

CSH Occasional Paper



**Women in the Calcutta
Municipal Corporation :
A Study in the Context of
the Debate on the Women's
Reservation Bill**

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Publication of the
French Research Institutes in India

No. 2
2001

**WOMEN IN THE CALCUTTA MUNICIPAL CORPORATION.
A STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE
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This article presents the findings of a survey conducted in 2000 in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC), where quotas – 33 per cent of seats - for women have been implemented since 1995. Quotas, or reservations, for women (as well as for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) are one of the boldest provisions of the decentralisation policy defined by the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments passed in 1992, which gave a constitutional status to local self-government for the first time in the history of independent India. While the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (73rd CA) defines the decentralisation policy at the rural level (a policy commonly referred to as « Panchayati Raj », or government of the panchayats), the 74th CA deals with urban local bodies, i.e. Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats, depending on the size of the city.

Women's quotas in the Indian cities have evoked comparatively little interest so far¹. This relative indifference contrasts, on the one hand, with the abundant literature generated by women's new role in the Panchayati Raj institutions. And on the other hand, with the heated debate provoked since 1996 by another constitutional Bill, now commonly referred to as the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB), proposing to implement similar quotas for women in State Legislative Assemblies and in the Lok Sabha.

The case study described here was conceived as an answer both to the debate over the WRB, involving a series of arguments, for and against women's quotas, in need of a confrontation with existing experiments, and to the present research gap concerning the implementation of quotas in Indian metropolitan cities. The size of cities such as Calcutta, Delhi, Mumbai or Chennai in terms of their population, and the type of

¹ The few existing studies on this subject include Barry, Honour & Palnitkar (1996), Arora & Prabhakar (1997), Nanivadekar (1997), Gill (1999), and MARG (2000).

problems their urban governments have to deal with, means that many of the arguments over the WRB are relevant to the level of the Municipal Corporations. This study therefore, is an assessment of the first phase of the implementation of women's quotas in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, which proceeds by testing the major arguments expressed during the debate over the WRB.

Quotas for women : an option long rejected

Quotas for women were actually considered as early as in the 1930s, in the context of the constitutional reform of British India. The 1935 Government of India Act - implementing the principle of group representation on an unprecedented scale in the subcontinent - granted women, as well as some eleven other categories, reserved seats in the elected Provincial Councils. But from then on until the 1980s, the option of special provisions to ensure women's political representation was rejected three times.

In 1939, the "Women's Subcommittee", within the National Planning Committee formed by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chandra Bose to evolve the future economic policy of independent India, rejected the option of women's quotas (Sharma 1998: 26). The Constitution of India adopted in 1950 indeed suppressed reserved seats for women and proclaimed the equality between men and women as one of the Fundamental Rights.

Reservations, however, were adopted for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in higher level representative bodies (Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas), as well as in educational institutions and government jobs. A third category was mentioned in the Constitution as having a right to special help - i.e. to positive discrimination - from the State: that of the "socially and educationally backward classes", later called Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In 1953, a National Backward Classes Commission was nominated under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar, with the mission of identifying those groups qualifying as "Other Backward Classes". In his report, K.Kalelkar wrote about women:

"The position of women in India is peculiar. We have always felt that they have lived under great social handicaps and must, therefore, as a class be regarded as backward. But since they do not form a separate community it has not been possible for us to list them among the backward classes." (GOI 1955: 31)

This statement is remarkable insofar as it considers women as a class – a conception central to the second wave of the Indian women’s movement, which was to emerge in the 1970s. But Kalelkar underlines very clearly the major obstacle to this conception: women do not form a community for they cannot be isolated from men.

The very same argument was put forward by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), in its report, *Towards Equality*, published in 1974 as part of the preparations for the Women’s Decade (1975-1985) proclaimed by the United Nations. *Towards Equality* then represented the most ambitious survey ever on every aspect of Indian women’s lives. Its conclusion conveys its authors’ dismay at the glaring discrepancy between the promises of the Constitution and the reality, 25 years after India gained its independence:

“...The right to political equality has not enabled women to play their roles as partners and constituents in the political process [...] Instead, these rights have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist special protective and acceleratory measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in society.” (GOI 1974: 302)

Yet after listing the arguments in favour of reservations for women in political assemblies, this option is finally rejected on three grounds:

“Separate constituencies for women would narrow their outlook. [...] Women’s interests as such cannot be isolated from economic, social and political interests of groups, strata and classes in society. [...] The minority argument cannot be applied to women. Women are not a community, they are a category.”(GOI 1974: 304)

In order to encourage a greater participation by women into the political process, however, the CSWI recommends that “women panchayats”, i.e. women’s councils, be formed in every village as an integral part of the structure of local government (GOI 1974: 304). It also enjoins political parties to increase the proportion of women among their candidates, “so that in time to come the representation of women in the Legislative Bodies has some relationship to their position in the total population of the country or the state.” (GOI 1974: 305)

The 1990s : a new consensus

The recommendations of the CSWI do not seem, over time, to have had any significant impact on the proportion of women in elected assemblies: in the Lok Sabha, this proportion peaked at 8,6 per cent in 1999, while in the Vidhan Sabhas, on

an average, women constituted only four per cent of representatives between 1952 and 1997².

Women are thus defined as a group by their near absence, throughout time, from political arenas. At the end of the 1980s, this established fact revives the notion of women's quotas as a way to force the invisible barrier that denies them access to politics. Quotas in political assemblies then become a major demand of the Indian women's movement. The *National Perspective Plan for Women*, a document prepared under the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1988, updates the data compiled in *Towards Equality*, and recommends that (i) 33 per cent of seats in all elected assemblies, from the village to the Union level, be reserved for women, and that (ii) political parties promote women's electoral representation by giving at least 33 per cent of their tickets to women candidates (GOI 1988).

In 1989, the Rajiv Gandhi government introduced a decentralisation Bill which would ultimately become the 73rd and 74th CA, providing 33 per cent reservations for women in local elected bodies, four years later. But women's quotas did exist at the local level even before 1993. Four States played a pioneering role in this regard: in 1985, the Janata government of Karnataka implemented quotas (25% of seats) in the village and district councils, followed in 1986 by the Telugu Desam Party government in Andhra Pradesh, who reserved 9% of seat for women in district councils; in 1990, the Congress (I) government of Maharashtra introduced quotas (30% of seats) in urban local bodies as well as in the district, block and village councils; and in 1991, the Communist-led government of Kerala introduced quotas (30% of seats) at the district level only.

The 73rd and 74th CA were thus prepared for in India by a reflection spanning six decades over the feasibility of women's quotas, as well as by a few local experiments. But even beyond India the 1990s were marked by a quasi universal consensus on the need for women to be better represented in political assemblies. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women which took place in Beijing in 1995, to take stock of the condition of women worldwide and define actions to be taken, testified to this growing consensus. One of the twelve « Strategic Objectives » identified in the « Beijing Platform for Action », was indeed « to take measures to ensure women's equal access and full participation in power structures and decision-making » (UN

² « Factfile 1952-1997 », *Seminar 457*, « Empowering Women », p. 50.

1995). In many countries other than India (such as Argentina, Brazil, Belgium or France), affirmative action policies were designed, during the 1990s, so as to break the « glass ceiling » which seemed to restrict women's proportion in national parliaments to a world average of 14% (IPU 2001).

These new policies were preceded everywhere by national debates on the need and ways to increase women's political representation. In India, however, the provisions relating to quotas (for women, SCs, STs), were hardly discussed prior to the passing of the 73rd and 74th CA. This may be due to the fact that those who passed the two constitutional amendments were not likely to be personally affected by their implementation. This somewhat cynical hypothesis is supported by the intensity of the debate that emerged when a similar policy was considered at the States and Union level, through the Women's Reservation Bill.

The debate over the Women's Reservation Bill : on the objectives and means of a greater political representation of women

The main points of the Women's Reservation Bill, drafted by the National Commission for Women, are the following :

- One third of all seats will be reserved for women in the Lok Sabha as well as in the State Legislative Assemblies ;
- Out of the seats already reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes³, one third will be reserved for women belonging to either category;
- The constituencies reserved for women will be selected by rotation, for 5 years.

The debate over the WRB, involving mostly politicians and women's rights activists, has been taking place both in Parliament - where the Bill has been introduced four times in four years, always to face a strong, at times even violent, opposition - and in other fora such as the media, seminars and conferences all over the country. To sum up a long series of discussions, seven major arguments have been developed during this debate.

The arguments supporting women's quotas, on the one hand, can actually be found, as the Norwegian sociologist Hernes has shown, in about any debate on women's political representation. Hernes classified these arguments, all dealing with the

³ Since 1950 SCs and STs have had reserved seats in the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabhas in proportion to their importance in the total population.

objectives of a massive presence of women in political assemblies, into three main categories.

Firstly, arguments focusing on **gender justice** : women's presence in elected political assemblies has to be in proportion to their place in society if « people's representation », central to the democratic principle, is to be meaningful.

Secondly, arguments focusing on **women's interests**: in this line of reasoning, women are considered as an interest group, and a large presence of women in political assemblies is deemed necessary for their interests to be adequately represented.

Thirdly, arguments focusing on **women as a resource** for political life : women are here considered as possessing specific qualities or talents, which could fruitfully be tapped by society through their more effective political participation (Hernes 1982).

The opponents to the WRB, on the other hand, did not contest the above mentioned reasons why women should be numerous in political assemblies. Rather, their arguments focused on the perverse effects of women's quotas as they were outlined in the WRB ; they criticized quotas as the *means* to reach these objectives.

Firstly, critics focused on the question as to **which women** would benefit from women's quotas, since the Bill does not specify any criteria of eligibility other than sex (except for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). The opponents of the WRB have been arguing that (i) nepotism is likely to annihilate the democratising potential of the Bill; and that (ii) such reservations are likely to benefit mostly those women who belong to the privileged sections of society. Gender justice would thus be a mere façade, and social justice might actually suffer from women's quotas.

Secondly, the difficulty of finding enough suitable candidates has been underlined, along with the **risk of incompetent people being elected**.

Thirdly, a backlash by men, threatened by quotas, has been anticipated: men resenting the forced eviction of their male colleagues would be likely (i) not to allow women to contest out of reserved constituencies, and (ii) to confine the beneficiaries of quotas to some kind of **women ghetto**, allowing them to deal only with areas traditionally considered as “soft”, such as health or education.

Lastly, the proposed system of **rotation of reserved constituencies** every five years has been denounced on two counts: (i) as a major obstacle to the establishment of a nurturing relationship between elected women and their respective constituencies; and (ii) implying that women candidates would always have to oppose other women

candidates, thus both undermining the possibility of female solidarity, and depriving women of a chance to prove that they can do at least as well as men candidates⁴.

The following analysis is centered around these seven arguments, i.e. the issues at stake in the Indian debate on women's quotas. The paper follows a broad chronological order, examining, firstly, who are the women councillors elected in 1995 ; secondly, how they performed as councillors, and how newcomers learned their job ; thirdly, to what extent did they represent women's interests ; fourthly, what was their impact on the working of the CMC ; and lastly, how they dealt with the rotation of constituencies at the time of the next electoral campaign, in June 2000.

Calcutta as a testing ground

Calcutta was selected as the object of this case study because West Bengal was one of the first States to adopt most of the provisions of the 74th CA. Constituencies were reserved for the first time for the 1995 municipal elections, therefore the survey conducted in 2000 could cover the full first term « with quotas »⁵.

However, other specificities as well make the Calcutta Municipal Corporation a particularly interesting city government to study. West Bengal's record in local self-government is unique in India. West Bengal was the first State to implement the recommendations of the Ashoka Mehta Committee, nominated in 1977 to suggest solutions to the general weakness of local institutions. From 1978 onwards, following one of the major recommendations of this Committee, the West Bengal government regularly held elections at the local level, and allowed political parties to play a major role in these elections – which had not been the case till then, for local government had been mostly conceived since the 1950s as mere agencies for the implementation of development programmes. The Left Front, ruling without interruption from 1977 onwards, actually used local self-government institutions as a major instrument of its hold on the countryside.

⁴ Madhu Kishwar, the co-editor of the journal *Manushi*, has consistently been at the forefront of this criticism of the WRB; she is one of the members of the Forum for Democratic Reforms, who drafted an Alternative Women's Bill, proposing to shift women's quotas at the party level. (Kishwar: 2000)

⁵ Calcutta is not, however, the first metropolitan city where women's quotas have been implemented in India; similar quotas were implemented in the Bombay Municipal Corporation as early as 1992, subsequent to the policy of reservations for women in Local Self Government Institutions adopted by the government of Maharashtra in 1990 (Nanivadekar: 1997).

The State capital, however, has always been perceived by the Left Front - which concentrated its policies (most notably the land reforms) on the rural areas - as a strong site of resistance of the main opposition, i.e., until 1998, the Congress (I). While the Calcutta Municipal Corporation was superseded in 1972 by the State government, then dominated by the Congress(I), the Left Front did not organise municipal elections until 1985. By that time, the territory under the jurisdiction of the CMC had been enlarged to include areas such as Jadavpur or Garden Reach - areas whose residents were thought to be favourable to the Left Front (Kohli, 1992 : 140). In 1985, 1990 and 1995, the Left Front indeed won municipal elections in Calcutta, but always with a thin margin. We will see later that the 2000 election proved to be a landmark in this regard.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act, 1980, was amended to include the provisions of the 74th CA, whose broad objective is to give urban local bodies « the institutional capability to deal with problems of urbanisation » (Pinto, 2000 : 22). Calcutta actually embodies the urban crisis which most cities are struggling with in India today : acute urban poverty, overpopulation, gross inadequacy of civic infrastructures and basic urban services such as water supply, drainage and sewerage, housing, and public health. The 74th CA provides for « functional decentralization, financial decentralization and popular participation in civic affairs » (Mohanty, 1999 : 221). Its main features are the following :

- It defines the composition of municipal authorities, including that of ward committees in cities with a population of over 300,000 inhabitants⁶ ;
- It grants municipal authorities a five year term, with an obligation for State governments to organize elections every five years, conducted by the State Election Commissions ; it also provides, in case a municipality were dissolved before the end of its full term, that the State government shall organize fresh elections within six months from the date of dissolution ;
- It provides for the mandatory constitution of a Finance Commission by the State government, every five years, « to recommend to their Legislatures measures to improve the financial health of municipal bodies » (Mathur, 1999 : 4) ;
- It provides for the constitution of District and Metropolitan Planning Committees;

⁶ In the CMC, however, only 9 ward committees were formed between 1995 and 2000, due to the reluctance of political parties to comply with this provision.

- The Twelfth Schedule of the 74th CA lists the functions devolved to municipal authorities (in the West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993, the obligatory functions of the municipality are grouped under four categories, i.e. public works, public health and sanitation, town planning and development, and administration).
- Lastly, the 74th CA provides that in order to empower the weaker sections of society, seats will be reserved for women (33% in all municipalities), for the Scheduled Castes and for the Scheduled Tribes (in proportion to their population) for five years, on a rotation basis.

This last provision will now be the focus of this study. As far as Calcutta is concerned, since 1985 the CMC has been structured into 141 wards, (each ward comprising 20'000 to 50'000 inhabitants). In 1995, out of 141 wards, 47 were reserved for women, including three wards for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes, and 6 more wards were reserved for Scheduled Castes irrespective of gender. Reservations for women (and for SCs/STs) are central to one of the main stakes of the 74th CA - local democracy. The latter is actually a multilayered notion. Local assemblies, because of the daily, concrete character of the problems they are concerned with, and because of the proximity of local representatives to voters, are supposed to be more accessible, more accountable, more responsive to citizens. From the point of view of representatives, local politics is supposed to be more open to otherwise politically marginalised sections, such as women, because of the part-time character of the councillor's job. Lastly, local democracy has long been conceived, under the influence of the liberal tradition, as a school of democracy, a political training ground.

This study then, aims at testing the contribution of women's reservations to local democracy by confronting the different voices, and the practical experiences, of the beneficiaries of reservations with the somewhat general and abstract arguments exchanged during the debate over the WRB.

Methodology of the survey

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in three stages (February, June and November 2000). While the June fieldwork was mostly devoted to participant observation of the campaigning for the municipal elections, the two other fieldtrips in Calcutta were spent conducting a series of semi-directive interviews with councillors,

both women and men⁷. The sample of councillors interviewed was designed so as to provide me with informants from all major political parties - i.e. the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), the Congress (I) (Congress), and the Trinamul Congress (TC), Hindus and Muslims, tested politicians and newcomers, old and young people, Scheduled Castes and others. Altogether I interviewed 50 councillors, i.e. 35% of the 141 councillors elected in 1995. Out of these interviewees, 31 were women (60% of the total number of women councillors) and 19 were men (21% of the total number of men councillors). I also interviewed a section of what I assumed to be privileged «witness-actors» of the reservation policy: CMC officials, representatives of women's organizations of the city, and party cadres. Lastly, I analysed archives of the CMC, more particularly, the minutes of the House meetings from 1995 to 2000.

I. Who are the beneficiaries of women's quotas ?

“[Reservations for women] ... will definitely right the wrong and change the imbalance in legislative representation overnight [...] We must have more women if we want democracy to flourish” (Najma Heptullah)⁸.

“... chances are that we will be saddled with more “biwi-beti” brigades because [backward castes] leaders are likely to resort to fielding their mothers or sisters or wives to ensure that the women's quota stays within their caste control...”(Kishwar 1996: 2872)

Even though they do not legislate, councillors are the representatives of the people of their ward : they convey their particular demands to the relevant departments of the Corporation, and in their capacity of members of either the majority or the opposition in the House, they can support or reject more general proposals concerning the city. The municipal corporation is therefore a site both for political participation, articulation of citizen's interests and political debate.

The issue at stake here is that of gender and social justice, insofar as women's quotas might provide the former at the expense of the latter. The implicit assumption behind the « democratic argument » in favor of quotas is that they will provide access to

⁷ Three interviews with female councillors were conducted in 1996 and 1997, in the context of my Ph.D. thesis (*La représentation des femmes sur la scène politique. Etude comparée du Bengale occidental, du Maharashtra et du Népal*, Institut d'Etudes Politiques d'Aix-en-Provence, 1999).

⁸ *The Economic Times*, 16/03/1997.

political representation to a group of people hitherto largely excluded from politics. Women, of course, are a very heterogeneous group, and not all women are excluded from the political sphere to the same extent. The problem, then, can be summed up in two main questions :

- Will women quotas (in the absence of caste/class based subquotas other than those for the SCs and STs) actually benefit mostly elite women ?
- Will women quotas encourage nepotism, through an increasing number of candidates/representatives « by procurement », or « proxies » i.e. women relatives of the sitting councillor, whose only function is to keep the seat within the family ?

Social status and political resources of women councillors

In order to answer the first question, I used, as indicators of the social status of the women councillors elected in 1995, their caste/community identity, education level and occupation.

As far as caste/community is concerned, out of the Hindu⁹ women interviewed, 37,5% were Brahmin, 46% were Kayastha/Vaidya, 4% were Marwari and 12,5% were Scheduled Castes. Thus 87,5% of the interviewees belong to the higher castes.

Regarding education, here again the proportion of women with a comparatively high level of education is striking : 73% of the interviewed women had a university degree (37% had a BA, 7% had a LLB, 30% had a MA) ; 13% had reached the Senior Secondary level ; 7% were Matriculate ; and 7% had quit school after the Middle level.

Lastly, the occupational profile of the women councillors interviewed is the following : 38% of them are teachers, 24% are housewives, 14% lawyers, 10% employees and 7% in business.

The caste, educational and occupational profile of the women councillors interviewed suggest, beyond the elite character of the majority of them, a series of political resources to which these women have access : while caste and education (which is, of course, a resource in itself) provide social prestige, the occupational profile points to resources such as time (available to housewives, but also to teachers who can take a

⁹ 13% of councillors in Calcutta are Muslims; but Muslim women constitute only 7,5% of the total number of women councillors.

temporary leave since they benefit from job security); social popularity (the main resource of teachers); and oratorical skills (such as those of lawyers).

It was unfortunately not possible, in the course of this survey, to assess with precision the income level of the beneficiaries of quotas, but interviews confirmed that the financial resource is also very important. To start with, all candidates have to give a deposit of Rs 150 when they file their nomination (SC candidates, however, are to give only Rs 75). Only those candidates getting at least 1/6th of the votes polled, will then recover their deposit. But more importantly, a candidate must be able to support expenses incurred in wall painting, posters, banners, transport for herself and her supporters, mike hiring charges, dais for the street corner meetings, refreshments to be provided on the voting day to the polling agents and other incidental expenditure. The ceiling imposed by the State Election Commission on contesting candidates was, in 1995, of Rs 25'000. Real expenses are actually much higher : a CPI (M) cadre estimated that campaigning for one candidate costs between Rs 50'000 and Rs 70'000.

Some parties do partially fund their candidates (mostly through a system of coupons sold to sympathizers), but the majority of candidates have to raise funds, i.e. find sponsors, and/or rely on their personal fortune.

Once elected, councillors also have to be able to mobilize financial resources. Their monthly allowance, which was recently raised from Rs 700 to Rs 1300, is supposed to cover the expenses incurred in the course of their work for the CMC. Since it is grossly inadequate, councillors must have some money to spare simply for their transportation or ward office maintenance.

But beyond these basic expenses, Anita¹⁰, for instance, was proud to recall that when a tree fell over a slum in her ward, she provided the most affected families with shelter at her personal expense, thus spending Rs 38'000, whereas the Mayor had given these people only Rs 600 each ; in another case of natural disaster, she had had to provide food door to door, again at her personal expense¹¹. Salima, too, was especially proud of having provided her ward with a free ambulance service, in which she put her own money, as well as « well-wishers' donations »¹².

¹⁰ The names of people quoted have been changed.

¹¹ Interview, February 2000.

¹² Interview, February 2000.

We will see later that councillors can get funds for work in their ward, either from the CMC or from the Member of Parliament in whose constituency their ward is located. But personal financial resources, as well as the support of « well wishers » is obviously considered as a major - and legitimate - asset. Poor people, then, have a definite handicap in municipal politics.

The councillors « by procuration »

The second question relative to the profile of the beneficiaries of quotas was that of « proxy » representatives, i.e. women whose presence in municipal politics is only a façade, the real councillor still being their male relative whose seat in the latest election has been reserved for women.

How many « proxies » then, are there among the 1995 batch of women councillors ? If one considers as proxy any woman who is elected in a ward previously held by her husband/father/father-in-law, then six councillors, i.e. 11% of the total, fit this description. One must, however, immediately qualify this figure.

Firstly, one must distinguish between « proxies » and « inheritors ». The succession of several members of the same family in the position of councillor of a particular ward might just be the local version of an old tradition in Indian politics, in which it is not infrequent for political positions to be inherited from one generation of a family to the other¹³. Inheritors (female and male) get access to their first political position by inheriting it from a male relative, but they then build their own political career on that basis, whereas real « proxies » pretend to be the councillor only for formality's sake, knowing that once their ward is dereserved they will leave politics altogether, while their male relative will once again be the candidate.

Shalini is a typical councillor by procuration. Her husband, who was the sitting councillor of her ward until it was reserved for women in 1995, is obviously the real person in charge. He answered all questions on her behalf when I tried to interview her, while she smiled shyly. How then, had she managed to convince voters to vote for her ? « She approached the voters and told them : "our family is looking after the public interest" », he candidly says¹⁴.

¹³ This « dynastic factor » is neither new, nor restricted to Indian politics alone – it has long been a traditional feature of French local politics as well.

¹⁴ Interview, June 1996.

Being the wife of the sitting councillor is indeed, according to all inheritors, a real, and legitimate asset when one seeks election for the first time.

Lata, who was a candidate for the first time in 1995 in the (newly reserved) ward where her husband had been the councillor for 30 years, explains :

« People kept coming to my house to meet my husband when he was the councillors, so I knew them all... I was guided by my husband whenever I met with problems, and after a few months I took control, and I became the borough Chairman [a position her husband held from 1990 to 1995] ; now my husband does not attend the borough meetings »¹⁵

She thus presents her status of inheritor as an advantage, since it conferred her both familiarity with the voters and their problems, and a ready-made guide to help her learn her new job; but she takes care to specify that in the course of time she developed enough political skills of her own to be able to be elected and to work as a borough chairperson without any assistance.

Mina goes even further in justifying her being the candidate in the ward held so far by her husband :

« People are happy with [my husband's] work, so they're glad to support me now. They also know that as a teacher, I'm concerned about people's welfare. We're going to work together : first I was helping him, now he's going to help me ; and by helping him I've gained some experience of the job »¹⁶

She emphasizes here the solidarity between her husband and herself, presenting their couple as a team, in which both her husband's popularity and her own occupation combine to attract people's support.

Secondly, inheritors are not necessarily a consequence of the reservation system : one of the six women listed above, Chitra, the wife of the sitting councillor elected in 1990, was elected both in 1995 and 2000 *in a non-reserved ward*.

Thirdly, if one means by « proxy » a councillor who is actually the puppet of another person, then proxies are not necessarily the female relatives of former sitting councillors. Rasheeda recalls with some bitterness how she became a councillor for the first time in her life :

« I was chosen because I was a divorced, Muslim housewife ; I knew nothing about politics...But then I learnt the job, and when I

¹⁵ Interview, February 2000.

¹⁶ Interview, June 2000.

realized that the party didn't want me to do anything, I fought them, and I started working from my house, not from the ward office ; the former councillor tried to influence me, naturally ; and when the ward was dereserved in 2000, I wasn't given the ticket again... »¹⁷

Unlike Rasheeda, therefore, those women councillors who succeeded their husband in that position could rely – provided, of course, that their husband was willing to let them fully exercise their political functions - on a major political resource : that of a patron whom they could legitimately acknowledge.

The second election after the implementation of women's quotas is the time when one can actually differentiate proxies from inheritors. Out of the six women elected in 1995 to succeed their husband/father/father-in-law, five were given the ticket again by their respective political parties in 2000 : Chitra was re-elected (in a ward still unreserved) ; Sunita was proud to mention that after having been elected with a 12 votes majority when her ward was reserved, in 1995, she was re-elected with a victory margin of 2500 votes, even though her ward became « general » five years later¹⁸ ; Lata, whose ward was also de-reserved, lost to a male competitor, and so did Mina ; Shalini, whose ward was reserved for a second time in a row, was re-elected. Lastly, Janaki was not a candidate when her ward was de-reserved ; the party ticket was given again to her husband (who was not elected). Thus two thirds of the female inheritors proved themselves enough to be entrusted with their party's support even though their ward was de-reserved in 2000.

The following table shows two parallel trends : on the one hand, after the dramatic quantitative leap effected by the implementation of quotas in 1995, the number of women elected during the following election kept increasing : thus quotas do not, at this stage, seem to act as a ceiling on the number of eligible women. On the other hand, the number of women being elected to a position previously held by a close male relative is also increasing.

¹⁷ Interview, November 2000.

¹⁸ Interview, November 2000.

Table 1. The progression of women councillors and of inheritors in the CMC

Year	Total number of councillors	Women councillors (%)	Inheritors among women councillors (%)
1990	141	6 (4%)	NA
1995	141	53 (38%)	6 (11%)
2000	141	60 (42,5%)	12 (20%)

Source : Calcutta Municipal Corporation

Quotas appear, indeed, to encourage gender justice in terms of the presence of women in the CMC. But the simultaneous increase in the number of inheritors points to the growing importance of the family factor in local politics.

What finally emerges from this questioning of a few social characteristics of the women councillors elected in 1995, is that quotas did not produce social justice : among their beneficiaries there is an over-representation of elite women in terms of caste, education, and most probably in terms of income. Moreover, nepotism is indeed increasing in Calcutta's municipal politics, although one would need to know the number of inheritors among men councillors to be sure that this phenomenon is entirely due to the implementation of quotas.

However, an analysis of the same social characteristics in terms of resources shows that women councillors have access to major political resources such as education, time, popularity, money, verbal skills and, for inheritors, a male patron. These resources will prove to be crucial to the quality of the performance of the beneficiaries of quotas as councillors.

II. The performance of the beneficiaries of quotas

« We should try to bring a qualitative change with women's participation in [elected assemblies], rather than bring it down further with women simply joining as puppets in this unholy enterprise » (Kishwar, 1996 : 2873)

« In the initial stage, the quality of women representatives is not up to the mark ; it's difficult to get good candidates, especially in « SC

women » wards ; but in the long term it will be good. » (Calcutta's Mayor)¹⁹

Given the very small number of women who were active in local politics prior to the implementation of the 74th CA, the first foreseeable consequence of women's quotas is that it will translate into a massive eruption of newcomers in urban local bodies. The issue raised by critics of quotas is then that of the choice of democracy vs efficiency, common to all debates on affirmative action. On this issue, opponents to the WRB argued that the (partial) success of the Panchayati Raj was no ground for advocating similar quotas in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, since the functions performed by legislators were much more complex than those required from local representatives. But what, really, is the role of municipal councillors in a metropolitan city such as Calcutta ?

Firstly, councillors have obligations towards the voters of their ward : they must assess the needs of the ward, listen to the grievances of voters, and represent them in the CMC : they convey the voters' demands and needs to the relevant departments of the CMC, to the Mayor-in-Council or to the House, depending on the nature and dimension of the problem. Each councillor can sanction development expenditures of upto Rs 120,000 per year (Mukhopadhyay, 2000 : 30). If their ward is located within the constituency of a Member of Parliament (MP) from the same party, they also can appeal to the « MP fund » to effect particular tasks²⁰. Moreover, they convey all relevant information from the CMC to the voters, to whom they also provide official documents such as death certificates, student cards etc. They also have to carry a honorific function, and attend events such as inaugurations, school shows etc. taking place in their ward.

Secondly, councillors have obligations towards the CMC : they have to attend borough and House meetings once a month.

Lastly, they have obligations towards the political party they belong to, which means, most often, that they have to be available for a number of party meetings.

¹⁹ Interview, February 2000.

²⁰ Under the "Local Area Development Scheme », each MP can spend 2 crores per year for the development of his/her constituency ; these funds actually seem to be a major resource for getting work done in wards whose councillors belong to the opposition parties.

In short, councillors represent voters in the CMC, and they represent the CMC and their party in front of voters. Given the number and variety of the tasks which councillors have to fulfill, what are the specific problems – or advantages – of the beneficiaries of quotas, as women and as newcomers ?

The difficulty of being a woman and a councillor

Devaki, a lawyer, describes thus her typical working day :

« From 7 to 11 a.m., people come to see me in my house ; then I go to the Court ; then, in the evening again people come to me ; and I often go out to inspect various areas, I have to personally see the problems »²¹

Alpana, a Scheduled Caste woman who belongs to a poorer milieu, starts her day with the household chores ; she then goes to school, where she teaches from 6.30 to 10.30 a.m. ; after that she comes home, where she receives people's grievances, signs documents, writes letters ; from 11.30 to 2 she stays at the ward office ; then, if necessary, she goes to the CMC main office. She has to be permanently available for the people, she says.²²

Being a municipal councillor, obviously, is very demanding in terms of time. The beneficiaries of quotas thus have to face the difficult task, familiar to all working women, of juggling their domestic responsibilities with their public obligations. For women politicians, however, this difficulty is even greater since one feature common to domestic and to political work is that both involve a total commitment (Laufer, 1995 : 378)

The obligations of the councillor necessarily intrude upon her family life, both in terms of time and in terms of space. Councillors are used to receiving people at home, in addition to the time which they spend in the ward office²³. Here again, the family support appears as a crucial resource – a resource highlighted by inheritors such as Saloni :

« There are only small problems in being a woman councillor ; for instance, who will look after the children ? But I'm supported by

²¹ Interview, June 1996.

²² Interview, January 2000.

²³ Some councillors do not even have a ward office. Saloni, for instance, is used to sitting in a particular place in various markets of the ward, where people know they can find her.

my family ; and, when there is a big problem, my husband is there to help me »²⁴

I asked women councillors what, in their experience, was the main inconvenience of being a *woman* councillor. Their answers point to three main types of problems.

Firstly, all of them had to deal with the permanent scarcity of time, due to the competing pressure of domestic duties and political obligations (plus, for those women who were employed and did not take leave after being elected, the additional time required by their job) :

« I'm very busy from morning till night, but I have to manage my home also, for my family ; but my male colleagues seem to ignore it, they don't see that I sometimes need to rest » (Aruti)²⁵

« I will not continue as a councillor, even though I like politics very much ; my child suffers a lot from my absence » (Tulsi)²⁶

Secondly, they mentioned the incompatibility between some of their political obligations and women's traditional behaviour :

« The problem is not being a woman, but being a housewife ; when I have to go somewhere, the problem is that I cannot ride a bicycle... » (Alpana)²⁷

« When people come with a problem at night, then I cannot go out, unless the situation really compels me to do so » (Devaki)²⁸

« There is a problem if I have to go out after midnight, because then I have to get some male comrades to escort me ; I also have to defend myself against drug addicts... » (Tulsi)²⁹

The conflict between women councillors' role as respectable women and their role as politicians is indeed specially conspicuous when women councillors have to come out of their house after night fall. To do so involves two kinds of dangers in the Indian context : a physical danger, since violence is more likely to happen in the dark ; and a more abstract, but nevertheless very real danger ; that of putting one's reputation at risk, since respectable women are, by convention, not supposed to be out at night.

²⁴ Interview, November 2000.

²⁵ Interview, October 1997

²⁶ Interview, January 2000.

²⁷ Interview, January 2000

²⁸ Interview, June 1996.

²⁹ Interview, January 2000.

Thirdly, women councillors have to deal with their male colleagues' prejudices, :

« There is a discrimination : men councillors do not take us seriously, even though they don't show it openly ; but there is no such problem with voters » (Tulsi)³⁰

« A man can create many problems for a woman ; official executives take advantage of our ignorance...as newcomers, we feel too shy to shout » (Sujata)³¹

As newcomers, precisely, what kind of training was available for the newly elected women to learn the councillors' job ? All women councillors interviewed declared that they had had to learn their new functions hands on, since no training whatsoever was organised for the newly elected councillors in 1995.

How did newly elected women learn their job ?

Even though West Bengal was one of the first States to create an institute specialising in training the new beneficiaries of the Panchayati Raj (the Kalyani Institute), its equivalent for the urban areas, the Institute for Local Government and Urban Studies (ILGUS), formed more recently and based in Calcutta's suburb, did not play any role as far as the CMC councillors were concerned, between 1995 and 2000. ILGUS does provide training and consultancy to community leaders, and to municipal councillors all over West Bengal, but Calcutta's women councillors, who were invited to a specific training for them, subsequent to the passage of the 74th amendment, never came, said the director of the Institute³².

Five years later, the need for some minimal training for the newly elected councillors seems to have been better realized. In November 2000, i.e. 5 months after the 2nd municipal elections subsequent to the implementation of the 74th CA, a one day « Orientation workshop for new councillors », meant to explain the rules and regulations of House meetings, was organised by the CMC ; it was, however, scantily attended. But parties also organised their own training sessions : the CPI (M), for instance, organised a training camp for the newly elected councillors, to teach them how to motivate people, how to create a development scheme, etc.³³

³⁰ Interview, January 2000.

³¹ Interview, February 2000.

³² Interview, June 2000.

³³ Interview, November 2000.

How then, did the 1995 batch of elected women learn these skills? All women councillors indeed needed, in their new capacity, to get familiar with the technical aspects of defining action to be taken on a specific problem in their ward, getting a motion to be discussed in the House meeting, or simply explaining the intricacies of various development schemes to their constituents.

Three types of informal training actually emerge from the interviews, most women mentioning more than one type : 44% of the women councillors relied on explanations and instructions from senior party workers ; 44% could benefit from advice and suggestions from CMC officials, engineers, and from fellow councillors ; and 12,5% were trained by their husband or father-in-law (these women did not mention any other form of training). Lastly, only one woman (a lawyer) mentioned that she had taken a few paying lessons from an engineer in order to better grasp the complexities involved in solving problems such as water supply or drainage.

As far as the more political side of a councillor's job is concerned, however, most newly elected women could actually rely on some previous experience of collective action, mainly through party or front organization membership. Altogether 77% of the women interviewed had previously been members of a political party and/or of one of the party's front organizations. Among them, 83% mentioned a membership of the party's women's organisation, 48% a membership of the student's organisation and 30% a membership of a trade union (some women had been member of more than one type of front organisation).

Lastly, when asked why, in their opinion, they had been selected by the party to be a candidate in the municipal elections, the women interviewed gave four main types of explanations (again, not mutually exclusive), which also point to various resources available for learning their new functions. Belonging to a « political family » was a reason mentioned by 37,5% of women ; having done « social work » was also mentioned by 37,5% of women ; while 31% of them cited their own « political background » as an asset, and 31%, again, presumed that their « profession » – teacher, or lawyer – had made suitable candidates out of them. Therefore the family and the party appear once again as major training resources, while occupations such as social worker, teacher and lawyer, not surprisingly, show a special affinity for politics.

The advantages of being a woman councillor

Being a woman can also be an advantage when it comes to performing the functions of a municipal councillor. The women interviewed all agreed on two main reasons why women can perform particularly well in this role.

Firstly, they underlined the many aspects common (if on a different scale) between the responsibilities of a housewife and that of a councillor.

« Women are born home ministers... At home, a woman takes care of all problems, so why not on a larger scale ? » (Alpana)³⁴

« Being a councillor is ideal for a woman ; it's a work that looks a lot like that of housewives : you have to take care of water, of drainage (like in a bathroom) etc... » (Sunita)³⁵

The assimilation of the constituency to a larger household has been a recurring figure of speech in the discourse on women's aptitudes to political functions, ever since the Indian debate on women's right to vote started in 1917³⁶. This argument relies on the traditional sexual division of labour, of which it only displaces the contours. As such, its contribution to women's empowerment is dubious. Moreover, this metaphor can backfire : when taken too literally, it can be used to support the idea that women are fit only for the local, i.e. the more particular, concrete level of politics³⁷.

Yet when asked whether, provided they were offered the opportunity, they would consider being candidates in a future election, at the State Assembly level, for instance, 89% of the women interviewed expressed their readiness to go further into their political career ; among them, 27% asserted their intention to do so unconditionnally, while 54% said that their decision would depend primarily on the party.

The second major argument women councillors cited as supporting a larger number of women in municipal politics is that they are much more approachable by women voters.

³⁴ Interview, January 2000.

³⁵ Interview, November 2000.

³⁶ See Forbes 1979.

³⁷ Thus Bengali women were given, in 1923, the right to vote and to be elected at the municipal level only. Again, *Towards Equality*, in 1974, recommended, in its conclusion, the creation of women's panchayats at the local level exclusively.

« Muslims are very conservative, so their ladies can't go to the party office when they have a problem ; it was easier for them to have access to a woman councillor » (Rasheeda)³⁸

Even though she was not given the ticket in the 2000 municipal elections, Rasheeda said that she still acts as a representative of the Muslim women of her ward : she collaborates with the new councillor by conveying these ladies' demands to him. But Hindu women councillors also emphasized how, as women, they could reach, and be reached by, the many women who would either feel too shy to go and meet a male councillor, or who would simply not trust him to understand and deal with problems such as marital disputes, for instance.

« Earlier, the male members of the family would come most often ; now women come more than men, to bring me their problems ; women of the slums come to me in a group, about problems of water, drainage...and there are family problems also ; husbands drink and beat their wives... I had the police close the liquor shop » (Ketaki)³⁹

By underlining their special relationship with the women of their constituency, women councillors indeed present themselves as the representatives of women, insofar as representation involves knowing about people's problems as a first step into putting these problems on the political agenda.

As a conclusion, it appears, on the one hand, that the performance of the beneficiaries of quotas may have suffered both from their being women, and from their being newcomers in municipal politics. As women, they were constrained by the weight of domestic responsibilities, and by that of gendered normative behaviours ; as newcomers, they were necessarily handicapped by the absence of any comprehensive, formal training to prepare them to their new functions.

On the other hand, the women councillors elected in 1995 could rely on a number of resources to palliate this double handicap, such as their family (a relay for domestic work as well as a training resource), their own political experience and sometimes the skills specific to their occupation. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that women councillors gave access to the CMC to women, i.e. to 50 per cent of voters, is certainly a major argument in favour of the ability of reservations to promote political participation, in the largest sense of the word. But the question whether elected

³⁸ Interview, November 2000.

³⁹ Interview, February 2000.

women do represent women voters is a complex one, and must now be addressed separately.

III. The representation of women's interests

« It is not as if women have not occupied seats in the legislatures ; it is simply that they have not addressed the questions which pertain to the problems of women adequately, seriously or with sensitivity. Had they done so, we would not have had all these missing women or illiteracy or hunger or homelessness or violence both at home and at the work place. The demand behind the Women's Reservation Bill is that women representatives should address the specific problems of their constituency » (N.Chandhoke)⁴⁰

“Women's participation in politics is necessary for holistic development ...[Women] are bound to have a better perspective on vital issues such as environment, healthcare and education, particularly of the girl-child, as these affect them directly” (A.Celly)⁴¹.

The figure of 33 per cent, frequently criticized by those who support women's quotas for the sake of gender justice, is often justified as emanating from a study conducted by a Scandinavian social scientist, showing that one third is the threshold from which a minority can constitute a « critical mass », i.e. is in a position to have an impact on the decisions taken by the group as a whole (Dahlerup: 1988). By forcing the election of 33 per cent women among municipal councillors, then, the 74th CA seems to aim at a better representation of women's interests through the presence of a critical mass of women in urban local bodies. But the question whether elected women do actually represent – i.e. advocate – women's interests is a complex one, as it involves a series of subquestions : what are the problems perceived, by women councillors, as women's interests, or women's issues ? Do women councillors want to represent women's interests ? Are they in a position to do so ?

In order to answer this set of questions, I relied on three main sources : what women councillors said ; the minutes of the proceedings of the House meetings, showing both which issues are raised, and by whom ; and what a few representatives of women's

⁴⁰ *The Hindu*, 06/12/2000.

⁴¹ *The Pioneer*, 22/04/1996.

organisations of Calcutta - assumed to be the closest thing to a women's lobby - said of their relationship with women councillors.

What are women's interests ?

I asked women councillors what were the main problems they had had to deal with in their respective wards, and then, what were, in their view, the main problems faced by women in their ward.

The most frequently mentioned women's issue was « family problems », i.e. mostly marital disputes (42%) ; then came « economic problems, unemployment » (25%), « water scarcity » (21%), « violence » (21%), the lack of « latrines » (12,5%), and « illiteracy » (8%). Interestingly, 12,5% of the women interviewed said that there was no such thing as « women's problems », but only « general problems ».

A comparison of this list with that of the most « important issues in the ward » identified by women councillors, shows that women's issues come among the least frequently mentioned problems, with the notable exception of « water scarcity », mentioned by 94% of the women interviewed. Lack of latrines (12%), illiteracy of women (12%) and the need for maternity homes (6%) occupy the last three positions on this list, way behind drainage, street lights, road repairs, slum development and solid waste disposal.

But do women councillors consider women voters as their constituency ? In other words, do they want to represent women first ? If a majority of the women councillors interviewed expressed their concern for the problems of women, most of them, however, strongly opposed the suggestion that they represent women exclusively, or even more particularly. The interviews suggest that they actually draw a strong distinction between what they can do for women in their capacity of individual councillor, within the ward, and what they can do as the group of women councillors within the CMC.

As individuals, we have already seen that most women councillors emphasize that being a woman makes them much more approachable for the women of their ward. They underline the commonality of experience which enables them to better understand women's problems :

« Being a woman, it's easier for me to discuss with women, for instance about their need for latrines ; men hear but do not work on

those problems ; we, as women, feel the importance of the problem » (Monika)⁴²

« Women talk very freely to me ; these are destitute women, victims of atrocities ; I give them counselling, and I convey their complaints to the police station » (Rina)⁴³

However, they underline the fact that dealing with women's problems is not their main function, but rather an addition to their general load of work as councillors.

« Women come to me with their family problems, they're very oppressed ; this is an additional work for me ; but I'm a member of the State Committee of the Ganatantrik Mahila Samity [the women's section of the CPI-M], so they also come to me for that reason » (Aruti)⁴⁴

« Women's issues don't matter to me, but women of the lower sections are very ignorant, they have very little awareness, although there are good laws for women ; whenever they come to me I help them, because I am also a lady » (Anita)⁴⁵

Several women councillors were proud to mention achievements such as the mobilization of bustee women to make them benefit from a particular self-employment scheme, the construction of a maternity home, how they helped widows to get the pensions to which they are entitled, the mediation role which they occasionally played in family disputes etc.

The comparatively greater involvement of women councillors in projects concerning mostly women is confirmed by one of the senior officials of the CMC. The Bustee Cell of the CMC, created in 1986, is mainly concerned with implementing schemes of self-employment for slum-dwellers ; since 1998, one of the most important of these schemes, the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana, has been focusing on women slum-dwellers. According to the Deputy Director of the Bustee Cell, women councillors are more interested than their male counterparts in this scheme⁴⁶ ; it is also easier for them to reach women, to tell them how to form « neighbourhood groups » , to disseminate information about the existing facilities to which they are entitled to apply, she says.

⁴² Interview, January 2000.

⁴³ Interview, February 2000.

⁴⁴ Interview, October 1997.

⁴⁵ Interview, February 2000.

⁴⁶ Interview, November 2000.

What are the issues raised by women councillors ?

But what about women councillors *as a group* ? Does the new, massive presence of women councillors have an impact on the agenda of the House meetings ? Is there a solidarity between women councillors on women's issues ? There seemed to be a consensus on the actual impossibility for them to unite across party lines on any issue.

« For women, I work in bustees, non-formal education, health, widow stipend, maternity relief...My first aim is to develop the consciousness of women, to make them aware that they can stop depending on others... [But] as representatives, in the House we don't want to raise issues considered as sectarian, but only general issues... » (Kiran)⁴⁷

« There is no scope for women's issues in the CMC, except for pensions and family benefits » (Anita)⁴⁸

Three main arguments are put forth to explain this state of things, invoking (i) party discipline as the dominant factor in alliances within the CMC ; (ii) the nature of issues discussed during the House meetings ; and (iii), ideological reasons – the latter being mentioned only by councillors belonging to the communist parties.

« Women's issues are not debated. The problems discussed in the House meetings are general problems : roads, lighting, water...and there is solidarity within the party only »(Monika)⁴⁹

« I'm not a feminist : women cannot solve their problems alone ; we're oppressed, we have various demands on our hands ; but other oppressed sections are there also (workers etc.). We share the same problems ; the oppressed class has to move together » (Aruti)⁵⁰

In order to assess the impact of women councillors on the agenda of the CMC, I analysed the proceedings of the House meetings for which the board of councillors gathers once a month.

The following table sums up the types of issues raised in front of the House, as well as who – men or women – raised these issues most often. This table does not take into account the yearly budget sessions of the House, in which only the budget as a whole is discussed.

⁴⁷ Interview, November 2000.

⁴⁸ Interview, February 2000.

⁴⁹ Interview, January 2000

⁵⁰ Interview, October 1997.

Table 2. The issues raised and discussed in the House meetings between 1995 and 2000

Issues	Number of times it was raised by a male councillor	Number of times it was raised by a female councillor	Total number of times it was raised
1. Water supply	25	15	40
2. Functioning of the CMC (rules implementation, personnel management)	23	5	28
3. Illegal constructions	22	3	25
4. Management of the CMC funds	20	5	25
5. Road repair/construction	15	2	17
6. Public health (control of malaria and other epidemics, vaccination campaigns, health centres, food and water quality control) and safety (manholes, fire prevention)	13	2	15
7. Solid waste disposal	12	0	12
8. Drainage/ sewerage	10	2	12
9. Illegal activities	11	0	11
10. CMC building plan	8	3	11
11. CMC land use	6	3	9
12. CMC buildings	6	3	9
13. Parks	6	1	7
14. Property taxes	6	1	7
15. Roads renaming	2	4	6
16. Maintenance of historical places	2	4	6
17. Schools	3	2	5
18. Street lights	5	0	5
19. Issuing of licences	4	0	4
20. Pensions	2	2	4
21. Payment of compensations	4	0	4
22. Community halls	3	0	3
23. Public toilets	3	0	3
24. Family benefit schemes	1	1	2
25. Electrification	1	0	1
26. Issuing of certificates	0	1	1
Total	213	59	272

Source : Minutes of the Meetings of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, 1995-2000⁵¹.

⁵¹ We are giving here an account of the proceedings concerning the period between September 1995 and November 2000, covering altogether 54 monthly meetings of the House (the proceedings of the meetings held between February and September 1996 were not available).

The table above is an indicator *among others* of the issues dealt with by councillors ; councillors can, and do work on many problems affecting their ward without necessarily attracting the House's attention to it. Many issues take other routes, such as submitting proposals to the Mayor-in-Council (MIC), which might then become a resolution of the MIC placed before the House for approbation ; or submitting a problem directly to the concerned CMC department. What this table shows is (a) the nature and the relative importance of the issues discussed in the House ; and (b) the respective participation of men and women councillors relative to the various issues at stake.

It emerges from this analysis that water supply is indeed the most pressing issue in Calcutta, an issue raised by male as well as by female councillors ; then come all kinds of questions relating to the working of the CMC itself, and not far behind questions relating more specifically to the use of the CMC funds; apart from the functioning and financing of the CMC work, illegal constructions, roads and health are the issues most often raised by councillors.

What is the participation of women to the House debates ? Women councillors clearly participate much less in the debates than their male colleagues, who intervene into the debate 3,6 times more often than their female counterparts do, even though they were, from 1995 to 2000, only 1,6 times more numerous.

Moreover, on those issues which the women councillors interviewed defined as women's issues – such as health, (widows) pensions, public toilets and family benefit schemes, they appear to actually intervene much less than men (on public health), just as much as men (on pensions and family benefit schemes), or not at all (on public toilets). Even more baffling are those issues on which women's contribution outnumbers that of men : the renaming of roads, and the maintenance of historical places, i.e. issues relating to culture, and to cultural symbols – so much for the idea that women are necessarily more interested in concrete issues....

Finally, then, this table shows that the massive presence of women councillors does not seem to influence the agenda of the House : women's interventions are almost never numerous enough to influence the relative importance of the various issues discussed ; and they do not intervene on what has been construed as « women's

issues »⁵². But the table also shows that there *is* scope for issues affecting women within the House debates : schools, maternity homes, public latrines or family benefit schemes are actually discussed. Two hypotheses come to mind in order to explain the weak participation of women to discussions around those issues : (i) women councillors do not consider these issues as major issues, and/or they do not consider themselves as representatives of women ; (ii) they do not want to be discredited by appearing to be concerned only, or mostly, with women's, i.e. sectarian issues.

Women councillors and women's organisations

In order to test the first hypothesis, that is, to probe to what extent women councillors want and/or can act as the representatives of women, I tried to ascertain the nature of the relationship, if any, between women councillors (and more generally the CMC) and women's organisations. I thus interviewed representatives of eight women's organisations operating in Calcutta, including the women's sections of two political parties, the CPI (M) and the TC.

The non-party organizations all have been set up by women, and are run by women, to help women as a group, through literacy classes, skill trainings, self-employment schemes, hostels, legal counselling, creches, health services etc.

The objectives of the women's sections of political parties are more ambivalent. On the one hand, the parties' women's sections provide a parallel, « women only » site of political mobilization, thus being within the reach of those women who find it difficult to be party workers ; as such, the women's sections devote part of their work to activities meant to improve women's condition, such as income generating schemes, literacy classes etc. On the other hand the women's sections of political parties constitute a ready-made pool of volunteers to help the party carry activities such as a demonstration or an electoral campaign. The women's sections of political parties are thus organisations by women, but not exclusively for women : their agenda is always subordinated to that of the party.

⁵² Out of the 54 meetings analysed through their proceedings, only once was a question relating exclusively to women raised : this was a request that the ladies' room in the councillors' club be enlarged, and it was expressed by a male councillor. Two other examples of specific requests occurred: the claim for barracks to be built for Harijan workers (expressed by a Brahmin, male councillor), and the request that Urdu reporters be appointed by the CMC (expressed by a Muslim, male councillor).

Both women councillors and women's organisations represent women : while the former can be said, at the very least, to represent women through their mere *presence* in the CMC, women's organisations, which have no electoral legitimacy, represent women through their *advocacy* work. Thus membership of, or even a relationship with, a women's organisation, seemed to be a good indicator of the level of « gender-consciousness » of women councillors.

Very few women councillors mentioned any membership of a women's organisation other than the women's section of their political party (of which, as we said earlier, 83% had been a member at some point). The few women who did so were actually members of the women's cell of organisations such as the Lion's Club, i.e. charitable organisations targeting women, rather than feminist organisations.

From the side of women's organisations, the question whether they had, as such, observed the impact of the new presence of 53 women in the CMC, evoked a series of negative answers.

At first, all interviewees agreed that their relationship with the CMC is hardly there at all : they would get in touch with the CMC only regarding property tax exemptions, when a function organised by them has to be graced by the local councillor, or when problems such as water logging happen on their land.

On second thoughts, however, several of them reflected that the problem is not so much the irrelevance of the CMC's work to their own activities and needs, as the well-known inefficiency of the CMC.

« We don't work with the CMC, because we never get things done »
(Nari Seva Sangha)⁵³

« The Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority once got a grant for a population programme ; they had no idea how to use this money, so they came to us because they knew about the creches we are running. We were willing to work, but everything had to be done through the CMC doctor, who refused to budge ; so we stopped the whole thing... » (Mahila Seva Samity)⁵⁴

Most of these women activists disapproved of reservations for women, considering it a humiliating provision, and one which does not guarantee any progress for women as a whole.

⁵³ Interview, November 2000.

⁵⁴ Interview, November 2000.

« 33% won't help much ; women councillors are dominated by their parties. But it gives them access ; women are given a seat, but are they really enlightened ?... There is scope for women's issues in the CMC (the CMC can check the standards in schools, provide health services, help NGOs ...) but these issues are not adressed ; councillors are concerned with power politics » (Women's Sahayog)⁵⁵

« We had a project for street children, for which we needed the cooperation of the local councillor ; so we approached her, but she was a young woman who did what her husband told her to do, and he was not sympathetic to our idea, plus he did not like people coming to meet her all the time... » (All India Women's Conference)⁵⁶

Women's organisations thus view women councillors as dominated either by their respective parties, or by male relatives. All of them said they hadn't noticed any change in their contacts with the CMC in the past five years.

The representation of Scheduled Castes within the CMC

In order to put to test the second hypothesis, i.e. the alleged impossibility for councillors to represent sectarian interests in the House, I interviewed five councillors (2 men and 3 women), who had been elected in wards reserved for SCs. To what extent did these councillors want to represent more particularly the interests of SC people, and what were their resources (were they willing to do so)?

Four of them were (nominated) members of State/CMC bodies devoted to the welfare of SCs. But they held very opposed views on their role as SC councillors :

« I was nominated by the Mayor as a member of the SC/ST Municipal Committee which monitors several schemes (funded by the Central Government) to improve the condition of SCs /STs. We inform people of the locality about the different shemes... We are the coordinators between the CMC and the local people. But 99% of voters in my ward are non SCs ; caste is not a problem in our city life... I'm not a member of any SC association. Discrimination is there only regarding the scavengers, the Methor ; we help them by offering them self-employment opportunities » (Tala)⁵⁷

« A good number of voters in my ward are SCs, and they feel better represented by me; thanks to me they have benefited from specific

⁵⁵ Interview, November 2000.

⁵⁶ Interview, November 2000.

⁵⁷ Interview, February 2000.

schemes. I faced some contempt from the higher castes during the [electoral]campaign, but I've won their heart through my hard work... Reservations are necessary to bring up backward classes, since SC councillors bring up SC people's problems in the House, but reservations for women do not seem to me to be necessary » (Pankaj)⁵⁸

What is, then, the view of those women elected in « women SC » wards ?

Saroj was elected in such a ward, and she too was nominated by the Mayor as a member of the SC/ST/Backward Classes Committee of the CMC. She described what she had been doing for women and SC people, but insisted that « [she] represents everybody similarly »⁵⁹. She suffered discrimination as a SC from senior colleagues, both in and out of her party ; but neither women's issues nor SC issues are ever discussed in the House, she says.

Lastly Padma, who was elected the first time when her ward was reserved for women, and re-elected, five years later, when it was reserved for Scheduled Castes, listed a series of problems faced by women, but she could not think of any problem specific to Scheduled Caste people. « I don't discriminate », she says ; « whoever comes to me will get my help »⁶⁰

Thus while the notion of interests specific to the SCs is officially endorsed through the existence of a Municipal Committee exclusively devoted to them – a Committee which has no equivalent concerning women - SC councillors held very diverse views as to what their constituency is. What emerges from their answers is that there is a complete lack of consensus on both the need and the ways to better represent SCs' interests.

What are women's councillors resources in pushing a women-friendly agenda ?

Apart from the House meetings, one must also, in order to further examine the impact of women's councillors on the work of the CMC, assess the position of women in the various decision-making bodies within the CMC. In an increasing order of power, two types of positions are open to councillors : that of borough chairperson (there are 15 boroughs in the CMC) ; and that of member of the Mayor-in-Council (MIC).

⁵⁸ Interview, February 2000.

⁵⁹ Interview, February 2000.

⁶⁰ Interview, November 2000.

The borough chairperson, on the one hand, is elected by the councillors of the wards included in the borough, and has to organize and preside over a monthly meeting with the councillors of the borough, who then present the problems they face and advocate solutions. The main responsibility of the borough chairperson is to supervise the preparation of a budget for the borough, which will be submitted to the CMC, and then to distribute the sanctioned money among the different wards.

The MIC, on the other hand, is formed subsequently to the election of the Mayor by the councillors, during the first meeting of the board of councillors after the elections. The Mayor then nominates the Deputy Mayor and the 10 other members of the MIC, and distributes portfolios among them. The Calcutta city government has been the first one, in 1984, to adopt this system which replicates the cabinet system of government at the local level. Whereas the « Commissioner system », which dominates in most Indian urban local governments, attributes a mere honorific role to the Mayor and vests the executive authority in the State appointed Commissioner, the MIC system is characterised by the great power retained by the Mayor, who is the executive head of the Corporation, while the Commissioner is only the head of the municipal administration. In this system, the members of the MIC have two kinds of power: firstly, they submit propositions, on which the Mayor takes decision; secondly, the members of the MIC, as well as top officials of the CMC, have the power to sanction money for various projects.

What, then, is the position of women among borough chairpersons and within the MIC? We have seen earlier that critics of women's quotas suspected that men would resent their forcible eviction subsequent to the implementation of quotas, and as a result would deliberately confine their beneficiaries to a restricted number of areas traditionally considered as « feminine » or « soft », areas which are usually the least prestigious, and therefore the least conducive to the further development of a political career.

The very small number of women occupying the position of either borough chairperson or member of the MIC makes it difficult to assess the relative prestige of the areas of which they are in charge. But it is clear that this number has increased after the June 2000 election. From 1995 to 2000, only one woman councillor (an inheritor) was a borough chairperson; in 2000, two women were borough chairpersons, including one SC woman.

A clear progression of the position of women also appears within the MIC subsequent to the June 2000 elections. From 1992 onwards the MIC had included, out of a total of 12 members, only one woman, who was however, in charge of the most important department, that of water. In 2000, for the first time, the Deputy Mayor (who officiates as Mayor in the latter's absence), is a woman, and another is member, MIC, in charge of solid waste management.

Finally, the last two years of the 1995-2000 term were marked by a prominence of women as political leaders in the CMC, a prominence resulting from the massive shifts which took place from the Congress (I) towards the Trinamul Congress in December 1999, making the latter then the main opposition party. Thus from January 2000 onwards, the chief whip of the Trinamul Congress (i.e. the leader of the opposition), the leader of the Left Front and the leader of the BJP within the CMC were three women.

As a tentative conclusion, one might say that the « critical mass » theory is not validated by the first term of the CMC including women's quotas : a massive presence of women within the CMC is obviously not enough for women's issues to find a better position on the urban government's agenda. Most women councillors are conscious of, and concern themselves with, the problems faced by women in their ward. But they do not want to advocate women's interests within the House, because they do not consider them, or they do not want to appear as if they considered them, as major issues. A similar phenomenon was observed by B.Ghosh in a study of women elected at the rural level in West Bengal :

« Women [panchayat] members know what the special problems of women are. Yet in their perception of development they could not get out of the pervading influence of the ideology of public works and include gender-specific issues on the agenda of the development plan ...They have not perceived their role as the mouthpiece of women [...] » (Ghosh 1996 : 152)

The distinction women councillors draw between what they can do as individuals and what they can do as councillors in the CMC suggest that they work for women almost in a private capacity ; clearly, for them the personal is not political. Their non-relationship with non-party women's organisations confirms that they are not women's rights activists ; the political party is their main reference, and they adopt the party's priorities. Lastly, the fact that SC councillors have no such reluctance to assert their more particular commitment to SCs interests shows that, contrary to what

women councillors said, « sectarian interests » can be, and are expressed within the CMC. Gender, clearly, does not have the same legitimacy as caste as a basis for solidarity and concern, in short for mobilization.

IV. The impact of women on the general functioning of the CMC

« Any polity in which violence and crime dominate, women as a group become automatically marginalised – partly out of choice but largely due to the fact that barring exceptions, women cannot effectively compete with men in gangsterism » (Kishwar 1996: 2873)

« Everybody knows that women are less easily carried away and are more objective [than men]. They will make politics more sober. » (T.N.Seshan)⁶¹

The issue at stake here is whether women constitute a resource for political life. Do women bring to politics (what is assumed to be) feminine qualities ? This question is problematic, since it relies on the postulate of the existence of « feminine qualities », a notion belonging to an essentialist definition of woman which has been the object of much debate within the women's movement, both in India and elsewhere. It is, however, an important question to ask, if only because of the prominence of the « resource » argument in all debates on women's political representation.

In order to answer this question then, one will need to (i) identify women's qualities ; and to (ii) define criteria so as to measure how, and how much, these qualities appear to have an impact on political life.

Women's motherly qualities

As far as the first part of the problem is concerned, interviews revealed a broad consensus on what constitute women's specific qualities. Most people – men and women – seemed to agree with the idea that women, being women, can improve some aspects of municipal life.

To the question « Do women make a difference in the CMC, and if yes, how ? », only 6% of the women councillors interviewed answered « no ». Among the others, 69%

⁶¹ *India Today* 15/10/96.

cited « women's honesty, their sincerity » ; 31% evoked « women's hard-working qualities » ; and 12 ,5% mentioned « women's patience ».

« Women are sincere and honest because woman means mother ; a mother manages her family, so she can manage a ward also »
(Lata)⁶²

« A woman can serve people better than a man because she's a mother » (Salima)⁶³

“Many women councillors are more active, more honest, more society/family oriented than men. Women are mothers...In wards where a woman is councillor, the polio pulse is more satisfactory”
(Calcutta's Mayor)⁶⁴

Feminine qualities are thus the qualities assumed to pertain to mothers : nurturing capacity, honesty, devotion to others, patience. The « resource » argument , as it is asserted by councillors, is actually a « maternalist » argument, which assimilates womanhood to motherhood. The maternalist argument has a strong, emotional appeal – all the more so, one might think, in Bengal, where the “matrifocal” character of the Hindu cosmology is particularly developed (Nandy, 1990: 8). But this is a dangerous argument, as it relies on stereotypes which have been often used in the past to actually exclude women from politics : women, being mothers, are too soft, too emotional, too partial to be able to deal with public affairs, it was argued (Pateman, 1989). Moreover, even beyond the mere question of women's political participation, and notwithstanding the highly idealized character of this conception of motherhood, the assimilation of women to mothers validates their social legitimisation through motherhood only, thus strongly restricting women's freedom in orienting their lives.

Standing out of the apparent consensus on women councillors' motherly qualities, however, the Municipal Secretary's assessment provides a much needed nuance :

« Women councillors are usually quiet, but they can become violent sometimes ; once, the women councillors gheraoed the Chairman of the House on a party issue ; it's easy for them to do that, because there is no female marshall in the House ; otherwise the Chairman would have been quickly rescued !...Young women councillors are very active ; also many women councillors are constructive in their

⁶² Interview, February 2000.

⁶³ Interview, February 2000.

⁶⁴ Interview, February 2000.

suggestions ; they are more assiduous than men, they're more disciplined... »⁶⁵

The incident described here suggests not only that women are not necessarily non-violent, but also that they are able to manipulate the conventions of behaviour between genders to pursue very unwomanly ends. Moreover, the qualities he refers to – activity, discipline – are different from the usual motherly attributes, and evoke, rather, attitudes typical of newcomers eager to prove themselves.

The impossibility of testing the « resource » argument

In order to proceed towards a testing of the maternalist argument, one would now need (i) to measure men and women councillors' respective attitude towards corruption, their sincerity and their patience ; (ii) to assess their respective nurturing capacity ; and (iii) to compare the amount of work put in by them - *all other factors being equal*. Such an endeavour is obviously fraught with methodological as well as practical difficulties. The problem of the « resource » argument is indeed that it relies on a series of clichés which are hardly testable.

It is not possible, then, to say whether or not the new, massive presence of women within the CMC has made the latter a more transparent, more dedicated, more efficient institution. The resource argument, finally, appears to be an assortment of stereotypical representations whose bearing on the political reality is largely unverifiable.

V. The rotation of constituencies reserved for women

« ...accepting 33 per cent permanent reservation for women is... the equivalent of a « zenana dabba » (ladies compartment) in every train. Men then come to expect women to remain confined to the ladies section... » (Kishwar, 1996 : 2872)

« Women legislators, when elected under a rotating quota will not be able to nurse their constituencies on a long-term basis, because after dereservation of that constituency, they are not likely to get a ticket for the same seat. » (Kishwar, 2000 : 4152)

The system of rotating, reserved constituencies has attracted the greatest number of criticisms during the debate over the WRB. The issue at stake is here again, a

⁶⁵ Interview, November 2000.

complex one. Firstly, reserving constituencies for women means restricting the openness of the electoral competition – which is then closed to men – and therefore formally goes against the democratic principle according to which every citizen has an equal right not only to vote, but also to contest in any election. The counter-argument, of course, is that the fact that women have been unable to constitute more than 4% of councillors in Calcutta since 1952 shows that while electoral contests were formally open, they were really largely closed to women.

But even more than the fact of reserving constituencies, it is the rotation of those which has attracted the strongest criticisms. Rotation is obviously the necessary counterpart of the reservation of constituencies: it balances, over a series of three successive elections, the unequal status of reserved vs. general constituencies. But critics of the WRB assumed that reservations would arouse such a resentment among men that those women who were elected for the first time in a reserved constituency would not be given the ticket for a second time once the constituency is de-reserved and becomes general again. Therefore, the rotation of reserved constituencies has been expected to be detrimental to the political career of the beneficiaries of quotas, as well as to politics in general since it deprives elections of their “sanction” aspect, thus diminishing the accountability of elected representatives towards voters.

The June 2000 municipal election in Calcutta, being the second election subsequent to the implementation of women’s quotas, offered a wealth of details and nuances about the actual impact of the rotation of reserved wards on municipal politics.

Being a candidate

Getting the party’s ticket, or registering oneself as an independent candidate, is the first step of the municipal election. What happened in the newly reserved wards⁶⁶ in 1995 ? And what happened in the de-reserved wards in 2000 ?

The pattern of reservations is actually not quite unpredictable. It is available with the State Election Commission, which defined this pattern for three elections to come. Parties and potential candidates in a given ward are therefore in a position to anticipate a strategy, taking reservations into account : most wards become general after having been reserved, but some of them are reserved for two elections in a row, and yet others become reserved for a different category.

⁶⁶ I deal here with all the wards reserved either for women or for SC women.

In 1995, the sitting councillors whose wards were newly reserved were usually not given the party ticket, except for a few party leaders (such as the Mayor) who were given the ticket in a different ward.

Who then, were the women candidates in the newly reserved wards ? According to a woman cadre of the CPI (M), the eligibility of a potential woman candidate is assessed according to her « popularity » ; moreover, she must have done some social work, have a clean image and some political principles ; but being a party member is not necessary. She added that it was actually not difficult to find enough suitable candidates at the municipal level⁶⁷. Indeed in 1995, women constituted 33 per cent of candidates but 38 per cent of the elected councillors, which points to a high rate of winability. However, both in 1995 and in 2000, the average number of candidates was slightly higher in general wards than in reserved wards.

Table 3. The number of candidates in reserved and in unreserved wards

Year	Average number of candidates in reserved wards	Average number of candidates in general wards
1995	5,5 (2 to 11)	6,5 (3 to 15)
2000	6,6 (2 to 12)	8,5 (3 to 21)

Source : State Election Commission, Calcutta

In the 2000 elections, out of the 47 wards that had been reserved for women five years earlier, 39 became general again (since 5 of these wards were reserved for women once again, and 3 were reserved for the Scheduled Castes).

What happened, in these de-reserved wards, to the former beneficiaries of quotas? Out of the 39 female sitting councillors, 51% were given the ticket by their respective political parties to contest elections in the same ward ; 18%, were given the ticket to contest in a different, reserved ward ; and 31%, did not contest the elections. Altogether then, more than two thirds of the beneficiaries of quotas retained the support of their party after de-reservation of their ward, even though one fourth of these women had to campaign in a new ward, which is necessarily more challenging

⁶⁷ Interview, November 2000.

than campaigning in the ward where and for which one has been working for five years.

What about the anticipated backlash by men ? Out of those 6 women councillors who had been elected in 1995 in general wards, in 2000 one was given the ticket in a different, reserved ward ; the five others were given the ticket in the same ward – but for three of them, their ward was newly reserved for women.

Lastly, even though getting a party ticket is a definite advantage in the electoral competition, a number of women contested as independents, emboldened by the fact that their ward was reserved for women. Reservations then appear as generating an opportunity effect. However, we have seen earlier that campaigning is an expensive endeavour ; thus potential candidates must have some network to rely on for their campaign ; this was the case, for instance, of an independent woman candidate, who mobilized the children to which she had been providing free school, to paste and paint her electoral posters all over her ward.

Campaigning

The campaign for municipal elections, like any electoral campaign, is a time suffused with political symbolism, as politics then becomes literally a show. Any electoral campaign, of course, is firstly about visibility – of the party, its symbol, more rarely its agenda. Reservations for women combined, in June 2000, with the high visibility of Mamata Banerjee – whose portrait was all over the city – and to a lesser extent with that of yet another woman, Indira Gandhi (interestingly preferred by the Congress(I) to the present president of the party, Sonia Gandhi), to give the impression of a highly feminized municipal election.

The campaign is organised along a series of pre-defined steps, each involving, beyond the candidate, different types of actors. The first half of the 3 week long campaign usually consists in going from door-to-door, starting with areas where the candidate has more supporters. At this stage, the candidate personally introduces herself to as many voters as possible : her name, her face must become familiar, and they must be associated with the right party (and with the right party symbol). Sitting councillors then seize this opportunity to remind voters of their past achievements, and promise to do more ; sometimes they face the wrath of voters, at other times they are thanked for what they have done. New candidates generally meet voters more briefly, only

occasionally criticizing the sitting councillor and announcing what they plan to do for the ward.

This first round is usually prepared for by party workers, who go all over the ward in the preceding days to make a detailed list of those people who will actually vote on the polling day (thus removing from the list of targeted people those residents who are not on the voters list, those who vote in another ward, and those who will be absent on the D-day). This « scrutinizing » phase is meant both as a way to organize the door-to-door, and as a way to check electoral rigging.

The second phase is devoted to processions and (street corner) meetings, where not only the candidate, but also party workers address groups of voters . A municipal campaign is thus a highly collective endeavour, mobilizing different kinds of party workers : men and women, leaders and simple members.

In June 2000, the campaign going on in the 47 wards reserved for women seemed to open up a new, important political space for women. Even without reservations, women and men campaign together, but there is a sexual division of the campaign work : while men take exclusive care of wall painting and slogans-shouting, more women accompany the candidate in the door-to-door. Their presence at that stage is crucial, since only women are allowed to enter the house (and meet the women of the household) in conservative families.

Reserved wards provided a greater visibility not only to women candidates, but also to women party workers, who were more numerous and more prominent in the entourage of women candidates than in that of male candidates⁶⁸ ; and most importantly, perhaps, for women voters, who obviously found it easier to speak freely with a female rather than with a male candidate. The door-to-door phase of the campaigning is an opportunity many voters seize, to voice their needs, their grievances. One positive impact of reservations might well be that the sheer presence of so many women in the campaign will help women at large take themselves more seriously as citizens concerned with (local) politics.

Yet at the same time the reservation of a ward seems to eliminate all references to the gender of candidates. In such a context, nobody refers to the advantage or the

⁶⁸ Salima, for instance, estimates that about a quarter of the 250 party workers who are engaged in her campaign are women .

inconvenient of having a woman as councillor. Candidates are introduced by party workers without any reference ever to their gender:

« I cannot request anything as a woman, but only as a party member ; I campaigned for the party, not for myself... » (Devaki)⁶⁹

« The party took charge of the campaign ; they talked on my life, my work, my social activities, my family, and I visited every house, I explained what I had done » (Ketaki)⁷⁰

Inheritors are an exception in this regard, since they always highlight the family dimension of their candidature. During the door-to-door, Mina, wife of the sitting councillor, was introduced as « Mina S., the wife of Talal S. », while her husband remained discretely at the back of the group of people who surrounded her. Inheritors, however, are not necessarily less assertive than other women candidates. Thus Mina seemed to enjoy more authority over the party workers accompanying her than Preeti, who got the ticket as an acknowledgement of her long involvement with her party, but who nevertheless, seemed to follow her fellow party workers.

But if the gender dimension seemed to be largely excluded from the campaign in reserved wards, other « sectarian interests », however, were being highlighted. One independent Gujarati candidate, for instance, built her whole campaign on the need for the Gujarati community to be represented within the CMC ; she was eventually not elected.

Lastly, a municipal electoral campaign usually focuses on local issues only (that is, mostly the condition of civic amenities), but that particular campaign was more political in tone. The political stakes of the June 2000 campaign were indeed high, since these municipal elections were considered, both by the ruling Left Front and by the opposition, as a test of the Trinamul Congress' capacity to challenge the former's 23 year old domination of the State, and assert itself as a credible alternative. Since the 1985 elections, which put an end to the supercession of the CMC, the Left Front had always won Calcutta ; but when general elections were held in 1998 and then in 1999, all three Members of Parliament elected from Calcutta belonged to the opposition (TC and BJP) ; the 2000 municipal elections were then construed by the opposition, as the definite proof that Calcuttans wanted a change. Winning over the CMC was presented as the first step in the great change to come, that is, overtaking

⁶⁹ Interview, June 1996.

⁷⁰ Interview, February 2000.

the Left Front in the Assembly elections scheduled six months later. This exceptional, highly symbolical dimension of the local election was attested by the active support provided by the party leaders to local candidates. It might also, incidentally, have helped giving credibility to women candidates as politicians in their own right .

Getting elected

The table below shows, firstly, that in 1995 the voting rate was actually higher in reserved wards than in non-reserved wards, which goes against the idea that voters would disinterest themselves from an electoral competition in which all contestants are women. Unfortunately, data disaggregated by sex are not available ; we are thus not in a position to ascertain whether women voters voted more in those wards that were reserved for women.

Table 4. The electoral participation in reserved and unreserved wards

Year	Average electoral participation in reserved wards (W, SCW)	Average electoral participation in general wards
1995	74,2% (52% to 85,6%)	72,4% (49,3% to 95,8%)
2000	62,5% (33,1% to 89,9%)	64,6% (42,2% to 89,9%)

Source : State Election Commission, Calcutta.

The table 4 also reveals that the 2000 municipal election was marked by a clear fall in the voting rate, which is probably due to the high degree of violence that characterised this election. One can notice, moreover, that the relative position of reserved and unreserved wards is then reversed, the voting rate being now higher in the latter.

Table 5. The proportion of women councillors, including in non-reserved wards

Year	Total number of councillors	Women councillors (% of the total number of councillors)	women councillors elected in general wards (% of the total number of women councillors)
1990	141	6 (4,2%)	6 (100%)

1995	141	53 (38%)	6 (11%)
2000	141	60 (42,5%)	13 (22%)

Source : State Election Commission, Calcutta.

The above table contradicts the « zenana dabba » theory. The increasing number of women elected, on the one hand, belies the most frequently denounced perverse effect of quotas, i.e. that instead of being a minimum figure, quotas actually automatically become a maximum figure, a ceiling. On the other hand even though, as we saw earlier, the number of inheritors among elected women increases with the second election, the number of women elected in non-reserved wards also increases. The fact that the number of women elected in non-reserved wards has been consistently, so far, superior to what it was prior to the implementation of reservations, points to the stimulating effect of reservations on women's participation in municipal politics. Thus, contrary to what M.Kishwar had anticipated, more and more women actually contest – and win – against male opponents.

But the « nurturing » argument stands partially verified. Even though more than half the sitting female councillors whose ward had been de-reserved were given the party ticket for a second time, the rotation of reserved ward does generate a game of musical chairs for a number of men and women councillors, which is problematic both for their political careers, and for their accountability to voters.

Conclusion

The confrontation of the various arguments on the virtues and dangers of quotas for women in elected assemblies, with the voices and experiences of the first batch of women elected in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation subsequent to the implementation of such reservations, now allow us to take stock of the first phase of this implementation.

One of the major arguments supporting women's quotas - that women's specific qualities and talents constitute a « resource » for political life – actually appears to be unverifiable, at least on the short term, even though the notion of women's qualities,

which are really mothers' qualities, is largely accepted by the women as well as by the men interviewed.

The « male backlash » argument, put forth by opponents to women's quotas, stands contradicted in every possible way : on the one hand, more and more women are being given the party ticket in non-reserved wards while on the other, more and more women get access to relatively powerful positions within the CMC, such as borough chairperson or member of the Mayor-in-Council. Moreover, the fact that the number of women elected in general wards increases from one election to the other also goes against the argument that quotas would result in a « women's (electoral) ghetto » : More and more women actually contest - and win – against male candidates.

All other arguments stand partially verified. On the important « gender justice vs social justice » debate, it appears that quotas do favour gender justice insofar as they seem to boost women's participation in municipal politics. Far from putting a ceiling on the number of elected women, they actually result into an increasing number of women councillors. Yet the survey showed that, on the one hand, elite women are overrepresented among the beneficiaries of quotas and on the other, that nepotism is indeed on the rise, with the number of inheritors increasing from one election to the other – a phenomenon which is doubtlessly encouraged by the rotation of reserved constituencies. Reservations, therefore, do not distribute political opportunities among women equally.

As one turns to the « democracy vs efficiency » debate, however, both the elite character of women councillors and the increasing importance of the family factor in municipal elections, translate into a series of resources which are crucial to the performance of the beneficiaries of quotas. As women and as newcomers, most of them are doubly handicapped when confronting the multiplicity of the tasks they have to perform as councillors. Their social status in terms of caste, education and occupation suggests their comparatively greater access to such major political resources as prestige, education, time, verbal skills and money. Family support is another essential resource, as it provides a relay for domestic work, an escort if need be, and, for inheritors, a legitimate political patron.

The rotation of reserved constituencies actually constitutes another aspect of the « democracy vs efficiency » debate, insofar as it balances the status of reserved and general constituencies over a series of three successive elections, and in doing so,

generates a game of musical chairs detrimental both to the career of women and men councillors and to the interests of voters.

Lastly, on the all important question of the representation of women's interests, women's quotas appear to be far less effective than their supporters would have us believe. While the new presence of so many women councillors seems to give access to the CMC to all those women who would never have dared to address a male councillor, both interviews and the minutes of the House meetings showed that women councillors do not openly represent women's interests in the CMC. Women councillors, clearly, are no feminists : they do not consider women's issues as major issues and they have no relationship whatsoever, with (non-party) women's organisations. The « critical mass » effect, obviously does not operate automatically, or, at least, not immediately.

But the time factor is precisely one of the main limitations of this study, confined as it is to the very first phase of the reservation policy, that is, to the first batch of women councillors benefitting from quotas. A follow up study over the second and the third election is very much needed to assess whether the impact of reservations as I observed it in 2000 is a durable one, or if the representation of women's interests, for instance, will be more and more effective with every election.

Such a longer-term focus would also consider the larger dimension of reservations for women, including (i) the ability of the beneficiaries of quotas at the local level to progress towards higher levels of politics, with or without quotas in State Assemblies and in Parliament ; (ii) the capacity of quotas to transform the norms of gendered behaviour by providing new role models for women ; and (iii) the possibility that a massive presence of women in political assemblies may challenge the sexual division of domestic work.

Lastly, Calcutta, or Kolkata (as it is known since January 2001) is obviously not representative of Indian cities, nor even of Indian metropolises. West Bengal in general, and the State capital in particular, are characterised by a comparatively high level of literacy , a high level of political consciousness, and a special reverence for women as mothers.

Moreover, the political equations in West Bengal since 1998 might have influenced the situation of women candidates in the 2000 municipal elections. To what extent did Mamata Banerjee make a difference ? As the leader of the opposition in the State

from 1998 onwards, and as a Union minister⁷¹ who has, in the past two years, strongly expressed her support to the Women's Reservation Bill, one might wonder what her impact was on the women of her party. She certainly seems to be a powerful role model for the women party members of the Trinamul Congress, who often mentioned their admiration for her physical courage.

Prior to the 2000 elections, Mamata Banerjee had underlined that she would extend particular support to the women councillors of her party, as part of her growing self-representation as a champion of women's rights. On the whole indeed, the Trinamul Congress proved to be the most supportive party for women sitting councillors. The TC, being a young party, certainly needed to consolidate the influence of its representatives; giving the ticket to sitting women councillors was a way to thank them for shifting their loyalties from the Congress to the TC.

Is Calcutta, then, an exception in the Indian urban landscape? Comparisons are now called for, to differentiate the role of factors pertaining to the regional political culture from that of more structural factors, in the impact of reservations for women in local elected assemblies.

⁷¹ She resigned from that position in March 2001.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a survey conducted in 2000 in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, to assess the first phase of the implementation of women's quotas – 33 per cent of seats - in this urban local body. The study proceeds by testing the major arguments expressed during the debate over the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes to implement similar quotas in legislative assemblies at the States and Union levels. Based on a questionnaire, interviews, direct observation and archive analysis, the paper addresses in turn the five major issues raised in the course of that debate: do women's quotas favor or hinder gender and social justice? Do they hinder the efficiency of the assemblies to which they apply? Do they favor the representation of women's interests? Do they have an impact on the general functioning of the urban body? Lastly, is the system of rotating reserved constituencies detrimental to (women) politicians and to voters?

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