,

> I came across a picture of Mamata Banerjee in one of the magazines. I was very young then, probably studying in IV or V standard. The magazine described her as someone who resists injustice and supports the common people. It intrigued me and made me think, "who was this girl?"[8]

Adopting a simple yet passionate style of description in her autobiography, Banerjee appears keen to underline the renunciatory element in her politics, to the extent of claiming to have no wish at all to join politics, which she describes as a "dirty game of chess" (Banerjee 1998, 3). Highlighting her ultimate allegiance to the wishes of the "people," Banerjee posits herself as a typical outsider in politics, with no personal ambitions of her own, naive and vulnerable to the machinations of her erstwhile colleagues in the INC and mortally threatened by her political rivals in the CPI(M), with both factions often working in collusion against her. As her autobiography recounts her triumph over the frequent conspiracies hatched by her political rivals, it is interesting to note that the latter are almost always male. Banerjee's self-making as a beleaguered woman politician perennially under threat from her male political rivals contributed substantially to the rise of her political career.

Through her close association with and stated empathy for the sufferings of the poor and disadvantaged, Banerjee claims the position of a morally superior representative of an undifferentiated construction of the "people" (Müller 2016) against the elite Bengali *bhadralok*[9] political establishment while displaying street-style courage and willpower (Nielsen 2016). Among her supporters and followers in the AITC, Banerjee presents a moral leadership style that constitutes a clear departure from the instrumentalist political practices governing mainstream Indian politics. Banerjee's status as a single woman, professing complete commitment to the cause of political activism; her careful cultivation of an austere style of dress involving plain white

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8. Interviewed on June 2, 2018.

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

cotton saris, rubber flip-flops, and *jhola* bags[10]; and her demonstratively frugal accommodation, lifestyle, and dietary habits have also lent her popular legitimacy. Through the endorsement of a simple indigenous sartorial and lifestyle ethic, Banerjee attempts to claim the anticolonial legacy of the Swadeshi movement[11] and appropriate the Gandhian as well as the communist styles of political asceticism while fashioning herself as a nativist nationalist who is "performatively non-Western in thought and habit" (Bhatia 2011). Reflecting on Banerjee's activist oeuvre, Debi Sen, a senior trade union leader from the AITC, traced Banerjee's leadership during the "forest-fire days" of the Singur (anti–land acquisition) movement to the latter's personal experience of struggling during her "exceptionally difficult childhood." For Sen, Banerjee's austere lifestyle, above all, established her as "a leader of unusual stature" in the contemporary Indian political landscape, underlining the influence of the ascetic mode of power over popular perceptions of Banerjee's leadership:

> Didi has become the CM [chief minister] twice, but she does not own a car or a big house. Her bank balance is non-existent. She has never ever taken salaries from the State or the Central Government. She constantly opts for economy class air travel, saving the government lakhs (1 lakh = 0.1 million) of money, I have followed in her footsteps. She even pays for her own tea and biscuits. You know that Didi lives in a rented house at a Calcutta slum; with asbestos roofing and without A.C. [air-conditioning]. What to say, we are fortunate to be alive in her time![12]

In a similar vein as Sen's emotive endorsement of Banerjee's leadership, other members of the AITC such as Dipak Dey, an officeholder in the AITC's student front, the Trinamool Chhatra Parishad, claimed that among all the contending political parties in the state, Banerjee was a "true representative of the weak, the marginalized."[13]

Alongside facilitating the cultivation of her self-fashioning as a moral exemplar and an apolitical leader of the "people," Banerjee's autobiography also records the several different instances of lethal

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

11. Developed on the backdrop of the Partition of Bengal effected under the British Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1905, the Swadeshi movement advocated an ideology of anti-colonial economic nationalism by calling for the boycott and burning of British goods and endorsing the use of indigenous goods.

12. Interviewed on June 13, 2018.

13. Interviewed on June 21, 2018.

attempts on her life by her political opponents,[14] which are seared in the popular consciousness by the virtue of extensive newspaper coverage and diligent memorialization[15] by her party every year. Her writings abound in references to active conspiracies against her, such as the copious use of phrases such as "web of conspiracy," "blueprint," and "victim," among others (Banerjee 1998). It is perhaps her lived experience that compels her to describe her political career consistently through military metaphors in her autobiography and in her party's official self-description (AITC 2018a). While recounting the incidents of conspiracies and attacks on her, Banerjee's narrative makes substantial use of Hindu mythological tropes, undertaking a secular refashioning of religious metaphors in the process: "[T]hey make blue prints to kill me- their battlelines encircling me like *Abhimanyu*"[16] (Banerjee 1998, 163).

Alongside Banerjee's autobiography, key institutional texts sponsored by the AITC, such as "Maa, Mati, Manush" (AITC 2018b), also illustrate the use of Hindu religious iconography and nativist rhetoric for her self-fashioning as a leader of the "people" as well as for facilitating the populist imagination of the "people" as an undifferentiated and righteous entity (Hansen 2008). Banerjee's performance of populist leadership involves the intermeshing of the figure of the political ascetic with her image as an embodiment of a distinctly Bengali Divine Mother goddess. The party document "Maa, Mati, Manush" illustrates the foundational influence of Bengali regional pride and the iconography of the Mother Goddess. The document subscribes to an organic conception of the nation with the terms *Maa* (Mother) and *Mati* (Soil) reflecting the late nineteenth-century nationalist territorial imagination of undivided Bengal as a Divine Mother that was, in turn, derived from

14. Banerjee (1998) recounts several such incidences in her book: the murderous attacks that she identifies as being orchestrated by thugs affiliated with the CPI(M), as well as the state police included early attempts to run her over with a car, fracturing her skull with batons (1990) during a peaceful political protest, beating and dragging her out of the Writer's Building (the seat of the executive in Bengal) for claiming justice for a raped tribal woman (1993), and, most recently, beating and manhandling her during her 25-day hunger strike at an anti–land acquisition movement (2006) that had incidentally propelled her to power.

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

16. Abhimanyu was a prominent character in the ancient Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* — a war hero who died young in the battle of Kurukshetra while being trapped by and fighting seven great warriors all by himself. His tragic story has seeped into the Hindu lifeworld and has become a trope for indomitable courage in the face of obstacles but is at the same time also used to refer to an innocent victim of adverse circumstances. Banerjee's characterisation of herself as an Abhimanyu may thus be read as an attempt to fashion herself as a modern political hero who is besieged by her rivals on all sides.

the Shakta tradition[17] of the Hindu pantheon (Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 1993; Ramaswamy 2010; Sarkar 2001). In this document, the deified body politic is conceptualized as a nurturing maternal figure, and its citizens are described as the "children" of the Divine Mother (AITC 2018b). The text also refers to the anticolonial freedom struggle, asserting in several ways that people (*Manush*), regardless of sectarian affiliations, collectively fought in the freedom struggle, while also characterizing the contemporary times as an "hour of crisis" when the "fallen people" of Bengal are said to have become "corrupt, narrow and indolent" (AITC 2018b). The Mother Goddess is invoked to bring deliverance from the crisis and rejuvenate the "people." The document seeks to augment the cultivated popular image of Banerjee as a crusader for the downtrodden and a leader of the "people." Importantly, the document's subtle portrayal of Banerjee as a divinely ordained political representative also serves to reinforce her public persona of a protective and compassionate Didi (elder sister) of the "people."[18] In the context of Bengali familial culture, the role of the elder sister has been recognized as that of a "proxy mother" who is supposed to act as a caring intermediary between the parents and the younger siblings (Nielsen 2016, 124). Banerjee's sacralized official image as a compassionate Didi to the Bengali "people" thus contributes toward framing the scope of her leadership above and beyond formal political obligations as well as ideological framings while also underlining the criticality of the particular regional context in the performance of leadership by women leaders in India (Banerjee 2004).

Aside from the Didi persona, Banerjee is often more directly revered as an incarnation of the Hindu warrior goddess Durga[19] by her followers and supporters. An instance of such deification of Banerjee is a giant cut-out poster of Banerjee depicting her as Durga (Chatterjee 2019) at a massive

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

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

19. The Mother Goddess Durga is one of the several incarnations of Shakti (the Divine Feminine) who represents at once the nurturing and maternal attributes as well as the protective and belligerent dimensions of *shakti*. The most popular visual representation of the 10-armed Durga shows her mounted atop a lion and killing a demon with her trident while an arm of hers is raised in benediction. The ritual adoration of Durga or Durga Puja is the most significant annual religious festival of Bengali Hindus, and is also often seen as a syncretic cultural festival involving participation from other religious communities in Bengal.

public rally on the eve of the general elections on January 19, 2019. Emulating the popular visual representations of Durga with 10 arms equipped with a variety of weapons, the poster portrayed Banerjee with 10 extra arms, with each arm holding out a particular conditional cash transfer scheme of the AITC government, such as Kanyashree, Rupashree, and Yubashree. Appropriating the popular sentiments associated with the symbolism of Durga, the poster portrayed Banerjee as a deified maternal leader who represented benevolent welfarism as well as an unassailable moral power against her political rivals. Far from being an isolated event, ritual worship of Banerjee during Durga Puja has also been recorded in Nadia District in Bengal (*The Hindu* 2016). Banerjee's association with Durga iconography also extends beyond the symbolic frame, with policy consequences. The AITC government's electoral strategy of extending direct financial patronage to clubs organizing Durga Puja every year across West Bengal and the recent rivalry between the AITC and the BJP over control of the clubs (Bhattacharya 2020; Daniyal 2019c) are examples of such policy consequences.

While Banerjee's status as a single woman and her self-fashioning as an apolitical leader of the people with an austere personal lifestyle characterize her performance of political asceticism, her cultivated persona of a "street fighter" as well as a nurturing Didi and an embodiment of the Mother Goddess mark her negotiations with the demands of hegemonic masculinity and femininity in the performance of her populist leadership. The criticality of Banerjee's upper-caste social positionality in her cultivation of the Didi persona is underscored by the ways through which such a persona is seen as representing the interests of the disempowered and the marginalized even while laying claim to the cultural inheritance[20] of the elite bhadralok establishment she is considered an opponent of.

It needs to be noted in this context that Banerjee's use of religious and mythical idioms to characterize her political journey is conducted amid the macro-social space of Indian politics, which is also inhabited by other adherents of the ascetic mode of political power. Hindu right-wing political figures affiliated with the BJP — such as Yogi Adityanath, the present chief minister of Uttar Pradesh; Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur,

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

accused of terrorism[21] and a present member of the parliament; and Uma Bharti, a former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh — offer instances of religious renunciates who have joined electoral politics. Affinities with the discourse of Hindu Nationalism[22] shape their performance of a militant Hindu political identity (Sarkar 2001). While politicians such as Sadhvi Pragya and Uma Bharti also lay claim to anti-political moral leadership while adopting the ascetic mode of power in their self-representation,[23] their religious rhetoric is distinguished by its Hindu supremacist appeal and the espousal of violent resolutions to social conflicts (Butalia and Sarkar 1995; Datta 2010; Sarkar 1991, 2001). In contrast, Banerjee's rhetoric of anti-politics claims to adhere to the Bengali nativist sentiment of religious syncretism[24] and to oppose Hindu Nationalism. Nonetheless, her use of religious rhetoric in politics and her close relationship with cleric platforms belonging to both Hinduism and Islam seem to have facilitated a space for religious right-wing politics to thrive, claim her critics.[25] Constituting a clear departure from the political imagination of the Left Front regime, which was predicated on a distancing from religion, Banerjee's politics reinstitutes religion at the heart of Bengali political culture (Gupta 2012; Roy 2012).

Like her simple and passionate style of writing, Banerjee's political style is brash, often abrasive, and "non-gentrified" (Gupta 2012, 3). Her practice

21. A prime suspect accused in the serial bomb blasts that took place at Malegaon in the state of Maharashtra on September 8, 2006, Pragya Singh Thakur — known by the honorific "Sadhvi," which is bestowed upon Hindu female ascetics — contested the 2019 general elections and became the member of the parliament from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh under the present BJP government at the center.

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

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

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

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

of street-style politics pitted her against the more restrained rhetoric of the upper middle-class bhadralok male leadership that helmed the Left Front government. In her autobiography, Banerjee reflects on the obstacles she encountered during her early days as a parliamentarian, such as her requests being repeatedly ignored by the Speaker of the House during Question Hour (Banerjee 1998, 113), as well as her personal insecurities regarding her emotional persona and lack of command of English (Banerjee 1998, 114–15). She also puts forth a critique of the elitist colonial-era moorings of the old guard among the Indian political leadership by categorizing the Anglicized elite parliamentarians as "first-class citizens" while identifying herself with the "second-class citizens" — "ordinary" parliamentarians who lack "smartness" and "glamour" (Banerjee 1998, 115). This anti-elite political style was complemented by her low-income background (despite her carrying a Hindu upper-caste surname), as well as a complete lack of political inheritance or a male mentor — something that distinguishes her from several of her prominent contemporary women colleagues in Indian politics, such as Sonia Gandhi, Kumari Mayawati, the late J. Jayalalitha, or women leaders of the past such as Indira Gandhi. This lack of familial legacy is also underlined in the AITC's official self-description, in which emphasis on "her work" along with the depiction of Banerjee as "a politician of much experience and stature" (AITC 2018a), demonstrate an intention on the part of her party to construct her legacy as being driven by her personal accomplishments instead of any illustrious family inheritances or "dynasty politics" that have been a prevalent phenomenon in postindependence Indian politics[26] (Chandra 2016; Rai and Spary 2019).

The discursive strategies through which women leaders other than Banerjee such as Jayalalitha and Mayawati established their authorities within their respective parties and laid moralistic claims to political legitimacy involved invoking their close associations with and the patronage of their respective male mentors — M. G. Ramachandran for Jayalalitha and Kanshi Ram for Mayawati. Both female leaders cast themselves as the sole political heirs of their male mentors, seeking the

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26. Political dynasticism is a widespread attribute of party and electoral politics in India, to the extent that about 30% and 22% of the members of the Lok Sabha belonged to political dynasties in the 2009 and 2014 elections respectively (Chandra 2016). Originating in the democratic electoral politics of post-independent India, political dynasties are characterized by the active presence of several members of a family in different layers of state and national politics (Chandra 2016). Leadership in parties dominated by dynastic leaders are often "inherited" by their children or other close family members.

protection of their mentors' legacies to challenge potential contenders (Bose 2008; Pandian and Geetha 1989). The lack of male mentors and direct personal relations with charismatic male leaders brings out the uniqueness of Banerjee's political trajectory vis-à-vis those of Jayalalitha or Mayawati, even as all three female leaders are referred to by their respective followers in relational and extended kinship terms. While the three female leaders have adhered to different political styles and crafted correspondingly varying leadership personas — Jayalalitha being perceived as a generous "Amma" (Mother) with an affluent lifestyle, Mayawati embodying Dalit pride with her monumental statues, and Banerjee with her practice of austere living — a common preoccupation with personalized political authority characterizes all the three leaders.

In the context of Banerjee's populist leadership in West Bengal, all of the aforementioned attributes that constitute her political style — high emotions, anti-elite rhetoric, absence of political lineage, and lack of command of English — alongside the provision of an array of conditional cash transfer schemes[27] for different sections of the population under her administration, have substantially augmented Banerjee's popularity among women (Mishra and Aasaavari 2016), the rural and urban poor, and the lower-middle-class sections of the population. Her personal involvement with the naming and propagation of these welfare schemes (Ray Chaudhury 2020) led to the international acclaim[28] achieved by some of these programs being credited entirely to her personal leadership, reaping AITC electoral dividends (Mishra and Aasaavari 2016). The extensive audio-visual publicizing of these schemes and their benefits (Ray Chaudhury 2020) by the AITC government helped deepen the reach of personalized politics in Banerjee's administration as well as within the organizational space of the AITC. Recent public policy and administrative outreach activities such as "Didike Bolo" (Tell Didi), "Duare Sarkar" (Government at the Door), and "Paray Paray Samadhan" (Solutions in the Neighborhood) by the AITC government in West Bengal have tried to consolidate Banerjee's image as an accessible leader by forging direct and personalized

27. Banerjee's administration (2011 to the present) has backed several conditional cash transfer schemes targeted at different constituencies and sections of citizens. Examples include the Kanyashree scheme aimed at financially supporting girl students, the Samajik scheme that seeks to provide primary benefits to the workers in the unorganized sector, and the Manabik scheme that offers a monthly pension to persons with disabilities.

28. Kanyashree, a conditional cash transfer scheme that offers both annual and one-time cash benefits to girl students and aims at reversing school dropouts and child marriages, secured first place in the UNESCO Public Service Awards in 2017 (*The Hindu* 2018).

administrative connections between her leadership and citizens. In the AITC's official self-description, the party is conceptualized as a personal creation of Banerjee (AITC 2018a). The AITC's institutional discourse and public policy framework, therefore, also help enhance Banerjee's personalized leadership and the element of moral superiority in her self-fashioning. At the same time, Banerjee's association with welfarist schemes also contributes to the development of her image as an ideology-defying leader, particularly in the context of the persistent opposition to the communist Left Front government, which marked a substantial part of her political career and subsequent ascent to power.

Among her followers in the AITC, the cultivated image of Banerjee as a crusader for social justice in her days of activism and as a benevolent welfarist administrator while in power were wholeheartedly backed. Addressing her as Didi, most of her supporters interpreted Banerjee's leadership style and performance as an activist and as a policy maker in light of her personal life experience as an underprivileged woman and her nurturing, affective disposition. For instance, speaking of the welfarist conditional cash transfer schemes for young girls launched by her administration, Sanjana Bhowmik, a district-level member of the AITC, linked these schemes entirely to Banerjee's own experience of dire poverty in childhood — her origins in "a very lowly, grassroot[s] level,"[29] her lack of political inheritance, and her empathy for underprivileged girl students. Highlighting the personalized political culture within the AITC, Bhowmik, along with several other party members, characterized welfare schemes such as Kanyashree and policy initiatives such as gender quotas for women within the party as personal and "ingenious" creations of Banerjee. Thus, the ascetic model of the activist political outsider, as well as the gendered ideal of female leaders as nurturing, maternal figures, condition positive appraisals of Banerjee's performance of populist leadership.

At the same time, the normative status accorded to the ascetic mode of power and leadership in the Indian political culture provides standards under which Banerjee's leadership is subjected to scrutiny by her followers and critics, as discussed in the following section based on news reports and interviews with members of the CPI(M) and the BJP.

29. Interviewed on June 8, 2018.

CONTESTATIONS OF BANERJEE'S LEADERSHIP: DIDI, PISHI, AND MUMTAJ BEGUM

During the days of the anti–land acquisition movement at Singur, West Bengal, in 2011, the late CPI(M) leader Subhas Chakraborty criticized the "Maa Mati Manush" slogan popularized by Banerjee by calling her an "infertile woman" who could never understand motherhood (*The Telegraph* 2011), while his colleague Anil Basu characterized Banerjee as a sex worker from a red-light district in Kolkata whose "American patrons" funded her election campaign (NDTV 2011; *The Telegraph* 2011). Ridiculing Banerjee's accusations of police brutality against her during the movement, then–CPI(M) state secretary Biman Bose inquired why it was that Banerjee only got hit on her chest (Dasgupta 2019) and likened the political alliance between the AITC and the INC to a sexual partnership in which either party would be "above the sari or below it" (*Times of India* 2011). Questioning Banerjee's status as a single woman, a book authored by a retired civil servant and expelled AITC member claimed to substantiate — with legal documents — that Banerjee was married to an advocate but had chosen to keep it a secret to support her self-image as a committed political activist (Ghosh 2016).

In addition to exemplifying the traditionalist cultural maneuver of representing women under either the symbolic frame of the "goddess" or that of the "fallen woman," the instances discussed here also indicate the extent to which Banerjee's persona and political style generated a deeply stereotypical appeal among her critics. In the context of gendered stereotypes and expectations surrounding conventional models of political leadership (Bauer 2019; Eagly and Karau 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sjoberg 2013), these instances also underline the contextual particularity (Abi-Hassan 2017) of the fragile relationships that female populist leaders such as Mamata Banerjee sustain with idealized models of political leadership in general and populist leadership in particular. While navigating the androcentric foundations of the populist discourse, even as female populist leaders attempt to frame their leadership under traditional gendered discursive constructs and strategies — as Banerjee does with political asceticism, nativist rhetoric, and Hindu religious iconography — their self-fashioning is always tenuous, while their personal lives are placed under scrutiny. As the following discussion on perceptions of Banerjee's leadership will demonstrate, these gendered discursive constructs are often held by the followers and critics of female populist leaders as normative standards to

interpret and evaluate the political performance of the leaders. Through its focus on the negative interpretations of Banerjee's leadership, the following discussion will also illustrate the interdependent relationship between leaders and their constituencies (Gauja 2018; Maiguashca 2019; Sjoberg 2013).

The negative appraisals of Banerjee's leadership and of the policies of the AITC-led government in West Bengal offered by members of the left-wing CPI(M) and the right-wing BJP in their interviews with me were marked by an intense focus on the personal life and temperament of the AITC supremo. While Banerjee's followers in the AITC referred to her consistently as *uni* or *onar* — Bengali pronouns meaning "they" and "their," respectively,[30] connoting respectability — her critics in the CPI (M) and the BJP often referred to her as *o* — a pronoun also meaning "they" but not carrying the inference of respectability[31] and often indicating disparagement in formal settings. Furthermore, Banerjee's critics, particularly those affiliated with the BJP, preferred to address her as "Pishi" (paternal aunt) instead of the more popular Didi. This strategy of ascribing a different relationality to her political identity attempted to debunk the cultivated image of Banerjee as an exception in the Indian political landscape dominated by political dynasticism (Chandra 2016; Rai and Spary 2019) by linking her with her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, who is widely regarded as her political heir in the AITC (Bhattacharya 2018; Sabrang 2020). In recent years, BJP leaders have also referred to Banerjee by a different name — "Mumtaj Begum" — while charging her with "Muslim appeasement" in West Bengal (Bhattacharya 2020, 2021; Daniyal 2019b, 2019a, 2019c). Reflecting the Islamophobic demographic anxiety inherent in the discourse of Hindu Nationalism (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019; Mishra 2017; Ray 2017), BJP state unit leaders such as Dilip Ghosh have, correspondingly, accused Banerjee of posing a threat to the Hindu population of West Bengal by facilitating an increase in the state's Muslim population for the purpose of securing votes, branding her as the architect of "Greater Bangladesh" (Bhattacharya 2020; *Hindustan Times* 2017; PTI 2021).

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30. In the Bengali vocabulary, pronouns are gender-neutral.
31. Bengali equivalents of "they" are *uni* (singular), *onara* (plural), *o* (singular), and *ora* (plural). Illustrating the positioning of people across class, caste and gender hierarchies in South Asian society, these pronouns indicate respectability or the absence of it while at the same time they can be used to imply degrees of intimacy. *Uni* and *onara* signify social respectability and are often used to denote people belonging to higher castes and classes, while *o* and *ora* are pronouns devoid of attribute of respectability. In familial or friendly settings, *o* and *ora* can indicate a greater degree of intimacy but in formal settings, they imply disparagement.

Alongside such contextually rooted linguistic maneuvers, negative appraisals of her leadership were also marked by nonverbal gestures indicating contempt, while reflections on the AITC-led government's welfare policy framework tended to focus predominantly on Banerjee's personal disposition. As Manisha Ghosh, a state convenor of the BJP's Trade Cell, expressed it, "Your recorder is not being able to record my smile. I wish you had a video camera here to record the smirk that I am giving right now when I think of her."[32] Arguing that Banerjee and her party had "no originality" when it comes to developmental policy making, Ghosh argued that most of the welfare schemes offered by Banerjee's government were "repackaged versions" of the BJP-led central government schemes initiated under Prime Minister Modi:

> Although the money comes from the Central Government, she has been packaging it and doing that- giving it to people. As I was saying before, if I do the cooking and you go and serve it, credit will automatically go to you. That's what she's doing. They are showcasing their *Kanyashree*, *Rupashree* schemes — everything ends with a *Sree* [feminine grace], but she lacks *Sree* [smiles].

This quote highlights how negative evaluations of Banerjee's leadership style and policy making intersect deeply with traditionalist gender stereotypes. Ghosh's claim that Banerjee lacks *sree*, or feminine graces and auspiciousness, demonstrates the fragility of the balance between hegemonic masculinity and femininity that female leaders such as Banerjee are required to sustain. Drawing from her claim that Banerjee poorly performs conventional femininity, Ghosh further characterized her as a "very ruthless, heartless, insensitive kind of a person" whose "body language is very bad, very arrogant, very thoughtless," questioning Banerjee's cultivated political style of a benevolent caregiver.

On the eve of the Assembly elections in West Bengal in 2021, the incumbent AITC contended with an ascendant BJP, and Banerjee's style of populist leadership was pitted against the Hindu right populist leader and Indian prime minister Modi. The BJP's intense election campaign in West Bengal saw its central leaders, such as Modi, Amit Shah, J. P. Nadda, and Yogi Adityanath, incessantly attacking Banerjee in their speeches by characterizing her as an advocate of nepotism in connection with her nephew. Furthermore, Modi personally taunted Banerjee with his jibe "Didi Oh Didi," in a tone that closely resembled catcalls, repeated copiously at

32. Interviewed on November 24, 2019.

every campaign rally (Bordia 2021; Kazim 2021). After the AITC's landslide victory in the 2021 elections, the misogynistic content of the BJP's campaign against Banerjee was interpreted as one of the factors that consolidated the support of women voters for Banerjee and her party, in addition to the popular welfarist schemes (Kazim 2021; Roy 2021; Sircar 2021).

As critics in the BJP targeted her self-fashioning as a nurturing and benevolent maternal figure, those from the CPI(M) sought to delegitimize Banerjee's performance of political asceticism in particular. Sunil Chatterji, a former minister with the Left Front government that preceded the present AITC government, criticized the personalized political culture of the AITC and argued that, far from the ethic of selflessness, Banerjee displayed a high degree of narcissism — "an I-ness,"[33] particularly in the way her government propagated the welfare schemes as her personal "charity." Sheela Sengupta, a senior CPI(M) leader, also attacked the image of Banerjee's austere personal lifestyle:

> Her aura as a poor person is completely fake. I am being very clear about this. Her head to foot, I won't go into other details. Everything about her, starting from her dressing sense to everything else, is a *chhadmabesh* [disguise]. We know everything about her.[34]

Alongside characterizing Banerjee's ascetic self-representation as a *chhadmabesh* (disguise), Sengupta also sought to dismantle the popularized narratives regarding physical attacks on her by CPI(M) supporters during her days of activism by claiming that Banerjee had "completely faked" the attacks, while the hunger strikes that she led were perceived to be "stage-managed." Sengupta's appraisal underlines the tenuousness of the relationship between Banerjee's leadership and the ascetic mode of power in the eyes of her critics.

It could be noted that both the positive and the negative interpretations of Banerjee's leadership focused primarily on the leader's personal appearance and temperament. In particular, the negative appraisals illustrated the points of convergence in the gendered institutional cultures of both the BJP and the CPI(M), notwithstanding their distant ideological positionings. In their comparative analysis of left populism (Podemos) in Spain and right populism (Finns Party) in Finland, Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo (2019) underline the influence of hegemonic masculinity in the political practices and institutional cultures of both the political parties, despite their ideological incongruences. Similarly,

33. Interviewed on January 7, 2019.
34. Interviewed on January 7, 2019.

through their overwhelming focus on Banerjee's personal lifestyle and disposition in their negative appraisals of Banerjee's leadership, members of the BJP and the CPI(M) display their adherence to traditionalist gendered premises (Eagly and Karau 2002; Sjoberg 2013) that support idealized, androcentric models of political leadership.

CONCLUSION

"Women in the privileged spaces of the political realm are matter out of place," argued Nirmal Puwar (Puwar 2004, 11) in her sociological study of the experiences of British women parliamentarians belonging to racial and ethnic minorities. Across political cultures, perceptions of women's leadership are marked by intense surveillance (Puwar 2004; Sjoberg 2013) and scrutiny of their personal lives (Tickner 2001). The behavioral traits associated with hegemonic masculinity that constitute idealized models of political leadership assume critical significance under populism (Geva 2018; Maiguashca 2019; Meret 2015), posing structural limitations for female populist leaders. The negotiations that female populist leaders undertake with such idealized leadership models in populism are often mediated through their adoption of certain traditional gendered discursive constructs. Successful adoption of these discursive constructs, alongside other populist strategies such as anti-elite rhetoric, high emotions, and construction of binary identities by female populists in their self-fashioning, provides them with a degree of political and moral legitimacy despite the fragility of such self-making. Often in the process of adopting traditional discursive constructs for their performance of leadership, female populists reframe the constructs.

Banerjee's performance of political asceticism in combination with nativist rhetoric and Hindu goddess iconography reconfigures the archetypal figure of the male political ascetic through her self-fashioning as a female political outsider consistently at the receiving end of murderous conspiracies from her male rivals who are seen to represent the "elite" political establishment. The abundant use of emotions in her writings and speeches further assists in reframing the idealized model of the rational and detached political ascetic while complementing the populist content in Banerjee's leadership. While Banerjee's leadership is marked by her practice of "street-style politics," which is consistent with the idealized model of populist leadership, the themes of sentimentality and vulnerability — drawn from the repertoire of behavioral traits associated with conventional femininity — also form an integral part of

her populist self-fashioning. In particular, the element of gendered vulnerability in Banerjee's political style, illustrated by the wide range of insults targeting her personal appearance, character, life choices, and identity as a woman by her critics in the CPI(M) and the BJP, can be seen as constituting a departure from the hypermasculine, "strongman" models of populist leadership as well as from the stoicism associated with the political ascetic. During the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, in which Banerjee successfully faced perhaps the toughest challenge in her political career from the BJP, she undertook a strategic refashioning of her political persona in association with a political consultancy firm, the Indian Political Action Committee. Her rebranding as "Banglar Nijer Meye" (Bengal's Own Daughter) presented Banerjee as an icon of nativist Bengali pride against the New Delhi–based leaders of the BJP. Appealing in particular to the women voters of the state, this rebranding also highlighted her gendered vulnerability and need for protection in the context of personal attacks on her leadership by the central leadership of the BJP. The element of vulnerability was further accentuated by her public appearances in a wheelchair after she sustained a leg injury in an accident during campaign (Ray Chaudhury 2021).

The self-makings of other male populist contemporaries of Banerjee in India, such as Narendra Modi, also involve a strategic management of emotions — for instance, Modi's narrative of having worked as a humble *chaiwala* (tea seller) in his childhood. Contestations of the cultivated populist self-makings of such leaders, however, rarely involve gendered/sexualized critique as they do in the case of female populist leaders such as Banerjee. While being the subject of criticism, the prevalence of emotive articulations in Banerjee's self-fashioning also contributes towards reinforcing the mobilizational capital of her leadership. As the positive interpretations of Banerjee's leadership demonstrate, particular emotional moments in the cultivated narrative of Banerjee's personal life struggles act as "affective triggers" (Mayer 2014, 7) for her followers and supporters, shaping their ideas about and expectations from political leadership.

With the centrality of emotions in populist politics, criticism of the contemporary surge in populist politics across the globe has often revolved around the overwhelming influence of emotions[35] in populist

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

speech and action, with the assertion that emotions are detrimental to the "proper" conduct of politics, even as emotions have borne a foundational influence on several epochal political moments in history such as in anti-imperialist movements. Recent studies of populist movements have sought to address this undermining of emotions in politics as well as reflect on what constitutes "proper" politics (Devenney 2019; Eklundh 2019). In her study of the Spanish left-populist movement, the Indignados, Emmy Eklundh (2019) argues that the disfavoring of emotions in politics stems from the Cartesian duality of the mind and the body and is accompanied by the privileging of the rational over the emotional. The prevalent use of emotional rhetoric in populist politics is therefore often cited in order to delegitimize populism. In the context of Banerjee's populist leadership, this discourse of political appropriateness is reflected particularly in the negative appraisals of her personal disposition, political practice, and style of writing. Also connected intrinsically with stereotypical gendered ideas, negative perceptions of Banerjee's politics that target her personal life and character attempt to reveal her disqualification from the ascetic mode of leadership as well as from what is held as "proper" conduct of politics that was idealized in the elite bhadralok circles in West Bengal. At the same time, Banerjee's use of nativist Bengali pride and high emotions in her self-making presents a continuity with key historical moments such as the early twentieth-century nationalist Swadeshi (Indigenous) movement, the freedom struggle, the electoral victory of the communist Left Front in 1977, and so on, in the trajectory of the region's political development.

Even as her emotive political rhetoric is held against her by her critics, Banerjee's deployment of nativist and religious iconography in her writings and speeches serve to reinforce her populist self-making as a benevolent, ideology-defying, welfarist, maternal figure to her followers. To counter the precarity of her performance as a political ascetic, Banerjee's populist project draws from the Hindu religious iconography of the Divine Mother as well as implicitly from her upper-caste origins, culminating in the persona of her as an apolitical caring "Didi" to the Bengali "people" who is seen as a defender of the interests of the marginalized as well as an heir to the intellectual inheritance of the elite bhadraloks. Banerjee's populist self-making contributed toward effecting a decisive transformation of political culture in contemporary West Bengal in favor of reinstating the salience of religion in the region's political vocabulary when she facilitated and helmed a shift from the

communist-era political rhetoric of class to that of religion[36] and caste and the politics of recognition while appropriating the socialist discourse of welfarism and redistribution in her policy orientation. At the level of governance, Banerjee has been seen as affecting a rupture in the hegemony of the "party society" (Bhattacharyya 2004b, 2009) under the CPI(M)-led Left Front regime, which was distinguished by the complete control of the CPI(M) over local institutions of governance and society in rural West Bengal and enabled the party to function as the sole mediator between the citizens and the government. The personalized organizational structure of the AITC and Banerjee's efforts at resuscitating the state bureaucracy as a medium for the distribution of public goods among voter-citizens marked the shift from the "party society" of the Left Front era, even as the immersive presence of parties as a marker of social identity in rural West Bengal and political violence among supporters of rival political parties persist.

As the interpretations and appraisals of Mamata Banerjee's engagement with political asceticism and other contextual themes indicate, however, such populist projects remain fraught and contested, destabilizing the perceived homogeneity of the "people" and the corresponding leader-centrism of populist narratives. Even so, through their unique, contextualized adaptations of the traditional discursive constructs, female populist leaders such as Banerjee contribute toward redrawing the contours of the idealized model for populist leadership as well as that of the broader political and cultural context, they perform their leadership in.

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

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