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The Significance of Posters and Political Culture: An Analysis of the Practices of Two Mainstream Political Parties

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of political posters in Bangladeshi politics and specifically how they are used to communicate with the masses, shape their minds and serve in other ways as tools of party politics. It highlights the increasing attention to visibility as a form of political communication, whereby politicians and activists enact a long-term performance of visibility by staging poster exhibitions in places where public density is high. The paper emphasizes the role of such posters as channels of relaying messages about and creating digital identities of party-political actors. In particular, it explores how image size and dress code are used by the Awami League, a mainstream political party in Bangladesh, where leaders use posters, among other things, to demonstrate obedience. Also, the paper examines the role of gender with respect to attire, as there is a difference between the controlled dressing of women and the relative freedom of dress afforded to men, particularly men who are attired in the Mujib Coat. Based on this discussion, the paper seeks to illuminate the changing role of politics at the local level by focusing on the complexity of the interactions among visuals, clothing, and gender in the context of party politics in Bangladesh.

Introduction

When exploring the political culture of Bangladesh, it is necessary to investigate the manner in which political leaders are represented. As a rule, political leaders can be directly elected or already occupy a public position. In Bangladesh, a country in which elections are regarded not as a political process, but rather as a cultural rite, visual expression becomes an essential element of sociopolitical discourse (Singer, 2020). A campaign poster transcends the narrow political usefulness of a poster per se, and reflects wider social identities and expectations, and expresses disparities in culture and gender (De Witte, 2021). This study is important because examining political posters contributes to an understanding of the political culture of leaders of the country, and scrutinizing the historical, social and structural representations of gender in posters and the ways in which some of these pejorative depictions can be overcome in the geospatial environment, is of definite value.

The broader research question that informs this article is as follows: *How do political posters in Bangladesh create and perform political identity by their style of clothing and image size, and what is the consequence of this creation and performance on the perception of gender and political culture in Bangladesh?* In doing so, the paper adds to the existing literature on political posters, visual political communication, and electoral politics, as well as provides a South Asian point of view in which symbolism, party identity, and cultural affiliation remain at the center of political representation (Singer, 2020; Ford, 2021). Given its robust party politics, and the particular political roles played by the two genders, the example of Bangladesh, in the comparative analysis of political posters, can offer an instance of the influence of localized traditions and cultural affiliations on the minds of the electorate.

Scholars around the world have stated that clothing and fashion are important visual expressions of social identity, transmitting information about culture, social status, and values (Cristina, 2020). This dynamic is particularly strong in political posters in South Asia, where clothing can be a significant indicator of political attachment, class, and culture. Analysis of images in Indian political posters indicate a predisposition towards using religious symbols, traditional dress, and provide a visual and symbolic link to the cultural, domestic, and political institutions of the candidates (Mathur, 2016). The portrayal of women in poster images in Pakistan has been associated with issues of religious identity, and the presence of women in the public space of the poster can be seen as a challenge of patriarchal ideals (Jamali & Mathew, 2015).

The two leading political parties of Bangladesh, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are characterized by some differences in the attire of the leaders depicted in the posters. The practice of wearing the national dress, primarily the "legendary Mujib coat," has become a way for many people to show their loyalty to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a former Awami League leader. On the other hand, the leaders of the BNP, influenced by the charismatic and powerful ex-leaders of the party, wear more modern attire, including formal Western suits, which symbolize their global orientation and professionalism. These differences in dress signify contrasting visions of political culture and identity, which posters communicate symbolically in public spaces (McLuhan, 2017). A poster is thus one medium, an outlet through which meaning is conveyed visually, communicating it to both literate and illiterate individuals symbolically through the clothes of the individuals depicted. (Hall, 1997).

Gender, of course, appears prominently in these kinds of articulations. Political posters usually show female figures in ethnic wear

as symbols of party allegiance, while the insignia on their clothes and the color schemes used are usually in line with party colors. Sometimes, head coverings such as the burqa or attire such as the shalwar kameez reflect the multidimensional convergence of religious and patriarchal standards that have continued to define women as political entities. Such gendered images of women in these cultures not only imply the image of an 'ideal' woman but also reflect sociocultural norms surrounding the modesty and overall appropriateness of women participating in politics. In Bangladesh, where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself models sari-wearing as a form of national and political identity, poster representations of women wearing sari closely mirror these expectations.

This study intends to focus on the visual elements of political culture by concentrating on the elements of clothing, image sizes and the portrayal of different genders in political posters. It analyzes gender identity change through campaign communications and assesses how political culture is 'performed' through clothing and visual symbols. More broadly, the study situates Bangladesh within regional scholarship on South Asia, showing both similarities, such as the role of traditional attire, and stark contrasts in clothing, for example, unique features such as the Mujib coat's iconicity, between the Awami League and the BNP. At the very least, the case of Bangladesh contributes to global debates on the intersection of political communication, visual culture, and gender in electoral politics (Ford, 2021; Singer, 2020).

Theoretical Perspectives

Political posters in Bangladesh create meaning through a dense layering of cultural symbols, clothing choices, body placement, and visual structure. These posters rarely rely on text alone. Instead, they

communicate authority, morality, and belonging through images that ordinary viewers can read instantly because they draw on everyday Bangladeshi visual knowledge (Kuttig, 2020). This is why theories of meaning, symbolism, and identity matter here not as abstract ideas but as tools to understand how these posters work on the ground.

In Bangladesh, clothing is one of the strongest visual markers used in posters to shape how viewers understand a leader. It communicates social origin, piety, class, and political orientation without a single line of explanation. A Panjabi paired with a prayer cap positions a candidate within a moral and religious frame that many rural voters read as trustworthy and humble (Ahmed, 2020). A customized suit creates a different message, linking the candidate to modernity, higher education, and institutional authority, especially in urban settings. The Mujib coat and sari add values of loyalty to a certain political party. These visual choices build meaning because they connect to familiar cultural associations that people use to interpret political figures quickly in a crowded media environment. This process can be explained with the help of structuralist thinking: the visual elements of a poster do not act independently, but they are a system where meaning is created through their connection with each other (Lévi-Strauss, 1973).

Meaning is also constructed in the way in which posters organize bodies and symbols. Leaders who are at the top or at the visual center are perceived to be more powerful. This hierarchy is reinforced by their clothing. The Awami League posters, for example, tend to portray the leader in sharp Panjabi-waistcoat outfits that convey the sense of tradition and state power, whereas grass-roots organizers look smaller and wear simpler local clothes. This hierarchy provides the visual representation of the political framework: who rules, who obeys and who keeps the party

legacy. Even though Barthes (1977) elaborates on the reliance of images based on common cultural signs, in the case of Bangladesh, it is the grounding of these signs in the practical experiences of class, religion and political loyalty that is important. The identity formation of posters is also based on how Bangladeshi society interprets belonging. Clothing defines the difference between a rural and an urban leader, someone who seems friendly or prestigious and someone who seems to fit in a particular constituency. An image of a candidate captured on a relief mission in a cotton Panjabi, with a black coat, during flood relief efforts, provides a chance to demonstrate his connection to the poor and his readiness to interact directly with the party legacy. This attire is not only read by voters as a fashion statement, but also as a sign of character. This argument is in line with the concept proposed by Tajfel (1981) regarding group identity, except that it is formed here in local social categories like *Murubbi* (respected elder), *Neta* (leader) or *Bhai* (protector).

Hierarchy is observed even in small details like the quality of fabrics, color contrast, and the arrangement of the pictures. In posters that promote national leaders, local politicians are usually dressed less formally, in the background, or are depicted in smaller portraits. This visual distance is an indication of the party chain of command that generally exists in South Asian politics (Jahan, 2015). Simultaneously, such a poster also promises the voters that the local candidate will be loyal to the national figure. Clothing is the medium distinguishing these ranks, marking the connection and preserving authority.

The meaning of political posters in Bangladesh is formed with the help of culturally specific visual language in which clothes play the leading role. It defines the interpretation of leaders, forms group identification and even serves as a depiction of hierarchy. Such posters are successful because

they fit the visual expectations of Bangladeshi consumers who interpret clothing not only as fashion, but also as an expression of personality, authority and social status.

Research Methods

To examine, analyze, and interpret views of the social world, which are composed primarily of culturally and socially relevant concepts, this study focused on an interpretative approach employing qualitative research methodologies. The qualitative approach was adopted because the goal of the research is not to measure or predict in a numerical sense, but to understand how meanings are constructed and experienced in the everyday lives of people who produce and consume political posters. This approach makes it possible to follow the patterns and social contextual shifts that underlie and embody the phenomena and to capture nuance that, in its essence, is irreducible to quantitative data (Clark, Foster & Bryman,2019:16).

To achieve this, we employed in-depth interviews, content analysis, and semiotic analysis. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with political activists, student leaders, NGO operatives, members of the local civil society and citizens whose everyday routines involve political communication. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, so that not only the people who are directly involved in the production and distribution of political posters, but also the general receivers of such messages, were represented (Shawkat, 2017).

The respondents were demographically diverse in terms of age (between 20 and 55 years), gender (male and female), and educational level (higher secondary to postgraduate level). Professionally, they consisted of students, small-scale entrepreneurs, political volunteers and grass-roots

organizers. This difference was essential when it came to contextualizing poster communication in wider social and cultural contexts (Geise, 2011a).

The interviews were conducted in an informal and conversational manner to ensure that the participants posted their perceptions, attitudes and lived experiences quite openly. Systematic content analysis and semiotic interpretation were used in the data analysis process. During transcription, data analysis and interpretation, the participants were referred to using pseudonyms. Thematic coding was done to transcribed interviews in order to determine recurring frameworks, which included perceptions of power, identity construction, poster networks, and symbolic meaning-making. Content analysis was used to trace verbal and visual patterns communicated through posters - keywords used repeatedly, design features, and color use (Desiree and Castro, 2022) - whereas semiotic analysis was used to decode the signs, body language and colors used to provide posters with cultural and political appeal (Martinec, 2001). Such a dual approach serves both the intentions of the researcher and the interpretations of the audience, placing the political posters in the socio-political and historical context in which they are circulated.

The Rationale for the Small and Large Images on the Posters

The portraits of senior leaders, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina, and Sojib Wazed Joy, are usually crafted in a small size, whereas the size of the portrait of the local candidate or organizer appears very large in Bangladesh political posters. Such a layout reflects not only hierarchy but individual branding- the large image draws attention to and consolidates the presence of the candidate, and the smaller portraits provide an indication of party membership and loyalty (Hossain and Islam, 2019). Top party personalities tend to be reduced in size at the top of the poster as

a sign of respect, but on the other hand, the image of the local aspirant is magnified at the center to assert itself. Practically, this is in line with Hutchinson (1968), who states that the pictorial element of a poster should be visually appealing to draw attention to it, and a huge picture ensures that the image is seen by the observer even at a distance. Within the setting of Bangladesh, where political recognition is primarily based on publicity, an engaging image benefits a candidate and helps them gain familiarity among the voters (Chowdhury, N.S., 2020; Nair, 2017).

The political poster generally centers a large candidate profile that ensures that anybody who walks by the poster notices the person in the portrait and recalls their face. This is especially so in the mixed literacy areas, where individual recognition is paramount. The smaller images of national or regional leaders serve as visual indicators of party affiliation, which communicates that the candidate is supported by or connected to higher-ranking representatives (Ullah, 2018; Zavos, 2018). The mini-leader images do not compete for attention with the primary photo, but they represent the network and support of the candidate. Posters are therefore not just election adverts but a means of negotiating and holding onto party hierarchies as well as indicators of the larger South Asian visual politics of hierarchy, prominence, and image symbolism (Chopra, 2019; Kuttig, 2020). Likewise, political posters used in such countries as India, Pakistan, or Nepal often include large photos of local or regional leaders and smaller photos of national figures in order to indicate loyalty, power, and party affiliation, which proves that visual hierarchy is an effective tactic within the region (Nair, 2017; Zavos, 2018). One interlocutor[1] explained, *"Large images on posters tend to be more eye-catching and attention-grabbing, making them effective at conveying the central message. Those who want*

[1] **The interview conducted on 17th December 2022. The Interlocutor's name is Namus Sadiq (32)**

to be familiar with their images remain large" (personal communication, 2022). The hierarchical nature of the party is solidified in the layout of the images, revealing who is "above" and "below" in the organizational hierarchy.

Authority is also conveyed in image size. By making their own portrait larger than that of the senior leaders, the local aspirants manifest confidence and prove their leadership qualities, whereas the presence of revered senior faces, even in a smaller size, gives the poster the air of legitimacy. This dual strategy reflects how posters function as pervasive visual expressions of politics in Bangladesh, simultaneously highlighting personal prominence and party affiliation (Hossain & Islam, 2019). Another respondent[2] noted, *"It has become a culture, or a custom to attach images of senior leaders, and those who want to build their identity have their images enlarged so that there is more focus on them in the public eye."* These practices developed as posters became widespread in public spaces, creating a ritualized design pattern where senior leaders' images signal loyalty, while enlarging one's own image strengthens public identity, echoing visual political cultures across South Asia (Nair, 2017; Zavos, 2018).

[2] 2 The interview conducted on 25th January 2023. The interlocutor's name is Asad Mahmud (29)

Figure 1: General Secretary, Awami Shecchasebok League is showing his political connections by using large and small images. (Photo taken by the author on 11th March 2022).

On the poster, the General Secretary of the Awami Shecchasebok League[3] has enlarged his own image. The poster also contains images of party leaders in a smaller size so that the Secretary could focus more on his

identity while keeping the party image intact and pleasing the leaders. For candidates, the rationale for expanding their image is the creation of an identity that will be remembered by viewers. This pattern of identity creation against the backdrop of party allegiance is evident from the grass-roots level to the top or national level in Bangladesh. Both the Awami League and the BNP use the same approach when it comes to placing public images and keeping their legacy alive. Party posters are "essential to the composition, maintenance, and assemblage of inter- and intra-party politics," suggesting that image placement serves internal power dynamics as much as public persuasion (Kutting, 2020). The size and imagery of posters influence the character of political campaigning to the point where posters become a display of personality instead of a place where rational

[3] **Sub-group of Awami Political Party**

debate can be conducted.

Image size is a strategic tool of Bangladeshi political posters, and it is extensively discussed in the research on visual politics and the political culture of South Asia. It is the conscious use of contrast between large and small images in visual politics that grasps attention, expresses power and conveys power relationships (Kuttig, 2020; Hossain & Islam, 2019; Chowdhury, 2020). Images are as crucial as textual messages in political discourse, especially in low-literacy or image-based electorates (Ullah, 2018; Hutchinson, 1968). In South Asian political culture, the practice places greater focus on the cultural and ritualized aspects of political representation, wherein a preference for imagery is not only a feature of functional selection but also an indication of social norms, party hierarchies and historical continuity (Nair, 2017; Zavos, 2018). The visual similarity of posters in South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal, demonstrates that the logic behind the balanced sizes of images, visibility, power, and party affiliation is not a localized phenomenon, but an entire regional norm, and that these visual hierarchies function as both symbolic and practical uses of politics. This study contributes to the larger debates on iconography, symbolism, and performance in South Asian politics by examining the use of visual indicators by political actors of Bangladesh and other nations in the region to negotiate authority, loyalty and voter recognition. (Chopra, 2019).

Clothing Worn by Politicians on Posters

In Bangladesh, politicians tend to wear dress codes that are identified with senior party leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman. The leaders and MPs, ministers and activists of the two dominant political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

(BNP), all reproduce these party-distinctive clothing codes on posters, often with some form of logo-tag, or party logo alongside them. The practice is widespread not only in city centers but also at the upazila level where local activists on posters resemble district and central leaders. Top activists in the various districts are given commands by the Dhaka headquarters, and they pass them down to lower-level activists, building a hierarchy of sartorial loyalty that finds its way down to poster culture in the various localities. Clothing, therefore, reflects the continuation of partisanship, and is a marker of political commitment, as well as ideological conformity (Barnard, 2002; Calefato, 2004).

Clothing is of particular importance in this analysis since political posters display the images of activists as identity performances. The way in which leaders wear certain clothes symbolizes them to the people, thus building visual political legitimacy (Barthes, 1983; Hebdige, 1981). The particularity of clothing renders these images unique manifestations of political culture, a top-down approach in the context of local politics. A good example of this is the "Deepjal phenomenon" where a negative character in the relevant film impacted images of politicians in political posters, causing a change in dress to a Western style in order to convey a cleaner and more respectable image (Chowdhury, 2008). Thus, clothing has symbolic power, pointing to authority, modernity or tradition.

The Bangladeshi political dress mode exists squarely within a broader South Asian political culture, where the various types of garments worn, including the Nehru jacket, khadi kurta, sari, sherwani, and Western suit, have long been employed to indicate ideological commitments, moral power and nationalism. The Mujib coat, based on the Nehru jacket, has a similar symbolic charge because it conveys sacrifice, simplicity, and the nationalist heritage of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in much the same way that

the Nehru jacket has come to represent postcolonial leadership in India (Roy, 2007; Srivastava, 2015). Likewise, the sari, worn by Sheikh Hasina and earlier worn by Indira Gandhi, grounds women leaders in maternal nationalism and cultural authenticity, as well as represents a kind of gendered political respectability (Tarlo, 1996). The Western fashion of suits, such as those worn by Ziaur Rahman, indicates cosmopolitan competence reflecting political aesthetics in Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, where customized suits are associated with discipline, bureaucratic power and internationalized modernity (Weiss, 2001; De Mel, 2021). In South Asia, political clothing serves both as a symbol of personal identity and a pedagogical system, teaching followers how to identify themselves visually with party standards and expectations.

In the two leading parties in Bangladesh, the Awami League and the BNP, leaders at every level of the party, ministers, MPs, district officials and grassroots activists replicate these party-based styles. The central party office provides visual guidelines to district leaders, which are further reproduced on posters at upazila and union levels. This establishes a sartorial hierarchy of loyalty where clothing is used as a form of ideological obedience and discipline among the population (Barnard, 2002; Calefato, 2004). The proliferation of these types of clothing in posters guarantees that the political hierarchies are not just written but are also practiced through the visuals, and therefore, dress becomes a ritual with which it is possible to perform political pedagogy. During my fieldwork, one activist[4] explained: *"As a politically devoted person, I know that from the central part of the party leaders wear the Mujib coat for showing love and obedience. That's why when I circulate my posters, I try to wear the*

[4] The interview conducted on 11th April 2022 in person when I was in Bangladesh. The interlocutor's name is Nazia Khatun (40)

clothes. Even our Member of Parliament, Zillur Rahman, wears it to show respect to the founder of our nation." This statement is a perfect illustration of how dress practices reflect the discipline of the party, and thus, social identity becomes visible and intelligible to the community (Demirtaş, 2003; Akmemir, 2018). The same trend occurs in other countries in South Asia, like in India where BJP workers copy the kurtas worn by Modi, and Congress activists copy the Nehru jacket, while Nepali leaders don the Topi and followers of Sri Lankan parties replicate the dress codes of party dynasties (Spencer, 2007; Vaishnav, 2017; Shrestha, 2013). Thus, clothing becomes a visual pedagogy that teaches followers how to present themselves as loyal subjects of the political hierarchy, blending respect for tradition with aspirational modernity. In Baliakandi Upazila, district MPs and grassroots activists alike follow these sartorial patterns, wearing Mujib coats or Western attire depending on affiliation, thereby linking dress with party loyalty, legitimacy, and continuity (Barnard, 2002; Calhoun, 1994).

In addition, clothing on posters is deeply gendered. The sari, consistently used by Sheikh Hasina, maps onto long-standing South Asian expectations that women leaders embody maternal authority and cultural stewardship. Such representations echo regional patterns in which female politicians—Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Benazir Bhutto adopted traditional dress to reconcile public authority with gendered expectations of modesty and virtue (Tarlo, 1996; De Mel, 2021). For male politicians, the Mujib coat and Western suit index contrasting masculine performances, nationalist sacrifice versus modern managerial competence. Islamist candidates use beards, caps, and Panjabi-pajama sets to align themselves with piety and moral leadership. These gendered and ideological differences construct an accessible "visual vocabulary" that

citizens can quickly decode, while simultaneously reinforcing party legitimacy and historical continuity (Hebdige, 1981).

Fashion, as cultural theorists argue, is a non-verbal system of communication that encodes both individual and group belonging (Barnard, 2002; Lurie, 2000; Saucier, 2011). A Union Chairman[5] who is an Awami League politician[6] said: *"Dressing like party leaders means being loyal to the party officials. The following path is shown by the party's high officials. For a long time, there has been a practice in the field of politics that whoever joins the party should follow the dress of the high leader of the party to portray the party spirit and present himself as a loyal worker of the party."* Hence, politics is always tied to party legacy, which is also reflected in party-centric loyalty through clothing choices.

Figure 2: The posters in the images reflect a party hierarchy expressed through clothing. Senior leaders are depicted in black and white attire, while junior leaders wear the Mujib coat to demonstrate loyalty and respect toward the party (Image taken by the author on April 5, 2022).

[5] This interview conducted on 4th December 2022. The interlocutor's name is Mahbub Arafat (61)
[6] This interview conducted on 24th March 2022. The interlocutor's name is Lamia Begum (32).

In the Rajbari district, posters reveal MPs, district secretaries, and grassroots activists wearing coordinated clothing - Mujib coats, Panjabi's, and shirts that visually articulate loyalty to the party hierarchy. This consistency highlights the fact that style implies subcultural power, as Hebdige (1981) says, but, in this case, is reformulated as political loyalty. The use of clothing as a symbol on posters is another indication of the connection between individual branding and group identity: bending the dress code will in all probability lead to the loss of credibility and perceived loyalty to the party (Marchetti, 2020; Calefato, 2004).

At the same time, hybrid clothing trends have also emerged. Activists, especially younger BNP and Awami League members, often combine Western and traditional attire (e.g., suits or dress shirts with Mujib coats), producing hybridized identities that appeal, simultaneously, to both tradition and modernity.

Figure 3: A BCL leader displays his western dress teamed with a Mujib coat. (Image taken by the author on 5th April 2022).

The poster above, of a Baharpur Union Chatra League[7] activist, was circulated in the locality on March 7, 2022. As one BCL leader[8] explained, *"As a student leader, it's not possible to make posters from the shop, and I am good at mobile photo editing; that's why I create posters by using my previous image. Even if it is a Western shirt, when I add a Mujib coat digitally, it shows respect to the party founder."* Thus, technology allows younger political activists to reach the masses easily and promote a more 'formal' style of representation. This digitally produced hybridity mirrors trends across South Asian youth politics, where activists mix traditional clothing with global styles to signal both modernity and rootedness (Udupa, 2015).

In student politics, posters containing photographic images are especially common. One reason is the limited financial capacity of young activists, who often rely on personal photos taken with their phones. With the help of digital technology, they create and distribute a new form of poster independently. This artistic fusion emphasizes, according to Calhoun (1994), the constructed character of self-knowledge, which is generated by the agency of a person, as well as fulfilling the expectations of a group. These practices are in line with Cristina (2020), who points out that fashion is a symbolic representation of power: by blending Western trends with party-accepted clothes, activists shape hybrid political selves, which, while implying loyalty, express modernity in the process as well.

Aesthetics of posters are also influenced by economic inequalities. Higher level leaders, using their wealth to hire professional photographing services and designer clothes, make sure that their posters correctly portray the required sartorial codes, while student and grass-roots activists use self-

[7] Student Political Party of Awami Political Party
[8] 7 The interview conducted on 12th January 2023. The interlocutor's name is Bikash kumar (21)

made photos that are digitally edited. However, clothing invariably expresses loyalty, authority and legitimacy, and in this regard, sartorial politics has proven to be a semiotic system which cuts across classes and economic boundaries (Castells, 2010; Marchetti, 2020; Barthes, 1983).

This discussion revealed the function of clothing in Bangladeshi political posters at the intersection of visual politics, gendered representation, and South Asian political culture. Dressing is an artificially and culturally intelligible act of performance, which forms political identity, communicates allegiance, and supports hierarchical organizations. Comparisons among political practices in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka reveal that clothing serves as a common visual language throughout South Asia, where clothing such as the Nehru jacket, sari, kurta, and Western suit all have political connotations. By analyzing these trends, it becomes clear that clothing is not merely a form of decoration but is a vital means by which political power is exercised, and gender morality and party continuity are brought into existence and displayed.

The Difference in Clothing between Male and Female Politicians Depicted in Posters

Both men and women across the political spectrum of Baliakandi Upazila in the Rajbari District are attempting to assert themselves in the political arena. However, in a patriarchal society, men wield power and hold positions in many institutions, whereas women are still excluded, often lacking access to important posts and titles. Women can be found in politics but are seldom given priority and acceptance in places of visible power. This hierarchy is visible in posters as well, which are one of the primary media of political self-representation. Men are free to circulate posters of themselves in a bid to build their identity, but most women are

confined due to the rigid principles of religion, patriarchy, and culture (Cristina, 2020; Chowdhury, N.S., 2020).

Fashion is closely tied to social stratification, with clothing marking symbolic boundaries and creating distinctions between individuals and groups (Cristina, 2020). In South Asia, this process of stratification is gendered. Women politicians usually circulate posters of themselves during elections or national festivals by presenting themselves in sarees and with their heads covered, creating impressions of the "traditional Bengali woman." This is done strategically to secure a positive reception from the predominantly Muslim electorate, where conservative values remain powerful (Akdemir, 2018; Castells, 2010).

Figure 4: A female politician's poster in which she attempts to convey religious sentiment and maintain patriarchal norms. (Image was taken by the authors on 6th May, 2022).

In the printed poster (Figure 4), the female politician distributed campaign images as a candidate for the Union Parishad election. On the poster, she is wearing a saree with her head covered in the manner of a

traditional "Bengali woman."-Such attire helps women align themselves with the former ruling party iconography (for example, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina typically wears saris) and appeals to conservative Muslim-majority voters. As Eisenstein (1984) notes, men hold greater privilege in politics, while women's gender roles are shaped and constrained by the dominant patriarchal system. One local female[9] politician explained, *"Our area is very conservative; whenever I think about making posters, I always keep in mind the sentiments that are grounded in our society. Most of the people are religious; that's why I wear a saree and cover my head. Otherwise, the public would not vote for me. Even a saree is a symbol of Bengali women, and our Prime Minister also wears it, so when I wear it, people welcome me without criticism."* In other words, she dresses not for personal style but to signal conformity with Islamic modesty and the ruling party's patriarchal image. Scholars of South Asian politics and gender roles observe similar trends: women leaders are frequently cast as dutiful daughters or mothers in public symbolism rather than as independent architects of policy (Bullough, A., Kroeck, K. G., Newburry, W., Kundu, S. K., & Lowe, K. B. 2012). In one Sri Lankan study, even a Member of Parliament bluntly stated: "You can't wear trousers and do a speech on a stage. You have to wear a saree." (Vijeyarasa, R., Vanniasinkam, N., & Gunasekera, V., 2021). This remark – from a neighboring South Asian country – echoes the same pressure on women everywhere in the region to adopt traditional attire if they wish to be taken seriously.

The historical use of women's bodies in political imagery also plays a role here. Chowdhury (2020) argues that women's images in Bangladeshi posters have long oscillated between empowerment and objectification, depending on the political context. Importantly, these women's posters

[9] The interview conducted on 30th May 2022. The Interlocutor name is Farhana Azim (42)

send a dual message. By emphasizing piety and modesty, a candidate conveys both personal virtue and loyalty to party ideals. As feminist theorists note, such imagery reduces women to symbolic roles (e.g. "pious mother" or "loyal daughter") rather than political agents. One regional analysis explains that female politicians' public faces are controlled by "gendered symbolism" – roles that invoke emotional connection but strip away claims to real agency (Bullough, A., Kroeck, K. G., Newburry, W., Kundu, S. K., & Lowe, K. B. 2012). As a university student[10] noted, *"No matter what clothes women wear, they must face criticism. If you wear a burqa, you are called a good girl; if you wear a hijab, you are considered polite. But women will never be spared from judgment."* This demonstrates how the female body is constructed and structured in a social way through the intersection of gender, religion and respectability (Shapiro, 1999).

In comparison, men are much freer in terms of clothing. Their clothing rarely draws the undue critical attention of people unlike in the case of women, since men can be seen as effective representatives of themselves without fear of moralizing due to their dominance in the political arena (Eisenstein, 1984). As Johnson (2022) reminds us, female politicians all over the globe are regularly subjected to increased scrutiny on being "too formal", "too colorful", or "too feminine", and yet, the attire of men usually goes relatively unnoticed. Visual politics in South Asia assign men their dress as either being modern or as being sufficiently traditional but never assign the dress of women as having any moral content. As an illustration, Indian women politicians tend to dress up with a "power dress" by conforming to male attire (suits or jackets) or donning a bright sari, just to prove that they are not out of place in a male dominated

[10] The interview conducted on 27th April in person when I was in Bangladesh. The interlocutor's name is Nazmun Sharmin (24)

field (Mukherjee, T., 2024). However, even this tactic is based on delicate proportions: according to one fashion pundit, on an occasion when female Indian minister Sushma Swaraj wore a Western jacket, it was accompanied by an enormous bindi and Sindhoor to indicate that she was still a "traditional Hindu woman". Male leaders are allowed to exercise authority or cosmopolitanism with a minimum amount of criticism, yet women who dress in modern attire are continually required to encode extra signs of traditional femininity to secure their legitimacy (Eisenstein, 1984).

Meanwhile, such dressing limitations are not only cultural but also political. Women leaders are obliged to negotiate between competing pressures: religious conservatism, patriarchal standards and the symbolic power of party leaders such as Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia. By recreating the outfits of these elders, women place a visual claim to their authority in the wider party traditions. Fashion, in this respect, is not only aestheticism but also about justifying women who are challenged by political systems (Barnard, 2002; Calefato, 2004; Lurie, 2000).

Moreover, posters are also indicators of larger conflicts on behalf of rights and recognition. Amnesty International (2011) underlines that freedom of expression and belief involves freedom of choice in terms of attire as a part of cultural or religious identity. However, in the real-life scenario, women in Bangladesh do not enjoy such freedom; they are expected to dress according to community expectations to be electable. Some of these barriers can only be overcome by individuals belonging to politically and economically powerful families, like Farhana Azim who found it relatively easy to enter politics. Posters, as Kutting (2020) indicates, not only demonstrate the gendered disparities in clothing, but also show the structural disparities of political involvement in rural Bangladeshi society.

The gendered double standard in clothing demonstrates how the reinforcement of norms is achieved through representation. The posters of Baliakandi upazila reveal that gender is a potent force that hinders female representation and influence in South Asian politics. The social construction of acceptability in women's clothing on these posters is thus clearly demonstrated, and it is evident that only when women dress in a conservative, traditional way can they be accepted. Men, on the other hand, do not hesitate to use clothing to indicate status or modernity. This double standard is to be understood in the context of broader systems of visual politics, gendered representation, and traditional South Asian values, all of which collude to restrict the role of women in politics. Such images are a reminder that campaign fashion here is much more than a mechanism of aesthetics; it is a major tool of social control and a symbol of underlying inequalities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper adds to the body of research on visual politics by illustrating that political posters in Bangladesh are structured visual practices as opposed to being merely campaign tools. The analysis demonstrates how political identity and authority are made and regulated by emphasizing the size of images, clothing, and gendered representation. The everyday practices of politics in public spaces are culturally intelligible through these visual practices.

The results contribute to the existing body of research on political posters and visual communication by demonstrating that image size is a symbolic process through which hierarchy is negotiated in party politics. Although previous research focuses on visibility and attention in political images, this paper lays emphasis on the manner in which juxtaposition of

enlarged local portraits with smaller images of national leaders allows for personal political identification and simultaneously reflects obedience to party leadership. Posters in this context are visual concessions involving personal ambition and organizational discipline by promoting party organization instead of subverting it.

Another way in which this study expands on existing knowledge on political dress is its illustration of the how clothing on posters is ideologically complicit and educative. The paper uses South Asian research on sartorial symbolism to demonstrate how party-related dress codes like the Mujib coat, sari, or Western suit are replicated at the grassroots level to express legitimacy, historical continuity, and ideological obedience. Clothing is therefore a form of visual language in which we learn, express and normalize political culture.

Notably, the research paper adds to the corpus of gender-specific studies on political representation by showing how the visibility of women in politics is conditioned by limiting sartorial standards. In contrast to male politicians, whose dress codes indicate positions of power or advanced civilization, women must publicly demonstrate humility and cultural decency to achieve the political status of primary actors. These stereotyped expectations, which are visually displayed in posters, strengthen patriarchal power relations and diminish female agency, despite the incorporation of women in social-political spaces. This highlights gender inequality within the political arena, where it is institutionalized even in the most mundane visual practices.

Taken as a whole, the analysis places Bangladesh within general South Asian discussions of visual politics, and points to context-specific processes in the country that are influenced by party history and cultural representations. Political posters become prominent places where

hierarchy, gender expectations and political loyalty are represented and normalized. In conclusion, this study has shown that political posters in Bangladesh are actively involved in creating a political culture. Posters create authority, govern political membership, and perpetuate already existing power relations using controlled visual strategies. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the field of political communication, visual culture, and gender by analyzing these daily practices of visuality to reveal how politics is performed, taught, and normalized via images displayed in public spaces.

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