

Transcending gender
**Reservation, representation and identity among elected
women representatives in municipal politics**

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By

750393

School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies
University of Oxford

Abstract

I make a comparative study of the articulation of gendered interests by elected women representatives (EWRs) in rural and urban contexts. I show that while rural EWRs are increasingly articulating gendered interests, urban EWRs avoid representing themselves as 'women's candidates'. Finally, I present some arguments to explain why urban EWRs might choose to 'transcend' gender in articulating interests – focusing on the discourse on women and development, the self distancing of the women's movement from 'formal' politics and the socio – economic background of urban EWRs.



Contents

Introduction	5
Part I: the construction of 'women' through compensatory discrimination programmes: a historical analysis of affirmation and subversion	11
Part II: EWRs transcending gender, the creation of spaces for the articulation of gendered interests in rural and urban contexts	19
Part III: Different spaces, different challenges? Understanding why EWRs hesitate to articulate gendered interests	24
Conclusion	35

Abbreviations

PRI: Panchayati Raj Institution

EWR: Elected Woman Representative

NGO: Non Governmental Organization

WRB: Women's Reservation Bill

GOI: Government of India

MCD: Municipal Corporation of Delhi

Introduction

Women constitute a miniscule percentage of political representatives, both in local and national governments the world over. On average, women constitute 18.4% of national parliaments.¹ The 15th Lok Sabha contains 11.2% women, which is the highest in the history of Indian elections.² In contrast to the national parliament, more than 1 million women are a part of rural and urban local government in India. This is because in 1992, the government mandated the reservation of 33% seats in local governments for women.

While numerous studies have been conducted on women in panchayats, there is limited work on women in municipal politics. The challenges and opportunities that elected women representatives (EWRs) face, vary significantly depending on their context. Recent studies suggest that rural EWRs are increasingly articulating gendered interests. In contrast, studies on urban EWRs show that they are more likely to transcend gender in articulating their interests. I argue here that the rich history of ‘empowerment’³ programmes aimed at rural women by the state and certain non – governmental organizations⁴; however problematic their assumptions, opened up spaces for women to articulate gendered interests, in fact even encouraged them to do so. Urban women councillors, on the other hand, were not exposed to the discourse on women’s role in

¹ Inter – Parliamentary Union <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> (24th May, 2009)

² <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/highest-ever-61-women-elected-to-15th-lok-sabha/93002-37.html> (24th May, 2009)

³ Empowerment is an essentially contested term; here I use it to identify the process by which women (and men) “experience as well as challenge and subvert power relations” at the global, national and local level (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002: 4).

⁴ A number of organizations ranging from religious to sports organizations, with disparate structures, functions and aims are loosely termed NGOs. Here, I use to it refer to not for profit development organizations (both national and international).

development and practices related to it, to the extent that their rural counterparts were. I suggest that this, along with the self distancing of the women's movement from 'formal' politics in the 1970s and the socio - economic identities of urban EWRs is fundamental to understanding why they might transcend gender in the articulation of their interests to a greater extent than rural EWRs.

The sudden entry of a large number of women into structures of government generated considerable interest among social scientists who studied the interaction between the state and EWRs to investigate transformation (or lack thereof) at the level of the individual beneficiary, the community of women, the beneficiary's society, village or municipality and national discourses. These studies were located in a variety of feminist theoretical paradigms - liberal, standpoint, post liberal, radical, critical, Foucauldian, postcolonial and neoliberal; with considerable overlaps. They drew from the experiences of EWRs to enrich concepts such as representation, identity, power, justice, democracy and equality. In this section I examine theoretical debates around quotas for women. An analysis of empirical studies on rural and urban EWRs is presented in part two.

The debate on quotas for women is framed around three major axes; first, whether women are more likely to represent the interests of other women; second, whether women bring a different ethic to politics; and third, whether the greater presence of women in parliaments is the logical conclusion to democracy. The broad framework within which these debates take place is one of equality and difference. The dilemma for many is whether the basis for inclusive citizenship (or specifically quotas for women) should be the acknowledgement of difference - that there is a sexual division of labour within the private sphere and that women continue to play a caring role within it; or the

promotion of equality – which requires questioning the existence of the private and public spheres and the challenging of women’s roles within them. There are two strands within the difference argument; a ‘radical’ argument which assumes that men and women are inherently different and that women bring an ethic of care and compassion. However, this argument is inverted by patriarchal discourse to confine women in traditional roles (the ‘patriarchal difference’ argument). In contrast, the second strand – the ‘interest’ argument, assumes that men and women have different interests because of the sexual division of labour.

The ‘interest’ argument – that women constitute a unique interest group – has an implicit assumption that the interests of women must be different and therefore necessarily antagonistic to those of men (Stacey and Price 1981, Lister 2003: 154). Given the heterogeneity of women’s experiences can one justifiably argue for a universal category of women with similar interests? Sunder Rajan has pointed out that “the ascribed identity “women” may be (selectively) both embraced and repudiated by female subjects in waging their struggle against patriarchy” (Sunder Rajan 2003: 16). The most obvious shared interest among women is that of greater access to political power (Jonasdottir 1988). Secondly, almost all societies are characterized by a sexual division of labour and the implicit, often explicit assumption that the private or domestic sphere must be managed by women (Sapiro 1981, Lovenduski 1986). In India, the recognition of difference among women has led to a demand for a quota for OBC women within the women’s quota in national parliament. Leaders like Uma Bharti, Mayawati, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, have expressed fears about elite women cornering quotas in parliament. There is also ambivalence among certain tribal groups about the 73rd Amendment because it disturbs their ‘traditional’ systems

of local governance (Sharma 1998: 35). The argument made by supporters of the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) is that gender injustice exists to such an extent over India, across caste, class and religious identities that it warrants special action on the part of the government.

The 'radical' argument for reservation is that the entry of a critical mass of women will bring a different ethic to politics. This is based on the rather problematic essentialization of women's natures, linking women to an ethic of compassion and care. This characterization of women is problematic because of its similarities to traditional justifications used to oppress and confine women to the private sphere – as in the 'patriarchal difference' argument. In Ruddick's seminal work on maternal thinking she argues that women as mothers bring a framework of peace and conflict resolution which is focused on the preservation of life (Ruddick 1980: 354). However, Dietz points out that the inequalities of power and exclusiveness associated with the mother – child relationship is antithetical to the principles of democratic citizenship (Dietz 1985:20). Jones sums up the dilemma facing feminist as "How to recognize the political relevance of sexual differences and how to include these differences within definitions of political action and civil virtue without constructing sexually segregated norms of citizenship?" (Jones 1988: 18). In India, this argument (in its patriarchal sense) is articulated most forcefully by the Hindu right, which has traditionally mobilized women to enter the public sphere on the assumption that they bring an ethic of honesty and strength because of their association with motherhood. In part one of the dissertation I argue that this assumption has also traditionally framed the policies of the state.

The 'justice' argument is framed around universalist justifications about extending democratic practices and the assumption that the gross underrepresentation of women

in formal politics is against the principle of democratic justice. It questions the legitimacy of any democracy which does not reflect the diversity of society, including other 'minority groups' (Kymlicka 1995, Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Therefore, it assumes that representatives do not represent programmes, policies or ideas; but people. This assumption is criticized by those who argue that in a democracy, it is less important who the representative is, but what they represent. This might be used to justify the dominance of elite men in parliament. However, political realists point out that in heterogeneous societies there are few 'public interests' and numerous differing and potentially conflicting interests that must be held in check. But of course, it is not possible to represent every interest equitably during decision making. This logic leads us to a justification of why 'women's interests' specifically need to be represented which shows that the demand for women's representation cannot fit neatly within any one framework of reasoning.

To me, the strongest case for reservation comes from a combination of the 'justice' and 'interest' arguments, what Lister calls "differentiated universalism" (Lister 2003: 68) and what Alexander and Mohanty term citizenship "defined through and across difference" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xxxi). While Sainsbury argues that women's participation in formal politics in Sweden increased after they switched their argument from the representation of special interests to "democratic principles and equal rights" (Sainsbury 1993: 279), interest politics has greater currency in India, used both by disadvantaged and 'forward' groups alike. However, even though backward castes have demanded compensatory discrimination based on principles of social justice rather than special interests; for women, the difference discourse (in the form of 'radical', 'patriarchal difference' and 'interest' arguments) has permeated state policies and has

even been invoked by the women's movement to demand citizenship; and more recently greater political representation. I suggest that the discourse on social justice (essentially the 'justice' argument) can be used more strongly by women's groups to demand reservation in national parliament given the Indian state's willingness to apply principles of differentiated universalism for other disadvantaged communities. The 'interest' argument must be used alongside the 'justice' argument to justify the classification of women as a group with special interests. This is especially problematic in India, where caste, class and religion, inter alia, are interwoven with gender identities. However, both quantitative and qualitative accounts of women's status in India indicate that patriarchy exists at all levels – across all these other categories. Therefore, arguing for social justice for disadvantaged communities as the logical end to democracy⁵ on the assumption that women form such a community makes for a forceful argument for women's reservation.

Methodology: I use secondary theoretical and empirical literature from a range of disciplines to illustrate my arguments. I conducted interviews with thirteen women councillors from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi between March and April of 2009. Every third ward in the MCD is reserved for women, and I used random selection within that group to choose subjects for interviewing. Ten were affiliated with the BJP, one with the Congress, one with the BSP and one was an independent candidate. Unfortunately, it was harder to gain access to Congress councillors in the limited time that I had. This could have influenced the nature of responses. The interviews were semi structured and involved questions on whether they felt women represent the interests of other women, whether reservations empowered women and what the term

⁵ Or is less abstract terms, goals made explicit in the Indian constitution.

empowerment meant to them. Meetings took place both at their homes and offices and while some were extremely clear about their priorities and opinions others were more ambiguous. In general, they were more comfortable answering questions about their agenda for the term but less forthcoming with their opinions on 'women's empowerment' and the efficacy of quotas. This might be because given their busy schedules, the interviews were usually fairly short.

The dissertation is divided into three parts, in the first I examine shifts in the normative justifications for compensatory discrimination for women from colonial to contemporary India; focussing on the context within which reservation was introduced. In the second part I make use of qualitative and quantitative studies to highlight how in contemporary India, rural EWRs are making the 'interest' argument more forcefully than their urban counterparts. In the final part I offer some reasons for why this might be the case.

Part I: The 'construction' of women through compensatory discrimination: a historical analysis of affirmation and subversion

In part one I provide an analysis of the historical context in which reservation for women was introduced to demonstrate how contemporary discourses on reservation for women are shaped by earlier debates on first, citizenship for women; second, the role of women in development and third; the relationship between the women's movement and the state. I suggest that in justifying compensatory discrimination for women, the state and women's movement have used various arguments at different historical points; but that in general state policies reflect the 'patriarchal difference' argument, while the women's movement, and individual beneficiaries, have used a

combination of 'radical', 'interest' and 'justice' arguments depending on the context; affirming, questing and negating the state's dominant discourse. The three sections cover first, the influence of the nationalist ideology and Nehruvian consensus on women's demands for representation between the 1930s and 1960s; second, the self distancing of the women's movement from the State from the 1970s to the 1990s; and third, the general consensus on women's entry into local governments from the 1990s onwards.

1930s - 1960s: subsumed by nationalist ideology

The 'patriarchal difference' argument was dominant during the freedom struggle. Women were projected as the repositories of traditional culture, a sacred space outside the influence of the colonisers; strengthening the public (masculine) - private (feminine) divide. Moreover, the influence of the national movement checked any collective demands for women's representation. Separate electorates were introduced for women in the 1937 and 1946 elections on the assumption (by the colonial government) that they would give women access to power and that women held universal interests which could only be addressed by other women. They were rejected by leading women's organizations because of the strong influence of Gandhian ideology, which was essentially antagonistic to the principle of separate constituencies (Forbes 1979: 18). However, the 'patriarchal difference' argument was affirmed, questioned and negated, by women in the national movement. For example, even in 1933 members of the AIWC such as M. Kamaladevi, though she was against reservation for women, suggested parties be given special incentives to run women candidates thereby demanding the inclusion of more women in the public sphere (Singer 2007: 38). Even

within the dominant discourse of 'patriarchal difference', the 'justice' argument was articulated by certain sections of the women's movement. For example, Herabai and Mithan Tata who campaigned with the Joint Select Committee in London argued that women "with the *same qualifications* as laid down for men in any part of the scheme" should be given the right to vote (Forbes 2002: 224 – 225, emphasis mine). Therefore, the affirmation of the 'patriarchal difference' argument by women leaders may have been more strategic than principled.⁶ In our attempt to discover history and the nature of the women's movement some ideas are suppressed and some given voice to help create our own discourse of a possible history. Even though the dominant idea within the nationalist struggle was probably one of 'patriarchal difference' and women relegated to the traditional private sphere, the idea of gender equality as the logical end of justice and democracy was expressed even then.

Reservation for women was rejected during the constituent assembly debates as against the principles of (formal) equality. However, some women members raised issues of women's representation at the time, albeit hesitantly. For example, Purnima Banerji, who represented a general constituency in UP, proposed that special representation suggested for Muslims and Sikhs under the new article 312F also be extended to women. However, as the other groups were excluded from special consideration Banerji withdrew her amendment without explanation (Singer 2007: 53 – 54). The first three elections treated women candidates and voters as a separate category. This was especially true of the Congress party which ensured that 15% of its tickets were given to women, much like the separate electorates. In fact in 1952, 45% of the candidates were

⁶ For example, Sarojini Naidu argued to the INC at the same time, "We ask for the vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civil duties, your *public* place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and instil into them the ideals of national life."

women. Singer writes that the high percentage of women candidates resulted from first, a sense of debt that Congress leaders felt they owed to women freedom fighters and second, the belief that voters would seek governments to represent themselves (both along gender and caste lines). Once the 'debt' was fulfilled and the party realized that categories like caste were more powerful than gender, "the potency of constituencies suitable for ladies subsided" (Singer 2007: 84). From 1962 onwards the number of women in parliament diminished considerably till about 1980.

1970s - 90s: the rise of 'autonomous' women's organizations

In 1974, the Committee on the Status of Women in India, in its report 'Towards Equality' systematically highlighted the worsening condition of Indian women across economic, social and political indicators. However, the majority of its members felt reservation for women was, "a retrograde step from the equality conferred by the Constitutions" (GOI 1974: 303). Nonetheless, even then some members argued for reservation on 'justice' grounds; that, "When one applies the principle of democracy to a society characterised by tremendous inequalities, such special protections are only spearheads to pierce through the barriers of inequality" (GOI 1974: 357). The Committee recommended the establishment of women's councils or women's Panchayats in every village as an integral part of the rural local government structure and that political parties increase the numbers of women candidates to ensure parity in representation in legislative bodies. Therefore there was a demand from the movement for women's inclusion in politics, but within the liberal framework which denied the centrality of reservation as a means to equality. Even though they denied the validity of reservations, this period was when the 'justice' argument was made most unambiguously.

In her study of the women's movement in India, Calman shows how the 'autonomous' women's movement; what Forbes describes as the second wave of the women's movement (Forbes 1996) distanced itself from electoral politics after the breakdown of the Nehruvian consensus (Calman 1992: 17). During the course of the second wave, the movement stressed its autonomy from the state and focussed on providing services to individual women to help them gain advantages from the law, rather than petitioning the state directly (Sen 2002: 484). The politicization of women through the anti Mandal and Ramjanmabhoomi movements, as well as the struggles of feminists against the Muslim Women's Bill and sati were instrumental in defining what constitutes 'women's politics' during the 1980s. Roy argues that national and religious – cultural identities competed against each other, and gender was the site on which this contest played out (Roy 2005: 211). It had two important consequences for the debate on reservation. First, it questioned the category of 'women'; demonstrating the many ways in which the interests of women differed from each other – weakening the 'interest' argument. Second, it affirmed the 'patriarchal difference' argument because numerous middle class, upper caste women came out into the public sphere at this time, but not as equal citizens, rather as 'woman – citizens' (Roy 2005: 225). The theory of maternal thinking promulgated by Ruddick; women as imbued with an ethic of care by virtue of their experiences of motherhood is inverted in this discourse. Here, women in their roles as mothers (of the Hindu nation) must save their (Hindu) nation demonstrating responsibility and strength (Sarkar 1996: 138).

During this time there were also strong demands for reservation for Other Backward Classes using the 'justice' argument in the context of caste discrimination. Comparing normative justifications for reservation for women and OBCs highlights the ways in

which women continued to be categorized and identified as a special category by the Indian state. The justification for reservation was not the rectification of historical marginalization and social transformation as with the OBC but that women could represent the needs of other women (and children). Another point of departure from the demand for caste based reservation was the fact that the demand for reservation for OBCs came from a gradually strengthening OBC movement. The women's movement did not present a united front about women's reservation and the impetus for pushing through the reservation tended to come from men in the parliament. Moreover, the broad framework within which debates on women's reservation took place focused on women's access to development more than their right to political power and representation.

1990s onwards: consensus on reservation in local government within the framework of women's role in development

The 'National Perspective Plan for Women', compiled by the Congress government recommended that 33% seats be reserved for women in Panchayats and Municipalities and political parties voluntarily give 33% of their tickets to women candidates (GOI 1988). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Bills were formally enacted in 1992 and made the first recommendation enforceable by law. There was almost no public debate over reservation for women in local government. Singer argues that it developed because of "the sudden convergence of political agendas" (Singer 2007: 96). Certain state governments had introduced reservation for women even earlier including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kerala. As early as 1964, most states had passed laws requiring that at least two women were "co - opted" into the Panchayat if

none were elected. The assumption behind co – opting women was that women, especially rural women, would not voluntarily join public decision making bodies. In contrast, reservation is based on the assumption that women will contest elections when given the opportunity (Singer 2007: 98).

The international discourse on women's role in development gave greater legitimacy to the inclusion of women in local government, however, equating inclusion with empowerment and access to development more than representation. Of course, there was never a single discourse on development.⁷ Nonetheless, for the Indian government, the Panchayats proved to be an ideal space to encourage women's participation because of their association with social and economic development. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing held in 1995 identified increasing women's presence in public decision making bodies as one of its chief strategic objectives. It articulated a 'justice' argument in its mission statement arguing that women's participation is central to the functioning and strengthening of democracy, and their ability to challenge oppressive norms (Towards Beijing 1995: 89). Countries across the world including Argentina, Brazil, Belgium and France introduced affirmative action for women in

⁷ A more explicitly feminist Gender and Development (GAD) emerged out of critiques of the mainstream "feminizing" Women in Development approaches (Lazreg 2002: 124). Moreover, the concept of 'development' was critiqued by post development as either another version of western hegemony (Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1995, Rahnema 1997) or simply as too top down in its approach (Friedmann 1992, Munck 1999, Freedman 2000). Feminist theorizing in the post development framework produced either post structuralist critiques of western universalism and development discourse (Marchand and Parpart 1995, Rowland 1997) or a greater emphasis on women's grassroots participation (Afshar 1998, Kabeer 1994). Critics of post development pointed out that the language of universal rights was often redefined and redeployed by people's in the South to create their own discourses about development (Cooper and Packard 1997, Lehmann 1997, Corbridge 1998). 'Women in development' was not the only discourse on development by international agencies; gender and development and post development enriched the theoretical debates on development immensely. The extent to which these alternatives to mainstream development theories were adopted by the major international organizations is still contested (Parpart 2002: 44 – 46). However, my argument does not address these debates; but rests on the assumption that the entry of these organizations (international, national, mainstream or 'alternative') led to gender sensitization and opened spaces for the articulation of gendered interests – and more so in rural than urban areas.

governments. Interestingly, urban local bodies were increasingly portrayed as the most acceptable spaces for women to enter 'formal' politics. The Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government by the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) declared in 1998: "The local government, with its inherent responsibility for the provision of basic services and infrastructure having a direct impact on the lives of households, forms the closest and most acceptable level of representative governance for women" (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 7).

The consensus over the need for greater representation of women in public decision making bodies broke down over the issue of reservation for women in the national parliament in India. This becomes understandable given that the discourse of women as either agents or subjects of development which facilitated the 73rd and 74th Amendments cannot be used at the level of national politics. Another reason for this impasse is that while Members of Parliament were comfortable handing over power to women at the local level in a paternalistic fashion, reservation in parliament directly threatens their place in national decision making and so they will be personally affected by it (Sharma and Rai 1998: 159).

In conclusion, the historical context in which reservation for women emerged has played a significant role in shaping contemporary discourses around reservation. State policies have mostly reflected 'patriarchal difference' assumptions, which have been affirmed, questioned and subverted at various points by actors in the women's movement. In part two and three I compare the findings of empirical studies on EWRs in rural and urban local government and argue that the impact of the international discourse on women's role in development, the self distancing of the women's

movement from 'formal' politics, and their socio – economic background influence the varied ways in which rural and urban EWRs articulate gendered interests.

Part II: EWRs transcending gender: the creation of spaces for the articulation of gendered interests in rural and urban local governments

In part one I outlined the historical context within which reservation for women emerged, pointing out that it was the discourse on women's role in development, *more than a concern with representation* which facilitated the 73rd and 74th Amendments. In part two, I provide a brief institutional overview of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments which mandate the reservation of 33% seats for women in rural and urban local governments respectively. Next, I present a comparative study on the impact of the 73rd and 74th amendments and show that the entry of a critical mass of women has not automatically translated to a feminist agenda for urban institutions as opposed to increasingly large numbers of panchayats, where it has. In part three I suggest part of the reason for this is popular association of panchayats with 'development' and municipalities with 'formal' politics.

Institutional overview

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were introduced in 1992 to facilitate greater decentralization at the rural and urban level respectively. They did so through providing legal status to local assemblies and entrusting them with greater functions and powers. The inclusion of certain historically marginalized social categories, including scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women was fundamental to the project of decentralization. While the 73rd Amendment applies to the Panchayati Raj system,

the 74th Amendment applies to Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats depending on the size of the city. The 74th Amendment states:

“Not less than one – third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality.”

GOI 1992

Similarly, the 73rd Amendment mandates the reservation of seats for women at all three tiers of the PRIs. Most literature on women’s entry into government focuses on the 73rd Amendment and changes in the panchayat system, ignoring the implications of the 74th Amendment on gender in municipal politics. Recent studies show that women are bringing a difference to PRIs, specifically raising issues that have traditionally affected women’s lives (Buch 2000, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Beaman, Duflo, Pande and Topalova 2006). In contrast, emerging research on the 74th Amendment shows that women councillors do not prioritize ‘women’s interests’ and have not made a difference to issues that have traditionally been addressed by municipalities (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005, John 2007). Next, I present relevant studies on women in local government to highlight the different experiences of rural and urban EWRs. In part three I suggest reasons for the disparities in the findings.

Women in rural and urban local government: a study in contrasts?

“When we meet, we work together as women, for our lobby. We don’t take much notice of our party identities”

EWR from a village Panchayat in Karnataka quoted in Jain 1996: 11

“Women’s issues are not debated. The problems discussed in the House meetings are general problems : roads, lighting, water...and there is solidarity within the party only”

EWR from the Calcutta Municipal Corporation quoted in Lama – Rewal 2001: 28

Early studies of the 73rd Amendment were largely critical of the ability of elected women representatives to affect change in the existing system. Work on the intersections between gender and caste in the PRIs showed that caste often played a determining role in elections and women candidates were often selected unanimously by dominant castes without any real contest (Lieten 1996: 2705). There was the fear that women would act as ‘proxies’ for their male relatives because without suitable training they would be unable to act on their own (Kishwar 1996: 2873). Even though reservation was also implemented for other disadvantaged communities, the focus of most literature was on women, especially in panchayats, with the expectation that they would transcend caste and class identities and represent the interests of women and children; and criticism when this failed to happen immediately.

In fact, recent studies show that while it is not an unqualified success by any means, the 33% quota for women in PRIs has brought about some tangible changes in the distribution of public goods and consequently the lives of women across rural India. There are reports of women leaders giving more attention to fulfilling the basic needs of their villages such as water (taps and tube wells), education (schools, adult education programmes, and school teachers), sanitation (community toilets and the construction of drains), fuel wood patches and health services (Niranjana 2002: 384). In Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka, which introduced reservation even before the 73rd Amendment; EWRs have introduced issues such as drinking water, education and the closing of liquor shops into panchayat agendas (Sharma 1998: 32). In West Bengal

expenditure was allocated toward safe drinking water and roads specifically after women expressed concern about these issues (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). In Rajasthan, the increase in women panchayat members has led to better immunization rates for children and higher school attendance rates for girls. In the same study it was found that the presence of a female Pradhan (chairperson of Gram Sabha) reduces the gender gap in school enrolment (Beaman, Duflo, Pande and Topalova 2007). However, Ban and Rao (2008) in their study of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu find that apart from minor differences (a slightly stronger preference for education and water issues) there is no evidence to suggest that EWRs are more sensitive to the preferences of women. They attribute the difference in their results to their choice of states, implying that higher gender differentials lead to a greater change in policy preferences of EWRs (Ban and Rao 2008: 514 – 526). Individual case studies of women Sarpanches show that more women are using local politics to gain access to political power at the state level. Recent ethnographies reveal the ambiguous spaces that EWRs with greater political ambitions occupy in panchayats and their communities. For example, in all an women panchayat in Maharashtra, two of the four women who resigned cited the Sarpanch, Usha Badhe's ambition as destructive to the functioning of the Panchayat. Sathaye shows that people perceive local socio – economic development as the primary function of Panchayats and in that sense see it as antagonistic to state or national electoral politics (Sathaye 2001: 108).

However, on the whole, the rather optimistic view of EWRs in panchayats is not corroborated by studies of EWRs in municipal politics. A study of Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai municipal corporations shows that the entry of a 'critical mass' of women has not affected their functioning and agendas; and that the impact of women

on Municipal politics has been largely symbolic at this stage. It points out that in a political world that is still mostly dominated by men, women councillors and candidates are usually keen to 'transcend their gender' concluding that feminism is alien to urban municipal politics. Where gender is relevant to municipal politics, it acts in a restrictive way perpetuating women's roles as housewives managing a larger family – the constituency (Ghosh and Lama-Rewal 2005: 135 – 137). Another study of Delhi and Bangalore shows that when interviewed, the majority of women councillors avoided representing themselves as 'women's candidates' in their constituencies (John 2007: 3991 – 3992). Similarly, a study of the first batch of women councillors in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation showed that women councillors did not openly raise any issues concerning women's interests and had no relations with women's organizations outside of their parties' women's wings; seemingly with no feminist agendas at all (Lama-Rewal 2001: 25 – 31). Nanivadekar writes of a woman mayor from Nagpur who attempted to address issues she felt concerned women – through health camps, mobile health centres and the provision of more public toilets in the city. She even provided Rs 100,000 worth of additional development funds to women councillors to help compensate for their disadvantaged position while mobilizing funds from MLAs and MPs. However, she found that only one councillor had specifically kept in mind women's interests while spending the additional funds (Nanivadekar 2005: 5 – 6). Evidently, the experiences of EWRs and their gendered articulation of interests varies considerably depending on their rural or urban contexts. This leads Lama Rewal and Ghosh to conclude, "Women are not a special constituency for women councillors despite the fact that they are aware of women's issues". In the four cities that they surveyed – Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, EWRs insisted that they represented both men and women and in fact, there

should be no gender difference in policy preferences (Ghosh and Lama Rewal 2005: 121). In my interviews with EWRs from Delhi I found that most raised general issues such as electricity and water as their main priorities. When I asked specifically whether women raise women's issues, I was told "We raise issues that concern the common man" or "Women raise general issues but are more sensitive to women's issues" (Interviews April 2009). There was an obvious discomfort with being perceived as representing women. I present some reasons for this in part three.

Part III: Different spaces, different challenges?

In this section I analyse why urban EWRs might seek to transcend gender in their discourse on representation while rural EWRs might articulate gendered policies more explicitly. There are several possible reasons for this but here I focus on three; first, the influence of the international discourse on women's role in development on state policies, non - governmental organizations and autonomous women's organizations. Second, the self distancing of the women's movement from 'formal' politics in the 1970s. And third, the socio - economic background of urban EWRs.

While there are exceptions to the generalization that rural EWRs raise gendered interests more explicitly than urban EWRs and there are instances of urban EWRs raising 'women's issues';⁸ my contention is that they are *less likely* to raise gendered interests because of the three reasons outlined above. This does not mean that urban EWRs reject the 'difference' argument in favour of the 'equality' argument. They are just as likely to use the 'radical' argument (both in its patriarchal and feminist interpretation) - of women bringing a different ethic to politics. Therefore, between the

⁸ See, for example, Nanivadekar (2006: 5)

two strands of the 'difference' argument, they feel more comfortable making the 'radical' argument than the 'interest' one, perhaps because the latter challenges the status quo in a more obvious way, demanding a shift in priorities and spending while the former complements the prevailing 'patriarchal difference' argument and therefore has greater acceptability. For example, in her study of elite women in Hubli – Dharawad in Karnataka Deshpande finds that 70.67% of them think that reservation for women can reduce corruption and crime (Deshpande 2006: 149). In their study, Ghosh and Lama Rewal found that 76.21% of women councillors in Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, thought they had some special qualities that set them apart from male councillors (honesty, sincerity, more hardworking, less corrupt etc) (Ghosh and Lama Rewal 2005: 108 – 109). In interviews with EWRs from the MCD I found that many women felt that increasing the number of women in the MCD would reduce corruption. They were clearly more comfortable making the 'radical' argument than the 'interest' one. While the 'radical' argument is also used in rural contexts (again in both the patriarchal and the feminist sense), the 'interest' argument is clearly also present – that women as a category have interests that are different from and sometimes in conflict with the interests of men because of the sexual division of labour. This is reflected in the changes that rural EWRs have brought to panchayat agendas. I argue here that while EWRs justify reservation using all three arguments – 'radical', 'liberal' and 'justice'; the degree to which they use each argument is shaped the constraints and possibilities that their local contexts present. One might even compare this with moments in the history of women's representation where depending on the context, women have argued for political inclusion using the 'radical' 'justice' and 'interest' arguments. This is not to say that women were not shaped by dominant discourses on gender; but that different

women were and are shaped by a multiplicity of discourses, so it is not uncommon for them to articulate both a politics of difference as well as equality in the same time and space.

A. The international discourse on development and role of NGOs

The first reason for an urban rural divide with respect to the gendered articulation of interests concerns the role of the international discourse on women's role in development in facilitating reservation for women; and thereby constructing the parameters within which reservation is understood. As mentioned earlier, this discourse emphasized the role of women in development and advocated their inclusion in formal institutions both to strengthen development practices and 'empower' women. The influence of 'international feminism' – feminist ideas on economic development practices, adopted by international organizations, the government and a plethora of NGOs provided a range of resources to women in India (Calman 1992: 73); but certainly more for rural EWRs than urban EWRs (PRIA 2002: 4).⁹ Of course, there is a re reading of dominant or mainstream discourses on development within local contexts by NGOs, women's organizations and individual beneficiaries (Corbridge et al. 2005: 250 – 255, Hanafi and Tabar 2006: 199 – 228). Nonetheless, the mainstream discourse on women's role in development – as framed by international organizations and reinterpreted and redefined in local contexts, has created spaces for a gendered articulation of interests; and to a greater extent in rural than urban India. Ghosh and Lama – Rewal point out, rural women, given their greater illiteracy rates and the stronger presence of patriarchy were (and continue to be) a priority for numerous women's organizations (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 138). Most studies on rural EWRs mention the important role that

⁹ http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/pdfs/PRIA/PRIA_Invisible_Yet_Widespread_2003.pdf

NGOs have played in PRIs.¹⁰ In contrast, the studies on urban EWRs point out the weak links between NGOs and municipal corporations.¹¹

Through the 1970s international funding for community organizing among women increased substantially, as did the numbers of NGOs working in that area.¹² While the NGO community is by no means a homogenous category and making generalizations about it is a difficult task, a space was created for international and urban activists to organize rural EWRs.¹³ Calman argues that the leadership of educated, urban women “has been the most vital resource in the establishment of empowerment groups; poor illiterate women do engage in spontaneous protest, but cannot sustain an organization without the help of educated activists” (Calman 1992: 15) seemingly implying that rural women have been ‘empowered’ significantly by outside (educated urban, international) forces. What does this mean in the current context of rural EWRs? Perhaps given the history of ‘empowerment’ programmes aimed at rural areas, some women were already sensitized to the international discourse on gender equality and justice. There’s an interesting parallel with nationalist arguments which claimed that Indian women had been handed political freedom by their ‘enlightened’ male counterparts (Chatterjee 1990), except that the *Indian* woman becomes the *illiterate, poor, rural* woman. But I do not see this discourse as ‘depoliticizing’ or ‘disempowering’; instead, I suggest that

¹⁰ Jain 1996: 13 – 14, Vyasulu and Vyasulu 1999: 3685, Kudva 2003: 457 – 458 and Everett 2009: 18 – 19

¹¹ Lama – Rewal 2001: 31 – 32, Ramesh and Bharti 2001: 79 – 80, Ghosh 2003: 150, Nanivadekar 2005: 6 – 11, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2007: 24

¹² The number of not for profit organizations which worked in the fields of development, literacy, health and civil liberties also increased dramatically during the late 1970s in response to the oppressive state regime during the emergency (Sen 1999: 339). Rai provides a brief analysis of the influence of international agencies in making gender mainstreaming central to the agendas of national governments (Rai 2003: 22 – 23).

¹³ In her study of the nature of NGOs in the United States Wolch concedes that certain broad forces do shape the national character of voluntary organizations even though her argument is that local contexts and institutions determine the character of voluntarism to a great extent as well (Wolch 1990).

spaces for the articulation of gendered interests were created – knowingly or unknowingly. The state, NGOs and women’s organizations had disparate agendas; some more feminist than others; but whatever the agenda, the discourse and its practical implementation in the form of policies, helped create spaces for the gendered articulation of interests.¹⁴ The women who are ‘empowered’ by these programmes often occupy an ambiguous space in their communities; they might be simultaneously respected within formal political institutions and regarded as shameful in their private lives (Still 2009). While the notion of ‘empowering’ others in a socio – political and cultural vacuum, without adequate knowledge of local contexts is disturbing, in reality, policies designed by international, governmental, non – governmental and autonomous women’s organizations have expanded possibilities for rural women in political institutions. Kudva argues that training by NGOs¹⁵ and the government, has strengthened political participation of women in Karnataka. While the government mostly provides training in rules and procedures, NGOs tend to include ‘gender awareness’ in their training (Kudva 2003: 457 – 458). In conclusion, both the government and NGOs have traditionally targeted rural EWRs as agents of development – a practice that continues today. Because the mainstream discourse on development and development practices primarily targeted rural women, the 73rd amendment was perceived as an agent of empowerment to a much greater extent than the 74th amendment. This not only opened up spaces for rural EWRs to articulate gendered

¹⁴ A similar argument about the emancipatory potential of state policies is made by Kohli (1980) about the “empowerment” of sharecroppers (operation Barga) and the politicization of the local government (red Panchayats) by the left front during the land reform campaigns of the 1970s. Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava and Veron (2008) corroborate this argument in a different context – the empowerment of “weaker sections” by the CPI (M) with regard to the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) in Midnapore, West Bengal.

¹⁵ For example, ISST, SEARCH, MSK (Mahila Samakhya Karnataka) IDS (India Development Service) and HSS (Hengasara Hakkina Sanga) in Karnataka (Kudva 2003: 457)

interests, but even encouraged them to do so. Thus, rural EWRs could more easily demand a change in the priorities of panchayats and make the 'interest' argument, than their urban counterparts.

B. The self distancing of the women's movement from 'formal' politics

A second related reason for the rural urban divide is the self distancing of the women's movement from 'formal' politics at the end of the Nehruvian consensus, as outlined above. In fact, most accounts of the women's movement argue that the women's movement never *separated* from the state, but just began to engage differently with it (Rajan 1999: 10, Calman 1992: 37 – 41). Calman suggests that the women's movement in India was never averse to engaging state institutions and as more "Indian women, who suffer a lack of esteem and power in both the public and private spheres" were 'empowered' they welcomed the opportunity to engage the state (Calman 1992: 197). In the 1970s the movement was 'autonomous' of political parties and electoral politics but not the state. Moreover, it was not a monolith and parts of it continued to participate in the electoral process. However, the emphasis of the movement did shift from electoral mobilization to 'empowerment' outside party politics. For example, Nanivadekar finds that the women's movement did not influence the electoral outcome or intervene decisively in the electoral process in Maharashtra even after twelve years of reservation for women (Nanivadekar 2006: 7).

This meant that there was easier access to panchayats which were more closely associated with development than municipalities which were perceived as closer to 'formal' politics. Even as the demand for reservation in the national parliament grew in the 1990s, the experiences of urban EWRs were largely ignored while there was

significant new research on quotas in PRIs.¹⁶ This is surprising given the relative proximity of urban local institutions to formal politics which might provide a better comparison with national party politics. For example, municipal politics are characterized by the dominance of political parties, larger financial outlays and the displays of power on the part of councillors towards local organizations, leaders and localities to a greater extent than panchayats (John 2007: 3992). Moreover, as Ghosh and Lama – Rewal point out, other than their being political newcomers, urban EWRs might hesitate at expressing gendered interests because they are marginalized from powerful positions and do not want to alienate themselves further by adopting issues that might be considered sectarian. (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 137). This resonates with my argument, which is that, for EWRs, making the ‘interest’ argument is considerably harder because it demands a shift in the priorities of the institution much more explicitly than making the ‘radical’ argument, which is more acceptable because it can easily be understood as the ‘patriarchal difference’ argument. Even the justice argument does not demand a shift in the priorities of the institution because it equates reservation with justice, often stopping short of demanding changes in the policy preferences of governments. Understood this way, the ‘interest’ argument engages most directly with the existing system and demands the greatest change within it while the radical and justice arguments often think beyond and work outside the institutional framework which makes articulating them much easier at the rhetorical level, even though potentially they present stronger threats to the status quo. So why is it that rural EWRs can make ‘interest’ arguments with greater ease than urban EWRs? I suggest, the

¹⁶ As pointed out earlier, there are numerous studies on women in PRIs, but there is a dearth of studies on women in municipal politics

role of women's organizations, inter alia, is fundamental to the creation of spaces for women to demands changes in policy.

Feminists are apprehensive of engaging the state because it is often viewed as a masculine apparatus which dilutes emancipatory political aims. Research on rural EWRs has illustrated how even protectionist (and therefore potentially disempowering) discourses around compensatory discrimination might unknowingly create spaces for numerous other discourses on gender – some in consonance with the state's ideology and some which encourage new emancipatory political aims. The fundamental question is whether the neo – liberal state empowers or conversely co – opts the 'targets' of its compensatory discrimination policies. Corbridge et al. draw on the work of Foucault to argue that the state's compensatory discrimination policy has the potential to open up "significant spaces of empowerment for the men and women it seeks to position as participants or beneficiaries" (Corbridge et al. 2005: 7) Everett uses the Foucauldian governmentality framework in a study of how EWRs in Panchayats are produced and how they respond to state structures. She differentiates between a strong and weak foucauldian perspective; the first implies that state structures merely extend rule over its subjects and create citizens whose actions and ideologies are in consonance with the government. The second grants greater agency to the 'subjects' of state institutions. As Everett points out, the strong foucauldian perspective obscures the complex responses of EWRs to reservation. In contrast, the weak foucauldian perspective recognizes that their responses to state structures "run the gamut from compliance to assertion and subversion" (Everett 2009: 17).

Even though the women's movement in India has traditionally engaged with the state, radical feminist demands for dissociation from it are being given increasing voice within the movement. However, despite a seeming consensus of the patriarchal nature of the state; there is still ambivalence about its emancipatory potential (Sunder Rajan 2003: 31 – 32). In fact, most new social movements (within which the second wave of the women's movement emerged) do engage the state at some level. The "mainstreaming" of the feminist agenda through the state and NGOs is also contested within the movement. There is a fear that the more radical aims of the movement will be co-opted into the system through the official spaces that NGOs create for dissent within the system. Menon argues that the mainstreaming of gender into governance is at the cost of 'gender' being divested of its radical potential (Menon 2009: 103 – 104). The fear that unless patriarchy is explicitly challenged it only manifests itself in *other forms* makes some women's organizations critical of development organizations that aim at general uplift and state policies which 'target' women.

I suggest the 'mainstreaming' of gender by the state and the official spaces for dissent created by NGOs often facilitate the gendered articulation of interests and where they have been largely absent this has not happened. In other words, even when patriarchy is not explicitly challenged, the entry of 'gender' into mainstream discourse can create possibilities for the development of feminist orientations in beneficiaries. For example, when I asked for her opinion on 'proxies' an EWR from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi replied,

"It's men's limited thinking. For example, my father is very busy and does not have the time to help me with every issue. But I do everything on my own. If someone says to me, 'Mamtaji, whatever you are is because of your father' I'll

agree with them. But today, I have to stand on my own two feet. Men want to keep women down so they spread these rumours”

(Mamta Dhika, MCD councillor, interview with author, April 2009)

There is both affirmation of her father’s importance in her life and the decisions she makes and a simultaneous subversion of the proxy argument. Even though often, “the system of male privileges, status and property operates not only in the interests of men, but also women. Women are promised benefits, so that they have a greater stake in the prevailing social order” (Jeffrey and Jeffrey 1994) and it is in women’s interests to affirm patriarchal discourses, for most women there is both affirmation and subversion of dominant discourses in their construction of their identities. Clearly, women’s organizations can play a much greater role in municipal politics to ensure a change in the agenda of urban local governments.

C. The class identities of rural and urban EWRs

“Women in lower strata exercise more rights than their men grant them ideologically, and men of the educated strata concede their women ideologically more rights than the latter can actually exercise”

Quoted in Buch 2000: 10

Development oriented NGOs and women’s organizations have a strong presence in rural areas, but they are by no means absent in the urban context. Their failure to reach urban EWRs specifically has been, in part, due to the middle class socio – economic background of most municipal councillors. For example, the majority of women councillors in Delhi and Kolkata are graduates and even in Chennai and Mumbai, where the level of education is lower, the majority of councillors are educated up to Class X and Class XII respectively. In fact, across all four cities women councillors are better educated than their male counterparts. Secondly, most are not engaged in paid

employment and depend on family resources.¹⁷ Thirdly, on average only 15.5% of women councillors report a household income of less than Rs. 5000 per month. In Delhi 75% of councillors report a household income of more than 20000 per month. Moreover, councillors need to have money to contest municipal elections because even if they don't buy their tickets from parties¹⁸ the campaigning itself is extremely expensive (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 75 – 79). Thus, the majority of councillors could broadly be categorized as belonging to the middle classes. On the other hand, while rural EWRs are commonly perceived as being representatives of economically powerful communities, a study of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh shows that a large number are from families without any land or from small land holders with low asset holding and family incomes¹⁹ (Buch 2000: 13). The same study shows that despite being comparatively better educated and economically better off, EWRs at the block and district levels face greater opposition to articulating gendered interests than those in the panchayats. This supports my claim that despite their middle class status, or perhaps because of it, urban EWRs find it more challenging to articulate gendered interests (Buch 2000: 10). Their middle class status also has interesting implications for the way NGOs and women's organizations engage with urban EWRs and in fact explains their disengagement from women in municipal politics.

I have presented three reasons for the *greater* articulation of gendered interests by rural EWRs as opposed to their urban counterparts – the international discourse on

¹⁷ Even in a smaller town such as Karnal, 82% of councillors were unpaid family workers (Lakshmi, Sharma and Joshi 2000: 17). At a practical level, as Ghosh and Lama – Rewal argue, this means these women have more time to devote to municipal work than their male colleagues (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005).

¹⁸ In the 2002 Delhi municipal elections tickets reportedly cost between Rs. 1 Lakh and Rs 1 Crore (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 91).

¹⁹ 14% of the women representatives came from landless families, 19.5% from families with marginal holdings and 20.6% from families with small holdings.

women and development, the self – distancing of the women’s movement from ‘formal’ politics and the socio – economic background of urban EWRs. Other studies mention the lack of access to higher structures of power within the institutions (Ghosh and Lama – Rewal 2005: 137), the stronger presence of party politics in municipal politics (Nanivadekar 2006: 9 – 10) and other institutional differences between rural and urban government structures. Although important, these institutional factors warrant a separate, more detailed comparative study. In addition, empirical studies on PRIs rarely mention the influence of party politics, which makes a comparison between the rural and urban context problematic.

Conclusion: compliance, assertion and subversion

“The state is a fractured and ambiguous terrain for women, needing complex negotiation and bargaining by those working within its boundaries as well as those working on the outside”

Shirin Rai 2003: 19

Despite large volumes of scholarship on women in governance in India, there is a dearth of research on women’s experiences in municipal politics. This gap in the literature reflects the absence of links between Indian feminist advocacy and research organizations and urban EWRs. This is clearly contradictory to the active endorsement of women’s political inclusion as central to the Indian feminist agenda. Through my comparison of the rural and urban contexts, I have attempted to illustrate the manner in which patriarchy stifles women’s participation in ‘formal’ politics across both contexts, but in different ways. At the same time, however, the very discourses that strengthen patriarchy, might also lead to practices that create spaces to question it. Clearly, there is room to navigate government policies, as NGOs and women’s organizations have done

in the past, in the rural context. The entry of women into municipal politics must be utilized by the feminist movement in India if it is to engage more meaningfully with formal institutions.

Although I argue that urban EWRs do not articulate gendered interests, my aim is not to critique the policy of reservation. In fact, the failure of urban EWRs to articulate gendered interests can be construed as a failure of the policy only when viewed from the 'interest' framework. Within the 'justice' framework, their inclusion is essential to the democratic process, regardless of whether major policy changes are facilitated within a short span of time. The 'radical' framework too, is less concerned with policy changes as with a shift in ideologies and practices within the institutions. The 'success' of the policy therefore, cannot be measured solely in terms of changes in policy, given the multiple justifications for it that are used not only by the state, but also, as I have attempted to show, by the women's movement and individual beneficiaries.

I have argued here that the mainstream discourse on development and involvement of women's organizations in PRIs created a context wherein rural EWRs could, and were encouraged to, make the liberal argument and hence explicitly demand a change in priorities in panchayat institutions. On the other hand, the relative absence of these two factors along with the socio - economic background of urban EWRs makes it more difficult for them to articulate gendered interests and thereby demand a shift in the priorities of municipalities. In the first part of the dissertation I outlined the historical context in which reservation for women was made a state policy to highlight the generally 'protectionist' approach of the state towards women and the ways in which this has been affirmed, questioned and negated by Indian women. I highlighted the

confluence of factors which led to the 73rd and 74th amendments in 1992 – focussing on the international discourse of women and development. In part two I illustrated the impact that these historical developments have had on the articulation of gendered interests by EWRs in contemporary India, specifically pointing out the contrasts in the articulation of gendered interests among rural and urban EWRs. I used quantitative and qualitative research on women in local government to demonstrate how rural EWRs seem to articulate gendered interests with greater ease than their urban counterparts. In the final part of the dissertation I presented my arguments for why this might be the case and pointed out the need for the women’s movement to engage with formal politics at the urban level to introduce feminist agendas into urban local government institutions. Perhaps, as Sathaye concludes from her ethnography of an all women’s panchayat in Vitner, Maharashtra, there is no “one definitive unichrome ‘answer’ to what is essentially a process, and not a fixed object at all” (Sathaye 1998: 108). In that case, at this stage in the process of women’s inclusion into formal politics, it is time for the women’s movement to rethink, reformulate and strengthen its engagement with the women in urban local politics.

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