

Gendering Loyalty in Indian Electoral Democracy

The Trinamool Congress and Its Construction of a Female Constituency in West Bengal

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Through a consistent surge in their salience and distinguished by their autonomy, female voters have become an indispensable constituency in Indian electoral democracy in recent decades. Through a constructivist approach to populist political representation, this paper studies the conceptual terrain of the relationship between voter loyalty and populist democracy in the context of female voting and partisan support in contemporary West Bengal. This paper explores how the leadership of the All India Trinamool Congress in the state constructed a “loyalist” constituency of female voters who are beneficiaries of state-sponsored welfare schemes while exercising the logic of “othering” to exclude female critics and dissidents of the regime from such a constituency. Through interviews with grassroots workers of the AITC, this paper will also analyse the gendered expectations that underscore the populist constituency of the “loyal female voter” in West Bengal.

Since the last few electoral cycles at the national and regional levels, female voters of India have experienced increasing salience and autonomy (Kazim 2021; Kamra 2019; Ramesh 2020; Rajalakshmi 2024), which has marked them as a site of fierce electoral contestation among rival political parties. Promises of targeted direct benefit cash transfers and other welfarist measures directed at women’s social and economic self-sufficiency abound in the electoral manifestos of different parties. While regional parties such as the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) have experienced substantial success in attracting women’s electoral support (T Banerjee 2023; Raychaudhury 2021a), it is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that has enjoyed a major share of women’s votes at the national level—aided among other things by the Narendra Modi-led union government’s welfarist regime and the party’s mobilisational strategy of framing women’s political participation as *seva* (voluntary social service) (Chowdhury 2024; Aiyar 2023). Often interpreted as loyal and driven by pragmatic concerns, the female electorate carries with it the potential to upend prevalent sectarian electoral calculations characterised by affiliations to caste, class, religious, or regional identities.

However, the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections have offered a complicated picture—with state-wise variations in women’s voting patterns and the electoral defeat of several prominent women candidates from the BJP (Rajalakshmi 2024; Mishra et al 2024). In contrast, the AITC has seen tremendous success among women voters in the 2024 elections—with 53% of female voters of West Bengal voting for the party (Kumar and Ranjan 2024). Women’s electoral support for the AITC has been attributed to the welfarist regime of cash transfer schemes of the AITC-led West Bengal government as well as to the personal appeal of the populist leader of the party and the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. In the assembly elections of 2021, Muslim, Scheduled Tribe (ST), and upper-caste women constituted the AITC’s primary support base while Scheduled Caste (SC) women expressed a preference for the BJP (Lahiri and Menon 2021). Some regional parties such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) of Odisha, which had traditionally also enjoyed the support of women due to state support of women-led self-help groups, suffered from electoral reversals (Swain 2024). In Tamil Nadu, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—a party previously led by former female

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Chief Minister J Jayalithaa and once popular among women voters—similarly suffered electoral losses as its rival, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) managed to capture the female vote with its slew of welfarist schemes (Tamilarasu 2024; Sivapriyan 2024). In this context, a study of the AITC's sustained success in attracting women's electoral support can offer insights into the criticality of the particular regional context in the performance of leadership by populist Indian women leaders and their connection with their female support base (M Banerjee 2004). This paper offers a qualitative–interpretive engagement with the formal and informal institutional processes through which the AITC constructs a “loyalist” constituency of female supporters who are beneficiaries of state-sponsored welfare schemes while excluding female critics and dissidents of the regime from such a constituency.

Methodology of the Study

The theoretical framework that informs the analysis of the AITC's gendered policy regime and party culture in this paper is the constructivist approach to political representation in the context of populist political leadership (Disch et al 2019; Disch 2021). The global ascendance of new populist movements and political parties has thrown into relief the crisis of representative democracies and established political parties (Laclau 2005; Urbinati 2014). Corresponding to the populist moment has been a reconceptualisation of political representation as a creative process. The idea of political representation being a process entails a greater emphasis on accountability and what Hanna Pitkin termed as “responsiveness” (Pitkin 1967) on the part of the representative. Pitkin (1967) argues that the act of representation also necessitates the representative to exercise autonomous judgment. Influenced by Pitkin's early theorisations, constructivist theorists of political representation have in the recent decades sought to highlight the contextual nature of democratic claims (Saward 2006) as well as widen the boundaries of representation beyond formal electoral politics. The constructivist author, Lisa Disch (2015), reframes representation as a continuous process wherein “representative and represented” are “linked not by a static correspondence but in a dynamic process of mutual constitution.” Political representatives are seen by constructivists as creative agents who bring new political actors into being through their act of representation (Disch et al 2019). Such theoretical reformulations of political representation can have far-reaching implications for the field of women's political participation, chiefly by means of extending the boundaries of formal institutional politics. Parallel to this reimagination of political representation is the discursive approach to studying populist politics which has also underlined the creative potential of the populist leadership to engender new constituencies of the “people” whom the populist leader lays a moral claim to represent in electoral politics and beyond (Laclau 2005; Peruzzotti 2019).

In the Indian context, populist parties such as the AITC have been successful in constructing loyal electoral constituencies such as that of women—cutting across prevailing constituencies

categorised under caste, religion, and other markers of identity, primarily through the practice of welfare distribution. Characterising this emergent model of new welfarism through direct benefit transfers of cash and private goods as “techno-patrimonialism” (Aiyar 2023), scholars have underlined how this model frames citizens as passive beneficiaries of welfare (*labharthi*) from a benevolent “provider state” helmed by personalist leaders (Sircar 2023) rather than as deliberative, rights-bearing citizens. In the context of the AITC's electoral success in West Bengal, this paper goes deeper into the personalised leadership and gendered welfare delivery regime of Mamata Banerjee and the AITC. It traces the party's cultivation of a loyalist constituency of women beneficiaries of welfare and party supporters as a process that is simultaneously inclusive of active and passive female party supporters and exclusive of dissidents and critics, in alignment with its populist character.

The interviews analysed in this paper amount to 24 semi-structured interviews of women grassroots AITC workers and higher-level leaders in West Bengal conducted in four phases between 2018 and 2024, primarily in urban and peri-urban Kolkata. The paper has focused primarily on grassroots party workers and leaders as they constitute a critical link between Banerjee's populist leadership and the non-party-affiliated female electorate. Such political workers are often themselves tenuously connected to the party through the promise of short-term low-pay employment in exchange for party work. During and beyond electoral cycles, they serve to reach out to and mobilise female voters in favour of the party. In the limited research scope of the paper, the liminal presence of the female grassroots party worker offered a snapshot of the party's emotional appeal beyond the formal organisational structures of the party. Covering women members across different layers of the party hierarchy, the interviews allowed for a sample of the experience of women at the grassroots as well as in the higher echelons of the party. The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity while their surnames indicating their caste have been kept the same or equivalent. The interviews help to highlight informal processes that remain undocumented and yet reproduce gendered institutional continuity. Following the interpretivist focus on the meanings and motivations of actors, I noted the practice of linguistic ambivalence used by my interviewees to communicate their experiences of institutional exclusion.

This paper is divided into two broad sections. The first section engages with the connection between the gendered welfarist policy orientation of the AITC government, the personalistic leadership of Banerjee, and the articulations of loyalty to and belonging within the AITC by women party workers. It delineates the construction of a loyalist base of female party supporters through the dispensation of welfare and Banerjee's populist self-fashioning. With its focus on the series of events centring on women protesters at Sandeshkhali, the second section illustrates the populist politics of “othering” and gendered boundary creation that runs

parallel to the privileging of the loyalist female electorate and party worker.

Lakshmis of the Party: Tracing the Loyalist Female Constituency of the AITC

Among the array of direct benefit welfarist schemes in West Bengal that bolster the appeal of Banerjee as a charismatic representative of the marginalised, a majority target women and girl students. Kanyashree—a conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme—was initiated in 2013 and aims at encouraging more girl students between the age of 13 and 18 to continue with higher education, as well as curbing school dropouts and child marriage. It received the first place at the UNESCO Public Service Awards in 2017 (*Business Line* 2018) from among 552 project nominations from a total of 62 countries. At present, the scheme records over 25 million beneficiaries. It includes both annual cash benefits of ₹1,000 and one-time financial grants of ₹25,000 to be paid to girl students from low-income families. However, at the level of implementation, questions have been raised about the efficacy of schemes such as Kanyashree which aim to address child marriage in view of the persistence of a high number of child marriages in contemporary West Bengal (Ahamed 2021).

Another CCT scheme—Rupashree—modelled after a marriage assistance programme launched in Tamil Nadu (*Hindu* 2011), is targeted at low-income families intending to arrange their daughters' marriages after the latter attain adulthood (18 years of age). Launched in January 2018 as part of the state budget, the scheme provides a one-time financial grant of ₹25,000 to “economically stressed families” (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare 2018) during the time of their daughters' weddings. The stated aim of this scheme—being the alleviation of wedding expenses for disadvantaged families—is premised on the orthodox as well as problematic representation of unmarried young women as a “burden” on their families and can be seen as reinforcing the patriarchal practice of dowry. Notably, this is in sharp contradiction to the vision of the Kanyashree project that aims to facilitate higher education prospects for young women in West Bengal while deterring child marriage and the associated risks of early pregnancy as well as maternal and child mortality. By offering girl students—aged 18 years and from low-income households—the prospect of higher education (Kanyashree) on the one hand, and marriage (Rupashree) on the other—the AITC's policy framework weakens the goal of women's economic autonomy.

While the divergent and conflicting objectives of Kanyashree and Rupashree may signal a fundamental incoherence at the level of policymaking, a closer look at the naming of these schemes offers notable insights into the discursive commonality undergirding these frameworks. Both Kanyashree and Rupashree connote aestheticised Bengali adjectives for young women. Kanyashree denotes the charm of a young girl, while Rupashree lays emphasis on her physical beauty. The Rupashree scheme highlights the channels through which socially conservative gender norms are reaffirmed even as its award-winning

counterpart—Kanyashree—facilitates the challenging of those very norms. At the same time, traditionalist cultural representations of women as repositories of physical beauty and grace inform both frameworks. Illustrating the subterranean congruity between the two otherwise contradictory schemes helps to understand the ways in which hegemonic gender constructions weave into the practice of developmental policy-making, with resultant policies often mirroring sociocultural conventions they claim to subvert. At the same time, such contradictions also illustrate the government's attempts at simultaneously catering to the sentiments of the progressive and conservative electorate.

Alongside the CCT schemes, the AITC regime under Banerjee also sponsors a popular direct-transfer financial assistance scheme for all women aged 25–60¹ (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare 2023). While the policy guideline initially provided ₹500 to unreserved category women and ₹1,000 to SC and ST women (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare 2023), the provisions were increased a few weeks before the 2024 general elections—now offering ₹1,000 to unreserved category women and ₹1,200 to SC and ST women (Banerjee 2024). Invoking Hindu iconography, the title—Lakshmi Bhandar² (Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare 2023)—reaffirms the association of women with domesticity and docile femininity, while at the same time it facilitates the state's recognition and monetisation of domestic care labour that has historically been performed by women and has been undervalued vis-à-vis productive labour traditionally associated with men. The AITC's recent electoral successes at the rural and urban local government elections have been largely attributed to the popularity of Lakshmi Bhandar (T Banerjee 2023; *Anandabazar Patrika* 2022) as well as of Kanyashree and Rupashree among the female electorate, leading the government to double the monthly allowance under the Lakshmi Bhandar scheme on the eve of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The results of the 2024 general elections showed a 10.6% increase in the AITC vote share among women (Chatterjee and Basu 2024) and this increase has been credited to the increase in the Lakshmi Bhandar provisions. From prioritising the presence of women among the audience of her public speeches with meetings to addressing them as “my mothers” and “my sisters” (Raychaudhuri 2021a) as well as “my Kanyashrees” and “my Lakshmi Bhandars”—an explicit reference to the AITC government's welfare schemes—Banerjee has created and reinforced a direct, personalised, and emotionally charged connection with a section of the beneficiary female electorate who are framed under the category of docile and acceptable femininity. Aimed at constituting a loyalist female supporter base, the Lakshmi Bhandar scheme has generated a polarising appeal among its supporters and critics—which also includes several grassroots members of the AITC itself—who expressed a preference for steady employment instead of such direct benefit schemes.

Dolly Mondal³—a municipal ward office-bearer and grassroots worker of the party—stated that despite being a beneficiary of

Lakshmi Bhandar⁴ and other such welfare schemes, she preferred steady employment opportunities that would, according to her, aid her in managing her household expenses better.

I even say that it is better if they stop giving Lakshmi Bhandar and give employment to everyone. What will we do with ₹500–₹1,000? I cannot live on ₹500–₹1,000! If you go to buy [cooking] gas, that will itself cost you more than ₹1,000. It is therefore much better to give jobs.

Additionally, Mondal also speculated whether the prevailing inflation in the prices of essential items were the consequence of any tacit understanding between the AITC and its electoral rival—the BJP: “Didi and Modi are brothers and sisters. They both do things together in consultation with each other.” While she expressed a critical perspective on the AITC government’s welfare regime, Mondal stated her affections for Banerjee, “After my mother, Didi holds that place of respect in my heart” even as she clarified that she had never met Banerjee in person. “I don’t even wish to reach that level, I am better this way,” Mondal added, reiterating her deference to the existing party leadership.

Swarnali Saha⁵—an Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and grassroots worker of the party—expressed the “immense pride” she felt “as a woman” to see Banerjee as the chief minister. However, she also criticised the AITC government’s decision to extend the benefits of its financial assistance scheme—Lakshmi Bhandar—to all women (aged 25–60) irrespective of their economic status. She declared that she herself had not applied for benefits under the scheme as she did not intend to burden the government and the citizens of West Bengal with debt. “To get more votes, the government is borrowing money to finance these schemes,” Saha remarked, in a rare display of open dissent, which was soon followed by her affirmation that she continued to work with the AITC because of her love for “Didi and her schemes” despite being previously known in her neighbourhood as a *marka-mara* (branded/committed) Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) worker. Saha’s narration of how she came to receive her present job also displayed an element of transaction in her relationship with the party—an aspect that was also echoed by several other grassroots workers—particularly those who hailed from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds like Saha herself. With its promise of providing contractual government employment with the implicit condition of serving as party volunteers at a time of job scarcity and depleting female labour force participation in West Bengal, the AITC regime has attracted several women aspirants from low-income backgrounds and socially marginalised identities to its fold.

The Discourse of Loyalty and the Subcontracting of Authority

Notwithstanding the prevalence of transaction in the relationships that women party workers and grassroots supporters sustain with the party, an overarching discourse of strident loyalty to the party leadership—Banerjee in particular—informs the organisational culture of the AITC and can also be understood as seeping into the wider pool of welfarist scheme beneficiaries. Expressions of loyalty and emotional attachment

to the party leader also serve to augment the crafting of Banerjee’s populist self-fashioning as embodying the interests of the marginalised and a generous “maternal” patron of government welfare (Raychaudhury 2021b). Such emotionally charged connection with her female supporters has often worked as a remarkable shield for Banerjee from anti-incumbency sentiments, and even as her prominent associates have been taken into custody under allegations of corruption and misrule, Banerjee has managed to not only isolate herself from the taint of corruption but has also won several successive elections with large mandates. Under the Banerjee-led AITC regime, the constitution of a loyalist constituency accompanied by targeted direct benefit transfers and the subcontracting of authority to local party bosses in exchange for their unquestioned loyalty to Banerjee have been characterised as “franchisee politics” (Bhattacharyya 2023).

Recent public policy and administrative outreach activities undertaken by the AITC government such as “Didike Bol” (Tell Didi), “Duare Sarkar” (Government at the Door), and “Paray Paray Samadhan” (Solutions at the Neighbourhood)—aimed at consolidating Banerjee’s image as an accessible leader in direct contact with her electorate. Such administrative programmes contributed to the AITC’s electoral victories particularly in their appeal to women voters—who expressed appreciation for such doorstep governance programmes and forged a direct and emotional association with the programmes and Banerjee’s populist leadership (Kazim 2021). Additionally, party programmes such as “Banglar Gorbo Mamata” (Mamata is Bengal’s Pride) and Banerjee’s rebranding as “Banglar Nijer Meye” (Bengal’s own daughter) presented her as an icon of nativist pride against Delhi-based leaders of the BJP such as Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Along with appeals to the women voters of the state, the image of Banerjee as West Bengal’s daughter also marked a shift from the “street-fighter” image associated with her towards a more vulnerable figure in need of defence. Banerjee’s populist self-fashioning also foregrounded her performance of a frugal lifestyle—represented in her sartorial and dietary choices—that struck an emotional chord with her female supporters. Chandana Nayek⁶—a part-time party grassroots volunteer and domestic labourer—articulated the affective connection with Banerjee’s personality and leadership: “Didi feels like one of our own [‘nijer moto’]. When she says, ‘I don’t need meat and rice, a simple meal of boiled potatoes and rice is enough for me’, we feel it.”

Within the party organisation, the discourse of loyalty is illustrated even during instances when women party workers recount their experiences of institutional exclusion. Alongside serving as a resource pool and a support system for women party workers and aspirants, the family is frequently deployed as a metaphor by party members in their articulation of belonging within and loyalty to the institutional spaces of the AITC. Sanjana Bhowmik⁷—a municipal councillor and former office bearer—highlighted the top-down hierarchical command structure of the party by characterising the party elite as residents of the *upromohol* (higher tier of a mansion),

offering an image of the organisational edifice of the party as a feudal mansion that is traditionally a living space marked by the vertical segregation of its inhabitants in the higher and lower echelons. While the party elite are represented as the distant and privileged occupants of the upormohol, Bhowmik identified herself and her colleagues as the *nichutolar kormi* (lower-tier workers) who face disconnection and exclusion from the “secret garden” (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Gallagher and Marsh 1988) of the upormohol: “it is really not possible for us to be included in higher-level decision-making, we can’t go there, can’t even see what goes on.” Bhowmik’s identification of herself as a lower-tier worker disengaged from the party elite, further gains significance after considering her sudden demotion from an influential post in the municipality after a reasonably good five-year performance. Instead of expressing open disaffection, she attributed her demotion by the party leadership to “technical reasons” and the discretion enjoyed by the party elite, particularly the supremo, Banerjee.

The Party as a Family: Institutional Culture of the AITC

Alongside describing herself as a vulnerable low-level worker, Bhowmik characterised the AITC as “a large joint family” and identified her colleagues and herself as the “children” of the family. A similar characterisation of the party as a “joint family” which hosted members of varying dispositions was also offered by Mondal in the context of allegations of corruption against the AITC government. Such characterisations contributed to their interpretation of differences of opinion and dissent within the party as everyday quarrels among cousins in a joint family. While the representation of the party as a joint family can imply the existence of horizontal networks among party members, a different picture emerges when one examines the family metaphor through a contextualised lens. The image of the party as a family, a recurrent theme in the narratives of several party members in the AITC, seems to take as its source a specific historical construction of the South Asian joint family—characterised by the joint ownership of property among fathers, sons, and male cousins—patrilineal descent conditioned by the caste system and the overarching authority of elderly male members over others in the family (Thapar 1980, 2010). The prevalence of hierarchy and male authority within the joint family is reflected in the interpretations of vertical hierarchy within the party. Nandana Mukherjee, a ground-level worker in the AITC, articulated the familial naturalisation of male authority in the party hierarchy, while stressing that most of her women party colleagues—including herself—function “under the umbrella and direction”⁸ of the local male party leader, characterised as a “Dada”⁹ (elder brother), who “graciously listens” to the opinions and demands of ground workers but makes decisions “as he thinks best.” Similarly, Mala Pandey,¹⁰ a municipality representative from the AITC, spoke at length about the “benevolence and wisdom” of the member of the legislative assembly (MLA) for her area—a state-level male party leader—who appointed women as local party cell leaders.

The instances discussed underline the sedimentation and naturalisation of the disciplinary logic of vertical hierarchy

which contributes to the overall coherence and reproduction of the prevalent institutional cultures of the AITC. The fantasy of the party as a family also plays a critical role in undercutting and containing antagonisms and challenges to the hegemony and hierarchical authority of the party leadership through the fostering of emotional attachments. The logic of a vertical party hierarchy also contributes to the construction of a loyalist grassroots female support base. Open expressions of deference and loyalty to the party leadership constitute a crucial “rule-in-use” (Ostrom 2007) and are seen as the primary means towards facilitating the advancement of one’s career within the party in the broader context of political culture in West Bengal, primarily given the underrepresentation of women in elite spaces of decision-making in most parties. Such expressions of deference were also reflected in the way some interviewees shared their perspectives on the allocation of party and government posts as well as on the issue of political reservations for women. Chhanda Maity,¹¹ a municipal representative in a northern suburb of Kolkata, chose to describe her victory in the local municipality elections as a “blessing” of her (male) political mentor, indicating her loyalty to her mentor.

I have been guided and supported by our MLA and my guardian. I received the post of Councillor through his blessings. It was he who gave me the post, maybe he thought me competent enough for it.

Such examples of political patronage can be understood through the subcontracting of authority to local party bosses under the AITC’s “franchisee politics” (Bhattacharyya 2023). With the party’s relatively decentralised power structure at the local level, grassroots leaders such as municipal councillors can also amass authority by disbursing patronage and aiding citizens to avail the delivery of direct benefit welfare. For example, Swarnali Saha recounted how her reporting authority within the party organisation—the local female municipal councillor—gave her the responsibility of assisting local voters to get their government documents and enrol their names in welfare schemes. As demonstrated in Tarini Bedi’s (2016) research on brokerage politics and “political matronage” in Maharashtra, female grassroots party leaders can cultivate their own localised loyal constituencies through the politics of patronage and welfare delivery while further outsourcing their authorities to female party workers such as Saha.

Interviewees such as Mala Pandey and Shreya Das expressed their “heartfelt gratitude” to the AITC leader, Banerjee, for the implementation of 33% and, later, 50% quotas for women in rural and urban local self-government bodies. Hanifa Bibi,¹² a local rural government leader from the AITC, expressed her enthusiastic support for gender quotas in legislative assemblies and Parliament. She stated that it was quotas for women in rural and urban local government that had made it possible for aspirants like her to gain experience in government. “In our party, there is no discrimination against women—Mamata Banerjee has given us this space,” said Sonali Dey,¹³ a district-level youth wing member of the AITC, representing the frequently articulated perception among AITC members of Banerjee being a champion of women’s rights.

The AITC's personalistic character and the lack of a strong ideological base enhance the influence of personal loyalty to the party leader, Banerjee, upon the containment of disaffections and discontent in the party. When compared with the ideological hold over the institutional cultures of the CPI(M) and the BJP, the grip of personal loyalty to the chief leader over the narratives articulated by the interviewees in the AITC was ostensibly stronger. The influence of personal loyalty is exemplified through the scarcity of open expressions of dissonance from the official discourse regarding everyday decision-making in the AITC. Among the interviewees, those who admitted to facing discrimination in the candidature allocation process in elections or administrative posts chose to articulate their experiences of institutional exclusion through subtle linguistic manoeuvres, such as the metaphors of the party as a joint family and as a mansion—wherein discretionary powers regarding political recruitment and candidate selection are concentrated entirely with the party elite. Sanjana Bhowmik's narrative about her abrupt demotion from the post of municipality chairperson constitutes an instance of such linguistic manoeuvres.

During the interviews, all the respondents from the AITC identified themselves as ideological followers of the party leader—Banerjee—and claimed to be particularly inspired by her life and personal struggles. For her followers, Banerjee presents a moral leadership that constitutes a clear departure from the mainstream “instrumentalist” political practices governing India's electoral democracy. Tales of Banerjee's early days as a political activist had exercised a formative influence upon several of the women members of the AITC whom I interviewed. As Mala Pandey of 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?”

Within the personalised party culture (Rahat and Kenig 2018) of the AITC, the integration of women party members share an interdependent relationship (Sjoberg 2013; Maiguashca 2019; Gauja 2018) with the populist self-fashioning and leadership of Banerjee (Raychaudhury 2021b). The abundant use of emotions through the demonstration of “street-style” courage, sentimentality as well as vulnerability in Banerjee's personal life narrative, and political practice act as “affective triggers” (Mayer 2014: 7) for her followers, shaping their ideas and expectations of political leadership. Banerjee's self-fashioning also offers her followers motivational signposts for their own personal trajectories in politics. Most of the women interviewees from the party claimed to have been directly influenced and inspired by Banerjee's activism and her austere personal lifestyle. Amita Choudhury,¹⁴ a grassroots level worker of the AITC, recalled being motivated to join politics and being inspired to contribute to social welfare by Banerjee's cultivated public image of being a *janadaradi* (one who empathises with the people) leader.

Addressing her as *Didi* (elder sister), most of her supporters interpreted Banerjee's leadership style and performance as an

activist and as a policymaker in the light of her personal life experience as an underprivileged woman and her nurturing and affective disposition. For instance, speaking of the welfareist CCT schemes for young girls launched by the AITC government in West Bengal, Amita Choudhury of the AITC linked these schemes entirely to Banerjee's own experience of dire poverty in her childhood—her origins in “a very lowly, grass-root level”—her lack of political inheritance and empathy for underprivileged girl-students. Similarly, reflecting upon Banerjee's activist oeuvre, Debi Sen¹⁵—a senior AITC trade union leader and MP—traced Banerjee's leadership during the “forest-fire days” of the Singur movement to the Banerjee's personal experience of struggles 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 while at the same time, it had exercised a deep influence upon Sen's own political subjectivity.

In the institutional culture of the AITC, women's experiences of belonging and the development of their political subjectivities are mediated through their respective social locations and their loyalty to the party leader. Alongside conditioning the institutional belonging(s) of women party members, appeals to loyalty to the leader also facilitate the reproduction of hegemonic gender constructions and systemic continuity in the party through the containment and concealing of disaffections, antagonisms, and contestations. Even so, the construction of certain discursive binaries and boundaries lie at the core of such processes of sedimentation of dominant gender norms and relations within the institutional cultures of the party. Involving the pitting of discursive models of gendered subjectivities against each other, the creation of boundaries characterises the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011; Yuval-Davis et al 2006) in institutional spaces. For the sustained reproduction of such discursive binaries and frontiers, the elements of repetitive performance (Butler 1997, 1993; Yuval-Davis 2011) and the privileging of one model of gendered subjectivity over another assume critical significance. In recent times, such elevation of a particular loyalist model of gendered subjectivity has been extended beyond the confines of party culture and has been used by the party leadership to frame the body of beneficiary citizens and voters—many of whom are also tenuously connected to the party through the promise of contractual job opportunities. The belonging and loyalty of women party workers and voters to the party share a co-constitutive relationship with the politics of boundary creation which will be explored in the following section, with a particular focus on the recent events surrounding Sandeshkhali in West Bengal.

Locating the Politics of Gendered Boundary Creation at Sandeshkhali

While informal practices, such as affirmations of loyalty and deference to the party leadership facilitate women's integration and belonging in the AITC's institutional culture and beyond—such demonstrations of loyalty are also accompanied by performative condemnations of any criticisms of Banerjee's administration. In recent times, such condemnations have

assumed particular salience in the context of a series of events centring around Sandeshkhali—a relatively isolated island in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal (Raychaudhury 2024; Bhattacharyya 2024). Spirited protests by women villagers beginning in February 2024 against their longstanding economic and sexual exploitation by local strongmen affiliated to the AITC in Sandeshkhali grabbed the national media attention on the eve of the recently concluded general elections (Chattopadhyay 2024; Bhattacharyya 2024).

Several protestors recounted their experiences of being summoned or abducted into the local party office and of being routinely harassed, abused, and terrorised by henchmen working under the command of the strongman AITC leader—Shahjahan Sheikh. Sheikh—an example of the AITC’s franchisee politics—derived unfettered authority over his territory from the district-level party organisation. The residents of Sandeshkhali—primarily belonging to socio-economically marginalised caste identities—also claimed that for over a decade, Sheikh and his aides had forced villagers to give up their fertile agricultural land plots, converting them into saline pisciculture ponds (Agnihotri et al 2024) to finance his personal business enterprise. Although popular anger against Sheikh was palpable, the women protestors expressed their pleas for Banerjee’s personal intervention (*Livemint* 2024) while continuing to profess their loyalty to the AITC during the movement, citing their identities as beneficiaries of welfarist schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar.

Among the primary electoral opponents of the AITC, the BJP leadership characterised the rampant exploitation of women in Sandeshkhali as the oppression of Dalit Hindu women by Muslim strongmen¹⁶ (J Sarkar 2024b) while the CPI(M) underlined the economic exploitation of women in Sandeshkhali—which occurred primarily in the form of land-grab and non-payment of wages (Agnihotri et al 2024). Banerjee herself communicated her “sorrow” at the plight of the women of Sandeshkhali but alleged that the movement was being directed by opposition parties (*Press Trust of India* 2024). She also pledged to visit Sandeshkhali only if the AITC secured a decisive victory in the general elections (Singh 2024). Beside Banerjee’s implicit characterisation of the elections as a test of loyalty for Sandeshkhali’s labharthi female electorate to her leadership—during the elections several women protestors from Sandeshkhali alleged that they were no longer receiving their monthly cash allowances under Lakshmir Bhandar (T Sarkar 2024).

Alongside strongarm tactics such as stopping Lakshmir Bhandar funds to the recalcitrant beneficiary female electorate, responses from women AITC members to the protests at Sandeshkhali also illustrated the politics of gendered boundary-creation in play within the AITC. In a press briefing held while the protests were ongoing in February 2024, Chandrima Bhattacharya—the minister of state for health and family welfare and the president of the mahila TMC—characterised the protests held by the women of Sandeshkhali against land grab, denial of wages, and sexual abuse by local office-bearers of the party and the Panchayat as *toiri kora andolon* (artificially constructed movement) to counter the popular impression of the spontaneity of the protests (ABP Ananda 2024a). Bhattacharya’s

colleague and state cabinet minister—Shashi Panja—accused the BJP of inciting the protestors and sought to redirect the attention of the media and the union government to instances of gender-based violence in BJP-governed states such as Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. Mahua Moitra—the AITC MP from Krishnanagar who has had a record of vocal parliamentary activism—described the events at Sandeshkhali as a “fake narrative by the BJP” (Chaurasia 2024). While party supremo Mamata Banerjee attempted to defuse the protests by offering symbolic inclusion to a section of women from Sandeshkhali and promising redressal of their grievances at a party rally for women’s rights (*Millenium Post* 2024), discontent continues unabated among the women protestors in Sandeshkhali who have expressed their sense of hurt and betrayal at the lack of solidarity from a woman chief minister (*Livemint* 2024). In the midst of the heated election campaign, successive sting videos appeared on social media which showed some women protestors “confessing” that they had been trained and financially compensated by the BJP to claim that they had been subjected to sexual assault by Shahjahan Sheikh and his henchmen (J Sarkar 2024a). Among my interviewees, most female grassroots party workers—themselves belonging to marginalised social identities—expressed their complete support for the AITC regime while describing the Sandeshkhali protests as “rumour-mongering.” Srila Nayek¹⁷—a grassroots party worker—insisted that trusting the AITC regime’s perspective on Sandeshkhali was essential and a “true test of loyalty”:

See this is election season, someone can spread false rumours about Didi. We need to be careful about that. Didi is doing good work, so some people are spreading rumours about her. Whoever wants to do something good in this society has always had to face such rumours. We love Didi and stand by her. We have no connection with other parties.

Concomitant with the practice of intimidating and vilifying dissidents and the aggrieved, is the practice of extolling the category of female beneficiaries of welfare schemes as loyal supporters of the party, repetitively performed by the party supremo and others (Raychaudhury 2024). Such framing is inclusive of the female party worker who performs deferential loyalty to the leadership and implicitly excludes and delegitimises the critics and the victims of several incidents of gender-based violence (Singh 2022) that have occurred under the AITC regime. This politics of gendered boundary-creation can be interpreted as a derivative of the populist practice of “othering” (Moffitt 2016; Müller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Loyalty and the concealment of ambitions at the grassroots level is often incentivised through the promise of low-paying contractual government employment. Such informal practices foreground loyalty to the party leadership as a central criterion of women’s political inclusion, and facilitate women’s exclusion from and belonging both within and outside the AITC’s institutional spaces.

Conclusions

Exploring the discursive construction of the loyalist female grassroots constituency of the AITC in West Bengal, this paper presented a case study of the broader populist mode of political representation in contemporary Indian electoral democracy.

In congruence with the new welfarist framing of citizens as passive beneficiaries (Aiyar 2023), the AITC's populist invocation of its female support base as steadfastly loyal and homogenous offers a rather gloomy picture of women's political inclusion despite the rising salience of female voters. On one hand, in the wake of the recent gruesome rape-murder case of a young doctor at the prominent state-run R G Kar hospital in Kolkata, female welfare beneficiaries of Lakshmir Bhandar were marked as AITC supporters and faced incessant attacks on social media—being characterised as “sellouts” and “des-titutes” by critics of the party. The scheme Lakshmir Bhandar has been juxtaposed to the declining standards of safety of women—identified as the “Lakshmis” of West Bengal (ABP Ananda 2024b). On the other hand, a senior spokesperson of

the AITC exhorted women protestors to “return their Lakshmir Bhandar” implying that women who were recipients of Lakshmir Bhandar had no moral right to express dissent (Sengupta 2024). Such statements can also be interpreted through the framing of the party culture as “familial” that has been discussed in this paper which seeks to naturalise the undisputed authority of party leaders and by extension of the government. Recent events such as at Sandeshkhali and the R G Kar hospital therefore illustrate the exclusivist and oppressive logic that undergirds the AITC's cultivation of the female constituency. Even as such a constituency augments the visibility of women as a decisive electorate, the dark underbelly of absolute loyalty and passivity of such a political practice undercuts the progressive potential of such a constituency.

NOTES

- 1 While young girl students below 25 are covered under the Kanyashree and the Rupashree schemes, women above 60 automatically get transferred to the old-age and widow pension schemes.
- 2 Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess of material prosperity and domestic harmony.
- 3 Interviewed on 21 March 2024.
- 4 The interviewee holds a salaried government post which renders her ineligible for being a Lakshmir Bhandar beneficiary. This finding seems to align with allegations of leakage and misuse of the scheme that have been raised by opposition parties.
- 5 Interviewed on 21 March 2024.
- 6 Interviewed on 19 March 2024.
- 7 Interviewed on 16 January 2019.
- 8 Interviewed on 14 January 2019.
- 9 In the cultural vocabulary of South Asia, it is common to apply familial kinship terms such as *didī* (elder sister), *dada* (elder/older brother), or *kaka/chacha* (uncle) to non-familial relationships.
- 10 Interviewed on 2 June 2018.
- 11 Interviewed on 21 June 2018.
- 12 Interviewed on 4 May 2023.
- 13 Interviewed on 27 December 2019.
- 14 Interviewed on 14 January 2019.
- 15 Interviewed on 13 June 2018.
- 16 This narrative tended to highlight the names of Muslim strongmen and their Muslim aides over the predominantly Hindu local musclemen.
- 17 Interviewed on 19 March 2024.

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