

## 'Please Don't Go Yet': The Voice and Texture of Indian Women's Campaign Rhetoric

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### ABSTRACT

724 women candidates from India campaigned for their parties in the lead up to the parliamentary elections of 2019, and yet none of them were appraised for their oratorical skills. The absence of attention on how and what women say during their political campaigns is in keeping with a widespread apathy towards women's rhetoric in public discourses in India. Could that be the reason why electoral participation of women in India is alarmingly low and uninspiring? This article explores the gendered life of political speeches in India and the specific conditions within which the speeches of women candidates are assessed and promoted. To that end, the speeches of three political candidates are analysed, revealing an exhilarating battle of campaign rhetorics fraught with language restrictions and gender dynamics. Each of these speakers showcase a personal, idiosyncratic yet nifty tradition of political speeches through their use of domestic idioms, imagery, satire, and other feisty rhetorical claims. Most significantly, their speeches were covered by many media, catapulting to the forefront the so far neglected genre of women's political speeches. Although refreshing, it is still an uphill battle for the candidates, as they establish themselves as rhetors on their own terms.

**Keywords:** feminism, elections, women politicians, speeches, India

### INTRODUCTION

'I urge you to put the house in order,' pleaded first-time parliamentarian Mahua Moitra to the speaker of the house in 2019. 'Sir, there is no room for professional hecklers inside this great hall.' The great hall that Moitra so eloquently highlights belongs to the Lower House of the Indian Parliament (the *Lok Sabha*), fashioned to aid debates and foster dissent. Its purpose is fully realised only when equal status and opportunity are granted to all who speak within it. It could be that Moitra's hecklers were voicing their protest against the content of her speech, her gender, her party affiliation, or some combination of all three. Whatever it is that compelled them to showcase such behaviour, they were no friends of dissent and quite content to be enemies of a democratic political ethos. If a woman speaker can be heckled and interrupted in the Parliament and must continuously request for time to be able to finish her inaugural speech, then this is a potent moment to evaluate if women political leaders in India receive the recognition, respect, and audience they deserve when speaking in public. Are we, either as individuals or as a collective, less tolerant of women who hold public office? Has it always been like this?

At the time of its transition from colonial rule to independence after 1947, the founding leaders of the Indian constitution envisioned a Parliament that would create new frontiers of democratic nationhood. With this objective in mind, they funnelled their energies into building a new republic in which broadscale electoral democracy acted as a central lifeline. The realisation of this dream however was not easy to attain and equally or more difficult to retain. Caught in the heat of independence struggles and the partition of territories during this extremely critical moment of nationalist politics following 1947, the Constituent Assembly of India, which preceded the first fully elected Parliament, ensured that the first electoral roll of the independent nation was consolidated based on universal adult franchise and nothing less. In fact, Indians became voters before they were citizens, says Ornit Shani in her book *How India Became Democratic*, where she describes how this process encouraged a massive cooperative effort in building shared democratic spaces that ordinary Indians became attached to and started to own. The desire to work around certain notorious hierarchies and inequalities that divide Indian society, to put in place a 'procedural equality' that could enable the authorisation of a truly representative government, changed the

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meaning and texture of Indian democracy for years to come (Shani, 2017: 5). So deep was their commitment to this project that not just the politicians but also bureaucrats, and especially the latter made it their job to educate and include the common people into an administrative structure that could support and sustain a thoroughly democratic nation building process. For this, they speculated, consulted, and debated among themselves to ensure that the people's participation was more than just a voting right, that it was as close as it could be to a fully democratic deliberative process. This came to forge a sense of national unity, as various stakeholders of the project found themselves entrusted with duties that could make tangible differences in the effectiveness and credibility of the Parliament. As Shani says,

Turning all adult Indians into voters (...) against many odds, and before they became citizens with the commencement of the constitution, required an immense power of imagination. Doing so was India's stark act of decolonisation. This was no legacy of colonial rule: Indians imagined the universal franchise for themselves, acted on this imaginary, and made it their political reality. (2017:1)

Much has changed since 1947. Coming afar from those early days of heady nation building, the Indian Parliament has undoubtedly mellowed down its zeal to invigorate argumentative exchanges. In recent years, the executive wing of the government has repeatedly tried to suppress opposition challenges through many measures. Boycotts, suspensions, threats, and disrespect have increasingly gained momentum on the floors, elbowing out robust debates.<sup>1</sup> Mahua Moitra's 2019 appeal to the members of the Parliament to allow her to speak without being constantly interrupted, is evident of the intolerance that the Parliament has now come to represent. Still, she openly resisted the verbal onslaught and continues to do so in her participations in parliamentary debates whenever she is allowed the opportunity. For most other women parliamentarians in India however, participation in parliamentary debates is as rare as their membership in this powerful democratic institution. (Rai and Spary, 2019: 3). This makes the Indian parliament a particularly productive site of contradictions. As women tend to be overshadowed by their male colleagues in both representation and participation in everyday parliamentary affairs, the same Parliament takes bold steps in appointing women in major institutional roles. Indians have repeatedly cast their votes in favour of women leaders in the parliament and consequently the country had its first female prime minister in 1966, its first president in 2007, nominated a female Speaker of the *Lok Sabha* in 2009 and conferred important cabinet portfolios like Defence and Finance to women politicians in the last few decades. Moreover, as this article is being written in 2022, the parliament elected its second female President who identifies herself as belonging to the Adivasi or aboriginal communities, marking an unprecedented historical moment. While none of these are insignificant achievements and display an impressive roster when compared to other countries of the South Asian region, the day-to-day workings of the parliament present a wholly contradictory picture beginning with women's representation in the Parliament.

By all accounts, women's representation in the Indian parliament has been relatively low. A little over 11 per cent of the members in the *Lok Sabha* are women. Compared to this, the world average is 23.6 per cent and Asian regional average is 19.7 per cent (Rai and Spary, 2019: 9). According to the July 2022 data and global rankings on women's representations in parliaments by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, India's position is 144 out of the 193 countries enlisted. It is clear that the rise in women's representation in the parliament has been painfully slow. If we look at it, say Rai and Spary, '[A]ll the 333 individual women MPs ever elected to the *Lok Sabha*, from the 1st to the 16th, would not fill a single *Lok Sabha*, not even two-thirds, which further underscores the historical dominance of male MPs' (2019: 9). On the other hand, in the *Rajya Sabha* or the upper house, it is even more difficult to chart a steady increase since the number of women parliamentarians have varied between 5 and 12 percent since 1952 to present day, showing a slightly higher representation in the 1980s than in 1990s (Rai and Spary, 2019: 9). Successive national governments since the 1990s have failed to produce a legislative consensus to pass the long-debated Women's Reservation Bill, a constitutional amendment seeking to legislate for gender quotas to reserve a third of seats in the national parliament and state assemblies which would effectively fast-track increases in women's descriptive representation (Rai and Spary, 2019: 74-5).

It wasn't just the parliament where Moitra had to suspend her speech and openly address her audience. Once, during a campaign rally in Betai village in the state of West Bengal, a group of women from the audience were preparing to leave the meeting before Moitra's speech was over. It was late in the evening and the women appeared worried and in a rush. Moitra had only half-finished her sentence when she noticed movement in the audience. She wasted no time in directly addressing the women to make a personal plea: 'Please don't leave yet. I know you are getting late for work at home. There is much you have to do at home, and you must have left household work

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the following news articles speak of some of the recent events in the Indian Parliament: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/14-opposition-parties-to-boycott-constitution-day-function-in-parliament-121112600343\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/14-opposition-parties-to-boycott-constitution-day-function-in-parliament-121112600343_1.html), <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/what-did-india-really-get-from-latest-parliament-session-only-chaos-confusion>, <https://prindia.org/theprsblog/disruptions-in-parliament>

unfinished to attend political meetings,' Moitra said (2019b). While the rest of the audience kept silent and implicitly became a part of this private gendered conversation within a public meeting, Moitra asked the women to just wait a bit longer as she would soon be done, she promised. The women were eventually persuaded to stay and Moitra made a great rhetorical leap by appealing to women and their domesticity in her speech.

Campaign rhetorics are precursors to Parliamentary deliberations and require equal degrees of rigour and flexibility to persuade millions of citizens. And yet, in India it has received scant attention, even more so when it comes to analysis of speeches delivered by women politicians. A sustained indifference among scholars and political commentators alike on the corporeality of political speech acts, motivates me to read campaign speeches delivered by women politicians. Women's representation and participation in the parliament is but one part of the political game, it is also possibly just the tip of a prodigious iceberg. In their journey to the parliament, women politicians are subjected to various registers of assessment at every stage of the election process. How women speak, argue, raise issues, resolve conflicts are all matters of political interest since gender performances are at once circumscribed and emancipated by electoral audience expectations.

In this article, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which women political leaders use persuasion in other political arenas, outside the Indian parliament. More particularly, I am interested in exploring how women make a case for their parliamentary candidacy in national election campaign speeches. As forerunners to parliamentary positions, these campaign speeches are recruitment battlegrounds that every candidate must win. As they navigate through this very complex and stressful course, it is rarely so that men and women have the same experience. One of the primary reasons for this is that as in the Parliament, here too women candidates are vastly outnumbered by men. For every 100 candidates fielded by all parties for the general elections of 2019, only 9 were women (Spary, 2020: 225). How does this inequality in numbers shape and affect campaign speeches? I read the campaign speeches of a small group of women and examine their different facets and modes of working. Looking upon the speeches as at once persuasive and deliberative performances, I analyse how each candidate deploys individual narratives about politics, traversing opportunities and perils that can have lengthy impacts on their professional reputation.

Reading and analysing the role and influence of language and rhetoric in campaign speeches, delivered by select candidates in the lead up to the 17<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Elections in India, will yield a couple of results. By drawing women political communicators within a rhetorical frame, this article hopes to both increase the visibility of the work of women in politics as well as put forward a strategy for future studies and theorising in Indian feminist rhetoric. Analysing these speeches will also shed light on the construction of women's identities and public voices in contemporary Indian politics. Keeping in mind this relatively large scope of the project, the article will focus on two fundamental aims. The first of these is to track what kind of persuasive strategies are included in political campaigns of women candidates. The second is to observe how these three women mediate their gender identities as they build their rhetorical credibility. The objective is to ascertain if indeed women political speakers communicate specific rhetorical messages as they reposition themselves as rhetors on their own terms.

## THE FIGURE OF THE CREDIBLE LAWMAKER

Bryan Garsten in his book *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* explicitly defines rhetorical affect as something that the orator performs without any coercion. All they need to do is merely put 'words into the air.' Those words 'in the brief moments of conscious or unconscious reflection that occur while we listen to a sales pitch or a campaign speech' will become a slice of 'an active process of evaluation and assimilation (...) in our minds' (2009: 7). This part-spontaneous and part-skilled process of ambling through information to gather an exacting array of evidence, is what tenderly guides an audience to persuasion and conviction. Garsten says,

[B]eing persuaded is not the same as learning, but it is related. When someone sits back and decides, "All right, you have persuaded me," he is not merely describing something that has happened to him. In spite of the grammar, he is describing something he has done. (2009: 7)

To allow oneself to be persuaded is then as challenging as to persuade. Garsten asserts that

political decision-making is often the result of great speech and persuasion, more than that any other kind of ideology can enforce. As any democratic politician can testify, it is speech and speech alone that turns up as the most formative 'means of influence and technique of rule. (2009: 1)

Elsewhere, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin reject persuasion as a manifestation of the patriarchal bias that is characteristic of much of rhetorical theorising (1995: 2). In their view, all attempts at persuasion inevitably culminate in a struggle over power since its efforts are chiefly directed towards changing, controlling, or dominating its audience. In other words, influencing audiences, which has long been associated as an archetype of rhetorical effect, is glorified only because it grants the rhetor a feeling of self-worth. This value of the self for rhetors come

from being able to control people and situations. It also comes from 'the rhetor's ability to demonstrate superior knowledge, skills, and qualifications (...) in order to dominate the perspectives and knowledge of those in their audiences' (1995: 3). To counter this, Foss and Griffin propose rhetors try invitational rhetoric as an option for rhetorical analysis of public discourse. Invitational rhetoric does not impose the rhetor's viewpoint upon the audience, but is an invitation extended to the audience to think through new ideas along with the rhetor in a collaborative model. Based on the feminist principles of 'equality, imminent value, and self-determination', rhetors who apply the invitational style are not striving to convert the audience by undermining their ability to think for themselves (1995: 4). Instead, offering a mutually acceptable space to deliberate on the ideas introduced by the rhetor makes both the audience and the speaker recognise the inherent value of dynamic argumentation, where no one is made to feel inadequately represented. Foss and Griffin see their contribution as a boost to feminist rhetoric scholars to 'develop models for cooperative, nonadversarial, and ethical communication' (1995: 15).

Thinking outside Western rhetorics, Keith Lloyd examines the patterns of argumentation in and around India and the ways in which they differ from Aristotle's propositions on rhetoric. At the time Aristotle was defending the virtues of rhetoric to the Greek senators in Athens, the celebrated Indian political philosopher Kautilya in his text *Arthashastra*, identified '*ganas*' and '*sanghas*' – two popular non-monarchical governmental systems – as having a hand in developing deliberative practices which classified forms of public reasoning (Lloyd, 2018: 224). In the West, Aristotle's model of logical reasoning became the dominant approach, underlying 'the Western impulse to divide issues into two clear choices – only one of which can be true and only one of which can "win"' (Lloyd, 2021: 374). Compared to this, the mode of reasoning in the Indian subcontinent known as '*Nyaya*', codified and popularised by Hindu scholars of logic, emphasised 'communal reasoning based in attaining common good'. Using 'bridging rhetoric', a term borrowed from John Dryzek (2002), standing for associating with people with different social characteristics, Lloyd shows that in the *Nyaya* school of logic from ancient India, it is the community that decided how arguments were concluded and not just the rhetors. Practitioners of *Nyaya*-based reasoning believed that truth could not be made visible or attainable simply through modes of logic, irrespective of whether it is formal or informal. However, a consensus on truth could be reached through a process of negotiation among vested members of shared communities. Given that this *Nyaya* method was put into practice in a 'multi-religious, multiethnic, and multilingual' country like India, 'it simply had to be an effective bridging rhetoric' (Lloyd, 2021: 375). Besides, the successful application of this bridging method of persuasion was not only adopted and adapted by other existing religions in India at that time like Buddhists, Jains and Muslims, it also provided a means of establishing peaceful ways of maintaining dialogues and deliberations among people of different languages, situations, and beliefs (Lloyd, 2021: 374). Even with full knowledge that rhetoric and persuasion can be manipulated, no robust political system could deny either the influence or rigour of rhetoric.

To be able to influence well, persuasion must be pliable. Since there can never be a one size fits all template for political speeches, to be flexible and open to reorienting itself based on audience expectations becomes an irreplaceable value. The delivering of political speeches is then not only a matter of skill it is also a means of engagement, a chance to attend to disagreements and controversy in politics. If played well, it provides a fantastic opportunity to articulate arguments on either side of a disagreement or controversy, to link those arguments to the opinions of citizens and gently prodding them to deliberate. Politics and persuasion share an intimacy that is difficult to avoid. Persuasion is not just an ability but also a willingness, a generosity of nature, a voluntary commitment to listen to others, more so when they differ from the opinions of the speaker. Historically, men – more than women – were allowed to speak in the public sphere. To offset this imbalance, women designed their own persuasive strategies so that their voices were heard. In time, this came to represent a particular resistance movement often referred to as the feminine style in public speaking. Bonnie J. Dow reinforces that the feminine style may not always be biologically exclusive because many oppressed groups can employ feminine style as a rhetorical device for empowerment (1995: 109). Essentially, introducing the feminine style reconfigures the identities of rhetors and audiences. It aids in transforming audiences from passive receivers of information to active participants in the process of persuasion.

There is a serious threat in politics of creating echo chambers. Too often political speeches turn into flagrant boastings or attacks, signifying the candidate's accomplishments and power by way of belittling its opponents. These acts, though described as political rhetoric, can neither employ nor attain persuasion. To persuade successfully, the speakers must pay attention to details, listen as much as they speak, invite utterances as much as they inform. I find Garsten's (2009) rendition of persuasion in political discourse, Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational style and Lloyd's (2021) theory of bridging rhetoric as similar. In turn, what Garsten (2009) and Foss and Griffin (1995) describe as persuasion without coercion or manipulation have much in common with Lloyd's (2021) bridging rhetoric involving communities. Each of these performances work more for the audience than individuals, all three emphasise malleability in methodology and implementation, and expect to arrive at decisions through consensus instead of seeking for Truth. Putting these theories together, it becomes clear that the most enduring speeches in politics are those that persuade a heterogenous audience through meticulous deliberations.

But I also wonder if all political speakers have the same authority or liberty to persuade through deliberations? What happens to speakers who are also representatives of various minority groups or other intersectional groups? Can deliberative practices be accessible to all citizens equally? There is always an element of risk, of chance and hence controversy in political speeches. Undoubtedly, all political speakers try to influence their audience, but for some this involves a greater degree of risk taking than others. In the case of women politicians in India, this frequently amounts to a double whammy. Firstly, since so few women get to stand as political candidates and represent a constituency of their choice, expertise, or background, those that do may continually have to keep their political masters happier than their electorate. Secondly, apart from being mired in all types of social pressures these women candidates may not be seen by their audience as empowered enough to bring any real change in the constituencies they represent. How then might women candidates create a model of deliberative persuasion that also allows the audience to perceive them as credible lawmakers? In the Indian political environment, this predicament can be resolved to some extent through the induction of a cultural vernacular or multiple flexible gender and identity affiliations formed through discursive interactions, that can bridge the gap between the audience and their elected representatives. In the case of women politicians especially, the initiation of this cultural vernacular becomes imperative since other than creating a space of familiarity and comfort with the audience, it secures a platform from which the speakers can voice their resistances to other oppressive regimes.

For women in India, choosing a political career is neither easy nor popular. Casting their votes for women candidates after being persuaded by their campaign speeches do not come affably to a habitually recalcitrant audience, who are more interested in appraising those candidates on conservative gendered issues<sup>2</sup> than their competence in politics. Such events remind us that for women in politics, as in most public life, gender is intricately linked with political performance and patriarchal ideology which play a crucial and decisive role in shaping electoral choices. In most historical instances, women leaders in the Indian context have been kept away from gaining access to public speaking, and even when they did, they had to fight an uphill battle to establish their integrity and commitment to political life. Even now, despite the crusades for equal opportunity and educational reform, women political candidates in India still struggle for acceptance beyond tokenism in all governmental settings. Although rhetorical readings of political speeches of women candidates have received considerable attention within language and gender research literature in Western academia, there has been very little research available on political speeches by women in India. The rhetorical interplay between language, identity and representation in this truly diverse multilingual landscape turns complex in small constituencies whose political leaders may come from wholly different geographical locations and culture. In remote and rural constituencies, the local culture is intricately woven into the fabric of language,<sup>3</sup> so much so that the only way to persuade the audience is to establish an interpersonal communication with them, which prevents the candidate from being seen as just another political wanderer. To achieve this for any politician is not an easy task but even harder for a woman candidate and is worthwhile to examine if we were to find functional and sustainable rhetorical models for women politicians.

Persuasive political speeches are awash with features to impress, to appeal to the causes, sentiments, and habits of the audience. Yet, there is by no means an effortless way to accomplish this. It is this tactical disposition of political rhetoric that prevents it from being steered by either logic or emotions alone, although a neat amalgam between those two is perhaps too much to ask anyway. How then must we characterise the ilk of political speeches, specifically in economies as that of India, where the trimmings of reasoning and emotions still leave it wanting? For me it is in reading campaign speeches as an invitation to dissent, as a form of public reasoning as well as deliberation, that make them not about politics but rather a performance of politics. In my understanding, this is exactly what Moitra does in the two situations described earlier. In each event, she displays dissent and deliberation, negotiating her role as a woman politician. While in one she demands respectful attention from her mostly male colleagues, in the other she recognises that her women audience may not have as much freedom with their time as their male counterparts when attending political rallies. In each of these instances she situates herself beyond quotidian political duties and approaches her audience with an insight about their gender hierarchies and limitations and is subsequently applauded for her courage and compassion. To avoid becoming inimical, political rhetoric here reasons itself to be a site through which the orator mediates fears, hopes, prejudices and expectations of her audience. But for deliberations like these, most political speeches would be reduced to mere facts and entertainment.

### THREE LANGUAGES OF DISSENT

Once in every five years, India welcomes the festival of national and state-wide elections. The usual suspects are the state legislative assemblies and the *Lok Sabha* or parliamentary elections, but a number of more local

<sup>2</sup> Such as their marital status, domestic fidelity, and standards for cultural values, among others.

<sup>3</sup> More than the same in urban areas where the cultural and linguistic diversity is readily apparent.

varieties like *panchayats*<sup>4</sup>, municipalities and even frequent by-polls maintain a continuity in election season almost every year. Treated as a carnival, elections generate a euphoria mostly visible in their planning and organisation, particularly around the rallies and speeches of key politicians. An escalation of activities as the days arrive are a sure giveaway that something of great consequence is waiting to unfold. In Bengal specifically, the preparation for an election rally measures up to popular community events like soccer matches or music concerts. On the day of the speech recital a colourful stage is set early in the day; streets are blocked to vehicles; and microphones checked intermittently to make sure that audiences living more than a mile away also get to hear the speech. The anticipation of elections, like annual religious festivals, brim with zeal and an abundant commitment to flaunt all that the political parties hold worthy.

Working within this milieu, women political candidates are deeply entangled in the established cultural relationships between active politics, gender, and public use of language. They occupy a peculiar intermediate space, where they are occasionally evaluated favourably for being successful proponents of women and gender issues, while equally frequently lauded for not being one. Deblina Hembram, Mahua Moitra, and Mafuja Khatun are the three politicians from the state of West Bengal in India whose speeches are closely read here and examined for their rhetorical strategies. These speeches must be understood in the context of the entire campaign, the larger politics of the state, and the evolving position of women candidates in Indian elections. The state of West Bengal attained significance in the public eye during the 2019 elections, although one cannot deny that it has always had a strategic impact, feasibly for being the state with the third-largest number of seats in the *Lok Sabha*. However, this time, Bengal<sup>5</sup> garnered attention for certain other exclusive reasons. Bengal's politics in the last decade has witnessed a massive change of power. From the demise of the communist government<sup>6</sup> after running the state for over thirty years to the rise of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) party headed by possibly the fiercest woman politician in the country today who promised a complete makeover and facelift of state policies. The third and most recent entrant in this scenario has been the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). It is the party in power in the parliament currently, a Hindu nationalist party which sought and found ripe opportunities for sewing their ideology among a section of the population who were getting increasingly dissatisfied over minority claims and positions in the state. Several factors that also featured as major election issues, including the current chief-minister's erratic policies towards minority communities, the rampant corruption and arrogance of its ministers, and general economic instability hastened the rise of the common people against the current government. But most importantly, the AITMC of West Bengal was one of the only two political parties<sup>7</sup> who decided to implement voluntary gender quotas in 2019. Although this initiative did not influence other parties' nomination of women candidates, 'it was successful in enabling several women from these two parties to enter parliament' (Spary, 2020: 223).

These three major political parties, with three distinctive ideologies, fought tooth and nail to collect the maximum number of seats possible. The three candidates whose speeches I examine, each belong to one of these three parties. These speeches were also selected because they were strategically composed, delivered and promoted by their respective parties who showcased the candidates' ability to aggressively combat each other in these crucial election campaigns. These speeches also received ample media attention and coverage. The presence of these three women, in a sea of belligerent male politicians who usually have central statuses and dominate the electoral landscape, was a revelation of sorts specifically from the standpoint of providing platforms for a refreshing cast of female politicians in the parliament.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from being strategically composed, the speeches also brought to the political table unique rhetorical skills based on the candidates' local inheritances, social backgrounds and historical conditions. For instance, Deblina Hembram, represented the Adivasis or tribal communities who have been marginalised for centuries and are consequently embroiled in protests against almost all political parties in India for lack of education, infrastructural development, and employment opportunities in the region. Hembram was a candidate for the Jhargram constituency of the CPI(M) party and has been a member of the state legislative assembly for three consecutive terms from Ranibandh. Although a long-time party worker, Hembram shot to fame this time exclusively for her speeches, delivered both in the city of Kolkata and its suburbs during her campaign tours. Mahua Moitra, on the other hand, is a former investment banker who left her job with JP Morgan in London to join a career in politics

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<sup>4</sup> Village councils.

<sup>5</sup> West Bengal is often referred to as Bengal. The other half or the eastern part of the state was partitioned at the end of British colonialism and India's independence in 1947. It has subsequently emerged as the nation of Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup> Run by Communist Party of India (Marxist).

<sup>7</sup> The other one being BJD from Odisha.

<sup>8</sup> Among a total of 54 women candidates fielded by all parties, 17 were from AITMC, 5 from BJP and 6 from CPM (Trivedi Centre for Political Data). Each of the three candidates I read here belong to one of these three political parties, among which only AITMC and BJP were able to send 9 and 2 women from a grand total of 22 and 18 members respectively to the Parliament.

in India. She is currently a Member of the Parliament, having contested and won the election from Krishnanagar constituency and has earned a lot of interest and respect for her ability to deliver bold and fiery speeches. Finally, there is Mafuja Khatun, the first Muslim woman candidate fielded by the BJP in West Bengal, partly to counter the aggregation of Muslim votes around the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her party AITMC. Khatun did justice to her position and political ambition by unleashing a series of speeches targeting the Muslim population of the state. Khatun's seat in Jangipur was a fiercely contested one, considering her principal opponent was a three-time winner of that seat. In spite of their involvement in active politics for almost a decade or more, these candidates were barely known earlier for their political accomplishments and seldom featured in the media for their speeches. If campaigning is one of the most contentious and provocative spaces in the public sphere, then these speeches were nothing short of intense dissent in which each candidate tackled opposing ideologies with confidence and rigour. In diction, style, reasonability, and persuasiveness they each stood apart and soared to political eminence and visibility by far due to their rhetorical adeptness.

## **'IN THE NAME OF DEVELOPMENT': DEBLINA HEMBRAM AND THE ABORIGINAL VOICE**

Hembram's (2019a) speech at Kolkata was marked by a compelling and effective phrase in the Adivasi dialect, '*Amra oder charbok nai,*' translating as, 'We will not let them get away.' This was a bold rhetorical move and also a highly tactical one. Rarely have the audience from within and outside the tribal community been exposed to political speeches delivered in a tribal language, that too for a major political rally in the state capital. No doubt, this became a catchphrase to identify the passion and trauma of sustained negligence and violence (in a range of issues from deforestation, illegal mining to lack of basic resources) that the people of her community have endured for more than seventy years since Independence. But Hembram's (2019a) audience in Kolkata that day was not made of just members from her tribal community, but thousands of supporters of the CPI(M) party from other parts of the state. She spoke for roughly seven minutes, and her argument was built upon a list of development work that the current government promised to bring to various tribal lands but did not fulfil. She focused on questioning the level of unemployment in the state and how despite being educated, young men are not getting jobs. She screamed at her audience, 'You have to say what these men will now do. Will they go around the forest to rake leaves or kill rats in the fields?' (2019a). In a podium otherwise full of male speakers, Hembram shows no sign of being outnumbered. But she did bring up many times in her speech, her gratitude and appreciation for the party and the institution that has given her the opportunity to speak in this public platform, especially because she represents a non-urban constituency. Hembram's speech caught her own party members unaware since they did not expect her to be able to address a large audience so deftly. Hembram's campaign speeches up until then mostly attended by audiences from remote rural areas of the state, with whom she could communicate and construct spontaneous relationships by talking about common grievances. In this exclusive speech in Kolkata, Hembram outshone all other speakers in her ability to refreshingly articulate her passion for public service and political commitment for a community that rarely makes to national news, to a more diverse group of people. Hembram made sure to be equipped with not just facts and figures but also stories. Speaking mostly impromptu, she was halting at times but with a fervour that made her audience – no matter what their backgrounds – feel one with her. Her use of a basic but sensational linguistic style in which she switched between urban Bengali<sup>9</sup> and the tribal dialect in the most agile manner, gave her an edge over the others. She spoke about rising unemployment, lack of development in the indigenous people's reservation areas, lack of incentives for farmers, almost non-existent educational infrastructure, and a general apathy in the current government to bring about real social change in the area.

Some of these issues palpably fall under a common registry of accusations hurled by all candidates at each other. But what made Hembram's speech rhetorically impactful was how she adapted a locally accepted semantics – heightened by persuasive delivery – to focus on the manipulation of Adivasi communities for political purposes. She spoke fiercely against being them being used tokenistically as representations and subjected to frivolous appeasement policies. She was not speaking to only the Communist Party supporters but to the fourteen million people of the city, about classified atrocities suffered by generations of her people. Hembram could not have been unaware of her party's current political status in the state. She must have known as much as the people who had gathered there to hear her speak, coming from villages as far as 200 kilometres away, that the once ruling Communist Party can now barely amass enough numbers for building a respectable opposition. It was imperative therefore that Hembram build an image of herself as more than a Communist Party member. Although affiliated to that party, she spoke as a tribal woman addressing the large political divide between urban and rural constituencies. This awareness encouraged her to break out of the usual vain, self-obsessed speeches that are

<sup>9</sup> The language spoken in the state of West Bengal.

usually delivered by most political leaders in the state. As a dyed-in-the-wool communist, her focus was the condition of work and workers, but occasionally she also included other grievances of tribal communities. This short excerpt illustrates how her accusations against inefficient government policies were always unfailingly followed with a more personal response:

Such tall tales and a crock of lies! It looks as if they have nothing but love and compassion for us, Adivasis. In the name of 'development' they are offering us drums and other musical instruments, to preserve our music and culture. We, Santhals<sup>10</sup> and Adivasis, do not need their instruments to sing our songs. We can sing songs, make melodies even without their political blessings. (2019a)

She is sarcastic as she talked about the promotion of a disproportionate number of religious festivals supported by certain political parties: 'They say it is useful to do *pujas*<sup>11</sup> – so many kinds of *pujas* – Durga<sup>12</sup>, Kali<sup>13</sup>, dolls, any item for *pujas*, but no one available to help the distressed people of the country.' Hembram's persistent evocation of her humble background and assertion that political power fails to dazzle her, makes her one of the strongest allies of the common people. Her words are carefully chosen to depict a stark contrast between other politicians from privileged classes and her own Adivasi upbringing. Her message to her voters on the necessity to uphold this distinction was clearly communicated.

### **'IN POLITICS AS A FOOT-SOLDIER': THE CLARITY OF MAHUA MOITRA**

A graduate in Finance from Mount Holyoke College, USA and a former employee of JP Morgan in London, Mahua Moitra's entry into politics is as thrilling as her speeches. Relatively new to the political scene, she has been a member of the West Bengal legislative assembly from 2016 and elected a member of parliament in 2019 for the AITMC party. Also, she is possibly one of the most promising and aggressive political speakers in the country at present. Moitra's style of speaking includes meticulously chosen content and sharp and efficient delivery which has so far captivated her audience and played a big role in bringing persuasive speeches to the forefront of the political game in India once again. In one of her earliest speeches, she introduced herself to the audience of her constituency Krishnanagar: 'I am a politician and I have come here to do political work. I fully carry the responsibilities for the promises I make in my speeches and need no other party workers' assistance' (2019a). She then moves on to outline for her rural and possibly uneducated audience the many democratic responsibilities that politicians share with civil society members; carefully drawing out the differences in electoral decision-making between parliamentary and state elections.

Rather than interpreting these lessons in politics negatively, her audience immediately ally themselves with her on the promise of a transparency that has eluded them for many years due to opaque political methods. In their eyes, she resurrects politics from its generally assumed pit of corruption and the newfound respectability is embraced with genuine enthusiasm. Unlike Hembram, Moitra does not share the social background of most of her audience in her constituency. That is perhaps the reason why one cannot help but notice a pedagogic style in the way she constructs her arguments without letting them become condescending or pedantic. For example, knowing Bengal's love for soccer, she uses the game as a metaphor to define her position – 'I play as a centre-forward in the Indian political team. I am like Baichung Bhutia<sup>14</sup> whose offensive moves must be dexterously defended by the BJP government' (2019a). Moitra's soccer claim gets her Bengali audience every time, as does her scorn for the BJP government's failure to prevent the terrorist attacks in Pulwama, Kashmir earlier in the year. Her references to how the Indian state implicitly supported Hindu mobs who shamefully go into lynching spree against Muslim men and yet fail to preserve national security, is met with rounds of applause from her dedicated supporters.

Moitra's speeches are designed keeping in mind the expectations of her rural audience. She comes to her public speaking assignments well prepared; begins each speech with a customised introduction in which she talks about the love she has for her constituency; the familiarity she feels in the area that she has grown to be fond of; all in the manner of exposing a sense of responsibility of one who knows how to take care of her people. In her somewhat pastoral relationship and communication with her audience she teaches them organisational efficiency and urges them to get better at their political performances. In an informal and slightly endearing style of speaking, she explains difficult concepts like demonetisation, national security, economic development and communal

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<sup>10</sup> Ethnic groups residing in Eastern India.

<sup>11</sup> Religious festivals.

<sup>12</sup> Hindu Deity.

<sup>13</sup> Hindu Deity.

<sup>14</sup> A popular soccer player from Bengal.

harmony with an ease that makes even her male party colleagues sharing the stage with her look impressed. She tries her best to not alienate her audience and is always eager to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual exchange. Just as she constantly associates herself with her audience to maintain a unified democratic front, so she never makes the mistake of positioning herself as different from the electorate. She insists that her audience perceive her as more than a political leader, preferably also as a social leader. She instructs them, 'Fasten your seat belts, let us get on to the fields, yours and mine self-esteems are at stake, come, let us design this election for ourselves' (2019c).

Moitra's speeches draw examples from around the world, specifically about the Second World War and Nazi Poland and Germany to explain xenophobia and growing hatred for a particular race, religion, or community. She makes sure that she addresses the religious tensions in India today through moral and mythical stories about how Hinduism does not support killing Muslims. She makes her distance from this vision of Hinduism clear to her audience: 'I like to serve politics as a foot soldier and not a self-absorbed leader, greedy for power' (2019b). Finally, she distinguishes between a foolish and an intelligent politician, expounding how development is an evolving concept and that as a political leader she makes the best effort to attend to all the requirements of her constituency. Moitra is a strategist, an organiser, and a coach for her people. Her professional experience in global financial corporations affect the way she handles her rallies, shares information with her people and how she always persuades her audience invoking their democratic rights. Moitra sells electoral politics as an intellectual affair and assists the people of Krishnanagar to find reasons for the choices they make.

## CALLING OUT THE 'FAKE MUSLIM': THE SATIRE OF MAFUJA KHATUN

Among the three women candidates whose speeches are analysed here, Mafuja Khatun is the most prolific entertainer, collecting numerous spontaneous rounds of applause in almost all her speeches. An important candidate, unambiguously fielded by the BJP to gain currency among the Muslim community members in West Bengal, Khatun displayed an astute and remarkable perception of the job cut out for her in this election. She diligently focused on ways to initiate offensive attacks on the present Chief Minister and her government in West Bengal, possibly as an antidote to the growing discomfort in the state about Khatun's party's attitude to Muslims. Khatun made no mistakes in her speeches to uncover the workings and methods of distinguishing a true Muslim (herself) versus the 'fake Muslims', namely non-Islamic people who claim to support Muslims. In every speech, she publicly announces against the Chief Minister, 'Beware of fake Musalmans.' By articulating such a strong opinion, she establishes herself as an insider of the Islamic community and sets all other freestanding interlocutors as fictitious and misleading. Khatun targets her Muslim audiences through assurances of solidarity, a gatekeeping mechanism which prevents all but a handful of people to be named as authentic friends of Muslims. Her calling the Chief Minister a deceitful person for attempting to attend Muslim cultural events presupposes the audience's agreement and uses it as a cue to embark upon a personal attack on the aforesaid minister. The banality of the performance eventually does entertain her audience. Her story ends with an impertinent rhetorical question: 'How can the one who has not kept a fast and broken it at an auspicious hour, hasn't read the namaz, can wear a hijab and pray to Allah and join in the Iftar gatherings?' (2018b). True to that claim, Khatun always keeps her head covered when she comes to deliver her speeches. Moreover, all her arguments are against only the chief minister of West Bengal and no other political candidates. With explicit references as a *bona fide* practitioner of Islam, she presents an authentic leader in herself before her audience and a religious insider who can guide them to the 'real' political party that truly supports minority religious groups.

Khatun's speech style is reminiscent of a form fairly common in the late 70s and 80s among the Communist Party of India's members. Khatun's political career started with them when she was elected on the Communist Party of India's (Marxist) ticket in 2001 and 2006. But in the following two state elections (2011 and 2016) she lost to AITMC candidates. She eventually joined the BJP in May 2017. It is therefore not surprising that Khatun's training in political oratory was shaped by the Communist Party in the early phase of her career. This influence is still evident in the way she uses patriotic songs or poems in her speeches which creates a distinctive public voice that has little in common with her contenders. She speaks in a noticeable local dialect and accent, using a variety of puns and alliterative words to add a certain cadence to her speech. She also makes a habit of ending her speeches with either nationalistic poems or songs composed many years ago, possibly around the peak of India's freedom movement. Delivering long sentences almost breathlessly before breaking to draw a long breath, she makes sure that each sentence begins with an onslaught on the opposition candidate. For instance, she scorns Mamata Banerjee's (the Chief Minister of the state) ability to invest effectively in trade and industries by ascribing funny names to her projects, such as '*tolabaji shilpo*', '*syndicating shilpo*', and '*boma shilpo*'<sup>15</sup> (2018a) to call her out on the low utility index of such commercial enterprises. At another time, she joked about the numerous festivals organised

<sup>15</sup> The art and craft of extortion and bomb manufacturing.

by the state government promoting artisans: *'ghoti mela', 'bati mela', 'mati mela', 'choti mela'*<sup>16</sup> (2018a). Khatun's ability to weave an anecdotal story for every issue she raises against her contenders, adds a tenor to her speeches that is missing in the other candidates. Most of the stories she narrates about the opposition are laced with localised humour and are meant to ridicule rather than give any details of political work. One of her favourite topics is to commence an imaginary debate on who is a more ethical politician (the Prime Minister or the Chief Minister) without caring to produce any political analysis or statistical data as evidence. Unlike Mahua Moitra, who explains politics through civic terms and democratic rights to enforce a political consciousness among her audience, Mafuja Khatun is happy to persuade through spoof, satire, and absurd narratives.

## IDIOM, AMBIGUITY, AND CHARISMA

In an absolute and rather limiting sense, persuasive rhetoric is an indulgence in skill and eloquence. Political speeches therefore are part invention and intuition, and part emotions and evidence, all rhetorical elements swathed in idioms of identity. Still in politics, disagreements more than indulgence become the cornerstone of efficacious rhetoric. The three speakers here exercise the former over the latter in resisting to only speak for and as women in their campaigns. Merging personal tone with personal disclosure can be seen as 'interrelated characteristics of feminine style', claim Dow and Tonn (1993: 292). That is because, the telling of a personal experience 'presupposes a personal attitude to the subject and a willingness for audience identification' (Dow and Tonn, 1993: 292). However, this conspicuous lack of explicitly addressing the concerns of women voters; of trying to build any solidarity with a section of the population that clearly needs more representation; to refrain from making promises about issues that would influence women's choices in the future, should not seem like an abandonment of feminine style. Quite contrarily, it compels me to read them as a style reminiscent of methodical resistance against being trapped into circumscribed gender roles. Even though women politicians are aware of gender discrimination and the lack of adequate representations, to succeed they must also live up to models of gender-neutral national leaders, making way for easier governance at the campaign level.

Writing in 1963, W. H. Morris-Jones rationalised that to understand the 'inside story' of the workings of the Indian government, one needs to be aware of how influential political idioms are in keeping the government-electoral machinery well lubricated. Indian political language, he states, enjoys an exceptionally wide latitude ranging from style, fashion, background to education, manner, behaviour making utterances in this language liberally equivocal. Even though a certain amount of ambiguity is acceptable in political idioms of all countries, in most cases the regional variations of these idioms eventually merge with the dominant national language of politics. In India however, there is no single simple political language to begin with and faced with this lack of standardisation, all available political idioms can be implemented only with a characteristic authority (Morris-Jones, 1963: 133-53). The political leader or speaker is entrusted with this authority to adopt an idiom that most fittingly authenticates their identity. For Morris-Jones there are only three kinds of available idioms to adopt – 'modern', 'traditional', and 'saintly' – and most leaders of independent India, if not all, must ultimately decide to embrace one of these to defend their political logic (1963: 135).

More recently, Ramchandra Guha refers to this classification when he institutes 'charisma' as a trope for persuasive political leadership encompassing identity, rhetoric, and community loyalty. Charismatic leaders, Guha says are as much skilled with 'dramatic presentation of issues' and 'political oratory' as 'mastery of political psychology' (2011: 289). Borrowing from Morris-Jones's analysis of India's three political idioms, Guha marks the territories of each of these idioms by their styles of rhetoric. He identifies the modern idiom with the rhetoric of hope, the traditional with that of fear, and the saintly or 'national-populist' with the rhetoric of sacrifice. Since the modern idiom expresses itself frequently through the English language and is generally the idiom of the urban elite, its own rhetoric of hope offers a 'better and fuller life whether expressed in material terms or otherwise' (Guha, 2011: 295). The traditional idiom and its rhetoric of fear rests upon an anxiety of being outnumbered by others. Promoted as a warning to its members to remain loyal to their caste, religion, region, or language against all odds, this kind of political idiom and its rhetorical affect makes sure that no group or community goes unnoticed or underrepresented. Finally, the saintly idiom is laced with a rhetoric of sacrifice for it first campaigns for renunciation of all that is valuable to individuals and then against all tyrannical and therefore immoral regimes (Guha, 2011: 295).

This would not be the first time that personal identity has been associated with great oratory, adding a veneer of ethics over the kind of politics that continue to toe a thin line between the fair and unjust. As such, what Guha calls 'charisma' here is moderately akin to what ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35 CE - c. 100 CE) required all orators to possess, precisely wisdom, ethics and freedom from vice, to be of any service to the state. Only such a 'good man' could 'speak well' and foster a conscientious ethos. Are political leaders automatically

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<sup>16</sup> Utensils Fair; Earth Fair; Shoes Fair.

catapulted to being good men or do they have to work hard to achieve that title? Do women have to work harder, given that their working conditions in politics are engulfed in layers of complexity? Although Morris-Jones's (1963) examples of candidates enacting his three idioms did not include any women, it is reasonable to assume that women and men may not share the exact same forms of political idioms. Women's preoccupation with politics habitually goes beyond the party into the realm of the non-political. Wendy Singer's analysis of women's role in election campaigning in India suggests that on campaign tours, women politicians need to address local concerns that sooner or later get incorporated into election issues (Singer, 2007: 160-61). Difficulties in security, sanitation, dowry, or domestic abuse are political in only as much as they are openly discussed during election season; at all other times they drift along the tides of social activism. (Singer, 2007: 162). Campaign rhetorics of women candidates are conceivably melting pots where 'social service, vocal agitation and electoral participation' are all blended, howsoever coarsely, in the name of 'women's politics' (Singer, 2007: 180).

Delivering a political speech is more than simply instructing the audience on how to act, that would be counterproductive to reasoning. It is more equitable to read them as debates in the most capacious manner possible, where multiple interlocutors are equipped to make rhetorical interventions by promoting opportunities for further argumentations and discussions wherever required. The primary role of these interlocutors even when vested with political interests is to admit dissenting voices in public discourse. Rhetoric is what makes all such democratic articulations possible since it perfectly aligns itself to notions of dissent and disagreement.

## THE INTIMACY OF BELONGING

Like all things political, campaign speeches are almost always more than what meets the eye. Contradictions are in fact so integral to political speeches that a brilliant political speech, it is generally acclaimed, is one that does not fail to inspire even its detractors. To be something of that calibre necessitates careful crafting of not only *what* to say, but also *how* to speak the unspeakable. No part of a political speech can afford to be superfluous since there is hardly ever an audience more scrutinising, exacting or demanding than an electoral one. In nine out of ten speeches persuasion is accomplished by deploying multiple strategies designed to create a memorable impression of both the candidate and the speech. Content here is as much important as attire; enunciation and attitude as much as originality and sense of humour. At its core, these ambiguities of political speeches are also their very conditions of possibility. For it is in such a reading, I would like to think, that we observe the properties of those paradigms within which women speak, interact, influence and persuade during election campaigns.

Likewise, each of these three candidates whose persuasive strategies I explore, pitched their claims and posited their stakes to their voters not exclusively as women but as reliable and assiduous party workers. Hembram in Kolkata, Moitra in Krishnanagar, or Khatun in Murshidabad, were all campaigning in areas that they did not live in, which also means they shared no special intimacy with the largely unknown audience and required to firmly establish their credibility before they could solicit votes. Khatun tried to achieve this by bluntly aligning herself to Islamic voters, copiously referring to Muslim mothers and sisters; Moitra called herself the daughter of Nadia district; and Hembram used the Adivasi dialect to strike a familiarity. As the three women campaigners reminded the audience of these specific and intimate associations at every rally, they simultaneously constructed an informal space to foreground their identities. The leaders were fully aware that they had a lot to lose in the risk of being seen as too alienated for being woman politicians from other geographical regions and therefore seemingly beyond reach to usher any real change. However, apart from the initial exposition, there was nothing in the speeches to support explicit gender preferences or even its mobilisation as a rhetorical trope. Although women's issues did come up in the campaign speeches – more for Hembram and Moitra than Khatun – they were always projected as supplementary to other national issues. This was intriguing and exceptional since all three of them referred to the current plight of women across the nation, the continuity of atrocities inflicted on them and the result of corrupt male political leaders, who turn a blind eye to such events. Nevertheless, beyond these allegations, they made no other direct attempt to address women's issues, no endorsements of specific projects that these candidates might undertake if they were elected to office or made any empathetic reference to gender empowerment. It would not be wrong to suppose that these candidates shied away from being primary campaigners for women voters. On the same note, they never referred to each other's speeches and only cited either the chief or the prime minister whenever required, whether for criticism or inspiration.

This overt disengagement with women's issues by these three political leaders underscores the question as to how might the local and political metastasise into personal choices during campaigning? Each politician must be allowed to make their particular rhetorical choices as they nurture particular goals or directions in mind. Hembram, Moitra, and Khatun too appear to have made their choices on the rhetorical strategies and tools that get them to present their voice to their voters. Each of them establishes competence as they determine ways, some more successful than others, to share agency with their audience. Whether it is through humour (Khatun) or a constant use of metaphors (Moitra) or connecting with the audience on tropes of Adivasi language (Hembram), the women

are constantly in pursuit of a cultural vernacular. In every instance of successful persuasion, the audience and the women attain a moment of epiphany, documenting extraordinary strategies that increase the visibility and credibility of women as rhetorical communicators chronicling their contributions to the history of public discourse.

India is presently beyond the debate on whether more women should be encouraged to take up public office responsibilities; the answer is abundantly clear, and its implementation is an ongoing process. The stakes are equally high in presuming that both male and female politicians have the same opportunities for constructing and delivering campaign speeches and resulting in similar rhetorical impact. Such an assumption would then expunge any contention that even in politics, men and women have different lived experiences and that here gender narratives are shaped by a rather imprecise discernment of women's leadership roles. In other words, while women politicians are accepted as different leaders and seriously appraised for their characteristic communicative styles, occasionally those same identities are re-negotiated through rigid strains of gendered discourses. Framed by local customs and conditions these models of what a woman should express or say in public even when they are political leaders must be deftly managed by all female politicians in their campaign speeches. A woman political leader has an obligation to sound suitably progressive to her electoral audience without seemingly abandoning any gendered norms or convictions of the constituency she is representing. Her utterances are most persuasive when besides party principles, they effortlessly toe the line between practicing autonomy of speech and living up to regional paradigms about women's identities and role in public assignments.

The British feminist linguistic theorist Deborah Cameron (2006) in her article 'Theorising the Female Voice in Public Contexts' discusses several fundamental critical frameworks that evaluate the ways in which gender is associated with uses of language in the public sphere. She begins by drawing attention to how the 'third wave' of 'language and gender scholarship' shifted its focus from generalising tendencies of earlier feminist scholars' interests in universal 'grand narratives', to a more fruitful consideration of 'the "local" conditions affecting women's public utterance in different times, places and social groups' (2006: 3). Cameron, however, is reluctant to entirely discount all generalising notions, considering a certain uniformity exists in the role and function of female voices in public contexts across the globe. Citing examples from Joel Sherzer (1987) and George Kennedy's (1998) extensive anthropological and rhetorical scholarship on cross-cultural traditions, Cameron agrees that while at different historical periods exceptional women orators have been recognised and felicitated, majority of public speaking in almost all cultures continues to be dominated by men. Then again, even if over time democratisation of such spaces has become a concern for all, and efforts are made to include more female voices, there continues to be 'both prejudice and internalized anxiety about the female voice in public contexts' (2006: 4). While Cameron observes how concepts of public and private may differ over cultures and can be more inflexible and overlapping than generally understood, certain domains of oral communication, like law, politics or commerce continue to be flourished by male voices even when there is substantial awareness of gender discriminations. In India too, instances of strong female political speakers have been sporadic at best, with hardly any time-honoured traditions available for centuries.

## **CONCLUSION: THE PERVASIVE ERASURE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS**

For all its egalitarian championing of voices, rhetoric's foray into democracy has been marked by a glaring imperfection – that of the marginalisation of women's voices both as practitioners and theorists of rhetoric. By now it is a commonplace claim that women's voices are minimally audible in traditions of political debate, arguments and discussion when compared to men's, no matter what the cultural or geographic context might be. This erasure is so pervasive, that for centuries not even one recovered text is available containing an entire speech by a female orator from ancient India. Apart from some sporadic and insufficient references to Gargi as a renowned orator in the Brihadaranyak Upanishad (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) or Yajgyavalkya's brilliant wife Maitreyi (Sen, 2005: 7-8), most other women speakers or rhetoricians are glaring in their absence, fashioning a misconception that it was customary for women to stay away from matters of either public or political significance. In a tradition which otherwise labels its presumed deity of 'spoken words', a woman named Vac,<sup>17</sup> and makes her an accomplice of Brahma<sup>18</sup>, the irony of the lack of women speakers in classical history can be hardly understated. Then again, political events in India in the last two hundred years or so have produced a number of challenges to such assumptions, with increasing documentation and analysis of women's participation in politics, ranging from Laxmibai, the Queen of Jhansi in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through a spate of leaders during India's independence movement to even more contemporary coverage of political lives of leaders like Mamata Banerjee, Smriti Irani, or Sushma Swaraj.<sup>19</sup> Intriguingly though, none of these leaders' speeches have made it to either popular lists on

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<sup>17</sup> The Hindu goddess of spoken word.

<sup>18</sup> God of creation and part of the Hindu trinity.

<sup>19</sup> Popular women politicians in India in the last few decades.

influential oratorical performances or scholarly critical works. Even now, a casual search on Google for influential political orators in India comes up with less than a handful of women's names. A list published by *The Better India* in 2014 promoting '14 Inspiring Speeches by Indians You Can't Afford to Miss', singularly mentions only one woman's – Kiran Bedi's<sup>20</sup> – speech on visionary leadership during a TEDWoman event, among thirteen other male stalwarts from the country like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Narayan Murthy, and Sachin Tendulkar (Pareek, 2014). Two other such lists, an especially scathing one published by *The Outlook Magazine* on India's best orators, compares mostly male politicians with a cursory mention of Indira Gandhi – the only woman in the analysis – that too for her ineloquent ways (Bobb, 2022); while the *Bangalore Mirror* puts only two women politicians, Mamata Banerjee and Smriti Irani, in a list with seventeen other male competitors (2018). Comparably, a quest for critical works on speeches delivered by female politicians from India in my university library database yielded only six results. The path to recovering more voices is indeed long and arduous. At this rate, even if some progress is made in advocating women's speeches in political analysis, creating a corresponding corollary to the masculinist tradition remains a pipedream.

Political speeches are an invitation to its audience to think. It is in this temptation to think for themselves that the electoral audience finds unhindered access to reason and a taste of equality. Together with their leaders, they exchange ideas which empower them to evaluate and respond by voting the most suitable candidate as a lawmaker. This rhetorical analysis of campaign speeches delivered by Moitra, Hembram, and Khatun, is an attempt to draw attention to the representation of gender in such performances of political culture. Their speeches are memorable and worth analysing, not just for their content but also their rhetorical significance, the problems, and promises they pose for female public speakers.

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<sup>20</sup> An Indian police officer turned politician.

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