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Developing Explanations for Difference(s): Gender and Village-level Democracy in India and China

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Recent legislation enacted in India has set a quota of 33 per cent for female membership of the village *panchayats* (councils), resulting in a massive increase in women's representation in grassroots politics. In China, the break up of the commune system and the privatisation of agriculture have resulted in a sharp decline in women's representation in village assemblies. In this article I wish to examine this discrepancy. I begin by examining two different explanations of women's presence in political spheres. I first examine the structural explanations that have been put forward by feminists in their analysis of women's political exclusion. I then focus on some post-structuralist interventions by feminists theorising gender, nationalism and identity. The points of reference of the two are diverse, and nodes of meaning variously constituted. However, despite quite different theoretical frames, both explanations explore notions of exclusion and marginality of women under patriarchal political regimes. Further, both focus on meanings of modernity, nation, class and gender in the constitution of these regimes, and of women's exclusions within them. The intellectual terrains upon which the two approaches have developed are different, such that, until recently, a conversation between them has not always occurred.[1] I seek here to cross the boundaries of these two explanatory models in an attempt further to complicate our viewing of women's positionings within the political space of the nation-state.

The article is divided into two sections. In the first section I rehearse some of the arguments familiar to those of us working within the discipline of development studies. As I wish to focus on village-level political institutions, I explore the links made in the women and development literature between the levels of women's participation in agricultural production and their social status in the villages. These include both liberal and Marxist approaches and their critiques. I then argue that, while important, these structuralist explanations do not provide

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adequate frameworks of analysis and that we need to focus on the specificities of 'the political' in order to understand the divergent pressures and dynamics that produce women's exclusion from public spaces. In the second section, I focus on some recent work on modernity and women's constituted and constituting space in politics in India and the construction of gendered identities in China. This allows me to cut across the disciplinary boundaries of postcolonial feminist theory and the more familiar gender and development perspectives to reflect upon a more complicated set of explanations for the discrepancy in levels of political representation that I began with.

I suggest that modernity had different meanings for the political elites of the two countries, and therefore for the form that the modern nation-state took in India and China. The political space within the two nation-states was constituted differently, allowing women in the two countries varied political spaces within which to organise. These two factors together led to different foci and explanations of gender inequality and resulted in varied policy outcomes for women in the two countries. I argue, thus, that the role of national elites, the political spaces available to women to organise and make demands upon the state elites, and the initiatives of international social institutions have all played a part in political agenda-setting in the two countries, which has led to different and unexpected results for women's participation in the political systems; results which cannot be explained simply through the structuralist models generally employed hitherto.

Explaining exclusions: liberal and Marxist approaches to women's work and status

Before examining the arguments in detail, I want to question briefly the framework within which the feminist development literatures have taken shape, and continued to develop. The scripting of women in development tends to fall into a trap of granting privilege to women in the same way as is done when in the sociological literature on class the subject is automatically equated with 'working class'.[2] This obstructs a more textured analysis of women's position and role in different economic and social contexts. Further, we find that the exclusion of Marxist regimes from the framework of development remains unchallenged within feminist development literature. China, for example, has never been regarded as an object of study in this literature, despite the Maoist insistence upon Chinese membership of the Third World.[3] As a result, the authorship of the development literature has been retained by writers and practitioners based in the 'developed' West. The parameters of what is regarded as women in development, or gender and development, are then drawn and maintained within paradigms recognisable in the West.[4]

In this section I start with setting out the liberal and Marxist–feminist approaches to women's social status. Both sets of literatures, in different ways, correlate women's access to the sphere of work and their social status. My argument is that both these explanations, by not focusing on the specific political contexts and discourses of nation-states and their elites, are unable to explain the differences in the political status of rural women in India and China.

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Women's work and women's status: the liberal paradigm

In 1970 Esther Boserup published her pathbreaking study on *Women's Role in Economic Development*. Briefly, Boserup's argument was that women's status varies with the nature of productive activity and their involvement in it. Focusing on rural production, Boserup contended that the mechanisation of agriculture, generally equated with economic development, has resulted in the separation of women's labour from what is characterised as agricultural labour, which in turn undermines their social status. She pointed to shifting agriculture and irrigated agriculture as economic regimes where women's participation in production as well as their social status was high.[5] Tinker reinforced Boserup's analysis by suggesting that, because Western aid agencies exported gender stereotypes, so modernisation of agriculture led to the widening of the gap between men and women in economic and social terms.[6] Whyte and Whyte reached similar conclusions, while at the same time citing the 'cultural' as mitigating factors.[7] So, while a system of irrigated agriculture in Thailand could mean an improved status for women, the presence of Islam mediates this form of agriculture in Bangladesh to give women a low social status. However, the key to women's social status remains their participation in agricultural production, which is largely calculated through empirical data. Rogers, writing a decade after Boserup, made a similar analysis of women's work and social status as Boserup, but also emphasised the importance of women to the development process itself; it was not only women who would benefit from expansion of opportunity, but the development process itself would better achieve its targets.[8] It was an appeal to efficiency as much to a better deal for women. This analysis became the basis upon which the women in development (WID) agenda was crafted. The project was to ensure that the benefits of modernisation accrued to women as well as men in the Third World.

The liberal feminist literature focused on the issue of widening the access of women in agricultural production. Its concern with questions of access—which was in line with its liberal theoretical approach—led to an underemphasis on the social and political structures within which women were located and acted. This led to an oft-repeated prescription regarding improving women's standards of education so that they might compete more vigorously with men in the agricultural labour market. Little emphasis was placed on the content and context of education. The assumption was that 'education' remained the same when provided for men and women, girls and boys; the same as what was already being provided in the mainstream. And it was the provision of education which was presumed important for changing the context, rather than the context being important in itself to the dissemination of, and empowerment through, education. The individual, rather than social categories, are the focus of such analysis; the privileging of the male productive norm—within which women, in this analysis, need to participate—led to a 'truncated understanding of their lives'.[9] Despite all its problems, however, Boserup's and others' work made an important correlation between work and status which had thus far been ignored by the development agencies and governments in the West. This analysis also resonated

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with the attempts of liberal nation-states like India to address the persistent gender gap in their societies.

Marxist approaches

The correlation between work and status was not new. Marx and Engels had both made this connection clearly in their analysis of gender relations in the context of capitalist production. Their analysis too rested upon the assumption that women's status in society was dependent upon their access to, or exclusion from, the sphere of economic production. According to this view, the systematic exclusion of women was the result of the transition of the economy from a period of shifting to settled agriculture where women were pushed out of cultivation into home work, and where the definitions of work as we know it—as quantifiable and in the public space—began to take shape. Property and marriage, both associated with this mode of production by Engels, framed women's dependence on men. Capitalism, as an advanced form of property relations and capital accumulation, reinforced women's dependence on men. Capitalist forms of production also mobilised women into work in the public space, and yet maintained and indeed reinforced the gendered division of labour as technology advanced.

Assumptions about a male-headed family norm led to women's work being regarded as peripheral to the family income, which was earned by the man. Assumptions about women's bodies, skills and reproductive and caring roles meant that they found themselves in low-paid jobs. This explanation of exclusion focused on the structural bases of women's exploitation and tied these securely to particular modes of production. The overcoming of these modes, through class struggles, was seen as the optimal strategy for 'women's liberation'. Marxist feminists found much to support in this analysis of the family and property. Third World Marxist feminists were also able to make connections between the dependency of Third World states on international capitalism, and women's exploitation within the reconstituting families and economies.[10] Such a structuralist explanation had obvious gaps, despite the strong link it made between women's access to the public world of work and their social status. Apart from being Eurocentric in assuming one form of property and family structure to be the norm, it was also economically determinist. As Mies pointed out, 'patriarchal civilization [is] a system, of which capitalism constitutes the most recent and most universal manifestation'.[11] However, the orthodox Marxist explanation of women's subordination formed the basis of state policy in practically all state socialist countries, including China. By focusing almost exclusively on class relations, the Chinese communists overlooked the fact that many aspects of women's subordination cannot be explained by reference to private property and the bourgeois family norm.

While the liberal analysis was unable to contextualise women's individual choices within structural power surrounding them, the Marxist analysis left women with little choice but to join the overarching project of building socialism as a means of liberation. Improvement in access to education was the tactic in pursuit of gender justice put forward by the liberals; mobilisation of women into

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the economic sphere was advocated by the Marxists. Liberal and Marxist states made these varied analyses the bases of their policies. However, as all the indicators of women's status in our two case studies, discussed in the next section, show, neither of these strategies has been particularly successful in addressing issues of gender justice. Whether focusing on education or on women's mobilisation into work, women's participation in the public political sphere has remained very limited. I suggest that an important reason for the failure by both the above models to explain the levels of women's participation in the public political spheres stems from their neglect of the specificities of political discourses and the forms of political structures and meanings that states function with and within. In the next sections I outline the histories of two major Third World countries—India and China—to show how the structural frameworks established by the political elites, and the challenges posed to these, have affected the spaces in which women could mobilise and be politically active and effective.

The Indian example

Indian independence saw a degree of change in patterns of ownership of land, through both migration that resulted from the partition of the country and land reform legislation.[12] However, for the most part, land ownership remained undisturbed and in private hands. As a result, unlike in China, there has been no state-led policy focusing on labour mobilisation in agriculture which has specifically included women. State policies have, however, focused on poverty alleviation programmes, health provision, credit facilities to rural populations, at times specifically targeted at women, on improving implementation of land reform legislation, and recently on the introduction of structural adjustment. These have affected women's lives crucially, but there has not been any direct mobilisation of women into work by state institutions.

Women make up 31 per cent of the agricultural labour force in India. However, only 23 per cent of those classified as cultivators are women. At the same time 61 per cent of the 'agricultural helpers'—those who provide unpaid labour to the family farm—are women.[13] Predictably, the nature and extent of their participation in agricultural work varies according to membership of class, caste and/or religion. The lower the class/caste status of the woman's family, the higher the percentage of work done outside the domestic sphere; the more a religious and cultural tradition emphasises segregation, the less the visibility of women in agricultural work. Agro-ecological zones—wet/dry, rice/wheat—also affect the levels of women's participation in agricultural production. However, regional variations are significant and cut across many of these binaries. For example, women in the south (wet agro-ecological zones) participate much more than those in the north, but patterns of women's participation in the western and central regions do not conform to the southern 'wet agro-systems'. Similarly, female participation is low in the most prosperous states of Punjab and Haryana, but also in the poorest states of Bihar and West Bengal (the latter area is also a rice producing 'wet area').[14] Most research indicates that high levels of women's participation in agricultural production in India can be an important

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indicator of the prevalence of poverty. Female agricultural labourers are themselves the poorest in India, with wage levels of about three-quarters of male wages, and with the highest incidence of poverty of any occupational category. The problem with making correlations between increased participation in agricultural work and social status thus becomes obvious. What complicates matters further is an examination of women's participation in politics in rural India, which has shown an increased level of state support through quota legislation.[15]

As early as 1957 the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, which made recommendations on the introduction of the system of *panchayats* as part of the Indian political structure, suggested the co-option of women into the *panchayats* so that women's and childrens' interests were looked after.[16] This recommendation was taken up by various states with different levels of enthusiasm. In 1976 the *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* suggested that women's representation at the *panchayat* was extremely low and that this could be rectified only by establishing 'Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level to ensure greater participation by women in the political process'.[17] No national policy initiative resulted from this recommendation. In 1988 the National Perspective Plan for Women recommended a 30 per cent quota for women not only in the *panchayats* but also in *panchayat* leadership. In 1993 the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act was passed, with support from all major political parties, which provided for a quota of 33 per cent female membership in *panchayats*. One of the important reasons for the acceptance of quotas in 1993 was the changing pattern of party politics in India. With the fracturing of Congress domination, an increasing number of parties were competing for votes. Women's votes, and their mobilisation into party politics to gain those votes, has given women an opportunity to translate their activism into political clout.[18] Other factors also include international pressures and the strength of women's groups in mobilising support for their demands at local, national and international levels.

The Chinese example

After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in China in 1949, sustained attempts were made to mobilise women into agricultural work. This was part of the commitment of the CCP to resolving 'the woman question' in China. Land reform and the Marriage Law of 1950 opened up the possibility of waged work for women in agriculture. 'In 1950, in newly liberated areas, only 20 to 40 per cent of the female labor force participated in farm work; by 1957, 70 per cent of adult rural women were engaged in field work.'[19] The cooperative movement of 1956–8 and the communisation of Chinese agriculture provided the backdrop for women's mobilisation into agricultural labour. Women counted as collective and then commune members in their own right, and the work-point system of labour valuation helped in this process of individuation. By the end of 1956 the work-points for women's income were one-quarter of the total in many cooperatives in rural China. The Great Leap Forward (1958–60), which saw mobilisation of male agricultural labour into massive infrastructural projects, also saw 90 per cent of women participating in agricultural labour, 'averaging

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about 250 days of labour per year, equivalent to approximately three quarters of the annual labour of a male worker'.[20] Because the process of land reform and mobilisation of agricultural labour was driven by the CCP's ideological commitment to economic redistribution and socialist forms of production, variations on account of cultural and religious factors are far fewer in China. However, the nature of women's work remained subordinate to male work patterns. The description of 'agricultural helper' used above would not be inappropriate here, even though this help was waged and accounted for. An undeveloped commodity economy led to a continuation of household self-sufficiency, where women took up all the traditional domestic chores. Thus in the period from 1949–76 most non-collective agricultural work—'domestic sideline production'—was done by women as part of their unwaged contribution to the family income. Domestic sideline work 'was also regarded with suspicion by the Communist Party under Mao Zedong both because it was productive and because it could potentially detract from or threaten the commune economy'.[21] However, by the late 1970s around 80 per cent of peasant women worked in collective agriculture, constituting at least 40 per cent of the collective labour force in the countryside.[22]

In the post-Mao period (1978–) agricultural production in China has been transformed through a process of decollectivisation and the introduction of market reforms. A 'family responsibility system' of agricultural production has replaced the people's communes. While women can also contract land independently, the norm is for the male head of household to contract land from the state. Diversification of the rural economy has meant that sideline production has been transformed into a successful 'courtyard economy' where women predominate. Out of the courtyard economy has also grown the 'specialised household'—high-earning rural households which derive most of their income from just one area of either agricultural or non-agricultural production or services.[23] Specialised households run by women comprise 35–40 per cent of all specialised households, with some regions showing a figure of 55 per cent. Employment outside agriculture grew by nearly 16 per cent a year between 1980 and 1990; rural industry employed 34.7 million of the over 97.6 million rural non-agricultural labour force by 1992. This has led to another significant trend in rural employment. It is estimated that rural women are now responsible for 60–70 per cent of the total work of food production.[24] Most of these women are middle-aged—those with the least inclination and possibilities to migrate to the cities and the least access to the more productive work in rural industry or cash crop production. Overall, women in rural China are experiencing an expansion of options for work, with varied levels of control of resources as the family becomes the nodal centre of economic production and contractual arrangements.

The changes in the Chinese rural economy have also been paralleled by changes in rural political and administrative structures. The CCP had organised peasant associations in the early years of the People's Republic which were expected to have a minimum of 30–40 per cent women members.[25] Chinese agriculture was arranged into three tiers of organisation—the commune, the brigade and the production team. Women cadres were present at all levels in significant numbers, mobilised through the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and through an informal quota system.[26] Underrepresentation at the

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levels of leadership was a cause for concern, but in general 'Chinese women enjoyed greater political equality with men than their counterparts in most other developing countries'.[27] In the post-Mao period we have seen a significant decline of women's representation in rural institutions. Rural women are not being recruited into the CCP, which is privileging educated, urban recruits. Seventy per cent of all illiterates in China today are female. At the level of organisational positions, women's share has come down from the earlier 20–25 per cent to 4–8 per cent. While state policies are focusing on improving women's education, especially skills important to food production and domestic sideline production,[28] no specific policies have been put forward to rectify the growing imbalance in women's representation in rural organisations. Cadres of the All-China Women's Federation are no longer being supported in full-time educational work with rural women. 'Women's political participation is not regarded as an independent activity; it must be based on economic participation'.[29] In contrast to the Indian case, economic participation by women in China is not an indicator of family poverty. Women are participating in varied areas of rural production and are taking advantage of the changed economic climate and policies to improve their own and their families' standards of living. However, yet again, we are struck by the fact that economic participation in the rural economy is not translating into higher levels of political representation for women.

To recapitulate the main points made so far (1) in the Indian context, women's participation in agricultural work is an indicator of levels of family poverty; the higher the levels of women's participation, the poorer the family; (2) the levels of women's political participation in Indian *panchayats* have been significantly raised through the 74th Amendment Act of 1993; (3) in China the privatisation of agriculture has led to an expansion of work possibilities for women; although they are largely engaged in either food production or domestic sideline production, they are also engaged in running more lucrative and successful specialised households; and (4) levels of women's participation in rural organisations and branches of the CCP are declining, without, as yet, any clear policies to address this growing underrepresentation of women in the political sphere. Moreover, the economic/structural analyses examined so far do not suffice in explaining the differences in my two case-studies.

I now consider the proposition that the correlation between access to the world of work and an improved status needs to be mediated by other frameworks and strategies that are in the first instance political. There is a growing acknowledgement among feminists that women's presence in politics is of critical importance.[30] Agarwal, for example, has emphasised that 'greater representation by gender-progressive women in the legislatures, the judiciary, and many tiers of the legal machinery, would be a necessary part of that process, as would be the creation of a favourable ideological climate, the absence of which can lead to retrogressive shifts'.[31] Taking political subordination seriously means taking the political processes and contestations seriously; it means taking seriously the power that the state has in the contexts within which women operate. However, taking the state seriously also requires a recognition of the fractured terrain upon which its various institutions are situated, and using the interstices between the

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various levels of state institutions to the best advantage of women's struggles.[32] These struggles can lead to a confrontation with state institutions, and also to negotiations for 'getting institutions right for women'.[33] Further, while these struggles can be constrained by state power, they can also be constitutive of it. The strategic question then becomes one of reading the state map as accurately as possible in order to be able to organise resistance and negotiations optimally.

In this context the existing parameters of particular political systems become important, as do the discourses of legitimacy that state institutions employ. The first is important to the spaces available for the mobilisation of women and to the contesting of the dominant discourses of gendered power. The second is critical to the language and limits of negotiations that might, or might not, accrue between state institutions and women's struggles within a given political context. In the next section I explain the impact of the different political systems and the different discourses of legitimacy employed by elites within them on women's political status in the two countries.

Legitimacy, identity and political representation: issues for achieving gender justice

One of the curious things one notices in the above case-studies is this: recent legislation regarding women's representation in *panchayats* in India acknowledges group-based exclusions; in China we find a move away from such a position to the more traditional liberal stance of making the individual the primary focus of social and economic life. An examination of the two standpoints reveals that the particularities of the postcolonial state systems and the role of the elites within these have much to do with explaining this difference. It could be argued that both the liberal and the Marxist elites in India and China simply paid little attention to gender issues in the political sphere, so preoccupied was each with moving more women into paid labour or education.[34] However, I argue that the agendas for economic development and the fashioning of gender relations went hand in hand; that in the process certain opportunities were opened for women and others closed off.[35]

The Indian state elites and legitimacy

India is a liberal democratic state where the political elites have emphasised the importance of equal opportunities for all citizens—men and women. Access to opportunities in education has been considered particularly important in providing the necessary skills to compete in the market as an equal. However, we also find that the Indian state displays some characteristics which take it beyond any simple liberal analysis. As a postcolonial state, the Indian state occupies a particular space within society and economy.

The particular position of the Indian elites arose from anti-colonial struggles which were mounted largely within the modernising, liberal parameters that were privileged by the colonial rulers. The leadership of the Indian National Congress was largely middle- and upper-class, and upper caste. Highly educated within the colonial model, this group generally accepted the liberal political

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argument. Although most of the leadership was male, women found a place within the leadership and some, like Sarojini Naidu, were important members of the various committees. These women, however, were themselves from privileged backgrounds and were therefore atypical of the majority of women. They were also self-consciously universalist in their discourse—they identified with the idea of 'nation' as a non-gendered entity.[36] While Gandhi strove to present an alternative voice, the policy makers under Nehru were self-proclaimed modernisers. However, as Sarkar has pointed out, the modernity of the nationalist elites was only a 'weak and distorted caricature'.[37] Mani's work shows how this weak modernity played out in practice. She contends that the conception of tradition that the modernising nationalists attacked and the traditionalists defended was 'one that is specifically colonial'.[38] If the colonial powers used women's bodies as symbolic references to legitimise colonial rule, nationalist elites also used images of women to symbolise the new nation. Women as citizens of free India were a powerful image to be mobilised in the cause of legitimising the postcolonial state.

It has been argued that the postcolonial state prioritised the building of a modern capitalist economy while at the same time securing the central position of its own elites. The rhetoric of social and economic change in the interest of 'nation-building' was widely used by the elites to legitimise their position, allowing them a relatively autonomous sphere of action both within the economy and society.[39] As I have pointed out elsewhere, this characteristic was not only important to the legitimising strategies of the state elites, but was important to opposition groups as a means of holding the state organisations accountable.[40] These two characteristics of modernity and relative autonomy gave to the postcolonial state an impetus to framing social relations that were reflective of the new status of independent India.

The importance placed on the fashioning of gender relations by the Congress elites is evident in the following example. Even before India became independent, the Indian National Congress set up a National Planning Committee (NPC) in 1938 under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru to draw the developmental map of the new India. One of the nine subcommittees established by the NPC was on 'Woman's Role in a Planned Economy'.[41] The subcommittee was to deal particularly with issues of equal opportunities and rights for women and access to the world of economic production, which was identified as key to resolving the unequal status of women. The individual (woman) was the central figure for the committee, while the 'social' largely represented the hindrances, in the form of custom, preventing the individual participating as a 'useful citizen' in the life of the new nation. The nation was the only social unit which was liberating for the Indian woman, and the liberation of the Indian woman was important to the functioning of the modern nation within the global order. However, from the beginning there was a tension evident in the discussions of the committee. While the 'social' as custom was suspect, the committee was also concerned with maintaining customs and 'traditions': 'it is not our desire to belittle in any way these traditions, which have in the past contributed to the happiness and progress of the individual and have been the means of raising the dignity and beauty of Indian womanhood and conserving the *spiritual attributes of the Indian*

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Nation'.[42] The converging lines of womanhood and spirituality of the Indian nation within this document reveal the fraught nature of the enterprise upon which the Indian modernising elites were embarked. There was a constant redrawing of the social and historical map around the body of the woman to keep hold of the convergence that had been created; this was a project which could not reconcile the tensions with the affirmations of culture. We find, therefore, that the report of the committee receives little mention after formal citizenship rights were granted to women in the Indian constitution in 1950.

Women were granted the right to work, to stand for elections and to be elected. At the same time, concerns about 'minority sensibilities' led the Indian elites to accept constructed social identities that were essentially linked to framing women's bodies; the Muslim Personal Law defined the social framework for the 'Muslim woman' and took precedence over the Indian woman citizen. This happened despite the hope expressed by the committee for 'a common civil code including inheritance, marriage and divorce laws, which should be optional to begin with but universally enforced' within a 'reasonable period of its passing into Act'. Thus the liberal modernising framework included women within the political system as citizens, without problematising the terms within which such categories were defined within the prevailing hierarchies of the social order. While India's elites attempted to mark the country with a modern identity by equality legislation, and by linking traditional social systems such as the family, caste and religion with the 'pre-modern', they also employed markers of identity—minorities, castes—to construct new political stabilities and renew national pride. As the Indian women's movements developed, they began to challenge this complex liberalism of the Indian elites which invests in constituting women's identity in/as the closed and stable space of community, on the one hand, and yet recognises their demands for democratic rights as citizens in the open-ended space of civil society, on the other.

The political form that the Indian state had taken was important in this context of organising for change. As indicated, India is a multiparty democracy with elite competition as the primary motor for changes in development policy agendas. Women's groups have utilised the democratic space both to 'politicise gender'[43] and to struggle against the binding power of the party political system that at once formalises as well as marginalises women's demands for greater visibility and representation.[44] Significant changes within the political life of the country have seen the erosion of 'the Congress system' of government, introducing new social forces and political combinations which are having different impacts upon the woman/nation discourses.[45] However, the predominant elites still identify with the modernising project of the early nationalist ruling groups. Most political parties have recognised the symbolic importance of women's place in the political sphere under pressure from women's movements. In seeking new constituencies in the context of the breakdown of the Congress system, most political parties have looked to women as an important 'vote-bank'. And yet this recognition has not translated into any commitment to significant redistribution of resources that might invest the political rhetoric of equity with real power. The recognition of women as an important and distinctive group in politics has, however, allowed women's movements to insist

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upon certain formal rights and measures important to the expansion of the political space within which women can act.

Elites and gender recognition in China

The revolutionary state set up in China in 1949 was a socialist state based upon the principles of 'democratic centralism' mediated by nationalism. Anti-imperialism framed the experiences of this state, as much as it did those of the Indian state, even though the nature and form of this anti-imperialism (as of the experience of imperialism itself) was different from that in India. As in India, the nationalist leaderships in China were largely middle class and university educated. The debates of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 had endorsed a modernist vision for the New China for both the liberal and the Marxist elites.[46] Recovering the woman's place for the nationalist/socialist cause meant reforming the social relations that framed women's lives—through economic as well as political rights. Like the Indian elites, the political elites in communist China began by addressing the 'woman question' through law. The Marriage Law of 1950 outlawed concubinage and bigamy and gave women the right to choose their own partners. Free choice in marriage was regarded as the means to stop the exploitation of women in a context of feudal patterns of patriarchy which endorsed concubinage. But, as Evans points out, 'the law was premised on a naturalised and hierarchical view of gender relations that, by definition, limited the extent of the challenge that women could launch against the patriarchal system'.[47] While the Indian elites had sacrificed the interests of Muslim women on the altar of 'minority (male) sensibilities', the Chinese elites sought to reassure the millions of young men recruited into the military by denying women married to them the right to divorce without the consent of their husbands. Heterosexuality and monogamy were the two pillars of new sexual relations in socialist China, and women's transgression of either was projected as a threat to the stability of the new social order. It is not surprising in this context that the publicity given to the Marriage Law was considerably less than to the Land Law, which was passed in the same year.

Thus, like the Indian elites, the Chinese elites too displayed characteristics of a 'weak and distorted' modernism when they insisted upon opposing 'the idea of absolute freedom in marriage as it creates chaotic conditions in society and antagonises the peasants and the Red Army'.[48] Judith Stacey's powerful critique of the 'compromise' between socialism and patriarchy has focused on nationalism as important to our understanding of the position of the Chinese elites on gender justice.[49] Evans makes the point that political stability and social order played the same role. Sinification of Marxism also led to the creation of a nationalist *Chinese* socialist identity that was as much tied to the appropriate behaviour of the woman as to the 'nationalising' of a doctrine. The woman's body was not only confined within a monogamous framework; it was also made the focus of continued scrutiny by placing the woman at the centre of the stability of marriage itself.[50] National identity and modernity have thus gone hand in hand in China. The opening up of the public political and economic spheres was framed by identifying appropriate boundaries characterising a social

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ordering. This ordering, in turn, was based upon fashioning stabilities of gender relations, central to which was the place of 'woman'. This configuration of forces of stability has been particularly difficult for women in China. This is because the Chinese elites have overlaid the significant markers of nationalism and modernity with the socialist state; a challenge to the dominant discourses of gender in this context becomes a challenge to the stability of the state and nation itself.

The Chinese state, unlike the Indian, has been more in command of both despotic and infrastructural power and has resisted attempts to subvert constituted meanings of gendered identities. Organisationally, this resistance to challenges of meaning was played out through the positioning of the ACWF. This organisation functioned largely as a mobilising organisation; CCP policies on families and women's issues were transmitted through the Federation. Working within a system which privileged class politics above any other, the Federation was regarded as a cog in the state machine designed to educate and motivate women in supporting state policies. At the level of the communes, the presence of the Federation, as a representative of women's interests, thus needs to be analysed in the light of its weak organisational position within the political system.

While the earlier identities were constructed in the context of nationalism and building socialism in a bipolar world, the reaffirmation of the mediated presence of the woman on the public terrain in the post-Mao period has different concerns at its centre. As Evans points out, the 'refamilisation' of society, the process whereby the family has been confirmed as the key economic and social unit, requires the continued stabilising presence of the woman at its heart.[51] The urgency of the need for the modernisation of China required the support of women, in particular in implementing the one-child family policy. Further, the withdrawal of the state from areas of the economy and the introduction of the market meant that the social configurations within which women functioned needed to be realigned. The role of the woman as mother/carer became a feature of state discourses. Valorisation of women in the field of production shifted from urban to rural settings where women were regarded as central to the success of the courtyard economy. While the withdrawal of state subsidies meant a sharp decline in educational services in rural China, and with it the decline in levels of female literacy, the place of the female figure within the household became increasingly important. However, rural reforms have also seen an increase of female migration from rural areas to the cities. The opening up of the market has also created new vulnerabilities for rural women; old forms of marriage have re-emerged, as has sexual exploitation, kidnapping of women for sale into prostitution and violence against women. Women have thus faced new challenges within the changing economy, as well as come by new rewards. At the organisational level, while the All-China Women's Federation has raised the issue of creating an autonomous space for itself, it is still very much dependent upon the CCP and has to function within the narrow confines of a one-party-dominated political system.

One area with which the ACWF is particularly concerned is the falling number of women representatives in various political organisations. In 1988 the

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Central Organisational Department issued Document Number 6: 'Opinion on strengthening the work of training women cadres for selection and promotion in the process of reforms and opening up'. As Jude Howell notes, 'discussions abounded in the late 80s and early 90s about the pros and cons of quotas for women to political offices'.[52] However, the organisation is functioning not only within a one-party system, but also within changed economic conditions. So when the CCP leadership moves from structuralist explanations of social exclusion (class) to ones which emphasise the importance of individual agency within a non-liberal political system, the constraints upon the ability of the ACWF to promote alternative views are considerable. At the informal level, however, there has been an explosion of writings by and about women which represents 'a creative attempt to wrest the power to define "woman" away from the state in both its Maoist and its reform incarnations'.[53] The challenge that faces women's groups and organisations is to carve out spaces of resistance within a political terrain still marked by authoritarianism, at a time when changed economic realities and state discourses have moved away from old solidarities of class to leave a confused 'individual' bearing responsibility for her/his social position.

The national and the international arenas and women's movements

National leaderships in both India and China have been cognisant of the international sphere within which they are situated. Their concerns over addressing issues of exclusion—however philosophically situated—have had much to do with their experience of colonialism, on the one hand, and with the postcolonial positionings of independent nation-states, on the other. While the Cold War marked the world within which the two leaderships functioned, both Indian and Chinese elites sought inclusion in international organisations such as the United Nations. An international presence has also allowed elites of both countries to be aware of, and participate in, dominant themes in global gender discourses, and particular initiatives of the UN—the 1975–85 UN Decade of Women, for example—have provided foci for state initiatives to address issues of gender justice.

However, the differences in the political systems of the two countries have not allowed women's groups in the two countries to make use of international initiatives, discourses and alliances in the same way. The greater open-endedness of the Indian political system has allowed women's groups there not only to seek support but to engage in creative and critical dialogue with feminists in the international sphere. The 'opening up' of China has been limited by its political system, which has at times become central to international responses to state initiatives and has placed women's groups in the country in a difficult position. For example, while both the ACWF and other non-/semi-official women's groups in China participated in the NGO Forum at the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women, the focus on China's human rights record meant that the issue of national autonomy became entangled with the issue of women's human rights. The ACWF's ambivalent position within the Chinese political system meant that it was as much looking to make new alliances, as to promote the

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Chinese 'success story'. Chen Muhua, chair of the ACWF delegation to the conference, said: 'the Chinese government delegation will face three tasks: the first is to show the world the situation of Chinese women, to explain government policies and measures to solve women's problems and to show our achievements in this respect so far'.[54]

A focus on 'the political' thus allows us to explore new spaces for the explanation of different policy outcomes in India and China. The unexpected no longer remains that; the differences become explicable. There are, however, certain problems attendant upon this emphasis on political narratives and discourses. First, the focus remains the elites—as the main political agents, or those constituted as agents through pressures of nationalist and social movements, historical moments and international expectations. Second, the study of policy outcomes and framing discourses fails to make explanatory space for structures of inequality that impinge upon the daily lives of women in particular economic configurations. As David Lehmann comments in another context, 'so development has become post-modern in the sense that a certain conception of history and of the state has disappeared from its frame of reference'.[55] This 'certain history' includes an understanding of the materiality of women's lives not only in a patriarchal but a capitalist (or even globalised) society. It asks questions not only about the dominant narratives that frame women, but about the economic structures that weigh upon them. In doing so, it makes connections between men and women in common struggles against economic exploitation and state violence that are rooted in a political economy of resistance

Conclusions

Starting from an examination of the discrepancy in rural women's presence in the political arena, I have identified the following issues which might together help us understand how explanations of exclusion and policy options to address these have been constructed in India and China by the state elites. First, there have been the structuralist explanations which have privileged either the individual or the group as the focus of policy initiatives. These structuralist explanations have largely accepted and built upon modernist concerns with development and access to the fruits of development. Second, although important, they have been unable to accommodate wider explanations of exclusion which point to the importance of national identity to state elites in the postcolonial context. These identity-based explanations allow us to chart the sometimes unpredictable and nuanced character of state elites and their policies, and enable us to open up new spaces for contestation and struggle. Finally, I have also emphasised the importance of the 'political' in that women's groups are able to take advantage of new spaces in different ways depending upon the political system within which they function. In conclusion, therefore, I would assert the importance of getting away from discrete categories of explanation in order to arrive at more complex understandings of gender-based exclusions and struggles to challenge these. The work of post-structuralist feminists in the field of development and development studies is thus just beginning.

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Notes

1. See Marianne Marchand & Jane Parpart (Eds), *Feminism/Post-Modernism/Development* (Routledge, 1995).
2. Sara Suleri, 'Woman skin deep: feminism and the postcolonial condition', in: Bill Ashcroft & Gareth Griffiths (Eds), *The Post-colonial Reader* (Routledge, 1995), p. 273.
3. Maxine Molyneux's work on the Republic of Yemen, Nicaragua and Cuba finds its place in the literature on 'revolutionary regimes' rather than in gender and development literature. On the other hand, her writing on strategic and pragmatic choices is often quoted in development texts.
4. I am indebted to Caroline Wright, University of Warwick, for pointing this out to me.
5. Esther Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (St Martin's Press, 1970).
6. Irene Tinker & B. Bramsen (Eds), *Women and World Development* (Overseas Development Council, 1976).
7. Robert Orr Whyte & Pauline Whyte, *The Women of Rural Asia* (Westview, 1982).
8. B. Rogers, *The Domestication of Women* (Tavistock Publications, 1981).
9. Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities* (Verso, 1994), p. 30.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 46–50.
11. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (Zed, 1986), p. 13.
12. Rudra Dutt & K.P.M. Sundaram, *Indian Economy* (S. Chand, 1991), pp. 409–20.
13. World Bank, *Gender and Poverty in India* (World Bank, 1991), p. 19.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–9.
15. See Shirin Rai, 'Gender and representation: women in the Indian parliament', in: Anne-Marie Goetz (Ed.), *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development* (Zed, 1997); and Catherine Hoskyns & Shirin Rai, 'Gender, Representation and Class: India and the European Union', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 5 (1998), pp. 345–65.
16. Sushila Kaushik, *Women and Panchayat Raj* (Har-Anand Publications, 1993), p. 15.
17. Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India, *National Perspective Plan for Women* (Delhi, 1988), p. 304.
18. This does not imply an absence of fundamental disagreements about the terms on which women are being included in the political process. For an excellent exploration of the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist party's articulation of women's role in politics, see Tanika Sarkar & Urvashi Butalia, *Right Wing Women's Movement in India* (Kali for Women, 1994).
19. Xiaoxian Gao, 'China's modernization and changes in the social status of rural women', in: Christina Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel & Tyrene White (Eds), *Engendering China* (Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 81.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
21. Tamara Jacka, 'Working from within: women and the state in the development of the courtyard economy in rural China', in: Shirin Rai & Geraldine Lievesley (Eds), *Women and the State: International Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis, 1996), p. 145.
22. Elisabeth Croll, *Chinese Women Since Mao* (Zed, 1983), p. 23.
23. Jacka, 'Working from within', p. 154.
24. Shirin Rai & Junzuo Zhang, 'Competing and Learning: Women and the State in Contemporary Rural Mainland China', *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1994), pp. 51–66.
25. Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Clarendon, 1976), p. 140.
26. Junzuo Zhang, 'Gender and political participation in China', in: Shirin Rai, Hilary Pilkington & Annie Phizacklea (Eds), *Women in the Face of Change* (Routledge, 1992), p. 46.
27. S. Aziz, *Rural Development: Learning from China* (Holmes & Meier, 1978), p. 68.
28. Rai & Zhang, 'Competing and Learning', pp. 55–8.
29. Zhang, 'Gender and political participation in China', p. 51.
30. See, for example, Vicky Randall & Georgina Waylen (Eds), *Gender, Politics and the State* (Routledge, 1998); Rai & Lievesley, *Women and the State*; Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Sophie Watson (Ed.), *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions* (Verso, 1990); and S. Franzway, D. Court & R.W. Connell, *Staking a Claim: Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State* (Polity Press, 1989).
31. Bina Agarwal, 'Gender and Legal Rights in Agricultural Land in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 12 (1995), p. A52.

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32. Shirin Rai, 'Women Negotiating Boundaries: Gender, Law and the Indian State', *Social and Legal Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1995), pp. 391–410.
33. Goetz, *Getting Institutions Right for Women*.
34. I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for bringing this to my notice.
35. See also Hariet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China* (Polity Press, 1996).
36. Shirin Rai & Kumud Sharma, 'Quota legislation? The reservation debate in India', in: Rai (Ed.), *Gender and Democratisation: International Perspectives* (Macmillan, forthcoming).
37. Sumit Sarkar, 'Rammohun Roy and the break with the past', in: V.C. Joshi (Ed.), *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernisation in India* (Vikas, 1975).
38. Lata Mani, 'Contentious traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India', in: Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (Eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Kali for Women, 1989), p. 89.
39. Anupam Sen, *The State, Industrialisation, and Class Formation in India* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 160.
40. Shirin Rai, 'Women and the state in the Third World: some issues for debate', in: Rai & Lievesley, *Women and the State*, p. 13.
41. Maitrayee Chaudhari, 'Citizens, workers and emblems of culture: an analysis of the First Plan document on women', in: Patricia Uberoi (Ed.), *Social Reform, Sexuality and the State* (Sage, 1996), p. 211.
42. Sub-committee on Women's Role in the Planned Economy cited in *ibid*., p. 223. Emphasis in original.
43. Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1990).
44. Hoskyns & Rai, 'Gender, Representation and Class'.
45. Sarkar & Butalia, *Right Wing Women's Movement in India*; and Sangari & Vaid, *Recasting Women*.
46. See Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1960); Lucien Bianco, *The Origins of the Chinese Revolution* (Stanford University Press, 1971); and Flemming Christiansen & Shirin Rai, *Chinese Politics and Society* (Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 42–9.
47. Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China*, p. 6.
48. Hariet Evans, 'Monogamy and female sexuality in the People's Republic of China', in: Shirin Rai *et al.* (Eds), *Women in the Face of Change* (Routledge, 1992), p. 149.
49. Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (University of California Press, 1983).
50. Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China*.
51. Evans, 'Monogamy and female sexuality in the People's Republic of China'.
52. Jude Howell, 'The state and gendered autonomy in post-Mao China', paper presented at the Political Studies Association *Women and Politics Conference*, London, February 1996, p. 18.
53. Gilmartin *et al.*, *Engendering China*, p. 22; and Ziyun Li, 'Women's consciousness and women's writing', in: *ibid.*, pp. 299–317.
54. Cited in Howell, 'The state and gendered autonomy in post-Mao China', p. 33.
55. David Lehmann, 'An Opportunity Lost: Escobar's Deconstruction of Development', *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (1997), p. 571.

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