This article was downloaded by: [Canadian Research Knowledge Network]

On: 13 April 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 783016864]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

International Feminist Journal of Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713722173>

Essentially Political

Elisabeth Berg ^a; Jim Barry ^b; John Chandler ^b

^a Division of Gender and Technology, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden ^b Organisation Studies Research Group, Business School, University of East London, London, UK

Online publication date: 10 February 2010

To cite this Article Berg, Elisabeth , Barry, Jim and Chandler, John(2010) 'Essentially Political', International Feminist Journal of Politics, 12: 1, 25 – 44

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14616740903429106

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616740903429106>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Essentially Political

GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF CARE IN MUMBAI

ELISABETH BERG, JIM BARRY AND JOHN CHANDLER

Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, University of East London, UK and
University of East London, UK

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the gendered politics of social work in the Indian city of Mumbai, locating it in a post-colonial context. In order to do this secondary sources are examined along with empirical data collected by the authors. These are interpreted through the framework of a social constructionist methodology that draws on political sociology as well as elements of post-colonial theory and Foucauldian post-structuralism in order to acknowledge agency within a 'location' marked by both constraints and opportunities. The article explores the circumstances in which politicians and administrators find themselves in Mumbai. In considering gender and developing a strategy of what we term 'political essentialism', it is shown that those involved have been drawing on experiences in civil society and using imagined dualisms of gender to position themselves as shapers of social work in Mumbai.

Keywords

gender, India, Mumbai, political essentialism, social work

INTRODUCTION

This article considers gender and social work in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), a major city in one of the world's largest democracies. Perceived as an economically dynamic urban space, Mumbai is also marked by a post-colonial legacy involving issues of politics, religion and gender that permeate the local society at many levels. Situated in the Indian state of Maharashtra which, along with all other Indian states, has seen the introduction of a quota or seat reservation arrangement for local women politicians, Mumbai has been the focus of a

research investigation by the authors, concentrating on the implications of such applications in practice.

In this article we examine the implications as they relate to social work in a context where gender has become a highly topical issue, not least because of local interest in the outcomes of the quota system. Concerned that an exclusive focus on 'women' might be considered somewhat narrow, our interviewing programme has covered women *and* men politicians, as well as administrators, in Mumbai. Here we report the findings of a recent interviewing programme that explored social work issues, drawing on an earlier research investigation that had considered women's entry into local politics, their objectives and their early successes and difficulties. In an attempt to move beyond earlier work (cf. Barry *et al.* 2004) – which has nonetheless served as a solid foundation on which to build – we focus on the quota system a decade and a half after its introduction to see what differences if any it has made in relation to issues of social work, and to the ways in which women politicians and administrators might have helped to shape its development and delivery.

In what follows, we outline the theoretical framework through which we attempt to conceptualize these processes. We then delineate the methodological approach to the study, the earlier research and more recent findings on care situated in context or 'location'. Through an articulation of empirical and theoretical insights we discuss implications and offer some tentative conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We adopt an approach deriving from political sociology that focuses on 'power in its social context' (Bottomore 1993: 1–2). This enables us to bring a critical lens to bear on the implications of the quota in Mumbai. We also draw on insights from the Subaltern School in Calcutta, and Spivak (1988) in particular, which suggest the need for a political analysis in line with a perspective that recognizes society as marked by political, social and economic cleavages that require recognition and active resolution (Mouffe 1999). This leads us to argue for the conceptual utility of what we term *political essentialism*. This is not to propose or advocate a position associated with what has been called either strong or weak essentialism (Lloyd 2005: 56–7), the former following Plato in equating 'absolute being' with essence, the latter associated with Locke in conceptualizing the 'totality of the properties . . . indispensable and necessary attributes of a thing' (de Lauretis 1989: 4–5). It is not, in short, to offer a simplistic dualism of strong and weak essentialisms, nor even a dichotomy involving essentialism and anti-essentialism, where women in Mumbai might be seen as following a conventional view of politics as 'interest representation, constituencies and parties' (Lloyd 2005: 66). It is, instead, to examine the use of essentialist categories in everyday life to unsettle and shift conventional wisdom, and it is this that helps us to point to the political

significance of gender relations as embedded within wider social relations of power in civil society.

The need to recover the notion of politics as power was illustrated convincingly in our view in Foucault's critique of Habermas at UC Berkeley USA where he underscored the limitation of approaches that assume harmony in human affairs and rely on ideal-speech and the consensus-oriented properties of procedural regulation for the resolution of difficulties, advancing instead a position that sought to re-centre politics (Rajchman 2007: 9–11). For Foucault (1976), truth was transitory, conceptualized as a shifting *politics* of truth, which maintained a fragile balance in power relations that was invariably unarticulated in everyday life. This insight has recently been extended by Mouffe (1999) in her own critique of Habermas' (1995) concept of deliberative democracy as being in line with governmental shifts across Europe in favour of a neo-liberal reformist agenda that acts to normalize and take itself for granted. This, we would contend, is not limited to Europe, with commentators concerned to dispel myths about any golden age of Indian history. It is in this sense we find Sheth (1995: 26) acknowledging that even if expulsion and extermination were not considered acceptable in India's past, prior to colonization, subjugation and hierarchy were, raising thereby uncomfortable questions – for historians perhaps in general (McNay 1996) but scholars of orientalism and post-colonial studies in particular – about the status of history as a discipline.

Yet if for McNay (1996) history is radically unknowable, others have looked for discernible patterns in their attempt to make some sense of the colonial past, as well as the post-colonial present. Hall (1996: 243), for example, has identified two uses of the term 'postcolonialism'. The first, epistemological, reflects the postmodern, and particularly post-structuralist, turn and has found favour in studies of orientalism. The second, chronological, which acknowledges the importance of the past in shaping the present, is the perspective adopted here, though complemented by an appreciation of post-structuralism and the importance of language in shaping social and political affairs. This is in line with scholarship that identifies orientalism, not with a particular field of study and its own 'academic genealogy', but with a set of images and 'venerable set of factualised statements' (Ludden 1993: 251).

This helps us to identify taken-for-granted assumptions and consider the arguments of post-colonial and other scholars in 'location' (Nicholson 1990), and to be wary of imagined communities or nation states, in order to acknowledge the essentially political nature of the present and its connectivity with the past (Chatterjee 2004), even if we remain aware of its symbolic significance. In this sense the post-colonial legacy has rendered it 'very difficult for both Indians and outsiders to think about India outside of orientalist habits and categories' (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 11), an undoubted legacy of post-colonial rule and likely to affect Indian diasporas in debates over meaning and identity. This may just affect the subtleties of interpretation of Nehru's reference to India's 'tryst with destiny', and be an important aspect

of the post-colonial predicament, where pressures to develop 'market democracy' appear strong (Seabrook 1997).

The post-colonial context is thus significant as a space where religion, class and gender intersect historically in locations marked by global neo-liberal pressures and a resulting interest in an expansion of market democracy. This tends to put pressure on welfare provision, such as social work, which comes under critical scrutiny in the search for cost reductions and efficiencies in public expenditure, in line with concerns voiced in the West over the so-called 'race to the bottom' (Hirst 1998) associated with the slashing of welfare provision. There is, even so, no reason to believe that India generally will follow in the footsteps of its colonial rulers. While neo-liberalism may be viewed as an ineluctable force (Leys 2001) and perhaps even a dominant discourse (Harvey 2005), it can equally be seen as an uncertain project, its relationships fragile and susceptible to obstacles, resistances and blockages (Clarke 2004). If strong, its influences may cut across varieties of caste and class as well as gender.

In respect of the historical legacy, Forbes comments that both 'European inspired histories and the Indian texts they cited shared a belief in a unique female nature'. Indian texts:

...essentialised women as devoted and self-sacrificing, yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous. Texts on religion, law, politics and education carried different pronouncements for men depending on caste, class, age, and religious sect. In contrast women's differences were overshadowed by their biological characteristics and the subordinate, supportive roles they were destined to play. ... Occasionally Indian texts and historical narratives singled out women for special attention but usually this was because her accomplishments were significant by male standards.

(Forbes 1996: 1)

It certainly appears that in the research investigation reported here such essentialist views of gender persist despite recent texts emphasizing the importance of intersectionality (Phoenix 2006). Indeed they may well have strengthened the impulse to initiate the seat reservation system. Yet it also appears to be this essentialism, articulated with their prior experiences, that the women in Mumbai have been using or deploying strategically to shape social work practice. Such simplistic, essentialist dualisms have not been the only influence on gender relations of course, with Mahatma Gandhi favouring '*Kleevatva* (androgyny) to be a more potent principle than either masculinity or femininity' (Prasad 2003: 35). But dualistic gender essentialisms do seem to be prevalent in Mumbai's public service, with women characterized routinely by our respondents as caring and supportive of colleagues and constituents, while men are seen as hard-nosed and tough in their dealings with others, as we will see when considering the findings. But how can we account for this conceptually?

Spivak (1988), in her essay 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' uses texts, of the kind that follow, to consider counter-insurgency – an interest of the Subaltern School in its earlier neo-Marxist articulation before the turn to post-structuralism – arguing for 'a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously political interest' (emphasis in original):

It is of course true that the reports, despatches . . . in which policemen, soldiers, bureaucrats . . . hostile to insurgency register their sentiments, amount to a representation of their will. But these documents do not get their content from that will alone, for the latter is predicated on another will – that of the insurgent. It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence.

(Spivak 1988: 13)

The notion of insurgency in respect of gender and its association with active protest, and especially a 'revolutionary' connotation, may be thought to hark back to feminist texts from the mid-twentieth century (cf. Solanis 1968; Firestone 1970) rather than contemporary gender relations, but the same is not perhaps the case with the term rebel. This term can of course refer to armed protest, but also to refusals and resistances against established authority, of the kind referred to and noted earlier by Clarke (2004; see also Kumar 1994). Here, we find Spivak shifting ground from neo-Marxism in favour of a post-structuralist reading of history where the categories used by elites and masses, oppressors and oppressed can be articulated and deployed in ways that express dissent, obstruction, refusals and blockages. In short, to engage the essentially political element in such relations. This is an important insight that we will use to guide us in interpreting the findings of our research investigation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Initial interest in the research investigation had centred on the quota, or seat reservation system, introduced for a third of women politicians in Mumbai across Maharashtra in the early 1990s. It began with informal interviews of politicians, administrators and local community activists in Mumbai. Some of the interviews had been arranged by a contact person at the All India Institute of Local Self-Government, (IAS), although we also had the opportunity to arrange further interviews when we met our interviewees. This article builds on initial findings reported in earlier papers (cf. Barry *et al.* 2004),¹ and reports on a follow-up research investigation, the new data comprising further individual interviews and a focus group of women politicians collected during a field trip in April 2005 to explore issues of social work. These new sources of data have extended our understanding of the social context and processes at work, which we hope will have helped to limit any respondent and/or researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

For this article, we have sought to embed our recent work within previous empirical research, but have also drawn heavily on more recent interviews with two IAS officers – one man and one woman – two interviews with individual women politicians, one focus group interview with six women politicians representing different political parties, one interview with the Mayor of Mumbai (the incumbent at the time was a man), observation at a political meeting comprising women and men (where we were specially invited), as well as general observation over a ten day visit to Mumbai. These later interviews were conducted at the workplaces of the interviewees by the female and one male member of the team. We also engaged in observations across Mumbai and have drawn on secondary sources where these bear on our findings. Our purpose in this article is to make use of these data to understand actions and constraints affecting those who attempt to position themselves not as passive victims whose needs can be defined in advance, but as autonomous agents with the ability however circumscribed to shape events. This is informed by the theoretical work of Alcoff (1988) that articulates elements of social constructionism and post-structuralism with the significance of experience, as well as Spivak's (1988) post-colonial work inspired by post-structuralism as we have seen. Our methodological approach for this article is thus rooted in a broadly social constructionist methodology (Berger and Luckman 1966), with post-structuralist insights into discourse that acknowledge the experiences of our interviewees as real for them and used to position themselves as shapers of social work. In order to do this, the article seeks to examine understandings of these matters and their relation to political essentialism outlined in the previous section. In this process we have examined the experiences of politicians and administrators as they relate to social work, and considered how this informs their actions in a post-colonial context. This has helped us to situate our research investigation in a social, political, economic and historical context, or 'location' (Nicholson 1990).

Our purpose is to consider the ways in which administrators and politicians make sense of and shape the processes of social work in Mumbai. Before presenting our recent findings, we consider the context for our study and initial research work on the quota in Mumbai.

The Gender Quota in Mumbai: Context for the Present Research Investigation

Characterized historically by shared values, understanding and tolerance of diversity and difference, India was subjected to the colonial control of the British for more than 150 years through policies that acted to divide and rule, in ways that helped to shape notions of India that circulate today (Ludden 1993). Through the vehicle of the British East India Company, which changed from being a 'mercantile agency to a governing body in the late eighteenth century' (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 8), the

uneasy relations of colonialism led to 'intensely competing and conflicting political identities' (Sheth 1995: 27), with western categorization forging oppositional polarities, as between Hindu and Muslim for example, that continue to haunt south Asia today.

Even so, the image of a world, or golden past, that we have lost would appear to overstate the case, with contention rather than harmony and consensus appearing to have characterized social relations historically that have survived to the present day. In the recent past for example the issue of affirmative action through reservation has led to 'rising caste consciousness' and 'open violence' (Maiello 1996: 107), even if Dalits are made up of different groups of people – untouchables or Harijans as they are otherwise known. Today, Dalits can still be seen bent with the burdens of physical work as they haul carts along busy roads packed with automobiles old and new, financed we were advised by one of our interviewees through credit to the eager middle classes.

It was in this context that the 1974 government report on the status of women and the UN Declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year highlighted women's issues across India with 'the women's movement explod[ing] on the Indian political scene after 1977' (Ray 1999: 4). Unlike places such as Calcutta and Bangalore, issues of gender that included violence against women and sexual harassment were at the forefront in Mumbai, to the extent that it stood out to 'the international feminist community ... as an example of the Indian women's movement at its strongest', with very high proportions of women exercising their right to vote (Ray 1999: 5–6). Indeed what characterized Mumbai was a 'dispersed, heterogeneous and fluid [political] field' in which shifting coalitions operated, with contention the order of the day (Ray 1999: 11, 20).

The 1992 elections in Maharashtra saw the introduction of a quota, or seat reservation system, take place in this politically volatile milieu across areas of local self-government. While the reservation system did not involve higher levels of government, it directly affected those who stood for election from villages to urban government. Following the elections the number of women politicians in Mumbai went up from five to seventy-five out of a total of 221 (Singh *et al.* 1993: 93), creating at 34 per cent a 'critical mass' (Dahlerup 1988; Honour *et al.* 2003). The quota had been introduced in other states such as Karnataka and Kerala in the 1980s before its arrival in Maharashtra (Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2001: 1), and was designed to run for a limited series of elections.

The research investigation had begun with few if any preconceived ideas as to what might be found and, as hoped, the findings revealed much about the work of administrators and politicians in Mumbai. Indeed, their aspirations as well as frustrations, in relation to social work, became evident, along with their experiences of civil society where they interacted with family and friends, as well as women's groups and networks indicative of vibrant political activity and women's movement influence (Kothari 1993; Basu 1995; Desai 1996, 1997),² operating at local levels (Barry *et al.* 2004, 2006). Moreover

we were advised by our interviewees that western feminist texts had been circulated and discussed through the networks of the women's movement, the cost being no barrier when books were freely passed around. This is not to suggest a one-way traffic of academic and political literature, since texts of Indian origin were also available – outside as well as within India itself.

Even so, the difficulties female local government politicians encountered on their way to office were varied, involving obstructive men and family responsibilities, especially for those with young children, as well as a jaded view of party politics (Kumari 1993: 3–4) deriving from images of clientalism, or 'corruption' popularized in the press. Lack of confidence proved not to be a significant factor, despite the warning from Panda (1986: 78) for those with lower socio-economic status. Not all men opposed the women in gaining and sustaining office, although our interviewing programme did reveal at least one instance where a male corporator, which refers to politicians elected to the Brihanmumbai Mahanagarpalika municipal corporation in Mumbai, fed misleading advice to a new female incumbent, in line with the notion of the backlash (Faludi 1992). Even so, it transpired that some male administrators provided secretarial assistance to illiterate women politicians who were serving on municipal committees.

For their part, the women corporators reported what they saw as their own failure to help low-income groups, aid community participation, clean up the environment or increase employment. It was also explained by a male administrator that the husbands of some women corporators had been observed accompanying their wives into the Council Chamber to help them decide which way to vote. Excluding husbands from the Chamber circumvented this practice. On a different note, however, the women politicians talked with some pleasure of their ability to help redress grievances, make their voices heard on a range of social and political issues, and improve service delivery of amenities. This was broadly endorsed in the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's report concerning the contribution of women in other local government areas, both rural and urban, to 'health, education ... access to clean water, monitoring the functions of schools, providing health centres within reach of all communities, tackling alcohol abuse and domestic violence and providing effective waste collection and disposal' (Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2001: 6–7).

It became clear that the issue of the quota had become a live one in Mumbai, with men and women administrators, professionals and politicians – as well as journalists – openly discussing the seat reservation innovation and its implications. This extended to the ways in which the women administrators and politicians managed their subordinates and constituents respectively. We were advised that if they considered a request as reasonable they acceded. If not, they reacted accordingly and explained their reasons for denying the request. Should a subordinate ask for time from work to care for a sick child, for example, a woman manager usually accommodated this. A male manager we were told was far more likely to refuse the request, and to

advise the subordinate to separate home from work life and make other arrangements for the child. The same distinction held for women and men politicians. This would seem to confirm western academic literature that derived inspiration from Gilligan (1982), whereby boys are shown to develop a logic of justice and girls an ethic of care. Certainly, one reading of these data is that the women were deploying a strategy of political essentialism to confound the stereotype, using varieties of feminine and masculine behavioural displays in their dealings with others, and earning them respect all round in the process.

Our emphasis on historical context and experience is important since once the women politicians gain experience and learn the routines and processes of office, the more might we expect them, like the men before them, to become similarly implicated in clientalism. Interestingly, the increasing growth of women's involvement in questionable practices does indeed seem to be what is happening, at least judging from press reports. Even so, some women remain sceptical of male journalists. In one sense what has been indicated here follows Forbes' (1996: 1) comments noted above on women as 'devoted and self-sacrificing, yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous'. Yet this is not a convincing explanation for their actions in Mumbai, which draw inspiration from their prior experiences in civil society of women's groups and networks indicative of women's movement influences, as well as family and friends, and their use of popular imagination on gender essentialism, in order to focus attention on the disadvantaged in their community. This is a positioning, following Alcoff, which is recognized by both the women and men we spoke to as somewhat different from those of men, with the women exercising agency within constraints. In short the strategy of political essentialism may be, for them, significant in helping to shape the delivery and understanding of municipal processes within Mumbai.

SOCIAL WORK AND MUMBAI IN 'LOCATION': RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

India's billion strong population suffers persistent inequality, both religious and economic, with poverty variously defined. Certainly, there is concern for the plight of the Dalits who occupy the lowest rung in a caste system that maintains hierarchical privilege with elevation (or the reverse) possible in later reincarnations in return for the acceptance of the religious status quo in the present (Srinivas 1952). This does not mean that they are easily identified. As an IAS officer put it during an interview, 'caste differences are obvious in rural areas, but this is not always the case in a city like Mumbai. In the city you do not know who stands next to you.'

The issue of caste has certainly presented a 'challenge for the social work profession' (Ramaiah 2002). According to our interviewees there are,

nevertheless, systems of support in addition to social workers, including homes for the elderly and hospitals where care is provided. Even so, the scale of the problems facing the urban municipality in Mumbai is considerable according to interviewees in our sample and dealt with on a number of fronts. While senior professionals, often practising medical doctors, oversee mass inoculation and disease prevention programmes, elected politicians are also active, visiting hospitals, co-ordinating care and involving themselves in the maintenance of social solidarity at the local level. Furthermore, the findings of our research investigation reveal that recently elected local women politicians have been focusing their attention on the disadvantaged in their communities, managing both to care and shape provision in the present 'welfare mix' (Alcock and Craig 2001: 3) in Mumbai.

Yet inequalities and the resulting tensions are exacerbated in Mumbai by the numbers of people moving into the city in search of work, as we have seen. Mega-cities would certainly appear to face considerable problems, acknowledged in the 'Cochin Declaration' drawn up at the Congress of World Mayors that took place in Cochin in Kerala, India, in April 2005.³

But Declarations such as this one, while attempting to reflect the noble concerns of those who contribute to and draft them, tend to deal with a discursive currency so abstract that it becomes difficult to discern a practical outcome, despite good intention. So too with social work, the 'core definition' of which, shown on the websites of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), is as follows:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

(Reproduced in Lyons *et al.* 2006: 3)

There are definitional difficulties, not least the "Western" understanding' with which they are associated (Lyons *et al.* 2006: 4). Clearly context is important, with concepts such as empowerment, liberation, human rights and social justice open to debate and contested in practice (MacIntyre 1984). So too with poverty, long recognized in western academic discourse as a relative concept (cf. Townsend 1979). Its meaning in an Indian context was outlined for us by an IAS officer in Mumbai when he explained that the extended family system of social support was still important in India, along with some voluntary and religious institutional provision, adding that there were also hospitals, although these were few in number, alongside some private hospitals that were even scarcer. In addition small payments were made at village level to help those, including the elderly, considered to be in need of support and to deflect migration to the cities. Yet despite this it had proven difficult to

stem the flow of rural migration since the cities offered new opportunities for work. Poverty had thus become a serious urban problem due to the sheer volume of people involved that swelled the population in a city like Mumbai from around twelve to nearer sixteen million during the day, although numbers were difficult to estimate with any degree of accuracy and could, we were advised, be higher.⁴ He defined urban poverty in terms of a lack of access to fresh water, toilets, two square meals each day, education and living conditions; but even then some were sleeping underneath electric pylons or at the side of the road next to speeding motor vehicles. According to the IAS officer, on this definition, 'over 60 per cent of the people in Mumbai could be regarded as living in poverty, whilst the national average is closer to 23 per cent'.

The caste system in India, despite the incursion of capitalist companies and forms of development, remains powerful, although the resentment felt by the Dalits, who continue to suffer social exclusion and high levels of poverty, may just be building – much as steam in a pressure cooker – and offer significant challenges to the social work profession (Ramaiah 2002). Social workers in India have been involved, 'in fields of health, education, income generation, rehabilitation and resettlement, adoption, family and child welfare, and recently also in the field of gender sensitisation and environment protection' (Ramaiah 2002: 13).

They have used 'casework, group work, social work research and to some extent community organisation ... seldom us[ing] the social action method', the latter involving direct challenge to the discriminatory and abusive caste practices that Dalits have routinely experienced. The matter is complex not least because, as Ramaiah (2002: 14) observes, in 'India the professional social workers are also part of the caste system and to a great extent they too are not free from caste prejudices'. Neither are NGOs neutral. The tensions may be exacerbated in the future not only by regional Dalit protest movements, active since the turn of the nineteenth century (Ramaiah 2002: 4), but also by the pressure from 'antiglobalization' movements, especially as:

the values of social work are akin to those of many of the current global social (and environmental) movements and we need to see an end to the way in which social, economic and environmental issues are decontextualised and individualised.

(Lyons *et al.* 2006: 11)

Lyons *et al.* continue that the components are interconnected, as recognized by Nelson Mandela in the context of the Make Poverty History Campaign:

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. Sometimes it calls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness

blossom. Of course the task will not be easy. But not to do this would be a crime against humanity, against which I ask all humanity now to rise up.

(Reproduced in Lyons *et al.* 2006: 11)

The liberatory potential for social work, on an international level, as well as its political character will be clear from this. Even though there are more questions than answers raised in such speeches with terms that invite close scrutiny, social movements invariably garner support in the spaces between the lack of such definitional clarity or, as a Foucauldian might put it, in the appeal of, gap or even clash between, competing discourses. Yet this impulse to internationalism is tempered by a shift to local narrative and practice as social workers deal with short-term crises in what might be termed their own back yards. Furthermore, the influence of a neo-liberal counter-trend has been making its mark, although prognostications on the 'End of History' and liberal triumphalism (Fukuyama 1989) are premature, even if its spread has offered powerful symbols and imagined realities to further its influence (Chatterjee 2004) that attempt to dominate taken for granted assumptions (Harvey 2005). Yet its dominance is incomplete, with blockages and resistances acting in significant ways to impede its 'progress', as we have already noted (Clarke 2004).

So what factors operate in and through Mumbai? As we have seen, India has past experience of reservations, or quotas, for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, which have aided Dalits in their search for social, economic and political redress, even if this has resulted in the past in some instances of violent conflict and backlash (Maiello 1996; see also Kaushik 1993: 51). There is also, as we have seen, recognition of the limits of reliance on extended family support since, even if convention dictates that bereaved mothers of husbands share their family homes, provision is refracted by caste. Nonetheless, we were advised in our interviewing programme that homes exist for the elderly, and we interviewed professionals, often practising medical doctors, who talked with pride of how they oversaw mass inoculation and disease prevention programmes, with outreach social workers, for example, actively seeking out 'sex workers', in an effort to reduce the transmission of sexually transmitted disease. We also discussed such issues individually with female and male politicians who represented the local communities of Mumbai.

Issues of this kind were further developed in our focus group, with the women politicians talking of their work that saw them visiting hospitals and helping distraught constituents and families who found themselves in difficulties or disputes that sometimes involved the police. All this suggests that the women politicians as well as those professionals charged with responsibility for service delivery as in the instance of mass inoculation and outreach programmes, were focused on those who would, arguably perhaps, seem to be most in need of support and care in Mumbai. To some degree at least, according to the accounts of both women and men, this appears to be in contrast to their male counterparts, indicating that women are tending to deploy different subject positions, compared to men, in the politics of care in Mumbai. This is not

to decry all actions of the male politicians, but one clear finding from our interviewing programme was that men were more regularly referred to as being involved in questionable behaviour. Some men, we were told, were focused more on their business careers than their constituents, and had entered politics to work their way into the centres of municipal power where contracts – of the kind that favoured their private business interests – were awarded from tenders received, to gain valuable information on the procedures. In this the issue of clientelism, referred to by our respondents as corruption, was more often associated with men. This dichotomy may well have something to do with the experiences of the women and men involved prior to office in civil society. It may also be associated with an imagined view of the Indian woman as noted earlier.

One of the women politicians described to us how she helped constituents, as would a social worker: she would visit hospital with them, go to the police or help them write to the municipality. She considered that her work as a politician included this kind of support, although she doubted that male politicians would take the same view. Another woman politician, encouraged by other women politicians in the focus group, explained how she worked as a local medical doctor who saw her political mission as one of helping young children. She added that she had managed to secure acceptance by the municipal corporation of a proposal for mass inoculation against measles. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of these kinds of political work for women politicians, in contrast to their male counterparts.

Nonetheless, when discussing their work on municipal committees, they indicated that they did not elevate a gender perspective above their political work for their respective parties, although they had noticed that their concerns had tended to favour matters such as poverty, child protection and family issues. At a political meeting we observed women and men sitting together in party political groupings discussing issues unrelated to gender, although one man talked with much irritation about gender equality in the labour market – not even in Sweden, he remarked, was gender equality to be found.

Differences of view over gender issues were further illustrated during an interview with a woman administrator who talked of a national problem regarding the abortion of girl foetuses. She explained that the early identification of biological sex differences facilitated by medical advances had led to increasing abortion rates for such foetuses because tradition dictated costly payment of dowries on marriage. While seen initially perhaps as an individual problem, it had become a national issue with some men in Mumbai forced to seek marriage partners abroad in the absence of sufficient local women.

All in all, our interviews appeared to indicate quite strongly that the female local politicians and administrators were not only acting to shape provision in favour of the disadvantaged in Mumbai, they were also taking an active part in the process – as confirmed by both female and male interviewees. In this we contend that they enacted a strategy of political essentialism.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have outlined elements of social work in the politically volatile milieu and welfare mix of Mumbai in post-colonial India. We have argued that the processes of social work are open to debate, contestation and (re)shaping through time. We have also indicated that gender may be playing a not inconsiderable part in this process, with the seat reservation or quota system for women politicians significant in empowering women in positions of responsibility and decision making. They have drawn on prior experiences of civil society and made use of imagined notions of female difference through a strategy of political essentialism, linked to notions of ethical purity and care, to act in ways that unsettle power relations and advance political objectives, conceptualized here as the shifting of power in the shaping of social context. We have further argued that our empirical data support a view of devotion and self-sacrifice on the part of the women concerned, in line with popular images of the Indian woman, even if this representation may overstate the case. Even so, it would appear that men corporators have perceived the quota as a threat to their positions sparking a backlash since, as we have seen, support has conversely been forthcoming from men administrators.

Our contention, on the basis of the data presented here, is that women have been drawing on and using their experiences gained prior to office. Some of them, as would have been expected, had bought or loaned western as well as Indian feminist texts that were circulated through the networks of their women's movement, suggesting an international dimension to their political mobilization into the ferment of local politics. But it is the connectivity between the women's movement in civil society and the State that is of particular moment for those in the international feminist community, since it demonstrates the fluidity between the two with boundaries more apparent than real. And once the opportunity to stand for political office came, the women concerned showed the difference they could make. Use of the quota may be contentious, having been outlawed for example in the UK following its limited use by the Labour party shortly before it came to office in the late 1990s, but its effective deployment in Mumbai is an international example of its potential utility in other locations.

In enacting political office, the women incumbents used popular imagination and traditional views of gender through a strategy of political essentialism in order to position themselves in the service of the disadvantaged in their communities, occupying a space that has seen a reorientation of social work. Here gender is deployed in the service of a cause. This is not to fall back on false dualisms, but instead to conceptualize their contention as more strategically articulated within a fluid and volatile field of politics in Mumbai that challenges and unsettles normalized relations through dispersed networks. It is not that the language of women is 'speaking them' as subjects, yet nor are they entirely free agents. It is rather that their deployment of stereotypical characterization serves to subvert established

conventions of gender categories to the benefit of disadvantaged constituents through the making of social work.

For Spivak this would likely amount to a strategic use of positivist essentialism, though our interpretation is that while the women have been drawing on a discourse of generalized essentialism – where women are seen as somehow different from men – they have been using that discourse to unsettle established if fragile power relations and advance political ends to support vulnerable constituents. This, it would seem to us, is the key to understanding the use of identities and essentialist stereotypes by the women in public service in Mumbai, who have thereby positioned themselves to secure political ends, shifting social work in directions of their own choosing. However, we would quibble with Spivak's use of the term 'positivist' here, for which we have substituted 'political', since the issues implicate power and exist in a field of conflicting and self-interest where compromises have to be worked out and (re)negotiated in real time as Mouffe (1999) has argued. The strategy is therefore, we contend, one of *political* essentialism.

While making no grand claims for generalizability, we have reported a shaping of social work in Mumbai that has prioritized the needs of the disadvantaged and brought them to public attention. There has been some cost for the women concerned, noticeable in a backlash from some male politicians and journalists. Nonetheless, their determination in the face of such obstacles, and their use of their own experience and popular imagery through the use of political essentialism, has shown how the political minefield of social work can be traversed. Social work is clearly enmeshed within relations of power in social context that are essentially political matters, both of state and civil society.

Elisabeth Berg

Luleå University of Technology

Division of Gender and Technology

971 87 Luleå, Sweden

E-mail: elisabeth.berg@ltu.se

Jim Barry

University of East London

Organisation Studies Research Group, Business School

4–6 University way, London, E16 2RD, UK

E-mail: j.j.barry@uel.ac.uk

John Chandler

University of East London

Organisation Studies Research Group, Business School

4–6 University Way, London, E16 2RD, UK

E-mail: j.p.chandler@uel.ac.uk

- 1 Initially, a number of informal discussions were held with local politicians and women's movement activists through a local contact who co-authored the early papers arising from the research investigation. The interested reader is referred to Barry *et al.* (1998), which includes details of the study and an investigation into the 'public service ethos'.

A survey had been conducted of all female – along with a numerically equal number of male – politicians with a response rate of 53 per cent (117 out of 221) that helped to direct attention to areas for exploration. It transpired that the women elected to the Brihanmumbai Mahanagarpalika municipal corporation in Mumbai, referred to as corporators, came from a quite diverse range of backgrounds, and included in their number legal advocates and those unable to read or write. Many were popular local figures with little, if any, prior experience of formal party politics – although they were experienced in local community campaigns and struggles, with the majority involved in informal women's groups or women's networks, thereby widening the conventional understanding of politics to include civil society. It was these experiences, along with experiences of friends and families, which they brought with them to political office, and it was from among their number, along with male politicians, that we, as part of a mixed-gender research team, drew our sample for interview, beginning back in the mid-1990s and continuing into the present decade.

Following the survey, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. We asked open-ended questions and listened closely to our respondents, anxious to maintain a balance and flow in the social construction of the interview encounter. We have made no particular claim for representativeness in our interviewee sample, contending only that insights, which might have implications beyond their local significance, may derive from a qualitative approach such as this. Even so, it is worth noting that we took care to select interview respondents across the party political spectrum, from Congress I to BJP and Shiv Sena. We also interviewed middle and senior level administrators, from a range of local government departments – though particularly public health and education – and included women and men.

- 2 See Kothari (1993) and Desai (1996) on the women's movement in India, and Basu (1995) on developments of women's movements and local states more widely.
- 3 The resolution, which was '[d]iscussed [and] unanimously adopted ... declares in Cochin on 4 April 2005', that:

We, therefore, resolve:

- To closely look at MDG's [Millennium Development Goals] in our own city context and give to ourselves targets that we shall commit to achieve
- To frontload concerns in regard to poverty education, gender, child and maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases and environmental sustainability in all city activity
- To commit and allocate resources for the implementation of city targets focusing on slums and other vulnerable groups
- To engage with city stakeholders and afford them space in decision-making

- To promote partnerships in all city initiatives, and
- To harness new, specially information and communication technology to reengineer processes, improve service delivery and provide all citizens the fruits of good urban governance

We give to ourselves this Declaration and commit ourselves to toil for our citizens and our nations in the tangible achievement of MDGs.

(Cochin Declaration 2005)

The Cochin Declaration was drawn up at the World Mayors' Conference on Millennium Development Goals and the Role of Cities, 2–4 April 2005, Cochin, Kerala, India. The conference programme reads:

The MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] are a commitment by the community of nations to a comprehensive development vision that puts poverty reduction as central to sustaining global socio-economic progress. All United Nations Member States have accepted these goals as a framework for measuring development progress and have pledged to meet them. This conference intends to contemplate on the role that cities need to play in the achievement of these national goals, especially in view of the urbanization of poverty, through local strategies and actions.

(All India Institute of Local Self-Government 2005)

- 4 We note that Dalits, who occupy the lower rungs of the stratification hierarchy in India, comprise some 17 per cent of the Indian population: a 'majority (81.3 per cent) of them live in rural areas and only about 19 per cent of them live in urban areas' (Ramaiah 2002: 2).

Acknowledgements

A much earlier version of this article was presented at a University of East London Business School, UK, Advanced Research Seminar, and appeared in their Working Paper series; we would like to thank all those, including Professor Kazem Chaharbaghi and colleagues, who provided valuable feedback. We are especially grateful to the Editors and Reviewers of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* for their extremely insightful comments and encouragement to produce a vastly improved version.

References

- Alcock, P. and Craig, G. 2001. *International Social Policy: Welfare Regimes in the Developed World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alcoff, L. 1988. 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 13 (3): 405–36.

- All India Institute of Local Self-Government. 2005. World Mayors' Conference on Millennium Development Goals and the Role of Cities, Cochin, Kerala, India, 2–4 April.
- Barry, J., Berg, E. and Chandler, J. 2006. 'Social Movement and Change in the Public Sector', *Public Management Review* 8 (3): 433–48.
- Barry, J., Honour, T. and Palnitkar, S. 1998. 'Women, Urban Governance and the Public Service Ethos', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 29 (2–3): 251–72.
- Barry, J., Honour, T. and Palnitkar, S. 2004. 'Social Movement, Acton and Change: The Influence of Women's Movements on City Government in Mumbai and London', *Gender, Work and Organization* 11 (2): 143–62.
- Basu, A. 1995. *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Berger, P. and Luckman, T. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bottomore, T. 1993. *Political Sociology*, 2nd ed. London: Pluto Press.
- Breckenridge, C. A. and van der Veer, P. (eds). 1993. *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chatterjee, P. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Clarke, J. 2004. 'Dissolving the Public Realm? The Logics and Limits of Neo-Liberalism', *Journal of Social Policy* 33 (1): 27–48.
- Cochin Declaration. 2005. Available at <http://ailsg.org/centerasp/CochinDec.asp> (accessed 28 February 2005).
- Commonwealth Local Government Forum. 2001. *Reserved Seats for Women in Indian Local Government: Expanding the Involvement of Women in Local Government through Legislative Measures*. London: Commonwealth Local Government Forum. Available at www.clgf.org.uk (accessed 28 February 2005).
- Dahlerup, D. 1988. 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11 (4): 275–98.
- De Lauretis, T. 1989. 'The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain', *Differences* 1 (2): 3–37.
- Desai, M. 1996. 'Informal Organizations as Agents for Change: Notes from the Contemporary Women's Movement in India', *Mobilization: An International Journal* 1 (2): 159–73.
- Desai, M. 1997. 'Reflections from Contemporary Women's Movements in India', in Dean, J. (ed.) *Feminism and the New Democracy*, pp. 110–23. London: Sage.
- Faludi, S. 1992. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Firestone, S. 1970. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. London: The Women's Press.
- Forbes, G. 1996. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Foucault, M. 1976. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Fukuyama, F. 1989. 'The End of History?' in Ball, T. and Dagger, R. (eds) *Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader*, pp. 432–41. New York: Harper Collins.

- Gilligan, C. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Habermas, J. 1995. 'Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism', *Journal of Philosophy* XCII (3): 109–31.
- Hall, S. 1996. 'When was the "Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', in Curti, L. and Chambers, I. (eds) *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, pp. 242–60. London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hirst, P. 1998. *Can the European Welfare State Survive Globalization? Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands in Comparative Perspective*. Working Paper Series in European Studies, 2 (1). London: Birkbeck College, University of London.
- Honour, T., Barry, J. and Palnitkar, S. 2003. 'Gendered States, Critical Engagements', in Barry, J., Dent, M. and O'Neill, M. (eds) *Gender and the Public Sector: Professionals and Managerial Change*, pp. 27–43. London: Routledge.
- Kaushik, S. 1993. *Women and Panchayati Raj*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- Kothari, S. 1993. 'Social Movements and the Redefinition of Democracy', in Oldenburg, P. (ed.) *India Briefing*, pp. 131–62. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kumar, N. (ed.). 1994. *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. Charlottesville, VA & London: University Press of Virginia.
- Kumari, R. (ed.). 1993. *Women in Politics: Forms and Processes*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- Leys, C. 2001. *Market-Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*. London: Verso.
- Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lloyd, M. 2005. *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power, Politics*. London: Sage.
- Ludden, D. 1993. 'Orientalist Imperialism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge', in Breckenridge C. A. and van der Veer, P. (eds) *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*, pp. 250–78. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lyons, K., Manion, K. and Carlsen, M. 2006. *International Perspectives on Social Work: Global Conditions and Local Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MacIntyre, A. 1984. 'The Essential Contestability of Some Social Science Concepts', *Ethics* 1: 1–9.
- Maiello, A. 1996. 'Ethnic Conflict in Post-Colonial India', in Chambers, I. and Curti, L. (eds) *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, pp. 99–114. London: Routledge.
- McNay, L. 1996. 'Michel de Certeau and the Ambivalent Everyday', *Social Semiotics* 6 (1): 61–81.
- Mouffe, C. 1999. 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?', *Social Research* 66 (3): 745–57.
- Nicholson, L. J. 1990. 'Introduction', in Nicholson L. J. (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 1–16. New York & London: Routledge & Chapman Hall.
- Panda, S. 1986. 'Political Efficacy and Political Participation: A Study of Women's Involvement', in Kaushik, S. (ed.). 1993. *Women's Participation in Politics*, pp. 77–87. New Delhi: Vikas.

- Phoenix, A. 2006. 'Interrogating Intersectionality: Productive Ways of Theorising Multiple Positioning', *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 2–3 (6): 21–30.
- Prasad, A. 2003. 'The Gaze of the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis', in Prasad, A. (ed.) *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis*, pp. 3–43. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rajchman, J. 2007. 'Enlightenment Today: Introduction to the Politics of Truth', in Lotringer, S. (ed.) *The Politics of Truth: Michel Foucault*, pp. 9–28. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Ramaiah, A. 2002. *The Plight of Dalits: A Challenge to the Social Work Profession*, Available at <http://www.tiss.edu/faculty/ramaiah>.
- Ray, R. 1999. *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Seabrook, J. 1997. 'Still Searching for Gandhi', *New Statesman*, 15 August, pp. 26–7.
- Sheth, D. L. 1995. 'Democracy and Globalization in India: Post-Cold War Discourse', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Local Governance Around the World* 540 (July): 24–39.
- Singh, S. G., Lele, M. K., Sathe, N., Sonalkar, W. and Maydeo, A. 1993. 'Participation of Women in Electoral Politics in Maharashtra', in Kumari, R. (ed.) *Women in Politics: Forms and Processes*, pp. 63–107. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- Solanis, V. 1968. *SCUM Manifesto*. London: Matriarchy Study Group.
- Spivak, G. C. 1988. 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Guha, R. and Spivak G. C. (eds) *Selected Subaltern Studies*, pp. 3–32. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. 1952. 'The Caste System in India', in Beteille, A. (ed.). 1969. *Social Inequality*, pp. 265–72. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Townsend, P. 1979. *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.